

MONTHLY REPORT



IRAN CASE FILE

Your window on Iran from inside and abroad

July 2020



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THE EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Throughout July 2020, Iran was busy trying to resolve its main issues. It was attempting to avoid the dangers resulting from the collapse of the nuclear deal and the subsequent confrontation with the West. It was also attempting to mend its deteriorating relations with the European countries after the pressure it placed on them through reducing its nuclear commitments failed. Iran focused this month on signing economic and military agreements with its traditional allies to compensate for the damage caused by the maximum pressure strategy imposed on it by the United States. This strategy represents the biggest challenge which Iran has been facing over the past two years.

During this month, Iran did not witness popular anger resulting from its mounting economic problems. This is perhaps due to the temporary solutions taken by the government over the past two months such as offering justice shares and distributing cash subsidies. The interactions at the ideological level were calm and cautious. Amid the ongoing coronavirus pandemic in Iran and the date of Muharram rallies quickly approaching that start in Iran and move towards the Iraqi city of Karbala every year, the Iranian people are awaiting fatwas to suspend these rallies. The Iranian leadership has used these rituals in the past for political purposes whether to demonstrate its leadership over Shiites or to reaffirm its expanding influence in Iraq. Undoubtedly, these rituals will clash with the Iraqi government's measures to control its borders.

Through their fatwas, Najaf's senior clerics, such as Sistani, desire to reduce the number of pilgrims attending these rituals. Meanwhile, Makarem Shirazi, a Shiite cleric based in Iran, believes that the Ashoura rituals cannot be suspended. The debate between the government and the seminary is expected to mount in the coming days, particularly as the religious seminary and its figures are pushing Iraqi society to expel US forces, in spite of the consequences at this sensitive time.

In the political sphere, calmness prevailed at the popular level. However, there were

some activities which indicate the future course of interactions of the religious elite. The newly-elected Parliament, which is dominated by conservatives and IRGC figures as well as individuals linked with Ahmadinejad's former government, and populist Meddahs, launched a campaign to interrogate President Hassan Rouhani as a prelude to removing him due to his failure in fulfilling his electoral promises.

The nuclear deal's loopholes, which Rouhani signed with the Europeans, enabled them to abandon their commitments while Iran was unable to force them to observe their commitments under the agreement or obtain the necessary compensation it expected from these countries. This hostile atmosphere in the new Parliament prepares the ground for the moderates to be sidelined in the presidential elections scheduled to be held next year. This will result in the conservatives dominating the political scene. Only the support of the supreme leader has enabled Rouhani to survive the new conservatives' unrelenting criticism. The supreme leader believes that the internal situation should be kept stable with no need for political accusations to be hurled due to the challenges Iran is facing at the time being.

As part of the Iranian strategy to entrench its longstanding alliances, Iran has signed a long-term agreement with China, its biggest economic partner. Deepening cooperation between the two sides is perhaps nothing new.

But what has resulted in this agreement attracting more global attention is that it coincides with Iran's deepening economic crisis.

The timing of this agreement amidst Iran's economic crisis leads people to assume that China wants to control Iran via a series of long-term agreements, which cannot be revoked even if the country's relations with the West improve one day. For a while, Russia and China intended to sign agreements with Iran after the nuclear deal was signed in 2015.

Also, the secretive nature of the agreement raises concerns about China gaining preferential advantages regarding accessing the coasts of the Arabian Gulf and the Arabian Sea via Iranian territories.

This could change, though relatively, the balance of power equation in the region considering China's ongoing tensions with both the United States and India. This is in addition to the growing military inclination of China in recent years, with Beijing initiating a policy to build military bases overseas.

Meanwhile, nuclear diplomacy regarding the future of the UNSC arms embargo on Iran continued in high speed. Iran activated the dispute resolution mechanism (DRM) in response to the European Troika [Germany, France and the UK] triggering the DRM in January 2020. Tehran has alleged that the United States and the European signatories to the JCPOA have violated the terms of the deal. Further the Russians have assured the Iranians that the UNSC arms embargo, which expires on October 2020, will not be extended. Though Tehran had kept denying the sabotage of a series of mysterious blasts, which hit its most strategic nuclear facilities, it finally admitted that the attack against the Natanz nuclear fuel site had substantially destroyed the Iran Centrifuge Assembly Center. As for Iran's interactions at the Arab level, Iraq was the most outstanding scene for its interactions. July 2020 witnessed the Iraqi Prime Minister Mostafa al-Kazimi visiting Tehran. This was part of Iraq's effort to usher in a new phase in its relations with Tehran by asserting Iraq's right to territorial sovereignty, such as controlling its borders, restricting arms to the state and armed forces and disarming militias.

The Iraqi prime minister maintained official visiting protocols when he refused to meet with the Quds Force's new commander Esmail Qaani, who does not have diplomatic standing and does not hold a ministerial position warranting him to meet foreign officials.

He also refused Khamenei's request to pay the debts owed to Iran in US dollars. This is in compliance with US sanctions which prohibit US dollar transactions with Iran.

Due to rapid interactions in Iraq, Iran sees Baghdad as its top priority in its relations in the region. Iraq has become Iran's battlefield in its war with the United States. In contrast, we have seen a relative calm in the Yemeni file during the month of July. However, new pieces of evidence and reports documenting Iran's involvement in the smuggling of weapons to the Houthi rebels have emerged. This comes amid the Houthis practicing blackmail tactics similar to the Iranians. The Houthis have taken control over port revenues and have hinted at causing an environmental disaster through sinking the Safer oil tanker which has been seized by them.

As for international affairs, Iranian interactions, when it comes to relations with the United States, were characterized by a continual rejection of any negotiations with the United States. Khamenei said that he will not enter negotiations with the United States for Trump to use this as a diplomatic triumph to boost his position in the presidential elections. However, he has hinted at the possibility of entering negotiations if Trump loses the presidential elections.

The United States spared no efforts in imposing more sanctions and ensuring that Iran must pay compensation after it condemned Tehran for its involvement in the Khobar bombings in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. US fighter jets intercepted a Mahan Air Iranian passenger plane over Syrian territories after suspecting it to be carrying weapons to Syria. This incident resulted in the US imposing a new redline for Iran to prevent its transfer of weapons and limit its role in the Middle East.

As for Iranian-European relations, after losing hope that the Europeans could assist it in circumventing the US sanctions imposed on it, Iran hopes that the Europeans will not support US efforts to extend the arms embargo on it. The Europeans have approved of US efforts, but at the same time they have not undertaken measures to trigger the dispute resolution mechanism and freeze the nuclear agreement. Europe still adopts an ambivalent position because it seeks to obtain the greatest possible gains from both sides: Washington and Tehran. Maybe the first gain at the present time is for Iran to announce that it has agreed to pay compensation to the families of those killed in the Ukrainian plane which was downed in Iranian airspace by the IRGC when it fired two missiles.

Internal Affairs

The Internal Affairs part sheds light on four files, the first of which is The Ideological File. It discusses the religious elites' call to end the US presence in Iraq and the Ashoura related fatwas considering the spread of coronavirus in both Iraq and Iran. The Political File touches on the Iranian Parliament's attempt to depose President Rouhani and tip the scales further in favor of the conservatives ahead of the presidential elections. Meanwhile, the Economic File focuses on the details of the economic deal between Iran and China and its future ramifications. As for The Military File, the sabotages attacks against Iran were discussed including the Natanz incident. This is in addition Iran's nuclear diplomacy in regard to the future of the UNSC arms embargo.



THE IDEOLOGICAL FILE

This file casts light on the religious and ideological developments in relation to the religious elite in Iran and the Shiite religious seminary during July 2020, and the impact of these developments on the religious and political scene in the country.

During June, the file highlighted the fatwas of some clerics which stipulated the obligation to expel US forces from Iraq. First, this month, the Ideological File sheds light on the religious elites' call to end the US presence in Iraq after Khamenei's meeting with the Iraqi prime minister. Second, the file discusses clerical fatwas in relation to holding ceremonies and assemblies considering the ongoing coronavirus crisis in Iraq.

We seek to provide answers to some questions regarding the Iranian religious elite's remarks about the US presence in Iraq and the impact of these remarks on the political and social landscape in Iraq. Also, we seek to provide answers about the reasons behind the issuing of fatwas by some clerics rendering the suspension of ceremonies unlawful, with some clerics elevating these ceremonies from the status of being 'recommended without being obligatory' to the status of being obligatory.

I. Supporters of Velayat-e Faqih and the Call to End the US Presence in Iraq

The Iranian religious elites are still calling for the expulsion of US forces from Iraq.

Several religious figures reiterated this month that Iran will back Iraq to end the US presence. Although Iraq has not officially requested this support, however, Iranian elites supportive of Velayat-e Faqih have indicated their vision toward Iraqi policymaking. Ayatollah Khatami, member of the presidential body of the Assembly of Experts said, "The leader of the Islamic revolution focused, at the foreign level, that the United States is the common enemy of the Islamic world. It is the enemy of an independent Iraq and the enemy of the Islamic Republic of Iran."⁽¹⁾

These remarks are reminiscent of the remarks made by the supreme leader when he specified the identity of Iraq and its enemy. This should be left to the Iraqis if there is any respect for Iraq's sovereignty as Khamenei has repeated many times, "Iran has never interfered and will never interfere in the affairs of Iraq."⁽²⁾

The remarks of Khatami reflect the comments of the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei during his meeting with the Iraqi Prime Minister Mostafa al-Kazimi. He said, "The Islamic republic expects that our Iraqi friends know America and realize that the US presence in any country is a source of corruption and destruction. Iran expects the implementation of the decision of the government, people, and Parliament of Iraq to expel US forces, as their presence undermines security and stability."⁽³⁾

This was repeated by Khatami when he said, "The Iraqi state should realize the demands of the Iraqi people and Parliament."⁽⁴⁾

He then reminded the Iraqis of the killing of Qassem Soleimani on Iraqi soil, which justifies ending the presence of US forces. "Hajj Qassem Soleimani was hosted by the Iraqi people and government. Therefore, assassinating him is a clear insult to this government."⁽⁵⁾

Due to this insult, Iran will not leave Iraq alone in this conflict with the Americans,

according to Ayatollah Beheshti, member of the Assembly of Experts.⁽⁶⁾

Ayatollah Hashem Bushehri, secretary general of the Supreme Council of Religious Seminaries, made similar remarks.⁽⁷⁾

It seems that the Iranian religious elites supportive of Velayat-e Faqih used the remarks of Ayatollah Khatami during his meeting with the Iraqi prime minister as a basis to prepare their followers to drive out US forces and to keep the issue alive in the collective mind of Iraqis in general and in the religious mindset in particular.

