

MONTHLY REPORT



IRAN CASE FILE

Your window on Iran from inside and abroad

March 2019



RASANA

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March 2019

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THE EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As the Iranian regime becomes increasingly certain that European support for it in the nuclear agreement and in circumventing US sanctions will not be enough to alleviate the economic crisis that Iran is suffering right now, the Iranian regime has sought to strengthen its relations with its regional alliances. The most prominent event in March 2019 was the visit paid to Iraq by the Iranian President Hassan Rouhani and his Foreign Minister Javad Zarif. They were accompanied to Iraq by an Iranian delegation. There were multiple Iranian aims behind this visit, which was a discussion point across all political levels in Iran and abroad. No incident grabbed the headlines ahead of this visit except for the devastating floods which swept across the northwestern regions of Iran as well as its southern regions on the Arabian Gulf. Iranian interactions during the month focused on these two incidents. This is in addition to the mounting US pressure on Iran as part of its policy to force the regime to change its behavior. Hence the report monitored and analyzed Iranian affairs at the domestic, Arab and international levels.

When it comes to the Internal Affairs, there are four main files: the ideological, political, economic and military-security files. In the ideological file, according to the report, Rouhani's visit to the Najaf clerics marked a remarkable shift in the policies of the Iranian government. Rouhani agreed with Ayatollah al-Sistani about the nature of the Iranian role in Iraq and what the Shiite Arab clerics want from the Iranian state and its Marja. Despite the political rapprochement between the two countries, the size of the intellectual disagreement between the two Shiite Marjas in Qom and Najaf is still significant. The Najaf Marjas still take positions on Iraqi political issues which are far apart from the official Iraqi positions. Their demands are still not met by Iraqi politicians although the Iraqi government publicly follows their orders.

In The Political File, the issue of the Iranian government's handling of the crises caused by the floods that hit the country is the most prominent development. The disaster of the floods has turned out to be a bone of political contention at home. The conservatives heaped blame on Rouhani's government, accusing him of failing to handle the crisis. The government's performance was poor. It was even worse than the performance showed by the government during the earthquake disaster that struck in November 2017. The

Supreme Leader and the Revolutionary Guard aimed to emphasize that Iran's revolutionary institutions are the real refuge for the Iranian people in the face of disasters. However, there was a media clarification by the Rouhani government. It confirmed that the projects set up by the IRGC randomly and without sufficient scientific studies aggravated the floods. Also, the opposition overseas hinted that the IRGC premeditatedly flooded the Ahwazi lands as part of its scheme to change the demographic makeup of the area.

The initial indications show that Iran reaped many political gains from Rouhani's visit to Baghdad.

On the military and security level, the report addresses the issue of dual-use technologies and how Iran seeks them through illegal means. The most prominent example is the robotics industry in Iran which was developed through access to dual-use civilian and military technologies, with Iran turning its civilian technical gains into military products such as the robot Nazir which can conduct military reconnaissance and launch a short-range missile as well as some light conventional munitions. On the Arab level, the report discussed in the Iran and Iraq file, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani's visit to Iraq from a political perspective. Rouhani paid a three-day visit to Iraq from 11 to 13 March, 2019 which was historic and comprehensive in all respects, considering the package of gains he made for Iran. This included the two sides agreeing to revitalize the 1975 agreement which allows Iran to impose its sovereignty over half of the Shatt al-Arab. The two sides also agreed to revoke visa fees. These agreements translated into significant economic gains for Iran. This turns Iraq into an arena for Iranian influence and gives it the chance to officially and legally sustain its presence supported by an Iraqi government, however, within the framework of international agreements. This will make Iraq the real gateway for Iran to the outside world. Iraq came out as a loser from the visit with no gains made.

On March 13, 2019, the Syrian capital of Damascus witnessed a military meeting that brought together the chiefs of staff of the Iranian and Iraqi armed forces as well as the Syrian Defense Minister. Although the meeting was to focus on counter-terrorism measures, it formed part of the strategy employed by Tehran to try to show its strength in the region. The meeting coincided with the commander-in-chief of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard, Maj. Gen. Muhammad Ali Jafari on March 17, 2019, announcing the formation of Iran's armed forces comprising 100,000 fighters in Iraq and 100,000 fighters in Syria, as well as Iran's coordination with the Syrian and Iraqi governments to implement its corridor project.

The Iranian support for the Houthis in Yemen, which includes money and weapons, has meant that Tehran aims to continue the war and at the same time it wants to hinder establishing a new Yemeni federal project that will obligate the Houthis to abide by the outcomes of the Stockholm agreement. This comes amid increasing demands on the international community by the legitimate government to stand up to Iran's project in Yemen. This included the remarks made by the Yemeni President Abd Rabbo Mansur Hadi against Iranian support for the Houthis in Yemen and the need to assert the vital role of the Arab coalition to support legitimacy in Yemen and to preserve the Yemeni state. He also expressed Yemeni concerns about the Iranian role at international forums including the Security Council and the UN commissions, which believe that the process of reaching a roadmap to find a comprehensive political solution is still vague. At the international level, it seems that the United States is heading to exert more pressure on Iran by tightening the noose around the Iranian regime. This will happen through the United States seeking to drain Iran's financial resources and targeting its regional and international activities through a continued reliance on sanctions as an effective mechanism to pressure the Iranian regime through deteriorating internal economic conditions and intensifying popular pressure against it, as well as depriving it of resources to complete its missile program or its non-peaceful activities. This pressure also includes curbing its regional influence by paralyzing the regime's financial ability to fund its

project and its militias in a number of countries in the region. Also, the United States seeks to obstruct any attempt by global powers who want to offer aid to the regime to circumvent its sanctions, including the smuggling of oil and continuing financial transactions with Tehran, in defiance of its sanctions. The European position regarding the reactivation of the nuclear agreement's guarantees and countering the impact of the United States on its economic relations with Iran is slow-paced. Also, the Europeans have delayed the activation of the financial exchange mechanism which will allow European firms to continue their financial dealings with Iran without being hit by US sanctions; this will impact the volume of trade between the two sides. It seems that the overall trajectory of cooperation and understanding with Europe is suspended and shackled to a big extent. Some European countries also have reservations about Iran's destabilizing behavior as well as its ballistic missile program, which pose a threat to security in Europe. In response, some European countries launched a crackdown on Shiite centers in their territories out of fear of them being used by Iran for its illegal activities in Europe. All these issues will impact relations between the two sides. To calm Iran's fears about cross-border militia attacks, Islamabad seeks to build a 950km fence along the border separating Pakistan's Baluchistan province from the Sistan-Baluchistan province in Iran. The fence, which will extend from Karah Mountain to the Gwadar port in the Gulf of Oman, passes through various geographical areas, including mountainous hills, rivers, and seasonal valleys. This environment is ideal for human trafficking and cross-border terrorism. However, it is difficult to imagine how this fence will improve security in the eastern region of Iran given the mountainous terrain in the area which impedes the efforts of border guards even if they use modern technology. Also, smugglers and gunmen are well aware of the terrain on the border and will rely on their knowledge of the area to bypass the fence. This includes digging tunnels to enter Iran and relying on tribal bonds and cross-border relationships in Sistan and Baluchistan. This will allow fighters and traffickers to bypass the fence.



INTERNAL AFFAIRS

Iran's interactions at the internal level were affected by two incidents, the first of which was the flood disaster that swept through most of Iran's territory. Iran witnessed political rivalry between the different wings of the regime who traded blame about the cause of the increasing damage caused by the floods. The Iranian people affected by the floods were caught between an elected government incapable of alleviating its pain and the IRGC which provides little aid but has intensive media coverage on its performance in support of the victims. The second incident was the visit of the Iranian President Hassan Rouhani and his accompanying delegation to Iraq, which is expected to have a major impact on Iran's internal economic affairs by maximizing the role of Iraq in receiving Iranian exports and easing international economic pressures on Iran.





THE IDEOLOGICAL FILE

The report casts light on the ideological developments in the Iranian arena during the month of March, and the impact of these developments on internal actors within the seminary and the state. The report touches on the meeting between the Iranian President Hassan Rouhani and the Iraqi Shiite cleric Ayatollah al-Sistani in terms of interactions between Iranian state officials and the Arab Shiite Marjaia, as well as Zarif's visit to clerics in Qom.

First: The Sistani-Rouhani Meeting

The Iranian President met with prominent Shiite clerics in Iraq: Ayatollah al-Sistani, Said al-Hakim, Bashir al-Najafi, and Fayyad on March 13. This meeting was of importance as it was the first meeting between the highest religious authority in Najaf and any Iranian president since the 1979 Iranian revolution. After the Sistani-Rouhani meeting, a statement by Sistani's office said that the top cleric welcomed "any step in order to strengthen Iraq's relations with its neighbors ... on the basis of respect for the sovereignty of states and non-interference in their internal affairs." He also called for "Limiting the authorization to carry arms to the state and its security services"⁽¹⁾ and "demanded that the sovereignty of states should be respected."⁽²⁾

The meeting had significant indications at the internal and external levels for the two sides.

The Iranian side was keen to hold a meeting with the highest religious authority in Najaf in order to be accepted among moderate reformists in Iran, given that this is the first meeting between the highest religious authority in Najaf and any Iranian president since the outbreak of the Iranian revolution. It was reported that al-Sistani refused to meet the former Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in 2013 during his visit to Najaf. Among the messages the Iranian President and his Foreign Minister wanted to convey to the Iranian home front was that the reformist and moderate current has extensions and acceptance right across the Shiite world, especially in Iraq, which is one of the largest solid blocs of Shiites in the world and home to shrines and holy sites. Thus, it seems the matter is a moral victory for the reformists over the fundamentalists and conservatives. If this assumption is true, it would increase the tensions that already exist between the conservatives and the fundamentalists in Iran and the higher religious authority in Najaf. It would intensify the theoretical and ideological differences between the two sides.

This meeting may be interpreted as the Iranian side wanting to convey a message to its political and sectarian opponents in general that there is warmth and convergence of views between Iraqis and Iranians even at the level of doctrine, religious authority and religion, especially since doctrine and religion are the main factors in the determinants of relations between the two countries.

The Iraqi side, specifically the supreme religious authority, wanted to send direct and explicit messages to the Iranian authorities that Iraq has the right to independently make decisions at home and to consolidate its security forces under official state institutions by integrating armed militias into state institutions.

The religious authority may have agreed to hold this meeting as a way to pressure the fundamentalists in Tehran to change their strategy towards Iraq and Najaf. It may also have been a means to highlight the superiority of the Najaf seminary over Qom, as the fundamentalists in Iran want Qom to be the key religious center and simultaneously want to control the most powerful institutions in Najaf through changing their jurisprudential structure in order for them to be in harmony with the Velayat-e Faqih ruling theory in Iran. ⁽³⁾

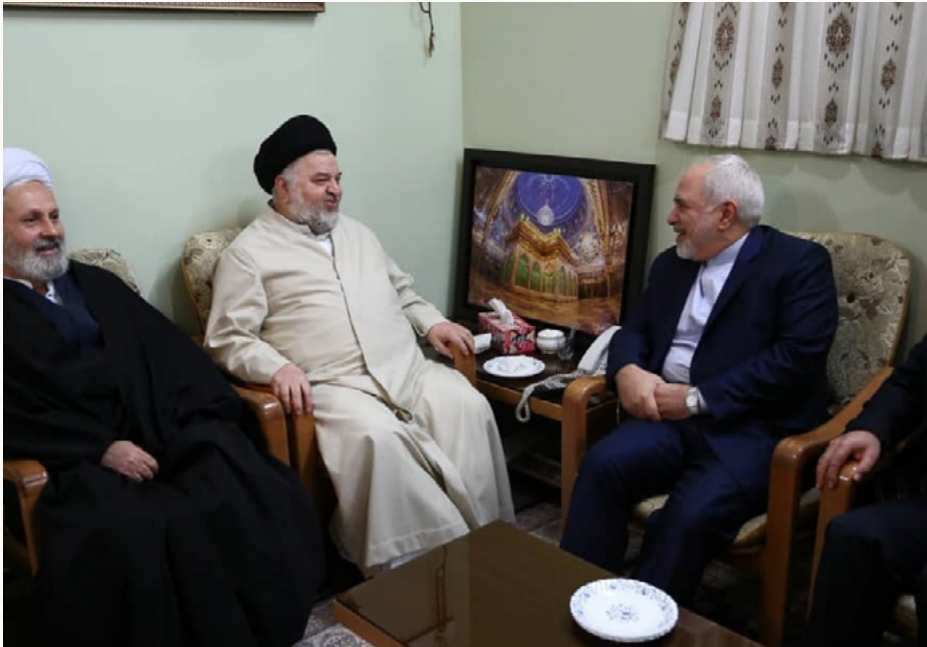
Second: Zarif's Meeting With Clerics in Qom

Shortly after the visit of the Iranian President Hassan Rouhani to Najaf on March 13 came the visit of the Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif to Qom on March 18. He met with several clerics in Qom. He submitted to them reports on his recent visit to Najaf along with the Iranian President.

