

MONTHLY REPORT



IRAN CASE FILE

Your window on Iran from inside and abroad

January-February 2020



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THE EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The beginning of the year 2020 was difficult for Iran. During February and March, Iran witnessed developments that could be labeled as nothing but disastrous and major setbacks for the country at multiple levels. It began with the assassination of the Quds Force Commander Qassem Soleimani which impacted domestic, regional, and international files. Then came the outbreak of coronavirus across Iranian provinces, which was followed by the fighting between the Turkish army and the Russian-backed Assad forces in Idlib, where the Iranian presence in the battle appeared ineffective and insignificant in a way never seen in Syria.

Even the issue of military manufacturing, about which Iran has long boasted, was dealt a huge blow as Iran failed for the third time to launch its satellite.

Internationally, it was the fifth and last phase in Iran's reduction of its nuclear commitments under the nuclear deal. It was sufficient for the Europeans to trigger the dispute settlement mechanism in response to Iran's nuclear deal violations. This is in addition to placing Iran on the blacklist of the Financial Action Task Force (FATF), which has resulted in more economic problems for Iran in addition to the US sanctions. But the biggest domestic blow was the lowest voter turnout in the elections in the history of the Islamic Republic, which reflects the government's low approval ratings and that the Iranian people are questioning the government's legitimacy.

At home, at the ideological level, the response of clerics to the coronavirus outbreak sparked a great deal of controversy among the religious elite and Iranian society in general.

The coronavirus outbreak began in the city of Qom where the religious seminary is headquartered. This city has a large community of foreign students who are studying the Shiite religion. Over the past few years, Iran has been keen to welcome Chinese Muslims within the seminary to create a Shiite faction in China. Also, there are large numbers of Chinese people who work on Iran's subway project, which has caused the virus to spread. The normal step would have been to quarantine the city, but clerics

strongly rejected this step, citing religious and metaphysical justifications such as holy shrines having the ability to cure diseases.

On the contrary, there were some clerics who wanted to put Qom on lockdown in order to prevent the spread of the virus. But in the end, the city was not closed and continued to receive Shiites from inside and outside Iran. In terms of the number of people infected by the virus and mortality rates, Iran is among the top four countries in the world. The failure to close the city drew the anger of huge segments of the Iranian people against Iran's clerics and the state's mismanagement of a crisis which has gripped the entire world, especially after the state assigned the IRGC to combat the crisis instead of the Ministry of Health.

At the political level, the most prominent development was the holding of parliamentary elections and the elections of the Assembly of Experts. It does not matter which party won the largest number of seats as long as most Iranian voters did not participate. After the government cracked down on protests which broke out in the aftermath of gasoline prices increasing, as well as the subsequent mass arrests of protesters and the end of the reformists-conservatives equation, it was natural that the people reacted by shunning the elections. However, Iranian authorities have intervened to the highest degree to hijack the will of the people via the Guardian Council which prevented nearly all those described as moderates and reformists from running for Parliament. The most striking move was preventing 90 lawmakers from running for Parliament, which sparked a firestorm of controversy across Iranian society, questioning why those lawmakers are still performing their duties in the 10th Parliament if they are not worthy of running for the upcoming Parliament. The question, of course, was not a call for expelling them from Parliament. It was a satirical question about the decision of the Guardian Council to disqualify them. Due to the disqualifications and engineering of elections, the new Parliament came out as pretty radical. The Parliament's session has become the biggest home to clerics and former military officers, especially the four recent sessions. Besides, Meddahs, those who recite elegies for Imam Hussein, appeared as a new political force strongly supported by the supreme leader in parliament.

The coronavirus issue showed up during the parliamentary elections. The government did not announce the outbreak of the virus until the ballot counting finished. Electoral gatherings caused the coronavirus to further spread. The Iranian clerics and politicians were keen to promote their ideals and gather people around them, not bothering to think of the harm which would be caused to the people due to these gatherings.

On the economic front, the report discussed two important issues. The first is the serious consequences of the FATF's blacklisting of Iran, such as closing the bank accounts of Iranians overseas and increasing Iran's financial isolation from its most important allies such as China, Russia, and Europe.

The second issue is the spread of coronavirus and its possible implications as the local currency lost 7 percent of its value against foreign currencies and the virus's threat to the tourism industry which brings 9 million visitors per year to the country and billions of dollars. This is in addition to the direct and indirect costs of coronavirus on the business community and domestic trade as the country is preparing for Nowruz celebrations on March 20.

Militarily, the Iran-backed Houthis claimed to have downed a Saudi Panavia Tornado, killing its two pilots. Despite the UN arms embargo on Iran, Tehran still manages to smuggle its improvised weapon system to the Houthis in Yemen. A report by a UN panel of experts, released on February, indicated that there are similarities between weapons captured en route to Houthis and those manufactured in Iran. The United Nations Security Council has been unable to decisively deter Iran from inciting the

conflict in Yemen. Arming its proxy militias, the Houthis, led to the failure of negotiations as a means to resolve the conflict.

The Arab regions neighboring Iran witnessed two developments that impacted Iranian presence in Syria and Iraq and posed a new challenge in addition to the challenges Iran is facing at home.

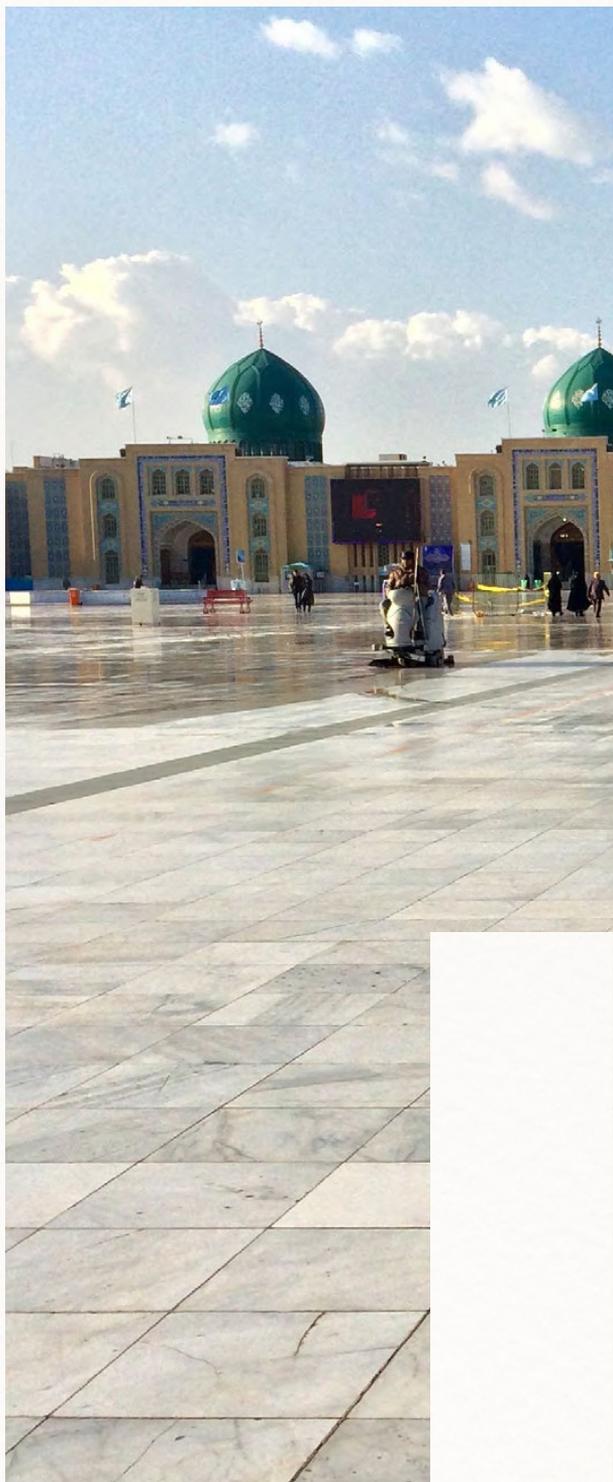
After Iran sought to make Iraq an arena for its dispute with the United States by targeting the US embassy headquarters and shelling US bases in Iraq, the killing of Qassem Soleimani earlier in the year came as a differentiating point between Iranian action before the killing of Soleimani and those after it.

The United States has curbed Iranian acts that aimed to stir up tensions in the region. Iran sought to place further pressure on the United States and its allies and to gain more levers to lift US sanctions on Iran.

Iran has had to deal with the danger of its militias in Iraq going on a rampage after the death of Soleimani who had full control over these militias and was the principal planner of their operations.

Also, Iran fell under pressure to avenge the assassination of Soleimani in order to maintain its prestige at home and in the region without engaging in a direct face-off with the United States which could lead the Iranian state to collapse. It also faced pressure to appoint a new Quds Force leader who has the ability to discipline and lead pro-Iran armed militias in Iraq and Syria that compete with each other to attain the biggest possible share of Iranian support and political power in the two respective countries. All these challenges stood in front of Iran during January and February amid the shaky situation at home.

The Syrian arena was no less fragile than the Iraqi arena for Iran. The battles which broke out between the Ankara-backed Syrian opposition factions and Bashar al-Assad's forces thrust Iran into a difficult balancing equation as Turkish forces entered Syrian territories to directly engage in conflict. The Assad government backed by Iran needs Turkey economically given the huge trade exchange between them which mitigates the impact of US sanctions. At the same





time, Turkey adopts political positions somewhat supportive of Iran in the face of the US sanctions, in addition to Turkey's complete understanding in cracking down on any Kurdish independence movements in Iran or Syria. All these factors prompted Iran to curb its meddling in the ongoing battles. Although Russia assumed the role of supporting Bashar al-Assad in the Idlib conflict, Iran also feared the Russian role would grow further and outpace its role in case it managed to crush the Syrian opposition in Idlib. At the same time, Iran wanted to leave Russia and Assad alone in the Idlib conflict in order for them to comprehend the importance of Tehran's ground forces and pro-Iran militias in determining the course of battles on the ground in Syria.

Internationally, it could be said that January and February witnessed a great deal of

deterrence by Iran. Despite Iran attacking oil tankers, and Tehran threatening navigation routes (the Arabian Gulf, the Gulf of Oman and the Red Sea), as well as targeting oil facilities in Saudi Arabia, and carrying out attacks on the diplomatic headquarters of the United States in Iraq since 2019, it is fair to say that the relations between the United States and Iran worsened dramatically after the death of Soleimani.

Iran is no longer capable of taking action without fearing powerful counter-responses against it. Therefore, this curbed pro-Iran militias. Iran's policy of plausible deniability adopted throughout 2019 can no longer be used to prevent global powers from punish-



ing Iran for endangering regional and international security. The latest US attacks may have contributed to pushing the European countries to take a firmer position on Iran reducing its nuclear commitments as it announced going ahead with the fifth stage of its nuclear violations. Iran announced it would no longer be committed to all the restrictions enshrined in the nuclear deal. Therefore, it increased the number of advanced centrifuges and its stockpile of enriched uranium beyond the limits set in the nuclear deal. This time, Europe has resorted to triggering the dispute settlement mechanism, which is an investigative process included in the nuclear deal. Based on the results of this investigation, the three European countries that are signatories to the nuclear deal could refer Iran's file to the Security Council again and work to impose UN sanctions against Tehran, rendering the nuclear deal null and void. But Europe did not announce that it was committed to the period stipulated in the JCPOA to refer Iran's file to the Security Council as it seeks to keep the door open to allow Iran time to change its position. As for Russia, it expressed dissatisfaction with Tehran hinting that it would withdraw from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty in case its file is referred to the Security Council again. Russia is setting its sights on the period when the UN arms embargo on Iran is lifted in order to get the biggest share in Iran's arms deals. This may be a key motivation behind future popular protests in Tehran against the government in case it announces the allocation of billions of dollars to purchase weapons at a time when the living conditions of most Iranians are deteriorating.

Internal Affairs

On the home front in Iran during January and February 2020, Iran witnessed several challenges which revolved around three main issues: the killing of Qassem Soleimani, the outbreak of coronavirus and the holding of parliamentary elections and the Assembly of Experts' elections.

