

MONTHLY REPORT



IRAN CASE FILE

Your window on Iran from inside and abroad

September 2020



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International Institute for Iranian Studies

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CONTENTS

The Executive Summary	4
Internal Affairs	7
The Ideological File	8
Najaf, Early Elections, and Iranian Concerns.....	8
The Political File	12
I. The Conservatives' Position on Rouhani's Remarks.....	12
II. Reformists Call on Rouhani to Step Down.....	13
III. The Conservatives Retreat From Demanding Rouhani's Resignation	13
The Economic File	16
I. The Snapback Mechanism and the Sanctions Included in It.....	16
II. The European Position Following the Decision to Activate the Snapback Mechanism	17
III. The Economic Consequences Arising From Implementing the Snapback Mechanism	18
The Military File	20
I. Iran and Mitigating the Implications of Implementing the Snapback Mechanism	20
II. Iran's Bet Over Nagorno-Karabagh.....	21
III. Military Activities.....	22
Arab Affairs	27
Iran and Syria	28
I. The Debate Over Iranian Moves in Syria Between Withdrawal and Repositioning	28
II. Iranian Military Moves for a Long-term Stay in Syria	28
III. Passing on Iranian Social Patterns to Syrian Society	30
IV. The Pragmatic Approach in Iranian Policy Towards the Syrian Arena.....	30
V. The Increased Divergence Between Russia and Iran in Syria	30
Iran and Yemen	32
I. The Iranian Government Places Military Technology at the Houthis' Disposal.....	32
II. The Association of Houthi Terrorism With the Iranian Government	33
International Affairs	37
Iran-US Relations	38
I. The US Move to Reinstat e UN Sanctions on Iran	38
II. Iran's Options to Address US Pressure	40
III. Implications of US Presidential Elections	40
Iran-Europe Relations	42
I. European Opposition to Reinstat e UN Sanctions on Iran.....	42
II. Iran's Human Rights Violations.....	43

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THE EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Iranian euphoria of victory, which it experienced after the UN Security Council voted against a US draft resolution on extending the arms embargo on Iran, did not last long. This step by the UN Security Council members was not sufficient to dissuade the United States from wanting to implement the snapback mechanism (the automatic resumption of the pre-nuclear deal UN sanctions on Iran). Moreover, the United States announced that it will sanction every country that dares to supply Iran with weapons, even if this country is among the United States' European allies.

This impasse, which Iran did not expect to happen, has led to confusion in many of Iran's files, particularly the ideological file. This file is concerned with the domestic and foreign relations of the religious seminary. Iran made the issue of expelling US forces its number one objective in Iraq, insisting it is an appropriate response to the killing of General Qassem Soleimani. However, Iran announced officially that revenge for Soleimani's assassination was achieved when it carried out missiles strikes targeting Ain Al-Asad base. However, there were no US troops at the base.

Iran's agenda to maintain its influence over Iraqi politics clashed with the recent proposal put forward by Najaf's Supreme Marja Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani to allow the UN to supervise the upcoming Iraqi parliamentary elections so that the outcomes fairly represent the choices of the Iraqi people after their uprising against corruption, sectarian quotas and submission to Iran.

Hossein Shariatmadari, the editor-in-chief of Kayhan newspaper, who is close to Khamenei, lashed out at Sistani, crossing the boundaries of decency and respectability when speaking about clerics. Shariatmadari's attacks sparked a backlash, even among the supporters of Velayat-e Faqih. This prompted him to back down from his remarks and apologize to Sistani, a move rarely taken by the Iranian government and its media apparatus. Have the Iranian government's media officials lost their bearings? Or is this

slip of the tongue a clear indication of the confusion existing within the entire Iranian ruling establishment?

The same state of confusion and ambiguity have had ramifications at the domestic political level. Rouhani, who had earlier announced that Iran had defeated the US maximum pressure strategy, and that Iran manipulated this strategy to isolate the United States from the international community, is now stating that the United States bears overall responsibility for the economic collapse which Iran is experiencing now. These remarks were dismissed by both the conservatives and reformists. Rouhani was thrown into a standoff with both currents due to these remarks, giving rise to calls for his ouster, which were met with counter calls amid tense finger-pointing between the conservatives and reformists and Rouhani.

At the economic level, the report discusses the ramifications of enforcing the snapback sanctions for Iran's economy. This is analyzed by reviewing the indicators of Iranian trade with Tehran's economic partners before and after the US pullout from the nuclear deal and the potential prospects after the snapback's enforcement. What is interesting is that this month President Hassan Rouhani made remarks defying commonsense and contradicting his previous comments and the comments of Iranian officials.

President Rouhani stressed that US pressures had failed to undermine the growth of the Iranian economy, saying that a 1.1 percent growth was posted without oil. Also, estimates indicate that Iran's oil sector grew by 6 percent over the last month despite sanctions. TankerTrackers.com indicated on September 25, 2020 that Iran's exports of oil and gas condensate amounted to about 1.5 million barrels per day.

The Iranian military experienced a state of ebb and flow amid the prevailing confusion at the ideological level, contradictory statements at the political level and the release of economic reports with disputed data. Iran participated in the Caucasus 2020 maneuvers in the presence of forces from Russia, China, Belarus, Pakistan, and Armenia. This was the biggest display of military strength on Russia's Caucasus, and these maneuvers indicate the military coalition that is gradually taking shape between Russia, China and Iran. It is attracting several countries in the Middle East, Central Asia, and South Asia. Meanwhile, Iran is suffering from the challenge resulting from the outbreak of fighting between Azerbaijan and Armenia, with its territories facing the prospect of Syrian radical fighters. They are deployed near its borders as Turkey has brought them to Azerbaijan to partake in the ongoing fighting with Armenia. This is while Iran is concerned about the anger of its Azeri minority at home due to the Iranian government favoring Armenia over Azerbaijan in the recent conflict.

Between Iran's success in the Caucasus 2020 maneuvers and the challenge posed by the Azerbaijan-Armenia conflict stands the most important Iranian file: the impact of enforcing the snapback mechanism on Iran's military activities and the possibility of Iran's friends refusing to supply it with weapons for fear of US sanctions.

As for Arab affairs, Iran is attempting to push back against its declining presence across several arenas of influence. In Syria, where Israeli strikes against Iranian militias are still ongoing, Iran has redeployed its forces, as mentioned by Iranian sources, keeping them away from the range of Israeli strikes. At the same time, Iran withdrew from territories under Russia's sphere of influence, as the Russians clearly want to marginalize the Iranian role in Syria and push the Iranian-backed militias to areas of lesser importance and to expel these militias from the disputed areas with Israel. However, Iran asserts that these shifts are 'redeployments' not withdrawals and reiterated support for Bashar al-Assad. Also, Iran emphasized that the deployment of its allied militias in Syria was not a waste of Iranian assets but an investment from

which Iran will reap economic benefits as well as political and ideological benefits. Iran's extreme pragmatism contradicts the Iranian revolution's core principles about helping those oppressed and standing up to arrogant forces. Iranian Public opinion is against the squandering of money on schemes intended to extend Iranian influence despite the economic suffering of the Iranian people.

In Yemen, Iran decided that it should use its support to the Houthi militia as a lever in the midst of US escalation following the implementation of the snapback mechanism. In a new development, Iran has publicly acknowledged what it has been secretly doing for a long time. In a shocking statement, Iran announced that it will put missile and drone technology at the disposal of the Houthi militia. Iran has been doing this for some time and there is substantial evidence to confirm this. But Iran wanted to present a new lever to counter the pressures it is facing. This significantly contradicts ground realities as Iran cannot do more than what it has already done.

At the international level, which represents the crux of the Iranian crisis and is the principal arena in which the crisis is unfolding, the report discusses Iranian-US relations in light of the US presidential elections.

Iran has intensified its threats and hinted that it would turn its back on all the provisions of the nuclear deal if the United States implements the UN sanctions and exerts pressure on other countries to comply with these sanctions.

Talk inside the Iranian Parliament has begun about enacting legislation to authorize the Iranian government to take all necessary steps to counter the US positions, such as pulling out from the Additional Protocol of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons and renouncing all the nuclear commitments signed under the nuclear deal.