Zarif met with the representative of Sistani in Qom, Javad al-Shahristani. Zarif said after the meeting that "the recent visit by the Iranian President to Iraq was a very successful visit and solved many obstacles in relations between Iran and Iraq." He said that he traveled to Qom to clarify the achievements of the visit to Iraq. "The success of the visit to Iraq is one of the main reasons behind my visit to Qom. It came to clarify the achievements made during this visit to clerics and fellow clerics as well as submitting an overall report on the latest political and diplomatic developments."⁽⁴⁾

Zarif met several other senior clerics, including Makarem Shirazi, Nouri Hamdani, Wahid Kharasani and Jawadi Amoli. ⁽⁵⁾

During his meeting with the Foreign Minister, Makarem Shirazi made recommendations on relations with neighboring countries and on issues concerning the Islamic world, according to news agencies. ⁽⁶⁾ Cleric Lotfollah Safi Golpaygani said, "the current situation of the Iranian economy is very regrettable and sad." He added, "The people face many difficulties that can be solved by taking useful and constructive policies." He



asserted to Zarif, “We should have strong relations with Egypt, Morocco and Jordan.”⁽⁷⁾ Jawadi Amoli praised Zarif and said, “You should know that you maintain the upper hand in your negotiations with the other countries.”⁽⁸⁾

Zarif’s visit to Qom directly after his return from Iraq has several signs that cannot be ignored. His meeting with Sistani’s representative and with senior clerics supportive of the Iranian state may help us to decipher the tacit messages that had not been announced. Perhaps the most important of which is that Zarif wanted to bring the traditional line in Najaf closer to Qom’s views, which has distanced itself from politics and governance, and at the same time close to the Iranian reformist movement, and the conservative fundamentalist line in Qom. He may have also conveyed messages from inside Najaf to the clerics he met in Qom. His meeting with the clerics supportive of Velayat-e Faqih indicates those clerics are eager to know what happened in the meeting between the Iranian President and Najaf’s clerics. However, regardless of the veracity of the messages that were delivered in these meetings, it is certain that Sistani did not meet Khamenei and they have never met since Khamenei’s appointment as the Iranian Supreme Leader, and Sistani heading the clerics in Najaf. No messages were exchanged between the Iranian President and Khamenei, or between Khamenei and Sistani’s deputy in Qom via Zarif⁽⁹⁾. But it is also not clear whether Zarif’s meeting with the clerics was held behind Khamenei’s back, or with its agenda and details coordinated which they wanted to deliberate with the clerics.

Conclusion

It is not acceptable, based on political and sectarian history, to say it is certain that the strategic, foundational and ideological differences between Najaf and Iran will end after the first visit or meeting between Sistani and the Iranian President. This is because the differences are not new but have been lingering between the two sides since Khomeini was in Najaf and authored his book titled ‘The Islamic Government’ in which he totally renounced Shiite jurisprudential and political teachings within the seminary when it comes to governance and politics which were based on the idea of waiting for Imam Mahdi. The two sides are not prepared to make any concessions on their jurisprudential views. Any concessions made by the Iranian regime will mark the failure of the Iranian revolution and its political platform. This is unimaginable for the ruling and religious elites in Iran except in the event of a radical change such as a revolution, a coup or so forth. Any concessions will mean a failure and defeat as well as the collapse of Iran’s geopolitical project in the entire region. Najaf sees itself as the guardian against Iran’s religious and sectarian ideology via its authentic teachings. Therefore, it is impossible that Najaf will take steps to move closer to Iran’s Shiite political theory since Najaf believes in the exact opposite. It wants Iranians to return to the traditional version of Shiism. Each group maintains a great distance from the other side. This point in particular is the root cause for the deep rift between the two sides which has engendered a series of differences, whether personal or jurisprudential, between the centers of power in Qom and Najaf.

THE POLITICAL FILE

The Iranian government and its obstacles in managing the crises resulting from the natural disaster it faced with heavy torrents and floods that swept through hundreds of Iranian cities and villages in March 2019, resulting in massive loss of life and property, exacerbated the existing problems facing the Iranian regime. The regime is going through a difficult period due to an internal economic crisis, US sanctions and regional isolation. These floods revealed Iran's weak infrastructure as well as the regime's inability to cope with natural disasters, its failure to respond to local emergencies and crises and its inability to manage and control such incidents. As a result of the heavy losses caused by the floods and the ongoing suffering of the people in the affected areas along with poor relief and rescue operations, the government has been widely criticized and accused of failing to manage the crisis.

First: Floods and Losses

Heavy rains hit several areas in northern and southern Iran. This quickly turned into a torrent of floods that hit about 25 of the 31 Iranian provinces, causing heavy loss of life and property. About 70 people were killed and 791 others⁽¹⁰⁾ injured, in addition to the displacement of thousands and the destruction of a large number of public facilities, homes and cars as well as the death of livestock. The electricity network was disrupted and thousands of hectares of agricultural crops were damaged. Floods also destroyed poultry and fish farms. Total losses in the agriculture sector amounted to more than 46 trillion riyals (about \$350 million).⁽¹¹⁾ The provinces that were hit hardest by the floods included Golestan where the floods submerged large parts of the province, especially the city of Aqqala with the floods destroying 70 percent of its total area. This is in addition to the Ahwaz region which was hit by heavy floods. Besides Golestan and Ahwaz, there are other areas that were hit with heavy losses including the provinces of Shiraz, Lorestan and Mazandran.

Second: The Government's Efforts to Manage the Floods

This crisis prompted President Rouhani, who was spending the Nowruz vacation, the beginning of the new Iranian year, on Qeshm Island located in southern Iran, to declare a state of emergency and to form a working cell to tackle the crisis. He also convened a meeting with the National Administration on Crises and Disaster Management in Golestan province in northern Iran. In the meeting between President Rouhani and the National Administration on Crises and Disaster Management, they recommended providing assistance and allocating subsidies to those affected. In anticipation of any civil disobedience or protests that might grip the flood-hit areas due to the weak relief and aid operations, the Iranian government promised aid to citizens across the country, irrecoverable loans, and bank facilitations to build housing units, as well as redressing the losses suffered by the agricultural and industrial sectors and repairing damaged infrastructure.⁽¹²⁾

There is a sense of distrust towards the government's promises due to the failure of President Rouhani to fulfill his commitments and the promises he made to the people since he came to office. The government also faces several obstacles in fulfilling its



promises to the flood-hit people. This is due to the severe economic crisis that the Iranian economy is facing at this moment in time.

Despite the intensive meetings held by the Iranian government and the efforts made by the National Crises and Disaster Management Administration, the deteriorating situation in a large number of areas, the continued suffering of citizens and the protests of those affected in some areas against the weak relief operations never stopped. This is in addition to the assertions made by the representatives of the areas affected by the floods in the Iranian Parliament that there was a lack of coordination among the agencies concerned. They also asserted that relief efforts by the government did not reach many areas hit by the floods. This is an indication that there is a real crisis when it comes to the management of floods in Iran. An example is the comments made by the representative of the Ahwaz region in the Iranian Parliament, Ali Sari, who said that the region is still experiencing a

lack of organization when it comes to the management of the floods and mitigating the damage. He also cited the acute shortage in equipment and hardware, especially in the areas still exposed to floods due to the continued flow of water which had filled the dams.⁽¹³⁾

The head of the Iranian government, who has faced a firestorm of criticism over the government's weak relief and rescue efforts as well as being accused of failing to contain the crisis, called on critics not to blame him for the consequences of the floods. He considered what happened as being a natural phenomenon⁽¹⁴⁾

He said that the loss of life and property caused by the floods was due to climate change and heavy rains in Iran over many days. However, environmental experts say that the aforementioned reasons are not the only factors behind the high losses and believe that a lack of experience, poor scientific management of urban areas as well as a lack of interest in environmental issues over the past four decades are the main reasons behind the high losses during the recent floods and torrents.⁽¹⁵⁾

Foreign Minister Mohammed Javad Zarif said his country could not help those affected by the floods and blamed the US government for imposing sanctions on Iran, describing it as economic terrorism. Zarif said Iran had not been able to buy helicopters required for rescue operations owing to US sanctions.⁽¹⁶⁾

The Iranian Foreign Ministry Spokesman, Bahram Qasimi, attributed the failure of the Iranian Red Crescent to play its role in relief and rescue operations to the US

sanctions imposed on the institution which have prevented access to aid sent by Iran and other countries.⁽¹⁷⁾

The US response came from Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, who blamed the Iranian government for the human and material damage caused by the devastating floods in Iran. He said that the Iranian regime was citing US sanctions against Tehran, while the Iranian government's mismanagement of urban planning and its lack of preparedness for emergencies led to the disaster that killed about 50 people.⁽¹⁸⁾

To ease the stinging criticism leveled against the government, the Iranian government dismissed the governor of Golestan, Monaf Hashemi, and appointed his deputy Mer Mohammad Ghraoui, who was accused of transforming large areas of Tehran's gardens into residential plots years ago, to be acting governor. The decision was taken by Iranian First Vice President Eshaq Jahangiri after the residents of the town of Aqqala, where the floods submerged 70 percent of its total area, heaped blame on the governor who was on vacation abroad. The governor of Golestan was not the only official to be on vacation inside or outside of Iran at the time of the flooding. Iranians circulated pictures of a number of officials, including President Rouhani, who was vacationing to celebrate the new Iranian year (Nowruz). However, it seems that the severity of the criticism leveled at the government and its inability to tackle this disaster, led to the governor of Golestan being made the sacrificial lamb.

Third: Floods: A New Opportunity to Attack Rouhani

Despite the widespread floods, the lack of preparation and the difficulty in taking necessary and sufficient measures to curb their impact, this situation presented a new and favorable opportunity for opponents and critics of Hassan Rouhani to attack him and his government and to continue with the criticism he has been facing since he took power in 2013. Foremost among those critics was Ebrahim Raisi who was picked by the Supreme Leader to head the judiciary. The crisis created by the floods represented a favorable opportunity for him to score political points for his radical current and to deal blows to President Rouhani who defeated him in the presidential elections held recently.⁽¹⁹⁾ He leveled harsh criticism at the government for what he called its delay in addressing the disaster and threatened to bring the officials before the courts over their complacency. The prosecutor general in Iran, Mohammed Jafari Montazari, considered the biggest part of the damage caused by the floods to be due to mismanagement as well as the government not being aware of general principles when it comes to managing crises.⁽²⁰⁾

Not only did the conservatives and fundamentalists level criticism at Rouhani, but the critics included reformists such as Mahmoud Sadeqi who is known for his criticism of the policies pursued by the radicals within the Iranian regime and for defending the policies of Rouhani. He said that he expected Rouhani would cancel his vacation on Qeshm Island and head to the flood-hit areas to support the locals and to follow up on the relief operations. He went even further, when he compared Rouhani with the US President. He said, "Trump interrupted his vacation before following a crisis which was far less severe than the situation which Golestan province is facing."

The enormity of the disaster, the large areas hit by the floods, the inability and failure of the state apparatus to tackle the crisis as well as the regime's fear of popular anger and protests prompted the Supreme Leader to intervene. He issued directives to the chief of staff of the armed forces Gen. Mohammed Bagheri to mobilize the entire armed forces including the IRGC and the army to help the residents of the flood-hit areas and to send more assistance to these areas.⁽²¹⁾

Despite the aforesaid reasons that prompted the Supreme Leader to call on the

military establishment to intervene to contain the crisis, this call involved attempts by the Supreme Leader's establishment to boost the institutions loyal to him to play a bigger role in resolving the internal crisis. In addition, this move aimed to silence voices within and outside the regime who have been calling on the IRGC to focus on the home front and to spend the money allocated to its affiliates on resolving the internal crises. The IRGC, which has been under fire for its deliberate interventions in regional countries and for squandering the resources of the state to achieve the regime's external aspirations, will not pass up the opportunity to gain the support of the Iranian street and to prove that it is the only establishment capable of supporting the people in the event of crises and disasters. This is in addition to proving that it is capable of playing an active and influential role at home and abroad simultaneously.

The IRGC is accused by some of the regime's institutions of working over the past years to destroy forests and pastures with the aim of selling them for commercial and investment purposes. In other parts of Iran, the IRGC established other projects which are purely profitable. These projects lacked the proper specifications and easily collapsed due to the recent floods. The IRGC established a road and a hotel down the stream of the floods in the city of Shiraz which suffered heavy losses. The other project is the railway established down the stream of the floods in the city of Aqqala in the province of Golestan, where the recent floods submerged the entire city.⁽²²⁾

Fourth: Attempts to Steal the Show Revives Old Conflicts Between the IRGC and the Government

As a result of Aqqala being submerged in the floods, the IRGC was compelled to destroy the railroad it established in order to discharge water. However, this operation triggered differences between the IRGC and the President. The two sides traded blame for days as Rouhani underrated the effectiveness and usefulness of the operation. He said that bombing the railroad with the aim of impeding the course of the floods in different parts of the country was totally ineffective. But the IRGC insisted that the operation would succeed in discharging water and curbing the damage.

In order to respond to the remarks of Rouhani which put the IRGC in an awkward situation, the commander of the IRGC ground forces Gen. Mohammed Pakpour undermined the government efforts in managing the flood disaster in the city of Pol Dokhtar in Lorestan province, west of the country. He said that the crisis lies in the weak management of the government. He added that no official in Rouhani's government dares to enter the city due to the anger of the city's citizens. The crisis management body of the Interior Ministry responded to Pakpour's comments, saying that they aimed to undermine the government's efforts to help the residents of the area.⁽²³⁾

Conclusion

The recent floods, which covered massive areas of Iran and caused huge loss of life and property, revealed the crises gripping the country. It also exposed the lack of planning and the poor infrastructure across many towns and cities.

The criticism leveled at Rouhani and the popular discontent at the government's response gave an opportunity to the radicals to continue pressuring the government and accusing it of failing to manage the flood crisis as well as blaming it for the deteriorating situation in the flood-hit areas. This led the two sides to finger-point, incriminate and to trade-blame.