All these issues overlapped, the ideological and political affairs are interlinked, with the economic and military affairs being impacted by these issues, becoming, in the end, a test for the government's ability to manage crises and challenges. The Iranian people and the international community were impacted due to the Iranian state's performance in responding to these challenges. The consequences of Iran's performance were not only confined to the Iranian home front but also spilled over to regional and international spheres.



THE IDEOLOGICAL FILE

This file sheds light on the ideological developments in the Iranian arena during January and February this year, and the impact of these developments on domestic actors within the state and seminary. This month, the report discusses the position of Iran's religious elites on the coronavirus outbreak in the country, raising questions about the impact of religious opinions on medical issues, how the crisis has been politicized and the divergent viewpoints regarding this crisis.

The Religious Elites and the Outbreak of Coronavirus

The outbreak of coronavirus across all the provinces of the Iranian state in general and in Qom, in particular, sparked various reactions from the religious elites, especially among the supporters of Velayat-e Faqih.

The virus spread in the city of Qom, which is a holy city for Shiites and the second most significant Shiite capital after Najaf. It is home to the majority of Iranian clerics and holds the largest number of jurisprudential classes. This led the authorities to address the spread of the coronavirus at a noticeably low pace. This is because putting the city in quarantine means that religious lessons will stop as well as Shiite pilgrimage to holy shrines and tombs, which would have a tremendous economic impact on the ruling and religious elites. This is in addition to causing harm to the prestige and holiness bestowed by Iranians on the religious elites and the way people determine who is religious and what is sacred. This holiness has always been encouraged by Velayat-e Faqih and its official institutions.

The position of Iran's elites towards the coronavirus outbreak could be highlighted and broken down via the following points:

1- Demanding Holy Shrines to be Continuously Open

Some clerics called for keeping holy shrines open as they are one of the sources of curing diseases. Ayatollah al-Saeedi, the supreme leader's representative in Qom, called on people to flock to holy shrines as they are a place for healing, which means that people visit these shrines seeking cures for their spiritual and physical diseases. Therefore, shrines should remain open and people should visit them. Of course, we should be aware and vigilant and pay heed to health concerns.⁽¹⁾

The website of *Fatima Masumeh Shrine* issued a memorandum where it blasted the decision of the Qom provincial council to suspend congregational prayers and measures to sterilize the tomb, citing that "the structure of the tomb is antibacterial and a strong shield against the coronavirus."⁽²⁾

Due to this situation, the spread of the virus increased and spread to more areas. Some people attempted to counter the spread of the virus by licking shrines and tombs as they are thought to be places of healing, not hotspots for the outbreak of the virus. Others wrote on social media that "those who don't visit us when our place is fearsome is not welcome when it is safe" rejecting calls for tombs and shrines not to be visited. Iranian



authorities arrested those who posted videos of people licking tombs which was a clear violation of the instructions of the Ministry of Health. The judicial authorities said that this behaviour was “unfamiliar.”⁽³⁾

2- Calls for Suspending Visits and Closing Shrines

Others called on clerics to close shrines and take precautionary measures given that the disease is spreading and getting out of control. They said, going to Qom is unlawful even if the intention is to fulfill a *nazr* [Islamic vow or commitment to carry out an act] “due to the possibility of incurring mental damage.”

The cleric Nouri Hamadani said, as he responded to demands for issuing a fatwa allowing travel to Qom in order to undertake a *nazr*, that it should be done at another time in order to prevent causing harm.⁽⁴⁾

In response to the same question, cleric Makarem Shirazi said, “If there is no acute danger to your life, after following health and safety recommendations, paying visiting Qom is permissible. You are not prompted to fulfill the *nazr* during the current circumstances, and you should do this after the danger disappears.”⁽⁵⁾

Therefore, many official conferences and forums at several historic mosques such as Jamkaran Mosque have been suspended.⁽⁶⁾

However, it is noticed that the requests made by clerics were not decisive but rather harmonious with the decision of the government which set regulations for visiting the shrines of imams⁽⁷⁾ and did not totally suspend these visits.

These regulations include sterilizing tombs, washing hands, following health information, and wearing medical face masks.⁽⁸⁾



The Friday Prayer Policy Council, the body responsible for conducting Friday prayers, decided on February 27 to suspend Friday prayers at certain holy places in addition to several key cities such as Tehran and Mashhad. The decision is the first to be taken since the 1979 revolution due to growing concern about the spread of coronavirus. An official in the Ministry of Health said that prayers, congregations, ceremonies, consolations and seclusions at mosques should be suspended and visits to religious centers should be halted until further notice.⁽⁹⁾

The Friday prayer leader in Mashhad, Ayatollah Ahmed Alamelhuda, decried suspending Friday prayers on February 28 in Mashhad. He said, “We have been briefed on the statement that has been published, and we did not establish Friday prayer, although we believe Friday prayer is a religious duty, and it should not be suspended in any circumstances whatsoever.” He argued that the authorities, while suspending the Friday prayers, are still allowing visits to shrines. He said: “The city of Mashhad and the country are not in quarantine. Gatherings in Mashhad happen in open places. Medical officials do not object to entering the courtyard of the shrine. Suspending this religious obligation has no justifications.”⁽¹⁰⁾

The slow-paced steps of the Iranian authorities in taking precautionary measures as well as their failure to order the complete closure of shrines led to the spread of coronavirus across Iranian provinces. It even spilled over into neighboring countries, especially Iraq, Kuwait, Bahrain, and Lebanon. All the reported infections in these countries are believed to have come from Iran.

3- Some Clerics Have Been Infected

A number of Iranian officials tested positive for coronavirus. Cleric Hadi Khosroshahi (1938-2020) died from the virus. He worked as Iran’s ambassador to the Vatican and was the head of Tehran’s interest section in Cairo (2001-2004).⁽¹¹⁾

Also, cleric Mohsen Habibi, one of the clerics and religious seminary teachers in Qom, died from coronavirus infection.⁽¹²⁾

It was also rumored that cleric Mousa Shubairi Zanjani was infected after his aide tested



positive for the virus. He was medically screened and tested negative for the virus according to a source at the university of medical sciences in Qom. As a result, the cleric skipped his religious lessons as well as congregational prayers.⁽¹³⁾

His grandson said that he was staying home. He did not go to The Shrine of Fatima Masumeh to conduct Maghrib and Isha prayers. His office is closed.⁽¹⁴⁾

The sister of the cleric was also infected with coronavirus and died at one of the hospitals in Qom. She is the mother of Mohammad Mirmohammadi who is a member of the Expediency Discernment Council who died from coronavirus too.⁽¹⁵⁾

4- Combating Calamity With Supplications

The Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei called on the people to supplicate and turn to God Almighty. According to him, this calamity “is not that tremendous. We have seen more disastrous calamities. He said that he places great hope in the prayers of the pure-hearted and untainted young men to lift this calamity.” He also urged them to use purely Shiite

supplications. “*The 7th Dua of Sahifa al-Sajjadiyyah*⁽¹⁶⁾ is very unique. We can speak to God Almighty using these kind words and pay heed to their deep meanings,” he added⁽¹⁷⁾

Similar to this, Ayatollah Alireza Arafī, Director of Religious Seminaries in Iran, issued a statement on coronavirus. The statement was filled with terms such as calamity, disaster, fate and destiny. He began it with the Quranic verse: “Nothing shall ever happen to us except what Allah has ordained for us.”

He included pieces of advice to the Iranian people in general and the people of Qom in particular. He said that the virus was a Heavenly trial and test to elevate the position of believers and increase their reward with God Almighty. The calamities are also a reminder for the disobedient and those heedless of God’s orders.⁽¹⁸⁾

He also enjoined turning to God Almighty, seeking refuge with Him, praying to Him, supplicating to Him and declaring the need for His Help.⁽¹⁹⁾ He then called on the people to follow the correct measures and instructions.

Conclusion

This file shed light on the religious elite and its position towards the spread of coronavirus in the country. It concludes that the religious elite, despite believing in medicine and science to end coronavirus, increased metaphysical, religious and unseen-centered narratives, attributing the main causes of the virus to Heaven, not to negligence and the failure of the government. Hence, the means to combat it shall be supplications and prayer in the first place, then health directives.

The religious elites were divided into two groups on the issue of visiting shrines. One side argued that shrines and tombs are not spots where infections are spread and that they are places of purity and healing, hence, they should not be closed. The other side called for shutting shrines down or increasing restrictions on the number of people visiting shrines.

THE POLITICAL FILE

The legislative elections which took place in Iran on February 21, 2020 went through several controversial phases. The elections started with the first phase in which parliamentary candidates were screened and ended with the final phase in which the final results were announced.

In conjunction with the parliamentary elections, the country held midterm elections for the Assembly of Experts, the body responsible for appointing and dismissing the supreme leader of the Iranian government, which includes 88 members, all of them are clerics and are elected for a single eight-year term.

I. Parliamentary Elections

Over 16,000 candidates applied for the parliamentary elections, but the Guardian Council disqualified nearly 9,000 candidates, including many reformists. Out of 248 lawmakers in the 10th Parliament who applied to run for a second term, the council disqualified nearly 90 of them, all of them were reformists, which adversely impacted the results of this current, paving the way for the conservatives to capture most of the seats.

Nearly 7,148 candidates contested for a spot in the 290-seat Parliament. Iran is divided into 55,000 polling centers distributed across 2,018 electoral constituencies.

1- The Currents Contesting in the Parliamentary Elections

The conservatives contested in the elections via several lists. They include the one led by Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf, the former mayor of Tehran and IRGC commander. Under the banner of the Coalition Council of Islamic Revolution Forces and Resilience Front, the conservatives presented a joint electoral list. This is in addition to other lists such as Proud Iran, Revolutionary Youth, Economy and People's Livelihood, and People's Coalition which includes several governors, ministers and senior officials who worked under the government of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. This is in addition to the Meddahs list, the last movement to join the conservative's camp.⁽²⁰⁾

Unlike the conservatives, who ran in the elections with seven main lists, the reformist movement ran in the elections via two lists only: the list of the Executives of Construction Party which was named Friends of Hashemi and made up of 30 candidates, and the Union for Iran which was made up of 30 candidates representing the most prominent reformist parties. The reformist parties include the Islamic Labor Party, the Democracy Party led by the reformist figure Mostafa Kavakebian, the Workers House Party, the Islamic Educators Assembly, the Freedom Party and Solidarity, the Union and Cooperation parties.⁽²¹⁾

The reformists' decision to increase the number of lists came as they realized that it was impossible to hold fair elections after the massive number of disqualifications of reformist candidates. This is in addition to the decision of the Supreme Policy Committee of the Reformist Movement not to proceed to the elections via electoral lists in order



to allow the parties working under the umbrella of the reformist movement to partake bearing their original name or take an independent decision regarding their participation in the elections.

The third party in the Iranian parliamentary elections was the independents. They contested in the elections via several lists, on top of them was the United Independent Front, which included 30 candidates and raised the slogan of 'No Lies.' This is in addition to the Union of Independent Candidates which included candidates who neither joined the reformists nor the conservatives.

Despite the importance of popular participation for the leaders of the Iranian government, the low voter turnout, especially by the supporters of the reformists, was an opportunity for the conservatives to win the majority of parliamentary seats.

Ahead of the electoral process, opinion polls were conducted, expecting a low turnout at the polling centers. The polls indicated that there was a popular mood to boycott the elections. Foremost among these polls was the one conducted by the research center of Tehran University which concluded that 24 percent of Tehran's population would vote in the parliamentary elections and the Assembly of Experts elections.⁽²²⁾

In light of these polls, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei attempted to mobilize people to partake in the elections. He described the elections as a legal duty, considering that an intensive turnout in the elections will display the unity of the Iranians in the face of what he described as enemies.⁽²³⁾

As for President Hassan Rouhani, he criticized the exclusion of a large number of candidates, in reference to the disqualifications of supportive reformist and moderate candidates. But he issued a call similar to that of the supreme leader for people to partake in the elections, considering that the elections will give Iran the strength and unity required for its position towards the United States.⁽²⁴⁾

2- The Low Turnout

After the end of voting and the counting of ballots, the official results announced by the minister of interior in Iran showed that the total turnout reached 42.27 percent. The highest turnout was recorded in Kohgiluyeh and Boyer-Ahmad Province with 71 percent, and the lowest turnout was recorded in the capital Tehran with 26 percent.