Iranian-European relations seemed to be warmer given the European pro-Iran position in the Security Council in relation to the vote on the draft resolution to extend the arms embargo on Iran. However, human rights violations have undermined the relationship between the two sides leading to heightened tensions following Iran's execution of wrestling champion Navid Afkari on accusations of killing two security guards during the protests which broke out in 2018. European countries called for a moratorium on the death sentence and a retrial, as the only evidence was the defendant's confession, which seemed to have been taken from him under duress. But the Iranian authorities upheld the death penalty to intimidate those at home rather than accepting the appeals of the international community which would have helped in improving Iran's international standing and its dismal human rights record.

Thus, in September, Iran went through a state of fogginess and displayed a lack of vision on most issues. It is still pinning hopes on the prospect that the occupant of the White House might soon be replaced, stopping short of providing solutions to its domestic, regional and international crises.

Internal Affairs

The Internal Affairs section covers four files. The first one centers on the ideological dimension of the Iranian internal situation, which has been significantly entangled with the religious seminary in Najaf, Iraq. It addresses the position of the Najaf seminary on the call to hold early elections in Iraq and the remarks of Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani in relation to the UN supervising the elections. Sistani's remarks sparked backlash from a senior media figure close to Khamenei but he shortly backed down and apologized. On the political level, several politicians called on Rouhani to step down and leave office due to his mishandling of the country's economic crisis. The Economic File casts light on the ramifications of implementing the snapback mechanism on the Iranian economy and the implications for the Iranian economy in case the United States succeeds in compelling countries around the world to comply with the UN sanctions on Iran. As for the Military File, it discusses a range of issues, including the impact of implementing the snapback mechanism on Iran's military activities, the challenges posed by the Azerbaijan-Armenia conflict to Iran and Iran's participation in the Caucasus 2020 maneuvers.



THE IDEOLOGICAL FILE

This month, the Ideological File sheds light on the religious and ideological developments and the political interactions linked to the Iranian religious elite and the Shiite religious seminary during the month of September 2020 and the impact of these developments on the religious and political scene.

In August, the Ideological File highlighted the divergent positions of clerics on how to hold the Ashura ceremonies considering the coronavirus pandemic. In September, the file covered the meeting of Ayatollah Sistani with the UN secretary general's special representative to Iraq and the repercussions of this meeting on the Iraqi and Iranian domestic front and the resurgence of the Iran-Najaf dispute.

Najaf, Early Elections, and Iranian Concerns

In September, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, the highest religious authority, met with Jeanine Hennis-Plasschaert of the Netherlands who is the UN secretary general's special representative for Iraq. He discussed several subjects and outlined his positions in regard to Iraq's crises. Sistani during the meeting with the UN chief's representative put forward the following proposals:

1. Sistani's Proposals

First: UN supervision of Iraq's parliamentary elections: Sistani called for the UN to supervise the upcoming parliamentary elections scheduled to be held next year because of – according to him – its utmost importance to ensure that the elections have credibility. In this respect, he said, “The elections should be held under a fair and equitable law away from the special interests of some political blocs and parties. Also, integrity and transparency should be observed across all the stages of these elections, and there should be serious monitoring and control in coordination with the concerned circle within the UN mission to Iraq.”⁽¹⁾

Second: banning arms outside state control: Sistani repeated his prime demand since the defeat of the Islamic State and the liberation of Iraqi territories, to ban arms outside the control of the Iraqi state and its official institutions.

“We call on the current government to proceed resolutely and strongly with the steps it had taken to achieve social justice, control border crossings, take away unlicensed arms and not allow some parts of the country to be divided into counties held by certain groups at gunpoint under different pretexts.”⁽²⁾

Third: Upholding national sovereignty and preventing any breaches or violations to it and resisting outside interventions.⁽³⁾

2. The Iranian Reaction

These demands raised concerns on the Iranian side. Kayhan newspaper, which is closely linked to the supreme leader, attacked Ayatollah Sistani. The attack was astonishing as the standoff between the two sides had always been kept hush-hush and hidden as all parties were keen not to publicize it. But this time Hossein Shariatmadari, the editor-in-chief of Kayhan newspaper and Khamenei's representative, wrote in his editorial,



“Sistani’s call on the UN to monitor the parliamentary elections in Iraq is considered inconsistent with his stature and position.”⁽⁴⁾

He continued, “You have made a mistake calling on the UN representative. There is no problem with this, but back down and rectify the mistake and announce that you did not say that.”⁽⁵⁾

Shariatmadari considered Sistani’s call for the UN to supervise Iraq’s elections to ensure its integrity as “an announcement of political bankruptcy.”⁽⁶⁾

However, due to growing popular and elite pressure, as well as the media uproar caused by the editorial which was deemed insulting to Sistani, Shariatmadari apologized to Sistani three days later. He wrote an article where he said, “The statement released by Sistani’s office does not speak of UN supervision of the elections but speaks of coordinating the monitoring in accordance with UN measures.” He added, “I apologize to His Eminence and I hope he accepts my apology.”⁽⁷⁾

Iranian officials attempted to ensure that the controversial remarks were solely attributed to the editor of the newspaper and did not reflect the position of the official Iranian authority. Furthermore, some of those close to the government insisted that the supreme leader is not close to Shariatmadari.⁽⁸⁾

It seems that Iran’s officials were given the green light to correct the mistake made by the newspaper editor. Zarif wrote on Twitter, “The grand Marja, His Eminence Ayatollah Sistani, is the fortress of Iraq, the security valve for the region, and an asset for the entire Islamic world. Iran appreciates the role of His Eminence in establishing security and stability in Iraq, maintaining its sovereignty and territorial integrity, getting rid of the occupation forces, and building a new Iraq according to the requirements of its brotherly people.”⁽⁹⁾

The chief of the Quds Force said, “Unity of the Iraqi people and acting as a popular force to counter the ISIS danger is attributed to the wisdom of Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani.”⁽¹⁰⁾

Columnists of reformist newspapers entered the debate, defended Sistani, criticized the editorial and considered it to be a blow to Iran-Iraq relations and Iran’s political and economic interests.⁽¹¹⁾

Those aligned with Iran in Iraq took a similarly critical position. For example, Nouri al-Maliki said that he was disturbed by the attack on Sistani.

In a statement, he said, “Marja Sistani, May God bless him, has been and is still the

security valve to protect the political process. He shouldered responsibility in very delicate circumstances and commands the respect of all factions of the Iraqi people. Therefore, I strongly denounce what was published in Kayhan newspaper and the disparaging criticism towards the Marja over receiving UN representative Jeanine Hennis-Plasschaert. It is an insult to all Iraqis.”⁽¹²⁾

Maliki called on the newspaper to correct its position which is not reflective of the supreme leader’s opinion, according to him.

Some pro-Iranian officials linked to armed groups first denied that there was an editorial criticizing Sistani, deeming it a fabrication by the enemies of Iran. Then they said that the editorial does not express Iran’s official position nor does it reflect the supreme leader’s opinion.⁽¹³⁾

At the official level, the heads of the three branches of power in a joint statement criticized what was published by the Iranian newspaper, reiterating Ayatollah Sistani’s demand that armed groups outside state control must be banned. They also reiterated the need to respect the important recommendations included in the statement of Grand Marja Sistani during His Eminence’s meeting with the UN representative. The backlash against the newspaper article included condemnation of the remarks which intended to belittle the stature of Supreme Marja Sistani who has been and still is the security valve for Iraq and its people. Belittling Sistani’s stature is not acceptable and open to criticism.⁽¹⁴⁾

3. The Dimensions of the Najaf Marja’s Proposals

Since the fall of the Saddam Hussein regime in 2003, Najaf has been concerned about Iran’s increasing influence in Iraq at several political, economic, social, and military levels. Iran is competing with Najaf to take control of religious networks and Shiite taqlid incubators. Iran has tried to impose a fait accompli on the ground in Iraq.

Those within the Najaf seminary understand that Iran’s influence extends way beyond the religious seminary and its sway over clerics. In the religious seminary and among clerics there has always been competition between Najaf and Qom to attract the public and the followers (taqlid). This is in addition to the competition in the fields of ijtiḥad and jurisprudential knowledge. However, the Najaf seminary now faces a political authority which intends to strip it of its pillars and undermine its independence, as did the Baathist regime.

