

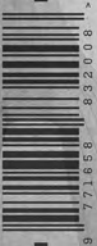
MONTHLY REPORT



IRAN CASE FILE

Your window on Iran from inside and abroad

May 2019



RASANA
المعهد الدولي للدراسات الإيرانية
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THE EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As the Iranian political system realizes the acuteness of the crisis, it is going through at this time, and its diplomats attempt to mitigate the impact of the crisis, the government's performance during May 2019 shows that no substantial change will happen in Iran automatically nor is it likely that the ruling elite will evaluate its policies. The policies and approach of the government remain unchanged although the embargo on its oil exports has entered into effect, and the United States has hinted at using force by sending its naval vessels towards the Arabian Gulf.

Internal Affairs

At home, on the ideological level, Iranian television has aired rhetoric filled with sectarianism and hate directed at Sunnis within Iran. This reflects the culture of sectarianism and hate disseminated by Iran. This culture is promoted by Iran in the Middle East by mobilizing Shiite militias. This hate demonstrates the new low the government has reached. On the one hand, the government calls for national unity among the different components of society and adopts calls for proximity among Islamic schools of thought. On the other hand, the government stirs up sectarian strife beyond its borders and deploys armed militias from Afghanistan and Pakistan under the guise of defending the holy shrine of Ahlul-Bait against Sunni attacks.

On the political level, Rouhani and the Hope bloc continued to show ingratitude towards the reformists in the Parliament. They supported the radical conservative Ali Larijani to become parliamentary speaker. Mohammed Reza Aref lost the election. This is indicative of Iranian domestic policy in the coming phase, given the approaching parliamentary elections, which will be held in 2020. The Iranian government is left unchanged as is the political structure surrounding Rouhani, which uses a reformist cloak that allows individuals close to the conservative elite such as Aref and Jahanghiri to control the government and Parliament using such figures in order to sway the biggest possible number of voters.

Will this structure continue during the coming elections or will the government attempt to float a new structure, which leads to the biggest possible turnout in the elections? What happened in the Parliament's presidential body elections indicates that the government did not have sufficient time to prepare an alternative structure. If the government fails to shape this structure before the coming parliamentary elections, it may be surprised with a low turnout at the polls.

On the economic level, the Iranian government has sought to limit the Iranian currency's collapse by devising the Integrated System for Hard Currency Transactions payment system. It is locally known as NIMA. Although it was launched in 2018, there was a noticeable drop in the dollar against the Iranian currency in May. Through this system, the sale and purchase of foreign currency is done via the internet between two parties; the first is the buyer from the importer side and the second party is the seller, who is usually a trader and exporter of Iranian goods. Perhaps it is the Central Bank itself, which pays the money incurred by Iranian importers directly to foreign traders through firms brokering between the Central Bank and foreign companies.

NIMA has permitted the government to sell hard currencies earned from oil revenues at prices higher than official prices, allowing it to gain higher financial revenues. Also, it has enabled importers to easily get a hold of hard currency at a price lower than that of the free market. For exporters, it has enabled them to sell hard currency earned from oil exports quickly and to exchange it with tomans regularly, without fearing any legal penalty.

On the other hand, the Iranian Central Bank can increase its reserves of hard currencies in case it purchases these currencies from exporters in exchange for tomans. This reduces the leakage of hard currency outside the Central Bank's treasury, and curbs the trading of currency outside the state's banking system as well as price fluctuations and their negative impact on the price of goods and services in Iranian markets.

There has been an unexpected drop in the price of the dollar in the Iranian market, albeit temporarily and not in large proportions. But there have been signs of the Iranian government's success in achieving a relative abundance of foreign exchange, either through the management of the foreign exchange market through NIMA or by receiving monetary support from Middle Eastern countries.

On the military level, the report discusses Iranian air defense capabilities. Iran admits that there are shortcomings in its air defense capabilities despite taking delivery of the S-300 air defense system and its official operation in Iran. Iran's military strategy depends on its missile arsenal and its kamikaze speedboats, but it needs a good air defense system to protect the places where its air defense batteries are stationed.

Arab Affairs

The report touches on the Syrian file, where Moscow seems to be intent on curbing the Iranian role in Syria after wiping out the Syrian opposition in a way that does not enable Tehran to be an actor capable of undermining Russian interests in Syria and becoming influential in the new Syrian equation. This has happened through the continued targeting of Iranian militiamen in Syria, which means that the fate of Iranian militias in Syria is a known subject in Moscow. These militias will not have a future presence that could threaten Russian interests in the new Syria. But Iran's insistence on reaping benefits from the new Syrian equation in compensation for what it has spent and its human casualties in Syria may fuel tensions and lead to more military confrontations with Russian forces in Syria.

As for the Yemeni arena, the maneuvers of the Houthis militias such as carrying out a fake withdrawal from Hodeida was the most remarkable development. The Houthis



announced that they had withdrawn from Al Salif, Ras Eissa, and Hodeidah ports unilaterally without determining the entity which will take over security in these ports. This was rejected by the legitimate government of Yemen, which considered the move a maneuver supported by the UN Envoy to Yemen Martin Griffiths. There is no doubt that this move, coinciding with the escalating pressure on Iran, indicates that Iran is working on a host of tricky maneuvers in the region, independently or via its affiliated militias.

International Affairs

The United States has stepped up its sanctions on Iran via several decisions, the first of which was it revoked the nuclear exemptions granted to the country following the signing of the nuclear deal in 2015. The exemptions allowed Iran to store heavy water within the levels permissible under the nuclear deal on its soil and allowed it to store amounts of enriched uranium larger than those permissible under the nuclear deal.

After revoking these exemptions, Iran is no longer committed to storing more than 130 tons of heavy waters on its soil as well as storing 300 kilograms of uranium enriched to 3.6 percent. The United States also imposed sanctions on the export of Iranian minerals as it is the second-biggest supplier of foreign exchange to Iran after its oil products. The United States moved its Abraham Lincoln aircraft carrier towards the Arabian Gulf and deployed its B-52 strategic bombers there.

In response, Iran declared it was reducing its commitments under the nuclear deal on a gradual basis through three stages. This Iranian move is dependent on the rest of the parties that signed the nuclear deal fulfilling their commitments promised to Iran and challenging US pressure imposed on Tehran. Four commercial ships were targeted in the economic territorial waters of the UAE. US-Iranian interactions have escalated in relation to Iran's nuclear deal, and economic sanctions have intensified on Tehran. Threats of military confrontation have increased, although there is no serious intention for direct confrontation.

The European file was linked to a large extent to Iranian and American interactions. Iran has become certain of Europe's weak position and its inability to stand by Tehran in the face of the US sanctions imposed on it as well as Tehran being aware of the limited role of the European proposed financial mechanism INSTEX. Therefore, Iran made the decision to reduce its commitments on a gradual basis in case the European nations that signed the nuclear deal do not stand up to the US sanctions, a move which has been rejected by European leaders.

Internal Affairs

The Iranian home front has witnessed radical interactions, which reflect the deep crisis, which the country is undergoing. On the ideological front, the report discusses the airing on Iranian television of a show insulting Sunnis and their personalities. This triggered a political crisis and provoked a strong reaction from Sunni lawmakers in the Iranian Parliament. In the political file, the radical lawmaker Ali Larijani managed to win the position of parliamentary speaker again. Mohammed Reza Aref, a member of the Omid bloc, failed to win the position. In the economic file, the report touches on the NIMA mechanism devised by the Iranian government to run the foreign exchange market in Iran. In the military file, the report discusses Iran's capabilities in the air defense field.



THE IDEOLOGICAL FILE

This file highlights the ideological developments in the Iranian arena throughout May and the impact of these developments on the domestic actors within the religious seminary and the state. The issue on which the file focuses this month is the Iranian television's religious and sectarian insults directed at Sunnis.

First: State-run television and insulting minorities

On Monday, May 21, Iranian state-run television insulted some of the Prophet's companions during one of its shows as Iran commemorated the birthday of Imam Hassan bin Ali.⁽¹⁾ In response, Sunni lawmakers in the Iranian Parliament protested against these insults and called on the Supreme Leader to intervene to bring these insults against the Sunnis and their dignitaries to an end. The lawmakers' message said that a live show on state-controlled television involved insults directed toward Sunnis, particularly at their personalities and sanctities on the birthday of Imam Hassan bin Ali.⁽²⁾

On May 26, the Supreme Leader responded to the demands of the Sunnis. He ordered the dismissals of those who insulted Sunnis from the state-run television channel.⁽³⁾ The meddah (religious orator or eulogist) who insulted the Prophet's companions was subsequently arrested on charges of stirring sectarian sedition. The authorities refused to reveal the name of the orator.⁽⁴⁾ The Channel 5 director was also fired, and the Iranian state-run television channel was prompted to apologize to Sunnis.⁽⁵⁾

Second: Systematic acts

This was not the first occasion on which the official Iranian establishment directed insults at minorities in general and Sunnis in particular. The late cleric Hashemi Rafsanjani admitted that such insults take place and Rouhani, during his presidential campaign, made a similar acknowledgment. This is in addition to the acknowledgment by the former President Mohammed Khatami. The late cleric Rafsanjani⁽⁶⁾ spoke out against these continuous insults from the Iranian political system towards Sunnis in 2014. He said that such insults led to the emergence of ISIS. These insults included celebrating the death anniversary of the Prophet's companion Umar ibn Al-Khattāb. The Iranians mark this anniversary, encouraged by the authorities. The state did not issue a law banning such celebrations passed down from the Safavid and Buyid dynasties.⁽⁷⁾ He said: "We have clung to the Sunni-Shiite differences, insulting the Prophet's companions and marking the death of Umar ibn Al-Khattāb until such acts have become commonplace for many!" Such acts which sow divisions among Muslims have led in the end to the emergence of al-Qaeda, ISIS, Taliban, and other groups.⁽⁸⁾ The former Iranian President Mohammad Khatami said that minorities, in general, are deprived of assuming senior positions in the government.⁽⁹⁾ According to President Rouhani, Sunnis are deprived in particular from official positions in the state.⁽¹⁰⁾ This institutionalized approach against Sunnis is nurtured by the sectarian and ideological motives of radicals affiliated with the religious seminary.