This tally means that only 24 million Iranians turned out for this election, the lowest turnout in the history of the elections held by the Iranian government over the past four decades. This low turnout plainly contradicted the forecasts of Iranian officials one day before the voting began that the turnout would be above 50 percent.

There are factors which contributed to the low turnout in the elections, which include the mass exclusion of reformists during the phase of vetting candidates by the Guardian Council, hundreds of deaths during the protests that hit the country following the increase of gasoline prices last November, the IRGC involvement in downing the Ukrainian jetliner, the severe economic crisis, which is the worst in the history of Iran and anger at the policies of the Iranian government.

3- The Final Results

In the outgoing Parliament, the 10th Parliament, the reformists and moderates, who support President Hassan Rouhani, gained the majority after capturing 137 seats out of the total 290 seats. The conservatives came second with 122 seats. The remaining number included the independents, including the representatives of religious minorities.

The new Parliament is totally different from the past. The conservatives rose from second place to first, gaining the absolute majority of 221 seats. The reformists and moderates suffered a huge setback compared to the past elections, capturing only 20 seats, with the independents coming ahead of them with 38 seats.⁽²⁵⁾

The remaining seats, totaling 11, will be decided in the second phase of the elections which will be held in the second half of April.⁽²⁶⁾

According to the law of the Iranian elections, constituencies where candidates fail to get 20 percent or above of the votes during the elections should hold a second phase of elections to decide the outcome.⁽²⁷⁾

Table (1): The Final Election Results of Iran's 10th and 11th Parliaments

The 10 th Parliament (outgoing)	Membership distribution	The 11 th Parliament (incoming)	Membership distribution
Reformists and moderates	137	—	19
Conservatives	122	—	220
Independents	31	—	40

Source: The International Institute for Iranian Studies (Rasanah)

In the capital Tehran, where there are 30 parliamentary seats, the conservatives, represented by the Revolutionary Forces Council Alliance led by Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf, the former mayor of Tehran, won overwhelmingly, capturing all 30 seats.

This means that the reformists who won all the seats in 2016 suffered a huge setback this time, winning no seats in the capital Tehran. This contributed to making them a minority in the new Parliament as they held the majority in the previous Parliament.

II. The Assembly of Experts Elections

In conjunction with the parliamentary elections, the midterm elections of the Assembly of Experts, which is made up of 88 members, most of whom are clerics, were held.

The elections filled the vacant seats after seven of its members died over the past few years, three of whom represented the capital Tehran: Hashemi Rafsanjani, Abolfazl Mirmohammadi, and Ayatollah Haj Sheikh Nasrallah Shahabadi. This is in addition to Hashemi Shahroudi, representative of Razavi Khorasan, Mohammed Momen, representative of Qom, Assadullah Emani, representative of Fars and Habibullah Mehmaan Nawaaz, representative of North Khorasan.

After the voting ended, the results came as follows: three candidates won in the capital: Ali Momenpur, Abbasali Akhatari, and Gholamreza Mesbahi Moghadem. In Qom, Mohammed Yazdi managed to win membership to the Assembly of Experts after he failed to win a seat in the Assembly in the past elections. In Razavi Khorasan, Mohammad-Taqi Mesbah-Yazdi won a seat in the Assembly after he failed to win membership in the previous elections. In North Khorasan, Gholamreza Fayyazi won the elections while Lotfullah Dejkam won membership to the Assembly for Fars province.

Conclusion

With the conservatives winning the majority of parliamentary seats, the current has wrestled control over the entire apparatuses of the Iranian state, except the presidency.

This new development could bolster the chances of the conservatives to win the coming presidential elections scheduled to be held next year as was the case with the parliamentary elections held in 2004 where the conservatives won, leading them to win the presidential elections in 2005.

The victory of the conservatives in the parliamentary elections and the decline of the role of the reformists and moderates within this significant Iranian institution demonstrates that the conservatives are intent on dominating the domestic and external scene in the coming period. This means that President Hassan Rouhani will face more pressures in the remaining year of his second presidential term. The conservatives will lead a new Parliament with a new conservative agenda which totally sees eye to eye with the policies of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and contradicts the policies of President Hassan Rouhani, who is considered a moderate figure politically and has been seeking to forge a reconciliation with the West since the signing of the nuclear deal in 2015.

Officials of the Iranian government always consider voter turnout in the elections as an indication of the government's legitimacy and position among the people. Based on this, it could be said that the low turnout in the latest elections showed the decline in popularity of this government to the lowest levels since the victory of the Islamic revolution in 1979.

THE ECONOMIC FILE

Iran being put on the blacklist by the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) and the rapid spread of the coronavirus across the country were the two biggest challenges facing the Iranian economy recently. These two issues will be the point of focus in this file to understand Iran's economic challenges and their possible implications for the Iranian economy.^[28]

The FATF placed Iran on its blacklist on 21 February 2020.^[29] This came as Iran has refused for years to abide by the body's regulations regarding financial disclosure and transparency. This international organization, established in France in 1989, is tasked with ensuring financial transparency around the world, and combating money laundering and terrorist financing. All countries of the world, except some countries such as Iran and North Korea, are members of the FATF. All the member states of the FATF are required to investigate money laundering operations and are obliged to present information on banking transactions on a regular basis. For years, the FATF has been giving Iran grace periods in order to ratify its regulations, but policymakers in the country have continued to delay the ratification of FATF regulations for political and security reasons, which led Iran in the end to be placed on the FATF's blacklist. This will cause Iran to be subjected to several financial restrictions which will aggravate the economic crisis it has been facing since the implementation of US sanctions in August 2018. This is in addition to the spread of coronavirus in recent times, halting business activities and creating dangerous economic challenges for the foreseeable future in case the disease continues to spread and the state loses control over its containment.

I. FATF Rules and the Reasons Behind Iran's Refusal to Ratify Them

The FATF has a set of recommendations which member states should implement in order to combat money laundering, the financing of terrorism and the proliferation of destructive weapons. They include:

- 1- Giving powers and purviews to concerned authorities (for example, the investigation authorities, the law enforcement authorities, the regulatory authorities) to oversee financial transactions of member states.
- 2- Enhancing transparency and making available information regarding the real beneficiaries from judicial persons.
- 3- Facilitating financial cooperation among member states.

The Iranian government, over the past two years, has been trying to promote the importance of Iran abiding by the rules and terms of the FATF to alleviate the impacts of the financial and commercial embargo imposed by the United States. It sought to convince the conservatives of the importance of this move for the Iranian economy.

This current has control over state institutions that have the power to accept or reject FATF rules such as the Expediency Discernment Council which has discussed the issue for an entire year. In the end, the efforts of the Iranian government to convince the members of the council to approve the terms of the agreement came to naught. This led

Iran to be blacklisted by the FATF in February.

Those opposed to ratifying FATF regulations fear that Iran will have to pay a security and political cost, paying no heed to the delicate economic situation in the country. This is because Iran abiding by the financial transparency and disclosure requirements imposed by the FATF on its member states will reveal the level of Iran's financial transactions to Hezbollah and other armed militias overseas, the means of transferring funds and any money laundering operations executed in favor of these militias. FATF oversight over the financial transactions between Iran and the outside world will reveal the small number of international firms which are still conducting dealings with Iran and circumvent US sanctions on oil purchases from Iran or are secretly conducting trade with it, including firms affiliated with China and other countries.

But it seems that the economic concern is not the most important factor for those refusing to ratify FATF regulations. The foremost concern is that Iran's financial support to military organizations overseas would be affected, particularly as all covert means in smuggling Iranian oil have failed. For example, Iran's oil sales reached 125,000 barrels per day compared to 2.5 million barrels as a daily average in 2016 and 2017.



II. The Implications of Iran Being Placed on the FATF's Blacklist

Iran being placed on the FATF's blacklist will have inevitable implications for the Iranian economy. Its exposure to danger will double as long as Iran refuses to ratify FATF regulations, thus its place on the blacklist will persist. This will be as follows:

1- Closing Bank Accounts of Iranians Overseas

Closing bank accounts or pseudonym accounts through which trade exchange is carried out via financial transfers, doubling the cost of financial transactions especially those carried out via unofficial means. The Deputy Foreign Minister for Diplomatic and Economic affairs, Gholamreza Ansari,⁽³⁰⁾ said that "Our decline to approve FATF terms means that bank accounts of all Iranians worldwide shall be closed. Any Iranian national who seeks to open a bank account outside Iran should be bearing the passport of another state."

2- Reducing Iran's Foreign Trade

This is because trade partners will shun conducting dealings with Iran as they fear FATF regulations in addition to the rise in the cost of trade, including insurance and financial transactions with neighbors. This will lead to a reduction in the level of foreign currencies flowing to the Iranian treasury as well as shortages and price hikes of some goods at home.

3- Expanding the Gap Between Iran and Its Allies in Favor of the US-led Maximum

Pressure Campaign

Countries such as China and Russia will face further challenges – in addition to the already existing ones – in conducting financial and banking transactions with Iran. They are FATF member states and subject to its financial regulations. China has emerged as the most important trade partner for Iran since the United States imposed sanctions on the latter. This is in addition to slowing the pace or even aborting the efforts of the EU to implement the INSTEX mechanism for trade with Iran. Hence, Iran would place a dangerous commercial restraint upon itself.

4- Impacting the Stability of Exchange Rates and Inflation Rates in the Future

In case the Iranian refusal to ratify FATF regulations persists, this will seriously impact the value of Iran's currency. The exchange rate of the US dollar has already risen against the national currency to reach 15,520 tomans per dollar immediately after the FATF announced its blacklisting of Iran. Although this rise is temporary and could be stabilized in the short term, the continuation of pressure on Iranian foreign exchange reserves will deprive it of the ability to support currency prices in the long run, opening the door for new waves of inflation hikes and instability on the Iranian street.

III. The Spread of the Coronavirus and Its Possible Economic Implications

Iran continued to deny that there were coronavirus infections for several days before the virus hit senior figures within the government and killed several senior leaders and religious clerics. But the situation was exposed later on and the government admitted that there were deaths and the spread of infection, estimated to be in the hundreds. Officials feared that revealing such cases would carry huge economic consequences, especially given that the economic situation is volatile. This is because the outbreak of the coronavirus impacts very important and vital sectors of the Iranian economy which Iran depends on to reduce the impact of US sanctions. In the following lines, we shall break down some of the possible impacts of the coronavirus spread on the Iranian economy:

1- Suspending Religious and Medical Tourism

Service sectors such as tourism will be the most impacted by the coronavirus after most of Iran's neighboring countries closed overland and maritime borders with the country. 9 million tourists visited Iran for entertainment, for surgeries and to visit religious and historic sights. A huge proportion of them come from neighboring countries such as Iraq and some Gulf states. These countries announced that people infected with coronavirus had entered their countries from Iran.

Suspending tourism means Iran will lose a key source of hard currency which brings in billions of dollars and will see a surge in the exchange rate of foreign currencies and gold purchases. Iran will also suffer from increasing unemployment and stagnation in trade deals and sales. Domestic tourism will drop. Nowruz celebrations which fell on



March 20 this year and usually see increased spending on travel, entertainment and food, were subdued.

2- The Impact on Domestic Trade

Due to minimizing travel, suspending school and academic study and paralyzing normal everyday life, sales and purchases will be disrupted, leading to a recession. A contrary situation could happen with people resorting to panic buying and storing edibles in case the spread of the virus gets out of control and panic spreads amongst the people, as was the case with some parts of China and South Korea.

This could impact Iran's food security in case there are restrictions on imports of some vital products which Iran needs from abroad such as wheat, corn, oils and other strategic commodities, which could cause inflationary pressures to continue into the future.