The Iranian threat to Najaf has possibly heightened because Iran is attempting to sanctify its actions with a religious façade, taking the sect as its umbrella while introducing an interpretation alien to the Shiite sect, and imposing it as a heritage-inspired authentic interpretation.

The Iranian government has managed to curb the influence of Najaf within its home base, and among its traditional circles and taqlid incubators. The Iranian government engaged in competition to seize these incubators, which pose a threat to the future of Najaf and its well-established and traditional line, paving the way for a new Najaf line leaning towards the Guardian Jurist.

In addition, those in Najaf cannot do the same on Iranian soil in Qom, Mashhad, Esfahan, and other incubators since the competition is unequal. Iranian cities are controlled by the Iranian authorities. Therefore, the Najaf marjaya understands it is facing an integrated political and religious authority, not merely a religious marjaya or a religious seminary.

Therefore, the marjaya in Najaf is vigorously attempting to prevent the Iraqi seminary landscape from being taken over by Iran as was the case with Najaf’s seminaries based in Iran. If Iran is successful in diminishing the ideological status of Najaf, this would lead to the emergence of armed groups outside state control and unyielding loyalty to the

Iranian government, the supreme leader and the Guardian Jurist who should be obeyed and submitted to.

If this phenomenon escalates and becomes out of the Iraqi state's control, the Najaf marjaya will then be facing a new fait accompli imposing on it new beliefs other than those it inherited and is struggling to uphold.

Najaf's concern is vividly illustrated in Sistani's statement after the fall of Saddam Hussein, quoted by the US historian Juan Cole, "Even if this could lead to my perdition, I will not allow the Iranian experience to be repeated in Iraq."⁽¹⁵⁾

Conclusion

The Ideological File this month touched on the attack mounted on Ayatollah Sistani by one of Iran's official newspapers. This was in response to Sistani's remarks in relation to holding early elections and coordinating with the UN when it comes to supervising the elections. Furthermore, the subsequent firestorm which could have threatened relations between the two sides was discussed.

Of course, Iran's concern about holding early elections and UN supervision is attributed to the fear that pro-Velayat-e Faqih parties – supportive of Iran – could suffer significant losses.

Iran initially condemned Sistani's proposals out of fear that Najaf, via these proposals and statements, would hinder the advancement of pro-Iranian factions and parties in Iraq. These parties have become adept at applying electoral strategies to enable them to gain the majority of seats in past elections.

The Najaf seminary blocked the path for pro-Iranian parties to reject UN supervision or coordination, as leading Iranian figures were forced to retract their criticism leveled against the UN as an enemy of Iran, as stated in Shariatmadari's editorial.

We could come up with two important conclusions in this respect.

First: The Iranian government still sees Najaf as an impediment to Iran's full control and its plan to become the epicenter, thus having the final say over Shiite decision-making in Iran and Iraq alike, according to the requirements and prerequisites of Velayat-e Faqih.

Second: The Iranian retreat and apologies are a tactical act which do not reflect a genuine or a serious intent to build balanced relations and to not interfere in Iraqi affairs and support some parties at the expense of others. The proof of this is that pro-Iran factions still possess arms and refuse to surrender them to the state as the marjaya has demanded on a number of occasions.

THE POLITICAL FILE

In an attempt by the Iranian president to address the growing criticism from different political forces over the continued economic squeeze, which has reached record levels over the past few months, he called on his people to direct their wrath and curses at the White House instead of the Iranian government. He also considered the US sanctions as the principal reason behind the deteriorating situation in Iran. He revealed that Iran has incurred losses amounting to \$150 billion since the start of the US sanctions.⁽¹⁶⁾

This time, Rouhani's statement was significantly different when compared with another one he made on September 20, 2020, following the US decision to reinstate the UN sanctions on Iran. He boasted about his country's victory over the United States and how the maximum pressure strategy pursued by the Trump administration against Iran had led to the United States' extreme isolation.

I. The Conservatives' Position on Rouhani's Remarks

This position of the conservatives led to a new firestorm of stinging criticism targeting Rouhani and his government. Criticism was not limited to the conservatives but also included the reformists who have been the main supporters of Rouhani over the past seven years. They dismissed his justifications and some of them called on him to step down.

The conservatives refuse to direct blame only at the Trump administration for the economic crisis and say the government is also to blame, accusing it of mismanagement and not having a plan to save the economy and counter the ramifications of the sanctions.

The radicals within the conservative movement believe that Iran's hostility towards the United States is deeply rooted and cannot be denied. But they also believe that the Rouhani government's poor performance over the past seven years has negatively impacted the economic situation. Moreover, its impact has surpassed that of the US sanctions.

Since the US administration pulled out of the nuclear deal, the radicals believe that acknowledging the impact of the US sanctions on Iran's economic situation implies that Iran is dependent on the West.

They also believe that acknowledging this means that the fate of the Iranian people hangs on the White House and its decisions. This could further encourage the United States to double the restrictions and sanctions on Iran and force it to make concessions in regard to the various disputed files and issues between the two countries.

This could also indicate that Iran has reached an impasse and it no longer think of domestic solutions to resist sanctions. Therefore, the policy of ongoing pressures and economic sanctions may be the most suitable options to address Iran.

If the conservatives who have condemned the recent remarks of Rouhani back down and admit that the roots of the consecutive economic crises from which Iran is suffering are attributed to the United States and the sanctions it imposed on Iran, then they must also acknowledge that the key to resolving these crises is submitting to the US demands

and sitting down at the negotiating table to arrive at a new agreement on its nuclear project and to reaching understandings on the future of the outstanding issues between the two countries.

But the conservatives, especially the radicals among them, are opposed to the idea of negotiating with the Trump administration, which the Iranians consider to be unreliable. At this point, the Iranians hope that the presidential elections in the United States will result in Donald Trump losing the presidential race to his rival Joe Biden, or that Trump will offer agreeable solutions and guarantees to lift the sanctions on Iran in case he wins a second term in return for negotiating with his administration.

II. Reformists Call on Rouhani to Step Down

Rouhani's remarks led to tremendous opposition among a massive segment of the reformists. The reformist politician Abbas Abdi came forward and presented a proposal to initiate a breakthrough and improve and change the current circumstances in the country.⁽¹⁷⁾ The proposal called on Rouhani to resign. Abdi presented the same proposal after the reformist movement's supporters expressed their resentment over the government's role and its negative position in relation to the street protests in different Iranian cities in November 2019 in the aftermath of gasoline prices rising.

At that time, Abdi's proposal was considered as an attempt from the reformists to distance themselves from the government which hiked the price of gasoline, triggering the wave of protests which left hundreds of people dead.

This call found support among other reformist figures such as Abdollah Ramazanzadeh – the former spokesman of Mohammad Khatami's government – who welcomed the proposal, describing it as good and a means to end the confusion and reassign responsibilities.



