

MONTHLY REPORT



IRAN CASE FILE

Your window on Iran from inside and abroad

January-February 2019



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The atmosphere of the economic crisis has been dominating the political scene over the past two months in Iran. Adapting to the economic siege is dominating the Iranian political mindset. Many are closely watching the imminent rise of public anger against the regime. They are encouraging people to protest in light of the economic crisis and deteriorating socio-economic conditions. During the period of preparing this report, the Iranian regime depended on several policies aimed at alleviating the impact of the economic siege imposed on the country. It also aimed to eliminate the reasons for public anger, especially at the economic level, amid a crackdown on dissenters including leaders and pundits. The regime also adopted a foreign policy based on reliance on its current partners who could maximize their economic interests through continuing transactions with Iran.

At home, the Iranian regime aimed at the ideological level to boost its control over the religious establishment. Any Friday preacher who appeared to oppose state policies during his sermons would be dismissed. This prompted several preachers to quit their positions in fear of being called to account by the law as well as by the state's security apparatuses due to sermons critical of the regime. The regime was also hit by another crisis: the death of top clerics in the inner circle of the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei such as Hashemi Shahroudi, who was the Chief of the Judiciary and the Chief of the Expediency Discernment Council. Hence, the policy of one man for several positions continues to be pursued by the regime as it suffers from a shortage of trusted loyalists.

At the political level, Ibrahim Raisi's ascent to the top position of the judiciary and Sadiq Larijani's appointment as head of the Expediency Discernment Council reflects the Supreme Leader's keenness to maintain the dominance of the conservatives over Iran's decision-making institutions. These decisions sparked fear among popular circles in Iran since appointing such people who believe in the tenets of Khamenei's ideology to these positions means Iran will enter a new phase that will be characterized with more repression, violence, killings, and the suppression of freedom. Power will be amassed in the hands of a new generation of loyalists to the Iranian regime. This in addition to boosting Raisi's clout within the regime and increasing his chances to succeed the Supreme Leader as he will not

run in the coming presidential elections in 2021. However, some speculate that the next Supreme Leader will be more loyal to the IRGC, which is expected to play a pivotal role in choosing Khamenei's successor.

When it comes to the economy, the main budgetary lines for the next budget reveal three main characteristics. The first is that Iran's spending is dedicated to the management of state affairs instead of investment and development. The second is the inequitable distribution of expenditure with heavy spending focused on security and military aspects whereas there is little focus on productive sectors such as agriculture and industry that are in need of massive investment. The third is the government's attempt to calm public outrage due to deteriorating economic conditions through increasing wages, offering some sort of limited subsidies, delaying decisions to increase energy prices, and continuing to sell government bonds to fill the budget deficit. This approach has negative implications as it increases the annual appropriations allocated to paying off Iran's debt.

As for sectorial developments, Iran's oil exports rose as South Korea and Japan resumed importing Iranian oil again. Iran, however, overstated its financial budget, which will start on March 21 on a higher export volume than the current one, despite an unspecified US exemption to eight nations from its sanctions on Iranian oil exports. On the other hand, the cost of Iranian banking transactions is still high as the European financial mechanism for trade with Iran - INSTEX - has not been activated, and the Expediency Discernment Council has refused to agree to the FATF Convention on Combating Money Laundering. Iran is seeking to increase the signing of free trade agreements with neighboring countries such as Afghanistan and Azerbaijan to ease the impact of the US embargo on its foreign trade, with a greater focus on Iraq, as confirmed by Iranian official visits during which many economic agreements were signed.

In the military arena, Iran is in a race against time when it comes to announcing its accomplishments in military hardware manufacturing. What Iran announced during January and February 2019 about manufacturing the Fateh submarine and launching a cruise missile from the submarine Ghadir is indicative of progress in the field of military weapons despite the poor capabilities of its locally manufactured weapons and the lack of safety for the forces using them. The security aspect was the biggest weakness for the Iranian regime during this period due to repeated attacks on the IRGC and the success of armed opposition groups in carrying out attacks against the IRGC where dozens of its personnel were killed in areas with security vacuums such as in Sistan and Baluchistan in southeast Iran. These groups felt that the Iranian regime was about to lose control over these areas.

At the Arab level comes the visit of the Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammed Javad Zarif to Iraq, just four days after his US counterpart Mike Pompeo's surprise visit to Iraq at a time when Iran considers Iraq as a lifeline and economic lung to counter pressure and circumvent US sanctions by containing Iraq as a neighboring country and turning it into a gateway to export Iranian oil to the outside world. Thus, Iran sought to build a network of complex economic interests with Iraq and to launch a mechanism for financial exchanges through renewing contracts to supply Iraq with electricity, as well as pushing for a law to expel US forces from Iraq, in order to confront US policies aimed to tighten its noose around Iran by keeping Iraq away from Iran and pressuring it to comply with US sanctions.

In Syria, Iran during this phase seeks to reap benefits in return for the human and material costs it incurred over the past years since the start of the Syrian crisis. Therefore, Iran seeks to intensify Iranian-Syrian political, economic and defense cooperation for a long-term stay in Syria. It also seeks to maintain its gains and implement the rest of its plans in Syria as a strategic link, among others, to connect Iran to the Mediterranean in the context of the Iranian vision of Syria as an Iranian province. This was illustrated when Syrian President Bashar al-Assad visited Iran. He was met without the Syrian flag being raised beside him.

He also had no accompanying delegation although there was an Iranian delegation when he met President Hassan Rouhani. This comes at a time when Israel is increasing its attacks on Iranian positions in Syria. Relations between Iran and Syria are also seeing more divergence due to the disappearance of common interests between the two countries.

In Yemen, Iran is still using the card of offering financial and military support to the Houthis and supporting their stance towards the Stockholm Agreement to the point of their violating it. This happens through manipulating the agreed truce to send more military reinforcements, deploying forces and waging attacks by Iranian-made drones on the al-Anad airbase in a flagrant violation of the agreement. Iran is well aware of the importance of Yemen in accomplishing its so-called Shiite Crescent and the impact of its pro-Houthi intervention on pressuring Saudi Arabia to make concessions on other outstanding issues between Riyadh and Tehran. This is completely rejected by the Kingdom and it calls on Iran to stop intervening, spreading chaos in the region and fomenting regional instability.

At the global level, it has been confirmed that the international partners of Iran are unable to circumvent US sanctions entirely. European efforts to launch the financial channel for transactions with Iran failed in convincing Iran not to leave the nuclear deal entirely while maintaining pressure on it to negotiate its missile program and to stop its regional interventions. As to the US-Iranian arena, Iran is waiting for the US decision regarding extending the exemption to the eight countries granted a waiver to import Iranian oil. In the meantime, the United States sought to unify its allies and their policies to force Iran to change its behavior through the Warsaw Conference. In response, Iran persisted in its policies of undermining regional stability, paying no heed to the international position rejecting its missile tests based on the UNSC resolution. This resolution was an international move to prevent Iran from conducting more missile tests.

As for January and February 2019, these months saw progress in the efforts aimed to forge a unified position against Iran globally. Europe did not take practical steps in enforcing its financial mechanism. Iran's efforts in supporting trade with foreign partners such as Turkey did not see success either. Iranian-Turkish economic indicators suggest a decline in mutual trade. As for Iran's eastern neighbors, Iran's relations with Pakistan saw a dangerous deterioration following the kidnappings of IRGC personnel on the border by Jaish al-Adl, a Balochi group. Iran was quick to heap blame on Pakistan for not doing enough to maintain security in the border area with Pakistan. This also coincided with tense ties between India and Pakistan, which impacts Iran's regional alliances.



INTERNAL AFFAIRS

Fearing a new wave of popular protests as openly admitted by Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei who said he is waiting for sedition in 2019, the Iranian regime is crafting policies to avoid such an upheaval. The regime is working to reshuffle the cards on the home front. It is working to domesticate the religious establishment and to make it totally submissive to the political authority as well as to undertake a shakeup among the leaders of the regime's key establishments. At the same time, the regime is working to alleviate the impact of the economic crisis on the daily lives of the public through increasing the wages of its military personnel, delaying the increase in energy prices and increasing appropriations for the health, education and subsidy sectors, even if this happens at the expense of Iran's productive sectors. On the other side, Iran is in a race against time, declaring more successes in military industrialization although such successes cannot be confirmed. The biggest challenge faced by the regime is internal security after successive attacks that targeted the IRGC border guards at the border and the security vacuum, especially on the Iranian-Pakistani border.



THE IDEOLOGICAL FILE

The Iranian regime is currently working to subdue the religious establishment more than ever before. It seeks to silence those embracing opposing viewpoints to the official narrative based on which it issues its official and popular rhetoric. The regime has checked the lists of Friday preachers and scrutinized their ideologies as it seeks to remove any dissenting preacher, even if the dissent is minimal. Friday preachers in the areas where minorities reside faced the most dismissals and transfers. Some of them preferred to quit willingly probably because they would be unable to produce a realistic religious discourse that is credible and does not contradict the practices of the Iranian regime in Ahwaz as well as in Sistan and Baluchistan, which is populated by a Sunni majority. The following report tackles in its ideological section the resignation of Friday preachers, the religious dimensions and political indicators behind the resignation of Friday preachers and the independence of the Friday preachers' establishment.

First: Resignation of Friday Prayer Leaders

Ayatollah Moussa Jazaeri, the Friday prayer imam in Ahwaz, resigned. He said that his resignation was due to inability and old age.⁽¹⁾ But others point to political reasons as the real motivation behind his resignation⁽²⁾. His resignation coincided with the resignation of the cleric Abbas Ali Suleimani, a Friday preacher in Sistan and Baluchistan who justified his resignation on the basis that he wants to give more opportunities to the youth and to encourage new ideas. The two simultaneous resignations support the hypothesis that these resignations happened due to political reasons.

The resignations of the two clerics come after a series of resignations by Friday prayer leaders over the past two years such as Mohsen Mojtahed Shabestari from East Azerbaijan Province, Alireza Barghandi from South Khorasan Province, Ayatollah Zine El Abidine Warbbani from Gilan Province, Ayatollah Asadullah Emani from Fars province, Jafar Mohsen Zadi from Alborz Province and Ayatollah Mohammad Naqi from Elam province. Last year, Ayatollah Yehia Jafar of Kermanshah province resigned after his remarks on supporting President Rouhani stirred controversy across the country. At the time, the First Vice President Ishaq Jahanghiri described the developments as worrying.⁽³⁾ The Friday prayer imam of Tabriz Mohammed Ali Al-Hashem was appointed in place of Mohsen Mojtahed Shabestari. Also, Abulqassem Yaquobi was appointed in July 2016 in place of Habibullah Mehmaan Nawaaz as the Friday prayer leader in Bajnord. Khamenei issued a decision to appoint Alireza Abadi, after sacking Alireza Bergandi, as a Friday prayer leader in Birjand in August 2017. After the resignation of Yehia Jafari as a Friday prayer leader in Kerman province in November 2017, he was replaced by Hassan Ali Addadi Soleimani. We notice that the new imams are supportive of the Imam's Line.⁽⁴⁾

Second: Religious Dimensions and Political Indications

The Iranian regime depends on the Friday sermon as an essential component in shaping the collective mind and national-ethnic identity of the Iranians. The Friday prayer, after the 1979 revolution, began to be held on a regular basis at the suggestion of Mahmoud

Taleghani after the approval of Khomeini.⁽⁵⁾ The regime realized the importance of the sermon on Friday in sending its message to the public across the country and its remote provinces, especially before the emergence of sophisticated means of communication. After technological developments, it was assumed that the influence of Friday sermons in Iran would see a decline as a political tool used by the regime for mobilization. But the exact opposite has happened due to a conducive environment. The Western sanctions on Iran and its increasing isolation led the ruling elite in Iran to revitalize its rhetoric of being targeted as well as it banning several websites and social media platforms. Hence the regime increased the importance of Friday prayer sermons in modern times to convey its viewpoint and to shape the awareness of the elite and public alike.



Third: The Imams of the Friday Prayer Policy Council:

Independence or Subordination “Imams of the Friday Prayer Policy Council” was established in 1994 following a decision by Khamenei. The members appointed by Khamenei in the Council administer a budget of up to 20 billion tomans (\$4.7 million)⁽⁶⁾ and the chief of the council is appointed by a direct decree from Khamenei.⁽⁷⁾

Through pursuing this policy, the regime aims to control the preachers and prayer leaders of the major and minor mosques across the different provinces and to ensure that they will not violate the state's policy line. The regime ensured the centralization and institutionalization of the Friday prayer sermons by dividing the state into main regions. A landmark prayer leader is appointed for each region. Less important prayer imams are appointed for small towns. In this way, the state ensured that the Friday prayer imams will not act independently of the main line of the state. It also ensured that they will not act independently of it due to incentives. Friday prayer imams enjoy financial incentives and massive executive powers inside the region where they work.⁽⁸⁾

The regime deems it appropriate to curb the independence of Friday imams and to control the issues they tackle in their Friday sermons. The imams, according to the former Chief of Imams of the Friday Prayer Policy Council, give their sermons on behalf of the Supreme Leader. It is normal for them to be in line with the policies of the regime that are determined by the Supreme Leader. All Friday sermons by the imams are in line with the policies of the regime outlined by the Supreme Leader.⁽⁹⁾

Therefore, the regime does not fear sacking any Friday prayer leader who shows any sign of dissent to the line of the Supreme Leader or attempts to practice any form of independence. The regime may allow some difference of opinion inside the religious seminary as it is made up of elites and it does not work directly to shape the awareness of the street, unlike the Friday prayer leaders who are in constant contact with the masses. Cleric Jalaluddin al-Taheri, one of the Friday prayers leaders in Isfahan, resigned, or was dismissed, due to his defense of Ayatollah Montazeri and his demand that the house arrest imposed on him be lifted.⁽¹⁰⁾ During the upheaval of 2009, restrictions were placed

on Rafsanjani to prevent him from delivering Friday prayer sermons after his famous sermon on July 17, 2009 where he blasted the human rights violations, repression, and electoral rigging.

These harsh measures against detractors along with the privileges and massive powers which are given to Friday imams led to their utter subordination across the country, leading the regime to completely dominate the religious arena.

We also notice that the regime considers the establishment of the Friday Prayer Council as a means of purchasing religious loyalty and legitimizing the political system. Major financial scandals were exposed especially within the Imams' Council across Iran.

Conclusion

It is clear that the Iranian regime and the Supreme Leader in particular cannot give up their absolute power to appoint Friday imams and to set the wording of the sermons directly through the central offices across the state. Religion is fully controlled by the state and the two cannot be separated. The state believes that it is responsible for the quality of the speech that must be conveyed to the people, and that it is responsible for the clerics and the religion itself, considering that the Supreme Leader is the deputy to the Infallible Imam in the period of Occultation. In addition, the regime needs these imams to consolidate its legitimacy, extend its influence and to shape the collective mind and national identity.

Also, from the beginning, Friday prayer imams are trained under close supervision by the regime. The regime reinstated Friday prayers after a hiatus period. It also formed concerned and competent committees. It disburses wages, appoints and sacks imams. It cannot be imagined that there will be a mass mutiny by such an institution which is considered one of the normal apparatuses of the state, not parallel to the state or having a superior position over it, unlike the religious seminary, which has been active in religious, social and political life before the regime took power. It is a religious establishment transcending time and space. The regime sought to hijack and subordinate some of its sections, but it is still active and resistant to the regime's approach towards Friday prayer imams.