3- Restricting Iranian Foreign Trade In case the coronavirus spreads and impacts production and the economy of China, which is Iran's biggest trade partner, trade will be significantly affected. China provides Iran with raw materials and spare parts and is the biggest buyer of Iranian oil. Also, the rapid spread of the coronavirus had a decisive role in disrupting trade with neighboring countries due to precautionary measures taken, especially by the UAE and Iraq.

Iraq is the number one destination for Iranian non-oil exports and Iranian products make up nearly one quarter of the total requirement of the Iraqi market in terms of foreign products. As to the UAE, it hosts the largest Iranian business community overseas and is an important trade partner for Iran, whether in terms of re-exporting Iranian goods abroad or importing goods required by Iran from the outside world via Jebel Ali ports. The UAE has recently suspended flights and cruises with Iran and launched flights to return Iranian visitors, most of whom are traders.⁽³¹⁾

On the other side, there are indirect economic costs as a result of increasing material and human fatalities due to the silent spread of the virus. This is in addition to other indirect economic costs due to a lack of transparency between society in general, and the government and between the business community in particular, and decision-makers in the country.

Conclusion

Recently, two events happened simultaneously and they could be serious challenges for the Iranian economy: the FATF's blacklisting of Iran and the spread of the coronavirus.

The first event hugely impacts Iranian financial transactions overseas and reduces its foreign trade. The decision also increases its financial and banking isolation from its key allies such as China and Europe, supporting the strategy of maximum pressure led by the United States, thus paving the way for inflationary pressures to remain unchanged in the future.

As to the second development, the spread of coronavirus threatens the future of religious tourism, which is one of the most important sources of income for the economy and Iranians. It also threatens the vital trade flow for Iran with China and neighbors such as Iraq and the UAE and disrupts the normal course of everyday life as well as sales and purchases. This was illustrated in the limited spending on this year's Nowruz which fell on 20 March. During these celebrations trade and domestic trips usually increase. All these crises put Iranian policymakers in a very difficult situation which requires them to swiftly intervene to contain the consequences before they exacerbate.

MILITARY FILE

On February 14, the Houthis claimed to have downed a Saudi Arabian Panavia Tornado, a twin-engine, variable-sweep wing multirole combat aircraft. Both pilots were unable to survive the crash. Flying over Yemen's al-Jawf province, the aircraft provided close-air support (CAS) to Yemen's National Army.⁽³²⁾ Since the Saudi Air Force never claimed that a malfunction led to the crash, a released infrared video of a surface-to-air missile striking the Tornado supports Houthi claims of shooting down the aircraft. Earlier in October 2017, the Houthis boasted of downing a Saudi Air Force Eurofighter.⁽³³⁾ The Houthis' claim turned out to be false as it was unproven. Also, Riyadh rejected the claim.

The Houthis had earlier shot down a Saudi Air Force F-15E while giving a close call to two Emirati F-16s.⁽³⁴⁾ Downing a fourth-generation fighter is no mean feat. The secret, however, is the Houthis' readiness to take on such advanced, high-speed jets and actually having the capability to hit them accurately. Iranian missile derivatives are based heavily on Chinese, North Korean and Russian technology. They are the main sources of Houthi firepower and have become increasingly potent. Two-shot down fighter jets and boats with missile parts impounded on the high-sea provide insight into Houthi military capabilities.

The infrared video released by the Houthis showed a missile system tracking the Tornado which was marked and fired at. In response, it released chaff and flares to dodge the hostile projectile. The missile hit the Tornado and it came crashing down in a fireball. It is widely believed that the Houthis fired an improvised R-27T air-to-air missile (AAM) from a pickup.⁽³⁵⁾ These AAMs are called Vypel R-27T. The previous downing of an F-15E in 2018 was also attributed to the same weapons system, which is AA-10 Alamo-B as designated by NATO. It is an infrared homing missile with a maximum range of 63 km and maximum altitude or vertical separation of 10 km. According to the Iranian system of classification, Vypel R-27T is called Fater-1. Also, there is enough evidence to prove the existence of Iranian Sayyad 2C Surface to Air Missiles (SAMs) in Yemen.⁽³⁶⁾ The SAM system is a prodigy of the Russian S-75 (NATO name SA-2 Guideline). While reverse engineering and upgrading the Russian missile, Iranians are thought to be heavily reliant on S-75's Chinese and North Korean derivatives. The two-staged air



defense missile is claimed to travel at 3,600 km per hour with a range of 60 km to 100 km with a 200-kilogram warhead. Some analysts hold that a Sayyad 2 was used in shooting down the F-15E in 2018. Others credit the downing to a modified R-27T AAM.

I. The Arms Embargo Withers

As per the 2015 UN Security Council Resolution 2216, the transfer of weapons to the Houthis is banned.⁽³⁷⁾ The embargo notwithstanding, the fundamental question remains: how does Iran manage to smuggle its improvised weapons systems to the Houthis without a land corridor unlike the case with Syria and Lebanon? There were reports in the early days of the coalition strikes that the Oman-Yemen border was used to funnel weapons to the Houthis. However, in recent years, Iran has depended on fishing dinghies to transfer weapons. They are less noticeable and can blend in well with other similar vessels on the high seas. They come with almost all sorts of disassembled and portable weapons systems, ranging from drones, bombs, rockets, AAMs, SAMs, surface-to-surface ballistic and cruise missiles to name a few from a swelling list of advanced weapons. During the last three interdictions in the North Arabian Sea, the US Navy and coast guards found parts of cruise missiles and drones in boats. The CENTCOM statement after the February interception stated: “In addition to three surface-to-air missiles, the arms cache included 150 ‘Dehlavieh’ anti-tank guided missiles, Iranian thermal imaging weapon scopes, Iranian components for aerial drones and unmanned small boats, as well as other munitions and advanced weapons parts.”⁽³⁸⁾

A similar ‘fishing boat’ captured in November contained components to manufacture Quds-1 land-attack cruise missiles and Noor anti-ship cruise missiles, as per CENTCOM’s statement.⁽³⁹⁾ The Noor anti-ship missile is a derivative of China’s C-802 missile with an estimated impact range of 120 km.⁽⁴⁰⁾ The US Central Command attached greater significance to the capture of the ‘358’ missile but did not delve into its technical details. Various weapons experts believe that the ‘358’ missile is a ‘uniquely Iranian-designed’ system and more potent than its parents i.e. the Chinese C-802 anti-ship cruise missile or

the Russian Kornet anti-tank guided missile. The Houthi militia, a non-state actor, possessing such lethal weapons is completely different to them being part of a national army’s arsenal.⁽⁴¹⁾ The Houthis, like any non-state militant outfit, undertake rogue operations, ranging from attacking civilian areas to targeting merchant vessels at sea. Thus, merchant ships in the Red Sea, Bab al-Mandeb Strait and Gulf of Aden are increasingly vulnerable to Houthi attacks.

“The Houthis’ rapid adoption and improvement of this technology, almost certainly with Iranian assistance, is a strong indicator that Iran can transfer similar capabilities to



some Shiite militias in Iraq and to Hezbollah in Lebanon,” a study by HIS Markit noted. It also concluded that 68 percent of Houthi attacks between January and October 2019 were with drones and 32 percent with ballistic missiles, all smuggled from Iran.⁽⁴²⁾

II. The UN Report on Yemen

A report by a UN panel of experts released in February points to the technical similarities between weapons captured en route to the Houthis and those manufactured in Iran. The UN's Yemen report notes two significant trends: the first is the transfer of commercially available parts, like drone engines, servo actuators and electronics; the second is the Houthis receiving ongoing military support in the form of assault rifles, rocket-propelled grenade launchers, anti-tank guided missiles and more sophisticated cruise missile systems.⁽⁴³⁾ Some of these weapons have technical characteristics similar to those manufactured in Iran. The UN points out that a vital smuggling route runs overland from Oman and the southern coast of Yemen, through territory controlled by the Government of Yemen, towards Sana'a besides a sea route.

The UN examined weapons and military-related material seized in Yemen on December 10, 2018, in Aden, which included type 56-1 assault rifles, rocket-propelled grenade (RPG-7) launchers and associated optical sights. The UN experts inspected a sample of such weapons in Abu Dhabi while inspection visits to Aden could not happen. China and Iran were asked about the chain of custody as the weapons were originally of Chinese design. Tehran has rejected the accusation that the RPG-7 launchers conform to the specifications of its arms. As per the investigation, the seven-digit serial numbers on the munition correspond to the numbers on PGO-7V3 semi-knocked-down kits produced in Belarus but exported in 2016 “to Paya Pardaz Asia in Tehran with an end-user certificate stating that they were destined for the Ministry of Defence and Armed Forces Logistics of the Islamic Republic of Iran.”⁽⁴⁴⁾ The story is no different for Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs), which the UN report identifies as unscrewed aerial vehicles. UAV smuggled parts are available in common markets like the availability of parts for cars or appliances.

The shipment captured in January 2019 in Jawf consisted of components to manufacture Qasef- and Samad-family drones. They were shipped to Oman prior to being found in Yemen, confirming the existence of the overland smuggling route via Jawf and south-east Yemen. The captured shipment of servo actuators in Abu Dhabi while in transit to Sana'a in November 2018 are thought to be for UAVs as well as for water borne improvised explosive devices.

The cache captured on November 25, 2019, unearthed the illegal shipment of 21 anti-tank guided missiles, most likely Iran's Dehlavieh version of the 9M133 Kornet along with two previously unknown surface-to-air missiles. In addition, the cache included components for three missiles: a Quds-1 land-attack cruise missile, C802 anti-ship cruise missile and an unidentified cruise missile.⁽⁴⁵⁾

The United Nations Security Council resolutions and an international coalition of countries have so far been unable to decisively deter Iran from fomenting the conflict in Yemen. The Houthis developing their capabilities, as well as their evolving strategies and tactics to deal with global responses has led to the failure of negotiations as a means to resolve the conflict. With the unprecedented and unexpected toll from the coronavirus outbreak in Iran, there is some glimmer of hope that Iran's will power and capability to foment conflicts in the Middle East will be hampered.

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Arab Affairs

In January and February 2020, Iran faced several challenges at the regional level with its neighboring Arab countries. These challenges were connected to two critical developments that affected Iran's infiltration in the Arab countries: the assassination of the Commander of the Quds Force and the involvement of Turkish forces in a battle against Bashar al-Assad's forces in Idlib. As a result, Iran faced challenges in managing its armed proxy militias in both Iraq and Syria. However, its relations with Russia and Turkey were seriously tested when disputes between the two sides in Syria escalated into armed clashes. Iran inclined not to intervene directly in the armed conflict between the two sides due different and even contradictory considerations, which influenced its position.



IRAN AND IRAQ

Early January 2020 witnessed an unprecedented escalation in US-Iranian tensions that almost led to a war between the United States and Iran in the troubled Middle East region. On January 3, 2020, the United States assassinated the second most powerful man in Iran, General Qassem Soleimani, who was second only to the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei in terms of power. The Iranian Revolutionary Guards responded at dawn on January 8, 2020 by targeting two American bases in the Iraqi provinces of Anbar and Erbil with 10 medium-range ballistic missiles.

I. The American-Iranian Escalation on the Iraqi Scene

The decision to escalate was not taken lightly. It was in response to pro-Iranian armed militias in Iraq targeting American forces. They attacked the Iraqi-American military base K-1 hosting American soldiers north of Kirkuk on December 27, 2019 with about 30 missiles. The attack resulted in the death of an American civilian contractor while six soldiers sustained injuries: four Americans and two Iraqis.

Only two days after the attack against the K-1 American base, under the guidance of President Trump to carry out a crushing revenge attack, on December 29, 2019 the US military bombed five battalions of the Iraqi Hezbollah: three in the Iraqi city of Al-Qa'im and two in Syria on the Syrian-Iraqi-Jordanian Border Triangle. It resulted in 28 deaths, including Abu Ali Khazali, first regiment of the 45th Brigades commander, one of Soleimani's closest associates, and 48 were injured.

