

MONTHLY REPORT



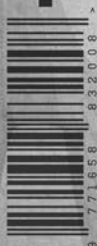
IRAN CASE FILE

Your window on Iran from inside and abroad

August 2019



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THE EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

During the month of August, Iran did not manage to drag the region into a military confrontation which could have been used to bypass the embargo imposed on it. The United States, in the meantime, reiterated that it will continue its strategy of maximum pressure on Tehran, with the aim of forcing it to change its hostile behavior in the region. It has become clear that the Iranian military establishment will continue with its provocative acts towards the region's countries after it became sure that the limited confrontation strategy is the best option for the US even if the military confrontation option is endorsed in general by the US. Hence, Iran assessed this imminent limited confrontation and deemed it better than being under the constant impact of Washington's maximum pressure policy. A limited confrontation strategy will not lead to the Iranian government falling. On the contrary, it will consolidate its power through national cohesion, and ensure society is more prepared for enduring greater economic pressures in order to avert popular or factional protests that Iran witnessed in 2018.

Following a poor response from regional and international powers to Iranian provocations, internal changes were limited and characterized by being influenced by external circumstances. At the ideological level, the Iranian arena turned its attention to the fatwa of cleric Kazem Haeri in which he called for targeting US troops deployed in Iraqi territories. The fatwa was most probably issued as a result of Iranian pressures due to the longevity of US troops in Iraq and the cooperation with, or at least silence towards, these troops by Shiite Marjaia since the start of the US invasion. But as the situation continues to turn increasingly tense between Washington and Tehran in Iraq, the Shiite Marjaia of Iranian inclination have

been tasked with shaping the situation which Iran seeks to achieve in Iraq and to continue the manipulation of the Iraqi government to serve Iranian interests.

At the political level, the Iranian president continues to complain about the little powers granted to him and his inability to run the state in the way set out in the Iranian constitution.

At the same time, he faces harsh criticism from lawmakers who have protested at the way he has managed relations with the United States. This is consistent with the approach of the hardliners who use the rejection of any call for negotiations as a means to get closer to the supreme leader. At the level of state administration, no effective policies from the Iranian government have been successful in improving the deteriorating economic situation as has been the case with most of the government's policies during Rouhani's second term.

At the military level, the consecutive targeting of Iranian forces deployed in Iraq and Syria by the Israeli Air Force posed the biggest challenge to Iran at the time given the lack of desire from Iran to engage in a faceoff with Israel. This shows a striking contradiction in the Iranian position: in the Gulf, there are brazen provocations and offensive hostile acts versus a deadly silence towards Israeli provocations. Some believe that the silence towards Israel is attributed to the firm belief that the United States will totally throw its weight behind Tel Aviv while the position will be different when it comes to the Arabian Gulf. Therefore, Iran rushes to commit hostile acts in the Gulf and display silence towards Israeli strikes in Syria and Iraq.

In July and August 2019, Israel expanded the scope of targeting Iranian positions in Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon, which seems to be a deliberate Israeli plan to curb Iranian influence through bombing weapons and rocket depots belonging to Iranian militias, especially in Iraq. Israel seeks to destroy these militias before Iran manages to build up weaponry in the new arena which it could use, in addition to its proxy militias in Syria and Lebanon, to target Israel. This is in addition to the desire of the Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to boost his popularity ahead of the Knesset elections in September 2019 at a time when Israel is receiving its greatest support from the US, unprecedented in its history. Also, Israel feels the proximity of the Iranian threat to its vital spheres, areas of influence and borders since Iran exceeded the redlines set by Israel in Syria. This comes amid reports of Iran transferring ballistic missiles to its loyalist militias in Iraq and its intent to move its armed militias in the Arab countries to mount strategic attacks against Israel and the United States due to the complicated situation between the United States and Iran after the United States scrapped the exemptions granted to the major importers of Iranian oil and the imposition of sanctions on Iran's non-oil sectors.

While Iran was hit by Israeli strikes in Syria and Iraq, Iran has been avowedly entrenching its presence in Yemen. It has accepted the credentials of the first Houthi ambassador in Tehran. This Iranian decision lacks legitimacy in the context of international law as it does not recognize the diplomatic representation of splinter groups. But the move shows the desire of Iran to declare its full support

for the Houthi militia while sticking to its outright denial of interference in the Yemeni crisis.

As for international affairs, in August, the call to extend the arms embargo against Iran was raised, which the United States demanded in a recent Security Council meeting. The embargo is supposed to be lifted in October 2020, after which Iran will be able to import all offensive weapons. There is no doubt Russian and Chinese weaponry will be accessible for Iranians, and maybe some weapons from Western countries which may consider the matter as an economic opportunity that should not be missed. This means more violence and the stirring up of more crises in the Middle East due to the sophisticated weapons which Iran will get if the embargo is not extended. Within the US strategy of maximum pressure, the United States announced that it is taking a number of measures to reduce Iranian influence in Iraq. In the meantime, European countries continue to try to push the parties to negotiate, however, Iran is aggravating the situation by deploying GPS jammers at Abu Musa, an Emirati island occupied by Iran, with the aim of disabling navigation devices for aircraft and ships passing in the region, in order to detain them under the pretext of entering Iranian sea and airspace. France has proposed a \$15 billion credit line to Iran in return for Tehran halting the reduction of its nuclear obligations and engaging in the negotiating process. The proposal was initially welcomed. Iran's hollow slogans about rejecting negotiations with the United States were exposed in the face of financial temptations. However, the French proposal evaporated due to the US refusal. But, in general, Europe seemed to be inclining towards the US position more than before due to the seizure of the British oil tanker and Iran's intransigent position.

As for the Indian subcontinent, the Iranian position on the Kashmir crisis which resurfaced following India's announcement of abolishing self-rule in the disputed region was affected by Indian-American rapprochement and India's ceasing of its imports of Iranian oil. Iran declared solidarity with Pakistan in the aftermath of the crisis although it opened a base for India in southeastern Iran, specifically in Chabahar. Furthermore, there has been increasing military and economic cooperation between Iran and India. As for the Kashmir crisis, India opted to stand with Pakistan despite its close cooperation with India as a form of pressure on the Delhi government.

Internal Affairs

Iran is facing a major challenge when it comes to the US sanctions imposed on it. This challenge gets bigger as time passes. The sanctions are increasing, and their scope is expanding to include the proxies of Iran in the region as well as the countries and entities cooperating with it overseas. This leads to a depletion of Iranian resources in addition to the elimination of networks tasked with smuggling oil and letting in foreign currency, which runs counter to the Iranian objective at this phase to be resilient for the longest possible period. It is waiting for global changes that could lead pressures to be lifted without making significant concessions.

Therefore, the passing of time is a double-edged weapon for Iran. Inasmuch as Iranian offensive actions makes the other party feel the enormity of the consequences of mounting attacks on Iran, and they create tough negotiating conditions with Iran whether for the Europeans or the Southeast Asian countries, which deem Iran as a genuine threat to their interests as Iran threatens the security and stability of the global energy market. The main obstacle facing Iran is answering the question: is entering into negotiations compulsory? What is the right moment to start negotiations to avoid as much loss as possible?



The Ideological File

***The Ideological File* casts light on the ideological developments in the Iranian arena during August and the impact of these developments on internal actors in the state and seminary. In addition, the ideological file focuses this month on the religious fatwa issued by cleric Kazem al-Haeri residing in Iran regarding the targeting of US troops in Iraq. The fatwa caused a big uproar within religious seminaries in Iran and Iraq. It grabbed the attention of the political authorities and religious elites in both countries.**

I- The Fatwa of Kazem al-Haeri and Its Dimensions

Cleric Kazem al-Haeri issued a fatwa⁽¹⁾ in which he called on Iraqis to target US troops deployed in Iraq and to target US interests. In the same fatwa, he said, “In this context, I say it plainly and announce, out of my legal responsibility, that the existence of any military force from the United States, or any force similar to the United States, is unlawful under any guise, such as offering training and advice, or even combating terrorism, the Americans are its initiators and sponsors.”⁽²⁾

The fatwa of Haeri came after a drone hit an arms depot of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) in Iraq. It was said that the drone was from Israel, so Kazem al-Haeri wanted to respond with US interests being targeted in Iraq.

The fatwa triggered tremendous reactions, but some raised questions about its timing. They argued that the US presence in Iraq is nothing new and Kazem al-Haeri is not known for issuing jihadist fatwas. He did not issue such a fatwa after the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the subsequent battles such as those between the Sadrist movement and US troops in southern Iraq.

It seems that the fatwa of Kazem al-Haeri reflects the ongoing crisis in Iran. Tehran uses this fatwa as a bargaining chip to alleviate its economic and political pressures. This analysis is backed up by the fact that Haeri is one of those who believes in Velayat-e Faqih.⁽³⁾ He also believes in the right of the guardian jurist to create new rulings.⁽⁴⁾ The PMF in Iraq, for the sake of which this fatwa was issued, is supportive of Velayat-e Faqih too. According to jurisprudential criteria, this fatwa was issued by a cleric who lacks legal jurisdiction. The cleric who is capable, qualified and entitled to issue such a fatwa is the guardian jurist or the supreme leader of Iran himself for it to be binding on the PMF, the majority of its members follow the supreme leader of Iran. Cleric Haeri is well aware of this. The commanders of the PMF brigades are either supportive

of the Marjaia of the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei or supportive of the Najaf seminary led by Ali Al-Sistani. Haeri's fatwa is not binding on any of those PMF brigades.

II- Reactions at Home and Abroad

Inside Iraq, reactions to the fatwa by the Iran-based Haeri varied. The Asaib Ahl Al-Haq militia threatened to target US interests in Iraq such as its military forces, consulates and military bases. One of the movement's officials said, "We want neither training, nor support or transfer of expertise."⁽⁵⁾

The Fatah Alliance asserted that it will support the fatwa of Haeri at the Iraqi Parliament. The alliance also described it as a brave fatwa against US and Israeli attacks, which targeted the positions of the PMF.⁽⁶⁾

The deputy head of the PMF accused the United States of permitting drones to enter Iraq to strike the arm depots of the PMF, but the Iraqi government announced that such remarks do not represent the official Iraqi position.⁽⁷⁾



Close to the diplomatic position of the Iraqi government, the Shiite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr issued a statement ruling out the possibility of Israel carrying out such operations against the PMF, calling on the government to conduct a neutral investigation into the matter. He also called for the possession of weapons to be confined to the state in order to prevent foreign interventions.⁽⁸⁾

The escalatory positions adopted by some of the leaders and wings of the PMF in response to this fatwa are intended to ensure that drone strikes do not happen again. Turning threats into realities and opening the door for confrontation with US forces stationed in Iraq have other reasons and motives. The fatwa of Haeri is not a sufficient justification for such a military conflict.