The Iranian government has not intervened to root out these sectarian motives or issued laws, which promote the principles of equality and respect toward minorities. Furthermore, the government has itself upheld the executions of individuals from ethnic minorities, including individuals from the Arabs of Ahwaz. This prompted the European Union to express concern about Iranian policies towards minorities in Iran.⁽¹¹⁾ The Iranian political system itself has prevented Sunni figures and dignitaries from freely moving between Iranian cities unless there is a permit, whose issuance is denied on most occasions. Any attempt to breach the travel ban without the permission of the authorities leads to those people being summoned and arrested.⁽¹²⁾ The government also places harsh restrictions on the building of Sunni mosques.⁽¹³⁾

Therefore, we could say that the Iranian government does not have a genuine intention to improve the situation of the Sunnis. This strategy towards minorities has become a source of sectarian legitimacy for the political system as we see it.

Third: Responding to the demands of Sunni lawmakers

The Iranian state-run television's insults toward Sunnis – or minorities in general – were not the first or the last to be committed by official or semi-official institutions towards minorities. But the insults on this occasion came during a different political and sectarian circumstance. In this case, the ruling elites which adopt a radical religious or sectarian approach renounced the incident or turned a blind eye to it since it was committed by an official apparatus controlled by the state. This is also because the incident was widely circulated in media outlets regionally and internationally at a time when there is a tense regional and international situation as well as strong pressures on Iran economically and politically. Yet the Iranian government attempts to contain these unprecedented pressures and a possible war against it. This also coincided with the comments of Zarif, which came on the day when the Supreme Leader met the demands of the Sunni lawmakers that Iran wants to sign joint defense agreements with all the Gulf nations.⁽¹⁴⁾

In addition to the regional circumstances, there are internal factors to which we cannot turn a blind eye, leading the government to hasten to contain the crisis. Indeed, the Iranians moved swiftly to unify their domestic ranks, which cannot endure more political or sectarian tensions, which may deepen as the insults targeted central, not marginal, personalities, the Rightly Guided Caliphs themselves. This gave a chance to

a wide spectrum of Sunnis, including the Ahwazi Arabs, the Kurds, and the Turkmen, in spite of their ethnic differences, to unify their demands. The political system was quick to come to grips with this fact. This social fabric, made up mainly of Sunnis, is fragmented and not unified in a single political or social structure. Thus, the Iranian government has worked to prevent these groups from coming together, even if for temporary demands. This is the main reason for imposing a travel ban on Sunni clerics and dignitaries.

Fourth: Velayat-e Faqih and opposing Iran's sectarian heritage

Most Shiite clerics reject this sectarian approach [Velayat-e Faqih] and Iran's radical policy in the region, especially with regard to Sunnis. Most of the fatwas issued by Shiite clerics enjoin coexistence, unity and prohibit insults against Sunni figures. If these fatwas are prompted or adopted by Iranian leaders, this is due to nothing except pragmatism. As Iran's Jurist Leader (Vali-e Faqih) possesses ultimate authority, his fatwas are legally binding. Nevertheless, Shiite scholars consider his fatwas as a matter of choice on issues concerning the impermissibility of violating or disrespecting Sunnis.⁽¹⁵⁾

However, the essence of contemporary Iranian policy, totally inspired by the Velayat-e Faqih theory, has caused sectarian divisions by invoking history and heritage, which are supposed to be dismissed within a modern state and its institutions committed to the provisions and criteria of local and international laws. Velayat-e Faqih not only invoked history, but it bypassed the nation-state and forged ties directly with local sectarian groups, paying no heed to nation-states in the region given the belief that the Supreme Leader in Tehran is not only a guardian over Iranians but also has power over all Shiites and even over all Muslims across the world. This has fomented countless tensions due to Iranian interventions which have become the main pillar of Iran's foreign policy. This approach has also led to glamorizing violence as a tool to tighten the Iranian government's grip on the Iranian home front in the first place, and then beyond the border, as Iran is the central power to which all Muslims should display loyalty.

Overall, there is a strong relationship between Velayat-e Faqih as a political and religious theory and the strategies outlined by Iranian policymakers towards minorities in general and Sunnis in particular. This is illustrated in the comments made by Rouhani, which we cited above.

Conclusion

There are no genuine or serious intentions from the Iranian political system to improve the status of minorities in general and of Sunnis in particular. The Sunnis have been seeking the fulfillment of the same demands since 1979 to this day. No breakthroughs have yet happened when it comes to the Sunnis' position in the political and social system in Iran.

The Iranian strategy towards racial and sectarian minorities is a product of an ideological line of thought approved by Khomeini based on his own interpretation of the Velayat-e Faqih theory. This policy is neither reversible nor negotiable. It is true that sometimes we may see some political conflict or internal political standoffs among the different blocs and camps. But in the end, it has been ideologized by lines of thought through which the government maintains its sectarian legitimacy among its supporters and fellows in the religious seminaries. Any talk of the Iranian government renouncing this strategy means the Iranian political system renouncing the Velayat-e Faqih theory. This is not within the realm of possibility given the government's unyielding adherence to it. The religious elite believes that any renouncing of Velayat-e Faqih and its exigencies mean the failure of the Iranian and Velayat-e Faqih project in the region, with enemies succeeding in curbing the will of the Absent Imam.

This ideologization in understanding the way in which political developments proceed leads to ideologizing policy and politicizing the Shiite sect, this will cause the status quo to be perpetuated until political relapses, and intellectual shifts happen followed by profound political revisions. They will be carried out by those concerned about directing the Iranian political compass. They, by nature, will not be from the generation of the founding fathers.

STUDIES

IN ISLAMIC IRAN, SHIFTS IN GENDER RELATIONS..

FAMILY VALUES CHALLENGE SOCIETY

BY: DR. BANAFSHEH KEYNOUSH

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THE POLITICAL FILE

In the elections of the Iranian Parliament's presidential body held annually to choose the parliamentary speaker, its two deputies and the rest of the 12-member body, the Reformist Movement continued its failure to oust Ali Larijani from holding the post of parliamentary speaker. Radicals and moderates managed to get him reelected as parliamentary speaker. The reformists' failure did not stop at this point, as they lost the position of the parliamentary speaker's second deputy, which was captured by the radical candidate Abdel-Reza Masri, who is a member of the Velayat bloc.

After this result, Larijani continues to chair the Iranian Parliament for the third consecutive term. He has been chairing the Parliament for 12 years (from 2008 to 2020), surpassing the late Hashemi Rafsanjani, who held the post for nine years (from 1980 to 1989).

First: The continued failure of the Omid bloc to oust Larijani

One day before the elections, the three blocs in the Parliament: Omid, Velayat, and the Independents picked their candidates for the Parliament's presidential body.

The Chairman of the Omid bloc Mohammed Reza Aref ran for the position of parliamentary speaker, while the lawmakers Massoud Pezeshkian and Ali Motaheri ran for the first and second deputy speaker posts, hoping they would keep their positions for the fourth year in a row.

The Independent bloc, supportive of Ali Larijani, chose the latter to continue leading the Parliament as its speaker. But it did not name candidates for the first and second deputy speaker posts. As for the third bloc, the Velayat bloc, it named at the last minute



Javad Abtahi, the lawmaker representing the city of Khomeyn, the birthplace of Imam Khomeini. It also chose Mohammed Hussein Farhankbi, the representative of Tabriz and Eslamshahr in Parliament, and Abdolreza Masri, the representative of the city of Kermanshah. Masri also was the Minister of Welfare and Social Security under the former government of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

After a heated contest, Ali Larijani emerged as the winner with 155 votes out of 279 votes. Aref got 105 votes, and Abtahi won only five votes.^[16]

Candidate	Supportive bloc	Number of votes
Ali Larijani	The Independents	155
Mohammed Reza Aref	Omid	105
Mohammad Javad Abtahi	Velayat	5

As for the deputies to the speaker, the lawmaker Massoud Pezeshkian of the Omid bloc got 148 votes, maintaining his position as the first deputy of the parliamentary speaker. The second deputy speaker Ali Motaheri lost the race to the Velayat bloc candidate Abdolreza Masri, who came second after winning 143 votes.^[17]

Candidate	Bloc	Number of votes	Position
Massoud Pezeshkian	Omid	148	First deputy of the parliamentary speaker
Abdolreza Masri	Velayat	143	Second deputy of the parliamentary speaker

To fill the remaining positions of the 12-member presidential body, six members were elected out of 15 members as secretary generals. They included Amir Hussein Kadizadeh Hashemi (Velayat bloc), Mohammed Ali Wakili (Omid bloc), Ali Asghar Youssefnejad (Omid bloc), Akbar Ranjber Zadeh (Velayat bloc), Ahmed Amir Abadi (Velayat bloc) and Alireza Rahimi (Omid bloc).^[18] Three observers were also elected: Behruz Nemati, Ashouri Tazani, and Asadullah Abbasi.^[19]

Second: Why did the reformists refuse Aref's participation in the elections?

Unlike the rest of the Parliament's blocs, it seems that the Omid bloc was hit by sharp divisions between its head Mohammed Reza Aref and a number of its members who believed that Aref's participation in the presidential body's election might be detrimental to the position and weight of the Omid bloc. These differences and concerns were revealed by Ali Motaheri after he lost the seat of the parliamentary second deputy

speaker. He said that he, along with other reformist lawmakers such as Mohammed Reza Tabsh and Gholamreza Taj Kardon, refused Aref's participation as they fully realized the nature of alliances within the Parliament and that the chances of Aref winning were low, as well as fearing that the Independents and the Velayat bloc might forge an alliance in case Aref insisted on running for the position.⁽²⁰⁾ The results of the elections proved that the fears of the bloc's members were legitimate as it lost the second deputy speaker's position.

Third: The role of radical alliances in helping Larijani win

During the past year's elections, neither of the three candidates - Ali Larijani, Reza Aref and Hamid Reza Babaei (who was representing the Velayat bloc) - managed to win the parliamentary speaker's position in the first round. Aref came first with 114 votes, Larijani was in second place with 101 votes, and Babaei won 54 votes.