THE POLITICAL FILE

As a result of the rise in the average age of the Iranian regime's top leaders, which has become apparent with the death of figures who Khamenei considered as his most loyal aides, the Supreme Leader has to amass a number of important powers in the hands of someone from the second generation of politicized clerics who are clearly loyal to him. The circle around Khamenei is narrowing as a result of his not appointing enough new leaders and the regime's rigid structure. After the death of Hashemi Shahroudi, Raisi was picked to head the judiciary. Sadiq Larijani was appointed as head of the Expediency Discernment Council. It seems that Khamenei has a limited number of cards he plays here and there in search of loyalty and a continuation of power rather than appointing competent people to run the state. The report addresses the following topics:

- Khamenei's New Appointments: Rotation of Positions or Rotation of Power?
- Sadiq Larijani: From Chairing the Judiciary to the Expediency Discernment Council.
- A Member of the "Death Committee, and the Spearhead of Executions" Appointed the Head of the Judiciary,
- The Indications and Results of Appointing Larijani and Raisi at Both the Judiciary and the Expediency Discernment Council.

Khamenei's New Appointments: Rotation of Positions or Rotation of Power?

The death of the former head of the Expediency Discernment Council Hashemi Shahroudi in December 2018 and the appointment of Sadiq Amoli Larijani in his place as well as the appointment of Ibrahim Raisi as the new head of the judiciary instead of Sadiq Larijani opened the door to debate on the implications of such appointments and to what extent they are related to the appointment of a successor to the Supreme Leader. This comes as Shahroudi's name had continued to be floated for several years as a strong nominee to succeed Khamenei.

Shahroudi was close to Khamenei. The latter appointed him to several important positions within the regime including the judiciary from 1999 to 2009. After the death of the former chair of the Expediency Discernment Council, Hashemi Rafsanjani, in January 2017, Khamenei appointed Shahroudi as head of the Council. He was considered a figure who enjoys support from the IRGC and the rest of the fundamentalists within the regime. ⁽¹¹⁾

After the death of Shahroudi as well as other figures such as Ali Jannati, Mohammad-Taqi Mesbah-Yazdi and Naser Makarem Shirazi who had all reached advanced age, the circle of the conservative figures trusted by Khamenei as successors has become very narrow. Khamenei found himself compelled to choose from among young leaders who embrace radical ideologies and who have proved to be loyal to him. Over the past few years, they assumed key positions within the regime.

1. Sadiq Larijani From Chairing the Judiciary to the Expediency Discernment Council

Choosing Sadiq Larijani to chair the Expediency Discernment Council came as a surprise to the Iranian street, given the opposition to his policies and the criticism leveled at him by human rights organizations, let alone the accusations that he has bank



accounts containing millions of dollars. The death of the former head of the Expediency Discernment Council Hashemi Shahroudi may be the main reason for Larijani's appointment to this position and his rise again.

Despite the criticisms launched by the former Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and a number of Iranian regime leaders and figures to the Larijanis, who have for many years been in control of a number of institutions and high positions in the Iranian regime, Khamenei appears to be maintaining the influence of this family in the coming period. Here we find Sadiq Larijani moving from the chairmanship of the judiciary to the Expediency Discernment Council which is one of the key institutions of the Iranian regime. His elder brother Ali Larijani, who is the Speaker of the Parliament, has stated for months that he is planning to run in the upcoming presidential elections scheduled for 2021 in cooperation with reformists and conservatives.

The opponents of Sadiq Larijani believe he was biased in his decisions and policies during his tenure as head of the judiciary. They expect he will play the same role in changing the state of balance and moderation created by the late Hashemi Rafsanjani during his presidency over the Expediency Discernment Council.

As to the future of the Council, it is expected that no change will happen when it comes to its performance and work in the coming period. This grim speculation stems from the weak performance of Larijani during his tenure as president of the judiciary. Some critics said that the spokesman of the judiciary displayed a stronger performance and maintained more influence than Larijani.⁽¹²⁾

On the other hand, Sadiq Larijani's membership in the Guardian Council in addition to his new position means he will play an important role in choosing candidates for the coming parliamentary and presidential elections. He may support his brother Ali Larijani, who is close to Khamenei, to run for the coming presidential elections.

2. A Member of the Death Committee and the Spearhead of Executions chairs the Judiciary

Unlike the former heads of the judiciary, appointed by the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei over the past 30 years, Raisi is the sole chair of the judiciary who possesses rich experience in the field. Raisi, born in 1960, joined the bench in 1980 when he was still 20 years old. Despite chairing the Imam Reza shrine over the past three years, he maintained his position as head of the clerics' court entitled to trying clerics who oppose the Iranian regime. The following are the most important positions claimed by Raisi since the establishment of the republic so far. *Table 1.*

Table 1: Key positions within the judiciary assumed by Ibrahim Raisi

Position	Year
Prosecutor General of al-Karj city close to Tehran	1980
Attorney General of al-Karj city	1980
Prosecutor General of Tehran	1985
One of the members of what is known as Death Committee which supervised mass executions in 1988 against political prisoners	1988
Attorney General of Tehran	1989-1994
Chairman of the General Inspection Organization of Iran	1994-2004
Deputy head of the judiciary	2004-2014
Iran Attorney General	2014
Director of Imam Reza Shrine in Mashhad	2016
Candidate in the presidential elections	2017

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In August 2017, he was appointed by the Supreme Leader, along with the former mayor of Tehran Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf who withdrew from the presidential race in favor of Raisi, as members of the Expediency Discernment Council. ⁽¹³⁾

Khamenei's desire to elevate Raisi to the top positions within the regime has emerged since 2016 when he appointed Raisi as head of the Imam Reza Shrine. In 2017, Khamenei and the conservative current supporting him worked to back Raisi in the presidential elections held on May 19, 2017, but he lost the race against the incumbent President Hassan Rouhani.

After he lost the presidential elections, it was expected that Raisi's position would decline among the conservatives, or at least his powers would become confined to the chairmanship of the Imam Reza Shrine. But the Supreme Leader's desire to elevate Raisi to higher positions appeared in recent months when some officials spoke of the possibility of Raisi chairing the judiciary. When the head of the Expediency Discernment

Council Hashemi Shahroudi died last December 2018 and Amoli Larijani was appointed in place of Shahroudi, it became certain that Raisi is to be appointed as the head of the judiciary.

The reasons that encouraged the Supreme Leader to pick Ibrahim Raisi for this position include Raisi's closeness to him, his long experience in the judiciary, and his first-hand knowledge of judicial authority along with the reasons that Khamenei himself determined which include his jurisprudential knowledge and his expertise. In the Supreme Leader's statement on appointing Raisi, he said that the aim behind appointing Raisi is the desire to transform the judiciary to cope with the needs and the challenges it is facing, as well as conferring freedom a legal status, clawing back public rights, overseeing the enforcement of law, paying due respect to courts and judges, combating corruption, cooperating with the executive and legislative branches of power and supporting them.⁽¹⁴⁾

The International Commission on Human Rights in Iran stated that merely placing Raisi's name among the candidates for the chairmanship of the judiciary is a disaster for the rule of law as well as justice in Iran. He was one of the members of the Death Committee which oversaw mass executions against thousands of political prisoners in 1988.⁽¹⁵⁾

As for Human Rights Watch, it considered the appointment of Raisi, who spearheaded the 1988 executions against political prisoners, as an indication of the deterioration of human rights in the country.⁽¹⁶⁾

3. The Indications and Results of Appointing Larijani and Raisi at Both the Judiciary and the Expediency Discernment Council:

A-Indications

1. Picking Larijani to chair the Expediency Discernment Council and Raisi to chair the judiciary reflects Khamenei's desire to keep the radicals dominating the decision-making institutions in Iran. This desire has appeared since picking the late Shahroudi to chair the Council in place of the late Hashemi Rafsanjani.

2. These appointments indicate that Khamenei wants to boost the clout of the radicals after the results of the parliamentary elections, the Assembly of Experts and the presidential elections held in February and April 2016 and May 2017 showed a palpable decline for the conservatives in favor of the reformists and the moderates.

3. Despite Khamenei's desire to boost the clout of the radicals and pick his confidants, choosing Raisi and Larijani discloses the limited options he has at hand to deal with any vacuum that could happen in any one of the influential institutions within the regime.

B- Results

1. The Iranian state which aspires to a radical change within the regime fears Raisi or Larijani could be soon the head of the Iranian regime. The ascent of any radical to the position of Supreme Leader in the coming period who believes in the ideology of Khamenei and follows his manner of governance will kill any hopes of the Iranian people for political change. This could thrust Iran into a new phase full of repression, violence, suppression of freedom and the amassing of power and wealth in the hands of a new generation of loyalists to the current regime in Iran.

2. According to some analyses, whoever succeeds Khamenei, whatever his affiliation is, will have the same characteristics and personality as Khamenei. But the Council of Experts, the body tasked with appointing and dismissing the new supreme leader, will be committed to the mechanism of selecting the supreme leader as prescribed by the Constitution. Additionally, the new leader will be more affiliated with the Revolutionary

Guards which is expected to play a pivotal role in choosing Khamenei's successor. These characteristics apply to Larijani and Raisi, especially the latter who enjoys strong ties with the IRGC and most of the key people in the conservative current.⁽¹⁷⁾

3. Ibrahim Raisi ascending to the chairmanship of the judiciary means he made great strides towards becoming the third supreme leader of the Iranian regime. In other words, Raisi's appointment as head of the judiciary means not only an increase in his clout and strength within the regime but also an increase in his chances to become the third supreme leader..

4. Raisi's appointment as head of the judiciary means that he will not run in the presidential elections in 2021, which will open the door for new conservative leaders to compete against the reformists.⁽¹⁸⁾

5. The conservatives following the 2009 presidential elections worked to weaken the position of the late Hashemi Rafsanjani who the reformists and moderates were pinning their hopes on to play an influential and effective role in choosing the successor to the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. But his death in January 2017 and the choosing of Sadiq Larijani for the Expediency Discernment Council and Ibrahim Raisi for the judiciary constituted a genuine relapse for the conservatives and moderates. These appointments may weaken the likelihood of choosing a supreme leader who pursues moderate approaches when it comes to foreign policy.⁽¹⁹⁾



THE ECONOMIC FILE

The Iranian financial budget outlined the government's policies during the new year and explained the aspects of its spending as well as the attention it will give to each sector, whether services, production, religion or military. It also renders clear the sources of revenues that the government expects to rely on in the next budget in light of the current challenges resulting from the US economic blockade imposed on it. The first axis will deal with this issue in detail. The second axis will then clarify and break down the most important developments in the economic sectors during January and February at the level of the oil and non-oil sectors. This includes the European mechanism INSTEX offered for trade with Iran in light of US sanctions and with the Europeans linking it to Iran's accession to the convention on combating money laundering (FATF). This is in addition to the Iranian government's focus to boost trade relations with some neighboring countries, especially with Iraq, to ease the impact of economic sanctions on Iran's foreign trade.

First: The Budget of the New Iranian Year 1398 (2019-2020)

1- The main lines of the budget

The Rouhani government has submitted its draft budget for the new fiscal year 1398 AH, which begins on March 21, 2019, to the Iranian Parliament. It could be described as an austerity budget despite an increase in the nominal value of Iran's local currency. The budget reached 479 trillion tomans, or about \$82.5 billion according to the new exchange rate. The government's exchange rate of its local currency in the draft budget is to reach 5,800 tomans per dollar instead of 4,200 tomans in the current budget. Thus, the value of the next budget will be reduced by \$20 billion compared to the budget of the current year of \$102 billion. It is affected by the decline in the overall economic situation as a result of the US sanctions imposed on Iran since August 2018.

The government planned to reduce its dependency on oil in the next year to only 27%, based on the following estimates: - Exporting 1.5 million barrels per day of crude oil.- The average price of a barrel of oil estimated at \$54.- The budget's increasing dependence on tax revenues. In fact, this plan seems highly unrealistic. The Iranian government's dependence on oil often increases to more than 50% in times of crisis and economic blockade, as has been the case in previous years. On the other hand, the government assumed that it would be able to export 1.5 million barrels per day during the new year, how will this happen, given that it has not reached this target now even in the presence of exemptions from oil sanctions against it for eight countries for a period of six months?

2- The Budget's Revenues and Expenditures

The Iranian government's revenues come from several sources, the most important of which are oil sales at home and abroad, and tax receipts. The government's expenditure is distributed among various sectors, and most of the expenditure is allocated to operational expenses relating to sustaining the state and its institutions. In terms of expected government revenues, the Iranian government aims to rely on taxes as a major source of revenue during the coming year. It hopes that taxes would account for more

than 43% of the total budget revenues during the year. It seeks to depend on oil by 27%. In addition, it seeks to find other resources to finance the budget such as the sale of government bonds and assets through privatization or borrowing programs.

As the Iranian budget deficit increased in recent years to close to \$11 billion ⁽²⁰⁾ during the nine months of the current Iranian year 1397 (March-December 2018), the government proposed to acquire the portion of oil revenues deposited in the National Development Fund (34%). But the Supreme Leader rejected the proposal and ordered the government to transfer 20% to the fund instead of 34%. The government would only have the remaining 14% and seek other sources to tackle its budget deficit or to reduce its expenses.

As to the targeted expenditure, all projected expenditures compared to the current fiscal year were reduced by 19% according to the official exchange rates. The decline will be much more according to the market exchange rates. It is noteworthy that the large proportion of the allocated expenditure goes to normal operating expenses, which include salaries, maintenance costs and the continued functioning of government departments and apparatuses. These expenses amounted to 320 trillion Iranian tomans or equivalent to 67% of the total expenditure of the next budget. The distribution of sectoral expenditures was as follows, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Distribution of Some Expenditure of the Iranian Budget

Aspects of expenses	The total value (in trillion tomans)
Current and operational expenses	300
Security and defense	62
Urbanization and infrastructure	62
Education	43
Health	35
Subsidy and combating poverty	7

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3-The Main Features of Next Year's Budget

The government gave some attention to social aspects, despite a clear cut in expenditure in the next budget, to avoid raising public anger. It allocated \$14 billion to subsidize the import of essential goods at the old official exchange rate (4,200 tomans per dollar), up from \$13 billion last year. This is an attempt by the government to avoid increasing the prices of some basic products imported from abroad that are important for ordinary people, especially basic food products. It postponed the increase in gasoline prices for another year. The government did not forget that a previous proposal to increase petrol prices and scrap cash subsidies were factors that led to the outbreak of popular protests against the government in early 2018.



In addition to increasing subsidies, the government has proposed an increase in government salaries by 20%, ⁽²¹⁾which could increase to 40% in line with rising inflation[21]. It also decided to allocate 7 trillion tomans for subsidies. Healthcare allocations increased to 37 trillion tomans (\$6.3 billion at the exchange rate of 5,800 tomans per the dollar). The government yet decided to exempt those with incomes of less than 2.3 million tomans a month (\$397) from paying taxes.

Thus, the government paid attention to a number of social aspects in an attempt to contain public anger. On the other hand, it plans to increase taxes on those with higher incomes, in addition to reducing expenditure in general for most sectors. It also did not allocate adequate expenditure for investment and productive sectors compared to non-productive sectors such as security, defense, the media, and religious institutions.