III- Najaf and Haeri's Fatwa

From another religious angle, the fatwa of Haeri put the Najaf religious seminary in an awkward situation and defied its religious and jurisprudential clout in the entire Shiite arena in general and inside Iraq in particular, which

represents its geographic and demographic presence. Therefore, the Najaf seminary did not comment on Haeri's fatwa whether to indicate its approval or disapproval. Sources in the PMF, who are supportive of Imam Hussein's Shrine, said they are committed to following the line of the Najaf religious seminary and the directives of the commander in chief of the armed forces in Iraq.⁽⁹⁾

The Najaf seminary's refusal to comment on Haeri's fatwa could be interpreted as its total opposition to it more than its approval. The history of Najaf's seminary, its jurisprudential heritage, its political theory which contradicts Velayat-e Faqih and its opposition to any active political participation during the absence of the Infallible Imam makes this interpretation more acceptable as it is more consistent with the Iraqi political status quo.

Conclusion

The interactions in the aftermath of the fatwa issued by cleric Kazem Haeri indicate that Iran sought, through this fatwa, to achieve several strategic goals at the religious and political levels.

At the religious level: Iran is still dissatisfied with the positions of the Najaf seminary given the hard times through which the Iranian state is going. Najaf always adopts neutral positions in order to preserve the seminary and Shiite jurisprudential heritage. The Iranians want the religious seminary in Najaf to be totally supportive of Velayat-e Faqih and to support the general policies of the Iranian state, which are deemed by the Najaf seminary as a violation of its jurisprudential role as well as to its theory of political jurisprudence which is opposed to the absolute guardianship of the jurist. The relationship between the Najaf seminary and the Iranian state is conflictual due to competition between the two in regards to who represents the Shiite masses, in addition, they compete for domination over the people when choosing the most capable cleric at every stage.

At the political level: Tehran seeks to transfer the religious seminary's clout from Najaf to Qom, from where it can control clerics and polish the image of those supporting the state. In addition, opponents, can be easily controlled and shackled by tough restrictions. There is another approach Iran follows towards the Najaf seminary which is to empower Iraqi clerics who are proponents of the Velayat-e Faqih line and the absolute guardianship of the jurist. This is how Tehran will show others that not all Iraqis or Najaf seminary's clerics oppose Velayat-e Faqih. Moreover, it will be able to spread its influence over the Iraqi religious arena and incite disturbance at the Najaf seminary through its loyal clerics who will undoubtedly impact the seminary in terms of its loyal Shiite support base or the amount of funds allocated to it by Shiites.

But we could say that a fatwa which is issued by the Najaf Marjaia has an influence which is deeper than any fatwa issued by Qom clerics excluding the

guardian jurist. This is because the Najaf Marjaia depends on a jurisprudential and seminary-related heritage which is not available to Qom clerics. The latter only depend on support from the Iranian state which is supportive of Velayat-e Faqih. This has enabled Najaf to appear as an independent establishment keeping its distance from political authority. Hence, Najaf relies on its distance from politics in order to maintain its position as the biggest religious establishment in the Shiite world.

The Political File

During August 2019, President Hassan Rouhani resumed speaking of the little powers granted to him. On the anniversary of the assassination of the former Iranian President Mohammed Ali Rajaei, which coincides with the Government Week,⁽¹⁰⁾ Rouhani called for not meddling in the affairs of his government. He also called for granting his government the necessary powers to enable it to perform its duties and carry out its missions.

In May, Rouhani spoke on the topic relating to government powers on two different occasions. On the first occasion, he touched on the lack of government powers, and demanded that other authorities not interfere in the work of the government. On the second occasion, he demanded that his government be granted powers similar to the broad executive powers that were granted by Khomeini to the Iranian government during the Iran-Iraq War. Rouhani demanded more power in April and May because he wants to lift the restrictions imposed on him by the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and other hardliners in order to better deal with the stifling economic crisis, which has been significantly exacerbated by the US withdrawal from the nuclear deal and the escalation of US sanctions against Tehran. His recent talk on the issue of powers is due to two main reasons:

I- Rouhani's Desire to Hold Talks With the US Administration

A day after Iran's Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif visited the G7 Summit in France, which was met with harsh criticism from Iranian hardliners, Rouhani said he was ready to meet anyone if it was in the interest of the Iranian people, in a hint at his willingness to negotiate with US President Donald Trump.⁽¹¹⁾

But the Iranian hardliners met these remarks with angry criticism and responses that amount to accusing Rouhani of treason. 83 fundamentalist lawmakers, including members of the Steadfastness Front, sent a notice to Rouhani accusing him of sending signals to the US president of Iran's willingness to negotiate, and of violating the supreme leader's refusal to negotiate with the United States.⁽¹²⁾

Khamenei did not directly warn Rouhani against negotiating with the US administration, but the weekly magazine *Hezbollah Line*, published by the office of the supreme leader, discussed in its new issue the president's statements in which he announced his readiness to negotiate with the US admin-

istration. On its cover, the magazine published an old quote by Khamenei, where he said, “Negotiation with the United States is totally rejected, not only with its president, but also with its secretary of state and other officials.”⁽¹³⁾



The Kayhan daily newspaper, which is considered the voice of the supreme leader and known for its hardline positions, attacked President Rouhani and argued that Trump needs a photo-op with Iranian officials for the sake of the coming US elections, and he waits for Rouhani to grant him this chance. The paper reminded Rouhani of his previous remarks where he said dialogue with the United States was some kind of madness because it did not abide by the nuclear deal which was approved by the United Nations.⁽¹⁴⁾

In the face of these criticisms, President Hassan Rouhani had no choice but to back down from his previous statements by declaring that his country opposed in principle bilateral negotiations with the United States. He linked negotiations with the US administration to the lifting of sanctions and the requirements of Iran’s national interests.⁽¹⁵⁾

II- The Interference of Regulatory Bodies in the Government’s Work

In recent times, the judicial authority and regulatory bodies have made several arrests and conducted several trials against former officials in some government institutions such as trying Hassan Fereydoun, the brother of Hassan Rouhani, over corruption and financial irregularities as well as the former governor of the Central Bank Ahmed Araghchi on charges of smuggling hard currency outside the country. This is in addition to detaining the former head of Iran’s Privatization Organization (IPO),⁽¹⁶⁾ within the framework of the law on combating corruption and economic crimes, which is a top priority for



Iran's judiciary, especially after Ebrahim Raisi was appointed head of the judiciary.

Although Rouhani supports the project of eradicating economic corruption, he believes that the arrests and trials are accompanied by direct interference from the judiciary in the affairs of the executive authority under the pretext of oversight. He also believes that the trials should be the last stage in the fight against corruption, i.e., after the completion of investigations and scrutiny. However, the judiciary continued to accuse government officials and conducted daily public trials, which negatively affected the government's performance.

President Rouhani, who believes that the fight against corruption cannot be carried out through imprisonment and arrests, indirectly accused the judiciary of politicizing the trials. He called for investigating the cases without political interference. Rouhani's resentment over the negative role played by regulatory bodies has reached a stage where he warned that interference by these bodies in the work of the government would lead any president of Iran to fail.⁽¹⁷⁾

But the Iranian judiciary quickly responded to these accusations.

The head of the judiciary considers that everyone understands that Iran's financial and banking system is facing many crises, and therefore financial institutions should be reformed to eliminate corruption and to prevent individuals from benefiting from their relationships to obtain funds illegally.

The deputy head of the judiciary, however, supported Rouhani's argument that arrests and prosecutions would not eliminate corruption, and that the role of the judiciary should be limited to prosecuting all those proven to have acquired money illegally. However, he believes that if the Iranian government had fulfilled its role totally, there would be no need for the judiciary to intervene in the fight against corruption.⁽¹⁸⁾

Conclusion

Rouhani resuming his discussion on the few definite powers granted to him and accusing regulatory bodies run by the hardliners of intervening in the affairs of his government reveal the significant divergence in viewpoints between Rouhani and Khamenei, and his loyalist bodies, on the way to deal with the threats and crises facing Iran. They also reveal the significant obstacles and hindrances shackling the performance of his government.

The question that Rouhani raised during his speech on the anniversary of the assassination of the former President Mohammed Ali Rajaei, “Which responsibility do you want from a person without powers?” is the best proof of his government being shackled by the hardliners.

The Military File

Iran has been exhibiting extraordinary restraint despite persistent Israeli attacks on its assets and personnel in Syria, Lebanon and most recently Iraq. The most prominent Israeli attack targeted Brigadier General Mohammad Ali Allah-Dadi, a military officer in the Quds Force, who was killed in a suspected airstrike in the Syrian Golan Heights in late January 2015.⁽¹⁹⁾ Colonel Mehdi Dehghan was amongst seven Iranian Quds Force members killed in April 2018 during an Israeli attack on the T-4 airbase in Syria.⁽²⁰⁾ He was heading the drone unit in Syria. With recent Israeli blows against the Iranian-backed Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) in Iraq, the escalation threshold has been stretched further by Israel according to Iranian military strategists. The relentless pursuit of Iran to better equip and organize its militias in the aforementioned three Arab countries has not been deterred by Israel's deadly attacks. How long can Iran's resolve and patience last?