Nevertheless, Chief of Staff of the President of Iran Mahmoud Vaezi strongly defended President Rouhani's remarks and sent a message to the reformists who have called on the president to step down. He said, "The government includes several reformist officials. If the reformists do not respect the government, they should at least respect their companions within it."⁽¹⁸⁾

III. The Conservatives Retreat From Demanding Rouhani's Resignation

Until recently, the conservatives had called on President Rouhani to resign. But it seems that the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei who is opposed to the current government resigning played a pivotal role in shifting the position of the conservatives towards

the government. This shifting position was apparent in the opposition that reformist politician Abbas Abdi faced when he called on the government to resign, thus, clearing the way for another capable person to find solutions to deal with the economic crises that the country is experiencing. Conservative newspapers considered this call as a reformist attempt to shirk responsibility and dodge accountability. The radical newspaper Kayhan concluded that the reformist movement has been Rouhani's backer over the past years. Those affiliated with the movement took up positions in the government. Despite their poor performance, they now seek to bypass Rouhani by calling on him to resign.⁽¹⁹⁾

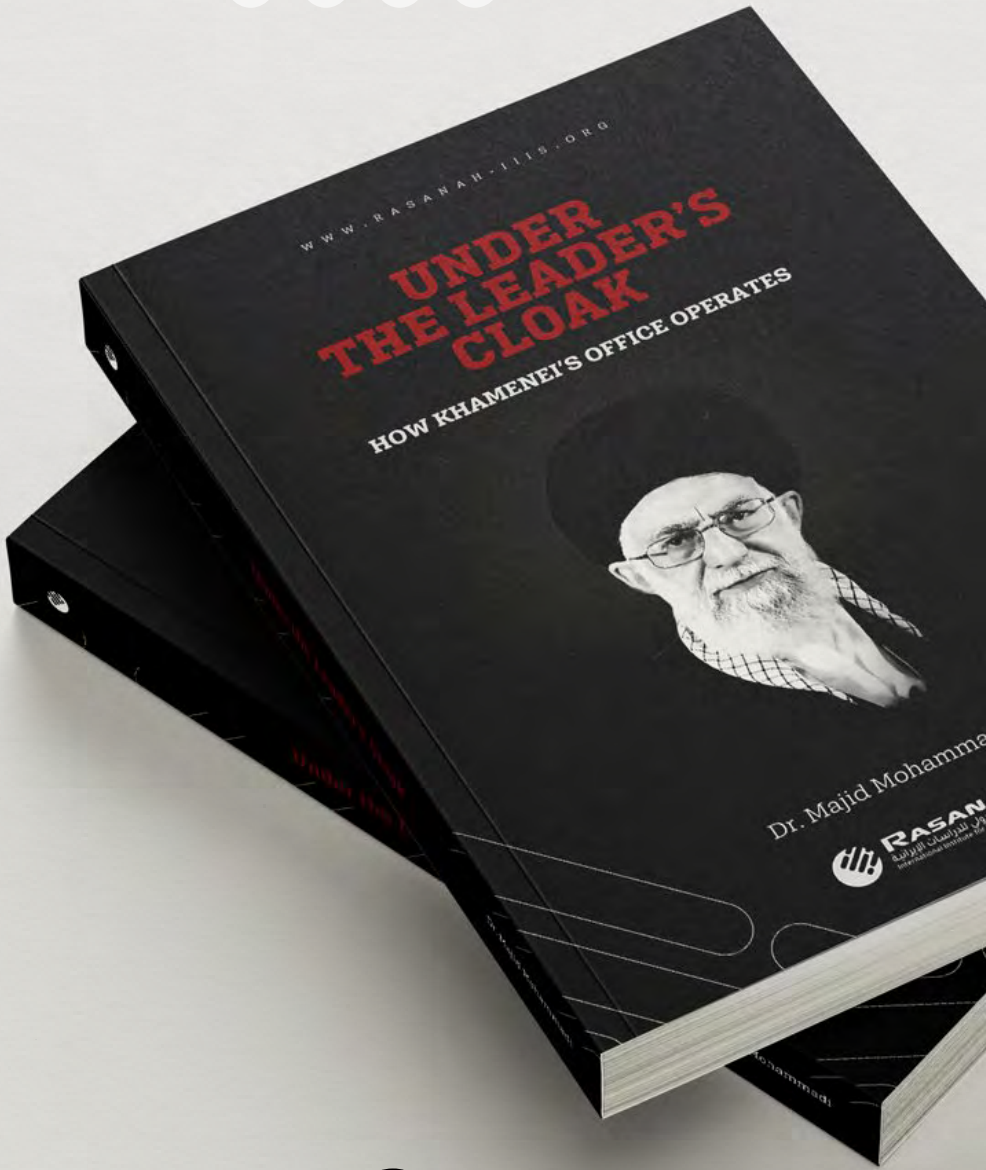
In addition, the conservatives' position was expressed in the poll on Twitter that was carried out by Jalil Mohebbi, Secretary of the Office for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice. He is also one of Rouhani's opponents. The poll, in which many conservatives participated, showed that 55 percent of the respondents were against Rouhani's resignation while 45 percent of the respondents were in favor.⁽²⁰⁾

Conclusion

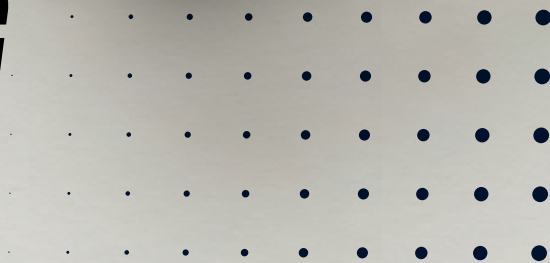
According to the foregoing, we could say that President Rouhani's remarks – in which he admitted that the US sanctions are hurting the country's economic situation – reflect the enormity of the damage that the sanctions have inflicted on the economic and living circumstances in Iran. They also reflect Rouhani's desire to resolve the nuclear deal crisis and end the US sanctions imposed on Iran. But his desire is always at odds with the stubborn position of the radicals.

Rouhani's remarks also allude to a tacit criticism of the radicals who refuse to negotiate with the United States. The conservatives' criticism of Rouhani's remarks, despite being justifiable, is nothing more than a political tactic and is not motivated by genuine concern for the country's economic welfare.

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***COMING
SOON***



THE ECONOMIC FILE

The Economic File for the month of September sheds light on the United States' enforcement of the snapback mechanism.

The US decision to impose UN sanctions on Iran via triggering the snapback mechanism as detailed in Resolution 2231 on September 20, 2020, based on the earlier notification submitted by the United States to the president of the UN Security Council on August 20, 2020, caused some discontent inside Iran and among other countries, especially among those concerned about the Iranian nuclear file.

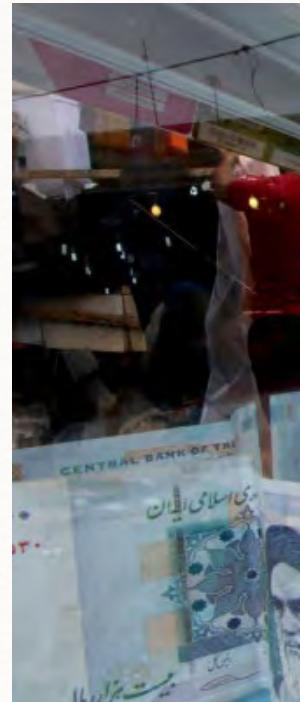
Therefore, this file provides a brief analysis of the snapback mechanism and its nature, the international reactions to the United States implementing this mechanism and the ramifications of sanctions being reimposed on Iran.

I. The Snapback Mechanism and the Sanctions Included in It

The snapback mechanism allows all UN sanctions to be reimposed on Iran in the event that a country which is a party to the nuclear deal concluded with Iran in 2015 requests for this, on the basis that Tehran violated its obligations stipulated in the deal. According to UN Resolution 2231, any JCPOA (the nuclear agreement) participant country can lodge a complaint with the Security Council if it deems that one of the parties to the deal has violated its obligations. The Security Council, after receiving a notification of the complaint, grants a 30-day period to vote for a draft resolution to continue in effect the terminations of the provisions of previous Security Council resolutions. Accordingly, as soon as the period expires, the sanctions will automatically become effective unless the Security Council meets and approves the extension of the sanctions relief on Iran.⁽²¹⁾

Activating the snapback mechanism leads to the reimposition of all UN sanctions on Iran, including the cessation of uranium enrichment and the activities connected to nuclear energy as well as the continuation of the arms embargo on Tehran, which is scheduled to expire on October 18, 2020. Washington did not stop at the snapback mechanism, US President Donald Trump also imposed economic sanctions on entities which help to supply arms to Iran, preventing them from accessing the US market and financial system.⁽²²⁾

The UN sanctions that were lifted under the nuclear agreement in 2016 included various sanctions and restrictions imposed on Iran from 2006 to 2010. They included banning the supply of nuclear material and technology, freezing the assets of firms and individuals connected to Iran's nuclear program, imposing an arms embargo, and giving international authorities the right to inspect Iranian ships and aircraft. In addition, the movement of individuals connected to Iran's nuclear program could be monitored, and the funds and assets belonging to the Revolutionary Guard and Iranian shipping lines were frozen, and countries were asked to inspect Iranian cargo ships.⁽²³⁾



II. The European Position Following the Decision to Activate the Snapback Mechanism

The US announcement was met with wide-ranging international criticism by Iran and other member states of the UN Security Council based on several considerations. As for Iran, the US resolution to activate the snapback mechanism was considered a symbolic measure and part of Trump's campaign for reelection to the White House. The Iranians dismissed the impact of these sanctions on trade dealings between Iran and other countries.⁽²⁴⁾

On the other side, 13 out of 15 Security Council member states rejected the US resolution due to the fact that the United States is no longer a party to the agreement with Iran after its withdrawal last year. Thus, the resolution is nonbinding and has no legal grounds.⁽²⁵⁾

In response to this US resolution, the E3 countries – France, Germany and Britain – dismissed the US move, pointing out that any resolution or measure to reimpose UN sanctions on Iran has no legal effect due to Iran's commitment to fully implement the nuclear deal and that Tehran's sanctions relief from the UN sanctions will continue despite the US decision.⁽²⁶⁾

The response of China and Russia, the countries which are most likely to continue cooperation with Iran, was no different from the European countries. The two countries announced they would not abide by this mechanism, reiterating their commitment to supporting the nuclear deal and the UN Security Council resolution.