Yet, it appears that the strong interference of clerics in this issue is considered by Iran as a basis to strengthen the legitimacy of the acts carried out by militias against US positions in Iraq. This will result in political, military, or religious clashes between the conflicting parties. Hence, the remarks made by clerics are intended to legitimize these potential conflicts. This decision to expel US forces at the strategic level should have been left to Iraq's religious and political elites, as they are constitutionally tasked with this issue, not left to the Iranians to decide. But perhaps the Iranians believe this decision would undermine the government of Mostafa Al-Kazimi and his recent political decisions against pro-Velayat-e Faqih militias.

II. Coronavirus Amid Muharram Gatherings in Najaf

Najaf has attempted to reduce the number of ceremonies and annual consolation assemblies held in Muharram due to the coronavirus pandemic. Ayatollah Sistani has argued that sorrow can be expressed in different ways other than large gatherings.

"There are several ways to express sorrow and grief during this painful occasion and show sympathy towards the Prophet Mohammed and his untainted family members."⁽⁸⁾

Among the different ways that Sistani alluded to broadcasting consolation assemblies via television stations and advising religious and cultural centers and institutions to



coordinate with respected preachers and experienced reciters in this respect. They should mobilize and urge believers to listen to them and interact from their homes.⁽⁹⁾

As for public assemblies, Sistani made it obligatory to strictly observe the health controls through implementing social distancing and wearing face masks. In addition, other protocols to prevent the spread of the coronavirus should be observed including limiting the number of attendees in accordance with the recommendations issued by the concerned entities. These measures vary in accordance with resources that are available. These assemblies may be held in open-air or closed places. The measures taken by different towns also vary according to the level of the spread of the virus.⁽¹⁰⁾

In the same context, cleric al-Fayyad said, "Holding consolation ceremonies at shrines, mosques and all public places depends on implementing the instructions of doctors and medical staff, and the advice of the World Health Organization and the decision of the Crisis Cell."⁽¹¹⁾

Cleric Bashir al-Najafi said, "Amid commitment to observe medical protocols, we could hold the Imam Hossein-inspired ceremonial rituals at the assemblies, processions and other rituals which lovers of Imam Hossein are accustomed to performing."⁽¹²⁾

The fatwas of the three Najaf clerics were like one another. Other clerics issued similar fatwas such as al-Haeri. He said, "Performing rituals is among the confirmed recommended acts in Islam, but we are going through exceptional circumstances. Performance of rituals by believers should be done in such a way so that they do not violate what they must abide by in light of the spread of this pandemic."⁽¹³⁾

Meanwhile, there were other more radical voices. They made what is recommended to be obligatory, even though these rituals are generally not considered to be obligatory by the sect. The striking matter is that all these fatwas were issued by Iranian clerics. Cleric Alawi al-Jarjani rendered obligatory the observance of rituals. He said, "Holding consolation assemblies for the master of martyrs (PBUH) in the sacred month of Muharram is among the most important religious rituals and it should not be forgotten. In the current circumstances where coronavirus is spreading, the consolation should be held in the traditional manner, while taking into consideration the health protocols. Maybe it should be held via modern and innovative means by dressing up in black, raising the consolation banners and taking care of oneself."⁽¹⁴⁾

Makarem Shirazi's remarks were more politicized and expressed Iran's desire. "Consolation assemblies of the master of martyrs cannot be suspended under any pretext. During the era of Reza Khan, what had they done about Ashoura?"⁽¹⁵⁾

He considered the rituals to be among the fundamental issues of religion, not the subsidiary ones. "Of course, we have fundamentals which we cannot abandon, including the issue of holding the consolation assembly in the month of Muharram and Safar."⁽¹⁶⁾

We notice the use of terms such as "obligation," "impossibility," and "fundamentals" in the remarks made by al-Jarjani and Makarem Shirazi. This points to the fact that these rituals have been elevated well beyond their original status. However, rituals have been amplified in Iran since the era of the Safavids and Qajaris up to this day. Political and economic interests converge when it comes to the issue of rituals.⁽¹⁷⁾

Conclusion

The Ideological File for this month sheds light on two issues. The first is in relation to the keenness of the Iranian religious elite to end the US presence in Iraq and their strong remarks on this issue, making clear that expelling US forces remains an urgent priority, as well as exerting pressure on the Iraqis to implement Iranian objectives. The second issue is in relation to the clerical fatwas issued on holding consolation ceremonies during Ashoura considering the coronavirus pandemic.

Two important conclusions can be made. The first: the religious elite supportive of Velayat-e Faqih considers Iraq's affairs to be part of Iran's internal affairs, and directly addressed the Iraqis, bypassing Najaf's marjaya and attempting to impose a fait accompli. The actions and remarks of Iran's clerics are attributed to their belief in the absolute guardianship of the jurist (the supreme leader), as the ruler of Islam and Muslims.

The second is that some clerics expressed caution in relation to holding ceremonies and consolation assemblies. They feared an increase in the coronavirus infection rate and deaths in Iraq. Others conflated the status of these rituals, elevating them to an obligatory level, and imbuing them with political dimensions.

THE POLITICAL FILE

The desire of the conservatives to tighten the noose around President Hassan Rouhani has been evident since the parliamentary election campaign in February 2020. Some conservatives who dominate the new Parliament have vowed to hold Rouhani accountable for failing to make good on his electoral promises. Others have threatened to depose him from his position due to his weak performance throughout his two presidential terms. These positions and remarks are an indication that the new Parliament will be at odds with Rouhani. This prompted Rouhani to call for cooperation and the extension of friendship between the government and Parliament during his speech at the opening session of Parliament held in May. He hopes to spend his last year in office without facing more pressure.

I. The Bill to Hold Rouhani Accountable and the Conservatives' Call for Him to Be Deposed

The majority-wielding conservatives in the newly elected Parliament undertook their first step against the performance of the Iranian government when more than 130 members of Parliament signed a bill to hold President Rouhani accountable. This bill includes several files such as Rouhani's signing of the nuclear deal which the conservatives believe was a big mistake. This is in addition to the rise in the exchange rate of the dollar and the surge in real estate and vehicle prices.⁽¹⁸⁾

In addition, the chairmen of the 12 committees of the Iranian Parliament sent a message to President Rouhani. They called on him to put forward urgent solutions and to reconsider his economic policies which he has implemented during the past seven years of his presidency, particularly those related to the economy and livelihoods. In addition, they called on him to address fluctuating prices and his government's inability to control the markets.⁽¹⁹⁾

As for the five questions which lawmakers were about to pose to President Rouhani, they are as follows:

- What are the reasons behind the rise in the value of foreign currency and the national currency plummeting?
- What is the reason behind prices surging in the automobile and real estate markets, and why hasn't the government taken any steps to secure housing units for the people at affordable prices or steps to increase the quality of domestically manufactured cars over the past seven years?
- What is the strategic mistake which the government made in the nuclear deal that enabled the United States to withdraw from it without paying any price and resulted in the Europeans renouncing their obligations under the deal as well as not activating the INSTEX financial mechanism?
- The government was scheduled to help and compensate production units hurt by the spread of the coronavirus, but there are objections to this decision. What has the government done? And what is the extent of the help to be provided?
- The government provides the dollar to investors at the exchange rate of 4,200 tomans, how many billions of dollars has it provided? What is the fate of these dollars and what

is the impact of this on curbing the inflation rate?⁽²⁰⁾

■ The setbacks which the government has suffered over the past seven years, and the subsequent pressures and crises fueled the Iranian street's anger towards the government in particular and the Iranian political system in general. However, the bill to hold Rouhani accountable is not apolitical. Some radical lawmakers are calling for Rouhani to be ousted. He would be the second president to be deposed since the Iranian revolution after the former President Abolhassan Banisadr. The latter was deposed by Khomeini earlier in the 1980s after Parliament withdrew confidence in him and he was accused of being politically inept.

To repeat this scenario, member of the Resilience Front and representative of the eastern city of Kashmar, Javad Nikpen, said that the reasons which led to former President Abolhassan Banisadr being deposed apply to President Hassan Rouhani now. Therefore, he should be interrogated and declared incompetent as a prelude to deposing him.⁽²¹⁾

Others have gone further, calling for Rouhani to be tried, including the representatives of Esfahan province, Khomeyni Shahr and Mohammad Taghi. They lashed out at the government after questioning Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif in Parliament on July 5, 2020. They called for trying President Rouhani and his Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif for betraying Iran.⁽²²⁾

Such calls may be considered as an electoral tactic to deal a final blow to the reformists, the main supporters of the current government. They have faced setbacks and pressures ahead of the presidential elections scheduled to be held in 2021.