The Parliament was obliged to enter a second round of elections to decide the winner of the parliamentary speaker's post. This round witnessed an alliance between the Independents' bloc supportive of Larijani and the Velayat bloc with which Babaei was affiliated. This alliance resulted in Babaei's withdrawal in favor of Larijani, who won 147 votes, with Aref only winning 123 votes.

This partnership continued through the latest elections as media outlets revealed that the Independents' bloc entered into negotiations ahead of the elections with the Velayat bloc. The alliance included the Independents' support for the Velayat bloc's candidates to win the posts of the first and second parliamentary speaker instead of Massoud Pezeshkian. Larijani will continue in his position as parliamentary speaker until the end of his current term, which ends following the parliamentary elections scheduled for February 21, 2020.⁽²¹⁾

The alliance between the fundamentalists in Parliament (the conservatives and moderates) which would not have been accomplished had it not been endorsed by the Supreme Leader, reflects the Supreme Leader's desire to continue to rely on Larijani's family in occupying senior positions within the Iranian political system. Sadeq Amoli Larijani is the Chairman of the Expediency Discernment Council, and Ali Larijani is the parliamentary speaker. This also reveals the government's keenness not to cause any changes to the balance of power among the political blocs making up the government, given the status quo where the country is facing mounting US sanctions and threats.

Fourth: The future of the partnership between the moderates and reformists

The alliance between the Independents and the Velayat bloc, which led to Aref's defeat, may be a prelude to ending the partnership between the reformists and moderate conservatives which led Hassan Rouhani to win the presidency for two consecutive terms. In case this alliance ends, this will quash Larijani's hopes of gaining the reformists support as a consensual candidate in the coming presidential elections scheduled to be held in 2021 as was the case with the coalition which led the reformists to support Hassan Rouhani, who was affiliated with the moderate conservatives in the presidential elections held in 2013 and 2017.

Aref's desire to end the alliance with the moderate conservatives appeared only a few days after he lost the presidential body elections. He addressed the Supreme Policy Committee of the Reformists, saying that in the coming elections the bloc will separate itself from the opportunists and those who seek to exploit the position of the reformists within Iranian society for their own benefit.⁽²²⁾

Therefore, it is not inconceivable that Aref set his heart on something beyond running against Larijani in the Parliament's presidential body elections. In other words, the head of the Omid bloc in Parliament desired to end the bloc's partnership with the moderates even if this would mean him losing in the presidential body's elections or the bloc losing

the first and second deputy parliamentary speaker positions. It is likely that he aims to announce himself as a candidate for the Reformist Movement in the 2021 elections and to obstruct the path of Larijani who seeks to gain support from the reformists to run in the coming presidential elections.

Although Ali Larijani has announced recently that he has not yet decided to run in the coming presidential elections⁽²³⁾, there is a belief that he could run in the coming elections given his massive ties with different currents and the strong support he receives from the Supreme Leader and the IRGC, as well as considerable support from the moderates who deem him the person capable of running the country in the coming period.

It is worth mentioning that Larijani's statement in which he said that he is not considering running in the presidential elections came in response to a mistake from the governor of the Razavi Khorasan province, who introduced Larijani to give a speech during an event in the city of Torbat Heydariyeh. He mistakenly introduced Larijani as the President of the Republic before Razavi corrected himself, saying: "He could become the president in 2021."⁽²⁴⁾ This means that Larijani's statement on his indifference towards running in the 2021 elections was an attempt by him to relieve himself of this burden and to avoid talking about this matter too early ahead of the elections, which will be held in nearly two years.

Conclusion

Given the nature of alliances and their role in deciding the winners of the Iranian Parliament presidential body's elections, something which has been clear over the past few years, Larijani was expected to continue chairing the Parliament during the last year of the current term. The new thing about these alliances is the fundamentalists' agreement to oust Ali Motaheeri from the presidential body in favor of the candidate of the fundamentalists' Velayat bloc.

Although the alliance between the Independents and radicals led Larijani to win the presidential body elections last year, repeating this alliance in the last elections and the blow that was dealt to the reformists may impact the future of the alliance which has been forged since 2013. It may also quash Larijani's ambitions to gain support from the reformists for the coming presidential elections.

STUDIES

THE FUTURE OF THE IRANIAN NUCLEAR FILE POST- TRUMP

BY: *DRISS LAGRINI*

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THE ECONOMIC FILE

The role and effectiveness of the NIMA payment system and the exchange rate fluctuations in Iran

Internal and external economic pressures have prompted the Iranian political system to find a mechanism to control the volatility of the sharp exchange rate fluctuations witnessed by Iranian markets over the past two years. These have had very damaging consequences such as exhausting Iran's foreign exchange reserves as dollars have had to be supplied to purchase goods. The volatility has also impacted the lives of ordinary citizens, who have endured an excessive increase in costs. This was confirmed by the inflation data released during the past two months, where the price of food commodities exceeded 85 percent in April. The Iranian authorities launched the mechanism NIMA, and we will shed more light on it and its real role in the economy as well as its scope and effectiveness in reducing fluctuations in exchange rates.

First: What is the NIMA system?

Locally known as NIMA, or the Integrated System for Hard Currency Transactions, is a government system for the exchange of foreign currency launched in 2018.⁽²⁵⁾ Through this system, the sale and purchase of foreign currency is conducted on the Internet between two parties; the first is the buyer from the importer side and the second party is the seller, usually traders and exporters of Iranian goods. Perhaps it is the Central Bank itself, which pays the money incurred by Iranian importers directly to foreign traders through firms brokering between the Central Bank and foreign companies.

Components of NIMA

The NIMA system has four basic components:

- 1- Importers of goods and services as buyers of currency.
- 2- Exporters of goods and services as currency suppliers (including the state from oil revenues).
- 3- Brokers and banks that facilitate transactions between the parties.
- 4- The decision-maker who controls the regulating decisions and the limits on sales and purchases.

The advantages of the NIMA system

Through NIMA, the government can sell oil at prices higher than the official exchange rate and achieve higher financial revenues in exchange. It also makes it easier for importers to obtain the foreign currency at a lower price than that on the free market. The system also allows exporters to quickly sell their foreign exchange earnings and exchange them with tomans on a regular basis, without fearing any legal consequences.

On the other hand, the Central Bank of Iran can increase its reserves of the foreign currency if it buys these currencies from exporters in return for tomans. This reduces

foreign currency leakage outside the bank's treasury and limits the trading of the currency outside the country's banking system as well as exchange rate fluctuations and their negative impact on prices, particularly of goods and services in Iranian markets.

Second: Exchange rate fluctuations during the month and NIMA's role in reducing them

The dollar exchange rate against the Iranian toman in May saw price fluctuations that reached a peak of 15,600 tomans per dollar after geopolitical tensions with the United States increased. The United States sent its naval forces to the region. The price declined to 13,500 tomans after political tensions eased, and the threat of war between the two countries faded away. In the wake of the relative decline of the dollar, the Iranian media praised this decline and called it an achievement, a government victory, and a new beginning of political, economic and foreign exchange rate stability. However, this has nothing to do with reality. So, the price decline did not seem real. It has countless explanations other than being an indicator of the improvement in economic circumstances. These explanations include the following:

1- Concocted reasons behind the decline in the dollar's exchange rate in May

The relative calm in geopolitical tensions with the United States has played a role in the decline of dollar prices, as the call for war between the two sides mounted over the past ten days. As a result, the dollar rose to more than 15,500 tomans on May 10 due to the desire by Iranians to buy the dollar in anticipation of the future.

But in addition to the calm political atmosphere, there were other reasons related to the government's intervention to influence the volume of supply and demand and therefore, exchange rates, namely:

A- Government influence on the supply of the dollar available for sale in the market by increasing the government's injection of foreign currencies in the market to reduce their prices, or taking measures and precautions leading to an increased supply of the dollar. Recently, the Central Bank of Iran issued new instructions requiring Iranian exporters of non-oil goods to return at least 50 percent of the foreign currency generated from their exports to the Central Bank through the NIMA domestic payment system and to exchange it with local currency. On the other hand, the role of smuggling networks in some of Iran's neighboring countries in increasing the supply of the dollar at home by smuggling it into Iran after exchanging it with other currencies is known.

It is known that the Iranian exchange system is not free; that is, price is not subject to supply and demand forces altogether, and the government intervenes in determining its price increase or decrease. Therefore, there are three exchange rates in Iran, the government exchange rate, the free exchange rate, and the NIMA exchange rate, which is in the middle between the previous two prices paid by the government to the exporters in exchange for taking their foreign currencies generated from exports to increase their foreign exchange reserves.

B- Government influence on the demand of the dollar, which means placing governmental restrictions on Iranian demand to buy the US dollar and curbing their demand to do so, by placing a higher limit on buying and restricting buyers. Moreover, the leaked information about the government's inclination to tax US dollar buyers, in particular, may lead major dollar holders to quickly get rid of the amounts they possess and to sell them or parts thereof.

2- Is the decline in the foreign exchange rate genuine or concocted?

In fact, those following Iran's economic indicators and circumstances realize that

the decline in the foreign exchange rate against the toman in mid-May was not because of normal causes resulting from the interaction of supply and demand forces. Rather, it was concocted and happened as a result of government intervention and influence on both the supply and demand aspects in determining the exchange rate of the dollar as explained above. Dollar prices are not expected to fall automatically as US sanctions affect Iran's foreign currency supply sources - oil export revenues and non-oil exports of Iranian products, petrochemicals and minerals.

Therefore, an important question comes up here: is there actually a decline in the foreign exchange rate in Iran if we look at the long-run? The answer is no. The change in currency prices cannot be judged by a short period of one or two days. It has to be compared to an older base point, which reveals the general trend of the foreign exchange rate change away from the daily upward or downward fluctuations.

A look at Figure 1 shows that dollar prices - the most sought-after foreign currency - have been on the rise since the United States announced the suspension of the extension of oil exemptions in late April. The dollar before the US decision was below 3,000 toman. It then rose to a price of more than 15,600 toman on May 10, coinciding with the mounting tensions and military escalation with the United States.

Even as the dollar fell to 14,100 toman on May 20, it was still 1.5 percent above the April average. After only a few days, the dollar again rose to around 14,500 toman. But when compared to the beginning of this year, we find that the average price rose by more than 20 percent, when it was then only 11,700 toman. This is to say that the broader time horizon reveals that the dollar is on the rise against Iranian currency, as shown by the overall outlook in the following chart.