Russia considered the resolution to be totally illegal and that the United States has no authority to impose unilateral sanctions on Iran. As soon as the final deadline of the arms embargo on Iran set out in Security Council Resolution 2231 expires, Iran will freely conclude arms deals with other countries.



Meanwhile, China stated that the United States does not have the right to use this mechanism as it withdrew from the nuclear agreement in May 2018. It also criticized the United States' violation of international law. China also highlighted the underlying threat to other countries which may also face US sanctions if these countries fail to abide by Washington's decision.⁽²⁷⁾

III. The Economic Consequences Arising From Implementing the Snapback Mechanism

In the aftermath of the unilateral implementation of the snapback mechanism, the US administration, via an executive order, announced the imposition of sanctions on any company or individual involved in importing or exporting arms to Iran. It also announced the imposition of economic sanctions on several Iranian institutions and officials linked to the nuclear program. This is in addition to imposing sanctions on several defense industries in Iran such as Shahid Hemat Industrial Group (SHIG) and Mammut Industrial Group.⁽²⁸⁾

The United States also threatened to take a series of harsh measures against the countries that violate the sanctions imposed on Iran such as imposing economic and financial sanctions against them and preventing them from entering the US market. This US step could undermine trade dealings between Iran and other countries as many international companies would prefer to have access to the US market rather than the Iranian market. Perhaps what increases the likelihood of Iran's international trade dealings potentially declining is the sharp decline in Iran's trade with its biggest partners since the United States pulled out of the nuclear deal in mid-2018.

The latest tallies issued by Iran's customs indicate a sharp decline in Iran's trade with its main partners throughout the first seven months of 2020. Iran's exports to China during the first seven months of 2020 declined by 61 percent compared to the same period in 2019. China is Iran's largest trading partner. Iran's exports to India decreased to \$140 million during the same period, down from \$3.2 billion last year. With Turkey, it decreased to \$580 million compared to \$3 billion the previous year. So far, the European Union has published statistics for six months of trade with Iran which do not show a significant change compared to the first half of 2019, but represent a sharp decrease compared to the same period in 2018.⁽²⁹⁾

On the other side, the Iranians play down the US decision as it is unilateral and has been dismissed by Europe, China, and Russia. The Iranian government also asserts that the country has been suffering from sanctions over the past two years. However, the decision to implement the snapback mechanism impacted the Iranian exchange market as the Iranian currency posted a new record decline against the US dollar, the price surpassed 29,000 toman at the end of September.

Maybe the impact of implementing the mechanism is limited compared to the bigger impact caused by the comprehensive US sanctions on the Iranian economy – which are still in place – and caused a sharp economic downturn estimated by the Economist Intelligence Unit in its most recent report (September 2020) to be 12 percent in 2020. This is in addition to posting record-smashing inflation rates over the past two years even though the European countries remained in the nuclear deal. Therefore, Chairman of the Foreign Policy and National Security Committee of the Iranian Parliament Mojtaba Zonnour criticized the European role – from the withdrawal of the United States from the nuclear agreement in mid-2018 up to implementing the snapback mechanism in 2020. He described the European opposition to the US mechanism as something that is not worth celebrating.⁽³⁰⁾

In a webinar held by the International Institute for Iranian Studies (Rasanah) on

September 22 following the implementation of the snapback mechanism, Managing Director at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Michael Singh said that despite the differences about the snapback mechanism, it may lead to productive diplomacy that will limit the flow of arms to Iran when the embargo expires.”

Iran's decision makers are still betting on Joe Biden winning the next US presidential elections and reaching an agreement to lift the economic sanctions imposed on Iran.

THE MILITARY FILE

The Military File in September sheds light on the Iranian government's reaction to the US government's efforts to impose sanctions on Iran via the snapback mechanism and the impact of this move on Iranian armament activities. It also addresses the Iranian point of view towards the latest tensions between Armenia and Azerbaijan on the northern borders of Iran in addition to the military activities and drills carried out by the Iranian forces.

I. Iran and Mitigating the Implications of Implementing the Snapback Mechanism

At the end of last August, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo announced the United States' intention to reimpose international sanctions on Iran. In two letters he delivered to the secretary-general of the United Nations and the president of the Security Council, the US demanded the return of all international sanctions that were previously imposed on Iran before the signing of the nuclear agreement in 2015, from which Washington withdrew in 2018.

He indicated that the United States will not allow Iran, the biggest state sponsor of terrorism in the world, to freely buy and sell weapons, missiles and other categories of conventional weapons, and that it will again be subject to international sanctions, including an arms embargo. This is in addition to preventing it from engaging in any ballistic missile tests and carrying out activities connected to enriching nuclear materials.

Iran will not be allowed to possess nuclear weapons.⁽³¹⁾ On September 20, 2020, the US secretary of state announced that the United Nations sanctions against Iran 'entered into force again,' warning of the 'consequences' if other countries fail to implement these sanctions. Pompeo said, "The United States is ready United States is prepared to use our domestic authorities to impose consequences for those failures and ensure that Iran does not reap the benefits of UN-prohibited activity."⁽³²⁾ He indicated that activating the snapback mechanism reimposes almost all UN sanctions on Iran. Pompeo stressed that his country will announce new measures to strengthen the implementation of sanctions and hold violators accountable.⁽³³⁾

For its part, Iran has mobilized its political and media tools to counter the US step and to highlight the illegal nature of this step. Among the significant measures taken by Iran in this regard are the following:

1. Strengthening Links With the International Atomic Energy Agency and Attempting to Influence It

The Iranian government welcomed the visit of the director general of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to Tehran. The outstanding issues between the two have been resolved, including Iran's approval to allow the inspection of two nuclear facilities which were a contentious issue with the IAEA. Iran also said it is committed to complying with inspections.⁽³⁴⁾

2. Threatening to Pull out of the Nuclear Deal

This is to put more pressure on the Western countries. This is clearly illustrated in the remarks and hints of Iranian officials.

3. The Call on the International Atomic Energy Agency to Condemn the Subversive Acts at Natanz's Nuclear Facilities

The Chairman of the Iranian Atomic Energy Organization, Ali Akbar Salehi, said that the IAEA and member states should condemn the subversive acts at Natanz's nuclear facilities. The remarks intended to show Iran as a victim of conspiracy amid mounting international pressures.⁽³⁵⁾

The Iranians are closely watching the US presidential campaign, hoping that President Donald Trump loses and Joe Biden wins. There are also voices calling for discussions over the steps that Iran could take in response to the implementation of the snapback mechanism. An emergency bill was proposed in the Iranian Parliament urging Iran to stop implementing its nuclear obligations and to end its compliance with the 12 provisions included in the nuclear deal in case the arms embargo on Iran is extended.⁽³⁶⁾

It seems that Iran does not have capability to implement what was mentioned in the emergency bill submitted at the Iranian Parliament. Such moves will not be accepted internationally, and then the international community will unanimously support the reimposition of sanctions. But these potential moves represent threats that aim to influence the international community and send a message to US voters to highlight the dangers of the US administration's policy towards Iran.