Second: The Most Remarkable Developments in the Economic Sectors

Iran's crude oil exports rose by a daily average of 1.25 million barrels in ⁽²²⁾February 2019, compared to 1.2 million barrels per day by the end of 2018. This increase was due to the resumption of the import of Iranian oil by South Korea at the beginning of the current year after a two month pause. The question that arises here is: How did the Iranian government assume oil exports will reach 1.5 million barrels per day in the budget of the next fiscal year, which will start in March 2019 given that until now exports are still well below this rate? This is in addition to the deadline for the exemption given by the US to eight countries from its sanctions on importing Iranian oil fast approaching, which will end in May. The United States has announced more than once that it refuses to extend the exemptions. It seems that the Iranian government has overestimated its expectations regarding the volume of its exports on which the revenues of the next budget are based, or that it is preparing for alternative plans to continue oil exports after the end of the exemption period, which is the likeliest assumption.

However, this will not be easy, and exports will often fall during the next year from the rate of 1.5 million barrels per day based on the failure of some attempts to increase oil exports by trying to sell to legal entities through an internal exchange of oil. Hundreds of thousands of barrels of oil were put to sale. But Iran could not sell them even after lowering their prices compared to global prices. Iran is likely to rely on other ways to achieve its goals, most notably smuggling, which will provide a safe haven for buyers from US inspections, especially countries such as China and India, as well as other Asian countries such as Japan and South Korea with which the United States has deep-rooted relations and interests.

As for the banking developments, US sanctions have undoubtedly raised the costs of Iran's financial and banking transactions abroad and have led to a significant decline in the Iranian currency against foreign currencies, especially the dollar. The United States is trying to block all avenues for Iranian banks to deal with international banks through the global financial network SWIFT.

But if the cost of financial transactions has actually increased in the US dollar, Iran's financial ties to the outside world are spread across some of the countries that conduct dealings using currencies that are universally accepted, such as the Yuan and the euro.

Officials of the Iranian banking sector believe that Iran's financial relations with the outside world are mediated by four major countries: China, India, Turkey, and Italy, with their basic currencies: the yuan, the rupee, the lira and the euro. The Rouhani government has relied on Europe after the US withdrawal from the nuclear agreement to reduce the impact of the international banking embargo imposed by providing alternative financial and legal mechanisms that allow Iran to trade with Europe and the rest of the world despite the US sanctions. The mechanism was discussed over the past 10 months without a clear practical application, but Europe has occasionally lowered Iran expectations regarding the feasibility of this mechanism.

Europe hinted to Iran at the beginning of the US withdrawal from the nuclear agreement that it seeks to establish a financial mechanism alternative to SWIFT. After it became clear that this approach was impossible, Europe provided a financial and legal mechanism called a 'Special Purpose Vehicle (SPV),' as a means to trade goods between European and Iranian companies. It covers all goods covered by the sanctions. But it has not been implemented. Then Europe proposed INSTEX, to trade goods that are not covered by sanctions or do not exceed food and pharmaceutical imports. It is still under implementation, as is linking the mechanism's implementation to Iran's accession to an international convention against money laundering or the so-called FATF working group which regularly oversees financial activities to ensure countries are meeting the requirements.

Thus far, the Iranian regime has not agreed to join it - although the current government and Parliament ratified it- specifically the Expediency Discernment Council. This is in order to maintain financial support for military wings overseas, in addition to continuing mechanisms to circumvent US sanctions. "Joining the FATF agreement will disrupt the lives of the people by criminalizing the circumvention of sanctions and creating restrictions on the transfer and exchange of hard currency," said Mohammed Jawad Irwani, a member of the Expediency Discernment Council, on February 20, 2019.

⁽²³⁾ Jawad added that financial transparency agreements such as the FATF and the CFT consider circumventing US sanctions as part of money laundering and they will create severe restrictions on the Iranian people and the economy.

On the level of Iranian trade relations, in the last two months, Iran has focused on alleviating the impact of the economic embargo by signing bilateral trade agreements and memorandums of understanding with some neighboring countries such as Afghanistan to expand cooperation in the port of Chabahar. It also signed deals with Azerbaijan to establish a joint plant to produce Peugeot cars and with Russia and Kazakhstan on the trade of wheat and flour. ⁽²⁴⁾

But the biggest Iranian focus in this regard was on Iraq after Iran was able to flood the Iraqi markets with Iranian products, leading Iraq to become Iran's largest market in terms of receiving Iranian non-oil goods in addition to exporting gas to it. In February, Iran's Central Bank governor visited Iraq and managed to sign agreements with the country for Iraq to pay back gas debts to Iran worth \$2 billion.

In general, Iran is focusing on strengthening its trade relations with Iraq as a



potential source of foreign currency under the US embargo through trade and opening bank accounts for Iranian exporters in Iraq in the Iraqi dinar. It hopes to later change these Iraqi dinars to currencies such as the dollar or the euro.

Conclusion

The government has focused its spending on running state affairs rather than allocating more expenditure on investment and development - which the Supreme Leader has realized and called on the government to correct.. It has also focused on allocating a large amount of spending on non-productive sectors that serve the regime's goals such as defense and security. But the government also increased allocations for healthcare and combating poverty. The government is also trying to ease public anger over deteriorating economic conditions and declining living standards by raising salaries, providing some limited subsidies and deferring energy price hikes. On the other hand, it will continue to issue government bonds, increasing the likelihood of it being thrust into an ever increasing budget deficit cycle, resulting in a larger share of the budget being allocated to fill the deficit at the expense of development projects and improving living conditions.

Iran's oil exports rose as South Korea and Japan resumed oil imports from Iran, yet Iran exaggerated its fiscal budget, which will start on March 21 on the assumption that it will achieve higher oil exports than it currently achieved given the US exemption to eight nations from its sanctions. The cost of Iranian banking is still high as the European financial mechanism for trade with Iran, INSTEX, has not entered into force. The Expediency Council refused to accede to the FATF, an anti-money laundering agreement, which the EU has asked Iran to join as an undeclared condition for the activation of INSTEX. It is likely the volume of Iranian exports to Iraq will increase after the signing of a number of trade agreements during official Iranian visits to enhance Iranian influence in Iraq. This will happen through the export of Iranian goods in Iraqi currency, and the possibility of Iranian traders in Iraq changing their currency into foreign currencies such as the euro.

THE MILITARY AND SECURITY FILE

Iran is engaged in a cutthroat self-imposed race to announce the maximizing of its military capabilities, whether the announcements are true or not. The naval force is one of the sectors that Iran seeks to develop swiftly. During the maneuvers dubbed 'Velayat 97' conducted in February 2019, Iran declared that it managed to manufacture a cruise missile launched from a submarine to hit land targets. Iran also declared that it commissioned the Fateh submarine in the navy. Iran also seeks to boost the range of sailing for its naval forces and to prove that it is the most powerful naval force in the Gulf and Sea of Oman. This report, in its military and security aspects, broaches on the issue of developing Iranian submarines through studying the capabilities of Iranian submarines, especially the Fateh submarine as well as future plans to boost the capability of submarine units and the strategic aims Iran pursues behind such upgrades. The armed attacks against the IRGC will also be discussed.

First: Developing Iranian Submarines

The Iranian Navy conducted the 'Velayat 97' drills on 22 February 2019 for three days, in east of Strait of Hormuz, Makran Coast, and eastnorthern area of the Indian Ocean covering more than two million km². These drills are distinguished from the previous ones by launching the Ghadir-class missile submarine and announcing that the Fateh-class submarine joined the fleet of the Iranian Navy. Do these drills, which focused on submarines, announce a new transformative strategy in the Iranian navy which has been dependent on corvettes for swift actions without risking the use of large warships in engagements, seeking to avoid the human and material costs?

1- Capabilities of Iranian Submarines

Iranian submarines joined the Iranian navy for the first time in 1991. At the time, a contract with the US to purchase a submarine in 1978 had been canceled after the outbreak of the revolution. From that time until the end of the Iraq-Iran war, Tehran was unable to acquire any submarines.

A-Russian Kilo Class Submarine

Iran now has three Russian Kilo-class submarines it purchased from Moscow in 1989 after the end of its war with Iraq. Tehran took delivery of the first submarine in November 1992, the second in August 1993, and the third in January 1994.^[25] They were given the names Noah, Yunus, and Tarek. The versions that exist in Iran from this class are for exporting. They fall within the EM 877 class. It is 7.32 –meters long and 10-meters wide. It has a 6.6-meter plunger. It is equipped with state-of-the-art command and control systems. It is capable of carrying 12 torpedoes guided automatically or through wires. It is also capable of housing 30-40 mines. Reports indicate 1,000 mines were purchased with the Russian Kilo-class submarine. These mines are equipped with sophisticated remote-sensing devices that are operated by pressure.^[26]

The Kilo-class submarine is facing difficulties, especially in the environment of the Arabian Gulf. Control over it becomes difficult due to the swift change of maritime tides and subsequent tidal changes in the Gulf. In addition, the mines planted by this submarine are not produced in Iran. When the submarines entered into service in Iran, the high temperatures during the summer in the Gulf caused its batteries which operate its electric engine under the water to become dysfunctional. Iran resorted to India to resolve this problem since India possesses 10 submarines of the same class. It faced the same problem before. Iran upgraded the batteries, drawing on the Indian experience.^[27]

Figure 1: Submarine Kilo's Outer Structure

Source: <http://cutt.us/J2pBq>

The Kilo-class submarine operates in shallow and not-so-deep waters. It can move at the depth of 240-300 meters. The German Type 209 submarine surpasses it in terms of depth and speed. Additionally, the older version of the Iranian-made Kilo-class submarine has not been developed. The submarine had been exported to seven nations:

- Algeria: 6 Submarines: 2 Original Kilo, upgraded version - 2 Improved Kilo - 2 Improved Kilo- new contract and future delivery;
- India: 10 submarines-Original Kilo, an upgraded version;
- China: 10 submarines (8 Improved Kilo submarines, two Original Kilo submarines, upgraded versions);
- Vietnam: 6 Improved Kilo submarines;
- Iran: (3 Original Kilo submarines, undeveloped version);
- and Poland: 1 Original Kilo submarine. ⁽²⁸⁾

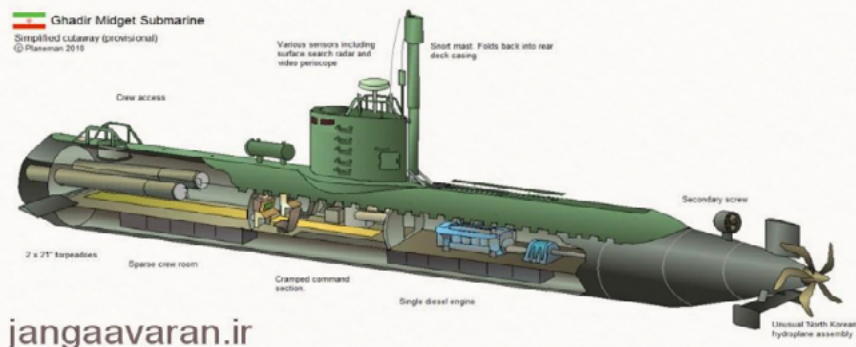
Notably, Iran was not at the top of the list of countries to which Russia exported the submarine. It was just ahead of last-placed Poland. Iran was also given the oldest and undeveloped version. This indicates that Russia does not desire to allow Iran to be a major naval force although it opposes the US presence in the Arabian Gulf.

B-The Ghadir Submarine

As a result of the sanctions imposed on Iran, it could not import other submarines. Iran turned to local manufacturing. The submarine Ghadir-class was produced in 2006, a small submarine known as Midget, whose weight is no more than 150 tons and carries no more than 10 crew members. It is 29-meter long and 2.7-meter wide.

However, the Ghadir submarine is characterized by the fact that Iran has the capacity to manufacture any number of them in a not-too-long period because 90 percent of its components are locally manufactured. In terms of capacity, the most important is the pace of readiness, as it can move from the docking position within 30 seconds, as well as proceeding in shallow water.

Figure 2: Ghadir Submarine: Internal Design



Source: <http://cutt.us/NCZmM>

Iran boasts that its Ghadir submarine was able to situate itself just two kilometers from a US aircraft carrier in the Gulf due to its small size and the minimal noise it emits. The submarine can also launch torpedoes from two front launchers, launch naval mines, carry commands and RPGs, and the required equipment for frogmen to be able to carry out underwater operations.⁽²⁹⁾

2- The New Production of Iranian Submarines: Fateh Submarine

The submarine, which Iran announced it entered into service in February 2018, represents the real start of producing submarines – if the information released on it is true. This is because its ability to sail for 35 straight days and its weight not exceeding 500 tons has resulted in it being classified as a small submarine according to global rankings. It is not medium-sized as Iran claims. It is capable of housing eight torpedoes which enable it to engage in combat confrontations. It can also carry 8 mines.⁽³⁰⁾

Figure (3) Fateh Submarine, the Outer Structure



Source: <http://cutt.us/tPR6I>

In general, the Fateh submarine's specifications are close to that of the Kilo-class submarine of Russia. But there is still a long road ahead for Iran to manufacture a submarine which is as powerful as Russia's Kilo. We notice that Iran did not disclose the model from which it derived the design of its Fateh submarine. The same thing happened when Iran unveiled the submarine Ghadir. No official statement was issued from Iran that it modeled the submarine on North Korea's Yono-class submarine. But due to the accumulation of information and participation in several drills, military experts managed to discover these details. The Fateh submarine proves that Iran resorted to Russian expertise in light of the current rapprochement between Russia and Iran as they have jointly fought on Syrian territories.

3- Future Plans to Develop Iranian Submarines

Iran announced that it is going to build a submarine bigger than Fateh. It is named Bathat. It weighs 3,200 tons and is 87-meters long.⁽³¹⁾ In addition, other Iranian sources said the weight of the submarine which is being built by Iran will not exceed 13,000 tons. It will be a medium size between Russia's Kilo, called Tarek in Iran, and Iran's Fateh submarines.⁽³²⁾ The Center for Strategic Defense Studies had published that the length of the submarine will be no more than 60 meters. It would be capable of firing winged missiles.⁽³³⁾

Although Iran has announced building its Bathat submarine since 2014, there are conflicting reports about the specifications of this submarine. Perhaps this means that the submarine is still in the phase of design or preliminary studies, especially as the Fateh submarine's manufacturing was declared in 2013, but it only entered into service in February 2018. This delay may be because of technical malfunctions discovered after manufacturing, which delayed the submarine's entry into service. We do not know whether these malfunctions have been repaired or if the submarine was commissioned following the pressure exerted on Iran due to US sanctions and the regime's desire to announce an accomplishment that boosts its image at home and abroad.

Second: The Armed Attacks on the IRGC

The Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corp (IRGC) came under a number of attacks in January and February 2019. Due to the political nature of the IRGC and its direct interference in politics and in suppressing protestors and minorities, the armed opposition operations focused on the IRGC instead of the regular Iranian Army. The striking factor was the armed opposition's direct attacks on the Revolutionary Guards with machine guns through small groups or individual attackers. The report reviews the attacks carried out by armed opposition groups against the Revolutionary Guards, the indications of the number and areas of these attacks, the Iranian interpretations of the recurrence of armed attacks and, finally, the political impact of successive casualties in the ranks of the Revolutionary Guards.