Therefore, the steps undertaken by the conservatives under the rubric of the Parliament are intended to impede Rouhani's path and end his ambitions, such as possibly succeeding the supreme leader.

II. The Supreme Leader Saves Rouhani From Interrogation and Rejects His Ouster

Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei impeded the efforts of the conservatives by rejecting their attempts to interrogate and depose Rouhani. This came in his first meeting with the members of the newly elected Parliament via videoconference.

Khamenei considers the current Parliament to be one of the most powerful and most revolutionary parliaments since the victory of the Iranian revolution in 1979. He stressed that he refuses to recognize differences among the three branches of power. Although the Iranian Parliament granted its members the right to question the president, however, the supreme leader objected to this and he justified his opposition to calls for Rouhani to be tried based on the following:

■ The people expect the three branches of power in the country to express the truth and let go of their disagreements.

■ The relationship between the Parliament and government should be within the framework of the law and Sharia, away from accusations and insults.

■ The last year of any government is usually a sensitive year. Therefore, there should be no move to weaken it.

■ Khamenei adopts the opinion that a government should perform its duties until the last day of its term. After the end of its term, it should hand over to the incoming government.

■ He called for unity and harmony in the country in the face of the enemy which deploys all its political, economic and media capabilities to fight Iran.⁽²³⁾

The position of Supreme Leader Khamenei was a blessing for Rouhani who had been facing pressure from the members of Parliament and his foreign minister was hit with disparaging comments, which amounted to some members of Parliament accusing him



of lying in the special session to interrogate him on July 5, 2020.⁽²⁴⁾

Following the supportive comments of the supreme leader, Rouhani reiterated that he would remain in power until the end of his second term. He pledged to Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei that he would do his utmost until the last day of his presidency with high spirits and enthusiasm to serve the Iranian people.⁽²⁵⁾

On the significance of the supreme leader's opposition to questioning and ousting Rouhani, it could be said that the reasonings cited by Khamenei may not convince many radical lawmakers. But they are obliged to accept them as they have been made by the highest authority within the Iranian political system. Yet Khamenei's refusal to question and depose Rouhani led to confusion among conservatives in Parliament, with them failing to correctly understand the position of the supreme leader. Khamenei fears Rouhani's ouster could lead to a political vacuum and trigger unrest in the country.

In 2018, when calls for dismissing Rouhani mounted due to his government's mishandling of the economic file, the supreme leader plainly rejected this call. He said that Rouhani should remain in his position and fulfil his duties to resolve the problems to prevent more chaos. He described those who called on the government to resign at that time as "working to implement the schemes of enemies."⁽²⁶⁾

There are other factors which prompted the supreme leader to resist calls to interrogate and depose Rouhani's government, including the current economic circumstances which Iran is facing, US sanctions and the worsening economic and health conditions due to rising coronavirus infection and death rates. There is another factor which could be behind Khamenei's desire to allow Rouhani to continue in office until the end of his second presidential term. The parliamentary attempts to oust Rouhani with the aim to address the country's economic challenges may turn out to be ineffective or impossible at the time being. If Rouhani is ousted, this means his Vice President Eshaq Jahangiri would take his place until the date of holding the coming presidential elections, according to Article 131 of the Iranian Constitution. It has been proven to the Iranian people over the past few years that the performance of Eshaq Jahangiri is no better than Rouhani. Also, Article 131 of the Constitution stipulates the necessity to hold presidential elections within a maximum of 50 days from the date of the president's ouster. It could be difficult to hold the elections so quickly considering the coronavirus pandemic, the

increasing number of infections and the government's intention to increase protocols to prevent the virus spreading further.

Conclusion

The position of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei in rejecting the questioning and ousting of the president is a green light for Rouhani to continue his second presidential term until its end. This provided a way out for Rouhani who had been cornered by the members of Parliament. Probably, The radicals who signed the bill to question Rouhani as well as those who wanted to oust and try him did not expect that Rouhani would manage to find a way out of his dilemma.

But this does not mean that the Parliament dominated by the conservatives will stop leveling criticism at the performance of Rouhani's government, especially in light of the ongoing difficulties and challenges facing Iran such as the nuclear deal, the US sanctions, and the crippling economic crisis.

THE ECONOMIC FILE

The Economic File sheds light on an issue which stirred a great deal of controversy during July. It is related to the leaked reports about Iran signing an economic and security partnership agreement for 25 years with China. There has been no official comment from China so far. Thus, we will focus on the nature of this agreement, its provisions and the nature of internal differences about it, as well as the future horizons of whether it will be implemented in light of the historical and contemporary developments in Iranian-Chinese economic relations.

I. History of Economic Relations Between Iran and China

Iran-China relations date back to the 1920s when the two countries signed a friendship agreement in the Italian capital Rome.⁽²⁷⁾

The remarkable point is that this agreement was signed at a time when the Iranian Parliament was closed. When it was reopened, the agreement faced opposition from the Zoroastrian member of Parliament Arbab Kikhsru who said that the treaty signed for economic reasons would bankrupt Iranian traders, as Iran exports nothing to China but opium while China would dump Iran with expensive and nonessential goods.⁽²⁸⁾

Weakness was the hallmark of economic relations between the two countries during the tenure of Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi. He prioritized the Europeans and Americans in his foreign policy agenda despite the exchange of official visits, including the visit of a Chinese delegation to Iran in 1978 and in return Iran sent delegations to China. These visits intended to boost Iran's ability to maintain a balance in the sphere of international relations.⁽²⁹⁾

Economic relations deepened after the success of the Iranian revolution in 1979 as the political and regional viewpoints of the two countries converged, with Iran's policy diverging from the American and European circles.

Below, we highlight the trajectory of economic relations between Iran and China after the 1979 revolution through four basic phases:⁽³⁰⁾

A. Slight support (1979-1989)

During this period, economic relations were still in the beginning phase. China supported Iran via supplying military equipment and transferred warfare technology during the Iran-Iraq war. Iran did not have confidence in Chinese products. Thus, its trade with China was low and it constituted less than 1.5 percent of its trade with the outside world.

B. Gaining confidence and reconstruction (1989-1991)

China attempted during this phase to gain the confidence of Iranian policymakers toward Chinese industries. It helped Iran in its reconstruction after the devastating eight-year war such as helping to repair infrastructure, selling it oil, equipment and helping to build dams and power stations. Trade exchange began to double between the two countries, reaching nearly \$341 million in 1991, but it was completely in favor of China.

C. Boosting of relations (1992-2005)

During this phase, Iranian confidence in Chinese technology and goods was strengthened. China had already helped Iran in developing major development projects such as the Tehran metro in 1992 and had transferred advanced technology. On the other side, Iranian exports to China were still limited and included oil and raw minerals. But the exports were on the rise compared to the previous phase.

D. The growing basic partnership (2006-now)

The economic ties between the two countries ushered in a new deeper and more cooperative phase. China sought to win a big share in the Iranian market, particularly in the commercial and service sectors. Iran relied on Chinese investments to develop its oil and petrochemical industries. China's dependence on Iranian oil imports increased. By the end of the 2000s, trade had significantly grown, with China becoming the biggest trade partner for Iran. China seized nearly one-third of Iranian commercial transactions globally in 2017, but it declined thereafter due to US sanctions. (See Table 1).

Table 1: Iran's Trade With China Compared to Its Trade With the World (US Dollars/Billions)

State/year	1981	1988	1998	2000	2008	2011	2017
With China	0.122	0.511	1	2.3	23.5	38.5	39
With the world	23.5	18.7	27.4	39.2	164.2	176	116.2
China's portion from Iran's trade with the world	0.5 %	2.7 %	3.6 %	6%	14%	22%	33.5%

Source: Researcher's calculations depending on data from IMF, direction of trade statistics- European Commission 2020

II. The Nature and Provisions of the 25-year Partnership Agreement

With no clear details or confirmation from China, Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif announced on July 6 that Iran is negotiating a partnership agreement with China, which will elevate the relationship between the two countries to a strategic level.^[31]

The comments triggered a wave of interactions and speculation inside Iran about the nature of this ambiguous agreement, its terms, and conditions and its alleged 25-year term.

No official text about the details of the partnership document between the two countries has been published. But news of its details was leaked in an article written in Petroleum Economist Magazine, quoting a senior source close to the Iranian Ministry of Petroleum.^[32]

The leaked provisions of the agreement are as follows:

1. Huge investments totaling \$400 billion over 25 years, covering Iranian railways, ports, airports, 5G networks and telecommunications.
2. In return, China will receive guaranteed supplies of Iranian oil, products, and gas for the 25-year term.



3. Establishing free trade zones in Maku in northwest Iran, Abadan near Iraq, and Qeshm, an island in the Gulf.
4. Allowing China to access the key Iranian port of Jask outside the Strait of Hormuz.⁽³³⁾
5. Deepening military and security cooperation in the Gulf.⁽³⁴⁾
6. Deploying nearly 5,000 Chinese security forces in Iran.⁽³⁵⁾

The provisions of the agreement triggered a divergence internally in regard to the partnership. On the one hand, many Iranian media outlets, and lawmakers⁽³⁶⁾ defended the significance of the agreement as it will lead to an economic boom and break the US sanctions imposed on Iran since mid-2018. It is also a prelude to a dangerous Chinese defiance of the United States.

On the other side, some columnists, writers, politicians, and public figures such as former President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad opposed the agreement. They deemed it as conceding Iranian sovereignty as the decades-long agreement would lead to Chinese control over Iran's economy and resources.⁽³⁷⁾

As for the official position of China, it has yet to be announced. China has remained completely silent, refusing to confirm or deny what has been mentioned about the agreement, until the time of writing this piece.