Iran also impatiently waits for October 18 when the arms embargo imposed on it is scheduled to expire. Iran will be free to buy and sell weapons and it hopes to conclude deals on advanced weapons, especially with Russia to strengthen its air force via a new set of fighter jets such as the Sukhoi 30 and the Sukhoi 35. Maybe it will purchase the S-400 air defense system. It also hopes to be able to export weapons to its proxies across the Middle East and supply its allies like Venezuela with missiles,⁽³⁷⁾ drones, and air defense systems to boost its economic revenues.⁽³⁸⁾

II. Iran's Bet Over Nagorno-Karabagh

With the recent flare-up of hostilities between Azerbaijan and Armenia over the latter's occupation of the Nagorno-Karabakh region, Iran's role in the Caucasus has once again come into the limelight.

Not only does Iran continue to provide vital energy and food supplies to Armenia (as it did during the annexation of Nagorno-Karabagh between 1992-1994) but it also strengthens the occupier's hold by building infrastructure and doing business with entities there.⁽³⁹⁾ Ensuring the food security of a country during a war is no less crucial than providing decisive military hardware. With no regard for Azerbaijan's uproar, Iran has built roads and bridges to connect with Armenia-occupied Azeri towns. One such town, Shusha, was captured by Armenia while its leaders held a peace summit with Azerbaijan.⁽⁴⁰⁾ Iran expressed "concern" over the annexation and soon opened a bridge to help ease Yerevan's logistical nightmare.⁽⁴¹⁾

Following reports of Iran's mobilization of troops along the Iran-Azerbaijan border, an Azeri drone sent for surveillance was shot down over its territory.⁽⁴²⁾ To the contrary, Russia has enjoyed all access to Iranian airspace since the 1990s for the provision of military hardware and other supplies to Armenia.

While trouble in the Caucasus is bothersome for Russia, a prolonged conflict will become nightmarish for Iran, as one-third of its population is of Azeri descent. A segment of its Azeri ethnic population has consistently expressed discontent over Tehran's policy towards the country's northwestern regions as well as the occupation of Nagorno-Karabakh. During the 1980s, the Popular Front of Azerbaijan worked to

mobilize people along linguistic and ethnic lines, which also had a significant following in Iran's northwestern regions where people protested against Tehran and went as far as destroying border posts. The protests, peaceful as well as violent, happening intermittently have forced Iran to create a façade of neutrality by engaging both sides through diplomatic channels.⁽⁴³⁾ Tehran's posturing aside, its cooperation with Yerevan is multi-faceted, sensitive, and strategic.

Iran opted to support the Armenian occupation of Nagorno-Karabakh to create a geographical disconnect between Azerbaijan and its Azeri community, which has so far remained not-so-extrovertly vocal. Besides, none of Iran's foes have ever tried to exploit Azeri discontent to its advantage as has been the case with Sistan-Balochistan, for example. Many Azeri people reside in Iran's northwestern regions of East and West Azerbaijan and Ardebil, with strong tribal and family ties across the border. Azeris, in general, are spread across Iran and are predominantly Shiites.⁽⁴⁴⁾

While Azerbaijan seeks to strengthen control over the areas surrounding the TANAP gas pipeline to Turkey, Iran wants its own pipeline leading to Europe through the Armenian region as the snapback sanctions could not be reinstated, giving it room to invest in future energy trade routes. Had it not been under UNSC sanctions, an Iranian gas pipeline could have been in the phase of construction. Currently, Iran supplies gas to Armenia in return for electricity produced by a nuclear plant.

Iran's other concern has been Azerbaijan's close strategic ties with Israel and the risk of its soil being used for an attack. The ongoing conflict increases Azeri dependency on Israel and the wedge between Baku and Tehran will possibly further deepen. So far, Iran has avoided making overtly provocative moves along the border with Azerbaijan or in relation to the ongoing conflict but the triangular cooperation – Iran-Armenia-Russia – is evidently keeping Yerevan in the fight. Baku has been consistently calling out both Tehran and Moscow for supplying weapons to Yerevan in recent months.⁽⁴⁵⁾ Regardless of its claims of neutrality and denial of illicit arms transfer to Armenia, Iran cannot keep itself out of the situation for its investment of over two decades in Armenia-occupied Azeri territories is at stake. Even if Azerbaijan falls short of freeing the entire Nagorno-Karabagh region, its domination can encourage the disgruntled Azeri-Iranians to take on Iran's ruling clergy.

III. Military Activities

1. The Zulfiqar-99 Drill

The Iranian Army carried out the Zulfiqar-99 military drill on September 20, 2020 – in which they tested rocket launchers, drones, cruise missiles with variant ranges — declaring that this drill will increase the effectiveness of Iran's military force and represents a shift in Iran's military doctrine.⁽⁴⁶⁾

However, the United States continued monitoring Iran's military maneuvers, three US drones targeted Iranian space on September 11, 2020 to watch the Zulfiqar-99 drill. When the Iranian army spotted and warned the US drones, they retreated. According to media reports, Tehran is planning to assassinate the US ambassador to South Africa to avenge the killing of Quds Commander Qassem Soleimani. US President Donald Trump warned Iran that “Any attack by Iran, in any form, against the United States will be met with an attack on Iran that will be 1,000 times greater in magnitude!”⁽⁴⁷⁾

Figure 1: The Qader Anti-ship Cruise Missile at the Zulfiqar-99 Drill



1. Sacred Defense Week

Marking Sacred Defense Week (an Iranian annual commemoration of the 1980–1988 Iran–Iraq War), several military activities were launched including military exercises and parades. A drill, dubbed as “Sons of Soleimani” was carried out in Hormozgan, southern Iran.⁽⁴⁸⁾ The IRGC carried out a military parade, displaying Raad-500 ballistic missiles, and unveiled two new radar projects dubbed “Soroush.”⁽⁴⁹⁾

2. Participating in the Caucasus 2020 Drills

The forces of Russia, China, Iran, Pakistan, Kazakhstan and Tajikistan launched their joint strategic drill, the Caucasus 2020, in Russia’s southern Caucasus region.

More than 80,000 troops took part in the four-day drill, including air, navy and ground forces. This is in addition to special missile defense regiments and cyber warfare units. Two units from the Iranian Navy and the General Staff of the Armed Forces partook in this drill. Russia’s Defense Ministry said that representatives from Armenia, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, and Azerbaijan acted as observers in the drill. Intercepting guided missiles, countering cyberattacks and addressing cyber warfare were amongst the drill’s objectives.⁽⁵⁰⁾

According to some Iranian observers, the significance of the Caucasus 2020 drill stems from the joint vision of the participants towards the western countries. It is considered a military alliance for deterrence purposes for these eastern countries against the American military power.⁽⁵¹⁾

Conclusion

The United States continues to pressure Iran to return to the negotiating table by imposing sanctions. However, the JCPOA participants do not have a road map to follow through which they can achieve a balance between maintaining the nuclear deal and protecting their shared interests with Washington. Thus, the benefits to Iran from lifting the arms embargo are expected to be minimal; Tehran would not reap anything more than a moral victory. However, Iran may still benefit from Russian support but this is not

guaranteed, particularly amid the US insistence to counter any move which attempts to support the Iranians in violating the sanctions. Regardless of the US elections outcome, it is believed that the perspective of the upcoming US administration will focus on re-establishing the bedrock of future talks between the United States and Iran to avoid the mistakes committed in the JCPOA.

The 2020 Armenian–Azerbaijani skirmishes have increased Iran’s challenges in the region; this is in addition to the normalization following the peace accord concluded between Israel, Bahrain and the UAE. Iran still bets and hopes that Trump will not be reelected. Even if Iran’s hopes come true, it cannot achieve all of its ambitions.

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Arab Affairs

Arab Affairs addresses two files: Iranian interference in Syria and Yemen. The first file discusses the controversy over the movement of Iranian militias in Syria: whether it was a withdrawal from the lines that are under Israeli air strikes or was a repositioning. It also deals with the steps taken by Iran to establish a long-term military presence in Syria. In addition, the first file also highlights Iran's endeavors to spread its social and sectarian practices in Syrian society and to promote the culture of mut'ah marriages, as well as the pragmatic dimension of Iran's presence, and the increased divergence between Iran and Russia.