1- The Qualitative Transformation in the Attacks

The suicide attack on a Revolutionary Guard personnel bus as it passed through the Khash district of Sistan and Baluchistan province, a predominantly Sunni province in southeast Iran, was the most significant incident in January and February 2019. The suicide attack killed 27 IRGC members and wounded 13 soldiers. It happened when suicide bombers attacked a bus carrying Revolutionary Guard soldiers with a car bomb on the road between Khash and Zahedan. The statement issued by the Revolutionary Guard after the incident showed the lack of professionalism by the Iranian security and intelligence services. The statement said the perpetrators of the attack were takfiri terrorists who are agents of the intelligence services of the arrogant regimes.⁽³⁴⁾ Then

the remarks of the Iranian officials followed. They heaped blame on regional parties, accusing them of supporting Jaish al-Adl which claimed responsibility for the attack. Jaish al-Adl is a dissenter organization active in southeastern Iran. It aspires for autonomy in the Sistan and Baluchistan region. President Hassan Rouhani accused the White House, Tel Aviv and their surrogates in the region, while Javad Zarif said that what happened in Khash was not separate from Warsaw, in reference to the Middle East Conference held in the Polish capital Warsaw in February 2019. In the meantime, the commander of the Revolutionary Guard's Muhammad Ali Jafari accused Pakistan of supporting the perpetrators and demanded that security measures be tightened on the Pakistan-Iran border. Khamenei was more realistic when he asked the IRGC to investigate and identify points of security imbalances and those responsible for not securing the IRGC convoy.⁽³⁵⁾

Khamenei's statement reflected a state of anxiety as a result of the repeated incidents targeting the Revolutionary Guards since the major attack on the Revolutionary Guards parade in the city of Ahwaz in September 2018. The second factor that pushed Khamenei to express his concern was that the attacks in the past months were concentrated in the province of Sistan and Baluchistan located on the Pakistan-Iran border.

The region is suffering from an absence of security, a rampant smuggling trade of arms and drugs, as well as the presence of armed opposition groups, most notably Jaish Al-Adl, which Iran classifies as a terrorist organization.

The cities of Sistan and Baluchistan witnessed a series of violent incidents, beginning with the abduction of girls and sectarian clashes between Sunnis and Shiites. This was followed by the killing of Sheikh Mawlawi Abdul Shakur, the chief of the board of trustees of Khash city's mosque last July, and the targeting of IRGC leaders in the region such as Ahmed Taheri and Rohallah Ali.⁽³⁶⁾

The attack in Khash district was preceded by an attack on the IRGC Al-Quds Base on February 2 in the area of Nakshaher in the Sistan and Baluchistan region. It killed one IRGC recruit and wounded five others. The public relations office of the Al-Quds Base announced in a statement that militants carried out a terrorist attack on the Basij outpost in the city of Nakshaher. According to the Tabnak website, the Attorney General of Nakhshar, Morteza Ali Ahmadi, said that Jaish al-Adl was involved in the attack that targeted a Revolutionary Guard unit in the city.⁽³⁷⁾ Two recruits of the Jaish al-Adl wore the Revolutionary Guards' uniform and entered the camp. After they hid in a trench at the base, they opened fire on Revolutionary Guards using machine guns.⁽³⁸⁾

2- Iranian Explanations Regarding the Increasing Number of Attacks

Iran's interpretation of the increase in the number of attacks on the Revolutionary Guards tend to suggest that armed opposition groups receive outside support with the aim of overthrowing the Iranian regime. It believes that Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates are the main instigators of violence in Iran. Iran's Revolutionary Guards Commander Mohammad Ali Jafari said after the Khash incident: "The patience with which the Iranian regime was dealing with the conspiracies and reactionary states in the region, especially Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates involved in these events, will change."⁽³⁹⁾

"We know that the Saudi and Emirati intelligence services are active in the southeastern region of Iran on the Pakistani border and are carrying out acts against the national security of Iran, and we will avenge the blood of our victims of Saudi Arabia and the UAE," he said in a public meeting held in Isfahan, "We ask the President of the Republic and the President of the Supreme National Security Council to give us more powers to carry out counter-operations".⁽⁴⁰⁾

Mohammad Ali Jafari's threats to Saudi Arabia and the UAE are an irresponsible act by a senior military commander in Iran. They could entail human rights and diplomatic accountability by international organizations such as the United Nations and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation given that these remarks were made only three days after the incident in Khash.

Iran has also ignored the fact that it is experiencing such acts of violence by its ethnic minorities as a result of racial discrimination and state terrorism practiced by the regime against its citizens. This behavior is rooted in the Iranian political arena and is not only confined to the era of the Iranian Republic as it also existed in the era of the former regime. For example, minorities have been engaged in a struggle against the central government since the 1950s, particularly the Arabs in Ahwaz who founded the Ahwaz Liberation Front in the 1960s, and the Baluch in southeastern Iran. The reality is that the Iranian regime refuses to admit that the Iranian state is based on first-class racial and sectarian discrimination.

3- The Consequences of Repetitive Attacks

As a result of the Iranian regime's unwillingness to address the real root causes leading to the emergence of armed opposition groups, the most important of which is the lack of justice and equality among Iranians, some Iranian regions have turned into an open battlefield between the regime and armed opposition groups such as Kurdistan in northwestern Iran, Ahwaz in the south, and Sistan and Baluchistan in the southeast. The regime has lost security control over these regions.

The failure of the IRGC and its intelligence services to secure its elements and the continuation of casualties among its ranks will cast doubt on the military and intelligence capabilities that the Iranian regime boasts of and relies on to control Iran's internal security and to suppress demonstrators. This comes at a time when the Iranian regime is expecting waves of protests during 2019. This was mentioned by the Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei earlier this year. He called it the "sedition of 1389 AH." This came in reference to the fact that the Iranian regime is subjected every ten years to a wave of intense demonstrations. The image of the IRGC being destroyed will lead the angry public not to fear it and to engage in political dissent.

Conclusion

A series of ensuing attacks will force the Revolutionary Guards to resort to violent practices more vigorously in order to suppress and eliminate its opposition, thereby increasing its violations and its assault on personal and public freedoms. These practices will fuel public hatred towards the Revolutionary Guards and the Iranian regime. This will make demonstrations and protests more likely. This will thrust Iran into a vicious cycle of violence between its citizens and the state.

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ARAB AFFAIRS

In January and February 2019, Iran sowed the seeds of its success in exchange for its precious sacrifice, specifically in Syria and Iraq. In this context, the Iranian Foreign Minister visited Iraq in January accompanied by several representatives of Iranian companies to strengthen trade relations between Iraq and Iran to circumvent US sanctions. His trip was also in response to his US counterpart's visit to Iraq to pressure the Iraqi government to comply with US sanctions. On the other hand, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad made his first public visit to Iran since the start of the Syrian crisis eight years ago, meeting Qasem Soleimani - the head of the Quds Force. Notably, the UN and Yemen uncovered more evidence to prove Iran's military support for the Houthis to keep the Yemeni war inflamed, threatening security and stability in the region as a whole.

IRAN AND IRAQ

Iraq, one of the major areas of US-Iran competition, witnessed an intense US-Iran struggle for influence in January and February 2019 after the US imposed sanctions on Iran, with both countries seeking to dominate Iraq via their respective elements of power. The United States deals with Iraq as a vital area of influence to confront Iran within the framework of its strategy to change Tehran's behavior. On the other hand, Iran counts on Iraq to confront US economic sanctions by exporting its oil through Iraqi territory to the world. However, Iran adopted a containment policy towards Iraq by reinforcing its political, economic and cultural relations to undermine US efforts to force the Iraqi government to comply with sanctions against Iran and to maintain its interventionist role there because Iraq is a strategic area of influence for Iran. The following report discusses Foreign Minister Zarif's visit to Iraq and its political implications, and Iranian pressure to pass a law to expel US forces from Iraq.

First: Zarif's Visit to Iraq and Its Political Implications

The Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif visited Iraq after the formation of the new Iraqi government was finalized. During his five-day visit (January 13- 18, 2019), Zarif met with Iraqi President Barham Salih, Prime Minister Adil Abdul-Mahdi and Mohamed al-Halbousi, the Speaker of the Council of Representatives of Iraq. He then went to Erbil and met with the leader of the Kurdistan Democratic Party, Massoud Barzani, and Nizhvan Bargain, the Prime Minister of the Kurdistan Region.

Four days after Mike Pompeo's surprise visit to Iraq, Zarif visited Iraq. This urgency reflected the fear of Iran's decision-makers regarding the US administration increasing pressure on the Iraqi government to force it to comply with US sanctions, which are representative of the US pressure strategy against Iran. The United States, however, is aware of the Iraqi position in the overall Iranian strategy to circumvent its sanctions. Observers have reported on Iran's intentions to transfer oil to Iraqi territory which is to be exported later under the name of the Iraqi government to circumvent US sanctions. With this intention, the US Secretary of State called on the Iraqi government to ensure Iraq's independence in the energy field.⁽¹⁾

He stressed Iraq's commitment to isolate Iran, by saying, "We are looking to our partners' contribution to confronting Iran."⁽²⁾ In other words, Pompeo not only called on Iraq to abandon Iranian electricity and gas but also to play an active role in isolating Iran by complying with US sanctions. This US demand on Iraq reflects its intention not to extend Iraq's 90-day exemption that started on December 20, 2018 to import electricity and gas from Iran - just as the previous 45-day exemption expired.

By not extending the exemption to the US sanctions after the deadline on March 20, Iraq will face a real crisis. In this context, the President of the Iraqi South Gas Company Hayan Abdulghani stated that Iraq needs two years to boost its gas production by the end of 2020 from 6.3 million cubic feet per day to 1.3 billion cubic feet per day to stop gas imports from Iran. The Iraqi government refuses to comply with US sanctions because they are unilateral and non-UN sanctioned.

Accordingly, Zarif visited Iraq three days after the Iranian Energy Minister visited Iraq to thwart US efforts and to reinforce Iran-Iraq relations. "We have a glorious history with Iraq and we stood next to Iraq in difficult times. There are good trade relations between Iran and Iraq."⁽³⁾

Second: Passing a Law to Expel US Forces From Iraq

Iran urges its militias and political alliances, including the Conquest Alliance led by Hadi Al-Amiri (the head of the Badr Organization) and the State of Law Coalition led by the former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, to develop a consensus in the Iraqi Council of Representatives to pass a draft law to expel foreign troops from Iraq. Iran already knows that 70% of foreign troops are US soldiers, with 6,000 out of a total of 8,000 soldiers. Issuing a law to expel US troops would terminate the Iraq-US security agreement which was established after the withdrawal of US troops from Iraq in 2011. However, this law will not be activated against its armed militias after the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) were incorporated into the Iraqi army at the end of 2017.

Iran's move to pass such a law has political implications and it coincided with US President Donald Trump's statement that "the United States will remain in Iraq to watch Iran's activities,"⁽⁴⁾ and media reports that the United States plans to establish military bases in the disputed areas between the Kurdistan region and the central government in Kirkuk, Nineveh, Diyala and Anbar. Impliedly, Iran wants to deliver a message to the Iraqi regime that the presence of US forces in Iraq violates Iraqi sovereignty, and to the United States that Iran is invincible in Iraq and it can attack the US military in Iraq legally through its militias.



The blatant violation of Iraq's sovereignty by the United States has been exploited by Iran to agitate Iraq's political class. The Iraqi President Barham Salih stated, "Trump did not ask Baghdad's permission to keep the US military in Iraq to watch Iran [...] It is of fundamental interest for Iraq to have good relations with Iran and other neighboring countries."⁽⁵⁾

The question here is does Washington actually depend on Iraqi territory to watch Iran's activities? In fact, the US abandoned Iraq without finding a foothold for its interests, by not establishing good economic ties before and even after its withdrawal from Iraq in 2011. In addition, the United States failed to forge a solid US-Iraq relationship and was unable to maintain strong ties with its allies from Iraq's powerful political parties and with key powers in Iraq's decision-making circles as Iran did after the US invasion of Iraq in 2003. Thus, it could not keep Iraq as an ally in the Middle East.

Third: Building a Complex Network of Economic Interactions With Iraq

Iran signed with the Iraqi government several economic, trade and cultural agreements to keep Iraq within the Iranian sphere of influence by building a complex network of economic interactions through:

1-Launching a Financial Exchange Mechanism

On February 5, the Governor of the Central Bank of Iran, Abdul Nasser Hemmati, announced the signing of an agreement with his Iraqi counterpart Ali Al-Alaak during his visit to Iraq to establish a special mechanism to facilitate trade and financial exchanges as well as to pay Iraq's debts, and in exchange Iraq will import Iranian gas and electricity. According to this agreement, Iraq will pay its debts estimated at around \$2 billion which it owes to Iran through several means, including paying Iran from its oil export revenues,⁽⁶⁾ and Iraq's Central Bank opening dinar accounts to facilitate gas and oil transactions between Iraq and Iran. In exchange, Iranian banks would also open dinar accounts in Iraqi banks.

2-Renewing Iraq's Electricity Supply Contracts

Iran and Iraq have signed an agreement to extend Iraq's electricity supply contract by 1,200 megawatts. Iran supplies Iraq with about 40 percent of its electricity needs. Iraq imports 1,300-1,500 megawatts of its electricity and 28 million cubic meters of gas a day from Iran to produce electricity.

These agreements will boost Iran's investment in Iraq from \$12 billion to \$20 billion, according to both leaders' remarks during President Barham Salih's visit to Iran. Iraqi media reported that the majority of Iranian goods exported to Iraq under the responsibility of the PMF are defective. The Iraqi Border Ports Authority detected more than 129 cases in January 2019 of the smuggling of drugs, money, and goods.⁽⁷⁾ Iran exports to Iraq food items, agricultural products, household appliances, air conditioners and auto parts.



Fourth: Reinforcing Iranian Power in Iraq

On February 13, 2019, the Iraqi Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research signed an agreement with the Iranian Open University for scientific and cultural cooperation. It provides for exchange fellowships and scholarships between Iraq and Iran as well as joint supervision by Iraqi university and Iranian Open University professors of theses and dissertations. It is also supportive of scholarships for Iraqi students in some specializations and for Iraqi professors to conduct their research projects in the scientific laboratories and research centers at the Open University. The agreement provides an opportunity for exchange visits and for participation in conferences, workshops and scientific symposiums held in both countries.

Conclusion

The United States believes that to tighten its blockade on Iran in order to curb Iranian influence in the Middle East, it needs to keep its military deployment in Iraq and to expel or at least curb Iranian forces in Iraq; which has become Iran's military camp for its pro-Shiite militias in Syria, Yemen, and Lebanon. On the other hand, Iraq has become a strategic option for Iran to export its oil to the world given the geographical proximity between the port of Basra and Iran's oil-producing fields as well as low financial and security costs. For this reason, Zarif was accompanied by several economists, investors, and leading Iranian companies on his visit to Iraq.

IRAN AND SYRIA

The latest developments in Syria: the incomplete US withdrawal from Syrian territories, the divergence of interests between Iran and Russia, in addition to Syrian opposition factions being mobilized in Idlib, incited Russia-Iran disagreements on their spheres of influence. As the Syrian war enters its final stage, Iran seeks to enhance cooperation with the Syrian regime which will enable the Iranians to expand their influence, to play an active role in the Syrian arena and to limit Russian influence on their interests in Syria.