III. Prospects of the Long Term Iranian-Chinese Partnership

This agreement shall be a main turning point in Iran's policy if implemented according to the leaked reports. This comes as Iranian policy has for decades adopted slogans of national independence and exhibited extreme caution towards outsiders since the 1979 revolution which raised the slogan of 'No East, No West.' Iranian resources for long periods had been under the monopoly of former imperial powers such as Britain and Russia during the past two centuries.

To clearly imagine the prospects of the alleged Chinese-Iranian partnership agreements, we need to examine the historical setting. It has been noticed over the past decade that China has a powerful presence in Iran. It has taken advantage of Iran's isolation and economic sanctions to develop a market for its products. This is while

Iran's economic and trade relations were declining with all the countries of the world, specifically since 2011, the year in which the UN Security Council imposed sanctions on Iran. ⁽³⁸⁾

Although China refused to recognize the recent US sanctions in 2018, and resisted them, the US pressure was significant this time. China's trade with Iran decreased by 34 percent, or nearly \$10 billion, in 2019. In addition, major Chinese government companies investing in Iran withdrew from the Iranian market, as they became more involved in the US market.

Based on the foregoing: the prospects of the Chinese Iranian long-term agreement can be seen from the following two perspectives:

The first perspective: It is a mere lever aimed to make gains for China and Iran.

The second perspective: the two sides will implement the agreement.

According to the first perspective: the agreement is merely a lever. It expresses the strong desire of the Iranian and Chinese sides to put pressure on the current US administration to change its position toward the two sides, however, it is possible the implementation of the agreement could be hindered on the ground due to the following reasons:

A. The impact of US sanctions on Chinese companies - including public companies - has become greater than ever before due to their increased involvement in the US market and their commitment to international financial transparency standards (such as FATF standards). This makes firms wary of financial isolation or punishment via expulsion from the US market in case of investing in Iran.

B. Fear of losing control of Iranian foreign policy as well as the sharp divisions at home towards the provisions of the agreement as discussed.

C. The nature of Iranian foreign policy is based on a no-trust position towards outsiders, especially as it is in a weak negotiating position with China.

However, Iran and China want to exert pressure for:

■ Iran's dire need to ease the tough commercial and financial blockade imposed on it two years ago, which has led to an unprecedented economic downturn as well as soaring unemployment and inflation rates. This has coincided with the painful consequences of the outbreak of coronavirus.

■ The Chinese desire to deter US President Donald Trump from interfering in its internal affairs, and its policies towards Hong Kong. In addition, its desire to curb US military deployment in the South China Sea as well as to avert the US president's discriminatory economic policies towards Chinese products.

With regard to the second perspective, it is in relation to reaching a formula on implementing the provisions of the agreement, particularly those provisions which favor China, such as: the provisions serving the security and strategic vision of China including security and military deployment in the countries through which the Silk Road passes and diversifying the sources of oil supplies from the Eastern Mediterranean region.

Also, its implementation depends on convincing public opinion on the Iranian home front regarding the terms of the agreement which have met with many objections. It also depends on China knowing US policy towards it after the US presidential elections in 2020. This will have a big role in deciding the position of China toward Iran over the coming years.

THE MILITARY FILE

Diplomacy has been faltering since the United States withdrew from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2018. Since its signing, Iran has been relentlessly pursuing its agenda of deadly interference in the Middle East by arming its militias with armed drones and deadly ballistic missiles. In the early morning of July 2, Tehran found itself hit where it hurt the most. A fire at the Natanz nuclear fuel site - a key nuclear facility - largely destroyed what is thought to be its most advanced building.⁽³⁹⁾ After underplaying the incident, Iran admitted that the sabotage had substantially destroyed the Iran Centrifuge Assembly Center (ICAC). The plant supplies high-speed, advanced centrifuges for enriching uranium.⁽⁴⁰⁾

It was not the first sabotage attack but rather one of many in three weeks. The other most notable one was on a missile factory in Khojir. Just like the Natanz incident it was downplayed as well, with the incident described as a fire in a gas supply line. The Khojir incident was also linked to a gas tank explosion.

Iran blamed Israel for the Natanz incident but did not offer a clear explanation as to what happened at the site. As a result, various explanations have been circulating. Some media reports quoted unnamed officials asserting that the damage at Natanz occurred due to explosives. Others hinted at a cyberattack similar to the one a decade ago that brought work at Natanz to a halt and eventually slowed down the enrichment process.⁽⁴¹⁾ Around 1,000 centrifuges were damaged but the destruction was far less than what was visualized by its planners.

Iran has vowed to avenge the Natanz incident. Tel Aviv has shown remarkable capability to penetrate deep inside Iran to carry out actions of its choosing. In 2018, a warehouse in Tehran targeted by Israel's Mossad successfully resulted in capturing a cache of secret documents weighing nearly half a ton. The booty was safely delivered to Israel.⁽⁴²⁾ So not only has Tel Aviv conducted a successful cyberattack against Tehran but also its agents have been able to penetrate the country via agents on the ground. Hence, a joint Israel-US cyberattack, or the planting of an explosive device are both possibilities. A third likely possibility, which if true would be more humiliating for the country, is a successful strike by a cruise missile, or a stealth fighter jet like an F-35i or a drone.

Israel has not come clean about the attack on the Natanz facility. Israeli's Defense Minister Benny Gantz told the state radio, "Everyone can suspect us in everything and all the time, but I don't think that's correct."⁽⁴³⁾ Addressing a conference, Israeli's Foreign Minister Gabi Ashkenazi, stated, "Iran cannot be allowed to have nuclear capabilities." To that end, he said, "we take actions that are better left unsaid."⁽⁴⁴⁾

Recently, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) also questioned Iran about its undeclared nuclear sites. The sites were disclosed within the cache of documents recovered by Mossad from Iran.⁽⁴⁵⁾ IAEA Director-General Rafael Grossi said in an interview that the UN watchdog will probe into Iran's past nuclear activities. "I keep insisting on the absolute necessity for us to resolve this issue very soon," Grossi remarked.⁽⁴⁶⁾

Behrouz Kamalvandi, spokesman for the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran admitted, "It's possible that this incident will slow down the development and expansion

of advanced centrifuges. There were advanced equipment and precision measurement devices at this site that were either destroyed or damaged.”⁽⁴⁷⁾ Experts agree that Iran's nuclear program has been pushed back by a couple of years. However, after the 2009 nuclear incident at Natanz, it recovered quite quickly and reactivated in 2010, therefore such a time delay of a couple of years can't be taken with a high degree of certainty.

Not just Natanz but the mysterious explosion at Khojir ballistic missile production complex in eastern Tehran on June 25 also led to intrigue globally. Tehran has been less vocal about the incident at the military site. The size of this partly underground military complex has not yet been fully disclosed to the public.⁽⁴⁸⁾

Meanwhile, nuclear diplomacy regarding the future of the UNSC arms embargo continued in high speed. On July 2, US Secretary of State Michael Pompeo reacted to Germany's assertion that following the US withdrawal from the JCPOA, it can't invoke the snapback clause. The top US diplomat stated, “As a participant in UN Security Council Resolution 2231, we are highly confident that we have the right to exercise that, but it is not our first objective.”⁽⁴⁹⁾

On July 3, Iran activated the dispute resolution mechanism (DRM) in response to the E-3 [Germany, France and the UK] triggering the DRM in January 2020. Tehran has alleged that the United States and the European signatories to the JCPOA have violated the terms of the deal.

Zarif visited Russia for the second time in July and won assurances from Moscow that the UNSC arms embargo on Iran which expires in October would not be extended. He also stated that a 20-year cooperation agreement was in the negotiation phase with Russia. Around the same time, US President Donald Trump and his Russian counterpart Putin discussed arms control and Iran's nuclear program in a telephone call.⁽⁵⁰⁾

It is unlikely that Trump will be offering any concessions to Iran ahead of the US presidential elections as he faces a tough opponent who has the upper hand in the opinion polls. The same stands true for Tehran which is unlikely to be receptive to a compromise after the recent string of sabotage incidents amidst crushing sanctions and a Parliament dominated by hardliners.

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Arab Affairs

Arab affairs consists of two files. Firstly, the Iraqi file addresses the visit of the Iraqi prime minister to Tehran and provides an analysis of the timing of the visit, a review of the developments during the visit, the discussions that were conducted during the visit and their outcomes. Secondly, the Yemeni file discusses the Houthi escalation fueled by Iranian support amid new evidence which reveals Iran's continuous provision of arms to the Houthi rebels. The file highlights the practices of the Houthis, similar to the methods practiced by the Iranian government such as seizing the Iranian Central Bank's assets and proceedings from ports. In addition the Houthis have threatened to cause an environmental disaster by blowing up the oil tanker Safer which was seized by the Houthis off the Yemeni coast.



IRAN AND IRAQ

Iraq is currently witnessing a different course of events than that of previous governments in regard to its internal files and external relations since Mustafa al-Kazemi became prime minister in May 2020. The following were the most important developments in the Iraqi file during July 2020:

I. The Implications of the Timing of Zarif's Visit to Iraq

The Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif visited Iraq on July 19, 2020 during which he met with President Barham Salih, Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kazemi; the Speaker of the Council of Representatives, Mohammed al-Halbousi; and the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Fuad Hussein to prepare for al-Kazemi's visit to Tehran and to discuss the development of bilateral relations, according to the statements of the Iranian ambassador to Iraq Iraj Masjedi.⁽¹⁾ Zarif also met with the head of the Iraqi coalition, Ammar al-Hakim; Al-Fateh Alliance leader Hadi al-Amiri; and the head of the Popular Mobilization Forces, Faleh al-Fayad.