The second file, Iran's presence in Yemen, addresses Iran's announcement that it supplies the Houthi militia with technology to produce missiles and drones and the link between Houthi terrorism and Iran's support of it.



IRAN AND SYRIA

Due to the multiple regional and international parties involved in the Syrian crisis that has been raging for approximately a decade, and the divergence of agendas and interests, especially that of Iran, which seeks to win the largest gains possible by extending the scope of its influence and control over resources – which is criticized by the United States, Russia and Israel – the Syrian arena witnessed several developments as follows:

I. The Debate Over Iranian Moves in Syria Between Withdrawal and Repositioning

Over the past few months, the Syrian arena has witnessed an extensive debate over what Tel Aviv has considered to be an Iranian withdrawal from Syria due to its successive air strikes. In relation to the aforementioned, pro-Iranian militias shifted some of their positions and sites. Iran handed over its headquarters to Syrian forces, estimated to be situated approximately 70 kilometers from Deir Ezzor to the east. However, 70 square kilometers of land is still under the control of pro-Iranian militias in this area. The Afghan Fatimiyoun militia moved from southern Deir Ezzor and Al-Mayadin to its headquarters in Palmyra city. The 313 Brigade also moved from southern Damascus to its headquarters in the Sayyida Zeinab area of southern Damascus. Armed formations moved to western Iraq.⁽¹⁾

Before these shifts, six positions of Iranian militias out of nine witnessed large scale moves in Abu Kamal and Deir Ezzor. The shifts involved four military sites out of seven in Homs governorate, while there were limited shifts in Aleppo. However, no shifts of militia headquarters in the governorates of Raqqqa, Daraa, Hama, and Damascus were observed. Most of these sites contain weapons depots for Iranian militias, the IRGC, and Hezbollah, as well as for the Fatimiyoun and Zainabiyoun brigades. These sites were handed over to pro-Iranian Syrian forces.⁽²⁾

Due to the ideological nature of the Iranian ruling system, these shifts can be described as nothing more than “repositioning,” and do not signify a change in Iran’s strategic position. Needless to say, Iran handed over these sites to loyal Syrian brigades in a very similar step to what happened in southern Syria after an agreement was concluded which resulted in the withdrawal of Iranian militias from the disengagement line in the occupied Golan Heights to around 80 kilometers. However, describing these shifts as a “withdrawal” does not reflect an accurate reading of Iran’s regional behavior.

Iran knows that withdrawing from Syria will cast a negative shadow over its regional influence as a whole, especially since it is not like other countries that take into consideration the calculus of profit and loss in the short term, but rather it relies on a long-term policy to determine its movements and foreign policies. Therefore, the bet on Iran withdrawing from Syria due to the painful and ongoing Israeli strikes against its militias is inaccurate on all accounts.

II. Iranian Military Moves for a Long-term Stay in Syria

On September 13, 2020, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights revealed that Iran had increased its recruitment of young men to fight alongside its armed militias

in areas under its control and influence: southern Syria, the west of the Euphrates, Abu Kamal, and the countryside of Daraa, Deir Ezzor and Quneitra. About 13,500 people were recruited for this purpose. This recruitment was carried out by Iran's strong arm in southern Syria known as the al-Areen Brigades by providing young men with financial incentives.⁽³⁾ Iran exploits two issues to intensify its recruitment in the mentioned areas: the deteriorating living conditions of young men, and Russia's preoccupation with the agreements it signed with the Turks in the de-escalation zones in northeastern Syria.

A series of Iranian moves were undertaken in response to Israel's belief that Tehran's influence in Syria had declined due to successive Israeli strikes. One of Iran's most important moves was the comprehensive military agreement that Iran's Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces, Major General Mohammad Bagheri and Defense Minister, General Ali Abdallah Ayoub concluded on July 8, 2020 to strengthen military and security cooperation in Syria. It led to the following:

A. Tehran announced on July 15, 2020 that it supplied Damascus with a medium-range surface-to-air missile system, "Khordad-3," to counter air threats.⁽⁴⁾ However, this system has a range of about 50 kilometers to 75 kilometers. Tehran is also proud of its effectiveness and success in shooting down the US drone in June 2019.

B. On July 19, 2020, some media outlets announced that Iran had deployed its Bavar-373 missile defense system to Syria which is equivalent to the Russian S-300 air defense system.⁽⁵⁾

Iran has other objectives behind the aforementioned moves in the Syrian arena. Some of these objectives intend to send a message to Israel and its ally America that despite the painful and repetitive air strikes against its militias in Syria, Tehran will seek to strengthen its military presence in the Syrian arena, and it will not abandon the Syrian card, and it is able to expand outside its borders despite the repercussions of harsh sanctions, the coronavirus crisis and the Caesar Act. Also, Iran's moves intend to send messages to the Russians that Iran cannot be overlooked in any arrangements in relation to the Syrian files, and that the Russians do not have exclusive rights in the Syrian settlement without coordinating with Iran, and that Tehran has alternatives to Russian weapons which have proven to be ineffective against the successive Israeli raids. Iran is also sending a message of reassurance to its militia fighters that it will not abandon them, and to all parties that Iran intends to stay in Syria.

However, the question is: will Iran's supply of its air defense system to Syria change the rules of engagement in Syria in its favor? According to several experts, the answer is no, due to the limited capabilities of Iran's air defense system. In addition, Israel can track and destroy Iranian systems before they even arrive in Syria because of its strong intelligence apparatus. Therefore, it will not change the rules of engagement and will not affect the balance of power in the Syrian crisis.



III. Passing on Iranian Social Patterns to Syrian Society

The Iranian association, Shariati, based in Damascus at the Iranian Cultural Center with its main headquarters in Mashhad, Iran, which has branches in Iraq and Lebanon, opened four hotels in Sayyida Zeinab, south of Damascus, on September 9, 2020 to facilitate mut'ah marriages (limited and fixed-term marriages practiced in Shiite communities). The association also concluded contracts with other hotels in the capital, such as Kairouan and Venice, to promote this type of marriage among the young men in the region on the one hand and to receive financial profit on the other hand by ensuring the young men reserve rooms in one of these hotels.⁽⁶⁾

Iran's aim in promoting mut'ah marriages in its spheres of influence in the Middle East generally and Syria particularly is to disseminate and extend Shiism in all Syrian regions by attracting the youth to Shiism in the areas under its influence and beyond. The Arab youth in crisis-affected areas cannot afford the costs of a traditional marriage (permanent marriage). Iran has been exploiting the difficult living conditions of young men, especially in Syria, to spread Shiism and entrench its influence. Iran also needs to maximize financial returns to alleviate the impact of the stifling economic sanctions it is experiencing.

IV. The Pragmatic Approach in Iranian Policy Towards the Syrian Arena

Major General Yahya Rahim Safavi, military adviser and aide to the Iranian supreme leader, admitted on September 28, 2020 that "Iran's interventions in the states of the region were not for free, but they were made to obtain funds, especially in Syria and Iraq." He declared, "We signed contracts with the Syrians, and we will get things in return, and every time we were helping the Iraqis, we got money in dollars." He also added that "we are helping every Muslim and non-Muslim country, but we got money in exchange for this. We gave the Venezuelans gasoline and we received gold bars in return and brought it by plane to ensure that no problems could happen."⁽⁷⁾

These remarks reflect a pragmatic approach in Iranian policy towards regional files, and reflect that Iran's sponsorship of regional proxies is not only to expand Shiite influence, but to reap economic and financial gains to help it cope with the repercussions of economic sanctions on the one hand and to ensure the sustainability of its regional expansionist project on the other hand.