Chart 1: The price of the dollar against the Iranian toman (January-May 2019)



Source: Bonbast.com, designed by the economic unit in Rasanah

Third: The effectiveness of NIMA in curbing future exchange rate fluctuations

Despite the advantages that the NIMA payment system can provide in support of exchange rates in Iran, it still has a fundamental flaw that substantially curbs its effectiveness, namely, the drop in foreign exchange rates by at least 25 percent of the free market price in Iran. This leads Iranian exporters to sell their foreign currencies,

especially from the dollar on the free market at a good price. As a result, the volume of foreign currency recovered from non-oil exports is no more than 30 percent, which means that the efficiency of the payments system remains limited in maintaining exchange rate stability.

The attempts of the Iranian political system to intervene and influence the foreign exchange market do not stop it from reaping some gains, although the intervention is not of burdensome material cost to the government. The government's intervention in the exchange market is motivated by economic and political gains as well, such as preventing the situation at home from exploding and halting the insane rise in the prices of goods and commodities, especially food commodities. It increased by more than 85 percent last April on an annual basis. Also, government intervention is motivated by its desire to claim to the world that Iran's domestic political and economic scene is stable as well as to show the ineffectiveness of US sanctions on the Iranian economy.

On the other side, the Central Bank of Iran incurs a large bill due to it subsidizing foreign exchange rates instead of leaving them to be determined by the forces of supply and demand, at a time when the current economic situation of Iran and the rational economic blueprint does not allow this intervention to continue for a long time into the future. If this happens, the foreign exchange reserve will be depleted quickly, given the decline in foreign currency sources in Iran on account of US sanctions. The latter reduced the revenues of oil exports by more than half, closed the channels of foreign trade and raised the cost of trade, especially the cost of imports, as well as the inability of the government to collect the full revenues of its oil exports - which are already shrinking. This is in addition to the government's inability to recover up to 70 percent of foreign currency resulting from non-oil exports via the NIMA system, which Iranian exporters prefer to sell away from the government. Therefore, the existence of all these pressures and obstacles will lead to making it difficult or even impossible to sustainably control exchange rates as long as the aforesaid pressures remain without any radical or substantial change, which are not concocted by temporary and unsustainable government interventions.

STUDIES

IRAN'S STRATEGIES TO CONFRONT THE US SANCTIONS MECHANISMS AND FUTURE SCENARIOS

BY: AHMED SHAMSELDIN

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THE MILITARY FILE

Iran's air defense capability: myth and reality

Since the capture of the US drone RQ-170 Sentinel on December 5, 2011, Iran has been aspiring to shoot down one of the many foreign reconnaissance objects flying unscathed through its airspace. The crash of the CIA drone not only perplexed the world but also raised the morale of the Iranian military as well as its people.⁽²⁶⁾ Hence, Tehran has been desperately strengthening and expanding its air defense capabilities. Iranian military efforts have centered around improving the detection, engaging and destroying capabilities of imported and indigenous radar and missile systems.

Iran's air force is obsolete and outnumbered. There is no exit from its quagmire because arms imports are not forthcoming either. In light of the United Nations Security Council's (UNSC) sanctions, arms exporting countries are barred from selling modern military arsenal including fighter jets and air defense systems to Tehran. Its Gulf rivals are not only equipped with the latest fighter jets and missiles but also with state-of-the-art air defense systems. In a conflict situation, which has become more of a reality after the attacks on two oil tankers near the UAE's Fujairah port last month,⁽²⁷⁾ the Iranian military's drones, its weapon of choice, won't stand a chance as they do in low-intensity conflicts. The very notion of plausible deniability will become irrelevant too. Any hostility will be attributed to the warring foe. Thus, Iran's best bet will be to adopt a defensive posture while relying heavily on its missile arsenal and its kamikaze boats. Its missile silos also need protection from enemy attacks, hence, the significance of its air defense system cannot be overstated.

First: Capabilities at hand

Recently, Iran unveiled the 'domestically-designed' Khordad 15 air defense missile system. Its Defense Minister Brigadier General Amir Hatami claimed that the Sayyad 3 missiles can bring down fighter jets and unmanned combat aerial vehicles (UCAVs) at a range of 120 kilometers.⁽²⁸⁾ As per the Khordad's purported ability to track 'stealth objects,' it can detect them from a distance of 85 kilometers and destroy them within a range of 45 kilometers. The system's deployment timeframe is claimed to be five minutes while it will be able to engage six targets simultaneously. This surface-to-air missile system is a further development in Iran's Talash air defense system. "Iran will bolster its military capabilities to safeguard its national security and interests, and does not need permission from anyone," said Iran's Defense Minister Amir Hatami at the Khordad's launch ceremony.⁽²⁹⁾

However, various defense experts doubt the minister's claim. The Sayyad 3 projectiles, in fact, are similar to the Hawk missiles imported from the United States during the Shah's reign. The Reagan administration had also delivered the same missiles to the country as part of the Iran-Contra scandal.⁽³⁰⁾ Some modifications in the launch system have led the Iranian military to 'indigenize' their weapons systems. The Sayyad 3 missiles are not the only ones to get such a superficial makeover and rebranding.



Undeterred by the concerns of its Arab neighbors and the United States, Iran has scaled up its military developments and it has displayed new military hardware. Though the projected capabilities of the weapons systems remain unverified and mostly exaggerated, the Iranian claims are meant to make newspaper headlines and to reassure the public.

The most notable thing amongst Iran's military feats is the test-firing of the Hoveizeh long-range cruise missile with a projected range of some 1,350 kilometers. In February, its navy's midget Ghadir-class submarine again fired an anti-ship cruise missile. Public displays of Tehran's military arsenal have become the norm. In a recent display at Tehran's Baharestan square near the Parliament building square, the solid-fuel surface-to-surface Sejil missiles, and the liquid-fuel Ghadr, among various missile systems, were on display as well. The Hoveizeh cruise missile is supposedly a high-precision terrain-hugging cruise missile whose payload has not been made public. The Iranian Defense Minister Brigadier General Amir Hatami declared that the test conducted in February, marking the revolution's 40th anniversary, was successful. "The test of the Hoveizeh cruise missile was carried out successfully at a range of 1,200 kilometers (840 miles) and accurately hit the set target," he said.

Tehran also claims to have developed a radar system - Arash 2 - which is capable of locating small flying objects. In the words of the former Khatam al-Anbiya Air Defense Base Commander Brigadier General Farzad Esmaili, "One of these systems is a long-range space radar with combined frequencies and the capability of discovering small flying objects and cruise missiles."^[31]

Iranian commanders have been vocal about the deficiencies in the country's air defense systems. Brigadier General Alireza Sabahifard recently noted that Iran's air defense covered a handful of Air Force bases and cities prior to the revolution. However, he said, the rude awakening of the Iraq war resulted in a comprehensive attack on all the

country's sensitive and vital centers. The military claims that the air defense systems now provide cover to over 3,600 sites including cities and sensitive installations. It boasts of an integrated air defense system with day and night capability provided by 'indigenized' radar systems and watchtower systems.⁽³²⁾

The Rassad 32 surveillance system is another domestically-developed tactical air defense system capable of surveilling Iran's airspace with a range of 15 kilometers.⁽³³⁾ Then, there is the indigenously-developed Ya Zahra AD missile system which is mobile like the Khordad 15 that also feeds into the integrated air defense network. There is not much that is indigenous about the system for it is a licensed copy of China's H-7, which itself is derived from France's Crotale missile short-range air defense system.⁽³⁴⁾

Two more radar systems – Moein 40 and Nasser 40 – also add to Iran's hostile object detection capability. Nasser is claimed to be a passive radar system capable of detecting targets in urban environments, and it is capable of locating small flying objects and cruise missiles in urban centers. Moein 40 has a declared detection range of 400 kilometers, which is meant for both civilian and military uses.

For coast guard personnel, Iran declared in July 2017 to have developed and deployed the Afaq system.⁽³⁵⁾ According to the Iranian Defense Minister Brigadier General Amir Hatami, "The coast monitoring radar is capable of monitoring vessels in a range of 200km, and it can also trace and hunt aerial targets." He also boasted that Afaq's mobile radar system is equipped with anti-electronic war capabilities while it is able to detect and track 100 vessels at a time.⁽³⁶⁾

Among the line-up of locally designed and developed systems is the Nazir radar system, which can "detect radar-evading targets and survive electronic warfare."⁽³⁷⁾ "The radar is special to detecting the small flying objects and MQ1, RQ4, and U2 aircraft and can easily detect and trace ballistic and cruise missiles and most importantly, the radar-evading aircraft," the Fars News Agency quoted the former commander of the Khatam al-Anbiya Air Defense Base Brigadier General Farzad Esmaili as saying. Back in 2014, Iranian military commanders claimed that Nazir is more advanced than the Russian S-300. "An air defense system more advanced than what they didn't supply to us due to their strategic interests went on display in the IRGC's recent exhibition," Brigadier-General Salami said in Tehran.⁽³⁸⁾

However, each radar system or surface-to-air missile in Iran's arsenal is a copy, licensed or otherwise, of a certain foreign innovation. It utterly lacks an effective capability to engage and destroy an incoming hostile object. As mentioned before, the range and capability parameters of defense systems remain largely exaggerated in Iran. Thus, Tehran keenly awaited the Russian delivery of its S-300 air defense systems which was agreed upon in 2005 but later revoked by Moscow in 2010 as a result of the UNSC's sanctions against Iran.

After the signing of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2015, Iran revived the deal with Russia, and the weapons system was finally delivered in July 2016. The Iranians could negotiate an upgraded version of the system (S-300 PMU2), whose exact details remain guarded. After the imposition of new US sanctions, the Russians do not seem inclined to supplement Iran's warfighting capability. Still, the S-300 system adds weight to Tehran's defense systems. It has since claimed to have integrated the system with its other air defense capable platforms. It is quite likely that Iran's S-300PMU2 has a kill range of 200km and its radar imagining spans more than 300 kilometers.⁽³⁹⁾

The Russian technology allows Iran to not only defend against intruding aircraft, cruise, and ballistic missiles as well as drones but also permits it to peep into certain regions of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates depending on where on the coastal

frontier it is deployed. Placing it in the coastal city of Bushehr where it also has a nuclear reactor will provide Tehran with a picture of parts of Iraq, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia. Deployment closer to the Strait of Hormuz gives Iran a view of air traffic in Saudi Arabia and Oman.