I- Israel's Pursuit of a Buffer Zone

The policy of offensive defense dates back to 1981 when Israel launched daredevil attacks against Iraq's Osirak nuclear reactor in Baghdad.⁽²¹⁾ The results were an astounding success. Tel Aviv's mission 'Outside the Box' was yet another high-profile operation to ensure its security in its immediate neighborhood i.e. Syria. The relatively easier but daring operation led to the destruction of Syria's nuclear program in Deir ez-Zor in August 2007.⁽²²⁾ Since the start of the Syrian uprising in 2011, Iran has been increasing its military cooperation with Syria. The war-torn country not only has Iranian Shiite militias operating on its soil independent of its armed forces but it also provides military bases to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and its affiliates. Over the years, the Israeli military has launched over 200 airstrikes against Iranian or Iran-linked targets in Syria, mostly without a matching retaliatory response from Tehran.⁽²³⁾

On August 26, Lebanon condemned back-to-back Israeli attacks on Hezbollah assets reportedly destroying a central component of Hezbollah's precision-guided missile program: a propellant-mixer which increases the range of missile engines and the accuracy of projectiles. The propellant-mixer was destroyed by Israel before it could be moved to a safe location.⁽²⁴⁾

On August 20, smoke was seen from the Balad airbase in Iraq. This was



an indication of the fourth in a series of recent Israeli air strikes against the Iranian-backed PMF, which had allegedly just received missile shipments and upgrade kits for advanced guidance from Iran. Satellite images confirmed significant damage and destruction on each of the sites hit at the airbase.⁽²⁵⁾ An explosion preceded it on August 12 that left the ammunition depot near Al-Saqr military base, rocking with a massive chain reaction of bigger and smaller blasts. Earlier on July 19, an explosion occurred at a base near Amerli in the Salahuddin province north of Baghdad and several days later at another PMF base at Camp Ashraf along the Iraqi-Iranian border. This has been the farthest that Israel's recent strikes have hit.⁽²⁶⁾ The most consequential was the IRGC's attempt in February 2018 to dispatch a drone inside Israeli borders from its T4- base east of Homs in Syria. An Israeli gunship helicopter shot down the drone, and in retaliation Israeli fighter jets bombed several Iranian military positions. Meanwhile, an Israeli F16- fell prey to heavy anti-aircraft fire and was downed inside the country with its pilot safely ejecting.⁽²⁷⁾ Just hours prior to US President Donald Trump's withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal in May 2018, Israel engaged in a fairly comprehensive attack against the Quds Force's weapons-storage facilities, logistics sites and intelligence centers in response to rockets fired at its troops in the Golan Heights.

Iran has Syria within its reach for the purpose of setting up bases, training facilities and ammunition depots. When Damascus Airport became a regular target of the Israeli military, Iranian activities were shifted to the T-4 airbase near Homs, deeper into Syria and farther from Israel.⁽²⁸⁾ More recently, Tehran is dispersing its assets across Syria to maintain secrecy and to make enemy strikes less effective as well as costlier.

II- The Iran-Israel Military Balance

Over the past couple of years, Israel has taken advantage of its real-time intelligence and superior firepower to launch deadly pre-emptive attacks with accuracy. The civilian toll has been reported to be low. Besides, surgical strikes

have stayed clear of inflicting damage on Russia's troops and its military assets.

Iran and Israel have distinctly different military strengths, which can't be compared in terms of numbers. Israel maintains a decent size military force in relation to its geographic landmass, albeit it is one of the most advanced and highly trained. On the other hand, Iran's armed forces rely less on conventional war-fighting means and more on hybrid or fifth generation warfare. Yet, Iran has paid particular focus to its missile development program and its drone fleet. Tehran is heavily reliant on its armed non-state actors, and its diaspora as well as on its propaganda machine with its narratives projected by national and global media agencies. Israel pioneered the concept of plausible deniability vis-à-vis its nuclear program while Iran applies the same concept via its drone and missile strikes as well as via the use of Shiite militias.

As per the International Institute for Strategic Studies' publication 'The Military Balance' (2017), an annual assessment of military capabilities and defense economics, both countries do not have much disparity. Both earmarked a military budget of \$16 billion until 2016 with Iran maintaining a force of 130,000 soldiers, 220,000 volunteers, and 350,000 reservists whereas Israel's active personnel number constitutes 133,000 along with 400,000 reservists.⁽²⁹⁾ The comparison is meant to provide a general perspective on the armed forces. The two militaries will not face one another when at full strength. Even if Iran decides to send troops to Syria and Lebanon to fight a full-fledged war against Israel, it will still need personnel to protect its territory from other adversaries bordering her. Due to this reality, Iran will continue to depend on its militias, Hezbollah and the PMF to serve its interests in Syria, Lebanon and Iraq. While the IRGC's Quds Force leads Iran's missions in Syria along with its troops, its strategy largely depends upon Hezbollah.

III- When Will Iran Retaliate?

Hezbollah remains Iran's most invaluable investment to realize its dream of strategic depth. Despite losing personnel, it has withstood its ground. Iran pays special attention to Hezbollah's financial, political and military needs. The same cannot be said about Iran's attention towards newer militias raised in Syria. In comparison to Hezbollah, the PMF has not transformed into an integrated, disciplined and specialized well-trained militia. After all, it is made up of 40 different groups.⁽³⁰⁾ Hezbollah has deployed its key advisors to train militias in Iraq, as they are extremely important for Iran in guarding its interests, in particular the flow of oil, arms and goods. The Israeli campaign against the PMF is aimed at disrupting Hezbollah's supply line instead of paralyzing Iraqi militias. The recent spree of attacks against the PMF does impinge on the Iranian stratagem in the region, hence the question of retaliating against Israel.

Iran has been patient and may continue to remain so in pursuit of its prag-

matic approach of not blowing up the entire game. Israeli strikes have led to frustration and rage among Iranian troops and militias as well as among Iran's supporters in the Middle East, yet there have been no signs of rebellion or criticism of Tehran's policy. The success of Tehran's hybrid warfare, so far, can be attributed to Iranians having a strong degree of allegiance to their spiritual and military leadership amidst losses and gains.⁽³¹⁾

Tehran has pragmatically absorbed the loss of its personnel as well as the losses inflicted on Hezbollah to motivate its soldiers and militiamen. Can further Israeli strikes against the IRGC and Hezbollah compel Tehran to forcefully retaliate beyond dispatching a few rockets or armed drones? The answer is anybody's guess.

The dilemma is manifold. Firstly, Israel has made defensive pre-emption against non-state armed actors the norm, which is accepted by western nations, Russia and China. Iran's actions in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon are largely seen as transgressive as they threaten the status quo. Secondly, Israel is fighting against its regional foes from its territory, thus it has only one front to safeguard. For Iran, fighting a full-fledged war with Israel will require a massive mobilization of its military assets along with strong economic backing, which Iran does not have at this moment in time. Iran has surrounded itself with enemies and frenemies (such as Pakistan and Turkey). Thus, if it engaged in retaliation against Israel for attacking the Quds Force in Syria, Hezbollah in Lebanon and the PMF in Iraq, the Iranian home front can be opened up by Arab countries with the assistance of Tehran's annoyed geographic neighbors to the northwest and southeast.

Thirdly, Iran's military arsenal is far inferior to Israel's. Despite this disadvantage, Tehran can inflict some damage to Tel Aviv, however, it will not be able to sustain it for a long period, notwithstanding its ballistic and cruise missile batteries.⁽³²⁾

Fourthly, it will not be long before Israel's allies will join her if a full-blown conflict develops with Iran. Iran's military or its militias will not spare the United States and its western allies that have military bases in the region. Iran maintaining discipline with an assortment of non-state actors under its control is a gigantic dilemma for the West especially when Tehran is exposed to a full-on war.

The generals in Iran deem it more befitting to attack an oil facility, a pipeline, a storage depot in the Gulf states or foreign military bases on Iraqi and Syrian soil through Tehran's mercenaries in Iraq or Yemen instead of going head-on against Israel. The Persians have, thus, managed to keep the threshold of conflict low. Even when Tel Aviv pursues its strategic objective of preventing the consolidation of an official Iranian military presence in Syria and weakening Iran's proxies in Syria, Iraq and Lebanon, Tehran is unlikely to change its counter-measures.

Nonetheless, Israel is taking no risks. Its defensive steps include the deployment of Iron Dome aerial defense batteries in the north and increasing reliance on F-35 Lightning stealth jets since it lost an F-16 to enemy fire and poor evasive maneuvers by its pilot.⁽³³⁾

Conclusion

For Iran though, Israel has an unrealistic strategic goal behind its strikes: the removal of all Iranian forces from Syria. Airstrikes alone will not be able to achieve this objective. Ground operations, either through rival militias or Syria's state institutions, can kick Iranian forces out. The situation in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon is nowhere close to that for now.

The Israeli military will continue to pursue its strategy of pre-emption by introducing more advanced firepower. Instead of counterforce operations, Tel Aviv's counter-value strikes will continue unless its new government resulting from the September 17 legislative elections decides differently.

Endnotes

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Arab Affairs

There were changes in the balance of power in the Arab arena for Iran during the month of August 2019. Iran's presence in Syria and Iraq has been greatly threatened by Israeli airstrikes targeting Iranian forces and its proxy militias. The Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) are also no longer safe from Israeli airstrikes. However, Iran has opted for a policy of non-retaliation in order to avoid opening further military fronts. Iran has concealed its weapons storage operations and fragmented its military units into small groups. These measures are driven by Iran's belief that airstrikes will not resolve the situation on the ground, and the Iranian presence will remain unless it is confronted by hostile ground forces.

On the other hand, the Iranian presence in Yemen and its support for the Houthi militia became more apparent after it accepted the credentials of the first Houthi ambassador to Tehran. Iran's decision to accept the Houthi ambassador, which has no legal value internationally, was facilitated by the latest developments in Yemen and the eruption of fighting between forces belonging to the Legitimate Government and the Transitional Council.



Israel Expanding Its Circle of Targeting Iran's Arms in Arab Countries

Israel expanded its circle of targeting pro-Iranian militia positions in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon in July and August 2019 by carrying out intense airstrikes, particularly in Iraqi territory. This attack was the first of its kind since it destroyed the Iraqi nuclear reactor, known as Operation Opera in 1981. Israel expanding its targets is a carefully weighted policy against Iranian arms in the Arab region, where Tehran seeks to extend its influence to change the balance of power in its favor. There are several questions posed such as: What are the most prominent areas of the Israeli-Iranian conflict in the Arab countries? What is the reaction of Iran and its arms in the battlefields? What are the motives of Tel Aviv for targeting the concentration of pro-Iranian militias in the Iraqi arena? What are the implications of this attack?