Iran did not understand America's deterrence message when it bombed the headquarters of the Hezbollah Brigades in Iraq and Syria. However, the Iranian misunderstanding of the American deterrence messages continued, illustrated by Iran calling on its supporters to besiege the American embassy in Baghdad on December 31, 2019, destroying its walls and setting fire to its main gates and security cameras. They later withdrew on the request of the Baghdad government which came under strong American pressure.

Iran's pursuit of escalatory policies against American interests and sites in Iraq heightened the prospect of war, particularly when Washington killed Soleimani and other PMF leaders including one of the most prominent PMF members in Iraq, deputy leader Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis with Hellfire R9X missiles at Baghdad International airport. The IRGC responded by bombing two American bases in Iraq: Ayn al Asad, and Harir in Erbil, with 10 medium-range ballistic missiles in retaliation without causing any casualties according to the Americans.

Throughout the mutual escalations, Iran's miscalculation -regarding America's deterrence messages after the killing of an American civilian contractor- was obvious. Tehran was betting on striking US interests before the US presidential elections to embarrass Trump. The Iranian government believed that the upcoming US presidential elections would impel the Trump administration to refrain from escalation against Iran as Trump's electoral chances would be undermined. Iran would no doubt benefit if a new US administration came to power and reconsidered Washington's withdrawal from the nuclear agreement.

Iran did not take into account that the death of an American citizen is sufficient to turn US public opinion in favor of military strikes against Iran. Trump increased escalation levels against Iran since he could not ignore this attack on US prestige while preparing for his election campaign. As a result, America responded decisively when it killed the engineer, the coordinator, the symbol of Iran's regional project, the sponsor of terrorist armed militias in Arab countries, and the person who ignited regional conflicts in order to attain Iranian hegemony.

II. The Motives Behind American-Iranian Mutual Escalation in the Iraqi Arena

The Iranian escalation against American forces was due to Tehran's desire to take advantage of the upcoming US elections. It aims to attain economic gains by pushing the Trump administration to ease the sanctions against Tehran. In addition, by putting pressure on US forces to withdraw from the Iraqi arena, the Iranian government sought to attain political gains in order to unilaterally dominate the Iraqi arena.

The American escalation against Iran by killing Soleimani was due to a number of factors, including the US Defense Department obtaining sensitive information and sending it to the White House. According to this information, Soleimani was developing a dangerous plan to attack American diplomats and soldiers in Iraq and throughout the region.⁽¹⁾ Such attacks would have undermined Trump's standing in front of the American people, compromised his electoral chances and reduced his popularity before the 2020 presidential elections. This information was reflected in Trump's statement on January 3, 2020 after the assassination of Soleimani, he said "Washington made the decision to kill Soleimani to stop the war, not to start one."⁽²⁾ In addition, on January 3, 2020 Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said, "Killing Soleimani disrupted an imminent Iranian attack [...] Soleimani was developing a plan that would endanger the lives of hundreds of Americans."⁽³⁾

Most likely, the Trump administration believed that Soleimani's plan was intended to turn US public opinion against Trump in order to weaken his position in the US political equation. This would no doubt undermine Trump's re-election chances, particularly if Iranian militias targeted American ambassadors or diplomats, similar to the assassination of the American ambassador to Libya some years ago. Therefore, in line his personality, Trump did not adopt a wait-and-see approach, particularly in light of the upcoming presidential elections.

The motive behind the US assassinating Soleimani can be attributed to President Trump wanting to take advantage of Iran's miscalculations in order to boost his re-election chances. Trump took advantage of US public opinion in the aftermath of the killing of an American contractor to eliminate Soleimani. This revenge attack allowed Trump to be seen as a defender of US citizens wherever they are. Since Trump's policies have improved US economic indicators internally, which should boost his electoral chances in the 2020 presidential elections, it was hoped the killing of Soleimani would prompt more Americans to vote for Trump.

In addition, Washington comprehended the need to curb Iran and prevent it from repeating the scenario of attacking more American forces in the future. Washington sent a message to Iran that the attack on American bases, interests and forces in Iraq and the whole region transgress the redlines set by America. Iran would have to think twice before planning to target American forces. America also attempted to prevent the Iraqi Parliament from passing a law expelling foreign forces from Iraqi territory.

III. The Limited and Symbolic Iranian Strikes on American Targets

Specialists in warfare described the Iranian bombing of two American bases in Iraq with 10 Fateh 313 ballistic missiles in retaliation for the killing of Soleimani as "limited and

symbolic” because they did not hit American forces directly and only destroyed some fences, walls and watchtowers. Iran promptly announced the end of its response when the Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif announced on Twitter that “Iran took proportionate measures in self-defense under Article 51 of UN Charter targeting base from which cowardly armed attack against our citizens & senior officials were launched” stressing that “Tehran does not seek escalation but will defend ourselves against any aggression.”⁽⁴⁾ Ali Rabiei, the chief of staff of the Armed Forces of Iran on twitter warned the United States of possible consequences in case it responded to the attack. “We have never wanted war but any aggression will receive a crushing response,” Ali Rabiei said on Twitter.



Trump’s brief tweet indicated a halt in strikes when he said “everything is fine.”⁽⁵⁾ During his speech on the evening of the Iranian attacks on January 8, 2019, Trump stressed that “the Iranian missile attacks caused no casualties in American or Iraqi lives,” although the Iranians announced that approximately 80 US soldiers were killed. He added, “Iran was given \$150 billion after the signing of the nuclear agreement. Instead of thanking my country, the Iranians were chanting death to America and causing unrest in Yemen, Syria, Lebanon, Afghanistan, and Iraq. The Iranian government killed 1,500 people in the demonstrations throughout Iran.” Trump also attempted to de-escalate tensions with Iran. Also, Trump offered an opportunity for peace when he said, “There is a possibility for Iran to have a bright future if Iran chooses to stop its support of terrorism, to de-escalate and to enter a new nuclear agreement.”⁽⁶⁾

The Iranian strikes against US bases indicated most importantly Tehran’s desire to uphold its credibility and dignity by undertaking a limited military response. The

main slogan of Iranian government figures at religious, political and military levels in response to the killing of Soleimani was that “response and revenge will come no matter what.” The Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, who chaired an emergency meeting of Iran’s Supreme National Security Council on January 3, 2020, declared three days of mourning. He said, “severe revenge awaits the criminals who have stained their hands with his & the other martyrs’ blood last night.”⁽⁷⁾

Likewise, President Hassan Rouhani during his visit to Soleimani’s family also spoke of “taking revenge severely,” adding “everyone will take revenge for Soleimani”⁽⁸⁾ when Soleimani’s daughter asked him “who will take revenge for my father?” On January 6, 2020, the IRGC Commander Major General Hossein Salami was issued an instruction to respond, “I say the last word at the beginning: We will take revenge, a revenge that will be tough, strong, decisive and finishing, and there will be no safe place for the US in the region.”⁽⁹⁾

As much as the Iranian government believed that a poor response would weaken its standing among its supporters at the heart of Shiite incubators, increase for hardliners and widen the circle of opponents against it, as well as concerns over increasing internal pressures with the outbreak of demonstrations calling for Soleimani’s death to be avenged, the government was conscious of US redlines and hesitated due the strong American deterrence message sent through the killing of Soleimani.

Iran prioritized Iraq due to the fact that this country is where Washington targeted Soleimani, and targeting American interests and bases deployed in Iraq is straightforward. This is because of Iraq’s geographical proximity to western Iran and the widespread deployment of pro-Iranian military militia throughout the Iraqi state that makes striking US targets a strong possibility.

IV. Factors Contributing to Iran Resorting to a Limited Response Option to Retaliate Soleimani’s Killing:

There are several factors that can explain Iran resorting to a limited response option, most notably the nature and priorities of the ruling elite in Iran. The ruling elite prioritises preserving the ruling theocratic government and its expansionist project in the Middle East more than avenging the killing of a military figure, even if that figure is a significant commander such as Qassem Soleimani. The limited response reveals its awareness of the wide differences between American and Iranian military capabilities. Washington possesses qualitative military capabilities in all border areas with Iran, and the American Navy is overwhelmingly superior to the Iranian navy. This places many Iranian targets within the American line of fire. Therefore, it is cautious about entering into incalculable adventures that undermine its rule.

The second factor is related to Iran’s perception of the US killing of Soleimani as an “eye-for-an-eye escalation” but does not signify a change in the American position that seeks to limit its regional influence. This is due to Iran’s awareness of American redlines, and Iran’s accurate calculus that if it is involved in a comprehensive confrontation, this would threaten the government’s survival and its regional gains, particularly its spheres of influence. A large-scale confrontation would also result in large financial and human losses for Iran.

The third factor relates to Iran’s awareness of the financial cost of a comprehensive confrontation considering the country’s exhausted economy due to US sanctions. Iran prefers asymmetric wars rather than conventional wars. It would appear from recent experience that Iran prefers limited confrontations so that it does not bear a direct cost.



Conclusion

Taking into consideration the aforementioned discussion, Washington and Tehran are likely to return to the pre-escalation phase. The United States may also tighten their siege against Iran by imposing new sanctions. Trump has vowed to change the behavior of the Iranian government, especially in light of Iran's awareness of American redlines. Iran still continues its "proxy wars" by indirectly putting pressure on its proxies to expel American forces from the Iraqi arena, by using its proxies: the Houthis in Yemen, Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Popular Mobilization Forces in Iraq which showed their full readiness to avenge the killing of Soleimani by targeting American forces and bases in the region.

Although American and Iranian statements indicate the end of the stage of American-Iranian military escalation in Iraq, renewed confrontation remains a real possibility at any time due to the ongoing failure in addressing the roots of the conflict such as amending the nuclear agreement, limiting Iran's ballistic missiles/ influence, controlling Iranian militias targeting US forces, and the continuation of suffocating US economic sanction on Iran .

Iran is the losing party in the escalation and has nothing to gain from its escalation against American forces in Iraq because it has crossed American red lines, which led to consequences for security and stability of the region. Armed confrontations are not in

the interest of all parties. However, sitting at the negotiating table is the most effective option in order to attain Iranian strategic goals through a diplomatic way. As President Trump tweeted, “Iran never won a war, but never lost a negotiation.”

However, the Iranian government’s attempts to use the death of Soleimani to gain more popular support proved unsuccessful. The government also lost the popular sympathy that it gained after the killing of Soleimani, because it retracted its previous statement and admitted that it shot down the Ukrainian plane with 176 passengers on board, mostly Iranians and Canadian (80 Iranians). Popular demonstrations broke out again in Tehran and Isfahan on January 11, 2019 calling for overthrowing the supreme leader.

IRAN AND SYRIA

Rapid developments took place both in the regional and Syrian arenas during January and February 2020, which inevitably cast a doubt over Iran's role in Syria, including the killing of the Commander of the Quds Force, General Qassem Soleimani, in Baghdad on January 3, 2020. He was responsible for managing pro-Iranian armed militias, and armed militias in Syria. Iranian efforts continued in order to gain control of the reconstruction phase in Syria and to maximize the scope of its influence. In addition, at the beginning of 2020, the Syrian government launched with Russian-Iranian support a military operation in northern Syria to regain control of Idlib.

I. Implications of Soleimani's Absence on Iranian Influence in Syria

Soleimani played a prominent role in shifting the balance of power in the battles that Syria witnessed during the past nine years between the Assad government and the opposition forces. During his visit to Moscow in mid-2015, he persuaded the Russians to intervene militarily in Syria to support Assad, who was controlling back then only 10 percent of Syria. This enabled both Russia and Iran to define their roles in supporting Assad who by the end of February 2020 was able to regain control of Syrian territories except for Idlib, where there has been an ongoing battle since December 2019.

Soleimani is considered the founder of the shadow state in Syria through establishing pro-Iranian armed networks and militias in Syria. This allowed Iran to influence Syrian decisions and to position itself among the most influential actors in the Syrian crisis. Iranian militias helped Iran to become a strong competitor in the ongoing power struggle in Syria. Soleimani was also able to develop military strategies in order to manage Assad's survival and to encircle and besiege opposition forces. He implemented policies of isolation, starvation, expulsion, and displacement which also facilitated in creating a line to the Iranian Corridor in Syria.