THE ECONOMIC FILE

After the Rouhani government introduced to Parliament its draft budget for the new year, 1398 AH, and announced that its ability to fulfill its budgetary pledges depended on Iran exporting 1.5 million barrels of oil at an average price of \$54 per barrel, the Iranian President Hassan Rouhani headed to Iraq in a visit where he was in pursuit of support for several critical economic files. Therefore, the economic file has been set particularly to cast light on the economic dimension of this visit.

The economic aspect consists of two main parts: the first part is devoted to breaking down a major issue during the month. Currently, it is the role of Iraq in helping to overcome the US economic embargo imposed on Iran almost a year ago, the economic gains Iran received from Rouhani's visit to Iraq in March and the expected challenges. The second part deals briefly with the most important developments on the economic scene during the month and its implications for both the economy and the Iranian people.

First: After Rouhani's Visit, Will Iraq Be Iran?

None can deny the strategic importance of Iraq to the leaders of the Iranian regime. Since the Iraqi arena has been open to Iranian intervention for more than a decade-and-a-half after the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime, the Iranian regime is exploiting all opportunities to strengthen its influence in Iraq to achieve ideological, military, political and economic gains. Economic gains are Iran's top priority to make up for part of what it has spent, and to have greater benefits over the medium and long term.

Iran has given Iraq increasing importance in recent months as well as after the imposition of US sanctions against it. This interest was initiated by the visit of the Iranian central bank governor to Iraq in early February leading to the signing of important banking agreements and the three-day visit of Iranian President Hassan Rouhani to Iraq in March. It was his first visit to Iraq since he took the presidency in 2013. It was a fruitful visit on all levels for Iran, specifically on the economic level. Iran was able to sign a number of agreements and memorandums of understanding aimed at reviving its exports and foreign trade with Iraq and others, as well as easing the economic embargo imposed on its international banking transactions.

1- A dip Into the Commercial Relations Between the two Countries

The volume of trade between Iran and Iraq has jumped multiple times in the past decade in the history of trade between the two countries. But all of these increases were in favor of Iran, i.e., Iranian exports to Iraq increased about 17 times over the past decade. The volume of non-oil trade between the two countries amounted to about \$8 billion in 2018 compared to \$ 6.5 billion in 2016 ⁽²⁴⁾ while Iraqi exports to Iran were very low, not exceeding \$21 million in the first half of 2017.⁽²⁵⁾ This is in addition to the natural gas exports estimated at \$2.5 billion annually. Non-oil exports to Iraq from Iran mainly include foodstuffs, milk, meat, poultry, household items, cars, spare parts, technical and engineering services, as well as exports of mineral materials, petroleum products, and petrochemicals. The two countries agreed during the recent Rouhani visit to take due measures to increase the volume of trade to \$20 billion.



What we noticed in addition to the apparent increase in Iranian exports to Iraq, as the previous statistics show, is the radical change in the destinations of Iranian exports abroad during the past year, so that Iraq became the first destination for Iranian non-oil exports. It took China's place, which occupied second position. This is after Iraq was ranked third behind China and the UAE in 2017.

Even if US sanctions play a role in the decline in Iran's exports to China, they do not mitigate Iran's relentless pursuit of boosting its economic gains in Iraq and relying on it to make up for its export shortages to other countries such as China and Europe.

2- The Iranian Economic Gains After Rouhani's Visit

In an attempt to break the economic embargo imposed on it, Rouhani's first visit to Iraq achieved commercial gains for Iran in the near-term. Perhaps it went further to boost Iran's economic, social and cultural gains in the long-term. Here is a breakdown of the most important gains.

A. Opening Iranian Accounts in Iraqi Banks

Iran has been able to agree with Iraq to open bank accounts for Iranian exporters in Iraqi banks in its currency, following the visit of the governor of the Central Bank of Iran. Simply put, Iranian merchants will export Iranian goods to Iraq. Instead of paying in dollars as was the case until September 2018, the money will be deposited in the account of Iranian exporters in Iraqi banks in dinars and will be sent to Iranian banks in the same currency or will be sent to traders in riyals, which is the likeliest option. It could also be changed to international currencies such as euros and then transferred to Iranian banks. This has not yet been done because of its difficulty given the US sanctions. The Iranian authorities are seeking to transfer the revenues of its exports to Iraq in foreign currency to tackle the shortage of hard currency in the country.

B. Accelerating Rail Connections and Other Long-term Goals

The two sides agreed to speed up the completion of the 35-kilometer railroad starting from the Shalamchah border port between the two countries and ending in Basra. It is a short distance but will connect the two railway networks in Iraq and Iran. The total length of the two railway networks amounts to 15,000 kilometers,⁽²⁶⁾ 12,000 of which covers the entire Iranian territories (see map No. 1). It is an old project floated decades ago. It was disrupted by terror attacks and ISIS annexation of some parts of Iraq. This railway connection will boost tourism between the two countries and will also enhance trade at a time where Iran needs to expand its commercial markets.

Map No. 1 The Railway Network Inside Iran



Source: Behtash Sepahan Company for private transportation, Redesigned by Rasanah IIIS.

Perhaps Iran will achieve more important gains from the revitalization of trade with Iraq through the railway connection project. These gains would be at the level of cultural and social incursions into Iraq. An Iranian will be able to easily start his trip from Tehran to Karbala, which is of religious importance, at very low prices. A trip may cost \$15. On the other side, an Iraqi will be able to start his journey from Najaf or Baghdad to the Iranian city of Qom (see map 2).

Map 2: The Direct Line Between the cities of Qom and Muhammarah [known as Khormashaher in Farsi] on the border with Iraq



Source: Behtash Sepahan Company for private transportation, Redesigned by Rasanah IIIS.

"In view of Iran's future plans for further participation in economic activities in Syria, the Iranian Chamber of Commerce proposes a tripartite treaty between Iran, Iraq and Syria based on free trade." This was a comment made by the Iranian Chamber of Commerce President, Ghulam Shafi'i,^[27] on Rouhani's visit to Iraq in March. It reveals in one of its aspects the long-term objectives that the railway connection project will serve. It is the Iranian corridor to the Mediterranean. It starts from Iran and passes through Iraq and Syria to the Mediterranean. In addition to the sectarian, security and political priorities, the awaited economic revenues are massive whether in terms of increasing the volume of trade between the three countries. It also represents an opportunity to reconstruct the two countries after long wars and to facilitate transportation, as well as commercial and even cultural interrelations. This is in addition to reducing the cost of Iranian exports to the southern EU nations.

C. Cancelling Visa Fees as a Card Serving Iranian Trade

The two sides agreed to scrap the collection of visa fees from the citizens of the two countries as of April 2019. Although this step will deprive the treasuries of the two countries of financial resources, the direct benefit here is popular communication and integration at the grassroots level by reducing the cost of traveling between the two countries. This, of course, does not prevent commercial benefits and encourages small traders to travel and find new markets for their products, especially Iranian merchants.

The abolition of visa fees will play a role in increasing the flow of Iranian tourism to Iraq, which will help markets and the hotel sector in Iraq. This is because the number of Iranian visitors to Iraq is higher than the number of Iraqi visitors to Iran. Iran used this point as a bargaining chip in the negotiation for preferential trade advantages and reductions in customs duties from the Iraqi government on goods and raw materials exported from Iran to Iraq.

D. Establishing Industrial Zones and Increasing Energy Exports

The two sides signed several agreements and memorandums of understanding, some of which help to increase trade levels for Iran, while others contribute to the operation of Iranian infrastructure companies. These agreements included the establishment of five joint industrial zones on the borders of the two countries^[28] and cooperation in the fields of industrialization and health, as well as increasing cooperation in the field of energy and the dependence of Iraq on Iranian gas and electricity exports until Baghdad is able to set up its own power plants, which is expected to happen in three years at least, by 2022.

3- Challenges on the ground

Iraq can play a significant role in easing the economic embargo imposed on Iran through trade, export, banking facilities, transport and tourism. It must be admitted that Iran has made significant economic gains from its growing presence in Iraq in recent years and has achieved greater commercial advantages during Rouhani's recent visit. However, a large part of the success of Iran's plan to ease the US embargo on Iraq is met by two major challenges:

The first challenge is the strong link between Iraq's economic interests and the stability of its relations with the United States as well as with the international community. The Iraqi government's request for permission from the United States to exempt it from Iran's gas and electricity import sanctions is clear evidence of this. The Iraqi government's resources are still heavily dependent on crude oil exports to world markets. This is in addition to Iraq's need for help from industrial and capitalist countries in its reconstruction after the long wars since the fall of the Saddam regime in 2003 and

the latest liberation of Iraq from ISIS during the battle of Mosul in December 2017.

The second challenge, no less important than the first, is the difficulty of transferring the Iraqi dinar to Iran in the form of international currencies such as the euro or the dollar, which is not yet certain as Iraqi banks are keen not to be subject to US sanctions and annoyances. At the same time, finding sources of foreign exchange is the main objective behind the Iranian banking and trade agreements with Iraq because of Iran's need to stop the deterioration of its foreign currency and its local currency, the toman. If this is not possible, the Iranian export boom will stop because the balance of trade between the two countries is almost completely tipped in favor of Iran. What will Iranian banks do with accumulating the Iraqi dinar if there is no parallel demand from Iranians, even after meeting the needs of Iranian visitors to Iraq?

Therefore, there are economic, commercial and even strategic gains achieved by the recent visit of Rouhani to Iraq in the near and long-term. However, the role of these gains in alleviating the impact of the US embargo imposed on it nearly a year ago is still limited so far, and going forward, it is tied to the extent of Iraq's ability to defy US sanctions. This is also related to the two sides' ability to find solutions to be able to change the denomination of exports to Iraq to foreign currencies without exposing Iraq to financial sanctions.

Second: The Most Remarkable Economic Developments in one Month

In the second part of this month's economic report, we briefly review the most important developments in the economic arena and their implications for both the economy and the Iranian people, such as the impact of inflationary pressures on the daily lives of Iranians and the government's tendency to reinstate the goods subsidy card. There has also been a new trend to diversify foreign trade sources with new partners after the retreat of traditional partners such as China and Europe.

A new Iranian year began on 21 March under a new slogan routinely issued by the Iranian leader at the beginning of each solar year, this time dubbed "Year of Opportunities and Production Boom." Focusing on economic slogans reflects the concerns of the regime and Iranian citizens. The past year's slogan was dubbed 'Encouraging the Domestic Product.' The question here is: has this slogan been achieved? The answer to this question is clear. It is highlighted by the unprecedented inflation rates in the country which exceeded 40 percent during that year.

The difficulty of Iran's current economic situation has been reflected in the way Iranians spend the New Year vacation. Iranians prefer to spend the first few days of their new year or the Nowruz holiday inside Iran and preferably outside their city. However, statistics from the Iranian Students Polling Agency (ISPA) revealed that more than 58 percent of the people did not leave their city in preparation for the Nowruz vacation. More than 32 percent of Iranians did not even leave their homes during the annual holidays to reduce expenses.⁽²⁹⁾ It was commonplace for Iranians in previous years to leave their cities. The main cities become ghost towns as their residents leave for tourism in the mountains and forests across northern Iran. In an attempt to ease the harsh living conditions suffered by the people, the government has proposed the reinstatement of food subsidy cards two decades after its abolition. The matter still requires the approval of the Iranian Parliament. On the other hand, we have recently noticed a new direction in the Iranian foreign trading compass and the focus of the Iranian government on activating trade with neighboring countries in an attempt to make up for declining trade with its traditional partners such as China and Europe over the past year. Rouhani revealed this new approach in his annual speech in March on the occasion of the Nowruz, saying that the new year would see "more friendships with all neighboring

countries.” He also spoke of a plan to increase trade with 15 neighboring countries other than China and India. These countries include Iraq, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Turkey, and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS)* through preferential trade agreements and tariff reductions or through the barter of commodities. Iran’s volume of trade with China and Europe was negatively affected by US sanctions. It fell with the first trading partner, China, by about 6% percent from \$37 billion in 2017 to \$35 billion in 2018. The biggest trade decline with Europe was in 2018. It declined by 12 percent. It declined to \$20.7 billion from \$23.6 billion in 2017. On the other hand, the volume of Iranian trade with neighboring countries as we explained previously with Iraq, as well as with the CIS, increased significantly over the past year, as the following table shows (see Table 1).

Table 1: The Volume of Trade Exchange Between Iran and a Number of Countries

The rate of trade exchange in billion dollars	1720	2018	Growth rate
China	37	35	6-
Europe	23.6	20.7	12-
CIS countries	--	More than 2.2	28

Source of the data: Iran Daily, Financial Tribune, designed by the economic unit at Rasanah Institute

Conclusion

It can be said that Iran boosting trade with its neighbors is an attempt prompted by new realities. However, it is in no way a substitute for trade with Iran’s major partners such as China or Europe. The volume of trade with all neighboring countries, including Iraq, has not reached the level of trade with any of its major partners. This is in addition to the qualitative variations in the exchanged goods and commercial products, which are predominantly primitive or agricultural as is the case with Iraq. On the other side, the other products are industrial and technological in nature.