I- The Areas of the Israeli-Iranian Conflict in the Arab Countries

1-Iraq

Iraq has become a new conflict area between Israel and Iran in the Middle East. Israel has targeted the headquarters of Iran's proxy militias, including the PMF, four times. Weapons and ballistic missile depots which were allegedly Iranian-made and transferred to militias across the Iraq-Iran border were attacked as follows:

A- On July 19, 2019, rocket launchers at the PMF positions were targeted in Amrili as well as the headquarters of Brigade 52 in the Salah al-Din governorate. A senior commander of Iran's Quds Force, Abu Alfazl Sarabian, was killed. The attack targeted several fighters affiliated to Hezbollah, and the Badr organization headed by Hadi Al-Amiri, Iran's most prominent man in Iraq.⁽¹⁾

B- On July 28, 2019, the PMF were targeted at Camp Ashraf, the stronghold of the Badr organization, about 80 kilometers west of the Iran border in Diyala province. 40 fighters, most of them Iranians, were killed in the attack.⁽²⁾

C- On August 12, 2019, weapons and missile depots of militias at base Falcon south of Baghdad were targeted.⁽³⁾ This military base is used by the IRGC to smuggle and transport weapons to Syria and Hezbollah.

D- On August 20, 2019, the Israeli Air Force bombed the Balad base of the PMF in the Salah al-Din governorate, the headquarters of Brigade 52 of the Shiite Badr Organization and the Iraqi Hezbollah in the provinces of Baghdad, Salah al-Din and Al-Qa'im, near the Syrian border.⁽⁴⁾

2- Syria

The Israeli Air Force targeted pro-Iranian militia positions in Syria four times during July and August 2019:

A- On July 1, 2019, Israel targeted a scientific research center and a military airport in Homs where Iranian and Hezbollah fighters were deployed, as well as several military sites in the Damascus countryside, including the positions of Iranian fighters.⁽⁵⁾



B- On August 25, 2019, Israel targeted the positions of the Quds Force, Hezbollah and pro-Iranian militias southeast of Damascus. As a result, two Hezbollah fighters and one Iranian fighter were killed.⁽⁶⁾

3-Lebanon

On August 31, 2019, Hezbollah's headquarters in Beirut's southern suburbs were targeted by two Israeli drones. Hezbollah announced that it destroyed a military vehicle at the Israeli army base in Avivim near the Lebanese border in northern Israel, killing and wounding those inside. In response, the IDF fired 40 cluster and incendiary rockets into Maroun Al Ras, Yaroun and Aitaroun.⁽⁷⁾

II- Iranian Positions and Reactions

The Iranians stated that they could change the conflict equation to the detriment of Israel through its arms in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon. On August 25, 2019, the Secretary of the Expediency Council Mohsen Rezaee and on August 26, 2019 the Special Aide to the President of the Islamic Parliament of Iran in International Affairs Hussein Amirabdollahian confirmed, "The Iranians are capable of changing the equation to the detriment of Israel."⁽⁸⁾ They said that Tel Aviv has used elements of the People's Mojahedin Organization of Iran, who have accurate information about the location of the weapons depot at Camp Ashraf. They have lived in this Iraqi camp for decades, to carry out attacks in Iraq.

Iraq is of great significance to the Iranian strategy because it is Tehran's western gate to cross toward Syria and the Mediterranean. Therefore, it is a key link in what Iran calls the "Shiite Crescent," as well as in the Iranian corridor to link Tehran to the Eastern Mediterranean through Syria and Lebanon on the one hand. In addition, Iraq is considered as a central corridor for Iran in its efforts to identify smuggling corridors in order to transfer arms to Hezbollah and Syria on the other hand. It is also an economic outlet to re-export oil to the outside world in order to reduce the effects of the harsh economic sanctions. Iran's presence in Iraq hinders the establishment a strong Iraqi



government that can thwart Iranian plots in Iraq. Eventually, Iraq would be dependent on Iran.

III- Israel's Motives for Expanding the Circle of Targeting Iranian Arms

Although Israel did not directly announce its involvement in carrying out the military attacks against Iranian-linked targets in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon, the leadership of Israel did not hesitate to announce its strategy of striking Iranian targets in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon, to curb Iran's regional influence. The Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said on August 23, 2019, "Iran has no immunity anywhere. Our forces operate in every sector against Iranian aggression. If someone rises up to kill you, kill him first." He also added, "We will continue to act firmly against Iran and its proxies to defend the security of Israel." This was an implied reference to the Israeli strikes against PMF targets in Iraq.⁽⁹⁾

Israel has enough motivation to expand its targeting of Iranian arms. The bombing of missile depots, factories and headquarters at pro-Iranian militia positions in Iraq is of strategic importance for Tel Aviv. Israel aims to destroy these missiles preemptively, before Tehran succeeds in accumulating weapons in a new arena that could be used against it. Netanyahu is seeking to boost his popularity ahead of the September 2019 legislative elections, and to provide Israel with capabilities to launch attacks targeting these positions. Iraq lacks missile defense systems capable of targeting Israeli forces. Israel exploits the American presence in Iraq to target Iran-linked targets without receiving strong Iraqi condemnation, unlike in Syria where Russia is the main player. Israel has also enjoyed unprecedented US support under Trump allowing it to carry out actions against Iranian targets in Iraq.

Moreover, Israel feels Iran's approaching threat towards its vital spheres, areas of influence and borders since Iran has crossed the Israeli red lines in Syria by exploiting the conflict to smuggle weapons to Hezbollah and to launch an offensive on infrastructure specifically in southern Syria near the Israeli border. The media reported that Iran is transferring ballistic missiles to

its proxy militias in Iraq to hit its opponents in the region. It also announced that Iran has an intention to command its armed proxies in the Arab countries to carry out attacks against Israel, a strategic ally of the United States, in the context of worsening Iran-US relations after the United States cancelled the exemptions to eight countries to import Iranian oil and its imposition of sanctions on Iran's non-oil sectors.

Apparently, Israel escalating its policies against Iranian positions in the Arab countries is intended to target Iran's expansionist project in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon since it opposes the Israeli project in the Middle East region. From the Israeli perspective, Iranian expansionism undermines Israeli ambitions and plans in the region and reinforces Iran's power to the disadvantage of Israel. Therefore, Tel Aviv seeks to target the positions of pro-Iranian militias in vital Iraqi provinces. Israel aims to prevent Iranian militias from being stationed near the occupied Golan Heights in Syria. In addition, Tel Aviv wants to avert the smuggling of arms to Hezbollah through Iraq and Syria. Israel is aware that the arena of Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon is one where Iran should be curbed.

IV- A Reading of Israel Expanding Its Circle of Targeting Iranian Arms

Following the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, the potential indirect threats against Israel diminished from the countries that border it. The nuclear risks were cleared out when Israel targeted the Syrian nuclear reactor in Deir Ez-zor in 2007 and the Iraqi nuclear reactor in 1981. Threats against Israel were focused on the southern front: the Gaza Strip, and the northern front: the Lebanese Hezbollah. Since Netanyahu took office in 2009, Israel's ideology of external threats has changed; Iran has replaced Iraq as Israel's external threat. Therefore, Israel realized the necessity to prevent Iran from becoming a nuclear state, and to prevent it from consolidating its influence in the geographical areas bordering Israel.

The region has witnessed new developments since the outbreak of the so-called Arab Spring revolutions in early 2011, which provoked riots, civil wars and popular revolutions. These developments turned Netanyahu's concerns about Iran's threat to Israel into a reality since the geographical barrier between Tehran and Tel Aviv collapsed after war erupted in Syria and Iraq. Iran's presence close to Israel's border was realized after the state institutions in Syria collapsed, political life in Lebanon deteriorated, and the government in Iraq collapsed, which consequently turned these three countries, Iraq, Syria and Lebanon, into arenas of conflict between Israel and Iran. Iran seeks to extend its influence across Iraq, Syria and Lebanon to the Mediterranean. This project intersects with the Greater Israel project, which according to Israeli strategy extends until the Iraqi-Iranian border. This explains Iran's successive statements concerning its failure of creating spheres of influence near

the border with Israel. This means that Tel Aviv has managed to expand its spheres of influence towards the Iraqi-Iranian border.

Accordingly, Israeli policy makers created a strategy to counter the expansion of Iranian influence in accordance with the rules of the Iranian game itself, which is based on the principle of 'transparent borders' with regard to the collapsed neighboring countries, to curb Iranian influence by targeting its arms in these countries. Syria was the first battleground in the Israeli strategy because it is a bordering country and became an arena of conflict for influence among many regional and international powers. Israel, however, is one of those powers. Iran gives priority to Syria in order to maximize its influence near the Israeli border. Since 2017, 200 is the estimated number of Israeli airstrikes against Iran's positions in Syria which targeted the infrastructure of drones and missiles belonging to pro-Iranian militias in Syria. Targeting Iranian missiles and drones is a high priority in Netanyahu's doctrine which should be destroyed in a manner similar to the targeting and destroying of nuclear weapons under the Menachem Begin doctrine during the last two decades of the 20th century to protect Israel's security and to ensure its survival.

Israel has adopted escalatory policies to counter Iranian threats since the US administration announced its strategy of maximum pressure against Iran to modify the behavior of its political system in May 2018. The Israeli Air Force intensified airstrikes against Iranian positions in Syria, Lebanon and Iraq. Israel is also set to take part in new military alliances to secure oil supplies in the Arabian Gulf and the Red Sea. Operation Sentinel is one of these alliances which was called for by the United States in July 2019 amid a modest response by only 10 countries, including Israel.

The Israeli attacks against the headquarters of pro-Iranian militias in Iraq show that there is an Israeli desire to extend the attacks against Iranian positions in the Arab countries and to transfer the circle of hostility to areas adjacent to the Iranian border, where Camp Ashraf is only 80 kilometers away from Iran. These attacks are carried out in coordination with the United States which has the Ayn al-Asad Airbase, including 5,500 US troops deployed in Iraq. However, curbing Iran's regional influence is considered as the third pillar in America's maximum pressure strategy against Tehran.

Conclusion

Iran's expansionist project faces strong challenges. The US strategy of maximum pressure, which intends to reduce Iran's regional influence, and growing Russian-Iranian differences in Syria following the absence of common interests in terms of keeping Assad in power are undermining Iran's regional project. Iran's project intersects with regional challenges, including the extension of the Israeli military circle with the unprecedented targeting of Iranian arms in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon. Simultaneously, Iran is suffering a severe economic crisis due to international sanctions, which led it in a state of

panic to target oil tankers in order to affect international maritime traffic. The region is expected to witness a further escalation as Iran targets American and Israeli interests as well as their traditional allies in the Middle East depending extensively on its proxies. Iran fears to involve itself in direct military confrontations with its opponents, because it is aware that the balance of power is not in its favor.