Second: Evolving strategic calculus

As much as Iran is vulnerable to a barrage of foreign fighter jets and missiles, so are its foes across the Gulf. The flight time for a missile is in the range of three to four minutes, depending on which part of the country is targeted. However, its Arab adversaries have multilayered defense arrangements against aerial objects. Their latest air defense systems are getting tested day in and day out due to intruding Houthi missiles and drones.

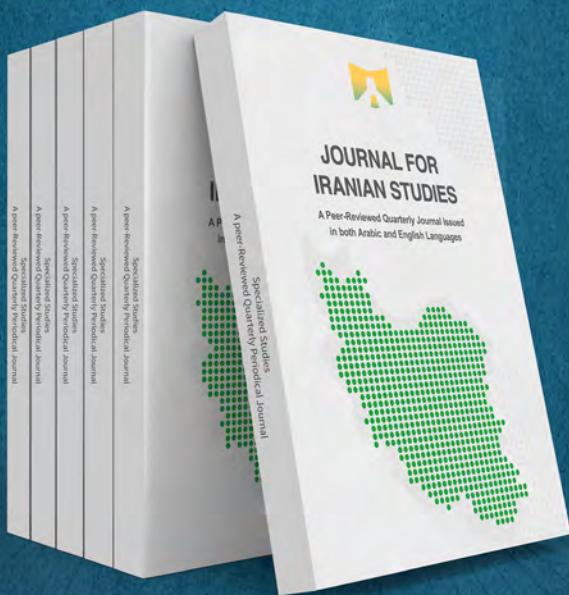
Nonetheless, the Russian export of its S-300 missile defense system to Tehran does change the threat-perception calculus of the Arab states as well as of America. Unlike its adversaries, Iran's Russian air defense arsenal will be thinly spread due to the country's landmass and the dispersal of military installations. Devoid of Russia's medium-range Buk-M2 missile – one of which was used to shoot down the commercial jet Malaysian Airlines flight MH17 – Tehran lacks the punch that other operators of the S-300 or S-400 have. However, it must have replaced the missing Buk-M2 missile with locally-produced or reverse-engineered surface-to-air-missiles. The rude reality-check, however, remains that older versions of the Russian system in Iran's armory will not be able to



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match the threat-level posed by newer incoming jets as well as missiles. Besides, it also will not be able to develop a multi-layered defense shield.

Over the past decade, Tehran has placed an especially high premium on reverse-engineering or developing a drone force, missile cache and radar systems. When Gulf tensions lead to all-out hostilities, Iran's heavy reliance on developing asymmetric capabilities to deter adversaries with vastly superior conventional military power does not appear to be of much use.

Conclusion

Its integrated air defense system remains untested, contrary to that of its key rival, Saudi Arabia. Its four batteries of the Russian S-300 system will be too cramped with incoming hostile traffic. Except for Iran's handful and aging, yet capable, F-14 Tomcats and MiG 29s, there is little it has in comparison to fighter jets such as the F-15, F-16, and Rafale to name a few (assuming that the USAF F-35s stay out of the equation).

Even if the US does not enter the fray, Iran's posture in a conventional war will remain defensive. The Arab Gulf states may, however, utilize the opportunity to suppress Iranian offensive capabilities and destroy its early-warning systems and air force assets. Still, Tehran may not go down without inflicting some losses to its rival air forces. Much will depend on how practical and realistic its personnel training and air defense integration has been.

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Arab Affairs

The report addressed two files of Arab Affairs: Syria and Yemen. In the Syrian file, Iran faces a struggle for control and influence with its partner, Russia, over Syrian territory, which led to successive military confrontations. The Syrian army forces were divided between Russia and Iran. Military clashes broke out between the two sides. However, the division seemed obvious. In spite of the numerical superiority of Iran and its proxy forces, the pro-Russian forces were able to achieve military successes against it. Russia aimed to remove Iran and its militias from the south of Syria, as well as to hold Hezbollah elements off. The small number of Russian land forces were not able to remove pro-Iran forces from larger areas of Syrian territory. Russia may postpone this until it receives remuneration from the international parties that reject the Iranian presence in Syria. In the Yemeni file, the report dealt with the relationship between the pressures on Iran internationally and the position of the Houthis towards peaceful negotiations to end the Yemeni crisis, through the fake withdrawal carried out by the Houthis from the port and city of Hodeida.



IRAN AND SYRIA

While Russian-Iranian mutual interests in Syria have faded away through a change in the balance of power in favor of the Syrian President Bashar Assad, a new phase emerged on the Syrian arena. In May 2019, this new phase of Russia-Iran relations went beyond political divergences on the Syrian crisis to the struggle for influence and military confrontation in various Syrian regions. This confrontation aims to gains the greatest scope of influence in Syria to compensate for what they have sacrificed since the outbreak of the crisis, while Iran is going through a critical time because it faces unprecedented US sanctions and pressure to change its behavior.

First: Russian attacks against Iranian militias in Syria

In May 2019, Iran's forces in Syria came under intense Russian pressure as Russia sought to achieve its next goal, namely, limiting Iran's role in Syria after maintaining Assad as ruler of Syria, while Damascus carries out a comprehensive restructuring of its military and security institutions.

1- Intensifying Russian pressure on Assad to eliminate Iran's militias:

The Russian pressure on Assad aims to push through some of Russia's demands in the process of institutional restructuring in order to remove Iranian troops and militias in Syria. The Russians realized that all their achievements in Syria would be in favor of Iran unless Moscow eliminated Iran's pro-Shiite militias from the restructuring process, on the ground, there are no heated internal conflicts in Syria that require the presence of Iranian fighters to settle them. With regard to Iranian superiority, the Russians must reconsider their deployment since their land troops are limited compared to the Iranians. Therefore, getting rid of pro-Iranian militias is a clear key objective on Russia's agenda. The following include the Russian steps against Iran in Syria:

A- Targeting the pro-Iranian Fourth Armored Division:

The Russians have exerted pressure on Assad to restructure the Syrian army's Fourth Division, led by Iran's first ally in Syria, Maher Assad, the brother of Bashar Assad, in favor of Moscow, in order to unify allegiance only to Russia to ensure the limitation of the Fourth Division's power. It is considered the closest and most loyal division to Iran by virtue of its sectarian composition, and its domination over the national defense militias, the irregular forces formed by Assad with Iranian support, in conjunction with Syrian military intelligence and its Joint Chiefs of Staff in 2012. Therefore, the Fourth Division relied mainly on the Iranian leadership to implement its plans in the midst of the conflict between Assad and the Syrian opposition factions since the beginning of the crisis in 2011. After the Iranians increased their incursion in Syria following the recapture of Aleppo by Assad at the beginning of 2017, the Fourth Division has gained more power.

The Russians have been annoyed about the growing dominance of the Fourth Division in Syria in a way that runs counter to Moscow's ability to impose its agenda, and thus

maximizing Russia's gains, interests, and spheres of influence. Therefore, the Russians have intensified their pressure on Assad since the beginning of 2019 to restructure the military institutions of the Fourth Division such as the General Staff, the division of management, the administration, and the military security command.

Moreover, the Russians have exerted pressure on Assad to dismiss many of the officers who belong to Maher Assad, such as the Head of the General Military Intelligence Division, Major General Mohammad Mahalla, Brigadier General Ghassan Bilal, the manager of Maher Assad's office and the former commander of the Republican Guard Talal Makhlof.⁽¹⁾ In addition, more than 600 officers of Maher Assad's loyalists have been referred for investigation after being arrested on charges of corruption.⁽²⁾ On the other hand, pro-Moscow officers have been appointed to prepare a new Syrian army under Russian leadership command.

B- Establishing detention centers in Syrian prisons for fighters affiliated to Iranian militias:

The media reported that Russia established secret detention centers in Damascus to arrest and punish Iranian militia fighters if they disobeyed Russian orders.⁽³⁾

Pro-Russian forces in Syria carried out arrests and raids targeting Lebanese Hezbollah's fighters and personnel. On April 29, 2019, the Syrian military and strategic expert Brigadier General Ahmed Rahal revealed on his personal Twitter account that the Shiite villages of Kam, and Mukhtar in April 2019, as well as two Shiite militias in Homs province, witnessed raids and arrests carried out by pro-Russian forces in Syria. This resulted in the arrest of 12 Hezbollah members with the aim of eliminating them in Homs. The pro-Russian forces received a commitment from Hezbollah to evacuate its headquarters and to remove its flags and banners from the two villages.⁽⁴⁾ After Russian reconciliation in the northern Homs countryside, Russia has the upper hand and plans to limit the influence of Hezbollah in the countryside of Homs due to its concern that the region could turn into another South Lebanon. The same situation is occurring in the south of Syria (Daraa), where the Russians and Iranians struggle for influence.



2- The recurrence of armed confrontation between pro-Russian forces and Iran in Syria:

The political tension between Moscow and Tehran coincided with armed confrontations in early 2019. This reflected the growing tensions between the Russians and the Iranians in Syria. Only three months after the previous round of confrontations between pro-Russian and pro-Iranian forces in the Ghab plain in Hama before the end of January 2019, and the refusal of Deputy Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov to describe his country as an ally of Iran, military confrontations broke out again in mid-April 2019, and they even involved the use of heavy weapons in different parts of Syria, resulting in killing and injuries on both sides, including IRGC elements.⁽⁵⁾

Moscow is apparently moving on two tracks to curtail Iranian influence in Syria. Firstly, Russia seeks to build strong pro-Russian military forces to secure its areas of influence in strategic areas because Russia does not have strong ground forces on Syrian territory to stabilize, secure and expand its areas of influence. This can be implemented through buying influential officers and their loyalty in the Syrian army and by attracting local military brigades away from Iran's control. Secondly, it aims to weaken the militias and the pro-Iranian brigades in Syria by intensifying pressure on the Syrian President to dismantle the militias which are not affiliated to the Syrian army and to expel them from the pro-Russian concentration areas; for example, the commander of the Syrian Fifth Division Suheil Salman al-Hassan expelled the pro-Iran Fourth Division forces out of the Ghab plain.