The visit took place at a critical moment in the Iraqi arena as there is a changing political discourse in the country since the beginning of al-Kazemi's rule who opposes the Iranian agenda, leading to an escalation of tensions between his government and the armed militias loyal to Iran. Al-Kazemi took bold and unprecedented steps to move Iraq to the stage of statehood and to establish its sovereignty in accordance with his government's program.⁽²⁾ This program stipulates holding early elections and consolidating the writ of the state through restricting the possession of arms to the government and military institutions and strengthening the rule of law. Al-Kazemi has also established foreign relations on the basis of national sovereignty and the principle of reciprocity. He seeks to achieve a balance in foreign relations and to promote openness to friendly and brotherly Arab countries.

Therefore, al-Kazemi sought to curb the escalation of militias against the diplomatic headquarters in the Green Zone in central Baghdad. The security services, in a historical precedent, arrested the leaders and members of the Iraqi Hezbollah militia who are close to Iran, after raiding their headquarters, to enforce the principle of state sovereignty. Al-Kazemi issued orders that all foreign officials who wish to come to Iraq in a military and political capacity, without exception, must obtain entry visas before entering Iraq. This compelled the commander of the Quds Force, Ismail Qaani, to obtain an Iraqi entry visa before his visit to Iraq in early June 2020, in accordance with the principle of reciprocity.

Al-Kazemi made some changes on the security side to facilitate his policies and limit the influence of Iran's proxies and allies on security decisions. He relieved Faleh al-Fayad, who is close to Iran, on July 4, 2020 from his post as national security advisor and president of the National Security Agency. He appointed Qasim al-Araji as national security advisor and General Abdul Ghani al-Asadi as the head of the National Security Agency. According to media sources, General Abdul Ghani al-Asadi was previously dismissed from the Abdul Mahdi government because of his position against Iranian influence.

Al-Kazemi moved to control the land border in order to bring it under the army's control, depriving the pro-Iranian militias of the most important avenues to fund their

activities in the Iraqi arena. Al-Kazemi's move limits the smuggling of large quantities of drugs from Iran to Iraq,⁽³⁾ and also the entry of fighters, whether military personnel belonging to the IRGC or non-military personnel that have been recruited from unstable countries to work with the militias that belong to Iran in Iraq and Syria to protect Iranian gains. This led to the outbreak and the escalation of tensions between the al-Kazemi government and the militias, as a result they intensified their strikes against the diplomatic headquarters in the Green Zone. The media channels of the militias launched a campaign against al-Kazemi's policies to tarnish his image, especially the Al-Ahad channel, owned by Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, the closest arm to Iran. The militias also carried out a large-scale assassination campaign killing some activists and political analysts, including the political analyst Hisham Al-Hashimi. This was done to shuffle the cards and intensify pressure on al-Kazemi in order to force him to change his alignments and submit to the desires of the eastern neighbor of Iraq.

The visit was also carried out a day before al-Kazemi's visit to Saudi Arabia which was postponed because King Salman bin Abdulaziz was admitted to hospital. The program of this postponed visit reflected al-Kazemi's intention to open Iraq to the Gulf countries generally and Saudi Arabia particularly. The media indicated that he was planning to discuss several files, most importantly:⁽⁴⁾ a project to link the Iraqi electricity network with the Gulf to address the country's electricity crisis, ways to reactivate work on the Arar crossing between the two countries for commercial purposes, the activation of Saudi investments in Iraq, the security risks posed by armed militia concentrations near the borders of neighboring countries, including the proliferation of some militias in Iraq near the Saudi-Iraqi border.

Therefore, Zarif's visit to Iraq a day before al-Kazemi's postponed visit to the Kingdom reflects a state of anxiety in regard to al-Kazemi's policies in general and his intention to



open Iraq to Saudi Arabia in particular. This means, according to the Iranian mentality, diminishing Iranian influence in Iraq. If the Iraqi electricity network is connected to the Gulf, it will deprive Iran of dollar revenues from the export of gas and electricity to Iraq, and reinforce trade and investment relations between Iraq and Saudi Arabia. The strengthening of Iraqi-Saudi trade and investment relations would negatively affect trade relations between Iraq and Iran, which will cast a dark shadow over the level of Iranian influence in Iraq generally.

However, Iraqi affairs expert, Muhammad Salih Sidqian, ruled out that Zarif would ask al-Kazemi to mediate between Tehran and Riyadh due to the complexities of the contentious files and Saudi Arabia's opposition to this.⁽⁵⁾ He has forgotten that Saudi Arabia has always spoken repeatedly about the importance of dialogue provided that the Iranian government changes its behavior and desists from its dangerous actions, especially after the disasters that Iran has caused in the region as a result of its destructive interventions.

II. Zarif's Visit and the Iran Impasse in Iraq

Zarif's visit revealed the depth of the crisis that Iran is going through in Iraq. The Presidency of the State, the Presidency of the Government and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs focused on emphasizing the sovereignty of Iraq and the independence of its decision-making during the meeting with Zarif. President Barham Salih confirmed that "Iraq attaches importance to protecting its sovereignty and security and cooperates with allies and friends within the framework of mutual respect and non-interference in internal affairs." Al-Kazemi also stated, "Iraq seeks to reaffirm its balanced and positive role in making peace in the region."⁽⁶⁾ Foreign Minister Fuad Hussein stated, "We want balanced relations with all neighboring countries in accordance with the national interest and non-intervention in internal affairs(7)".

Iran's predicament in the Iraqi arena did not end with Zarif officially acknowledging Iraq's sovereignty including control over its borders and restoring the authority of the state, but extended to a popular rejection of Iranian influence, with a sit-in held in front of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in which many Iraqi citizens participated. This prompted the use of water hoses by security personnel to disperse the protesters. Many Iraqi activists tweeted the hashtag: "Zarif, you are not welcome in Iraq," in protest to his visit to Iraq. This represents popular approval for Iraq's sovereignty to be restored and to reclaim its Arab identity.

III. A Reading of al-Kazemi's Visit to Iran

Due to the postponement of al-Kazemi's visit to Riyadh, as a first stop on his foreign tour, Tehran became his first destination. He visited Tehran on July 21, 2020 before he undertook his visit to Washington. In Tehran, al-Kazemi met with Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, President Hassan Rouhani, Ali Shamkhani, the secretary of the Supreme National Security Council and Shura Council Speaker, Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf.

A set of observations can be made regarding the visit. Firstly, al-Kazemi was not accompanied by any official who is close to Iran, as was the custom in the past. The delegation included the Minister of Defense Jumah Inad, Foreign Minister Fuad Hussein, Finance Minister Ali Allawi, Electricity Minister Majed Hantoush, and National Security Adviser Qasim al-Araji, who is known for his balanced outlook on foreign relations.

The second observation is about the content of the statements made by Khamenei during his meeting with al-Kazemi which were laden with political connotations. Khamenei said, "Iran expects its Iraqi friends to know America and realize that its presence in any country causes corruption, destruction." He added, "Iran expects to

abide by the Iraqi Parliament's decision to expel American forces because its presence is a reason for insecurity." Finally, he said, "They killed your guest in your house and admitted that rudely. Iran will never forget this and it will definitely carry out retaliatory strikes against the Americans."⁽⁸⁾

Apparently, these statements, which depicted Khamenei as Iraq's guardian, reflect the reality of Iranian intentions to maintain its influence in Iraq, its determination to make Iraq a field for confrontation with the United States, and to place pressure on al-Kazemi to dissuade him from his new anti-Iran approach and to force him to expel US forces in Iraq. Iran will probably not carry out retaliatory strikes against American forces and bases in Iraq that may lead to the killing of American soldiers. However, Iran was satisfied with a limited strike against American bases in January 2020 in response to the killing of Soleimani. Tehran realizes that carrying out retaliatory strikes that lead to the killing of Americans would be a dangerous venture. This action would be met with a strong American response that may risk the Iranian government itself.

The third observation is in regard to al-Kazemi's statements in which he stressed on non-interference in the internal affairs of the two countries, and to prevent Iraq from being turned into an American-Iranian war zone. During his meeting with Rouhani, al-Kazemi not only acknowledged Iran's role in helping Iraq to defeat ISIS, but he also said, "Iraq stood with Iran to overcome its economic crisis, to be turned into a market for Iranian products and to create comprehensive cooperation to ensure the continuation of the exchange of services."⁽⁹⁾

In the same context, some Iraqi media sources revealed that al-Kazemi refused two requests by Khamenei during his first meeting to pay the financial debts owed by Iraq to Iran. This debt has accumulated as Iran was providing Iraq with gas and electricity in dollars through Chinese banks. He insisted on paying in Iraqi or Iranian currency for fear of US sanctions. Secondly, he met with the commander of the Quds Force Ismail Qaani⁽¹⁰⁾

Conclusion

This position reflects al-Kazemi's desire to redraw the main lines towards Iran and his determination to confirm the same message that he delivered to Iran during Zarif's visit that it is time for Iran to deal with Iraq as a state and not as a subordinate. On the other hand, al-Kazemi wants to control the relationship with armed militias through Iranian channels because Iran is the main sponsor of these armed militias, in order to contain the escalating tensions between his government and these militias.

During Zarif's visit to Iraq and al-Kazemi's visit to Iran, the latter's statements indicate that he is aware of the problems and seeks to address them by adopting a different approach from that of the previous governments since 2003. He recognizes the importance of Iraq's return to its Arab fold since its national interests are closely tied to the Arab and Gulf spheres. However, Iraq did not gain anything from its alliance with Iran and the Iranian militias except for high rates of poverty, unemployment, political and security crises, and transforming into a battlefield between Iran and the United States. Iraq derives its real strength from the Arab environment, not from Iran, which is under siege and isolation.