THE MILITARY FILE

Forty years after the Iranian revolution, Iran's defiance and insecurity are often on display at its military parades and exhibitions. In spite of the UN Security Council's ban on Iran purchasing weapons and US economic sanctions, Tehran has been finding ways to keep the Shah-era military arsenal operational. Its quest for modernization has led Tehran to pursue unregulated or disruptive emerging technologies i.e. drones, hacking and missiles. For a state which is facing increasing isolation, access to unregulated technologies helps it evade western sanctions that have prevented it from importing sophisticated military hardware as well as dual-use equipment.

First: Catching Up to the Age of Robots

In a recent display, Tehran exhibited a few robotic systems, most notably a black and yellowish six-wheeler unmanned ground vehicle (UGV).⁽³⁰⁾ Although the UGV did not display military markings or a name in the Press TV clip, the UGV is thought to be an advanced variant of Iran's robocar Nazir. The other military hardware displayed included a wide array of 'stealth' unmanned aerial vehicles.

The Islamic Azad University in Central Iran has dedicated its efforts to robotics, particularly for their use in the battlefield ranging from mine clearance and firing grenades as well as search and rescue missions. Besides a few other robotic machines,⁽³¹⁾ Nazir itself came to fruition after governmental technological collaboration with the university.

The unnamed robot, possibly an upgraded version of Nazir, is equipped with 12 little canisters that release smoke and other gases.⁽³²⁾ It is also capable of firing rockets while being equipped with sensors for surveillance and communication purposes. The UGV



has a sizeable internal bay, which can carry munitions or small drones and machine guns. The first version of Nazir was unveiled in 2015⁽³³⁾ while Iran's land forces were testing a robotic rocket launcher in 2016.

The robocar, shown off on the eve of the revolution's 40th anniversary celebrations, is its third variant resulting from rigorous testing. Since they have not been seen in action, the sci-fi piece on display may be a propaganda ploy similar to the Qaher-313 'fifth-generation stealth fighter' which was unveiled by the former President Mahmoud Ahmedinejad⁽³⁴⁾ but it has yet to be launched. The most recent video only shows it slowly moving on the ground in 2017.⁽³⁵⁾ As much as such tactics exaggerate Iran's military prowess, they lead the Iranian people into believing that the hefty budget allocated to the military is being used on developing indigenous state-of-the-art weapons.

Not only external threats but also Iran's necessity to promote self-reliance and satisfy internal consumption compel it to modernize its military. It is important to note that the real information about the weapons systems displayed is rarely verifiable and accurate. The ambiguity or secrecy runs the risk of undermining Iran's military prowess or exaggerating its peril.

The Iranian military has struggled to keep itself relevant in the threat-perception calculus. The Iran-Iraq war came at a time when Tehran had modern American weapons systems. Soldiers who defected from Iraq's armed forces often brought invaluable weapons with them, especially Russian fighter jets.⁽³⁶⁾ In the absence of western supply chains and no more war spoils to relish on, Iran has hastened to focus on indigenous technologies.

Second: Challenges and Opportunities

Iran's investment in unregulated dual-use technologies has been a long-term affair. The best case in point is its drone program, which began in the mid-1980s⁽³⁷⁾ and represents a significant achievement given its technological and financial handicaps.

Over the years, Iran has been promoting student interest in computer sciences, mechanics and above all robotics, which results from the interplay of various scientific disciplines. Iranian educational institutions participate in every international competition and event about robotics.⁽³⁸⁾ Furthermore, the country has been organizing national and international robotics competitions. This has not only inspired Iran's student population but has also improved its learning curve.⁽³⁹⁾

Iran made headlines in the robotics community in 2016 when one of its nationals developed and presented Olive, an intelligent robotic suitcase, at Automatica, the leading exhibition for smart automation and robotics. He was granted a startup award.⁽⁴⁰⁾ The smart suitcase not only balanced itself but was also equipped with a built-in camera connected to Wi-Fi allowing it to follow the owner.

Iran has allied itself with Russia and China for technological cooperation both of which have made significant progress in the robotics field as well as in the technologies that create their ecosystems i.e software development, 3D printing, and materials.⁽⁴¹⁾ According to a RAND study, the technological feats of 3D printing are destined to have game-changing implications for the strategic balance of power.⁽⁴²⁾ Without the need of an elaborate industrial base or advanced expertise, an engine or missile part can be printed in a laboratory. However, acquiring a heavy-duty 3D printer is neither cheap nor commonplace. China has been pursuing access to this disruptive technology to reduce its production costs by cutting down on human labor.⁽⁴³⁾ Moreover, the soaring China-US competition also necessitates Beijing to utilize 3D printing technology for military-grade equipment including parts used for robotics.⁽⁴⁴⁾

China, more than Russia, offers Iran an ideal platform for learning as well as to access



technologies for robots which can be used for civilian and military purposes. Like many developing countries, Iranian students aim to take advantage of an increasing number of scholarships to study and later work in China.

The next key component for robotics is software development or programming. Iranian universities and other institutions have been giving the discipline due attention. However, high-end software evolves after its program has been written. The mammoth task of writing programs for robots performing complex and risky maneuvers is extremely costly not only to develop but also to test in order for them to evolve into reliable operating systems. Thus, the wizardry of hacking comes to benefit technologically aspiring countries such as China, Russia, Iran and India. Successful hacking attempts have led to a loss of invaluable data concerning software programs and tested data of military equipment such as tanks, submarines and fighter jets like the F-35.⁽⁴⁵⁾ Iran's prowess in hacking has been acknowledged by western nations as well as its neighboring countries.

The RAND study noted that a 2016 experiment⁽⁴⁶⁾ "demonstrated the ease with which hackers could turn malicious codes into real-world damage with a 3D printer."⁽⁴⁷⁾ Iran, like other countries aspiring for unauthorized access to the latest technology, has relied on its expatriates, professionals and students alike.

Conclusion

Undoubtedly, Iran has expressed clear political will to access and avail of unregulated, emerging dual-use technology. If its drone prowess can be any guide, the effort has achieved moderate success even in the presence of crushing sanctions. The use of unmanned aerial, sea and land vehicles will not only save Iran's military personnel from the risk of being arrested or killed but will also provide Iran deniability of involvement. Besides, industrial-scale production of military-grade robots would swell Tehran's confidence and capability to engage in conflicts with less vulnerability. If mass produced, such tactical military-grade robots⁽⁴⁸⁾ can multiply the devastating power of its many proxies currently engaged in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen.

The efforts to regulate sophisticated technologies and cyberspace are being frustrated by countries like Russia, China, and India. Minimum or no global consensus on regulation will help Tehran accrue optimal benefit without acting roguishly. The access to 3D printers, high-end software and advanced materials are vital robotic components but their interplay requires painstaking work and expertise. So far, Iran has not demonstrated that it has proven its mettle. The substandard performance of its drones against the capabilities claimed by the IRGC is a case in point. On the flip side, the Iranian Air Force struggled for a decade to keep the US-made F-14 Tomcats airborne amidst arms embargoes. It eventually succeeded not only in operating them until now but also upgrading a few of their systems.⁽⁴⁹⁾ Thus, Iran's will, along with unyielding actions can lead it to tapping into emerging technologies, giving its military a modern-day facelift and a boost in its capabilities.

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ARAB AFFAIRS

Iran has stepped up its expansionist activities and has moved into a number of Arab countries, especially Iraq and Syria. In addition, it has boosted its support for the Houthis in Yemen in the post-ISIS period, where the United States seeks to exert pressure on Iran in an attempt to modify its behavior. Iraq has emerged as a competitive arena for Iran and the United States, with both countries perceiving the importance of Iraq as part of their foreign policy and strategic imperatives. This was the underlying motive for the historic visit of the Iranian President Hassan Rouhani to Iraq from March 11 to 13, 2019. The Chief of Staff of the Iranian armed forces, Major General Mohammad Bagheri, held a military meeting with the Chief of Staff of the Iraqi Army, Othman al-Ghanmi, and the Syrian Defense Minister, General Ali Abdullah Ayyoub, in Damascus on March 13, 2019. Meanwhile, Iran continues its financial and military support for the Houthis to thwart the Stockholm agreement and to prevent the return of security and stability to Yemen. Significantly, Iran and its agents operate actively in conflict-stricken countries, however, strong and stable countries impede the implementation of Iranian plans.



IRAN AND IRAQ

In a historic visit, after five years since he took office, the Iranian President Hassan Rouhani visited Iraq for three days from March 11 to 13, 2019. The Iranian presidential visit to Iraq is the second visit to be made by an Iranian president to Iraq after the victory of the Islamic revolution in 1979. The first visit to Iraq was carried out by the former Iranian President Ahmadinejad in 2008.

First: The Features and the Timing of Rouhani's Visit to Iraq

Initially, Iran's presidential visit to Iraq coincided with political transformations and struggles for power in the Middle East to shape regional and international power equations. At the same time, the United States intensified its efforts to mobilize regional and international powers as well as Iranian oil importers, particularly in Asia, Africa, and Europe, to comply with its sanctions. To this end, the US sanctions against Iran aim to tighten the blockade on Iran as part of the US strategy to change Iran's behavior by lowering its oil revenues, and this aim will be facilitated by the approaching deadline of the sanctions waivers granted to eight countries to continue importing Iranian oil.

Iraq has emerged as a competitive arena for both the United States and Iran since they recognize the importance of attracting Iraq to their respective spheres of influence, particularly the US wants Iraq to comply with its sanctions on Iran. The United States perceives Iraq as the only economic gateway for Iran to circumvent its sanctions. For this reason, the United States continues to exert more pressure on the Iraqi government to comply with the sanctions and to limit the influence of pro-Iranian militias in Iraq. Recently, the US Department of State added the Iranian-backed militia in Iraq, Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba, to its terror list.⁽¹⁾ The Trump administration also announced the withdrawal of US soldiers from Syria and their redeployment to Iraq in order to keep a watch on Iran in Iraq. Correspondingly, Iraqi political alliances backed by Iran are exerting more pressure on the Iraqi parliament to pass a law to expel foreign forces from Iraq, which are largely comprised of US forces.

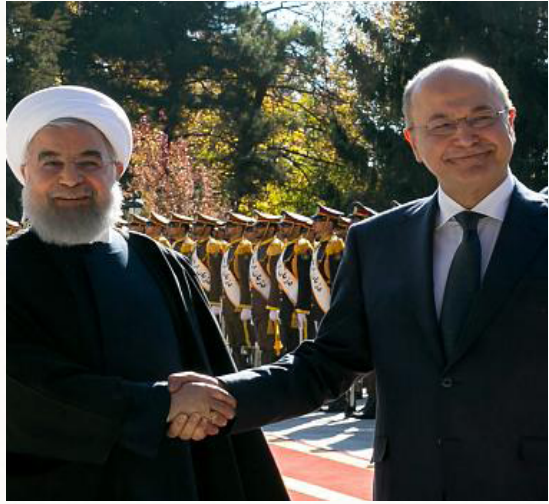
Rouhani's visit to Iraq was undertaken amid growing differences between the narrow circles within the Iranian regime. These differences are a result of the IRGC's influence in implementing Iran's foreign policy agenda in Iraq for the last decade and a half at the expense of Iran's Foreign Ministry which is supposedly responsible for the country's foreign policy. Accordingly, this has irritated the presidential office and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In this regard, the Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif submitted his resignation following the Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's meeting with the commander of the Quds Force General Qasem Soleimani and the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei without his presence or that of President Rouhani, but he later reversed his decision.

Second: The Objectives of Rouhani's Visit to Iraq

The aforementioned variables have outlined the circumstances surrounding Rouhani's visit to Iraq within the context of Iran's policy of containing its neighboring countries as a strategic choice to achieve several objectives. Firstly, it will help Iran circumvent US sanctions and to reduce their severe impact on the Iranian economy which relies on Iraq as a gateway to the world on one hand and provides more opportunities for the Iranian economy to ease the impact of US sanctions on the other hand by ensuring commercial and economic gains. Iran announced that it will raise the volume of Iranian-Iraqi trade from \$12 billion a year to \$20 billion⁽²⁾ and has called on the Iraqi government to withstand US pressure to stop importing Iranian gas and electricity. Iran also seeks to

dominate the Iraqi market while the process of reconstruction is ongoing in Iraq and is coordinating with the Iraqi government to build the Khorramshahr – Basra train line. In addition, Iraq and Iran have agreed to cancel visa fees for visitors intending to visit either country.

The second objective revolves around restoring the active role of Iranian diplomacy in implementing Iran's foreign policy agenda by limiting the role and influence of the IRGC. Zarif stated during Rouhani's visit to Iraq, "Today, it has been confirmed that the official ministry - Iran's Foreign Ministry



- is responsible for foreign policy in Iran and the international community must recognize it. This message has been delivered and I am pleased today to serve the Iranian people."⁽³⁾ This statement is adequate evidence of the Foreign Ministry exerting its importance, especially as it came after the Supreme Leader honored Qasem Soleimani in what was described as a "farewell" ceremony.

Thirdly, Iran is exerting pressure on the Iraqi Parliament to vote on a bill to expel foreign forces from Iraq which would ultimately lead to US forces being driven out and the US Airbase Ayn al-Asad in Iraq being shut down. This would curb the US administration's ability to watch or intercept any smuggling of weapons to pro-Iranian Shiite militias in Syria. This base is located in western Iraq on the main road linking Baghdad to the Syrian city Al-Qaim. The fourth goal is to keep Iraq within the Iranian sphere of influence to achieve its strategic goal of linking with Tehran.