Second: Escalation motives behind Russian-Iranian clashes

Russia recognizes the importance of taking advantage of the moment in which Iran experiences an increase in American pressure by Washington imposing stifling economic sanctions. The situation has worsened because of Trump's refusal to renew the waivers to import oil for the eight countries that were exempt from the sanctions. This has led to a sharp decline in Iranian oil revenues and is part of the US strategy to change Iran's behavior, particularly to curb its nuclear program, its ballistic missile program, and its regional activities.

The escalation of US pressure to curb Iran's regional behavior by classifying the IRGC as a terrorist organization is a strong motivation for the Russians to limit the movement of all Iranian militias in Syria amid Russian-Iranian rivalry to share influence in Syria. The Russians sought to target all strategic pro-Iranian headquarters in Syria. The Russians also believe that Iran must consider Russia's order of withdrawing its militias from these areas. Otherwise, the Russians would target these terrorist organizations, whether military or even advisers, like the Iranians, frequently state.

The absence of the common interest of maintaining Assad, the transformation of the battle on the ground and the concentration of the opposition in one geographical area increased the divergence between Moscow and Tehran. The Iranian strategy of long-term viability in Syria is against Russian interests in Syria because Tehran is re-positioning its militias in all the regions recaptured from ISIS and the opposition to guarantee more expansion and to secure its spheres of influence, particularly in the areas of phosphate and gas. Also, Iran competes for the biggest share of reconstruction contracts and has signed economic and military agreements with Assad as a strategic option to have the upper hand in the new Syrian equation.

Russia is working within a completely different strategy than that of the Iranians in terms of its premises, tools, and interests in Syria, which explains the divergence between Moscow and Tehran in Syria on the roles of Israel, Turkey, and the United States. The Russians, however, found the participation of all parties in the talks on Syria necessary, yet the Iranians rejected that. The differences in both countries' strategies also relate to



the form of governance of the new Syrian state; while the Russians prefer to strengthen the Syrian regime and to rebuild the state, the Iranians are working to maintain it under Iranian command to complete the implementation of its plans. Both countries diverged again on issues relating to resource distribution and reconstruction contracts.

Russian efforts to act instantly against Iranian influence in Syria were made more urgent by Assad's visit to Iran where he met with the Iranian Quds Force Chief Commander Major General Qassem Soleimani at the end of February 2019. Assad agreed to lease the port of Latakia, which is situated on the west coast of Syria, to Iran from October 2019. The port is currently managed by a Syrian-French company until October 2019.⁽⁶⁾ Although the name of the Iranian rental company has not been mentioned so far, the IRGC will likely run the port to carry out its military operations in the eastern Mediterranean and to provide logistical services in favor of Iran's project.

If this project is implemented, it will be considered as a success for Iran to gain a foothold in the eastern Mediterranean and it will advance Iranian efforts after more than a decade and a half to fulfill its ambition of a Shiite crescent. This explains the proposal of Iranian President Hassan Rouhani in signing a trade agreement between Tehran, Baghdad, and Damascus during his visit to Baghdad in March 2019, as well as the meeting of the three Iranian, Iraqi and Syrian leaders in Damascus.

In addition, Major General Mohammad Ali Jafari, the former commander-in-chief of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps on May 17, 2019, stated, "Iran formed an armed force of 100,000 fighters in Iraq and 100,000 fighters in Syria."⁽⁷⁾

Accordingly, for the next step, Russia is determined to reduce the role of Iran in Syria after accomplishing the first step of eliminating the Syrian opposition and terrorist organizations. This would prevent Iran from being a hindrance to Russian interests in Syria and would also limit Iran's influence over the new Syrian equation. Russia is to do this by tracking and targeting militia elements and pro-Iran military brigades in Syria. As a result, this means the fate of Maher Assad, the commander of the Fourth Division, is to be settled by Moscow in which he and his force have no future in the new Syria. However, the violent tendencies of Maher Assad may increase clashes and military confrontations with pro-Russian forces until the Russians successfully eliminate or curtail him from the Syrian equation.

Conclusion

In light of the above, the most likely scenario is the escalation of clashes between pro-Russian forces and pro-Iranian forces in the next few weeks and months in all Syrian areas. Russia, which benefited from US sanctions and pressure on Iran, works on separating its areas of influence from those of Iran in Syria, in preparation for longer military confrontations against pro-Iranian forces. Moreover, Iran drew up an ambitious plan to gain a foothold in the Mediterranean and seeks to implement the rest of its strategy. Iran always reminds everyone of the material and human sacrifices it has made in Syria and it is waiting impatiently to reap the benefits while it is under severe economic sanctions. In this context, Iran has a large deployment of its proxy militias throughout Syria. Meanwhile, the Russians are still devoted to accomplishing the next step of limiting Iran's power in Syria and turning it into a semi-exclusive Russian sphere of influence.

IRAN AND YEMEN

The developments in the Yemeni political arena have been directly affected by the political changes in the region. Firstly, the mutual threats and escalation between the United States and the Iranian political system, followed by US military moves in the Gulf region. American statements have referred to Iran's role in threatening navigation at Bab al-Mandab and the Red Sea. They clearly point to the role played by the Houthi militia as a military arm that serves Iranian policies in the region to aid its expansionist plan, to export its revolution and to spread chaos and terrorism. Here we will review the most important developments in the Yemeni arena, most prominently the repercussions of the embargo against the Iranian political system on the role of the Houthi militia in Yemen.

First: The fake withdrawal from Hodeida

The statement of the Deputy Commander-in-Chief of the IRGC Ali Fadavi represents the real role played by Iran in Yemen, where he openly admitted that his country supports the Houthis as much as it can, during an interview with Iran's Channel 2 on May 31, 2019. He denied all Houthi allegations of any Iranian role in Yemen "due to the complete siege, we cannot support the Houthis greatly, we cannot work there freely. Based on the Quran, we are obliged to help as much as we can, and we do," he said.⁽⁸⁾ At the same time, this statement represents the role of the Arab Coalition to support the legitimate government in Yemen and to save it from Iranian dependency and expansionist ambitions pursued through Iran's support of the Houthi coup in Yemen. The Arab Coalition to support the legitimate government succeeded in increasing the isolation of the Houthis politically, thus, ending the support given to the Houthis by major powers, and it reinforced the political position of the legitimate government in Yemen in conjunction with military pressure, to force the Houthis back to the negotiating table leading them to sign the Stockholm agreement. The pressure on both the Houthis and the Iranian government led to political maneuvers by them in an attempt to convince international public opinion, particularly UN committees that the Houthis abided by the Stockholm Agreement in withdrawing from Hodeida, however, in reality, the withdrawal from Hodeida was fake. The Yemeni legitimate government was not involved in the process of handing over the port and the Houthis did not identify the party it handed the port over to. However, the redeployment of the Houthis and their military terrorist operations came at Iran's request which coincided with the tightening of sanctions on Iranian oil exports. We will review the motives for political maneuvering and the military escalation of the terrorist operations carried out by the Iran-backed Houthi militia.

Second: Political maneuvers

The events and developments regarding the redeployment plan in Hodeida dominated the political scene for months. After months of the Houthi militia's procrastination regarding the implementation of the Stockholm agreement, the Houthi militia announced their commitment to implement the terms of the agreement and to



withdraw from three ports, namely Hodeida, Salib, and Ras Issa, which is of strategic importance. The commitment to redeployment in these ports is the first step towards a comprehensive political settlement in Yemen for the legitimate government and the UN committees. However, the legitimate government in Yemen considers the declaration of the Houthis to withdraw from the ports as a play and an attempt to turn international pressure on the legitimate government, especially as it coincides with the increasing US escalation and pressure on Iran. Furthermore, this declaration came only a few days before the meeting of the UN Security Council to consider the progress on the Stockholm agreement.

The Yemeni Ministry of Defense adviser, Colonel “Yahya Abu Hatem,” describes what is happening in Hodeida as a new play on the Yemeni stage, pointing at the same time to the role played by the United Nations in directing this play, “It was clear that there was manipulation of the terms and terminology by the United Nations although it is aware that the Stockholm Agreement is bilateral and it must be implemented in accordance with the mechanisms agreed on, unlike we have seen of the ports handed over by the Houthi militia to elements under its order.”⁽⁹⁾ In this context, the advisor to the President and the former Foreign Minister Abdulmalik Abduljalil Al-Mekhlafi accused the UN Special Envoy of colluding with the Houthis and he addressed Martin Griffiths, “The Houthis are a coup group who took over the state and the territory of the Republic illegally, which contradicts Security Council Resolution 2216. The only concept of withdrawal should be for legitimacy, otherwise, it would be a violation of the UN resolutions and deception, and it will unfold quickly and prolong the war and it does not lead to peace.”

Al-Mekhlafi confirmed that the coverage of the Houthi militia's crimes has led to a prolonging of the war.⁽¹⁰⁾ The position of the legitimate government was even more pronounced by a member of the negotiating delegation, Askar Zahel, when he responded to the statement of Michael Lollesgaard, the head of the mission to observe the implementation of the Hodeida agreement regarding the withdrawal of the Houthis, “The withdrawal of the Houthis was a result of international community pressure on them and Iran over the past period.” He confirmed government reservations and suspicions about the “unilateral” step.⁽¹¹⁾ Therefore, many analysts believe that the announcement of the withdrawal by the Houthis is only a political maneuver due to international pressure on them and Iran before the date of the Security Council session. It coincides with the UN's desire to achieve some progress ahead of this date even if it is not seen on the ground. This explains the intensive tours before this date by the UN Special Envoy, Martin Griffiths, especially after six months of signing the agreement while he did not make any progress on the ground. At the same, it has been reported that the Yemeni President Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi refused to meet with the UN Envoy.