Consequently, his absence will inevitably impact Iran's role in Syria, and diminish the influence of Iran's shadow state. The map of Soleimani's relations with field commanders in Syria, Iraq, and elsewhere indicates his closeness to non-Iranian leaders and elements from Iraq, Lebanon, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, as per operational and field requirements.

With his killing, Assad will escape Iran's clutches as Iranian pressure cards on him via Soleimani will no longer exist. Tehran had held Assad captive over the past decade. The image of Soleimani taking Assad's hand to meet the supreme leader was evidence of Assad's subordination to Iran's leadership. His absence would weaken the role of armed militias and reinforce the role of Syrian national institutions in making decisions internally and externally. It will also balance the relationship between the Syrian and Iranian national armies rather than between the IRGC, Syria's National Defense Forces and pro-Iranian militias in Syria.

Israeli estimates suggest that Soleimani's killing will give Tel Aviv an opportunity to redouble its efforts to remove pro-Iranian armed militias from Syria. According to Israeli

security sources, the prevailing view in the security apparatus is that Soleimani's killing "created a vacuum" within the Iranian system as Soleimani had strengthened Iran's presence in Syria, as he controlled, managed, and pulled Iranian strings. However, his assassination is considered as a significant opportunity to change the rules of the game, especially given the absolute refusal of Israel to face a new front similar to Hezbollah in southern Syria.⁽¹⁰⁾

II. The Continuation of Iranian Control Over the Reconstruction Phase

Through its major companies, Iran continues to control reconstruction operations in Syria to serve its expansionist plans and projects. The Iranian Ministry of Works has disclosed its intention to participate in building 30 thousand housing units throughout different Syrian regions. Syria's Minister of Education Imad al-Azab and Iranian Minister of Education Mohsen Haji Mirzaei agreed during the latter's visit to Damascus on January 22, 2020 to activate the agreement signed between Syria and Iran in the field of education. Iran is committed to building and reconstructing thousands of schools in Syria destroyed during the civil war that has been raging on its soil for years, as well as to equip schools, train teachers, and to exchange educational expertise.⁽¹¹⁾

Iranian efforts to implement infrastructure projects in Syria is further evidence that the theocratic government in Tehran does not care about deteriorating living conditions and educational standards at home. It is only concerned about implementing its absurd expansionist project abroad. Iranian media indicated that there are more than 80 dilapidated Iranian schools whereas those that are fit to provide education are either unsafe or lack heating because they did not receive fuel subsidies due to the pressure of US sanctions. About 6,000 homes were completely destroyed in the 2017 earthquake in Kermanshah and 6,000 homes need to be repaired.⁽¹²⁾ Schools were not repaired or rehabilitated until the end of February 2020. In addition, the Mayor of Tehran, Perouz Hanachi, confirmed that about 827 schools representing 70 percent of the total number of the capital's schools in Tehran are in critical condition and urgently need to be repaired.⁽¹³⁾

Surprisingly, before Mohsen Mirzai's visit to Syria, the Iranian Tasnim News Agency highlighted the dire humanitarian conditions endured by the inhabitants of Sistan-Baluchistan Province because of the floods that hit the province. About 342 schools in the province were partially or totally destroyed. All of them need either to be rebuilt or rehabilitated.

Iran controlling the reconstruction phase in Syria is of great importance to Tehran because it will contribute to alleviating the suffocating economic sanctions on Iran. It would allow Iran to control Syria's vital economic sectors enabling it to possess strong pressure cards against the Syrian government. Iran has taken advantage of the critical conditions faced by the country which has been torn apart by war. As a result, it can influence decision-making both internally and externally, and can maximize its gains and the scope of its influence in the context of the ongoing power struggle in Syria between the regional and international parties in order to obtain the largest area of influence geographically. This will maximize Iran's role in terms of power and influence and alter the equation in regional and international arenas.

The educational file is one of Iran's most important tools to spread its Twelver Shi'a doctrine in Syria. In 2014, the first Shiite school in Syria was opened under pressure with the name of "Alrasoul Alazam". It is considered as a manifestation of the success of Iran's cultural pressure strategy in Syria. Many Iranian educational and sectarian centers and colleges, such as the Sayyida Ruqayya College for Teaching Shi'a Sharia Sciences obtained work permits in Syrian universities. These schools were opened because of

Iran's role in supporting the Assad government, enabling Assad to remain in power during the war.

Moreover, Azad University in Iran signed with the Syrian government during 2018 a memorandum of understanding to establish a similar university. Tehran has widely spread the Shi'a doctrine by establishing hundreds of husayniyah and Hawzas, which numbered about 500 husayniyah and about 69 Shiite Hawzas in mid-2019. These learning centers teach Shiite Uşül al-fiqh, according to the Syrian Observatory. As a result of the activities that were carried out by these centers, along with financial support, about 7,500 people from southern and eastern Syria converted to the Shi'a doctrine by the end of 2019, according to the Syrian Observatory.⁽¹⁴⁾

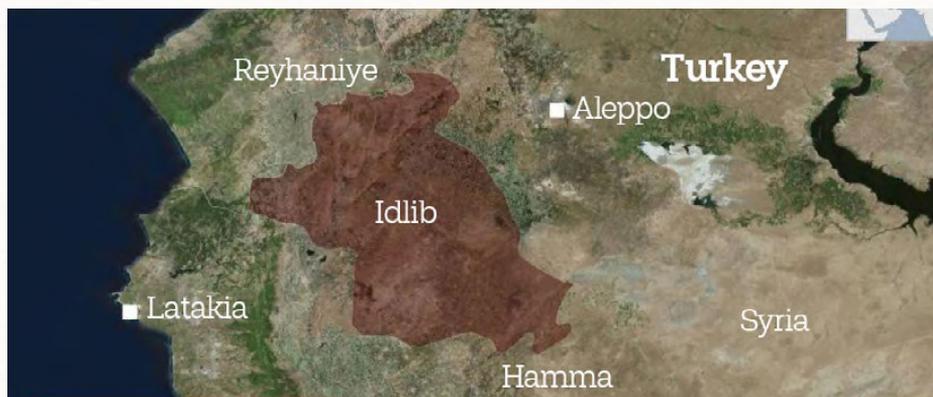
III. The Iranian Role and its Limits in the Idlib Battle

The Idlib battle in the north of Syria was the first military escalation between regional and international parties to the Syrian crisis in the framework of the power struggle that has been ongoing in Syria. The battle was waged between: Moscow, Tehran and Damascus on the one hand, and Ankara on the other side. Grouping the Syrian opposition in one spot was a Russian-Iranian-Syrian goal based on displacement agreements. This would help these three countries to attack the opposition all at once, secure their spheres of influence, and ensure Assad's control throughout Syria and Russian and Iranian interests and gains.

This proves that the understandings established in Sochi in September 2018 to establish a demilitarized zone in Idlib were understandings to consolidate areas that were liberated from the opposition forces before they were grouped in Idlib. After Assad took control of most of Syria's territories with the exception of Idlib and some pockets in southern Syria, he launched a military campaign supported by Iran and Russia at the end of 2019 to restore Idlib.

Further to the above, Idlib is considered as a strategic link area since international lines cross through it. They link Aleppo with Latakia and Rayhaniyya with Hama (see map No. 1). The Syrian government was able to control Maarat al-Numan and Saraqib, which are strategic meeting points between two international routes. The "M5" Aleppo with Damascus. In addition, the M5 passes via major cities: Hama and Homs to the southern border with Jordan. The M4 links Aleppo with Idlib, Latakia westward. The two motorways are of great strategic and economic importance to the Syrian government because they are the most important road transport corridors, and economic arteries. These two motorways are passages for Lebanese, Turkish, Asian, European and Russian goods to Syria and the Arab Gulf states.

Map (1): Idlib as a Strategic Linking Point



Source: BBC (Arabic), <https://www.bbc.com/arabic/in-depth-41267444>

As Syrian forces advanced through the Idlib countryside, the Turkish army bombed many sites of the Syrian government and its supporters that were fighting alongside Assad's forces in Idlib. The bombing claimed the lives of several militia fighters. Iran's media acknowledged that 21 Iranian affiliated Fatemiyoun and Zaynabiyoun fighters⁽¹⁵⁾ were killed because of the Turkish bombing. The Iranian military adviser in Syria called on the Turkish government to end its military operations by saying, "The Iranian forces have refrained from responding to the elements of the Turkish forces although they are within range of our firing range ... and yet the Turkish army continues the artillery shelling targeting our sites, centers and bases."⁽¹⁶⁾

The permanent representative of Iran to the United Nations, Majid Takht Ravanchi, during his speech on February 6, 2020, at a meeting on Idlib, announced his country's readiness to end Turkish-Syrian differences.⁽¹⁷⁾ Ravanchi's speech reflects Tehran's awareness not to engage in military escalation against Turkey since it borders Afrin in the north of Syria which is controlled by the Kurdish Democratic Union Party. Turkey also expressed its concerns about the influx of refugees into its territories. Iran is facing harsh economic conditions. Therefore, Tehran attaches special importance to circumventing the severe US sanctions. Turkey is one of the important countries for Iran because it rejects US sanctions. Idlib is the final phase for the Russians in order to restore Assad's control of all Syrian lands. The Russian's hope this will pave the way for a new phase to reconstruct Syria, and secure Russian spheres of influence.

Conclusion

In light of the above, it can be said that the killing of Soleimani will have a major impact on Iran's role in Syria, however, this does not mean that Iran will surrender its plans in Syria. Iran's regional project, most importantly in Syria, is one of the most important goals of the Iranian government. This explains Iranian efforts to stay for a long time in Syria in order to initiate demographic changes and implement the Iranian corridor project linking Tehran to the Mediterranean via Iraq and Syria. It is also noted that the limited Iranian involvement in the Idlib battle was due to cost factors and the Turkish position that rejects US sanctions on Tehran. In addition, Iran comprehends that Idlib is a Turkish national security zone. Even if Iran sought to extend its influence across all Syrian territories, it cannot, given the economic crises it suffers from.

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International Affairs

During January and February 2020, the US approach towards Iran changed due to the latter's hostilities that continue to endanger Middle Eastern security and stability. The US killing of the Quds Force Commander Qassem Soleimani was the first red line that curbed Iran's irregular warfare launched by Iranian-backed militias in the region. Also, the US operation in Baghdad had implications for the European countries dealing with Iran in response to Tehran reducing its nuclear obligations. It was as if the American strike made clear to Europe the seriousness of US intentions to confront Iran after Washington repeatedly overlooked Iranian attacks that threatened the security and safety of maritime navigation in the region and endangered global energy security. Even when Iran took revenge with a missile striking a US airbase in Iraq, the strike came after a leaked warning Iran sent to the US via the Iraqi government, so the strike did not cause any casualties. The Iranian revenge ended with the IRGC shooting down an Ukraine plane.



IRAN-US RELATIONS

During January and February 2020, the US-Iranian crisis continued to escalate. The following discussion highlights the most important developments in the US-Iran relationship due to rising tensions between the two countries:

I. Developments in the US Position Towards the Crisis With Iran

Since early 2020, the United States has imposed extensive pressure on the Iranian political system and began this by targeting the Quds Force Commander Qassem Soleimani in Iraq on January 3, 2020. This was the most prominent development at the beginning of the new year. The US attack represented an unexpected shock for Iran. According to the US narrative, the operation was preemptive and aimed to thwart Soleimani's plan against US interests and forces in the region.

To deter Iran and prevent retaliation in the wake of Soleimani's assassination, Trump said that the US administration had identified 52 Iranian sites, some of which are highly significant for Iranian culture, and would strike them if Iran attacked any US asset in the region.

Within the context of imposing more pressure, the US administration did not miss the opportunity to take advantage of the protests that erupted after the Iranian government admitted responsibility for shooting down the Ukrainian plane. Trump tweeted in Persian, "To the brave, long-suffering people of Iran: I've stood with you since the beginning of my Presidency, and my Administration will continue to stand with you. We are following your protests closely, and are inspired by your courage."