Third: Iranian and Iraqi Gains from Rouhani's Visit

The gains made by Iran and Iraq from Rouhani's visit can be seen in the joint statement issued by both parties on March 13, 2019:

1 - Iran's Gains From the Visit

Rouhani's visit to Iraq resulted in historic gains for the Iranian regime as well as for its people. This visit was a turning point in the relations between the two countries. This improvement in relations could help towards building a comprehensive partnership to back Rouhani and Zarif in confronting the IRGC's influence in conducting Iran's foreign policy, especially in Iraq and Syria. The most important gains are highlighted as follows:

A. The implementation of the 1975 Algiers Agreement : This represents one of the most crucial Iranian gains in contemporary history, given its failure in controlling the Shatt al-Arab waterway. This has been the situation since the time of the Persian-Ottoman struggles at the beginning of the 19th century, and even during the Iraqi royal era as well as during Saddam Hussein's leadership (although he signed the agreement) Iran was unable to exert its rights over the waterway. Also, successive Iraqi governments in the post-Saddam period , including pro-Iranian alliances represented by Nouri al-Maliki refused to make any concessions on Iran's right to the Shatt al-Arab waterway because the aforementioned agreement unfairly undermined Iraq's rights and its

historic sovereignty over the Shatt al-Arab.

The joint statement stated that “The two parties are serious to implement the border agreement between Iraq and Iran dated on June 13, 1975, the protocols and agreements attached thereto. In addition, Al Amaya Terminal must be recognized as Iraqi territory like it was before, without affecting the talks of the parties for the delimitation of the maritime border between the two countries.”⁽⁴⁾ Obviously, through this historic Iranian-Iraqi agreement, Iraq has made a significant concession on its historical and sovereign rights over the Shatt al-Arab by renouncing the Iraqi borders established by the 1937 Treaty which was unilaterally abolished by Iran in 1969; it provided Iraq almost full sovereignty over the Shatt al-Arab. Under the new agreement, Iraq did not implement the Algiers Agreement’s terms providing for “Determining the international river boundary between Iraq and Iran in the Shatt al-Arab in accordance with the thalweg line”⁽⁵⁾ which divides the Shatt al-Arab equally between Iraq and Iran. Thus it authorizes Iran’s share over half of the Shatt al-Arab longitudinally up to the entrance of the Arabian Gulf. Iran becomes a sovereign partner in this area; therefore, it is possible that the Shatt al-Arab will lose its Arab name and identity and will be recognized in international maps under the Iranian name, Arvand Rud.

However, the agreement between Iraq under Saddam Hussein and Iran was signed during the Shah’s period in 1975 as a result of Iranian pressure on Saddam Hussein by supporting Kurdish separatist movements against the Iraqi regime. This pushed Saddam to eventually sign the agreement. In exchange, the Shah curbed his support for Kurdish separatist movements. Afterward, Saddam seized the chance to withdraw from the agreement before the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq war in September 1980 because it was an unfair agreement.

Rouhani’s effort to exert pressure on Iraq to accept the Agreement illustrates the Iranian regime’s desire to change the tools for implementing Iranian foreign policy (especially in Iraq) from the Revolutionary Guard to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs which is supposedly responsible for implementing foreign policy. This reflects the regime’s desire to adopt a strategic approach to move to a new stage in which the Ministry of Foreign Affairs plays a central role in implementing Iranian policy in Iraq, entitled “To harvest the gain,” evidently noted from Soleimani’s absence during Rouhani’s visit to Iraq and in the awards ceremony held by the Supreme Leader in Iran. This move came after the IRGC’s mission in Iraq was accomplished by achieving political and commercial gains as well as large-scale militia deployment. In addition, the Iranian regime is wanting to withdraw the IRGC from implementing Iran’s foreign policy, given the siege and pressure against it to halt its regional activities. This move will deliver a message to the international community that Iran is dealing with Iraq within the framework of legitimate international relations.

B. Rouhani’s visit has achieved enormous economic and commercial gains, especially under the siege imposed on it, due to the success of the visit in canceling visa fees for Iranian and Iraqi visitors as of April 1, 2019.⁽⁶⁾ This may, however, benefit Iran more considering the great difference in Iranian visitor numbers to Iraq compared to the number of Iraqi visitors to Iran. Iraq will be deprived of significant visa fee revenues. Both parties also signed memorandums of understanding to boost the level of trade relations between the countries. This would also benefit Iran more because Iraq is one of the major importers of Iranian goods while Iraq does not export anything to Iran, exacerbating the balance of trade deficit between Iraq and Iran (for more details about Iranian commercial gains from Rouhani’s visit see *The Economic File in the Internal Affairs*).

Although Rouhani achieved enormous gains from his visit to Iraq, we cannot ignore

the remarks made by the Supreme Shiite Marja Ali al-Sistani, rejecting Iranian policies on two levels. Firstly, he rejected Iran's disrespect of Iraq's sovereignty and the violation of the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of states by providing military and financial support to its pro-Shiite militias in Iraq by stating, "Iraqi sovereignty must be respected and the weapons must be in the hands of the state,"⁽⁷⁾ meaning that Iran must curb this support to its proxies. Secondly, he emphasized that, "The regional and international policies in this sensitive area must be balanced and moderate, to avert their people more tragedies and damage."⁽⁸⁾ This opposing position was represented by the most influential Iraqi Shiite figure against the Iranian regime's policy towards Iraq which seeks to keep Iraq within the sphere of Iranian influence away from its Arab environment.

2- Iraq's Gains from the Visit

Iraq's gains are considered very low. Rouhani's visit to Iraq, however, has not yet resolved the Iraqi demand to restructure its electricity debt installments owed by Iraq, especially after it made concessions over the Shatt al-Arab to Iran. At the same time, the talks did not address several issues including the waste being dumped into the Shatt al-Arab by Iranian factories which is responsible for the high rate of salinity and pollution in the water in the southern provinces, and the defective Iranian goods exported to Iraq, as well as the smuggling of Iranian drugs to Iraq across the border and the crisis of the 23 shared oil fields. Iraq accused Iran of using the Al-Fakkah Field illegally.

Fourth: The Messages of Rouhani's Visit Internally and Internationally

There are many messages that Rouhani wanted to send from his first visit to Iraq. The first was sent internally to the Revolutionary Guard that the government and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs are able to harvest the rewards for Iran's material and human sacrifices in Iraq. Secondly, on an international level, Rouhani indicated to the Arab countries that Iraq has a central position within the Iranian strategy and will remain within its sphere of influence. The third message was to the US administration that Iraq is an ally of Iran despite US efforts to limit its influence in Iraq. To this end, the United States faces a serious problem in Iraq as it has not developed alliances within influential Iraqi political circles to maintain its influence in the Iraqi equation in the post-Saddam period. Consequently, the United States failed to maintain Iraq as an area of strategic interest and influence and as a strong ally. This in turn facilitated Iran's expansionist project and its influence on Iraqi decision-making institutions.

Conclusion

Considering the foregoing, Rouhani's visit to Iraq has resulted in several gains for Iran. Iraq has become an area of influence for Iran and the visit has consolidated Iran's position to stay in Iraq for a long time formally and legally with Iraq's permission within the framework of international conventions which will turn Iraq into a gateway to the world for Iran. To conclude, Iraq was the loser from this visit by not achieving any gains and even making major concessions on half of its historical and sovereign rights over the Shatt al-Arab.

IRAN AND SYRIA

On March 13, 2019, a military meeting was held in Damascus which included Major General Mohammad Bagheri, the Chief of Staff of the Iranian Armed Forces, the Chief of Staff of the Iraqi Army Othman al-Ghanmi, and the Syrian Defense Minister, General Ali Abdullah Ayyoub, to facilitate military coordination and cooperation among the armies of the three countries in fighting terrorist organizations (ISIS and Al-Nusra Front).

First: The Significance of the Iranian, Syrian and Iraqi Military Meeting

The meeting was significant for its timing as Iran is going through a critical phase in which Iranian oil revenues have declined by almost half as a result of US moves and pressures to tighten its siege on Iran regionally and internationally by exerting pressure on the Iraqi and Syrian governments to tighten the embargo on Iran as well as on Asian and European actors as the exemption deadline quickly approaches to change the political behavior of the regime. This in turn will limit Iran's regional activities, curb its ballistic missile program and its uranium enrichment. In addition, the United States supports Israel against Iranian militias in Syria and the US recognition on March 25, 2019, Israeli sovereignty over the Syrian Golan Heights occupied since 1967.

Furthermore, the meeting was held at a time when Russia and Iran's differences in Syria are growing as a result of a divergence of interests between the Russians and the Iranians in maintaining Assad and his regime, as well as in assembling the opposition forces in one geographical area, and in eliminating the last ISIS pocket sieged in Baghouz, eastern Syria. Additionally, there are growing differences between Iran and Russia over the new Syrian state, as well as competing ambitions over monopolizing Syrian phosphate, reconstruction contracts, and influence in areas throughout Syrian territory, especially on the Syrian coast. Additionally, there is growing Russian-Israeli coordination at the expense of Iranian interests in Syria due to convergence between Russian and Israeli views on removing foreign forces from Syria, which means that Russia has given the green light for removing Iranian militias from Syria as well.

Iran's decision-makers are aware that some Arab States are involved in the Middle East Strategic Alliance, known as MESA, for which the United States has undertaken extensive visits and tours. Recently the tour of the US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo to the Middle East on March 19, 2019, to strengthen military cooperation between the member states in the hope for building a strong and solid military shield to counter Iran's interventions in the Arab region which will form part of the US strategy in isolating Iran. This alliance will be able to confront Iran's expansionist activity militarily,



politically and economically in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and Lebanon. It will also combat the smuggling of arms between Iran and its militias in the region, especially the smuggled weapons to Hezbollah across Syrian territory.

The agenda underscored the importance of the meeting because it addressed several issues in favor of the Iranian project in Syria and Iraq. For instance, the Iranians demanded the opening of the Iraqi-Syrian border crossings Al-Qa'im and Alwaleed between Syria and Iraq which was accomplished when the Iraqi army approved the opening of the border crossings between Syria and Iraq. "In the next few days, the border crossings will be opened between Iraq and Syria,"⁽⁹⁾ the Iraqi Chief of Staff stated. Also, Bagheri, Al-Ghanmi and Ayyoub agreed to remove foreign forces from Syria in reference to US forces. The Syrian side asserted that the Syrian regime will regain control over its entire land as stated by the Syrian Defense Minister, "The Syrian state will regain control over all its entire land whether by using reconciliation or military force and Idlib will never be an exception because it is one of the four de-escalation zones in which three of them came under the Syrian state control, and Idlib and others will be so."⁽¹⁰⁾ Also, the Syrian regime aspires to control the entire territory of Syria, even the areas under the control of the US-backed Kurdish factions. This indicates that the coming weeks will witness a Syrian-Iranian escalation to nationalize the remaining areas which are not under Syrian control.

Second: Iran's Objectives for the Tripartite Military Meeting

Since terrorist enclaves in Syria are almost eliminated, the Iranian objective behind the meeting was not to combat terrorism. Yet, it is part of Tehran's strategy to flex its muscles in the region and to emphasize the Tehran, Baghdad, Damascus axis led by Tehran to consolidate its presence in Syria and Iraq as well as to pave the path for forming a military alliance under Tehran's leadership, especially since the meeting coincided with the announcement of the Commander-in-Chief of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards, Major General Mohammad Ali Jafari on March 17, 2019, "Iran formed an armed force of 100,000 fighters in Iraq and 100,000 fighters in Syria."⁽¹¹⁾ In the context of counting its gains and rewards, Tehran aimed to coordinate with the Syrian and Iraqi governments militarily to implement the Iranian corridor project linking Tehran to the Mediterranean sea in consideration of its human and financial sacrifices in Iraq and Syria (see Figure 1) as well as to maintain both countries within the Iranian sphere of influence and to send messages to the following countries:

Figure 1: Iran's Corridor to the Mediterranean Sea



1 – The United States and Israel: Iran is the decision maker in Syria and Iraq and its presence in the two countries is authorized by the governments of the two countries; therefore, the US forces must leave both countries because their presence is not authorized by the governments of the two countries, Bagheri said. He further stated, “Iran sent military advisers to Syria and Iraq at the request of Iraq and Syria with the permission of their governments,”⁽¹²⁾ adding that “the foreign forces stationed illegally in Idlib and the eastern Euphrates must leave as soon as possible.”⁽¹³⁾ In addition, Iran sent a message to both countries that it will control the Iraqi and Syrian crossings which include three closed crossings: the Al-Bukamal-Al-Qa’im crossing which is under the control of Syrian forces in Deir Ez-Zor; the al-Yaarubiyah crossing which is under the control of Kurdish factions in Al-Hasakah; and the Al-Tanf crossing which is under the control of US forces of the International Coalition Against Terrorism. If Iran was able to control these three crossings, it would be a great challenge to US forces at the Al-Tanf base and it will pose a greater threat to Israeli security because it will enable Iran to link the three countries together, practically facilitating the implementation of the Iranian corridor.

2- Russia: Iran is able to implement its objectives and projects in Syria by forming military alliances with Iraqis and Syrians and the Russian-Israeli rapprochement will not be a barrier to implementing Iranian objectives and projects in Syria. Russia’s absence from this meeting further reflected Iranian-Russian divergences as not inviting the Russians to attend the meeting went against what was agreed upon in the joint operations rooms established in Baghdad and Damascus which included Russia, Iran, Syria, Iraq, and Hezbollah to cooperate and coordinate on the collection and exchange of information with respect to ISIS. This Russian-Iranian divergence came a few weeks after Assad’s visit to Tehran; as well as the agreement between Israel and Russia to remove foreign forces from Syria, including Iranian forces and militias in Syria.