However, the most dangerous and biggest challenge facing al-Kazemi is the issue of restricting weapons to the hands of the state. It is a difficult task as Iran and the armed militias will not accept it. Iran possesses strong pressure cards through the proliferation of its armed militias across the Iraqi state, especially in the oil-rich southern provinces. Iran also has political arms in Parliament that can influence the decisions of the Iraqi government. In addition, Iran has a strong pressure card because of the debts and finances owed by the Iraqi government to Iran.

IRAN AND YEMEN

During July, the Yemeni arena witnessed many developments related to the Houthi military escalation internally in Yemen and abroad, and political escalation as a result of the Houthis' exploitative practices against the Yemeni people and the international community in a similar manner to Iran in many files. This coincided with domestic and international condemnations against the Houthi militia and the Iranian role in Yemen. The Iranian government has received widespread international condemnation, most notably against its supply of arms to terrorist militias, including the Houthi militia. Circulating UN reports prove the Iranian government's involvement in terrorist acts in the region, most notably the targeting of Aramco's oil facilities last year. As a result, this affected the political and diplomatic position of the government, the way the international community has dealt with lifting the arms embargo and economic sanctions against it. We will review the most prominent developments during July in the Yemeni arena that are related to the Iranian government's relationship with the Houthi militia. **Houthi Escalation Linked to Iranian Support:**

At the beginning of July, the Houthi military escalation increased internally on the Al-Jawf and Mar'ib fronts and externally by targeting vital areas in Saudi Arabia. Joint Forces Command announced on July 3, 2020 that four drones were destroyed which had been launched toward Saudi Arabia. In addition, the Houthi militia launched a missile toward Ma'rib governorate, which fell in the middle of Al-Shabaka neighborhood inside the governorate. The official spokesman of the Joint Forces Command, Colonel Turki Al-Maliki, described the Houthi escalation targeting civilians and civilian facilities inside and outside Yemen as a violation of international and humanitarian law and a threat to hundreds of civilians.⁽¹¹⁾

The coalition leadership also announced, in two separate statements on July 13, 2020, that it had intercepted and destroyed four ballistic missiles and seven bomb-laden drones launched by the Iranian-backed Houthi militia targeting civilians and civilian facilities in Saudi Arabia.⁽¹²⁾

The Prime Minister of Yemen Maeen Abdulmalik described the Houthi escalation which is supported by Iran as a flagrant violation of international law and the Security Council resolutions in regards to supplying arms. He stated that all UN moves have been followed by further military escalation which the Houthi militia has carried out on various fronts, especially in Al-Jawf and Mar'ib. He called this a "dangerous escalation" and a clear indication of the militia's lack of seriousness in peace and finding a political solution, in conformity with Iranian interests and goals.⁽¹³⁾

In the same context, the Yemeni prime minister stated in regard to the Iranian role, "The decision of war and peace is in the hands of its supporters in Tehran, which continues its blatant violations of Security Council resolutions, challenges the international community by continuously sending weapons and supports the Houthis. The joint forces of the coalition has recently seized quantities of Iranian weapons that were sent to the Houthis." This came during a virtual meeting of the Yemeni Council of Ministers on Thursday, July 2, 2020. At the meeting, the Council confirmed that Iran's

ongoing support to the Houthi militia and the provision of advanced technology to kill Yemenis is a blatant violation of the security, stability, sovereignty and territorial integrity of Yemen.⁽¹⁴⁾

It is worth noting that Foreign Policy, an American magazine, published a detailed report reviewing the suspected Iranian role in Somalia through its secret relationship with the terrorist group al-Shabab which is part of al-Qaeda. The Iranian government uses this group to smuggle weapons and oil to the Houthi militia.⁽¹⁵⁾

In this context, the Yemeni government released a statement about the suspicious activities of the Iranian government in Yemeni territorial waters. The Iranian government uses fishing vessels as a cover to smuggle various weapons to the Houthis. The Minister of Information Muammar al-Iryani said in this regard, "The dangerous information recently disclosed by Global Fishing Watch (GFW), which is specialized in monitoring and tracking fishing vessels, and Trygg Mat Tracking (TMT), which provides information on fisheries, regarding illegal fishing operations carried out by Iranian ships in Yemeni territorial waters reveals an aspect of such hostile activities."⁽¹⁶⁾

I. The Houthis' Exploitation of the Yemenis and the International Community Is Similar to the Approach Taken by Iran

The Houthi militia employing practices similar to Iran continues to blackmail Yemeni citizens and the international community in several files, which coincided with the torpedoing of all international efforts to reach a political settlement that ends the suffering of the Yemeni people. Houthi spokesperson Muhammad al-Bukhaiti stated in regard to the practices adopted by the Iranian-backed Houthi militia, "We put the Security Council, and the so-called international community under our feet." This reflects the extent of the Houthi militia's disregard for international laws and norms which has led to the political isolation of the Houthi militia from the international community as the Houthi militia is seen as an extension of the Iranian government. The Houthi militia uses oil shipments that reach the port of Hodeidah to blackmail citizens through customs duties and taxes on oil derivatives. The Houthi militia violated the agreement that was sponsored by the United Nations which stipulated the payment of employee salaries from oil revenues.⁽¹⁷⁾

In this regard, the legitimate government accused the Houthi militia of looting \$40 million from the Central Bank in Hodeidah, which was considered by the legitimate government as a flagrant violation of the agreement that was sponsored by the United Nations through the office of the international envoy. All ships in Hodeidah port are subject to technical, financial and legal scrutiny so that international controls are implemented in regard to money laundering, terrorist financing and to eliminate the resources used by the Houthi militia to escalate by curbing its illegal oil trade.⁽¹⁸⁾

Regarding the file of the Safer oil tanker, the Security Council called on the Houthi militia to implement their promises and allow UN experts to access the ship as quickly as possible. The Security Council described the Safer tanker issue as a ticking time bomb. Several countries confirmed that the Houthi militia will be held fully accountable for any oil spill in the Red Sea. The President of the Security Council and Germany's representative, Christoph Heusgen, stated that the members of the Security Council expressed their deep concern about the danger posed by the Safer tanker.⁽¹⁹⁾

Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs Mark Lowcock gave a briefing to the Security Council in which he stated that the United Nations had recently reached an agreement with the Houthi militia to grant the UN team access to the Safer tanker. The United Nations created a team and brought the necessary equipment but then the Houthi militia canceled the agreement a day before the arrival of the international



team.⁽²⁰⁾ It is worth noting that the Minister of Information Muammar al-Iryani called upon the international community earlier to take a firmer position towards the Houthis' manipulation of the Safer tanker file by saying, "The Houthi militia is using the file as a blackmail and bargaining tool. They represent a stumbling block to the real solution that can end the risk of an oil spill, the sinking or the explosion of the tanker, that poses a catastrophic environmental threat to Yemen, the region and the world."⁽²¹⁾

II. The Implications of the Houthi File on the International and Diplomatic Position of the Iranian Government

During the current period, Iran is dealing with the circulation of many files and reports in the United Nations and the Security Council that affect its position in regard to lifting the arms embargo and the sanctions imposed on it. Prominent among these files is the Iranian-Houthi relationship. In fact, the Security Council discussed several reports proving Iran's ongoing support to the Houthi militia through smuggling weapons, including ballistic missiles and drones. This is considered a violation of the arms embargo imposed by the United Nations. In addition, the United Nations report proves the Iranian government's involvement in the attacks targeting Aramco facilities in September last year. The circulating reports indicate that the Iranian government deliberately misled the world by claiming that the Houthis were responsible for the attack. However, António Guterres, Secretary-General of the United Nations, has proven the Iranian government's involvement in the attack.⁽²²⁾

In this context, the foreign ministers of Sweden, Britain and Germany considered the Iranian government's continuous dispatch of weapons to the Houthis as a flagrant violation of United Nations resolutions on the supply of arms to terrorist militias. At the

same time, they called upon the international community to take firm action against the Iranian government and the Houthi militia to prevent the continuation of the conflict which serves their interests. They praised the steps taken by the Arab coalition in regard to the ceasefire which helps in alleviating the suffering of the Yemeni people.⁽²³⁾

On the other hand, some Iranian and international media outlets reported that former Iranian President Ahmadinejad had sent a letter to Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and provided a copy to the secretary-general of the United Nations. The letter included an invitation to the crown prince to accept his mediation proposal to end the Yemeni crisis through forming a joint committee in this regard. Many observers believe that the former president cannot send such a letter without instructions from the influential bodies in the Iranian government. This letter reflects the international and diplomatic pressures that the Iranian government is subjected to because of the Yemeni crisis file and its destabilizing behavior in the region. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia highlighted several files condemning the Iranian government and reflecting Iran's danger to international peace and security, which would lead to economic, political and diplomatic consequences for the Iranian government.

Conclusion

The practices of the Houthi militia and the Iranian government is to blackmail the Yemeni people and the international community and to escalate at all levels to achieve the largest possible amount of Iranian interests to serve Iran's project not only in Yemen but also in the region.

This has increased international pressure on the Iranian government because of its military support to the Houthi militia by supplying and smuggling weapons to the Houthi militia in different ways, and in light of Iran's central role in prolonging the Yemeni crisis and increasing the Yemeni people's suffering, and the Houthi militia's continuous military and political escalation using practices similar to those employed by Iran. On the other hand, the legitimate government called upon the international community and the UN committees to impose more pressure on the Houthi militia to reach a political solution to end the suffering of the Yemeni people.