US interference in the Iranian elections did not stop at Washington sanctioning five members of the Guardian Council, but the US envoy for Iran Brian Hook and the US President himself questioned the integrity of the Iranian elections and considered the rigged election process as being unrepresentative of the will of the people.

Iranian authorities have accused the United States of launching massive cyber-attacks against Iran's internet infrastructure, and the Iranian Infrastructure Communications Company said that cyber-attacks on the country originated from East Asia and North America.⁽¹⁾

Some members of the US Senate asked the Trump administration to investigate the National American Iranian Council (NAIC), which is headed by Jamal Abdi, for possibly violating US law and distributing information condemning the Trump administration's targeting of Qassem Soleimani. In addition, some senators accused the NAIC of adopting a positive position towards the Iranian political system.

Although Trump once again hinted at negotiating with Iran and reiterated his unwillingness to engage in a direct military confrontation, in addition to the Senate's approval of a bill to limit Trump's powers to wage war against Iran on February 13, 2020, Trump is likely to exercise his veto on the decision, and then the Senate, in this case, would need a two-thirds majority to override his veto.⁽²⁾

The US administration also refused to issue an entry visa to the Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammed Javad Zarif to participate in UN Security Council meetings, but on the side-lines of the Munich Security Conference, Zarif met some members of the Congress and explained to them the Iranian perspective. Senator Chris Murphy praised Zarif's speech and tweeted, "Trump's Iran policy has done nothing but making them stronger and America weaker."

Representing the main aspect of the US maximum pressure strategy, the US administration continued to impose more sanctions on Iran. Table (1) shows the most recent and significant sanctions on Iran:

Table (1): US Sanctions on Iran's Leadership in January and February 2020

Date	Sanctions
10 Jan.	Sanctioning eight officials including: Ali Shamkhani, Secretary of the Supreme Security Council, Gholamreza Soleimani, Basij Commander, Mohsen Rezaei, Secretary of the Expediency Council, Mohammad Reza Naqdi, the Coordinator of the Revolutionary Guards, Mohammad Reza Qarai Ashtiani, Deputy Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces, Ali Abdullahi, Deputy Coordinator of the General Staff of the Armed Forces, Ali Asghar Hejazi, and Mohsen Qomi, both Senior Security Members at Khamenei's Office, for their involvement in destabilizing regional and international security.
17 Jan.	Sanctioning Ahvaz IRGC Commander Hassan Shahvarpour for human rights violations during the Mahshahr protests in November 2019.

Date	Sanctions
22 Jan.	Imposing new restrictions on Iranian investors and businessmen through cancelling the issuance or renewal of their visas, especially visas that allow major foreign businessmen and investors in US companies to live and work in the United States.
24 Jan.	Sanctioning and banning Fars News Agency by adding it to the US Treasury's Specially Designated Nationals (SDNS) list .
30 Jan.	Sanctioning the head of the Atomic Energy Organization, Ali Akbar Salehi.
20 Feb.	Sanctioning five members of the Guardian Council prior to the parliamentary elections including: Secretary of the Guardian Council, Ahmed Jannati, a cleric in the Guardian Council, Mohammed Yazdi, the Speaker of the Council, Abbas Ali Kadkhadai, and two legal experts in the Council, Siamak Rahbik, and Mohammed Hassan Sadighi-Moghaddam, for their role in the falsification of election results.

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Nevertheless, the United States has granted a license allowing certain trade transactions to be carried out with the sanctioned Iranian Central Bank through a Swiss humanitarian aid channel announced on January 30, 2020. The US special envoy ran, Brian Hook, announced that the United States is in talks with at least two other companies to send food and medicine to Iran through this channel, and the United States also extended Iraq's sanctions exemption to allow it to import Iranian gas and electricity, and it was said that this would be the last deadline.

The US confrontation against Iran's regional influence continued with it bombing Iranian militias in Iraq and Syria at the end of 2019 which resulted in dozens of casualties and injuries, and the killing of the godfather of the Iranian expansionist project Qassem Soleimani in Iraq on January 3, 2019. This was considered a severe blow, and it cannot be ignored. Moreover, targeting the leaders of the PMU, most notably Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, was also a blow to one of Iran's most important regional proxies.

Likewise, US efforts continued to tighten the screws on the Iranian political system. Within this goal, the United States has sought to transfer the arms embargo issue, which will expire in October 2020, to the UN Security Council, and tighten extensive sanctions on Iran. Table (2) shows the US sanctions that target companies and individuals who facilitate Iran in circumventing sanctions.

Table (2): US Sanctions on Foreign Entities That Cooperate With Iran in January and February 2020

Date	Sanctions
10 Jan.	Sanctioning 17 Iranian metal and mining companies, including a network of three entities based in China and the Seychelles, and a ship involved in the purchase, sale and transportation of Iranian mineral products.
11 Feb.	Sanctioning 13 people and institutions in China, Iraq, Russia and Turkey who support Iran's missile program.
25 Feb.	Five people were arrested for using a Polish company in order to sell Iranian oil to Chinese refineries.

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II. Iran's Confrontation Policy Against the US

The Iranian government considered the killing of Soleimani – and especially the scene of his funeral – an opportunity to restore its eroded legitimacy by leveraging it during the parliamentary elections that took place in February 2020. The hardliners raised the slogan “I am Qassem Soleimani.”⁽³⁾ Thus, the killing allowed the government to adjust the internal situation, and gained more time to deal with it. The killing provided an opportunity for Iran's hardliners to strengthen their position against the reformists, by engineering the elections in such a way to ensure a hardliner majority extremely loyal to the supreme leader in Parliament. Zarif said, “With all challenges and differences, all 82 million Iranians are one.”



The government in Iran also called for broad participation in the elections to entrench the political system's legitimacy and resistance. In response to US pressure, President Hassan Rouhani stressed that "these elections are very important...the political system in Iran desperately needs to show the world that the masses are in line." Khamenei considered participation in the elections as a religious and national duty.



In light of the US-Iran mutual escalation, hostile ideological rhetoric against the United States has returned. Moreover, the Iranian Parliament mandated the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Science, Research and Technology to add stories of US plots and crimes to books and curricula.⁽⁴⁾

Economically, the system is still betting on its ability to withstand, especially as the government believes that the economic situation is improving, as Rouhani said, "Iran is seeing better conditions in the upcoming months. This is the concept of the nation's resilience."

Militarily, Iran continued to support its missile program by trying to launch a new satellite, and Parliament approved an amendment to the 'Countermeasure' bill against the US designation of the IRGC as foreign terrorist organization. According to the new law, Iran designated the US Department of Defence as a terrorist organization. Iran also allocated 200 million euros from the National Development Fund to strengthen the capabilities of the Quds Force abroad.

In order to pressure the international parties to the JCPOA, Iran announced the fifth step in reducing its nuclear obligations. According to this step, Iran is no longer committed to any restrictions in the field of uranium enrichment. The IAEA continues its watch and investigation at Iranian sites, which is a clue that Iran is keen to preserve

the JCPOA.⁽⁵⁾ In response to the European triggering the dispute resolution mechanism (DRM), Iran has threatened to withdraw from the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT).

III. Implications and Repercussions

There is no doubt that the killing of Soleimani was a major shock to the Iranian political system and verified Soleimani's miscalculation in directly confronting the United States. However, the Iranian system ventured to respond and targeted US assets because Iran's credibility was at stake. Both parties sought to reduce the level of escalation and the crisis returned to the level preceding Soleimani's assassination; however, they both exploited the attack in Iraq to compete against each other in order to increase their respective spheres of influence in Iraq.

In light of these circumstances, the two sides reactivated their strategies. On the one hand, the United States continued to put pressure on the Iranian political system, and strengthened its regional presence, conveying a strong message to Iran that there are redlines that should not be crossed, and that the United States still has a strong presence in the region. It also continues to impose pressure internationally to bring about a complete collapse of the JCPOA by drawing European parties to its side, by pushing them to trigger the DRM. In addition, the United States has taken advantage of Iran's steps in reducing its nuclear obligations in order to re-impose international sanctions on Iran.

Iran, on the other hand, leveraged Soleimani's killing to rearrange its internal situation through mobilizing the Iranian people and using violence. The political system in Iran has aimed not to provoke the United States in order to avoid any direct confrontation that threatens the system's survival. The Iranian political system geared its policies towards strengthening its resistance strategy in all its political and economic aspects in order to counter external pressures. The system also returned to its calculated escalation strategy, by relying on its militias abroad to create indirect security challenges for the United States and its allies. Internationally, Iran announced the fifth stage of reducing its nuclear obligations, even though it tacitly means an end to the JCPOA, but the system left the door open for other parties to fulfil their obligations.

In the end, the relationship between the United States and Iran in the short and medium term will mostly be within the framework of limited confrontation, with the US intensifying pressure on Iran with the objective of forcing Iran to negotiate a new agreement consistent with its vision, in the midst of Iranian resistance and steadfastness, while testing Iran's ability to bear the cost of such a strategy, especially in political and economic terms. In addition, Iran will adopt a calculated indirect escalation policy against the United States in the region. This will ensure that Iran is not held responsible and does not face any heavy costs of the actions its undertakes. The massive burden falls on Iran, as the system faces a legitimacy crisis as a result of deteriorating living conditions and sanctions exacerbating the system's relationship with the people. The JCPOA may face collapse due to Iran's escalatory steps and in light of the current European position.

IRAN- EUROPE RELATIONS

Since its announcement regarding non-compliance with parts of the JCPOA on May 8, 2019, Iran has committed its fifth breach of the nuclear deal. As a result, the European troika resorted to triggering the Dispute Resolution Mechanism (DRM) under the JCPOA. Moreover, the UK ambassador to Tehran attended a vigil for the victims of the Ukraine plane crash. In this report, we discuss the aforementioned developments that took place in January and February.

I. Triggering the Dispute Resolution Mechanism

1- Reactions

Since 2020, Iran has continued to reduce its commitments under the nuclear deal. It committed its fifth breach in January, announcing explicitly that it will completely disregard the limit imposed on the permitted number of advanced uranium enrichment centrifuges. In addition, it announced breaching the limit set on its stockpile of enriched uranium. ⁽⁶⁾ On January 14, in a joint statement, the three European powers formally triggered the DRM as a countermeasure to Iranian violations of the restrictions set out in the nuclear deal. ⁽⁷⁾

The Iranians were somewhat shocked by the European decision, claiming that the Europeans did not take such steps when the United States unilaterally withdrew from the nuclear deal. They threatened to take tougher measures if the European Union implemented the DRM, which may eventually lead to the collapse of the nuclear deal



and the re-imposition of UN sanctions which had been lifted due to the JCPOA in 2015. Tensions increased to the extent that Iranian officials threatened to withdraw from the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT),⁽⁸⁾ like North Korea's withdrawal from the treaty in 2002.

Though the Americans accused Iran of not being forthright in answering the IAEA's questions, the Iranians confirmed that their nuclear program is monitored by the IAEA. "We have received irreversible harm or irreparable harm because of US sanctions, but nevertheless we will reverse the steps that we have taken provided that Europe takes steps that are meaningful," i.e. provide economic benefits, Iranian Foreign Minister, Mohammad Javad Zarif said.⁽⁹⁾ By triggering the DRM, the European troika and the European Union are keen to keep the nuclear deal alive; they do not want to cancel it, neither did they seek to submit the issue to the UN Security Council and reimpose sanctions on Iran, said Josep Borrell, the EU Policy Chief, at a press conference in Tehran. Borrell said that the three European countries agreed not to strictly abide by the 15 day JCPOA negotiation time limit, so that both sides would have more time to discuss their disagreements in order for Iran and other parties to comply once again with their obligations under the nuclear deal.⁽¹⁰⁾

At the meeting of the Joint Commission of the JCPOA on February 26, 2020,

"participants welcomed positive developments in the processing of first transactions by INSTEX [...] and reiterated their strong support and collective responsibility for the continuation of key nuclear non-proliferation projects that are an essential part of the JCPOA."⁽¹¹⁾ The meeting was instrumental in easing tensions between the European countries and Iran, temporarily. However, further steps are to be taken to make Iran completely comply with its nuclear commitments.