3 - Arab countries: Iran also sent a message that the formation of the so-called Arab NATO would not curb the implementation of its plans in Syria and Iraq as well as a message that it is able to form military pacts to confront the military alliances which stand against the Iranian project.

Conclusion

We can say that this meeting is the first of its kind and included the three countries that remain in contact regarding geographical issues, marking a new historical and unprecedented chapter. It may lead to the creation of an Iranian-led military alliance which goes beyond the mandate of countering terrorism and will play a pivotal role in influencing regional and international conflicts. Therefore, we are now witnessing Iran’s leading position within this axis, and that the show of strength by Iran is not only directed against Washington but also Moscow and the Arab capitals directly or indirectly.

IRAN AND YEMEN

After five years of the ongoing war in Yemen between the legitimate government and the Iranian-backed Houthis who still control the capital Sana'a and some parts of the north, Iran continues to destabilize Yemen's national security by supporting the Houthis financially and militarily. We will review several lines of evidence confirming Iran's involvement in the conflict in Yemen, the condemnation by legitimate government officials of the role played by Iran in Yemen, and international reactions towards Iran's behavior in Yemen.

First: The Continuation of Iranian Support for the Houthis

Despite international condemnation against Iran's support to the Houthis and the UN Security Council resolutions prohibiting support to Houthi militias in Yemen, Iran still supports them both financially and militarily. In March 2019, Iran's support for the Houthis was monitored. Iran's support to the Houthis continued despite its economic crisis, and the natural disaster which devastated large areas as well as the apparent failure of the government to ease the humanitarian and economic crisis resulting from the floods.

1-Iranian Financial Support for the Houthis

The panel of the United Nations Sanctions Committee revealed Iran's direct involvement in weaponry and financial support to the Houthis. The Committee also proved Iran's role in threatening security and stability in Yemen by supporting the Houthis directly. In addition, the Houthis received at least \$300 million in revenues from fuel shipped from Iran's ports to fund their war against the legitimate government. The UN report proved that the Houthis collected customs revenues in the ports under its control. On otherhand, the Yemeni President Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi welcomed the report's results at a meeting with Gustavo Meza-Cuadra and the representatives of the UN Security Council on April 2, 2019 and he considered this Committee truly representative of the international will in terms of supporting the political transition and in identifying those who threaten peace and security in Yemen.

Therefore, the Yemeni government's Economic Committee called on oil traders in areas under Houthi control to apply the mechanism regulating and controlling oil trading in line with the government's decision No. 75 of 2018, which provides for preventing Iranian funding to the Houthis through ports. The Economic Committee also reported that the Houthi militia prevents traders from implementing such a mechanism.⁽¹⁴⁾

The Houthis receive 407 billion Yemeni rials annually, (\$740 million) as revenues from telecommunications companies' fees because the Houthis control internet services in Sanaa and northern Yemen.⁽¹⁵⁾

2- Iranian Military Support for the Houthis

In the second half of March, the Yemeni army announced the seizure of a shipment of Katyusha rockets on its way to the Houthi militia coming from Iran. The Yemeni Army stated on its official website that a military patrol in Bihan seized a Katyusha rockets shipment on the sandy road linking Shabwa, Eastern Yemen and Al Bayda Province. The truck and its driver were detained and an investigation had begun.

It should be noted that the Lebanese Hezbollah possesses the same rockets, having 13,000 of these rockets or more. Yemeni security forces reported that they had seized several shipments of weapons and military equipment on their way to the Houthi militia and that Iran smuggled these weapons. In cooperation with the Coalition to Support



Legitimacy or the so-called Saudi-led coalition, Yemeni security forces are making great efforts to curb the smuggling of weapons from Iran to the Houthis.⁽¹⁶⁾

The Houthis use these weapons from Iran to destabilize Yemen and to disrupt the Yemen's peace process. They targeted the headquarters of the Governmental Committee for UN Redeployment Coordination in Hodeidah with Katyusha rockets and artillery shells on Tuesday, March 13, 2019. This was considered the third attack carried out against the Committee. On the very next day, the Houthis targeted the same headquarters with a bomb-laden drone, revealing the Houthis' true intention to derail the Stockholm agreement which aims to end the Yemeni crisis.⁽¹⁷⁾

Second: The Position of the Legitimate Yemeni Government on the Iranian Role in Yemen

The statement of the Yemeni President Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi during the Arab League Summit on March 13, 2019, represents Yemen's official position regarding the destabilizing Iranian role in Yemen and its involvement in this catastrophe. He said that "the coup of the Houthi militias backed by the terrorist regime in Iran is beyond description." He also added that the tragedy of the war has affected every town, street and house and that the Iran-backed militia has exacerbated economic, humanitarian and security issues in Yemen. This statement made by the Yemeni President is a clear condemnation of the Iranian intervention in Yemen's affairs and it reiterates so many Yemeni officials' statements condemning the Iranian role in Yemen for supporting the Houthi militia and its terrorist involvement. He also praised the active Arab action represented by Operation Decisive Storm in Yemen, which focuses on the security of Yemen and the Arab nations. He also said that sectarian militias prevented Yemenis from building the new federal Yemen project "The sectarian militias have destroyed everything that has been agreed upon in order to build a new federal Yemen, based on partnership instead of exclusion, cooperation instead of struggle and peace instead of wars". The Yemeni President also referred to the militia's violations of the Stockholm agreement with Iranian incitement to thwart the peace talks. "The Houthi militia with Iran's incitement deliberately thwarted these talks and voided it of any substance by refusing to implement it, most recently is the Stockholm agreement." He also condemned the Iranian regime calling it a terrorist actor which works hard to destabilize security and stability in the Arab region by stating "Iran has vaunted, with arrogance, pride and racism, that the fourth Arab capital has fallen into its hands."⁽¹⁸⁾

In this context, the Yemeni Foreign Minister Khalid al-Yamani blamed the Iranian regime and the Houthi militia for the failure of the Swedish agreement and called to take a firm stand in punishing the Iranian regime for supporting the Houthi militia. He said that the Houthi militia is seeking to exploit the humanitarian tragedy in Yemen. "The deadline for the completion of the first phase of the redeployment plan ended,

and the militia continues to refuse to withdraw from the port of Salif and the port of Ras Issa, without giving reasons.” Al-Yamani explained that according to the peace agreement, the first phase of the plan to open and secure the road to the Red Sea Mills must be implemented but the Houthis’ militia has so far refrained from handing over the maps of the mines they planted in the area and has insisted that the mines should not be removed from the areas of their redeployment. Handing over the map is “essential” for implementing the agreement, adding that it would be useless to suggest any other peace initiatives or talks unless the Houthis withdraw from Hodeidah and comply with the Swedish agreement.⁽¹⁹⁾ The Yemeni Information Minister, Muammar Al-Iryani, said that all Yemeni government officials have stated on numerous occasions that the legitimate government will not be involved in any talks unless the other party complies with the terms of the agreement.

Third: The International Position on the Iranian Support for the Houthis in Yemen

1- The position of the United Nations: In an attempt to save the stalled Swedish agreement, the Security Council held a closed meeting on March 13, 2019. General Michael Lollesgaard, as head of the new UN mission to observe the redeployment in Hodeidah, offered a plan on the current situation in Yemen to the Council. UN diplomats told the Council that the Houthis refused to withdraw from the Al-Saleef and Ras Eisa ports, and they mentioned that the legitimate government forces would regain control over those ports.⁽²⁰⁾

2- The British position: The British Foreign Minister Jeremy Hunt severely condemned the Houthis during his visit to the Yemeni temporary capital Aden, blaming the Houthis for ending the Swedish agreement. These remarks by the British Foreign Secretary and the British Ambassador to Yemen Michael Aron, reflect the shift in the British position. This position is considered a turning point in the course of the Yemeni crisis. Similarly, the British ambassador in Yemen asserted that Yemen without Iranian influence and Saudi territorial integrity are at the top of Britain’s goals in Yemen, adding that no political settlement can end the war without achieving these.⁽²¹⁾

3- The US position: The difference between the Democratic and Republican parties affected the Senate vote to end the President’s support for the legitimate government in Yemen. However, the Senate voted 54-46 from the Democratic Party, including seven from the Republican Party. According to the Wall Street Journal, the US Secretary of State Pompeo said that the decision can only benefit Iran, which is engaged in a proxy war in Yemen adding that if you really care about Yemenis’ lives, you would support the Saudi-led coalition to prevent Yemen from turning into a puppet state. The US Secretary of State’s statement represents the US administration’s intention to support the legitimate government and the Arab coalition in confronting the Iranian project in the region, especially in Yemen. Therefore, the US President is likely to veto against this resolution.⁽²²⁾

Conclusion

Iran continues with its destructive role in Yemen by supporting Houthis with weapons and money for prolonging the war and thwarting the establishment of a new Yemeni federal state that will force the Houthi party to comply with the Swedish agreement. The legitimate government calls on the international community to stand against the Iranian project represented by the statements made by Yemeni officials in all forums and events regionally and internationally including the Security Council and the UN committees. Both have been unable to establish a roadmap for a comprehensive political solution in Yemen.

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INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

In March, Iran's interactions with the international arena saw significant developments. The US sanctions exemption granted to eight countries importing Iranian oil expires within a few weeks. Thus, the Iranian government will face unprecedented pressure. The Europeans are keen to maintain the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) to contain Iran's power and to limit its threats to regional and international security. The talks between Iran and Europe continue to discuss European guarantees, including a financial mechanism to preserve the nuclear deal. Despite European reservations over Iran's regional behavior, its domestic policy and its activities inside Europe, Iran is not ready to give up on its talks with the Europeans. In this context, we cannot disregard Russia-Iran relations. Not only does Russia have reservations towards US policy towards Iran, but it also rejected the US unilateral withdrawal from the nuclear deal and the reimposition of sanctions by the US on Tehran. Moreover, Russia-Iran mutual interests in Syria, Afghanistan and the Caucasus have enhanced their relationship. It is quite important to study Iran's relations with other regional powers like Turkey, India, and Pakistan which Iran relies on as strategic trade partners to circumvent US sanctions.



IRAN AND THE UNITED STATES

The latest developments in March unveiled that the United States aims to place further pressure on Iran by targeting its domestic revenues, its regional influence and curbing its international maneuvers. The US pressure has had a significant impact on Iran’s domestic and international affairs. Iran faces US escalation through confrontation and by avoiding dialogue.

First: Aspects of the US Maximum Pressure Strategy on Iran

1- The US Department of the Treasury’s Sanctions

The US pressure on Iran has escalated. Table 1 illustrates the sanctions the US Department of the Treasury imposed on Iran in March 2019.

Table 1: The US Deaprtment of the Treasury’s Sanctions on the IRGC and its Militias in March

Date	Entities and Individuals	Reason
March 5 th	Harakat Hizbollah al-Nujaba leader Akram Abbas al-Kabi	Jeopardizing Iran’s security and stability
March 22 nd	14 individuals and 17 entities in connection with Iran’s Organization of Defensive Innovation and Research (SPND)	Prevent Iran from recruiting experts and scholars in its nuclear weapon program.
March 26 th	25 individuals and entities, including a network of Iran, UAE, and Turkey-based front companies.	The network transferred over a billion dollars and euros to the IRGC and Iran’s Ministry of Defense and Armed Forces Logistics (MODAFL),

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2- Escalation Against Iran’s Continuous Missile Tests

The US ambassador called on the UN, addressing the UN Security Council to confront the threats of Iran’s missile tests as they violates UN Security Council Resolution 2231.⁽¹⁾ Yleem Poblete, Assistant Secretary of State for Arms Control told the UN-sponsored Conference on Disarmament on March 19 that Washington would aggressively address “Iran’s regional proliferation of ballistic missiles and its unlawful arms transfers.”⁽²⁾ The United States sees Iran’s ballistic missile program as a risk to regional security and stability, increasing the risk of a regional arms race.

3- Confronting Iran's Regional Influence

The United States stressed that it will not accept another copy of Hezbollah in Yemen. The Warsaw Conference led to the formation of Arab and European action groups to confront Iran's influence in the region and to maintain stability in the Middle East.⁽³⁾

The recent military agreement between Muscat and Washington boosted their military cooperation, affecting Iran's interests in the region. The agreement allows US forces to use the Omani ports of Duqm and Salalah in the Arabian Sea for its aircraft and ships.⁽⁴⁾ This step is interpreted in the context of the US maximum pressure strategy against Iran. It will also confront Iran's methods to bypass US sanctions, deter its maritime threats, protect Gulf oil ships, and block its aid to the Houthi militia.

4- Driving Iran's Crude Oil Exports to Zero

Brian Hook, the U.S. Special Representative for Iran, said that the United States does not intend to extend the sanctions waivers for the eight countries importing Iranian oil. The US Department of the Treasury put pressure on some Asian countries to comply with US sanctions on Iran's oil exports. Referring to Singapore and Malaysia, the US Department of the Treasury, under Secretary Sigal Mandelker said, "It's very important that these countries have important visibility into the different ways the Iranian regime uses to deceive the international community in connection with the shipment of oil."⁽⁵⁾ The significance of these two countries come from their strategic location on the Straits of Malacca, which the United States believes to be Iran's gateway for directly or indirectly transferring its oil shipments to the Asian countries. To achieve this goal, Iran uses different shipping companies, and ships carrying flags of other countries as well as many other methods. The United States disclosed Iran's circumventing methods to the two Asian countries to help Washington in implementing sanctions against Tehran.