Iran and Yemen

The Yemeni scene with all its files was further complicated recently due to the emergence of currents that have a separatist project in the south of Yemen. They oppose the efforts of the Legitimate Government and the coalition countries to restore the state and to confront the Iranian project in Yemen. These events formed a strategic vacuum in favor of the Houthi militia. They also coincided with Iranian political maneuvers and Houthi military escalations on the Yemeni domestic front, especially in Hodeidah, as well as with the Houthi militia threatening and targeting vital spheres and civilian areas in the coalition countries. These military escalations were sponsored by Iran to help the Houthis as this serves its political and strategic interests.

We will review the most important developments in the Yemeni arena during August, and the implications of these developments on the Iranian role in Yemen which serve the political and strategic orientations and interests of the government.

I- The Strategic Vacuum Among the Political Components

The UAE announced that it would reduce its military presence in Yemen in July as part of the UAE's peace strategy in Yemen, according to Emirati officials, which several media outlets reported. Some Yemeni political components that adopted a separatist project in southern Yemen found themselves in a political and military position which could be used for their separatist aspirations, although these political components were involved in the war against the Houthi rebellion under the Legitimate Government and the coalition countries. The pace of developing events accelerated after the Houthis targeted El-Galaa camp in Aden and the parties in the Yemeni arena exchanged accusations regarding collusion with the Houthis. Events escalated when the separatist parties tried to reduce the influence of the Legitimate Government militarily in southern Yemen generally, and in Aden particularly, in addition to Shabwa, Abyan and Hadramout. Many observers believe the eruption of the military clash in the south of Yemen between the so-called "Transitional Council" and the government at the beginning of last August is in favor of the Houthis. The separatist project is not much different from that of the Houthis. It will create a strategic vacuum between Yemeni political components and limit Yemen's federal project.

In the 10 days of August, the Yemeni scene witnessed rapid fluctuations between the Transitional Council and the Legitimate Government that ended with a military and political de-escalation. It is represented by the coordination between the coalition countries and a Saudi-Emirati statement that underlines the support of the coalition countries to the Legitimate Government, and in bringing together efforts to confront the Houthis in northern Yemen and to establish a comprehensive ceasefire. On the other hand, the Houthis took this strategic vacuum as an opportunity to increase its military escalations. They aim to strengthen their political position and to advance their troops again to the south, especially towards the Strait of Bab al-Mandab, where Iran has strategic interests represented by controlling the waterways in the region. At the same time, the Houthis seek to tighten their control over the areas under their grip in the north.⁽¹⁰⁾

II- The Implications of the Events and the Iranian Role

1- Attempts to Penetrate Yemeni Unity

Iran has tried to use the events in the south pragmatically. Some Yemeni sources called for the unprecedented adoption of Iranian discourse by focusing on “Yemeni unity.” It was considered as an opportunity for some Yemeni political components, including the Al-Islah party, to join the rebel forces and to rally against the Legitimate Government and the coalition countries. This was most noticeable in the Houthi delegation’s visit to Tehran. During his meeting with the spokesman of the Houthis, Mohammad Abdul Salam, Khamenei stressed the need for maintaining Yemeni unity. In the same context, the Iranian Foreign Ministry Spokesman Abbas Mousavi stated, “The Islamic Republic of Iran has always supported a united Yemen, and considers defending the territorial integrity of this country is a joint responsibility of the entire Yemeni people.”⁽¹¹⁾ In regards to the invitation to the Al-Islah party to join rebel forces, according to Yemeni sources, Mohammad Abdul Salam stated, “During the meeting with the leader of the Iranian revolution, he stressed his support to the Yemeni leadership and people, and to the unity of Yemen against attempts to fragment it, considering Yemen one country and all issues of disagreement must be resolved through a Yemeni dialogue without outside interference.” Observers of Yemeni affairs believe that Abdul Salam’s speech was a direct invitation of dialogue with the Yemeni Reform Party and some other parties, because the situation is ripe for this more than ever before.

On the other hand, Yemeni sources said that Mohammed Abdul Salam sent to Iran’s leaders a complete file about the Houthis’ targeting of Saudi Arabia, and it included information of the technical and military assistance that the Houthi militia needs to pursue its targeting of vital sites in Saudi Arabia. Abdul Salam received orders from Iran regarding the next steps that the militia must implement in order to strengthen their positions and to serve Iran’s

strategic interests in light of the development of events in Yemen and the conflict between Iran and international and regional actors.⁽¹²⁾

2. Political Maneuvers and the Appointment of a Houthi Ambassador

The appointment of a Houthi ambassador to Tehran is a step contradicting the statements and positions of all Iranian officials in previous years that deny Iran's interference in Yemen's affairs directly or indirectly. It proves at the same time that Tehran is using the areas under the Houthis' control as its military camp so as to support its armed organization with sophisticated weapons as well as with technical and military experts; therefore, the militia will be used as an arm to serve Iran's strategic interests in the region. This was confirmed by all officials of the Legitimate Government and the Saudi-led Coalition in their statements throughout the years of the Yemen crisis that there is an Iranian project in Yemen.

The Spokesman of the Houthis, Mohammad Abdul Salam, announced that his group had issued a decree appointing Ibrahim Al-Dulaimi as its Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary to Iran. He was publicly recognized as an ambassador by the Iranian government two days after the Houthi leader Abdul Malik al-Houthi's written letter to the Iranian leader was received. The spokesman for the Houthis addressed Khamenei, "We consider your Guardianship as an extension of the line of the Prophet of Islam (Muhammad peace be upon him) and Amir al-Mu'minin (Ali may Allah be pleased with him). Your Haidarism and Alawite positions in supporting the oppressed Yemeni people is an extension of the line of Imam Khomeini and a matter of blessing and lifting spirit."⁽¹³⁾ This demonstrates the impact of Iran culturally implanting its political ideology, which is also adopted by its foreign arms in the region to serve Iran's expansionist interests.

Al-Dulaimi has been a special envoy of Abdul-Malik al-Houthi to Iran since 2015, and was indirectly conducting activities on his behalf before he was officially named ambassador in August this year.⁽¹⁴⁾

This move was a clear indication that Iran has a new plan of using the militia directly to serve its political and military interests through its ideological strategy. In particular, the appointed ambassador belongs to tribe of the Houthi leader and is a follower of his ideological group. He received his sectarian education in Iran. At the same time, he is the director of *Al Masirah* TV, which adopts the principles of the Iranian expansionist revolution. Its chairman is the speaker of the Houthi group, Mohamed Abdul Salam.⁽¹⁵⁾

On the other hand, appointing the Houthi ambassador to Iran was met with negative responses and condemnations at the international level, since it is illegitimate. In addition, the internationally recognized Legitimate Government has the right to appoint ambassadors. In this context, the Yemeni government's spokesman Rajeh Badi confirmed that his government will submit an official note of complaint to the United Nations. This action taken by the



Houthi militia and the Iranian government is a flagrant violation of international law and violates UN Security Council resolutions on Yemen. The Legitimate Government called on the Security Council and the United Nations to bear responsibility for what it calls a violation of international law. The official spokesman of the Yemeni government also said, “The Houthis have transferred a complementary relationship between the parties from under the table to the public.” This confirms that the Houthis are one of the military arms of the IRGC.⁽¹⁶⁾

In this context, the Yemeni Information Minister Muammar al-Iryani expressed the position of the Legitimate Government, noting that it was not surprised about this. He said in a series of tweets on his account, “The diplomatic exchange between Tehran and its tools in Yemen, the Houthi militia, is not surprising. It transferred the relationship from under the table to the public.” He added, “It confirms what we have said from the beginning about this relationship, its nature and objectives.” In reference to Iran’s exploitation of the timing and its announcement of the Houthis appointing an ambassador to Tehran, he said, “This came while the region is witnessing increasing tensions and Iran is struggling with its isolation, which it is trying to break.”⁽¹⁷⁾

3 - Houthi Military Escalation and Cooperation With Al-Qaeda

The Houthi military’s escalation through targeting a military parade in Aden in early August was a turning point in the series of events in southern Yemen after the UAE announced a partial military withdrawal from Yemen. The media reported that the attack killed and wounded nearly 40 soldiers, including the commander of the Security Belt Forces Brigadier General Munir Mahmoud Ahmad al-Mashali, known as “Abu Yamamah.”

According to a report by the Washington Institute for the Near East, this event contributed to the escalation of southern protests against the Houthis, and to the emergence of currents that have a separatist project. The report pointed out that, given the Yemeni reality, the political components in Yemen often form brief alliances against one common enemy. Some separatists at-

tributed the killing of Abu Yamamah to the collusion between the Houthis and the Al-Islah party. This accusation was the reason for the emergence of a group calling for independence during the funeral of Abu Yamamah, and the eruption of military clashes between Yemeni factions in the south.

Within the context of the Houthi military escalation, Yemeni Prime Minister Maeen Abdulmalik stated, “The recent escalation of the Houthi rebels came at the behest of their sponsors in Tehran. As much as it is a clear indication of them escaping their commitments to peace, it is also a miserable Iranian attempt to face its international isolation by moving its terrorist tools in the region and deluding the international community that is able to influence and threaten vital interests in the region and the world.” During his meeting with US Ambassador Christopher Hansel, Abdulmalik affirmed the government’s legitimate condemnation of the terrorist acts in Aden and the escalation by the Houthi militia in conjunction with the activities of ISIS in Yemen, referring to the cooperation and coordination between Al-Qaeda and the Houthis. He revealed this agenda, “Everyone is aware of it and it will inevitably fail. The enemy is known and his purpose is clear.”⁽¹⁸⁾

Yemeni security, military and political leaders have stated that the targets of the Houthi militia and the groups affiliated with ISIS and Al-Qaeda have merged, to target Yemen’s security and stability in the liberated areas. The attack against Al-Jalaa camp by the Houthi militia with an Iranian-made missile coincided with the terrorist attack with a car bomb against a police station in “Sheikh Osman.” Both attacks were clear evidence of both elements being involved in achieving Iranian goals in Yemen and their attempts to target the security and stability of Yemen. The director of security of Lahij Brigadier Saleh al-Sayyed said that the two terrorist attacks carried out were indicative of the complementary subversive roles enacted by the two parties. He added that the two criminal incidents will not discourage military forces from performing their roles and consolidating the security and stability in the liberated areas, and from their continuous efforts to restore all areas of Yemen.⁽¹⁹⁾

Within the framework of the escalation of the Houthi militia inside Yemen, the militia continued its escalation in various areas and districts of the province of Hodeidah in western Yemen, where the positions of the joint Yemeni forces stationed in the east of the city of Hodeidah faced fierce shelling by the Houthi militia in mid-August. In this attack, sources reported that the militia used heavy artillery such as the howitzer, and “B10” and “RBG” guided missiles.