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International Affairs

The International Affairs report includes two files. The first file addresses Iran's relationship with the United States. It discusses US efforts to impose more pressure on Iran, Tehran's position and options against US pressure, and the implications of mutual escalation between Iran and the United States. The second file deals with the ongoing interactions between Iran and the European countries in regard to the nuclear file in light of US efforts to extend the arms embargo imposed on Iran, the developments regarding the downing of the Ukrainian plane by IRGC missiles in Iranian airspace, and France's condemnation of the Iranian judicial system's jail sentence handed down to the French-Iranian journalist Fariba Adelkhah.



IRAN-US RELATIONS

US-Iranian relations are at a critical stage as of the US elections approach in November 2020. The current US administration seeks to undermine the nuclear agreement, and restore international sanctions on Iran, including the extension of the arms embargo against it and to impose a new reality in regard to its relationship with Iran before the elections. In fact, Tehran is betting on time, withstanding the pressure, and addressing the economic crisis resulting from sanctions, hoping that Trump loses the elections and his rival Joe Biden wins. This may alleviate pressure on Iran, and restore nuclear agreement and relieve the pressure on the Iranian government which has faced an unprecedented crisis due to US pressure. This report deals with the developments during July 2020 via three main axes: United States' efforts to impose more pressure on Iran, Tehran's attempts to confront the pressure and its options against the American position, and the implications and results of this confrontation.

I. US Efforts to Impose Further Pressure on Iran

The United States' efforts in the UN Security Council began at the end of June 2020 to extend the arms embargo imposed on Iran which is due to expire on October 18, 2020. However, the meeting demonstrated the extent of the gap between the US position and the rest of the nuclear agreement partners. The latter blame the United States for its unilateral policies and its withdrawal from the nuclear agreement.

The United States hopes to change the position of the European parties. In this context, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo met with British Prime Minister Boris Johnson on July 21, 2020. Pompeo reiterated Washington's view on extending the arms embargo imposed on Iran. He also welcomed the British, French and German joint statement which signaled that there would be consequences for the region's security and stability if the arms embargo on Iran was to end.

Washington plans, in case it is unable to form an international consensus against Iran, to resort to a clause in the nuclear agreement, which reinstates all Security Council sanctions on Iran automatically. This clause is mentioned in UN Security Council Resolution 2231 which approves the nuclear agreement.

The American administration continued its pressure on Iran, and worked to prevent Iran from exporting its oil, and condemned and attempted to disrupt the movement of Iranian oil tankers to Venezuela as a US court issued a warrant to the US authorities to intercept Iranian oil shipments to Venezuela.⁽¹⁾

The United States has also worked to prevent Iran accessing its financial revenues abroad, since these revenues will give the government the opportunity to support its armed militias and spread terrorism instead of using them to invest in its healthcare system. It seems that Washington has exerted pressure on the South Korean government to withhold payment of the \$7 billion debt it owes to Iran. The Koreans have refused to pay this debt under the pretext that the payment of dollars to Iran would breach the sanctions regime imposed by the United States. Therefore, they cannot transfer what it owes to Iran because of the sanctions.⁽²⁾

Iran activating a strategic partnership document with China has raised US concerns.

Brian Hook described the Iranian government and China as the “tyrannical twins” which have come together due to destructive commonalities. He said that the world is more aware of this danger than ever before.⁽³⁾

Regionally, two American fighters intercepted a Mahan Air passenger plane in Syrian airspace. The United States had previously added Mahan Air to its sanctions list for allegedly transferring lethal weapons to Yemen and Syria and contributing to Iran's hostile activities. US President Donald Trump extended the US national emergency with respect to Lebanon from August 1, 2020. He said that Iran continues to transfer weapons to Hezbollah, undermine Lebanon's sovereignty, destabilize the region, and threaten national security as well as the foreign policy interests of the United States.⁽⁴⁾

In a message sent to Iran, US President Donald Trump warned Iran of executing three men who participated in anti-government protests in 2018. Brian Hook also considered the eight-year prison sentence handed down to the brother of Masih Alinejad, who is an independent reporter and host of the news show Tablet on Voice of America, as evidence of the government's brutality and repression against any dissent.



Although Brian Hook stated that the military option is not ruled out as a means to prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon, the US administration is facing restrictions after the US House Committee on Appropriations passed an amendment in regard to the defense budget for 2021. This amendment prevents the funding of military operations against Iran if they were undertaken without Congress approval. The Committee also passed two measures to end the 2001 and 2002 war authorization. These measures will make Trump's use of the veto much more difficult as he cannot veto every single amendment. In this case, he has “to impose a veto on the defense budget as a whole” which curbs his power. However, the bill must be approved by both the House of Representatives and the Senate before it is sent to the US president for him to sign.⁽⁵⁾

Table 1: US Pressures and Sanctions on Iran (July-2020)

Date	Sanctions
July 2	US District Court issued a warrant for authorities to seize more than 1.1 million barrels of gasoline from four tankers heading toward Venezuela

Date	Sanctions
July 11	A US court ordered Iran to pay compensation for the military attack on Khobar Towers in Saudi Arabia.
July 17	Aiden Davidson, also known as Hamed Aliabadi, an Iranian-American citizen, was sentenced to four years imprisonment for allegedly violating the sanctions imposed on Iran.
July 20	A Turkish banker was convicted of violating US sanctions on Iran.
July 30	The United States has expanded sanctions against Iran's metals and construction industries.

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II. Iran's Position and Its Alternatives to Counter US Sanctions

Khamenei reaffirmed his intention not to enter into negotiations with the United States. He stressed that Iran will not start talks with the United States which will only benefit US President Donald Trump. Khamenei called upon the Iranian people to resist American pressure by depending on national capabilities.

To face the pressures and what it calls "economic terrorism," the government is planning to achieve two goals. The first goal is to support the country's economic needs. The second goal is to prevent an international consensus against Iran. The Iranian government seeks to exploit the various opportunities available on the international scene to the maximum to achieve its two goals.

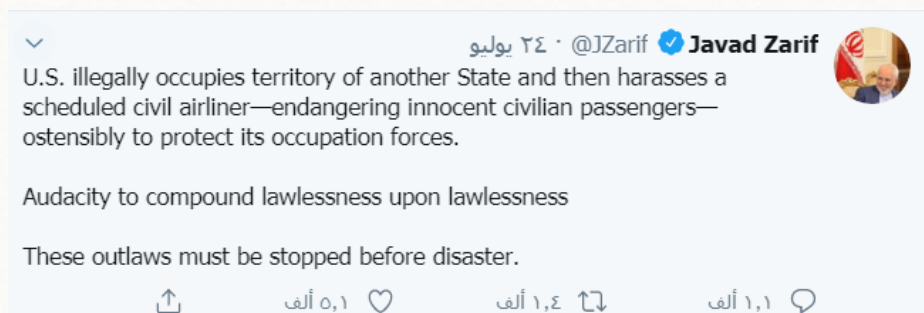
According to these two goals, Iran welcomed the outcome of the UN Security Council meeting that discussed the arms embargo imposed on Iran. The results of the meeting

from Tehran's point of view highlighted the unilateral position of the United States and revealed the consensus among all members to fully support the nuclear agreement and condemn the US policy towards Iran.⁽⁶⁾ Accordingly, Iran intensified its consultations with Russia and China. On the other hand, Iran expressed to the European parties its willingness to return to its nuclear obligations in exchange for the European parties meeting their obligations to Iran, particularly as the United States is preparing to put forward a draft resolution in the Security Council to extend the arms embargo imposed on Iran.

Iran continues to reinforce its international and regional partnerships to mitigate US sanctions. In this context, it sought to activate the strategic partnership it signed with China in 2016. Iran expressed its willingness to buy new weapons from Russia to enhance its defense capabilities, according to the Iranian Ambassador to Russia Kazem Jalali. Iran's moves aim to deepen economic relations with China and Russia, and to provide room to maneuver politically against the United States.

To reduce the impact of the sanctions, Iran has strengthened its regional position by strengthening its relations with neighboring countries. The government ordered the activation of the role of border provinces to develop relations with neighboring countries and open up border crossings for the movement of trade to mitigate the impact of sanctions and establish international financial transactions..

Tehran is more concerned about Iraq as part of its efforts to undermine the Trump administration's maximum pressure campaign. Therefore, Iranian officials urged the Iraqi prime minister during his visit to Iran to end the American presence in Iraq, and to follow up on Qassem Soleimani's assassination file and the killing of PMF leaders. Likewise, Iran reacted to the interception of Mahan Air's passenger plane over Syrian airspace by demanding the end of the illegal presence of American occupation forces in Syrian territories. This is because these forces have led to destabilization in Syria and the region as a whole.



To counterbalance the American pressure, the Revolutionary Guards conducted a joint drill, named Prophet-14, in the strategic Strait of Hormuz. The maneuvers included the targeting of a mockup US aircraft carrier. The Noor satellite was used to monitor the exercises from space. The United States put its military bases in the Gulf on temporary alert. US Commander Rebecca Rebarich, spokeswoman for the US Navy's Bahrain-based Fifth Fleet said that officials were aware of the drill, describing it as an attempt "to intimidate and coerce."⁽⁷⁾

Although Iran unofficially accused America of being involved in a series of explosions and fires at Iranian missile sites, power stations, and industrial complexes, most notably at Natanz, the uranium enrichment facility. However, the Iranian government has not officially accused the United States so far.

Iran is also continuing its endeavors to influence the results of the US elections. William Ivanina, director of the National Counter-Intelligence and Security Center, warned that Iran, Russia, and China are trying to interfere in the upcoming US presidential elections in 2020, and Iran's efforts focused on "influencing the Internet," by spreading misleading information on social media and republishing everything that is anti-American."⁽⁸⁾

Iran welcomed the report issued by the United Nations special rapporteur for human rights. It mentioned that the killing of Soleimani by America was a violation of international law and the United Nations Charter, because Soleimani was a high-level official of Iran, and Iraq is a sovereign state. However, the United States was unable to provide documents and strong evidence for killing Soleimani.