2- The Future of the European Decision

The Iranian government launched a plan to reduce its commitments under the nuclear deal to irritate the European Union which was unable to mitigate the economic crisis Iran suffered from due to the US sanctions. Iran took consecutive steps to persuade the European signatories to the nuclear deal to its side, seeking European solutions. Iran committed its fifth breach of the nuclear deal, following the US killing of the Quds Commander Qassem Soleimani, at that time the government was trying to ease the widespread public anger over its poor performance. The fifth breach indicated growing impatience with unfulfilled European promises, an Iranian government representative said.

After the European troika decided to trigger the DRM, the Iranians cooperated more with the European policy chief, whose efforts aim to return Iran to the negotiating table and uphold the nuclear deal. Without a shadow of a doubt, Iran does not want to cancel the deal nor does it want to bear a greater burden by losing the support of two permanent members of the UN Security Council in addition to Germany; a great world power that Iran is not ready to lose amidst its international isolation.

Though the nuclear deal is diplomatically and politically beneficial for the Iranian government, it prevents US-European coordination to reach an unanimous position towards Iran; consequently, Iran will face further pressure. Iran fully realizes that keeping the door open for negotiations paves the way for the future developments it wants. Time is a very crucial variable to change the US position towards Iran due to a potential change in the US administration and the international criticism of the US maximum pressure strategy against Iran.

The Europeans were fed up with Iran's violations of the nuclear deal. They sought to trigger the DRM and submit the issue to the UN Security Council. However, their escalation dramatically slowed down following the visit of Europe's top diplomat to

Tehran stressed that Europe would not strictly abide by JCPOA time limits to allow more time for diplomatic efforts and Europe would support the outcomes of the meeting of the Joint Commission of the JCPOA.

The Europeans aim to maintain regional security in the Middle East and contain Iran by forging political agreements. To achieve this goal, they should maintain the nuclear deal and ensure Iran's complete adherence to it. According to the Europeans, the nuclear deal is crucially significant for their security; any instability in the Middle East will lead to new waves of immigration and terrorism in Europe; similar to what Europe has suffered previously.

Moreover, they believe that the nuclear deal is strategically vital because it presents a landmark in resolving nuclear proliferation issues at the international level. It also highlights the effectiveness of European diplomacy and confirms that the Europeans make their decisions independently without US approval.



II. Iran Summons UK Ambassador: Calls to Expel Him

Following the US killing of the Quds Force Commander Qassem Soleimani and the Deputy Commander of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, the remarks made by the British prime minister and the country's defense and foreign affairs ministers in support of the US strike incited the Iranians. On January 7, the Iranian Foreign Ministry summoned the UK Ambassador Rob Macaire to Tehran over the remarks made by British officials in the aftermath of the US killing Soleimani.⁽¹²⁾

Iranian tensions reached their peak when the UK ambassador attended a vigil at AmirKabir University; he was arrested for a few hours and then released on January 11. The Iranian Foreign Ministry summoned the ambassador on January 12 over his participation in an "illegal gathering" and formally expressed its disappointment to the UK ambassador and government.⁽¹³⁾

The British ambassador tweeted, "Can confirm I wasn't taking part in any demonstrations! Went to an event advertised as a vigil for victims of #PS752 tragedy. Normal to want to pay respects – some of the victims were British." The UK Foreign

Secretary, Dominic Raab, denounced the ambassador's detention as a "flagrant violation" of international law.⁽¹⁴⁾ It is worth mentioning here that the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations recognizes the status of diplomatic agents and grants them privileges and immunities; he/she shall not be liable to any form of arrest or detention.

Tensions dramatically increased at home, protesters demonstrated in front of the UK embassy in Tehran calling to expel its ambassador.⁽¹⁵⁾ He left Iran on January 20 and returned on February 6.⁽¹⁶⁾ The British government confirmed that his trip had been planned some time ago and was not due to his participation in a vigil for victims of the Ukraine plane crash.

The UK ambassador's detention dramatically escalated tensions in the region, and it was tackled by taking into consideration other sensitive issues; including its nuclear program, the IRGC intervention in the region; the ramifications of the US killing of Soleimani; and the activation of the DRM to counter Iran's fifth breach of the nuclear deal. European-Iranian efforts to maintain the nuclear deal eased the diplomatic tensions resulting from the ambassador's detention and eventually led to containing the crisis.

Conclusion

European-Iranian relations fluctuated in January after the Iranian government announced its fifth breach of the nuclear deal. The European troika resorted to triggering the DRM under the JCPOA. However, it takes at least 15 days until the DRM is approved by all parties involved, when done, the joint commission aims to address the disputes between the parties, if unable to do so, the disputes can be submitted to the UN Security Council. After holding several meetings and exerting efforts in February, the European policy chief managed to ease tensions between the two sides. The Europeans, as a result, confirmed that they do not want to cancel the nuclear deal or submit it to the UN Security Council, given the fact that the Europeans will not follow the JCPOA time limits. Iran, in return, expressed its commitment to comply with the JCPOA as long as the other parties to the deal comply with their commitments and offer economic mechanisms that help Iran revive its collapsed economy.

Finally, in the context of the UK ambassador's participation in a vigil for the victims of the Ukraine plane crash in Tehran, the Iranians claimed that he is a foreigner who participated in an illegal gathering, while the British government stated that the detention of its ambassador is a blatant violation of international law; the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations. Their mutual diplomatic efforts managed to contain the crisis. They overcame the ambassador crisis and negotiated on vital strategic issues such as the nuclear deal and US-Iran tensions in January and February.

IRAN-RUSSIA RELATIONS

Despite their current tensions over the Syrian crisis, Iran and Russia maintained their political, economic and military collaboration. Amidst the rising tensions in the region resulting from the Iraqi and Syrian crises, the Iranian foreign minister visited Russia in January 2020, confirming the strong collaboration between the two countries. Iran continued boosting its economic relations with the Russia-led Eurasia Economic Union (EAEU); a regional trading block which also includes Belarus, Kazakhstan, Armenia and Kyrgyzstan. Iran signed a free-trade agreement with the EAEU paving the way for Iran to obtain full membership in the union. In this part of the report, we review the most significant developments in Iran-Russia relations during January-February at the economic, political and military levels.

I. Zarif's Visit to Moscow

According to many political observers, Zarif's visit to Moscow on December 29, 2019 happened at the right time as the region was witnessing several political developments in late 2019; most prominently escalating Israeli strikes against Iranian sites in Syria. This was in addition to the anti-Iran protests in Iraq and Syria and the US direct attacks on the headquarters of the PMF in Iraq. His visit came just before the period Iran gave to the Europeans to comply with their obligations under the JCPOA otherwise Tehran would launch its fourth step to scale down its nuclear commitments. Also, the visit came after the joint naval drills between Russia, Iran and China codenamed "Marine Security Belt."⁽¹⁷⁾

Though it is not unusual for Zarif to visit Moscow, this visit was ambiguous as no statement was issued on the topics discussed during the visit. It is worth mentioning here that the visit came just after the PMF attack on the US K1-Air Base in Iraq that killed an American contractor and Iraqi military officers. It probably confirms the American claim that they killed Qassem Soleimani because there had been an Iranian plan to attack American troops deployed in Iraq.

II. Military Collaboration

Russia rejected the extension of an arms embargo on Iran because it intends to take the lion's share of Iran's arms purchases. The UN arms embargo on Iran expires in October 2020. The United States has warned about the risks of not extending the arms embargo on Iran, which will endanger world security. "The @UN arms embargo on #Iran and the travel ban on Qasem Soleimani expire in October 2020. Our #CountdownToTerror clock is tracking how long until Iran is unleashed to create new global turmoil. We must not let this happen," US Secretary of State Michael Pompeo said on Twitter. It is worth mentioning that the arms embargo on Iran was part of the 2015 nuclear deal and expires in October 2020.⁽¹⁸⁾

In the same context, to uphold the nuclear deal with Iran, Russia warned Tehran from taking any step to withdraw from the NPT. Russia's Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov said that Russia urges Iran to comply with its obligations to the IAEA. Earlier, Iran's Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif had said, "If the Europeans continue their improper behavior or send Iran's file to the Security Council, we will withdraw from the NPT."⁽¹⁹⁾

III. Economic Partnership

To circumvent US sanctions and its ramifications on the Iranian economy, Russia and Iran enhanced their economic collaboration. Iran and Russia created their own transaction system as an alternative to SWIFT. Ahmad Ali Reza Beji, an Iranian member of Parliament, said that Iran and Russia can collaborate with each other to avoid western pressure.⁽²⁰⁾

In this context, Rouhollah Latifi, spokesman for Iran's Customs Administration said on February 18, 2020 that the trade volume between Iran and the EAEU reached \$2 billion; the volume of exports hiked to 41 percent and 5 percent in terms of weight and value during the first ten months of the current year as compared to the same period last year, and the volume of exports from Iran to the EAEU registered a 114 percent and 72 percent hike in terms of weight and value respectively as compared to the same period last year. Iran's top importers from the EAEU are Armenia and Russia; the top imports include liquid gas, food and fruits.⁽²¹⁾

To boost their trade balance, the Iranian Ambassador to Russia Kazem Jalali met with the Chairman of the State Duma Committee on International Affairs Leonid Eduardovich Slutsky on Tuesday, January 14, 2020. They discussed possible ways to strengthen bilateral trade.⁽²²⁾ Jalali also met with Russia's Deputy Minister of Transport Vladimir Tokarev and the head of the Iran-Russia joint working group. They discussed ways of enhancing collaboration in the development of railways, seaports and airports. Jalali highlighted the significance of Iran's northern ports in shipping goods between the two countries, emphasising the capabilities of investment in the transport sector and his country's willingness to boost ties in all investment sectors with such a strong country like Russia. Russia's deputy minister of transportation announced that both countries launched a project for the electrification of the Iranian Garmsar-Inche Burun railway line.⁽²³⁾ Russian Railways pulled out of the project under the pressure of US sanctions and Iran cannot sue its Russian counterpart, Interfax reported on February 25, 2020.⁽²⁴⁾



Conclusion

In January and February Iran-Russia relations went through ups and downs due to the impact of recent developments in 2019. The killing of Soleimani and the rising tensions between Washington and Tehran enhanced mutual cooperation between the two countries. Russia's role has been noticeably active in Syria where it strengthened its collaboration with Iran to protect its economic and political interests and acquire the lion's share of Syria's reconstruction projects while entrenching its presence in the country. It also supported the UN arms embargo on Iran to be lifted.

Conclusion

The challenges Iran faced in January and February 2020 clearly indicate that the country is facing a severe crisis in its policy-making. The military mindset dominates the Iranian government's performance in crisis management. The government advances its narrow political interests to entrench its expansionist project in the region, turning a blind eye to the interests of the people and the state.

The government's performance in countering the outbreak of coronavirus is a good example here. The clerics, who are keen to protect their own interests, called on people to visit holy shrines thereby endangering public health. To ensure the largest participation in the parliamentary elections, the politicians extended voting and postponed the announcement of the results.

Despite Zarif's continuous efforts to make the Guardian Council comply with the regulations of the Financial Action Task Force (FATF), the bill was approved by Parliament but was rejected by the Guardian Council. The FATF officially blacklisted the Iranian government due to its involvement in money laundering and terrorist financing. The IRGC refused to disclose its bank accounts and transactions conducted with its militias deployed in the region. The FATF decision will most definitely affect Iranian individuals, firms, and governmental bodies because their foreign bank accounts will be closed and transactions will be banned. Iranian trade will be paralyzed and Iranian students studying abroad will not be able to receive money from their families in Iran.

The hardliners won the parliamentary elections; clerics, military men, and former ministers in Ahmadinejad's government won the largest share of parliamentary seats. It is expected that the next Iranian president will be a hardliner, marking the end of the moderate program just as the reformist one had ended before.

Reading Iran's behavior during a year-and-a-half of US sanctions, we realize that Iran has been very stubborn and has refused to return to the negotiating table, dialogue is the only solution to Iran's crises. The Iranian government has not paid attention to public suffering and instead has focused on its expansionist project in the region.

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