The Houthi militia sent large crowds armed with various types of weapons, which were gathered from provinces far from the city of Hodeidah, and deployed on various fronts and areas around the province of Hodeidah at the beginning of August. This escalation by the Houthi militia is an extension of the Houthi violations of the UN Ceasefire Agreement in Hodeidah.⁽²⁰⁾



In a move described by many in the international arena as an extension of servicing the Iranian project, the Houthi militia targeted the Shiba oil field and Aramco oil facilities inside Saudi territory on August 16, 2019, by using a drone. This move was carried out under stifling sanctions on Iranian oil exports. It was considered an Iranian message reflecting repeated statements by Iranian officials of Iran not allowing any country to export oil via the Arabian Gulf if Iran is prevented from exporting its oil products. The terrorist attack on the refinery of Aramco has received widespread Arab, Islamic and international condemnation.⁽²¹⁾

Conclusion

Publicly and unprecedentedly, Iran is using the Houthi militias politically and militarily to serve its strategic interests. The Houthi militia continues to threaten the security and stability of Yemen and to escalate militarily inside Yemen and the region, by exploiting the gap between the Yemeni political components supporting the Legitimate Government. At the same time, the efforts of the Legitimate Government and the coalition countries continue in order to unite political components to confront the Iranian project in Yemen, represented by Houthis as its arm.

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International Affairs

Iran is facing a major challenge when it comes to the US sanctions imposed on it. This challenge gets bigger as time passes. The sanctions are increasing, and their scope is expanding to include the proxies of Iran in the region as well as the countries and entities cooperating with it overseas. This leads to a depletion of Iranian resources in addition to the elimination of networks tasked with smuggling oil and letting in foreign currency, which runs counter to the Iranian objective at this phase to be resilient for the longest possible period. It is waiting for global changes that could lead pressures to be lifted without making significant concessions.

Therefore, the passing of time is a double-edged weapon for Iran. Inasmuch as Iranian offensive actions makes the other party feel the enormity of the consequences of mounting attacks on Iran, and they create tough negotiating conditions with Iran whether for the Europeans or the Southeast Asian countries, which deem Iran as a genuine threat to their interests as Iran threatens the security and stability of the global energy market. The main obstacle facing Iran is answering the question: is entering into negotiations compulsory? What is the right moment to start negotiations to avoid as much loss as possible?



Iran-US Relations

During August 2019, US-Iranian relations remained tense, which this section elaborates on through the following elements:

I- Development of the US Position on the Iranian Crisis

1- Targeting the Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif and Maintaining Sanctions

The United States continued to impose further sanctions on Iran after ruling out military confrontation. The Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif was designated on the exclusive list of [OFAC](#),⁽¹⁾ with his assets and transactions in the United States frozen due to the fact the he is the “front of a corrupt ideological mafia,” according to the US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo.⁽²⁾

Table 1 shows US sanctions against Iran in July/August 2019

Date	Sanctions
July 31	The designation of Zarif in the OFAC exclusive list. ⁽³⁾
August 29	Four financial facilitators who were responsible for transferring millions of dollars from the IRGC Quds Force to Hamas Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigade in the Gaza Strip.
August 30	Nine entities and individuals in Iran and one in Hong Kong for their support to Iranian nuclear proliferation procurement efforts.

Source: Unit of Regional and International Affairs– Rasanah IIIS

2- Tracking the Grace-1 Oil Tanker

The United States requested for the Iranian oil tanker Grace-1 in Gibraltar to be detained, which the British Royal Navy seized in the Mediterranean, hours before the Gibraltar government was prepared to release it. The United States considered that the Iranian oil tanker had violated the international economic emergency law against bank fraud and money laundering. After the Gibraltar Supreme Court allowed the ship to leave without paying attention to the US request, the United States issued a seizure warrant,⁽⁴⁾ while Iran warned that any US move to detain the tanker again would have serious consequences.

3- Efforts to Extend the Arms Embargo Against Iran

In a bid to exert further pressure, on August 20, 2019 Washington demanded that the UN Security Council extend the arms embargo on Iran, which is supposed to end with another series of sanctions on October 18, 2020, in accordance with the UN Security Council Resolution 2231 which was adopted following the conclusion of the 2015 nuclear deal. The US State Department warned of the severe impact of lifting sanctions in light of Iran’s behavior in the field of military weapons.



4- Use of Unconventional US Capabilities

Although the United States has retreated from confrontation with Iran, it appears to have used unconventional capabilities to deter Iran and to send a message of what the United States is capable of. On August 30, President Donald Trump posted a clear satellite photo of a service tower and mobile launcher and said that the United States of America was not involved in the catastrophic accident during the final launch preparations for the Safir SLV Launch at the Semnan Launch Site One in Iran.



Also, the United States announced a cyber-attack conducted in June 2019, which led to the deletion of a critical database which Iran was using to plan attacks on oil tankers in the Gulf. Iran is still trying to recover the information destroyed in this attack.

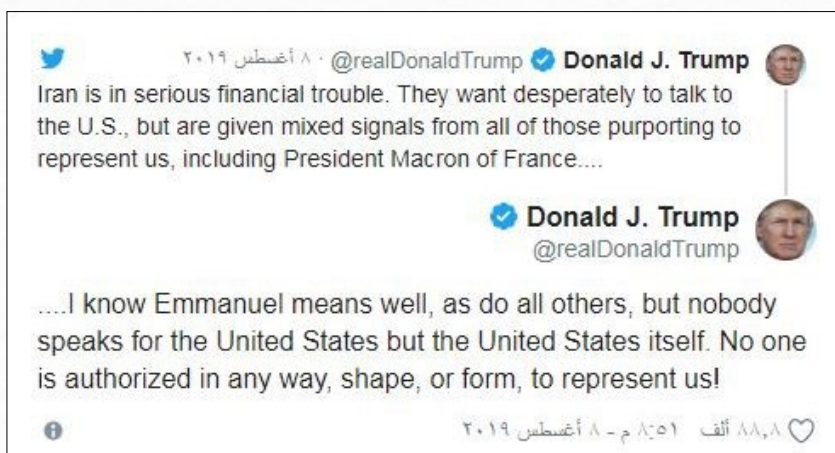
5- Efforts to Establish an International Alliance to Protect Maritime Navigation in the Gulf

The United States continued its efforts to form an international alliance to protect maritime navigation in the Gulf. In this context, Britain announced on August 5, 2019 its decision to accede to a US-led international naval security mission in the Gulf, emphasizing that it will work with Iran and its international partners to prevent any escalation and maintain the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), while Germany rejected to participate in a US request with France and Britain.

The Pentagon considered that Washington's doubling of its naval, land and intelligence capabilities in the Gulf region sent an essential message to the Iranian government that US forces are capable of dealing with any Iranian threat, and are committed to safeguarding US interests as well protecting maritime navigation in the region.⁽⁵⁾

6- French Mediation and the US Position on Negotiations

The Iranian case was controversial among the leaders of the G7 countries, the French President Emmanuel Macron was unable to make progress in mediation efforts between Iran and the United States. President Trump denied that he had previously authorized Macron to play this role, "Nobody speaks for the United States but the United States itself." France rejected this announcement, as it needs no authorization in order to maintain the nuclear deal, of which it is a crucial partner.



Trump believes sanctions will eventually push Iran to accept US terms and start the negotiation process, especially since he thinks sanctions have done

a great deal of damage to Iran's economy.⁽⁶⁾ Therefore, Trump repeatedly announced his readiness to meet with Iranian President Rouhani, while he expressed US unwillingness to change the Iranian political system but to make it a wealthy country if it wishes.

7- Countering Iranian Influence in Iraq

The White House announced measures to reduce Iran's influence in Iraq through additional procedures against pro-Iranian armed militias in Iraq.⁽⁷⁾ Furthermore, there are Iraqi suspicions that the United States recently facilitated Israeli military operations against armed militias in Iraq.

II- The Iranian Policy Against US Positions

The following elements illustrate the Iranian policy towards the United States:

1- Iranian Reactions to Sanctions on Zarif

Zarif tweeted that these sanctions have no effect on him or his family, but they impede any chance for future negotiation. Iran sent a letter to the UN Secretary-General, as it considers the US sanctions on Zarif as a flagrant violation of the fundamental principles of international law, as well as being against the objectives and principles of the UN Organization Charter. The US sanctions on Zarif have received adverse international reactions, especially from China, Russia, and some EU countries.



2- Meeting the Challenge of Establishing an International Alliance to Protect Maritime Navigation in the Gulf

Iran considers that the formation of an international alliance to protect maritime navigation in the Gulf brings no security to the region. Iran announced it would not allow such an alliance directed against it. The Iranian Defense Minister Amir Hatami warned, “ If a military force intervened in Gulf security, major developments could arise and lead to war.” Hatami also predicted the failure of US efforts. President Rouhani said, “Security for Security, peace

for peace, a strait for a strait and oil for oil.”

3- Targeting Transit Oil Tankers in the Strait of Hormuz

Iran has used GPS jammers over the Iranian-controlled Abu Musa Island to disrupt civilian aircraft and maritime navigation systems to force tankers to deviate and to give Iranian forces a pretext to seize them.