Third: The terrorist military escalation

These terrorist attacks targeted Saudi territories, most notably oil pipelines and oil transportation terminals by Iranian-made drones. These terrorist attacks had been celebrated by many Iranian media outlets, including the official Iranian media.⁽¹²⁾ It should be noted that these attacks were considered by the political circles as an Iranian message including a clear indication that the Houthi militia implements the Iranian agenda and that it is an integral part of the Revolutionary Guard serving the interests of Iran in the region. This was confirmed by the Saudi Deputy Defense Minister, Prince Khalid Ibn Salman and the Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Adel Al-Jubeir.⁽¹³⁾

It should be noted that the Houthi operations came after a relative de-escalation by the Houthis as they had stopped firing ballistic missiles towards Saudi territory since June 2018. The May attack was in the same month in which the United States ended the exemptions for the eight countries importing Iranian oil, giving an indication that the attack was prompted by Iran and it was a message directly linked to the US-Iranian crisis, especially as it targeted oil facilities inside Saudi territory.

Under severe economic sanctions imposed on the Iranian government, which had led to a decline in its support for each of its military arms: Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Houthi militia in Yemen, the Houthi militia demonstrated its indifference to the Yemeni financial and humanitarian suffering by launching a donation campaign to support Hezbollah. The campaign was carried out by a radio called SAM-FM, run by a member of the Houthi Media Commission, Hammoud Sharaf al-Din. The Houthis launched the campaign titled "From the days of Yemen to the resistance of Lebanon," and it is considered as returning the favor to Hezbollah. According to Yemeni sources, the staff member responsible for the radio had undergone several military training courses by Hezbollah and IRGC experts. This campaign was carried out while the United States was trying to thwart the financial mechanisms of Hezbollah, which is part of the sanctions package imposed on the Iranian government. In the same context, the US Secretary of the Treasury for Terrorist Financing, Michael Ivanov, stated that America is seeking any information related to the financing of Hezbollah and he offered a reward of about \$10 million for any information related to Hezbollah's financial activities.

This campaign was carried out by the Houthi militia with disregard to the difficult conditions, financial crises and famine suffered by the Yemeni people in the areas under the control of the Houthis. In contrast, the Houthi militias received rockets and weapons from Hezbollah which have been used against the Yemeni people through threats and killings. This indicates that the Houthis follow a policy similar to that of Iran and they work to serve the Iranian project in Yemen and the region despite the desperate need for economic stability and security for the Yemeni people.⁽¹⁴⁾ The spokesman of the Arab Coalition Forces confirmed during a press conference that the Houthi militia received weapons from Hezbollah, "Hezbollah provided the Houthi militia with drones and missiles that pose a threat to Yemeni interior affairs as well as to neighboring countries." He also stressed on the role played by the Iranian political system to destabilize security in Yemen and the region.⁽¹⁵⁾

Conclusion

The Houthi militias continue to destabilize Yemen's security and circumvent the peace process in Yemen. The military escalation that serves the Iranian project and interests in Yemen and the region, prove that the Houthi militia is one of the arms of Iran in the region and an agent carrying out its agenda with all the available tools. In the negotiations, the political behavior of the Houthi militia is affected by the level of pressures imposed on Iran, and its political decisions are dictated by the ways to counter the pressures imposed on Iran.

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THE ADVENT OF DRONES **IRAN'S WEAPON OF CHOICE**

BY: Naveed Ahmad

This study investigates the history of drones as instruments of warfare and their advent in the Middle East, as well as their integration into respective military arsenals as weapons of choice. Particularly, this study examines Iran's aspiration for drone technology and its evolution in its military doctrine. Facing a multitude of sanctions, Iran neither has the capital nor authority to acquire the latest technologies from foreign sources.

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International Affairs

On the international level, Iranian external relations have taken a different approach after the United States canceled waivers on oil exports and the JCPOA-related nuclear exemptions as well as US military escalation against Iran. In contrast, Iran decreased its nuclear commitments in order to give the JCPOA parties a deadline to fulfill their commitments in assisting Iran's oil exports and its financial transactions. Iranian militant groups also attacked oil tankers in the UAE economic sea zone near Fujairah and Saudi oil facilities, resulting in international reactions and igniting fears of a military confrontation, which threatens international security and stability.



IRAN AND THE UNITED STATES

The US-Iran confrontation has been escalating in an unprecedented fashion, most notably regarding Iran's nuclear file. The US military mobilization in the Gulf region has increased the expectation of a military confrontation.

The US-Iran escalation can be demonstrated through several elements:

First: The US escalation against Iran

Under intense US pressures aiming to reach a new deal to modify Iran's behavior, the US administration conducted the following:

1. The removal of nuclear waivers

After the removal of waivers given to oil importing countries from Iran, the US administration canceled some exemptions related to the JCPOA. The exemptions entered into force on May 4, 2019, and included: an exemption from the requirement to export heavy water produced in Iran, and the exchange of enriched uranium with natural uranium.⁽¹⁾ Also, Iran has to stop all sensitive activities, including uranium enrichment. The United States will not accept measures that support the continuation of uranium enrichment, nor will it allow Iran to store heavy water beyond its current borders. The United States will also impose sanctions if Iran develops the Bushehr nuclear power station, which Russia supplies with nuclear fuel. The United States extended cooperation with Iran in the field of scientific and civil research at the facilities of Arak, Bushehr, and Fordo for 90 days.⁽²⁾

2. Sanctions on the export of minerals

After the removal of waivers on Iranian oil exports, the US President issued an executive order on May 8, 2019, covering the Iranian iron, steel, aluminum, and copper sectors. The Executive Order effectively prohibits entities from buying, selling, transferring, or marketing these metals and products from Iran. It also prohibits entities from engaging intentionally in a significant transaction to sell, supply, or transfer essential goods or services used in these industrial metal sectors to Iran. Otherwise, these entities will face sanctions. The US Department of the Treasury gave 90 days to entities to end their transactions with Iran related to its metal sectors.⁽³⁾

3. Military threats

In early May 2019, the United States enhanced its military presence in the Gulf region through a series of actions including deploying the Abraham Lincoln carrier, as well as deploying five other warships to the Gulf.

Moreover, the United States positioned B-52 strategic bombers at Qatar's Al Udeid Air Base and at another base in southwest Asia, in addition to the Pentagon's announcement

of the deployment of the Patriot missile system in the region. Also, it sent US Arlington amphibious ships to the Gulf in order to enhance US presence there, and redeployed US forces in the Gulf states.⁽⁴⁾

Second: Iranian reactions

Iran has taken several steps in response to US threats and escalation:

1. Decreasing the level of its nuclear commitments

Iran's National Security Council issued a statement that placed liability on the United States and the other parties of the JCPOA for its collapse and any subsequent repercussions. Thus, Iran considered reducing its commitments to rebalance the demands of the JCPOA parties.⁽⁵⁾

President Rouhani announced the details of Iran's plan to reduce its nuclear commitments and said it would be in three stages. Each stage would be limited to two months, based on Articles 26 and 36 of the JCPOA, under which Iran would be allowed to suspend part of its obligations if sanctions resumed.⁽⁶⁾

These phases can be summarized as follows:

Phase one

Suspending the sale of heavy water and enriched uranium as a first step. In this phase, the remaining parties of the JCPOA have a 60-day chance to start negotiations on how to safeguard Iran's interests, especially in the oil and banking sectors, and to ensure the situation that existed pre-US withdrawal from the deal. If the deadline expires without reaching a result, Iran will move to the implementation of the second phase.



Phase two

In the absence of an agreement with the JCPOA parties within two months, Iran will start the implementation of the second phase, which includes two actions: first, enrichment of more than 3.67 percent uranium; second, developing the Arak heavy water reactor.

Iran has set a two-month deadline for it to raise its enrichment rate to 20 percent or more, and to develop the Arak reactor. The JCPOA stipulated that its waste cannot contain plutonium thus preventing Iran's access to a nuclear bomb. It was stipulated that the P5+1 will develop Arak. China and Russia with Iran formed the joint working

group on developing the Arak reactor, but this was halted by Chinese companies as they feared cooperating with Iran after the US threats of imposing sanctions against them. In the framework of this phase, Iranian officials say that the initial designs have been prepared, the equipment purchased, and Iran will build the reactor itself using its old design and technology.⁽⁷⁾

Phase three

This phase will begin if there is no response from the JCPOA parties within the deadline of an extra 60 days, when the Iranian file will be in the Security Council.

Rouhani did not announce the content of the third phase, which includes a deadline of 60 extra days, but said he sent the content to the remaining parties of the JCPOA.⁽⁸⁾

2. Iran's military escalation

Iran has sent a message to all parties involved in the crisis through its militias deployed in the region and its military arms, in response to the unprecedented US escalation and that of its allies against Iran.

On May 12, 2019, four civilian commercial cargo ships of several nationalities were targeted in the UAE's territorial waters near the Emirate of Fujairah.⁽⁹⁾

On May 14, 2019, two oil pumping stations for the East-West pipeline, transporting Saudi oil from its oil fields in the Eastern Province to the port of Yanbu on the west coast, were targeted by drones.

A Houthi website published two reports that "seven aircraft carried out attacks on vital Saudi facilities."⁽¹⁰⁾ On May 19, 2019, the US Embassy in Baghdad was targeted with a Katyusha rocket.

The US administration reported "recent intelligence and specific threats to US forces operating in the region and indications that Iranians are mobilizing their military equipment and transporting it by land and sea."⁽¹¹⁾

Third: Indications and repercussions of mutual escalation

The repercussions of US-Iranian escalation can be indicated as follows:

1. Mutual escalation on the nuclear issue

Undoubtedly, the US decision to remove waivers is part of the US extreme pressure strategy against Iran.⁽¹²⁾ The new nuclear restrictions put Iran and its partners in the nuclear field in a bind and imposed a new reality on the nuclear deal. The new US step will affect the JCPOA technical dimensions and undermine the legal entitlements of the deal.

In practice, the US nuclear restrictions will lead Iran to disrupt its commitments.⁽¹³⁾ Under the JCPOA, Iran is allowed to retain 300 kilograms of 3.67 percent enriched uranium, as well as to maintain 130 tons of heavy water and to sell or export the surplus abroad.⁽¹⁴⁾ Therefore, if Iran fails to export enriched uranium and its heavy water surplus outside the country, it will face a difficult situation in which it will have to suspend enrichment or exceed the specified quantities. It is expected that should Iran continue the enrichment process, it will not only be subjected to US sanctions, but other countries and the JCPOA partners will follow with their own sanctions and then the Security Council resolutions and all international legal disciplinary measures against Iran will be reactivated.