1- The US Increases its Criticism of Iran's Human Rights Record as a Pressure Tactic

The 2018 US State Department report on human rights disclosed that the Iranian government intensified its tough measures against peaceful protesters in 2018. The regime committed several human rights violations at home and abroad, including arming and funding terrorist groups in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen.⁽⁶⁾ Here the United States seeks to draw more attention to the human rights record in Iran as part of its campaign to pressure Tehran, affecting the regime's legitimacy in the international arena.

2- Confronting Cyber-attacks

Microsoft deactivated 99 domains operated by the IRGC that were used to steal sensitive information and to launch cyber-attacks against governmental agencies, companies, and individuals.⁽⁷⁾ This is also a part of the US campaign to confront the dangers of Iran's mushrooming cyber-attacks.

Second: Impact of US Sanctions on Iran

The impact of the US maximum pressure campaign is seen in Iran at home and abroad, especially in its trade volume balance.

1- Oil Exports Decreased

US sanctions contributed to a dramatic decrease in Iran's oil exports, which fell almost 50% since the US withdrawal from the nuclear deal in May 2018 and have reached 1.1 billion barrels since then.⁽⁸⁾ In the next round of sanctions, the United States aimed to tighten pressure on the countries granted waivers to import Iranian oil in a way that would not affect the global oil market or cause oil prices to spike. By the end of March Japan had already stopped importing oil from Iran although its exemption from US

sanctions is set to end in May because there are no guarantees to receive the last oil shipments before May.

2- A decrease in the Trade Volume

Iran’s oil exports to some countries dropped to zero while they dramatically decreased to 60 percent with other countries.⁽⁹⁾ Table 1 illustrates the impact of US sanctions on Iran’s trade balance with its partners in January-February 2019 in comparison to the same period in 2018.

**Table 2: Impact of US Sanctions on Iran’s Trade
With Some of Its International Partners**

Country	Level of partnership	Iran’s exports in Feb-Jan 2019 compared to the same period in 2018	Iran’s imports in Feb-Jan 2019 compared to the same period in 2018
China	Iran’s largest trade partner and oil importer	Exports to China declined by 65% to \$428 million	Imports declined by 34% to \$2.3 billion
India	The second largest importer of Iran’s oil	Exports increased by 64% to approximately \$332 million as Tehran imports most of its food and agricultural products from India	Imports declined by 30% to \$718 million.
South Korea	The third largest importer of Iranian oil	Exports declined to \$34 million in comparison to \$190 million in 2018.	Imports declined by 28% to \$485 million.
Japan	The fourth largest importer of Iran’s oil in Asia	Exports decreased to \$4 million compared to \$83.3 million in 2018.	Imports declined to \$134 million compared to \$668 in 2018.
Turkey	The largest importer of Iran’s oil in Western Asia	Exports declined by 27% to \$191 million.	Imports declined by 28% to \$485 million.
The United States	-----	Exports reached zero	Iran’s imports from the United States reached \$4.5 million in 2019.

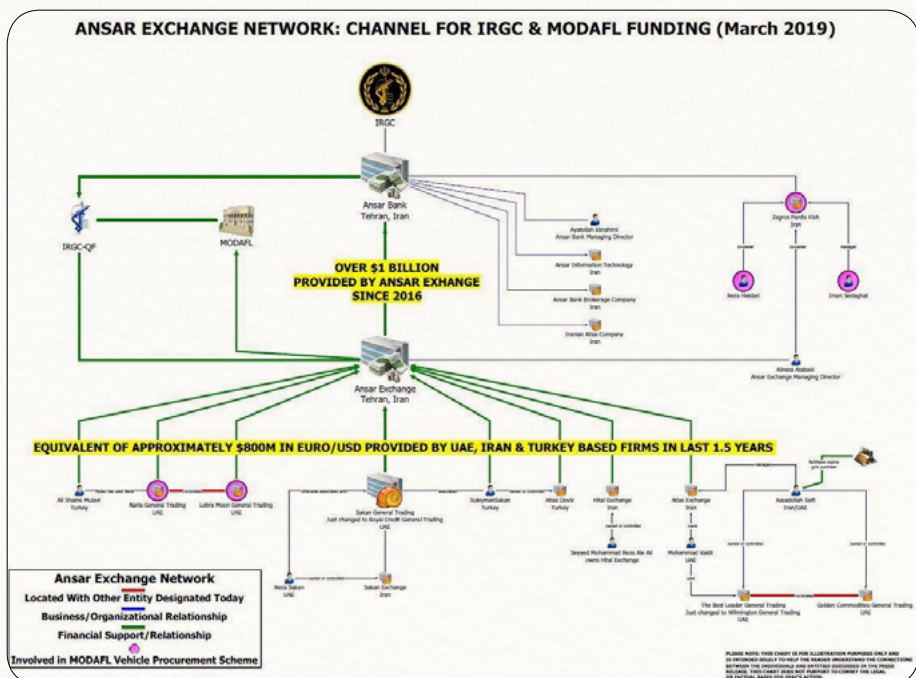
Source: <https://arbne.ws/2WFPkIN>.

Following the US maximum pressure campaign, living conditions deteriorated: skyrocketing prices, acute shortage of essential imported drugs, a notable drop in foreign currency exchange due to tightening sanctions on financial transactions with Iran and an inability to access oil revenues collected in foreign banks. Without a shadow of a doubt, these harsh conditions triggered an internal crisis that made the Iranian President Hassan Rouhani state that Iran is confronting its most severe economic challenge in 40 years. Apparently, the US sanctions campaign is effective in placing further pressure on the Iranian regime internally to force it back to the negotiating table, or face the prospect of collapsing due to growing internal crises.

4- Curbing Iran's Support to Its Proxy Militias

The US maximum pressure campaign has affected Iran's ability to fund its proxy militias and allies in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon and Yemen. This can be clearly seen in the remarks of Hassan Nasrallah, the leader of Lebanon's Iran-backed Hezbollah as he clearly stated that the US sanctions affected the movement's revenues, urging supporters to donate money. According to TankTrackers.com, a website which keeps a track of oil barrels in storage and transit, Iran has not managed to ship oil to Syria since January 2, 2019.⁽¹⁰⁾ Brian Hook, the US Special Representative for Iran, said on March 22 that the US sanctions campaign is working and it has deprived Hezbollah of receiving \$700 million a year from the Iranian regime.⁽¹¹⁾ It appears from the aforementioned facts that US sanctions have curbed Iran's funding and support to its proxy militias, which play an integral role in enhancing its influence in the region.

(Figure 1) describes an exchange network which transferred over a billion dollars and euros to the IRGC and Iran's Ministry of Defense.



Third: Iran's Options to Confront the US Maximum Pressure Campaign

Iran relies mainly on oil smuggling to bypass US sanctions. The Iranian President Hassan Rouhani said that Iranian oil exports will continue even if the United States did not extend the sanctions waivers. He also remarked on March 6 that it is less likely that Iran would negotiate with the United States on thorny issues because Washington aims to topple the 'Islamic regime' in Iran.

The Iranian regime seeks to mitigate the impact of US sanctions through adopting a regional policy, which includes circumventing sanctions, using its influence to ease the impact of US sanctions and its escalation.

This comes in the context of Rouhani's visit to Iraq.⁽¹²⁾ Tehran relies on Baghdad as a strategic path to bypass US sanctions on its oil exports and its financial transactions. Iran exploits its broad influence in Iraq through its active Shia militias and politicians occupying key positions in the Iraqi government, who have expressed their willingness to cooperate with Iran and have rejected US sanctions on Tehran, claiming that they impacted Iraq's joint interests with Iran, especially in power and gas supply.

Conclusion

The United States still counts on its sanctions campaign as an effective strategy to curb Iran's activities internally, regionally and internationally. The US sanctions aim to achieve the following goals: worsen the internal economic crisis triggering public discontent against the regime, deprive the Iranian regime of revenues that it needs to complete its ballistic missile program and its illegal activities, curb Iran's influence in the region through cutting off its revenue stream that is used to fund its expansionist project and its proxy militias in the region, and to cut off access to any international powers trying to ease the impact of sanctions through oil smuggling or financial transactions with Iran, defying the US sanctions.

Apparently, the next phase of the US-Iran confrontation will be over oil as the 180-day sanctions waivers granted to eight countries expire in May 2019 and the US administration is focusing on two options: not renewing the sanction waivers or decreasing Iran's oil imports in a way that will not affect the global oil market.

IRAN AND EUROPE

Common interests play an integral role in the Europe-Iran relationship. The two parties are keen to maintain JCPOA. The European guarantees to help Iran bypass US sanctions marked the recent developments in their relationship. However, there are other thorny files posing a challenge to the Europeans and a threat to the Iranians. The push and pull of Europe-Iran ties were clearly notable in March.

First: Mutual Efforts to Save the JCPOA

Europe-Iran talks are still ongoing. Their cooperation can be seen as follows:

1- Meeting of JCPOA Joint Committee

Managers, politicians, and assistants to the foreign ministers of Iran and to the other P4+1 countries as well as the Secretary General of the European External Action Service, Helga Schmid, met in Vienna where they discussed nuclear safety, safe management of spent nuclear fuel and radioactive waste, as well as legal acts and operational measures of the JCPOA. ⁽¹³⁾ Despite the US withdrawal from the nuclear deal, the ongoing talks between the two parties clearly indicate European willingness to preserve the deal.

2- Negotiations on Activating INSTEX

A delegation from the European Troika visited Iran where they met with Iranian officials, discussing ways to hasten the implementation of INSTEX quickly. At the same time, the head of Europe's new trade channel for Iran, INSTEX President Per Fischer met with Iranian officials and heads of the German, French and British delegations. ⁽¹⁴⁾ They discussed how businesses can benefit from the new INSTEX system and the procedures needed to develop this financial mechanism on a trade level.

3. Iran's New Mechanism to Trade with Europe STFI

Iran's Central Bank announced on March 19 the new Special Trade and Finance Institute (STFI) which will work with INSTEX to facilitate financial transactions and trade with Europe. It was registered with one million rials and will be supported with more revenues in accordance with its effectiveness, Iran's Central Bank reported. ⁽¹⁵⁾ STFI is an Iranian mechanism parallel to INSTEX.



The Europe-Iran talks indicate that the EU and the European Troika are still keen to keep channels of communication and understanding open with Iran to maintain the nuclear deal with Iran. They are also eager to enhance the new financial mechanisms to avoid any conflict with the United States.

Second: European Pressure Tactics Against Iran

Though the Europeans are keen to keep the channels of communication open with the Iranians to contain the Iranian regime and to preserve the nuclear deal, they still place further pressure on Iran as follows:

1- More Restrictions and Sanctions on Iran

On March 20, France forced Mahan Airlines to cancel its Paris flights as of April 1. On March 14, the Dutch government announced that it will closely monitor the Iranian students and scholars working in the Netherlands to prevent them from obtaining “dangerous technologies” that may help Iran develop its ballistic missile program. This step is taken under a comprehensive program the Netherlands launched to “intensify monitoring students and scholars who came from very dangerous countries”. The British Interior Minister Sajid Javid said that the British government added the political wing of Lebanon’s Hezbollah to its list of banned “terrorist” organizations. The UK is moving toward tightening its pressure on Hezbollah and its proxies deployed in Europe. The Netherlands implemented this ban before the UK did.

2- European Sanctions Related to Iran’s Human Rights Record

The members of the European Parliament criticized Iran’s human rights violations and called on the Iranian authorities to immediately release human rights activists and journalists jailed for expressing their views and for their involvement in public mobilization. The European countries, including France and Norway, criticized the prison sentence of the Iranian human rights activist and attorney Nasrin Sotoudeh.⁽¹⁶⁾ The human rights record remains a point of contention, which the Europeans rely on to place further pressure on Iran.

3- Monitoring the Activities of Shiite Centers in Europe

Some European countries have tracked the activities of Shiite centers in their territories. In March, French authorities took measures to stop the activities of four Shiite centers loyal to Iran. The Danish authorities disclosed documents confirming the Foundation of Imam Ali Mosque, affiliated to the Ahl-Albayet Foundation in Copenhagen, acts as a communication channel linking the Iranian government with Iranian migrants and Danish citizens. German intelligence unveiled the relationship of the Imam Ali Mosque to Iran and that it works under the Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, and its relationship to another mosque in Copenhagen, which is identified by German intelligence as a “central propaganda proxy for the theocratic rule in Iran.”

European contempt for these foundations is due to several reasons: their expanding role exceeding their main task of providing care to the minority that they represent and bypassing the governmental regulations for their activities; their policies and goals that jeopardize the national security of some countries. For example, the different European authorities found unlicensed weapons at these centers.

Third: Iran’s Position on the European Union

We can track the dimensions of the Iranian position on the European Union by exploring the following factors:



1- Iran's Doubts over European Sincerity

Iran continues to cast doubts over Europe's sincerity and its eagerness to maintain the nuclear deal through providing Iran guarantees to bypass US sanctions. The financial vehicle will set up a transaction channel to circumvent US sanctions, the European Troika seems the keenest among the Europeans to activate this mechanism — whereas other countries still have concerns over joining this mechanism. Moreover, it turned into a tool to blackmail Iran to save the nuclear deal.