4- Protection of Iranian Oil Tankers

Iran fears that the United States may target oil tankers, so it announced the deployment of a naval destroyer equipped with long-range cruise missile systems in the Gulf of Aden, on the pretext that the destroyer aims to provide security for its ships passing through the region. The latest naval vessel is accompanied by a logistical support ship and a helicopter carrier.⁽⁸⁾

5- Enhancing Defense Capabilities

Iran continued to develop its defense capabilities by reviewing a locally made long-range mobile surface-to-air missile system called BAVAR-373, which according to Iran is equal to Russia's S-300 air defense system. Iran also announced the inauguration of the *Oqab* air defense system.⁽⁹⁾

6- Position on Negotiations

Iranians hoped that French mediation would resolve the sanctions issue or pressure the United States to change its position, so Zarif accepted Macron's invitation during the G7 summit in Biarritz. Rouhani also hinted that he would accept to meet with Trump “if this were in the interest of Iran and its prosperity.” Zarif tweeted on his visit and meetings during the summit, “Road ahead is difficult. But it's worth trying.”⁽¹⁰⁾



Iran conditioned the lifting of US sanctions, which it described as “economic terrorism,” to starting negotiations with Trump. Moreover, any mediation efforts should focus on the reinstatement of the United States to the 2015 nuclear deal. Under divergent US and Iranian positions, the French initiative has not yet succeeded.

Conversely, the Iranian hardline parties criticized the government. The IRGC press outlets also criticized the government’s stance on the issue of negotiations and stressed the need to adhere to the position of the supreme leader, because the government’s policy in the past six years has damaged Iran since the signing of the JCPOA.

Conclusion

The United States is still betting on sanctions as the most critical element of its maximum pressure strategy. The United States believes that sanctions will bring Iran to the negotiating table without any conditions.

Indeed, the pressure is affecting Iran’s domestic situation, where oil exports have fallen to nearly 100,000 bpd.⁽¹¹⁾ Iran cannot afford this situation in the long-term, which could prompt it to reconsider its position on negotiating with the United States or agreeing to Trump’s offer to meet Rouhani and to start the negotiation process.

The strengthening military presence of some countries in the Gulf, as well as their accession to the joint force that the United States seeks to establish to protect maritime navigation, have led to a decrease in the targeting of oil tankers in the Gulf and a return to calm.

Through its qualitative measures against Iran, Washington has avoided a direct confrontation with Tehran. However, it has sent a message to Tehran indicating that Washington is capable of confronting Iran if required it. These measures are designed to change Iran’s behavior without initiating a broader conflict or prompting retaliation, a former CIA official announced.

It is difficult for the United States to offer concessions to Iran because the US government is confident that it can continue its strategy and achieve its goals. On the other hand, Iran’s ability to influence is diminishing, and its pressure options are eroding, especially since the EU parties and other partners in the JCPOA are unable to create a third course to solve the worsening crisis.

Iran-Europe Relations

Iran's attempts to change the European pressure policy have failed, and the package of promises made by European countries has not softened Iranian positions. When many warned that the nuclear deal was on the verge of collapse, the three signatory countries in 2015 (France, Britain and Germany) expressed the hope that they would be able to bring Tehran back into compliance and then save it, by trying to calm and turn away the specter of confrontation between Iran and the United States after the withdrawal of US President Donald Trump from the nuclear program in May 2018 and the reimposition of US sanctions on Iran. Therefore, we will analyze: European promises and Iranian reactions, obstructions to the path to stop Iranian escalation, and the Europeans moving closer to the United States.

I- European Promises and Iranian Reactions

Given the political and economic context, the Iranian reaction to the Europeans failing to fulfill their promises may not be surprising. French President Emanuel Macron promised to put pressure on US President Donald Trump during a meeting with him on the sidelines of the G7 summit in the resort of Biarritz in southwestern France on Saturday (24 August 2019). Several files were discussed, most notably the Iranian nuclear file and tensions in the Gulf region. France aims to give Iran limited economic incentives in return for returning to the negotiating table, fully committing to the nuclear deal, and abandoning radical policies such as its missile program and changing its regional behavior. With regard to French mediation efforts in regards to the nuclear deal and its proposed package to Iran, as well as persuading Trump to issue exemptions to some Iranian oil buyers, Hossein Naqavi Hosseini, a spokesman for the National Security and Foreign Policy Committee of the Iranian Parliament, said: "France's proposed package should be based on the Europeans fulfilling their commitments under the nuclear agreement, and if this package is outlined for resuming negotiations again with the United States, Iran will certainly not accept it. And if this package involves a way to pay US debt to Iran under the nuclear agreement, the circumstances will be appropriate to resume negotiations."⁽¹²⁾

Public opinion has been shaped in Iran to believe that these packages being offered by European countries, although imperfect and imbalanced, are the product of an effective resistance strategy. France, which is now proposing a

\$15 billion credit line, had not taken a single practical step between May 2018 and 2019 but did so immediately after the new Iranian strategy. The INSTEX mechanism became operational and France's credit proposals have been increased from a few million dollars to \$15 billion. Other US and European strategies based on trust or fear have not reduced threats but have also not brought any benefit. It led to the deployment of the USS Abraham Lincoln aircraft carrier to the region.⁽¹³⁾

The Iranian president gave the European countries, China and Russia 60 days to find a way to ease US sanctions, and when that did not happen, Iran announced on August 19, 2019, its readiness to move ahead with the third step of reducing its obligations under the nuclear agreement. "The Europeans do not have the serious will to fulfill the obligations under the nuclear agreement, according to their performance, evidence, and proof. Therefore, Iran will step into the third phase of reducing its nuclear obligations," said Mohammad Ibrahim Rezai, chairman of the Parliament's National Security and Foreign Policy Committee.⁽¹⁴⁾

The decision was met with European concern and French condemnation. A joint statement issued by France, Britain and Germany from the office of French President Emanuel Macron said that the risks require all parties to the agreement to stop and consider the possible repercussions of the measures taken by the three countries. The statement added: "We believe that the time has come to act responsibly,⁽¹⁵⁾ and to look for ways to stop the escalation of tension and the resumption of dialogue." The three European countries considered the dangers so great that it is necessary for all concerned to commit themselves to calm down and to reflect on the possible repercussions of their actions.

II- Obstructing Trajectories for Ceasing Iranian Escalation

The wave of Iranian escalation continued during August. Newsweek magazine reported that the European signatories to the Iranian nuclear agreement - Britain, France, and Germany, as well as other European Union countries - tried to circumvent the sanctions reimposed by the United States on Iran, such as its denial of Iran in accessing the US financial system and dealing in the US dollar.⁽¹⁶⁾ In the midst of this wave, several factors hindered European attempts to stop the Iranian escalation, including:

- 1- The Trump administration is firmly convinced that the more American pressure on Iran and its European allies, the sooner it will concede. However, Iran met this conviction with greater rigor, which affected European efforts, especially its confrontation with Britain, as Iran's seizure of the British oil tanker in the Strait of Hormuz, a few days after the Royal Marines of Gibraltar seized an Iranian tanker Grace 1 which was heading to Syria, threw the relationship between Europe, especially Britain and Iran into deep turmoil. This

comes at a sensitive time as Britain, along with France and Germany, is trying to salvage the Iranian nuclear deal.

2- The hardliners in Iran's decision-making positions feel that their adherence to the nuclear deal has not led them to achieve their aspirations and that the only way to create influence at the international and regional level is to step up Iran's sabotage activities and for Tehran to continue to be a source of threats in the region. If this does not achieve a tangible result, this will maintain an atmosphere filled with concern and tension.

3- France, Germany, and Britain tried to find a political and financial mechanism to cooperate with Iran in order to overcome the US sanctions regime. The INSTEX mechanism has emerged as one way to bypass the US sanctions regime, but it has not been activated, due to US control over international financial and banking systems, causing frustration for Iran. Regarding the INSTEX mechanism, Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif said: "The INSTEX mechanism may not be a remedy for problems in the short term, but in the long run it is a worrying indicator for Europe. First, there must be funds within the mechanism of INSTEX, and it is certain that the deposit must be money from Iranian oil or credit equivalent to Iranian oil, and the other problem is that INSTEX cannot be just a tool for humanitarian purposes, and should not be limited to food and medicine."⁽¹⁷⁾

4- The conditions laid down by the Iranian president appeared to be blackmail. According to him, if Europe does not agree to violate US sanctions on Iranian oil and banking sectors, it will continue to enrich uranium, as mentioned above.

III- The European Position Leaning Towards the US

The split within the European Union has become more apparent since US President Donald Trump announced his pullout from the nuclear deal. France, Germany and Britain believe in the importance of the deal to ensure that the benefits are gained from it, ranging from security to European trade.

Europe has been stuck in a dilemma due to its calls for an end to the escalation and its keenness to show differences of opinion with the United States in dealing with Iran, and taking a middle position between the demands of the US and Iranian parties. In the joint statement issued by the three European countries (France, Britain, and Germany), they called for "an end to escalation of tension and the resumption of dialogue" in this file. Iran confirmed its readiness for dialogue on certain conditions. France, Britain, and Germany have said they are concerned about the escalation of tension in the Arabian Gulf and the risks of the nuclear deal with Iran collapsing. They have called for a resumption of dialogue between all parties. The three European countries added in a joint statement that after the reimposition of US sanctions on Iran and Tehran's decision not to meet some of its obligations under the agreement, it is possible that the agreement concluded four years ago would

collapse.⁽¹⁸⁾

In the last quarter of August, Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif visited Finland, Norway, Sweden, and France on August 22, 2019, where the French presidential office announced Zarif's meeting with President Emanuel Macron and his foreign minister to discuss the Iranian nuclear file. In a telephone conversation between Rouhani and Macron, the office of President Rouhani stated that "the call took about 100 minutes, which indicates that we have logic in dealing with the region and the world, and that we have something to say about security issues and the other issues."⁽¹⁹⁾



There are indications that Iran is testing the credibility of the Europeans with regard to sending their troops to the Strait of Hormuz, considering the hostilities that exist according to the mindset of the Iranian government. Given Tehran's support for terrorist groups through the IRGC and long-standing violations of the values of the international community, France, Italy, and Denmark have signaled their support for a fleet to safeguard maritime navigation in the region, and there are calls for Germany to partake in this.

Despite Germany's support and tolerance towards the mullahs in Tehran and giving them the opportunity to make changes and reforms in the country, things have failed.⁽²⁰⁾ It is disappointing, given this danger, that France, Germany and the United Kingdom did not launch a joint European mission in the Gulf, with a single attack being deemed as an attack on everyone. If Britain leaves the EU, Germany will be the next target for the hardliners (in both Iran and the United States).