III. The Implications of the Mutual Escalation Between the United States and Iran

The policy of confrontation is still pursued by America and Iran. In the context of this mutual escalation, the Trump administration considers the extension of the arms embargo imposed on Iran as being critical at the current stage. The United States will attempt to pass it through the Security Council, or it will exercise its right as a partner in the nuclear agreement to achieve this objective. However, the Trump administration faces a problem of time because the US elections are approaching, particularly if Russia and China veto the extension of the embargo, and thus force it to activate the snapback clause which requires multiple protocols to be activated. However, internal obstacles and difficulties are present if the US chooses the confrontation option.

On the other hand, Iran refuses to submit to American wishes and to negotiate and instead chooses the option of resisting US pressures. At the same time, it is aware of US moves aimed to prepare the political ground to restore sanctions, and is trying to prevent this. Iran believes that the strategic goal of the policy pursued by the Trump administration is to undermine what remains of the nuclear agreement and to ensure that if a democratic administration is elected, it will not have an agreement that can be restored.

Therefore, Iran is conducting high-level coordination with Russia and China that support the nuclear deal and reject the US policy against it. In addition, Iran tries to gain more time while waiting for the outcome of the US elections, with growing indications that there is a possibility for Trump's democratic rival, Joe Biden, to win the elections, who supports the US returning to the nuclear agreement.

In Iran, some believe that the current US pressures, including the targeting of some vital installations and undermining the nuclear agreement, aim to push Iran to carry out escalatory steps that serve as a pretext for a military strike. The Iranian assessment is that Trump is interested in escalating even further with Iran in order to divert media attention from his approach in dealing with the coronavirus crisis and the conflict with China. Therefore, Iran at the current stage chooses to withstand US pressures and threats and not to escalate. It remains committed to maintaining the nuclear agreement as a legal document that supports Iran's position and has the support of its signatories, except for the United States.

Despite suspicions concerning the United States' involvement in the attacks on some vital installations and targets, Iran chose not to accuse the United States, probably because the accusation would draw a response from the US administration which Trump could use to his benefit. Iran does not want to grant the US president an opportunity to improve his chances of winning the elections. Any escalation could have dire consequences. Foreign Minister Zarif has warned of the implications

of any action which would reinforce the perception of Iran as a “threat to global security.» At this critical stage for Iran, this may consequently influence the rest of the signatories to the nuclear deal, particularly their positions toward Tehran.

IRAN-EUROPE RELATIONS

Iran-Europe developments during July 2020 mainly revolved around the fate of the nuclear deal in light of the UN arms embargo on Iran; a new report detailing the Ukrainian plane crash caused by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC); and France's condemnation of the verdict against a French-Iranian academic, Fariba Adelkhah, in Iran. In this part of the file, we discuss the implicit implications of these developments according to the Iranian and European points of view.

I. The Nuclear Deal in Light of the Negotiations on the UN Arms Embargo on Iran

While Washington continues to place further pressure on the UN Security Council to extend the UN arms embargo on Iran, coinciding with the fifth anniversary of the landmark accord – the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) – Iranian officials have reaffirmed their warnings and condemnations of the Europeans who have tilted towards supporting Washington's move to extend the arms embargo on Iran.

In a statement to Fars News Agency, Head of the Strategic Council on Foreign Relations Kamal Kharazi criticized the European policies, affirming that the European support for the US move to extend the UN arms embargo and the resolution of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) triggered by the European Troika, also called the E3 (Britain, Germany, and France), will lead to the collapse of the nuclear deal.⁽⁹⁾ Javad Mojtabeh Shabestari, member of the Assembly of Experts, criticized the Iranian government's willingness to return to its commitments under the nuclear deal if the Europeans keep their promises, saying this is equivalent to paying a "ransom." He called on his government to threaten the Europeans and deal with them decisively.⁽¹⁰⁾

According to the Iranians, the European position on the US move to extend the UN arms embargo represents a submission to US pressure. Abass Mousavi, Iran's Foreign Ministry spokesman, said that Iran has warned the Europeans not to surrender to Washington's diplomatic and political pressures, adding that Tehran will take adverse action if the Europeans follow the US move.⁽¹¹⁾

Amid European-Iranian tensions over the nuclear deal, in its statement marking the fifth anniversary of the nuclear deal, Iran called on the Europeans to meet their commitments under the nuclear deal. Mohammad Javad Zarif, Iran's Foreign Minister, had tweeted earlier on July 4 that Iran triggered the dispute resolution mechanism (DRM) on "at least six occasions in reference to the US and E3 violations."⁽¹²⁾ EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Josep Borrell, said that he received a letter from Iran calling to trigger the DRM. The letter expressed Iranian resentment over the E3's noncompliance with their commitments under the nuclear deal.⁽¹³⁾ On July 17, Borrell announced, "Notwithstanding differences on modalities, there is agreement that more time is needed due to the complexity of the issues involved. The timeline is, therefore, extended."⁽¹⁴⁾

The German Federal Foreign Office said in a statement that the European Troika



worked hard to maintain the nuclear deal, affirming that they are committed to the implementation of the accord and safeguarding Iranian interests.⁽¹⁵⁾ Borrell expressed the same position of the German Federal Office when he tweeted, “We need to preserve the #Irandaal and I will continue to work in my role as coordinator of the Joint Commission.”⁽¹⁶⁾

II. Developments Concerning the Ukrainian Plane Crash Caused by the IRGC

In early July, the Swedish Foreign Ministry announced that Iran and the countries of the victims of the crash reached an agreement, with Iran consenting to pay compensation to the families of the victims. No further details have been revealed either by Iran or by the Swedish Foreign Ministry.⁽¹⁷⁾

According to CBC (Canada), a newly released audio clip of a conversation between the head of the Iranian investigation team, Hassan Rezaeifar and a victim’s husband in which he confessed that Iranian officials had opposed the closure of Iran’s airspace — not allowing commercial airliners to fly in and out of Tehran the night that the plane was shot down — because it could have exposed Iran’s pending ballistic missile attack on the US base, Ayn al-Asad in Iraq, in advance.⁽¹⁸⁾

Moreover, BBC (Persian) said that the audio clip confirmed that Iranian officials knew about the IRGC launching a ballistic missile attack against the plane from the first minute of the crash but they refused to comment for security reasons.⁽¹⁹⁾ And in less than 24 hours from when CBC emailed the audio clip to Rezaeifar, he was suspended from his post according to CBC and BBC (Persian) reports. The Civil Aviation Organization of the Islamic Republic of Iran (CAO.IRI) has not denied or confirmed the reports.

In regard to decoding the black box of the Ukrainian Flight PS752, the Iranian Civil Aviation Authority in a statement announced that its delegation had arrived at France’s Bureau for Enquiry and Analysis for Civil Aviation Safety (BEA) in Paris.⁽²⁰⁾

The countries who are involved , the United States (the manufacturer of the aircraft)



and Ukraine (the owner of the aircraft), the governments of the victims (Ukraine, Sweden and Afghanistan), were all called to attend the decoding of the black box, according to the report of the International Maritime Organization. Representatives of the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO), CAO and the representative of Tehran's military prosecutor also attended the meeting.

The deputy foreign minister of Ukraine tweeted one day after the reading of the black box in Paris that the transcript from the Ukrainian plane confirmed "the fact of illegal [Iranian] interference with the plane." The Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba said that it was too early to blame human error for the downing of the plane, leaving many unanswered questions.⁽²¹⁾

III. France's Condemnation of Iran's Verdict Against the French-Iranian Academic Fariba Adelkhah

In late June, the French Foreign Ministry condemned the Iranian judicial system's upholding a five-year jail sentence against the French-Iranian academic Fariba Adelkhah. The French Ministry's spokesman stated that there were no authentic documents that support the Iranian verdict, accusing Iran of politicizing Adelkhah's case.⁽²²⁾

The spokesman of Iran's Judiciary Gholam Hossein Esmaeili replied to the French statement assuring that the verdict of the Court of Appeal was issued after it was confirmed that Ms. Adelkhah committed security crimes including conspiring against national security.⁽²³⁾

Fariba Adelkhah, research director at Sciences Po University in Paris, was arrested by the IRGC's intelligence arm when she visited Tehran in June 2019. French President Emmanuel Macron condemned the detention of Adelkhah and described it as

“unacceptable” and “arbitrary.” He has called for her release on many occasions. The French foreign minister accused the Iranian authorities of politicizing the case of Ms. Adelkhah and complicating relations between Paris and Tehran by upholding this verdict.

On July 1, Abbas Mousavi, Iran’s Foreign Ministry spokesman, criticized the French response expressing his country’s rejection of French intervention in its internal affairs. He claimed that France’s involvement in Adelkhah’s case has no legal justification.^[24]

Conclusion

The most significant developments in Iran-Europe relations is that Iranians officials were dismayed at the European tilt towards the US move to extend the UN arms embargo on Iran. They believe that the European position reflects unjustified reluctance and a repudiation of their commitments under the nuclear deal. Thus, the Iranians sought to trigger the DRM against the E3 in this month amid the latest developments in the Ukrainian plane crash caused by the IRGC. The black boxes of the plane were sent by an Iranian military and civil delegation to France. The countries involved in the plane crash attended the reading of the black box’s transcript. The French condemnation of the verdict against the French-Iranian academic, Fariba Adelkhah, received a negative response from Iranian officials who dismissed French claims and justified the five-year jail sentence upheld by the Iranian Court of Appeal on grounds of national security. France rejected the verdict and stated that there are no documents that support the Iranian verdict, accusing Iran of politicizing Adelkhah’s case.

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