However, Iran does not appear to have a desire to violate the nuclear deal thus far. The first phase is primarily a warning and aims to put pressure on the remaining countries in the nuclear deal. The choice of Iran during the first phase is not to exceed the scheduled rate of enriched uranium and heavy water reserves, as confirmed by the statements of



the political assistant to the Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Aragchi on May 8, 2019. These statements may be due to Iran wanting to create appropriate conditions for negotiations with the remaining countries in the nuclear deal, and to avoid provoking these countries during this delicate phase.

If the second phase is to be the actual start for Iran's reduction of its nuclear commitments, where Iran intends to begin full uranium enrichment and to develop the Arak reactor to the level it was before the JCPOA, the third stage would appear to be the real announcement of the JCPOA collapse. The third phase means that negotiations between Iran and the JCPOA remaining countries would have reached a dead end.

On the other hand, Iran declares that its road map is in accordance with Articles 26 and 36 of the JCPOA. Iran aims to not allow the United States to impose further sanctions, while having some time to negotiate with the EU countries in order to implement the terms of the deal and to help Iran in the process of exporting oil and overcoming financial sanctions. Even if these countries are unable to help Iran, it may earn some friends in the face of US attempts to revive sanctions and international resolutions against Iran.

2. Mutual military escalation and prospects of confrontation

Although the current US military mobilization in the Gulf region is the largest since the invasion of Iraq in 2003, and despite Iran showing its willingness for confrontation and the inevitable confusion this would bring to the entire region if this happened, it is unlikely that tensions will escalate into direct military confrontation due to several indicators. The two parties do not have a desire to reach a point of direct military confrontation. While US troops intensify their military presence and the US tightens its pressure on Iran, US President Donald Trump has offered to negotiate with Iranian leaders.

Despite the intensive movement of US forces, there is no direct sign of either side resorting to the military option in their official speeches; in fact, all statements from the political and military leaders in Iran and the United States declare there is no desire for a confrontation.

Article

FOUR REASONS PREVENT IRANIAN OFFICIALS FROM NEGOTIATING WITH AMERICA

BY: *majid mohammadi*

Despite the US President Donald Trump calling directly and continually on the leaders of the Islamic Republic of Iran to negotiate as well as his openness to negotiations, Khamenei, Rouhani, and Zarif have all said that they are not ready to negotiate with Trump's administration. Direct negotiations with the North Korean leader, Kim Jong-Un, shows that Trump is serious in negotiating with political leaders – including those who lead rogue governments.

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For their part, the Iranians consider the US military movement a kind of psychological war, and through adopting a policy of waiting, they hope to leverage this escalation.

There is also widespread international concern that military confrontation will have severe consequences for stability and security not only in the region but also at the global level.

If a military confrontation happens, the oil markets may experience unprecedented confusion. The United States considers these threats, besides its military presence, as supporting elements in its strategy of maximum pressure - to ensure the free flow of oil from the Gulf, and to deter rather than to engage in military action.

However, war is usually not a prior decision, and it may erupt due to an unintended accident. If the dominant voices on both sides were hawks, what would happen if Iran insisted on its policy, which may put Trump's strategy and US prestige at risk?

3. Depriving Iran of further foreign currency

The US sanctions on Iran's mining sector have imposed more economic pressure on the Iranian political system and has deprived it of foreign income. This sector accounts for 10 percent of Iranian exports and constitutes Iran's largest source of non-oil exports. There is no doubt economic pressure will be increased on the political system, which suffers from real problems at home, and the economic pressure may touch other essential sectors, such as the petrochemical sector.

4. Deferred negotiations

Despite the current climate of escalation, negotiations remain a reliable option since it is the least expensive option for both parties given the unequal power between the United States and Iran. For its part, the United States affirms that the primary objective of these unprecedented pressures is to negotiate a new deal.

President Rouhani has spoken about eight offers in which the United States suggested negotiations, as well as the mediation by four presidents between the United States and Iran.

On May 2, 2019, the Foreign Ministry Spokesman Abbas Mousavi said that Iran was “ready to work to reach a prisoner exchange deal with the United States...if there is an acceptance from the American side.” The Iranian foreign minister confirmed to the New York Times that Iran is ready to conclude a prisoner exchange deal with the United States. The timing of Iran announcing its readiness for dialogue or talks concerning a deal, even if it concerns a side issue such as a prisoner swap, is not isolated from the massive US escalation and gives a signal that Iran is showing some flexibility. But the political system postpones this option to maximize its chances in order to avoid obligatory negotiations that may result in no Iranian gains.

Conclusion

In the end, it is possible to say that the strategy of maximum pressure is continuing and that it poses significant challenges to the Iranian political system. Its continuation at the same pace will ultimately lead to an indispensable settlement for all parties. The other options will be costly to all, especially the option of military confrontation.

IRAN AND EUROPE

The position of the EU countries on the Iranian crisis in May 2019 was mainly related to the mutual escalation between the United States and Iran. The development of European-Iranian relations can be addressed through the following elements:

First: American and Iranian pressure on EU parties

The Iranian political system is deeply frustrated by the European countries because of their negative position towards the nuclear deal and US sanctions, especially the new US nuclear restrictions, which were designed to push Iran to violate the JCPOA. That is why Iran plans to reduce its nuclear commitments and to put the ball in the court of the EU countries, specifically the European Troika.

Moreover, the EU's seriousness in maintaining the deal was assessed in the 60 days given to the European parties and other partners to meet their commitments. The Iranian foreign minister accused the JCPOA parties of "not fulfilling any of their obligations" after the US withdrawal, and added that these countries "showed beautiful data, but in practice, nothing happened."⁽¹⁵⁾

Besides Iran's testing of the European position, it wanted to send a message through this escalation to dispel any EU conclusions, such as Iran giving in to the Trump administration. On the contrary, Iran has the power to disrupt all possibilities.

Iran is testing the European position for the last time on maintaining the nuclear deal and its related commitments, namely the agreed measures that Iran wants implemented: 1) to help Iran export its oil; 2) to overcome the financial sanctions through activating the mechanism of financial exchange which the European Troika countries announced in late January 2019.

On the other hand, US policies have led to more pressure on EU parties and their movement towards settling the crisis, especially after the elimination of waivers on Iranian oil exports entirely. The US has also imposed sanctions related to the Iranian nuclear file and on countries cooperating with Iran in this regard.

Europe is the object of an Iranian-American competition in an attempt by each side to win the support of the Europeans to influence the course of the crisis. Through its strategy, the United States seeks to create an international consensus against Iran by bringing Europe to its extreme position. Iran is trying to push the Europeans away from the US position, and urging them to help it [Iran] overcome the sanctions and evade the policy of the Trump administration.

Second: The European reaction to Iran's reduction of its nuclear obligations

The European reaction to Iran's reduction of its nuclear commitments has revealed a state of confusion regarding US and Iranian positions. While officials have expressed concern about the escalation that could lead to the collapse of the nuclear deal, European countries have exerted pressure on Iran to implement its commitments, although these countries have not taken practical steps towards implementing their own commitments.

For example, Britain said it was very concerned about Iran's announcement of



reducing restrictions on its nuclear program. It also added that Tehran would face the consequences if it pulled out from its nuclear deal.⁽¹⁶⁾

“Germany wants to keep the nuclear deal, which is why it is important that Iran complies with its terms,” said the German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas.⁽¹⁷⁾

The French position did not differ from the German and British positions. It was assumed that the three countries would ensure the continuity of the nuclear deal; these positions indicate that Germany, Britain, and France may move towards the US side on the Iranian issue over time.

The EU High Representative for Security Policy and Foreign Affairs, Federica Mogherini, in a joint statement with the foreign ministers of the European countries rejected any Iranian warning [over its nuclear commitments] and pledged to reassess Iran’s compliance with its nuclear obligations.⁽¹⁸⁾

It is clear that the European positions are to press Iran to fulfill the nuclear deal and that the United States has no responsibility for the current crisis, while Tehran sees these pressures as forcing it to commit unilaterally, especially since Europe is unable to save the nuclear deal in any way.

Third: The impact of escalation on European positions towards Iran

The Europeans did not try to fulfill any of their obligations to Iran, despite the Iranians threatening to reduce their nuclear obligations within 60 days if Europe did not meet its commitments. Regarding the activation of the mechanism of financial exchange (INSTEX), the consultations are still ongoing between the parties. INSTEX remained out of service until late May 2019 and generally faces several challenges. For Iran’s part, there is no intention to agree to the European conditions in order to activate the INSTEX mechanism, the most important of which is adherence to the FATF rules. The Iranian Foreign Minister, Mohammad Javad Zarif, questioned the benefit of concluding new agreements when there is no interest to be achieved from such agreements.⁽¹⁹⁾

On the European side, this mechanism restricts financial transactions to only the three countries (Germany, Britain and France). The terms of INSTEX make it an oil-for-food mechanism, while US sanctions make oil exports and retrieving their revenues difficult, if not impossible.

The competition for supporting the remaining countries in the nuclear deal by the United States and Iran is unequal. The United States has a tremendous influence on these countries, whether through encouragement or intimidation. For a year now, these countries were not prepared to challenge the US will, especially as dealing with Iran will have a cost. Europe so far has failed to activate the INSTEX mechanism to enable Iran to export its oil and to obtain its oil and non-oil export revenues⁽²⁰⁾ because of US restrictions. Furthermore, Iranians have felt that the European parties are closer to the US position and that they serve US strategic purposes intentionally or unintentionally.

Conclusion

In the end, it is possible to say that the United States is close to achieving real success in undermining the nuclear deal and its effects, further pushing Iran to violate it with all its repercussions, all of which are in favor of the US maximum pressure strategy. Europe does not have a significant margin to save the nuclear deal. In practice, it does not put any real pressure on the United States, but its pressure is directed towards Tehran, at least in principle, by its negative attitude towards the crisis. This puts the EU and the Americans, according to the Iranians, on the same page.

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IRAN CASE FILE

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