On the other hand, the United States may step up its diplomacy in Central



and Eastern Europe, where it has a greater chance to bring the EU states on its side.⁽²¹⁾ Germany has reservations about the Trump administration's strategy toward Iran, showing a neutral rather than a pro-Iranian role, but its frustrations have multiplied after Iranian escalation and provocations on all fronts, threatening German interests and exacerbating the refugee crisis from the region to Europe.

It seems that the Europeans in general, have tried to calm down, and have opted to give Iran one last chance before fully moving to Washington's side. The ascent of British Prime Minister Boris Johnson to power has raised some concerns about Britain's stance on Iran, but a British diplomatic source said Britain was likely to stick to its approach independently of the outcome of the Trump-Johnson meeting. This is what a French official also wished, saying that the position of the three major European powers (France, Britain, and Germany) should remain united on the Iranian file.⁽²²⁾

Another view of Britain's willingness to join the US maritime alliance in the Gulf points to a change in the new government's policy orientation on Brexit. The United States is the most important option for it to replace part of its dealings with Europe, its main choice for free trade.⁽²³⁾

It is worth mentioning in this intervening and evolving situation that there was a British initiative for forming a parallel force to the US coalition. Then, with the ascent of Boris Johnson to power, this initiative lost momentum and Britain announced its decision to join the US alliance, although in the beginning it insisted that the British alliance was not part of the US maximum pressure strategy.

Conclusion

Although European countries have not kept their promises to Iran, they will continue to do more, as Iran on the other side adopts tougher terms. Although the Iranian escalation has tested the ability of these countries to maintain their support for the nuclear agreement with Iran in defiance of American pressure, on the other hand, it put these countries in the position of enabling them to renounce the deal. Therefore, they chose to stand halfway, but they are more inclined to the United States in consideration of their interests.

To ease the Iranian escalation, Europe, especially the three countries (France, Britain, and Germany), must persuade Iran to be realistic and not exaggerate, as more Iranian attacks on European interests may force the EU to adopt the US strategy of maximum pressure.

Iran and the Crisis in Kashmir

Since the Kashmir crisis flared up once again due to Indian aggression, there has been a focus on international and regional reactions to India's annexation of Jammu and Kashmir. From a regional perspective in particular, observers have looked to the Arab Gulf states, given their warm relations with Pakistan, and Iran, given the significant Shia population that lives in Indian occupied Kashmir. The objective of this Iran case file piece is to analyze Iran's reaction by examining its position on the ongoing Kashmir crisis and to examine possible scenarios of how the conflict may play out, with emphasis on what scenario may best suit Iran's national interests. Finally, the piece aims to investigate whether Kashmir is a possible hotspot for Sunni-Shia conflict given Saudi and Iranian stakes in the territory.

I- Iran's Position on the Kashmir Crisis

Kashmir has been an issue singled out by Iran's revolutionary leadership even before the Iranian revolution in 1979. Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, in a speech in Najaf in 1965, called on all Muslims to set aside their differences and unite in support of a variety of Muslim causes. If the Muslim world could unite "then Jews would not covet Palestine, then Hindus would not covet Kashmir," Khomeini said.⁽²⁴⁾ He visited the Kashmir Valley in 1980 and delivered a lecture at Srinagar's Jamia Masjid. He emphasized the importance of unity and brotherhood, joined in the congregational prayer and met Kashmir's Shia leader Ayatollah Agha Yusuf Kashmiri.⁽²⁵⁾ With this interlinkage between Iran's revolutionary leadership and Kashmir, it was only natural for its present leadership to react to India's aggression in Kashmir. On August 21, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei tweeted: "We are concerned about the Muslims' situation in Kashmir. We have good relations with India, but we expect the Indian government to adopt a just policy towards the noble people of Kashmir and prevent the oppression and bullying of Muslims in this region."⁽²⁶⁾ In addition, a group of influential ayatollahs have taken a similar position to Khamenei and condemned India's annexation of Jammu and Kashmir. For example, Ayatollah Lotfollah Safi Golpaygani, one of the most high-ranking Shia clerics said, "Unfortunately, Islamic governments have not even issued a warning to the Indian government. If all Islamic governments were unified and would act unified in response to this great crime, the Indian government would stop its barbaric acts."⁽²⁷⁾ A resolution supporting the Kashmiri struggle in occu-

piet Kashmir was presented in the Iranian Parliament which noted the responsibility of all Muslim countries towards the Kashmir cause. A member of the Iranian Parliament, Ali Mathari, presented the resolution and he said all Muslim countries including Iran had an important responsibility regarding the oppressed Kashmiri people. He added that Iran could not remain dissociated from the fate and destination of the Muslim ummah. ⁽²⁸⁾

II- Why This Bold Criticism From Iran?

A question that could be raised is why has Iran risked its relations with India by issuing bold criticism over its aggression in Kashmir? Could it be because of its intention to mend relations with Pakistan, which have been unstable? Could it be due to the fact that a substantial Shia population in Kashmir will be further oppressed by India? Or could wider geopolitical issues be at play behind Iran's bold criticism of India? The latter carries more weight as India has recently halted its imports of Iranian oil complying with the US strategy of 'maximum pressure' on Iran. This Indian position has angered Iran's leadership. Iran has thus taken Kashmir as a means to embarrass India given its maneuvering within US geopolitical spheres. If India had not complied with US sanctions on Iranian oil exports, would Iran's leadership have been as bold in its criticism of New Delhi? Given Iran's pragmatic trajectory in its foreign policy one can deduce that it would have brushed aside India's behavior in return for the continuation of New Delhi importing Iranian oil as revenues from oil exports are vital in helping Tehran improve its deteriorating socio-economic conditions on the home front. In addition, the fact that nearly 20 percent of the total area of Kashmir falls under Chinese control is sometimes neglected. Beijing has resisted US pressure to continue its oil imports from Iran, and to ensure this continues Tehran has allied itself with China in its criticism over Indian behavior. The pragmatic nature of Iran's foreign policy can be highlighted via its relations with communist China and Tehran's silence over Chinese treatment of Uighur Muslims in Xinjiang. Likewise in the context of Kashmir, Iran has considered all its geopolitical cards, weighing them carefully, and has taken a position that does not risk its relations with either Pakistan or China but at the same time sends a clear message to India that it is not pleased with its toeing US policy against Tehran

III- The Best Possible Scenario to Satisfy Iranian Interests

There are four possible scenarios and each one will be analyzed to determine which one would be in the best interests of Iran.

1- War

This is a scenario not proposed by either Pakistan or India, as both countries possess nuclear weapons and the consequences of war would be severe not only for them but also for the countries of the region. Any radioactive fallout would endanger human populations in surrounding countries, with Iran in

close proximity to the conflict zone. In addition, Iran would not want another war on its doorstep, given the crises it has faced following the US invasion of Afghanistan. Iran's armed forces chief of staff cautioned Pakistan and India to avoid any "hasty decision" in Kashmir.⁽²⁹⁾

2- Resolving the Kashmir Issue

This might sound like an enticing proposal to end decades of conflict, but with the possibility of a UN peacekeeping force in the region, which would be interpreted by the Iranian and the Chinese sides as a US forward base, ending the conflict by both parties might not be as attractive as one might think.

3- Ongoing Situation of Instability

This would be favorable to Iran, as it averts the aforementioned scenarios. Iran has supported Pakistan on its demand for a plebiscite according to UN resolution 47 adopted on April 21, 1948. This resolution has been rejected by the Indian side, with India preferring a bilateral approach to resolve the issue. As a result of these conflicting positions, the Kashmir issue has never been resolved, lingering on for decades. In addition, ongoing instability in Kashmir at a low intensity level will ensure that the two powers in Iran's neighborhood are overstretched, allowing Iran to exploit regional situations for its national interests.

4- Separatism

Kashmir's Shia population, approximately 1.4 million, is mainly situated in the Budgam central district of Kashmir, as well as in parts of Srinagar and Kargil. Although Shias have stayed away from the insurgency in the territory, more Shia youth are now attracted to separatist calls, with Iran also favoring this scenario. Iran has increased its presence in Shia inhabited areas, with plenty of billboards with Khomeini's image, even in geographically cut-off areas such as Kargil. Every year Iranian Shia scholars visit and give fiery speeches raising further the calls for separatism among the Shia population. Shia separatism would suit the Iranian strategy of creating Shia states or safe havens adding to its grand strategy of a Shia crescent extending into South Asia.

IV- Kashmir Another Epicenter of Sunni-Shia Conflict?

As has been mentioned, Iran is making strong inroads into the Kashmiri Shia population, even recruiting Shia fighters to add to its brigades in Syria. At the same time, Sunni insurgent movements are entering Kashmir such as Al-Qaeda and ISIS. This could result in a Sunni-Shia bloodbath in a very challenging geographic area. ISIS has already penetrated Kashmir ideologically and organizationally, as well as declaring Kashmir as one of its provinces.⁽³⁰⁾ It is important to note that Saudi Arabia has invested a significant amount in Kashmir via NGOs that have built mosques and provided humanitarian services to an oppressed population. Iran is fully aware of this and is no doubt looking to counter Saudi influence by entrenching further its own roots in the territo-

ry. This could be reversed by Saudi Arabia leveraging its developing relations with India to ensure Iranian influence is undermined and Riyadh continues to have stakes in Kashmir. This could prevent Kashmir from spiraling into a zone of sectarian conflict propelled by Iranian ideological imperatives and its grand strategy to create Shia entities loyal to Tehran's revolutionary leadership.

Conclusion

Iran is currently exploiting its support for Pakistan on the Kashmir issue as a pressure card against the Indian government, to push the latter to continue importing Iranian oil and to breach US sanctions, but it seems that the growing interests between the United States and India will render the Iranian policy futile.

The maximum that Iran can achieve through this policy is to continue to cooperate with India in the sanctioned sectors in return for privileges that Tehran will give to New Delhi but they will be at a great cost for Iran. On the other hand, Pakistan views the Iranian position in support of Kashmir as not exceeding the limits of rhetorical support. In return, Iran gets a window to support its Shiite presence in the Pakistani part of Kashmir, as well as an opportunity to sign many security arrangements with Pakistan in their common border areas. What makes Pakistan suspicious of Iran is the growing military and intelligence cooperation between Iran and India.

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