First: Iran Continues Using the Same Tools and Policies for Long-Term Existence In Syria

The Member of the National Security and Foreign Policy Committee of the Iranian Parliament, Hishmat Allah Faht Bisha stated during his meeting with the Syrian Prime Minister, Imad Deeb Khamis in Damascus on January 16, 2019, "Iran's support to Syria was provided at the expense of the Iranian people's food and money and the good ties between both countries can make it up."⁽⁸⁾

The prospects of Syria-Iran ties prove the Western and Arab claims that Iran pursues an expansionist project in Syria and Iraq at the expense of development projects and socio-economic improvement, with Iranians expressing their discontent publicly against economic deterioration. They also expose Iran's justification of its presence in Syria; as it has constantly argued that it was requested officially by the Syrian government to provide military consultancy and to fight terrorist groups. The development of Syria-Iran ties motivated the latter to extend its sphere of influence politically, economically and military as follows :

1-Reinforcing Political Cooperation

Iran's political engagement in Syria is to underscore its efforts in protecting the Assad regime and to warn it of the consequences of breaking off ties with Iran. To that end, after the Syrian Foreign Minister Walid al-Muallem called for a visit to Iran on February 5, the Syrian President Bashar al-Assad also made his first visit since the beginning of the civil war in 2011. Assad's February 25 visit to Iran was sudden and secret.

Assad was called to visit Iran but his visit did not comply with proper diplomatic protocols, evidenced by the two diplomatic insults he received. Firstly, the Syrian flag was missing during his meeting with Rouhani; and secondly, Assad was alone and not accompanied by any delegation while an Iranian delegation attended. Qasem Soleimani attended the Assad - Khamenei and the Assad -Rouhani meetings. These diplomatic violations reflected the sensitivity of the visit and highlighted the role of the Quds Force in keeping Assad in power; and its role in defining and implementing Iran's policy in Syria. In fact, Soleimani was holding Assad's hand as if he was called on to meet the Supreme Leader.

The absence of the Syrian flag and Assad's delegation, as well as the statements made by Khamenei and Rouhani during their meetings, would result in many regarding Syria as an Iranian state or province and its President as a Syrian official of the Iranian state. In addition, Iran does not need Syrian permission to stay or leave Syria, "we will be next to Syria until it is stronger as before and eliminate terrorism since Syria provides vital strategic depth to Iran and vice versa, " according to Khamenei. Similarly, during the meeting between Assad and Rouhani, the latter stated, "the claimed victories blow the Western and American project, and we should be alert of what they are plotting against us as a reaction to their failure."⁽⁹⁾



Walid al Muallem responded, “Since we were able to defeat terrorism together, we will be able to confront colonialism.” He further stated, “The Syrian regime controls nearly 90% of Syrian territory.”⁽¹⁰⁾ Notably, the majority of the statements would lead one to conclude that Iran seeks to stay in Syria for a long time to seek compensation for the sacrifices it has made in the country.

2- Enhancing Economic Cooperation

Eshaq Jahangiri Iran's Vice President, and the Syrian Prime Minister Imad deen Khamis signed 11 agreements, memorandums of understanding and an executive program on January 28, notably the “Long-term Strategic Economic Cooperation Agreement.” Both parties also signed 10 other agreements related to culture, science, infrastructure, railways, investment, housing and information exchange in the area of money laundering and terrorist financing.⁽¹¹⁾

To enhance trade and investment between the two countries, the two sides established the Iranian-Syrian Joint Chamber of Commerce on January 29, offices and exhibitions of Iranian companies in Syria for Iranian products, an Iranian trade center in the free zone in Damascus, and a joint transport company to transfer Iranian goods from Iraq to Syria. In addition, the Governor of the Central Bank of Iran, Abdul Nasser Hemmati, signed an agreement to strengthen banking relations and to establish an Iranian-Syrian joint bank in Damascus.

These agreements will legitimize the consolidation of Iran's trade in the Syrian market to ensure more economic activities covering Syria's reconstruction needs. These agreements also provide Iran with the biggest portion of reconstruction contracts to rebuild the country. In fact, international institutions estimate the cost of reconstruction resulting from the eight-year civil war in Syria to be between \$350 billion and \$400 billion.⁽¹²⁾

3- Strengthening Defense Cooperation

In a meeting with Iran's Deputy Defense Minister Major General Mahmoud al-Shawa in Tehran on January 7, Iran's Minister of Defense, Brigadier General Amir Hatemi stated, “We will stand –like the way we were before – next to the Syrian people until they achieve total victory.”⁽¹³⁾ This important statement is one of many other statements expressing Iranian intentions to remain in Syria until total victory is claimed according to Iran's concept, which will turn Syria into an Iranian province to facilitate the formation of

an Iranian corridor linking Iran to the Mediterranean. Based on intelligence reports, Soleimani ordered militia elements (about 15,000 fighters) of the Iraqi PMF led by Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis to deploy on the Iraqi-Syrian border, waiting for the green light to cross the border to join the Syrian forces. If these Iranian forces are deployed in Syria, they will be the second batch of Iranian forces following Hezbollah at the end of 2014, while Israel and the United States have called on Iranian militias to pull out from Syria.

Second: The ongoing Israeli Escalation Against Iranian Concentrations in Syria

1-Israeli Claims of Striking Iranian Targets

On January 21, the Israeli Air Force fired more than 30 rockets against different Iranian targets in several Syrian governorates (Damascus, and its countryside, as well as in the countryside of Quneitra and As-Suwayda). As a result, four Syrian soldiers were killed and six injured, according to the Russian Defense Ministry, but the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reported that 11 people were killed. Whereas the Syrian Human Rights Organization stated that 21 were killed, including 12 members of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards.⁽¹⁴⁾ According to the IDF Spokesman Avichai Adarei, the strikes hit targets of the Quds Force including warehouses containing weapons at Damascus International Airport, and an Iranian intelligence site and training camp.

On his official Twitter account on January 21, the Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu justified carrying out the air strikes against Iranian targets in Syria to maintain security in Israel and the Golan Heights, "We hit Iranian targets after Iran fired missiles against our territory."⁽¹⁵⁾ Avichai Adarei also said, "The decision to strike Iranian targets was after Iranian forces launched Iranian made medium-range missile against the Golan Heights."⁽¹⁶⁾ *Debka* announced that the order to fire the improved Fatteh-110 missile, which carries a quarter-of-a-ton warhead to a range of 300 kilometers, was given in person by Qasem Soleimani.⁽¹⁷⁾

So why do Iranian militias continuously provoke the Israelis by firing missiles at the Golan Heights while they are already aware of the superiority of the Israeli air force compared to the Iranian air force? Is it to test Israel's response in the southern region of Syria, while observers have ruled out Iran's desire to engage in an open war with Israel? Or does Iran test the extent of Israeli readiness, If Iran wants to engage in a war with Israel?

Israel's justifications for striking the sites of the Iranian Quds Force, were: to curb the flow of Iranian fighters to Syria and arms to Hezbollah to change the rules of the game, and to deter Iran and Hezbollah from setting up military infrastructure in southern Syria which can jeopardize Israeli security.

Iran's main goal for sending IRGC fighters and militias from unstable countries; estimated at around 20,000, according to the statistics of the Israeli army, as well as providing financial and military support to its pro-militias in Syria, sending weapons to the Assad regime via civilian planes, according to a CIA report in 2018, and its intention to establish military bases and an army like Hezbollah in Lebanon and Syria is to find a balance of power with Israel. For this reason, Netanyahu on several occasions called to thwart Iran's plan to cordon off Israel.

Israel is concerned that the Iranians will use the US military withdrawal from Syria to consolidate its influence which Washington and Tel Aviv are seeking to limit. However, this has forced the US administration to keep 400 of its troops in Syria out of a total of 2,000 US troops: 200 soldiers will be under the command of multinational forces of a total 800-1,500 troops to maintain security in northeastern Syria between Turkish

forces and pro-US Kurdish forces to ensure de-escalation of military attacks between the parties. The Trump administration plans to keep the other 200 soldiers at the al-Tanf border base.

2-The Iranian Reactions to Israeli Strikes

Brigadier General Aziz Nasirzadeh, the Commander of the Islamic Republic of Iran Air Force stated on January 21, "We're ready for the decisive war that will bring about Israel's disappearance from the earth. Our young airmen are prepared for the day when Israel will be destroyed."⁽¹⁸⁾ This Iranian reaction to the IDF Chief of Staff Gadi Eizenkot's assertion of dropping thousands of rockets and bombs against Iranian targets in Syria (2018) was actually pointless.⁽¹⁹⁾ This response questioned Iran's ballistic missile capabilities. Therefore, Iranian official statements glorying its military capabilities are likely to increase its popularity internally while it faces a lot of crises at home and abroad.

Iran's military power, especially its air force, compared to Israel's and the stance of the parties during the crisis, limit the possibility of a future war due to the superiority of the Israeli Air Force, and because of the fact that Iran's air cover is unavailable in Syria. The Iranian economy and the Iranian Corridor linking Iran to the Mediterranean are top priorities according to the Iranian government which rules out any future war with Israel.

In addition, Russia, the main actor in the crisis, prevents the outbreak of war with Iran to protect its interests and its influence in Syria as well as the course of the Russian settlement, and to hinder the formation of any possible US-Israel alliance if a war broke out. Iran is aware that Israel is not the only country that wants to deter Iran in the region, with the US and the neighboring Gulf countries sharing the same ambition. Accordingly, the Iranians are aware of the consequences after Israel carried out a massive attack on its targets in Syria.

3- Political Divergence and Armed Clashes Between Russia and Iran

The new developments in Syria, the regime's new gains on the battlefield, the divergence of Russian-Iranian mutual interests, Russia's growing cooperation with Israel to curb Iran's expansionist project and to expel Iranian militias in Syria, the consequences of the US withdrawal from Syria, turned the deep political differences between Iran and Russia into armed engagements leading to the following :

A-Iran-Russia Political Divergence

After a few days of strikes by the Israeli air force against Iranian targets in several Syrian provinces on January 23, 2018, Iran accused Russia of conspiring with Israel to disrupt the S-300 system. The head of the National Security and Foreign Policy Committee of Iran, Hishmatullah Fallah Bisha said, "If the S-300 system operated properly, Israel would not have successfully carried out the attacks against Syrian territory,"⁽²⁰⁾ An Iranian report also mentioned, "Russia sold Syria a broken S-300 system." These statements and reports will affect Iran-Russia ties and the sale of the S-300 system.⁽²¹⁾

The Russian response towards the Iranian stance was unexpectedly shocking with Russia ending the alliance with Iran. During an interview with CNN on Friday January 25, Russia's Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov - one day after Hishmatullah's statement - when asked if Russia was Iran's ally on the ground in Syria, Ryabkov answered, "I wouldn't use this type of words to describe where we are with Iran," adding that "We in no way underestimate the importance of measures that would ensure the very strong security of the state of Israel." In addition, he said, "The Israelis know this, the US knows this, everyone else, including the Iranians, the Turks, the government in Damascus. This is one of the top priorities of Russia."⁽²²⁾

B- Military Confrontations Between Russian and Iranian Pro-Alliances

The Russian-Iranian political tension has been in line with armed confrontations in Syria. On January 27, 2019, Christoph Reuter, the *Spiegel* correspondent in the Middle East, was able to access a recorded conversation by Maher al-Assad, the pro-Iranian brother of President Bashar al-Assad who spoke of armed clashes between his troops and the pro-Russian Syrian Fifth Division led by the Commander of the Tiger Forces, Major General Suhail Al Hassan. Heavy machine guns were used in the Al-Suqaylabiyah district in Hama on January 19, resulting in nearly 200 fatalities.

The Russians have realized that Iran's expansionist project goes against their interests since the Iranians are seeking to seize the biggest share of reconstruction contracts. Moreover, the deployment of the IRGC in Syria threatens Russian influence in Syria and adds more burden on the Russians if Iran exploits Syria as a platform for engaging in military battles with Moscow. This thwarts Russian efforts to achieve a political settlement in Syria and weakens Moscow's stance before regional and international powers. In addition, the Russians have recognized the number of those affected by Iran's increasing presence in Syria. Therefore, Russia decided to add pressure on Iranian militias even if the regime depends on them to consolidate its regime in Syria, especially after the Quds Brigades Commander General Qasem Soleimani was on a tour close to the Golan Heights, just 45 kilometers away from the border with Israel on January 18. In turn, the Russians were embarrassed in light of Russian President Vladimir Putin's reassurance in 2018 to Netanyahu and Trump that Russia would keep the Iranians at least 80 kilometers away from the Golan Heights ceasefire line. ⁽²³⁾

Conclusion

Following the shift of the balance of power in favor of Assad, Russian-Iranian divergence widened, leading to armed confrontations, but Iran bets on the Russians internationally to find a balance of power to equal that of the United States, providing Russia with the chance to buy its oil and to export it to world markets because Iran itself is under US economic sanctions.

YEMEN AND IRAN

In January and February 2019, more international evidence revealed Iranian financial and military support to the Houthis in order to keep the Yemeni crisis ongoing without offering any solution that could establish security and stability in Yemen. Iran has urged the Houthis not to commit to the Stockholm Agreement because Hodeida and its port have strategic, military and political importance to all parties in the conflict. Moreover, Iran's support for the Houthis was a pressure tool to keep the areas of influence under the Houthis' grip.

First: Iran's Role in Thwarting the Stockholm Agreement

Yemeni official evidence unveiled the Iranian plot to bring down the Stockholm Agreement signed by the Yemeni government and the Houthis in Stockholm on December 2018, under the auspices of the UN Envoy to Yemen Martin Griffiths.

The Yemeni army spokesman, Brigadier Abda Mjali, stated that 38 Iranian experts are deployed in several locations including Hodeidah specifically and 50 others in Saada. In addition, the Yemeni army detected more than 200 Houthi attempts to break the truce using medium and heavy weapons.⁽²⁴⁾ The Yemeni Foreign Minister Khaled al-Yamani also - on the sidelines of the Warsaw Conference in Poland in mid February 2019 - highlighted Iran's attempt to thwart any peace talks by saying, "Iran played a major role to sabotage the Stockholm Agreement," and he called for "putting an end to Iran's interference in Yemen and its threat to security in Aden and the Red Sea."⁽²⁵⁾

These statements confirm the Iranian call to the Houthis to not commit to the provisions of the Stockholm Agreement. Iran, however, recognizes that the withdrawal of the Houthis, according to the text of the agreement, from the ports of Hodeidah, Salif and Ras Issa to the north of Sana'a Road, with the redeployment of Yemeni military forces under the auspices of the United Nations, would curb its military support to the Houthis, and give an opportunity to the legitimate government to regain control of the rest of the provinces that are still under the Houthis' grip if it controls the port of Hodeidah. Consequently, this would affect the Houthis and limit Iranian influence in Yemen.

Iran is also aware that losing Yemen at this very critical moment, particularly as the United States has tightened its blockade on Tehran to change its behavior, may affect its influence with regard to other regional files, especially the Iraqi file. The increasing pressure on Iraq to abide by US sanctions against Iran, the divergence between Russia and Iran, as well as the escalation of Israeli military air strikes to eliminate Iranian militias, will motivate Iran to keep its foothold in Yemen if Russia, the United States or Israel were able to curb Iran with regard to the rest of the outstanding regional files.



The Iranian President Hassan Rouhani said during his speech on the 40th anniversary of the Iranian Revolution that, "Iran has supported Yemen to continue its path."⁽²⁶⁾ This shows the importance of Yemen to Iran. Therefore, Iran urged the Houthis to break the truce by sending them further military reinforcements, redeploying arms in vital areas, carrying out air attacks via drone strikes against the Al- Anad Air Base killing the head of Yemen's military intelligence Muhammad Saleh Tamah on January 13, 2019, and shelling the camps of displaced persons in Hodeidah, which caused the loss of lives and property.