2- Disagreements Between the Branches of the Iranian Government Iran's

Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei commented on March 21 on the setting up of a financial vehicle between Iran and Europe, "Europe's financial channel introduced recently is more like a bitter joke and meaningless." He also on a previous occasion said, "do not wait for Europe."⁽¹⁷⁾ His remarks reflect a current inside Iran which does not believe in European promises and sees them as mere words. However, there is another current which believes that there is a clear disagreement between the European Union and the United States on Iran, which must be fully exploited to block the way for any US-EU rapprochement against Iran.

3- Cancellation or Suspension of FATF

Without a doubt, the disagreements between the European governments impact the cancellation or the joining of the Financial Action Taskforce (FATF). The two bills concerning joining the FATF are still under negotiation at the Expediency Council. The majority of the Expediency Council members have rejected the bills while some of its leaders expressed their disagreement over the government's attempt to pass these two bills according to them they serve the interests of the international powers, especially the Europeans.

The Expediency Council rejecting the two bills approved by the Parliament and submitted by the government undermines Iranian expectations on the activation of the financial vehicle INSTEX because joining the FATF is one of the European conditions to activate this financial vehicle.

Conclusion

The Europeans are taking baby steps towards activating their nuclear guarantees and in helping Tehran to circumvent US sanctions. This slowness has affected their economic ties with Iran. The European Commission announced on March 1 that the trade volume between Iran and 28 EU countries decreased by 18.392 billion euros in 2018. This notable decline is due to US sanctions which affected the economic cooperation between Iran and the EU countries. The decline is estimated at 12 percent in comparison to 2017 when the trade volume reached 20.952 billion euros. The trade volume is expected to dramatically deteriorate in the next stage. For example, Nokia announced in its annual report that it will not carry out any new business in Iran in 2019 and it intends to only complete existing contractual obligations in Iran in compliance with applicable economic sanctions and other trade-related laws.

The non-activation of an alternative financial vehicle to circumvent the US sanctions will negatively affect trade volume. Apparently, European-Iran negotiations on this subject are restricted and almost inactive.

Despite the open communication channels between the two parties, the thorny files have not been resolved yet. All the EU countries agreed to save the nuclear deal but only the European Troika countries are committed to implementing the EU guarantees following the US withdrawal from the deal. Moreover, the commitment to the EU guarantees is conditioned; the activation of the financial vehicle is conditioned to Iran's approval to the European conditions and foremost of which is joining the FATF. Needless to say, some European countries have reservations about Iran's regional behavior and activities jeopardizing national security in Europe. This can be clearly seen in the European authorities' monitoring Shiite centers in Europe, Iranian policies destabilizing the Middle East, and Tehran developing its ballistic missile program. The previously mentioned European concerns and measures impact its relationship with Iran.

Iran has no option but to cooperate with the Europeans in spite of the undesirable conditions due to several reasons: maintaining a wide gap between the Europeans and Americans with regard to its policies; investing in European efforts to circumvent US sanctions, and gaining more time to change the status quo, hoping that one of the parties would change its position, especially that of the US — if Trump loses in the upcoming presidential elections.

PAKISTAN AND IRAN

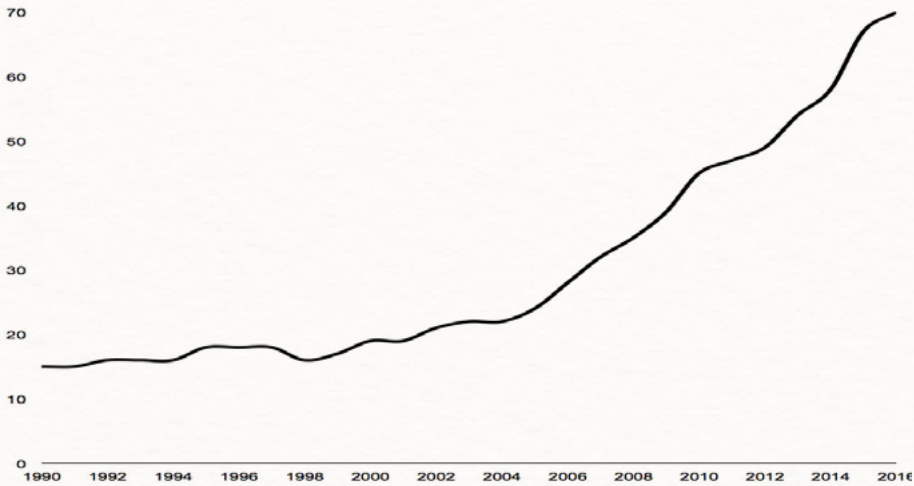
The use of border fences for security has a long history, with China's Great Wall being a famous example of how a massive cement structure was used to keep out raiding nomadic tribes that were causing havoc in China's interior. This simple security measure, despite the evolution and complexity of security threats, has continued to be used by modern-day governments to deal with a host of non-traditional security threats with an explosion in its use post 9/11, with the expansion of cross-border terrorism.

This part of the Iran case file, aims to analyse the potential construction of a border fence between Pakistan and Iran, with a particular focus on trying to investigate the causes which prompted this border fence to be proposed, its implications, and its effectiveness in improving the security situation in the eastern region of Iran, particularly on lowering the level of goods, arms, and drugs that are smuggled as well as militant attacks from groups situated in Pakistan. Before delving into the crux of the analysis, it is important to look at the use of border fences for security by countries around the world and their effectiveness in improving security, which allows ground for analysis on the impetus behind Tehran and Islamabad moving to fortify their shared border with a border fence, particularly looking at its costs, implications, and effectiveness.

First: The Effectiveness of Border Fences on National Security

According to Elizabeth Vallet, a geography professor at the University of Quebec in Canada, at the end of World War 2, there were only seven border fences in the world, with this number rising to 15 by the time the Berlin Wall fell in 1989.⁽¹⁸⁾ Today, there are 77 border fences in the world, with more countries resorting to this measure, and with an upsurge in 2015 (see chart below), as countries as varied as Austria, Bulgaria, Estonia, Tunisia, Kenya, Israel, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Norway announcing or beginning work on border fences to curb the flow of asylum seekers and migrants that could have an adverse impact on public budgets, employment, social cohesion and internal security.⁽¹⁹⁾ Despite, this upsurge, the question that needs to be answered is whether border fences are really effective in responding to pending security threats or indicate a desperation on behalf of countries to do something to deal with public pressure in response to an increasing flow of migrants and terrorism? When looking at some of the available data, it can be seen that on some issues and in certain realities border fences have been successful and in others not so. For example, since Israel constructed its border fences with the occupied Palestinian territories, the number of attacks on it dropped by 90 percent and when Morocco built its 1,700-mile system of ditches, fences and minefields, the Polisario Front became ineffective to a measurable extent.⁽²⁰⁾ However, some alternative data shows that groups intent on carrying out attacks figure ways around border fences by digging tunnels, using missiles and trying to enter via ports. When looking at migration flows from the data that is available, it is apparent that border fences do not prevent but divert migrants to finding different routes or alternative ways. For example, in the European migration crisis in 2016, when land routes via the Balkans were closed to migrants, they resorted to crossing the Mediterranean from North Africa. Also, since the 1990s the United States has found 150 tunnels under the US-Mexico border fence that covers only one-third of its 1,969-mile length.⁽²¹⁾

Turkey, a country facing terrorist threats and a growing migrant flow is not only fencing its border with Syria but is building a 144km long wall on its eastern border with Iran and is intent on building a wall with Iraq in the future as well. Turkey's



Source : Élisabeth Vallet, Zoé Barry, Josselyn Guilmarmou - Chaire Raoul-Dandurand, UQAM - Canada.

Interior Minister Suleyman Soylu, as reported by the news site Duvar, said that Turkish authorities had seen an increase in migrants from Iran, prompting Turkey to build a wall in Agri and Igdir, two Turkish provinces bordering Iran. He added that approximately 2.5 million Afghans are waiting on the Iranian border and that 95 percent of the wall in Igdir had been completed, with irregular migration in Igdir according to Turkish authorities decreasing by 90 percent.⁽²²⁾ However, like the other cases mentioned, no border fence is 100 percent effective, and independent data over a period of time will attest to the effectiveness of the Turkish-Iran border. In summary, the data available is not conclusive on the effectiveness of border fences, with varied results depending on the security issue, the reality at hand, and the countries involved. The debate on border fences and their effectiveness will rage on but there is agreement on a need for governments to look beyond the phenomena of border fences and to invest in improving bilateral relations, human development, and governance to combat shared security threats rather than resorting to a measure most familiar with prisons in a world interconnected particularly by the relatively free movement of peoples across lands.

Second: Official Statements and Reactions to Pakistan's Decision to Fence 950km of its Shared Border With Iran

To calm Iranian concerns about cross-border militant attacks from Pakistan, Islamabad intends to fence 950km of the border linking Pakistan's Baluchistan province with Iran's Sistan and Baluchistan province. The 950km border which begins at the Kuh-i-Malik Salih mountain and ends at Gwadar Bay in the Gulf of Oman includes a diverse landscape of mountain ridges, seasonal streams and rivers, and is fertile ground for human trafficking and smuggling as well as cross-border terrorism. Tehran stepped up its pressure on Islamabad in the aftermath of a suicide attack on an Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) convoy that left 27 dead and wounded 13 soldiers on February 13, 2019. The IRGC personnel had been traveling between the cities of Zahedan and Khash in the Sistan and Baluchistan province when their bus was targeted in a car-bomb attack.⁽²³⁾ In response, Major-General Asif Ghafoor, the Director-General of Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) said, "We both are considering fencing the border so that no third party

(terrorist) could sabotage the brotherly and friendly relations through any nefarious act.”⁽²⁴⁾ Lt.Gen. Asim Saleem Bajwa, commander of the army’s southern command in Baluchistan, said the fencing would help contain terrorism and smuggling.⁽²⁵⁾ The Iranian reaction to Islamabad’s proposal was somewhat supportive despite Tehran’s reservations, with the Chairman of the Iranian Parliament’s National Security and Foreign Policy Commission Heshmatollah Falahatpisheh stating to Fars News Agency, “The Interior Minister and members of the commission underlined that Pakistan lacks the capability to build a wall at the borders (but) Iran strongly welcomes construction of a wall at the borders with Pakistan.”⁽²⁶⁾ According to a member of parliament, Iran’s Interior Minister strongly supports Islamabad’s decision on building walls at its border with Iran to boost security.⁽²⁷⁾

Third: Costs and Implications

Despite Islamabad being eager to appease Tehran to keep it away from fully falling into India’s strategic orbit, there are question marks relating to the costs of the border fence, and its details, as well as its effectiveness and its implications for informal trade and its potential human cost. From the aforementioned quote by Major-General Asif Ghafoor, it would indicate that both Pakistan and Iran would share the cost of the border fence, but so far, no details have been made public on how the costs would be distributed and which party would carry the major share of the project’s financial as well as labor burden.

At this moment in time, it would be financially difficult for Islamabad to engage in such a massive project, given that it is still in the process of fencing its border with Afghanistan and is facing a worrying economic front, leading it to take loans from its close allies such as Saudi Arabia, and the UAE as well as it likely to seek assistance from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in the near future. Likewise, Iran is in no position to contribute significantly to the border fence, given its own internal economic worries that have led to ongoing protests, and with its regional expansionist projects in countries such as Syria, Iraq and Yemen requiring ongoing investments.

What is required is more effective anti-smuggling and counter-terrorism coordination and operations by both countries, which would mean building trust between the two countries and Iran seems to be hesitant given Pakistan’s warm relations with the Gulf states, particularly with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. This Iranian hesitancy has been heightened by the recent visit of the Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman to Islamabad where he announced an investment package worth \$20 billion, including setting-up an oil refinery in the strategically important Gwadar deep-water port.

A border fence would cost both countries billions of US dollars due to the area’s topography being difficult and would negatively impact informal trade that happens across the bordering areas. A lot of people in Pakistan’s Baluchistan province bordering Iran depend on informal trade given the poor economic conditions and low formal employment opportunities. In addition, ethnic Baluchi tribes living on either side of the border such as the Rigi and Shahi Zai tribes have assimilated into each other’s cultures, with inter-marriages and strong ties of tradition and religion.⁽²⁸⁾ Significant human fallout would be the consequence of the border fence materializing, similar to the human fallout caused by the Durand Line between Pakistan and Afghanistan, as well as the border fence being built between the two countries.

Conclusion

It is hard to see how the border fence will drastically improve security in Iran’s eastern region, as the topography of the area is difficult, which means that policing the area will be extremely difficult even if advanced technology is used. Also, smugglers and

militants are well acquainted with the terrain on the border and will resort to their intimate knowledge of the area to bypass any border fence by digging tunnels to enter Iran. This endeavor will be aided by tribal linkages and affiliations across the border in the Sistan and Baluchistan province, allowing smugglers and militants to evade the border fence.

When it comes to militant attacks, Iran needs to be more introspective as to why militants would want to carry out attacks in its Sistan and Baluchistan province rather than pressuring Pakistan to build a border fence. It seems like Tehran is deflecting blame to Pakistan, which is rather convenient as it allows it to escape the real reasons of ongoing instability in the region fuelled by socio-economic deprivation and minority oppression by the Iranian state which is intent on Persianizing minorities, religiously as well as culturally. It is important to note that the insurgency in the Sistan and Baluchistan province has been going on for a long period of time and it has its roots in the province, and it can not be overcome by building a border fence which does nothing to address the underlying critical factors which have stirred unrest for decades. The Ahvaz, Kurdish, and Baluchi resistance movements are not to be deterred by a border fence but are more likely to gather more collective will and determination to hit Iran with more serious security blows.

Endnotes

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March 2019



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