Second: The UN Condemnation of Iran's Support to the Houthis

The members of the Panel of Experts on Yemen submitted their report to the Security Council Committee, condemning Iran's support to the Houthis against the legitimate government and threatening peace and security in Yemen, as follows:⁽²⁷⁾

1. The head of the so-called Political Bureau of the Revolutionary Movement, Fadi Baoum, received financial support from Iran to form an anti-government movement and to undermine security and stability in Yemen.
2. The Houthis continue to deploy small and medium-sized Qasif-1 UAVs in different Yemeni cities, which contain the same characteristics as the Iranian-made drone Ababil.
3. During the year 2017, Saudi Arabia seized a ship loaded with oil which had false documents to avoid inspections on its way to Ras Issa from the Iranian port of Bandar Abbas. The oil received from Iran through the port of Hodeidah is estimated at 4.73 million metric tons from September 2016 to October 2018 out of a total of 169,019 million metric tons per month. Therefore, the port has strategic importance to the Houthis..
4. The Houthis assassinated the Yemeni journalist Mohammed Abdo al-Absi for writing a report proving their involvement in using oil sale proceeds to finance their military operations. The report also revealed the involvement of three companies in these activities, namely, Yemen Life owned by Mohammed Abdul-Salam, the spokesman of the Houthis; Oil Primer owned by Dagsan Mohammed Daghshan who is close to the Houthis; and Black Gold, owned by Ali Qersha. The UN Panel of Experts report confirmed that entities of Iranian origin and individuals were involved in financing the purchase of these companies.

Regarding the alleged mistakes of the UN Panel of Experts report about the Arab coalition to Support Legitimacy in Yemen (also known as the Saudi-led coalition) during military engagements, the spokesman of the Joint Incidents Assessment Team (JIAT) in Yemen, legal consultant Mansour Bin Ahmed Al-Mansour, said that the procedures followed by the coalition forces were proper and safe, taking into consideration the rules of engagement, international humanitarian law and the coalition's own rules.

⁽²⁸⁾ This proves false the claims by the Houthis backed by Iran that the Arab Coalition forces to Support Legitimacy in Yemen violated international laws and norms.

Conclusion

The official Yemeni statements and UN condemnations of Iran supporting the Houthis shows the credibility of the saying that Iran is inflaming the conflict between rivals parties in the region to implement its expansionist project in any geographical area within its sphere of influence. Therefore, Iran strives to thwart any talks, agreements or truces to establish security and stability in Yemen including the implementation of the provisions of the Stockholm Agreement or any new agreements in the future. In fact, Iran has impeded the Yemeni peace process including the Kuwait talks.

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INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

Iran has become a hot topic in the international arena following the US withdrawal from the JCPOA and the re-imposition of US sanctions on Tehran. The latest developments from January-February 2019 tell us a great deal about the challenges the Iranian regime faces. The growing US escalation and the maximum pressure approach of the Trump administration against Iran, in addition to the recent changes in the European position on Iran, have hindered Iran's ability to maneuver. Tehran had no choice but to adopt an alternative policy to avoid making concessions jeopardizing the regime's existence or risk losing effective bargaining chips.

In this section, we discuss Iran's relations with the most instrumental powers in the international arena: the United States, Europe, and Turkey. Ankara has become a strategic partner for Iran to address its growing economic pressures. Moreover, we explore Iran's relations with Pakistan and India, taking into consideration the recent increasing tensions between the two countries and their regional rivalry.

IRAN-US RELATIONS

US-Iran relations have been marked by escalation and direct confrontation. This report sheds light on the dimensions and implications of this escalation through identifying the maximum US pressure strategy on Iran, Iranian tactics and their attempts to circumvent US sanctions, as well as the resulting outcomes.

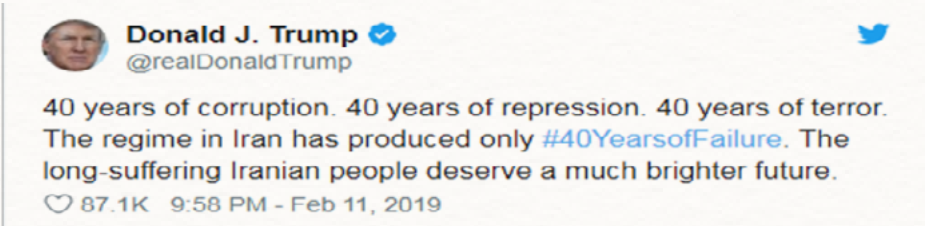
First: US Strategy Between Containment and Maximum Pressure

The United States has continued its escalation against the Iranian regime through:

1-Placing maximum internal pressure on the Iranian regime

The United States has attempted to incite public opinion against the Iranian regime by raising doubts about the effectiveness of its leadership. President Donald Trump, in a tweet in Persian addressing the Iranian people posted on February 11, held the Iranian government responsible for the suffering of the Iranian people and accused it of exercising repression as well as it being involved in terrorism and corruption.

Figure 4: Trump’s tweet on Iranian corruption



Source: <https://bit.ly/2Ffjs6t>

Seemingly, the United States threatens Tehran with regime change. “It has been 40 years of failure. Now it is up to the Iranian regime to change its behavior, and ultimately up to the Iranian people to determine the direction of their country,” National Security Adviser John Bolton tweeted.⁽¹⁾ Bolton’s remarks reveal that regime change is not unlikely in Iran and that it actually might be a top priority for the US. The US administration may use the threat of ‘regime change’ to force the Iranian regime to comply with its conditions.

The US Treasury imposed new sanctions specifically targeting the IRGC’s regional actions and its cyber attacks, (see table 3). The Trump administration relies on its strategy of imposing sanctions to place pressure on the Iranian regime.

Table 3: US Sanctions on Iran (January-February 2019)

Date	Sanctions
24 January 2019	Four entities: Two foreign militias and two airlines affiliated with the IRGC; Liwa Fatemiyoun and Liwa Zainebiyoun carrying out operations for the Assad regime in Syria in addition to the Iran-based Qeshm Fars Air and the Armenia-based Flight Travel LLC the US

Date	Sanctions
13 February 2019	Nine individuals and two firms as the IRGC used the New Horizon Organization, aimed at recruiting and collecting intelligence from foreign attendees. Four Iranians connected to the entity were also sanctioned for targeting employees in the US government through cyber attacks.

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Data source: <https://bit.ly/2U3kdZI> · <https://bit.ly/2WhPhmj>

Several lines of evidence indicate that there is a secret US plan to address Iran's cyber warfare. The Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif held the United States accountable for the failure of two Iranian satellite launches.⁽²⁾ According to international reports, the US administration is carrying out an 11-year secret plan to sabotage Iran's cyber warfare and missile program.⁽³⁾

2- The Strategy of Containment: Regional and International Levels

To complete its maximum pressure strategy on Iran, the United States doubled its efforts. The strategy mainly seeks to build a new international consensus on Iran and to curb Iran's influence in the region.

The United States has boosted collective collaboration to confront Iran. Since the beginning of 2019, moves toward establishing an Arab NATO have intensified. The US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo visited the 8-14 countries that may join the new alliance. The dialogues to launch the so-called Arab NATO continued in Washington on February 22, though there are still unresolved issues hindering the formation of this alliance: the principle of collective defense, the Gulf crisis, Israel's participation, and resignation of both Kirsten Fontenrose, a top White House official responsible for US policy towards Saudi Arabia, and retired General Anthony Zinni, the former head of the US Central Command who were tapped by the Trump Administration to organize the Arab NATO.⁽⁴⁾

Furthermore, the United States and Poland co-organized an international conference to confront Iran. The representatives and ministers of 62 states met in Warsaw, Poland on February 13 and 14, officially dubbed the "Ministerial to Promote a Future of Peace and Security in the Middle East."⁽⁵⁾ But it implicitly meant "to confront Iran's danger." This is a very significant strategic effort the United States exerted to confront Iran's regional behavior.

The United States supported efforts aimed at confronting Iran's influence in the region. During his unexpected visit to Ayn al-Asad Airbase in western Iraq, President Trump stated that he does not have plans for military withdrawal from Iraq and that the base can be used to carry out operations in Syria.⁽⁶⁾ Therefore, the United States redeployed some of its troops in Iraq. Trump suggested to Iraqi officials to redeploy US troops from Syria to Iraq, so he can send them back to Syria if needed. He also requested that Iraqi forces accompany US troops in the next operations to be carried out in Syria. However, Iraq rejected Trump's demands and announced that it will not allow any party to exploit Iraqi territory against any other country and that Iraq will not partake in any military operations abroad against its neighbors.⁽⁷⁾ On the other hand, Iran accused US forces of training and redeploying the People's Mujahedin Organization of Iran (PMOI/MEK) in Iraq.⁽⁸⁾

Pompeo visited Iraq on January 9, 2018, to place further pressure on the Iraqi government to comply with 'the US maximum pressure strategy' on Iran. The US pushed

Iraq to stop importing Iran's gas and to look for alternatives and to curb the power of Iranian firms operating in Iraq. US oil and gas firms proposed offers to the Iraqis to act as substitutes for Iran's gas.^[9] The new US strategy clearly indicates the strategic significance of Iraq as a frontline state to confront Iran.



Heading to the Middle East today to send a clear message to our friends and partners that the U.S. is committed to the region, committed to [#defeatISIS](#), and committed to counter Iran's destabilizing activities.

However, the US strategy towards Iran's influence in Syria is not quite clear. Following the US troop withdrawal from Syria, the power vacuum created by this move can be swiftly filled up by Iranian forces and help it to further enhance its influence in Syria.^[10] Thus, the troop withdrawal does not support the new US strategy. Following excessive pressures from within his administration, Trump changed his decision. He resorted to allowing a limited number of troops to remain in Syria to protect US interests and to reassure his country's allies.

The United States exerted efforts in the international arena to impact the European position on Iran, especially on Europe's attempts to salvage the nuclear agreement and to help Iran circumvent US sanctions. The United States pressured the Europeans to withdraw from the nuclear deal to confront Iran. The US Vice President Mike Pence clearly confirmed these US demands on February 16 at the Munich Security Conference.^[11]

On the other hand, the United States urged its European allies to impose sanctions on any alternative financial mechanism or economic aid, other than those approved by the United States, that would help Iran address the challenges of the US sanctions.

Overall, the US administration is still working to place further pressure on the Iranian regime through measures targeting the internal Iranian front and its regional influence, to eventually isolate Iran on the international stage. This strategy has caused the Iranian regime to face its darkest days. Iranian President Hassan Rouhani said his country is facing its worst economic crisis in 40 years. His comment indicates that the US strategy has started to reap its fruit.^[12]

Second: Iranian attempts to circumvent US sanctions

Anticipating the US strategy will drag it to the negotiation table, Iran has exerted efforts to bypass US sanctions. Iran's attempts to bypass US sanctions are detailed as follows:

1. Missile Power

According to Iran, missile power is a pillar of strength used as a deterrence tool to address external pressures, especially that of the United States. Iran's ballistic missile program has always been a highly controversial and political issue. Iran managed to use it as a bargaining chip. The recent missile launch attempts incited escalation from both Iran and the United States. Table 4 illustrates Iran missile launches carried out in January and February.

Through its missile launches, Iran raised the concerns of the United States, its neighbors, and Europe that Iran will not stand still if it faces any political or military escalation jeopardizing its existence.

Table 4: Iran's Missile Launch Attempts in January-February 2019

Date	Event
15 January	A failed attempt to launch a satellite into space.
2 February	A successful attempt to launch a new missile with a range of 1,350 km.
4 February	Flight-testing of the <i>Khorramshahr</i> 2 ballistic missile.
6 February	Second attempt to launch a rocket carrying a satellite.
24 February	A successful attempt to launch a cruise missile from the Ghadir-class submarine of the Iranian Navy.

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Iran attempts to mitigate the impact of US sanctions. The Iranian government will try to flood the country with foreign currency from North Korea and China (these two countries have been granted waivers of five to six months from US sanctions against Iran since November 2018).⁽¹³⁾ The government also relies on activating the alternative financial vehicle called the Instrument for Supporting Trade Exchanges (INSTEX) created by the European Troika in February 2019 to facilitate trade between Iran and Europe, easing Iran's access to revenues from oil exports and its import of basic goods.

2. Enhance Its Presence in the Regional and International Arena

Iran continues to enhance its cooperation with its neighbors to bypass US sanctions. It concluded agreements with Turkey and Iraq to enhance mutual trade.⁽¹⁴⁾ Zarif's visit to Iraq following the visit of his American counterpart reflects the significance and priority of Baghdad in Iran's regional strategy. The visit of the Armenian Prime Minister to Tehran unveiled the cooperation between the two countries on energy and free trade zones.⁽¹⁵⁾ Without a shadow of a doubt, Iran's neighbors smooth the path for Iran to circumvent US sanctions, especially those targeting its oil exports and its financial transactions.

To reinforce its international stature, Tehran hosted the "International Conference on Defense and Security in West Asia." Through this Conference, Iran attempted to break the international isolation resulting from the US strategy.⁽¹⁶⁾

In Syria, Iraq entrenched its presence through boosting cooperation with Russia and Turkey, especially after the US troop withdrawal from Syria. The Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's visit to Tehran on February 25 reflected the significance of Syria in the Iranian resistance strategy. To pave the way for admitting itself into the international arena, Iran continued placing pressure on its European allies to activate an alternative transactions vehicle, which was forged by the European Troika on January 31. However, it has not come into effect yet and the US sanctions are still effective. This made Iranian officials doubt the sincerity of their European allies. Moreover, Iran participated in the Munich Security Conference, the largest annual gathering of leaders, diplomats, and experts on security issues worldwide. Iran sought to extract the most benefit out of this Conference to undermine the outcomes and recommendations of the Warsaw Conference, exploiting some of the European positions opposing the US strategy towards

Iran. Finally, Zarif visited India to participate in the India – Iran Business Forum and also delivered a ministerial address at the Raisina Dialogue. The visit resulted in establishing a branch of Bank Pasargad in Mumbai to handle transactions related to India's oil purchases from Tehran in view of US sanctions on Iran.⁽¹⁷⁾

The latest Iranian movements show how the United States impacts the decision-making process in Iran. Iran has exerted all its efforts possible to mitigate the impact of US sanctions. Therefore, we conclude that the Iranian interactions in the international arena are mainly a reaction to US policy. Nevertheless, Iran managed to remain a strong actor in the regional arena and to exploit the divergence between the US and European policy, benefiting from the legitimacy of the nuclear deal and the European strategy of containment of Tehran. Yet the Iranian tactics may not necessarily work out.

Third: Findings

1. The US strategy of maximum pressure aims to force Iran to sit down at the negotiating table and to undermine Iranian attempts to bypass the sanctions. This is why the United States placed pressure on Iraq and the EU to comply with US sanctions.
2. The US role was instrumental in impacting the European position. An international consensus could not be built around INSTEX created by the European Troika, which has not yet come into effect. Actually, it seems useless as it will not effectively support Iran. The trade operations allowed in INSTEX are already permitted by the United States, i.e. its first stage covers basic medical and humanitarian products. It does not come up to Iranian expectations which include oil revenues to thwart US sanctions.
3. The United States managed to form a large-scale diplomatic gathering in Warsaw, which emerged as a means to monitor stability in the Middle East. The Conference resulted in forming international action groups that aim to find solutions for the region's conflicts and to ensure regional security and stability. The participants of the Warsaw Conference may also hold periodic meetings in other countries. Warsaw helped the United States to impact the European position and to smooth the path internationally to complete its maximum pressure strategy on Iran and to create an international consensus regarding its policies.
4. Iran closely observes US moves and prioritizes a strategy of resistance at home through enhancing national unity and curbing the ramifications of the economic sanctions on the Iranian people. Iran is keen to protect the legitimacy of the regime and to maintain internal stability, to undermine the US maximum pressure strategy that is aimed to push Iran to come to the negotiating table. However, Iran still enhances its ballistic missile program, and launches military drills near US troop deployments, especially in the Arabian Gulf, that are situated to confront any attack that Iran launches to jeopardize Arabian Gulf national security and the freedom of navigation. Iran by engaging in its military behavior raises the concerns of the international community that placing further pressure against Tehran is dangerous.
5. Iran is keen to entrench its presence in Iraq which was made obvious by Zarif's visit to Baghdad just after his American counterpart's visit. Additionally, it works to fill the power vacuum following the US withdrawal from Syria. It also continues to enhance its corridor of influence from Tehran to Beirut. Iran's strong regional influence is an effective bargaining chip which it exploits to destabilize the region and the world. It can be used to impact US policies and to curb any unexpected future escalation against Tehran.
6. Iran still bets on the nuclear deal and on its relationship with its European partners though they have not yet offered any effective guarantees. It endeavors to prevent the Europeans from following the US pressure strategy. Given the fact that the Iranian government is still able to adapt in order to evade US sanctions, it wants to have more time before any change that would alter the status quo.

IRAN-EUROPE RELATIONS

During January and February 2019, disputes between Iran and the European Union (EU) escalated due to the EU's ambiguous position towards the plan of maintaining the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), which the two parties dealt with after the US withdrawal from the deal in May 2018. The change of the EU position further increased the escalation, while the EU linked its guarantees to Iran with it implementing certain conditions, which Iran considers as being detrimental in its confrontation with the US, resulting in the indirect fulfillment of US objectives.

First: The EU Carrot-and-Stick Policy Towards Iran

After the EU was compelled to confront the US withdrawal from the JCPOA, the EU countries reconsidered their position towards Iran in accordance with with new conditions; this position can be clarified through:

1. The Return of EU Pressures Towards Iran

In February 2019, the EU statement reflected its position towards Iran. The statement pointed to the EU fears towards Iran's ballistic missile program, its regional interventions, it meeting its commitments within the JCPOA framework and its aggressive activities in some European capitals. The EU statement argues that Iran has to pass and implement the necessary legislation in the context of implementing its commitments within the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) regulations.

Moreover, the statement underlined the EU's support for the JCPOA and praised Iran's commitment to it, as well as it criticizing the US withdrawal from it and the new US sanctions. The statement emphasized benefiting from the wide-ranging interests within the JCPOA; it also considered the INSTEX mechanism launched by France, Germany and the United Kingdom as a positive means for conducting commercial and economic transactions with Iran.^[18]

It is clear that the Europeans try to meet the issue halfway and to bargain with the Iranians through a carrot-and-stick policy. The maintenance of the JCPOA is dependent on Iran's compliance with certain conditions including the ratification of FATF regulations, concluding a settlement on its ballistic missile program, and its regional role as well as files relating to terrorism and human rights.

Regarding Iran's ballistic missile program, the French Foreign Minister's remarks revealed France's clear position on this matter. Iran seems to respond unequivocally with regard to its ballistic missile program. Accordingly, the French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian threatened that his country is ready to impose further sanctions against Iran if no progress is made in talks over its ballistic missile program.^[19] According to Iran, negotiating its missile program under these circumstances is a European bargaining chip while it suffers the effects of tough US sanctions imposed since the beginning of 2019.

European envoys from France, Britain, Germany, Denmark, the Netherlands and Belgium expressed the EU's concerns to their Iranian counterparts in a meeting at the Iranian Foreign Ministry. They confirmed that Europe can no longer tolerate ballistic missile tests in Iran and assassination plots on European territories. Because of Iran's contrary position on the European demands, the EU passed sanctions on Iran on January 9, 2019. The sanctions included the freezing of funds and other financial assets belonging to the Iranian Ministry of Intelligence and its members under the pretext of Iranian diplomats' planning terrorist operations in the Netherlands, Denmark, and

France.^[20] These sanctions reinforced Iran’s suspicions, especially as the European plan to rescue the JCPOA in the meantime was faltering.

Table 5: European Measures and Sanctions Against Iran
During January-February 2019

Date	Procedures
January 9	The EU has designated two Iranians and the Internal Security Department of the Iranian Ministry of Intelligence on the EU’s terrorism list, on charges of planning terrorist operations in some European countries.
January 15	German authorities arrested a person suspected of passing data to an Iranian intelligence agency.

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The German government canceled the operating permit of the Iranian airline company Mahan Air in Berlin on January 22, for security purposes and suspicions of its military use. This was not the first time Germany and other European countries had taken such action; on December 22, 2018, Germany banned Mahan Air for its involvement in transferring IRGC soldiers and weapons to Syria^[21].

Within the framework of EU pressures on Iran, the Polish capital Warsaw hosted a conference on February 13 and 14, 2019, which was convened by the United States and Poland, in which more than 60 countries participated. Iran’s regional intervention and its threat to regional stability were the main points of discussion at the conference. The United States shared the European countries’ concerns at the conference about the danger of the Iranian role and the means of countering this threat^[22].

The conference was another sign of Europe’s changed stance towards Iran. According to Iran, this conference was a US move which aimed at striking the core of EU policy towards Iran, encouraging a polarization in policy for several European parties. On the European level, it may also contribute to the crystallization of divergent points of view, which will deepen European divisions over Iran. Moreover, it can be a bargaining chip to stop EU cooperation with Iran and thwart their efforts to maintain the JCPOA. The conference echoed the White House threat to initiate vigorous actions if Iran tried to circumvent US sanctions.^[23]

Figure 5: Pompeo at the Warsaw Conference in Poland



Source: <https://bit.ly/ZTj2Ak8>

2. The EU's Ineffective INSTEX Mechanism

At its last meeting on January 28, the EU failed to announce its Special Purpose Vehicle (SPV).⁽²⁴⁾ The European Troika could only find a mechanism to exchange funds called the Instrument in Support of Trade Exchanges (INSTEX) and reaffirmed its obligation to fulfill its commitments to maintain the JCPOA. On January 31, Germany, Britain, and France forged the European financial mechanism to facilitate trade transactions with Iran (INSTEX). The new mechanism is based in Paris and run by a supervisory board chaired by the UK and managed by a German banking expert.

According to the EU foreign ministers' remarks, the three countries will first support legitimate trade deals, especially those related to pharmaceutical, medical, agricultural and food products. The statement linked the new mechanism to the Iranian political system's compliance with the most stringent standards of Anti-Money Laundering (AML) and Combating the Financing of Terrorism (CFT), taking into account the EU and UN sanctions and the implementation of all FATF regulations⁽²⁵⁾.

INSTEX provides European banks and companies with a new business channel, where Iranian exports to Europe accumulate as credits that can be used for purchases from European suppliers; Switzerland has promised a similar measure. The mechanism reduces Iran's exposure to the US-dominated international banking system, limiting Washington's chances to impose new sanctions, and will be necessary to Iran in the near term as banks are reluctant to deal with the Iranian market even in trading exempted goods.⁽²⁶⁾

No doubt, the Europeans succeeded in building a new position towards Iran by linking the plan to save the JCPOA and helping Iran to confront sanctions with Iran's compliance to their key conditions. This brought the European position closer to the US position, where Iranians felt a real risk.

Second: Iranian Reactions to the Changes in the European Position

Despite the new EU position, the Iranian political system is still keen to maintain relations with European parties, with attempts to push the Europeans to adopt positive attitudes towards Iran; the dimensions of the Iranian position can be monitored through the following elements:

1. Rejection of European Pressures

In response to the EU statement on February 4, 2019, the Iranian Foreign Ministry expressed Iran's position. The statement reflected dissatisfaction with the final draft of the financial mechanism because of:

1. The mechanism's lateness and link it to FATF procedures;
2. Iran's rejection of the accusations that it targeted some European countries with terrorist operations;
3. Iran's rejection to open negotiations on its ballistic missile program;
4. and Iran's rejection of the EU position on its interventions in other regional countries and the EU's politicization of Iran's human rights issue.⁽²⁷⁾

2. Skepticism Towards INSTEX's Effectiveness

Iran believes that INSTEX is ineffective as it has no European consensus, and its trade exchanges do not exceed the limits of US sanctions, it is limited at its first stage to only humanitarian and medical materials, and does not include Iranian oil revenues.⁽²⁸⁾ This mechanism may not induce large firms to invest in Iran again because of the US sanctions. Finally, this mechanism is still conditional on amending Iranian laws on money laundering and the financing of terrorism and on solving other files related to Iran's ballistic missile program, human rights, and its regional role.⁽²⁹⁾

3. The Threat of Violating the JCPOA and Uranium Re-enrichment

Official hints were reflecting the possibility of Iran's return to uranium enrichment as a form of pressure on the Europeans who are eager to maintain the JCPOA. The Head of the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran, Ali Akbar Salehi said, "If Iran decided to exit the nuclear deal, we will ramp up our enrichment activities, and reconsider our projects."⁽³⁰⁾

4. Loss of Confidence in the Europeans

The developments in the European position have contributed to increasing suspicions among the Iranian ruling elite about the sincerity of their European partners. The Iranians believe that there is US-European coordination and distribution of roles to tighten the pressure on Iran. Moreover, they believe the JCPOA is no longer effective, and that all parties benefited except for Iran, on which the JCPOA has become a burden. In addition, they assess that Europe actually seeks to maintain the JCPOA in order to obtain more privileges from Iran's regional role and its ballistic missile program. From the Iranian point of view, European efforts are a complement to the US efforts and are consistent with them. The Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei was at the forefront of skeptics on the EU position and warned President Hassan Rouhani of relying too heavily on European support.⁽³¹⁾

Third: Findings

1. It is clear that the European position has changed into a carrot-and-stick policy through two formulas: **First**, swaying between a pressure policy and maintaining the JCPOA as a legal and technical framework to deal with Iran's nuclear problem; **second**, exploiting US pressure on Iran in order to reach understandings to address some issues: The development of Iran's ballistic missile program, its regional interventions, its support for terrorism in Europe, and its commitment to the FATF, as well as its human rights record.

2. There is no doubt that the European pressure on Iran is influenced by the US maximum pressure strategy. The US-European concerns about the majority of files related to the crisis with Iran returned to the forefront, including the development of Iran's ballistic missile program, and the Iranian regional expansionist project, supporting groups linked to violence and terrorism, as well as threatening the security and stability of the region and issues related to human rights' violations. The main sticking point between the Europeans and the administration of US President Donald Trump is the position towards the JCPOA.

3. Despite the European concerns on the survival of the JCPOA, European parties were unable to provide real effective assistance or guarantees to Iran on maintaining the JCPOA. It is difficult for Europe to sacrifice its strategic relations with the United States for Iran. Therefore, INSTEX remained a dead letter, and the EU has further tightened its position on Iran, a matter that could pave the way for more significant change, especially if Iran does not respond to European conditions.

4. The new EU position increases the effectiveness of the US strategy and increases internal pressures on the Iranian government. This situation may pave the way for an international consensus against Iran similar to the one that was achieved before the JCPOA.

5. The limited effectiveness of the financial exchange mechanism announced by the European Toika countries will affect the ability of the Iranian government to face two main challenges, as sanctions are re-imposed on Iran: maintaining Iranian oil exports and continuing international financial transactions and obtaining oil revenues. This will

have severe consequences on the economic situation and could lead to public unrest, especially if European procrastination continues against providing real guarantees for Iran, and if the United States cancels the waivers granted to eight countries on importing oil from Iran.

6. Despite European procrastination and the Iranian government's concerns, the Iranian leadership is still keen to keep a minimum level of cooperation with Europe and to maintain the JCPOA. That is why Iran is satisfied with its political and diplomatic gains from Europe at this stage. Accordingly, the Europe-Iran relationship deprives the United States of an international consensus against Iran. However, this situation depends on the ability of the Iranian government to withstand the US sanctions and to endure their ramifications, and at the same time to maintain and to protect the government's stability and interests. In addition, Iran is betting on the time factor and the possibility of changing positions or a change in the US administration, especially a change of policy that excludes the option of the United States resorting to military action against Iran.

IRAN-TURKEY RELATIONS

President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's weakness at home leading up to Turkey's local elections in late March, and the ascendancy of candidates sympathetic to the Kurds in the Republican People's Party (CHP), points to Erdoğan's desire to ensure that he has Iran's political support. Iran was the first country to condemn the attempted coup against Erdoğan in 2017, and insisted that Turkey should have a strong rather than a divided leadership. Iran believes that Turkey's weakening economy, and Erdoğan's relative weakness in the run-up to the local elections in March means that he will cooperate with Tehran to find mutually agreeable solutions to various political and economic issues that challenge the relationship between Iran and Turkey.⁽³²⁾

First: Political Relations Between Iran and Turkey Remain Steady

Political relations between Iran and Turkey remained relatively strong in early 2019. Ankara did not participate in the US-sponsored Warsaw Conference which aimed at increasing pressure on Iran.⁽³³⁾ Turkey's Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu has criticized the strengthening of US sanctions and pressures on Iran.⁽³⁴⁾ Iran has in response agreed to allow the launch of a Turkish language newspaper.⁽³⁵⁾

By late February 2019, the head of the Turkey-Iran Parliamentary Friendship group Uthman Nuri Gol met with Iran's ambassador to Ankara Mohammad Farazmand to discuss bilateral relations and the expansion of parliamentary relations between the two countries. Also, Farazmand hosted Ankara's representative to the Turkish Parliament and took part in the former Prime Minister's Necmettin Erbakan's commemoration.⁽³⁶⁾ In addition, Iran and Turkey held their fourth Joint Working Group session for the representatives of their deputy interior ministers to discuss terrorism, cross border movements, and to advance mutual security goals.⁽³⁷⁾

Second: Economic Relations Between Iran and Turkey Deteriorate

On January 20, 2019, the Iranian Parliament voted to impose a ban on the import of goods that are locally produced. In early 2018, Iran banned the import of another 1,399 products in the face of US sanctions. The bans will have a negative impact on Turkey's exports to Iran, and undermine the terms of the preferential trade agreement between Turkey and Iran which came into effect in 2015. Since 2018, Iran has banned the import of 61 Turkish products that were included in the trade agreement. As a result, Turkey's exports to Iran declined by 30 percent since 2018, and may decline further given additional bans that have been introduced in 2019.⁽³⁸⁾

Iran is a big market for Turkey's textiles, white goods, health, and cosmetic products, all of which can be produced locally. The ban that it has now imposed may impact the flow of these products from the Kapikoy checkpoint between Turkey and Iran which opened up in the eastern Turkish province of Van, at a cost of almost \$19 million in 2017.⁽³⁹⁾

At the fifth meeting of the High Council for Iran-Turkey Strategic Cooperation, held in Ankara in December 2018, the Iranian President Hassan Rouhani and his Turkish counterpart President Erdoğan agreed to increase trade from \$11 billion to \$30 billion. The two sides hoped that the opening of a fourth land border crossing would facilitate an increase in bilateral trade between the two countries. All signs then pointed to the possibility of this goal being achieved, given that from the start of Iran's last calendar year (March 21, 2018 through to December 21, 2018), the two countries experienced a 30 percent growth in the trade volume of non-oil goods compared to the same period a year earlier, according to the latest data released by Iran's Customs Organization.⁽⁴⁰⁾

By January 2019, Iran's exports to Turkey reached a value of \$485 million, registering a 16 percent fall from its previous value of \$577 million in the same month in 2018. Turkey exported goods valued at \$191 million to Iran, registering a 27 percent drop from its previous value of \$262 million in the same month in January 2018. The value of Iran-Turkey trade stood at \$676 million showing a 19 percent decrease from \$839 million in the first month of 2019.⁽⁴¹⁾

Turkey requires energy and mineral resources but Iran's limited access to international markets due to US sanctions prevents it from benefiting from this Turkish demand. Iran mainly exported liquefied natural gas, non-alloy zinc, aluminum and bitumen to Turkey during the nine months recorded above. Turkey exported over 900,000 tons of cooking oil, banana, tobacco, fibers, cotton and automobile parts to Iran.⁽⁴²⁾

President Rouhani still hopes that banking transactions between Iran and Turkey will continue as a prerequisite for developing trade ties between the two countries, a point that he directly brought up with Erdogan during the last Sochi Summit in February 2019. Erdogan said that Turkey is ready to join the European Union's Special Purpose Vehicle (SPV) to facilitate international banking and trade with Iran.⁽⁴³⁾

There are other pressing tensions affecting Iranian-Turkish economic ties. The Turkish government imposed anti-dumping duties (ADD) on Iranian-origin polystyrene (PS) in January 2019. A dumping investigation into Iranian export practices began in May 2018 after complaints by a Turkish PS producer. PS is used in food packaging, disposable utensils, cutleries and other consumer items, while high impact PS is used in consumer electronics and toys; whereas extruded PS (XPS) is used in the construction industry as insulation. A decision was made on December 31, 2018 to impose an 11.3 percent tariff on Iranian PS imports into Turkey, and this was on top of the 6.5 percent tariff already imposed on Iranian imports. The move helped to prevent Iranian exporters who were gaining a major market share in Turkey at the expense of Turkish and European suppliers. According to data from the Turkish Statistical Institute (Turkstat), Iran accounted for a sizeable amount of PS imports for much of 2018, second only to imports from the EU, although imports from Iran began declining after renewed US sanctions against Iran in early November.⁽⁴⁴⁾

Turkey resumed imports of crude oil from Iran under the exemptions granted by the United States to eight countries after Washington reimposed sanctions against Tehran in November 2018. Turkey is permitted to import 3 million tons of crude oil during the exemption period, equivalent to about 60,000 barrels per day (bpd). Turkey used to import 200,000 bpd of Iranian crude oil before US President Donald Trump's move to withdraw the US in May 2018 from the 2015 nuclear agreement, officially known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).⁽⁴⁵⁾

Turkey decreased its crude oil imports from Iran in the months prior to the sanctions coming into force. Its imports fell to zero in November 2018. Turkey received two tankers of Iranian crude oil equivalent to about 54,000 bpd in December 2018. The Solan tanker discharged at the Turkish port of Aliaga while the tanker Sea Topaz I discharged at the port of Tutunciftlik. According to Refinitiv Eikon's shipping data, Turkey was also set to receive cargo from the Sinopa tanker in January 2019.⁽⁴⁶⁾

Turkey still needs to boost its oil imports from other suppliers after the Iran sanctions waiver expires as this is not expected to be renewed. The previous US sanctions regime allowed Turkey's Tupras oil refinery to continue importing Iranian crude oil under its long-term purchase agreement, at a 20 percent reduction and on condition that payment remained banked at Turkey's state-owned Halkbank. Although Tupras is believed to have met the conditions, Turkey has been accused of approving a sanctions-busting scheme in the past. State-run Halkbank is involved in an ongoing court case over the issue.⁽⁴⁷⁾



Third: Tensions Over Syria Complicate Iranian-Turkish Ties

On February 14, 2019, Iran, Turkey and Russia met for the 14th round of the Astana peace talks on Syria in Sochi. The final statement of the Summit reiterated their support for the departure of US forces from Syria. However, the three countries thwarted UN efforts to initiate Syria's constitutional process but they agreed to commit to ongoing discussions to further the process as its three main guarantors.⁽⁴⁸⁾

They also recognized the need for wider coordination over Syria in the aftermath of the US withdrawal from the country, though the timeline for the withdrawal is unclear. Turkey believes that the US will abandon Syria and the Syrian Kurdish Popular (YPG) forces that form the backbone of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in northern Syria, as Washington does not wish to remain heavily entangled in Syria's affairs.⁽⁴⁹⁾ As a result, Russia, Turkey and Iran have agreed as a compromise that the Syrian government forces should take control around Idlib after the establishment of de-escalation zones and the disarmament of the SDF. Further details are expected in April when the Russian, Iranian and Turkish presidents meet again.⁽⁵⁰⁾

President Erdogan had earlier offered an ultimatum to the US to take his proposal for a safe zone in Syria, with either 200 US forces or some 400-500 anti-IS forces, or he said that Turkey would withdraw the offer. It is clear that Turkey wants control over northern Syria, and it has stressed that the issue was not fully addressed in Sochi.⁽⁵¹⁾ Also, Russia and Turkey are working out details of how to restore peace in the Alrakban camp as Russia has called for it to be closed.⁽⁵²⁾

Conclusion

Ankara and Tehran are working hard to maintain trade and economic relations, as well as banking transactions. Sanctions have taken a toll on the level of trade between the two countries, and Turkey is seeking alternative paths to import oil as a result of the current and projected fall of oil imports from Iran. In Syria, the two countries will continue to work with Russia to further the Syrian constitutional process, but they will remain rival forces within the country.

IRAN-PAKISTAN-INDIA RELATIONS

India and Iran sprang into action in mid-February to force Pakistan to act against militant outfits “acting from its soil.” However, it was a rare instance in which both countries tried to reprimand Islamabad publicly.

“Iran & India suffered from two heinous terrorist attacks in the past few days, resulted in big casualties,” the Deputy Foreign Minister of the Islamic Republic of Iran Seyed Abbas Araghchi tweeted on February 16. “Today in my meeting with Sushma Swaraj [. . .] We agreed on close cooperation to combat terrorism in the region. Enough is enough!”⁽⁵³⁾ The tweet was accompanied by a photo of Araghchi with India’s External Affairs Minister who visited Tehran on an unscheduled trip. Swaraj neither spoke about Iranian cooperation nor retweeted Araghchi’s message. Tensions between Pakistan and India provided a tailor-made opportunity for Iran to vent its frustration against Pakistan. Tehran was disappointed with the Imran Khan-led government for warmly embracing the Pakistani establishment’s traditional allies, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

Already frustrated at the competition Chabahar Port is set to face from Gwadar, the Iranian government’s worst nightmare of Gulf investment on the Makran Coast is fast becoming a reality. The most prominent investment in Gwadar is the MoU signed between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia for setting up an oil refinery and petro-chemical complex.⁽⁵⁴⁾ One way Gulf investment in Pakistan could be averted, according to Tehran’s assessment, was to make the threat of war as credible as possible. After the kidnapping of Iranian troops in October, the Iranian and Indian militaries held meetings with the agenda to curb ‘Pakistan-based’ militants.⁽⁵⁵⁾

First: India-Pakistan Tensions Over Jammu & Kashmir

India attempted to conduct ‘surgical strikes’ against Pakistan on the night of February 26 when its air force violated Pakistan’s airspace by a few miles and fired half a dozen Spice 2000 standoff bombs on a mountain slope in Balakot district, claiming to have hit a Jaish-e-Mohammad training site and killing dozens of ‘terrorists.’⁽⁵⁶⁾ The result was to the contrary. The Modi government used the pretext of striking terrorist bases inside Pakistan to avenge the death of 44 troops killed on February 14 in the suicide attack in the Pulwama district of Indian-administered Jammu & Kashmir.⁽⁵⁷⁾ Two days later, Pakistan’s Air Force (PAF) responded in Indian-administered Kashmir and dropped a similar munition on Indian brigade headquarters and other military installations. The payload was not programmed to explode but to send a message about the vulnerability of Indian military installations compared to the PAF’s capability.⁽⁵⁸⁾ The same day, an aerial battle occurred over the skies of Jammu and Kashmir. India lost a MiG-21 fighter whose pilot was captured by the Pakistan Army while six Indian troops died in a helicopter crash during a reconnaissance mission. India’s claim of shooting down a PAF F-16 remains unsubstantiated⁽⁵⁹⁾ while Islamabad has backtracked on its statement of having a second Indian Air Force (IAF) pilot in custody.

India’s politicians and the global media interpreted Modi’s blame-game as a tactic to bolster his support among India’s hyper-religious and nationalistic voting blocs ahead of the general elections, starting on April 11. To keep Muslim voters from participating, the election process in northern India will be conducted during the first three weeks of Ramadan. Besides sidelining the Muslim community, the Modi government has used anti-Pakistan rhetoric to appeal to Hindu voters. During its four years in power, the BJP government has not only avoided holding direct talks with Pakistan but has also

paralyzed the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC).

Second: Iran's Rage Over the Sistan-Balochistan Suicide Attack

Though lacking the nuclear and diplomatic clout that India enjoys, Iran's leadership threatened Pakistan with either sending in its troops or launching missiles at the suspected hideouts. Iran also accused its traditional foes, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, of involvement in the attack. Islamabad, Riyadh and Abu Dhabi immediately dismissed the allegations. The Iranian rage was provoked right after the IRGC lost 27 troops to a suicide bomb attack in its Sistan-Balochistan province on February 13. Brigadier General Mohammad Pakpour of the IRGC insisted that the suicide bomber belonged to the militant group Jaish al-Adl which has safe havens across the border in Pakistan.⁽⁶⁰⁾

"How did they [the terrorists] cross the border? And why has this neighboring country become a safe haven for these terrorist groups?" Iranian Major General Yahya Rahim Safavi said, according to Iran-based Tasnim News Agency.⁽⁶¹⁾

Addressing mourners in a packed Isfahan square, the Revolutionary Guards Commander Major General Ali Jafari said, "The Pakistani government, which has sheltered these [terrorists] and knows where their hideouts are . . . should be held accountable for the crime that has been committed. Pakistan will no doubt pay a high price."⁽⁶²⁾

Meanwhile, Islamabad was preparing to welcome Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman who was to oversee the signing of bilateral investment agreements worth over \$20 billion. The visit was preceded by that of Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Mohamed bin Zayed, who announced an economic assistance package for Pakistan worth more than \$4 billion.

While Iranian officials continued to hurl threats and ponder over scenarios to avenge the killings by 'Pakistan-based' Jaish al-Adl, Pakistan's Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi spoke to his Iranian counterpart Javad Zarif promising utmost cooperation.⁽⁶³⁾ The Iranian ambassador to Pakistan also held meetings with the Pakistani military representative who sought credible and actionable evidence behind Tehran's allegations. Yet again, Islamabad sought to avoid a media trial by a neighboring country and it asked for actionable intelligence. Meanwhile, Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei hinted at Israel when he held responsible "the spying agencies of some regional and trans-regional countries."⁽⁶⁴⁾

In his telephone call to Pakistan's Prime Minister Imran Khan on March 9, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani expressed disappointment on action against Jaish al-Adl. While Islamabad stated that the two leaders had a cordial conversation, Tehran is reported to have bluntly stated, "We are awaiting your decisive operations against these terrorists." In a not-so-subtle manner, the Iranian leader reportedly said, "We should not allow decades of friendship and fraternity between the two countries to be affected by the actions of small terrorist groups, the source of whose financing and arms is known to both of us."⁽⁶⁵⁾

So far, Iran has claimed that two terrorists involved in the attack were of Pakistani origin while three Iranians were their accomplices. It has also claimed that one of the alleged terrorists was named Hafez Mohammad-Ali. The Pakistani Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi has stated that three Iranian nationals have been handed over thus far.⁽⁶⁶⁾

Though bilateral relations have nose-dived since the 1979 revolution, mainly due to Tehran's intent to export its ideology into its neighboring countries, the current slump in relations is a result of a revival in Pakistan's cordial relations with the Gulf states after a lull during Asif Ali Zardari's government from 2008 to 2013. Tehran views

China's investment in Gwadar Port as an attempt to undermine its role in the Arabian Sea while Islamabad sees it as a trump card in evolving geo-economic and geo-political alignments.

Tehran was optimistic that the PTI government would live up to its pro-Iran policy line on Yemen and Syria and would keep its Arab neighbors at bay. At least since the capture of Indian spy Kulbushan Jadhav in 2016 from the Makran coastal region, Pakistan's intelligence agencies have gathered significant information about close India-Iran cooperation. Kulbushan, allegedly a commander in the Indian Navy, was based in Chabahar as far back as 2003 using a valid Indian passport and Iranian visa under the name Mubarak Patel.⁽⁶⁷⁾ Pakistan's demand for cooperation in unearthing the network of the Indian intelligence agency, RAW, has not been affirmatively responded to by the Iranian government. Meanwhile, Islamabad has discovered the extent of the high-level Iran-India military cooperation that is specific to Pakistan. The two states even deliberated on joint covert action against 'Pakistan-based' militant outfits.

Iran's actions in the troubled Sistan-Balochistan region are not seriously aimed at finding those who attacked the IRGC convoy. The Iranian government, as well as the IRGC, continue to ignore illicit cross-border activity from the Afghan side despite the extremely porous nature of the frontier and the marginal security measures in place.⁽⁶⁸⁾ The Iranian government is actually patronizing the smugglers as it needs dollars and gold in addition to routinely smuggled goods.

Conclusion

Clashes between India and Pakistan hold quite a few lessons for Iran. First, Islamabad has frustrated Delhi's strategy of coercion through the use of force. It has responded swiftly and embarrassed its adversary. Second, Islamabad enjoyed absolute support over its narrative from political parties, civil society and media houses, while being able to outperform its rival on the diplomatic and humanitarian fronts by releasing the captured Indian pilot. Notwithstanding Iran's heavy investment in lobbies and proxies, the result cannot be any different in case of armed conflict with Islamabad. Pakistan is neither Iraq nor Afghanistan where Iran can penetrate through its proxies and lobbies to achieve favorable alignment of foreign and security policies. Third, nuclear deterrence barred the two neighbors from opting for an all-out limited full-scale war. The disparity in military power vis-à-vis Iran is a tangible factor that Iran's policy-makers must take into account. As for its demand for action against Jaish al-Adl hideouts or safe havens across the border, Iran is in no position to complain. During the previous kidnapping of Iranian soldiers, Pakistan went the extra mile in freeing and returning the abductees from the border triangle region with Afghanistan. The IRGC, which started a media trial instead of pursuing professional cooperation with Islamabad including intelligence-sharing, is a difficult counterpart to work with. Finally, unless the Rouhani government satisfies Islamabad's queries about India's intelligence network in Sistan-Balochistan including the Makran coast, the evolution of a harmonious working relationship will be impossible.

Nonetheless, recent close cooperation at the political, diplomatic and military levels between Iran and India has evidently dismantled the perception amongst Pakistanis of Iran as a brotherly country in the southwest. Tehran's provision of a land and sea corridor for Delhi to Kabul in order for it to bypass Islamabad has been an eye-opener for those who did not earlier consider the implications of the handover of Chabahar to India.

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