It should be noted that the financial amount Iran has provided to Syria since it first intervened in the crisis about eight years ago is about \$6 billion annually according to the spokeswoman for the UN envoy to Syria Jesse Shaheen. This means that Iran has provided about \$48 billion over eight years, which is equivalent to about four times of Iran's annual defense budget.⁽⁸⁾

V. The Increased Divergence Between Russia and Iran in Syria

The rift between the Russians and the Iranians is widening in the Syrian crisis because of mutual assassinations carried out between the two Syrian divisions; one of them loyal to Russia (the Fourth Armored Division) and the other loyal to Iran (the Fifth Division also called the Fifth Corps) in Daraa governorate, southern Syria. This contributed to the two countries' realizing the importance of southern Syria. Iran attaches particular importance to this region given its proximity to the Iraqi-Syrian border, which is important for smuggling weapons to its armed militias, whether in Syria or Lebanon, and transporting fighters. Russia is alarmed by the implications of Iranian expansion in southern Syria and perceives it as a direct cause of Israeli air strikes against Syrian military targets.

Pro-Russian forces in Syria expelled Syrian forces and pro-Iranian fighters from

Dweir, a town in Deir Ezzor, and captured the Al-Ward oil field, apparently in response to the 11th Division of the Syrian regime which expelled Iranian fighters and pro-Russian militias from this town amid a Russian-Iranian struggle to share influence.⁽⁹⁾

However, with the absence of mutual interests between the Russians and the Iranians in Syria to keep Assad in power in Syria and to uphold his control over most of the geographical area since he retook Aleppo in early 2017, the divergence between the Russians and the Iranians has increased over the nature of the new Syrian state and the scope of their influence in Syria, and control over resources and investments in Syria. It escalated to armed clashes between pro-Russian militias and Iranian fighters in Syria during 2019. Russia wants a Syrian state that has a strong army that preserves its interests and changes the equation of influence in the Syrian territories as a whole in a way that will not increase Iranian influence. However, Iran wants a weak Syrian dependent state where it along with its armed militias have an upper hand to implement Tehran's plans. The Russian-Iranian conflict is likely to develop into a series of armed confrontations due to the ongoing race to monopolize the spoils of war and Tehran's quest to seek compensation for the material and human losses suffered in the Syrian crisis.

Conclusion

In light of the above, it can be said that the talk about Iran withdrawing from Syria is unrealistic and does not reflect a true reading of the nature of the Iranian government, which has been able to increase the level of its influence in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon and Yemen. It also suffered great material and human losses in expanding its influence. Therefore, Iran will not surrender without a fight in Syria or give up its other areas of regional influence. To strengthen its influence and hegemony, Iran does not rely on a single tool, but depends on various tools simultaneously, including military, economic, investment, cultural and social tools to ensure the extension of its sphere of influence, so that it retains complete control over Syrian decision-making internally and externally. However, Iran faces a number of difficult challenges in the Syrian file, namely the regional and international consensus on the need to eliminate the presence of pro-Iranian armed militias in Syria. Significantly, Russian-Iranian divergence in Syria has also increased in many vital Syrian areas, which will lead to armed confrontations between the pro-Iran forces and the pro-Russian forces not sporadically, but consecutively in southern Syria, the oil-rich eastern Euphrates region and in governorates such as Tartus, Latakia, Damascus, Rif Dimashq and Aleppo.

IRAN AND YEMEN

In September, the Yemeni arena witnessed further complications at the political and military levels which are directly connected to the Iranian role. The Houthi military escalation inside and outside Yemen increased, indicating growing Iranian movements to disrupt the Yemeni peace process that was agreed in Geneva between the two delegations of the legitimate government and the Houthi militia. These movements have further complicated the Yemeni arena. This Iranian involvement is clearly illustrated by the unprecedented statements of the official spokesperson of the Iranian armed forces. He said that all Iranian military technologies are at the disposal of the Houthi militia. Iran instructed the Houthi militia to initiate further political and military escalations to increase the complexities of the Yemeni crisis. This military escalation is considered a blatant challenge to the efforts of the United Nations and the coalition countries that seek a peaceful solution in Yemen. It also reflects the Iranian will to keep the Yemeni crisis ongoing in line with its expansionist interests with the complete subordination of the Houthi militia to Tehran, neglecting all political considerations leading to a united Yemen. The following are the most prominent developments related to the Iranian role in the Yemeni arena in September:

I. The Iranian Government Places Military Technology at the Houthis' Disposal

In a public and unprecedented statement, the official spokesman of the Iranian armed forces confirmed the Iranian establishment's involvement in destabilizing Yemen by supporting the Houthi militia militarily and supplying this militia with the weapons that are used to kill the Yemeni people and to prolong the Yemeni crisis. At the same time, he verified the validity of the previous reports of the Arab Coalition supporting the legitimate government in Yemen regarding Iran's destabilizing role in Yemen and the region. The spokesman for the Iranian Armed Forces, Brigadier General Abu al-Fadl Shikaraji, said that the Iranian government is placing its military technologies at the disposal of the Houthi militia. "We transferred the technological experience in the field of defense to them and they have learned to produce missiles, UAVs and weapons in Yemen themselves," Shikaraji said, as quoted by the Fars News Agency.⁽¹⁰⁾

The legitimate Yemeni government considered these remarks a flagrant violation of international law and a challenge to the will of the international community. It also believes that this explicit confession by the Iranian government represents its will, and supports the rebellion and the Houthi coup. Yemen's Information Minister Muammar al-Eryani stated, "The Iranian interference in Yemen and the war, triggered by the Houthi coup in which tens of thousands of Yemenis were killed or wounded, inflicted heavy losses on the Yemeni economy and left the largest human tragedy in the world. It is also a blatant violation of the principle of national sovereignty, a flagrant violation of international law, and a challenge to the will of the international community." Al-Eryani also noted that the Iranian interference in Yemen is one of the main causes for the stalemate in relation to finding a political solution, which exacerbates the human suffering in Yemen and constitutes a threat to international peace and security.⁽¹¹⁾

Many observers believe that these remarks, coinciding with the Geneva political talks, aim to confuse the political solution in Yemen and is a call by the Iranian government for the Houthi militia to initiate further escalations to complicate the Yemeni crisis in order to safeguard Iranian interests. These remarks are an extension of the Iranian government's previous position in relation to finding a political solution in Yemen. Such suspicious Iranian moves often coincide with any effort to bring peace to Yemen.⁽¹²⁾

The Iranian position brings to mind the statements of the Iranian Defense Minister Amir Hatami late last year on the need to strengthen and advance cooperation in the military field between Iran and the Houthi militia when he met the representative of the Houthi militia to Iran, Ibrahim Dailami. In the same week, the Iranian media reported on Dailami's meeting with the Iranian government's Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif. These Iranian moves coincided with serious steps to conclude a comprehensive peace process in Yemen under the auspices of the United Nations at that time. Many believe that these moves were an attempt by the Iranian government to use militias to blackmail the international community, harm neighboring countries and threaten international shipping lines in the Bab al-Mandab Strait. Iran always opts to launch these destabilizing moves in Yemen when international efforts have progressed to establish peace in the country.⁽¹³⁾

In this same context, Jamil al-Dhaheeri, the editor-in-chief of Kayhan al-Arabi newspaper, who is close to the Iranian supreme leader, said that the Iranian government may establish military bases in Yemen, saying that this Iranian support is an extension of the slogan of the Khomeinist revolution. These remarks followed the remarks of the official spokesman of the Iranian armed forces confirming the Iranian government's position in opposition to all peace initiatives in Yemen to further escalate tensions and complicate the Yemeni arena.⁽¹⁴⁾

The Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud condemned the Iranian interference in Yemen during his speech at the United Nations General Assembly in New York via video conference, by saying, "The Iranian regime's interference in Yemen by supporting the coup carried out by its Houthi militia against the legitimate authority led to a political, economic and humanitarian crisis from which the fraternal Yemeni people suffer. It constitutes a source of threat to the security of the countries of the region and the vital waterways of the global economy." He also indicated that the Houthi militia, at the instigation of Iran, seeks to undermine all efforts to reach a political solution in Yemen. The Iranian government is still carrying out terrorist operations that target the security of Yemen and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. It has used the Houthi militia to target the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia with more than 300 missiles and 400 drones launched toward the kingdom in violation of Security Council resolutions 2216 and 2231. He emphasized the role of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in supporting the attempts to find a political solution in Yemen in accordance with the three references agreed upon in order to end the suffering of the Yemeni people.⁽¹⁵⁾

II. The Association of Houthi Terrorism With the Iranian Government

On September 15, 2020, the media department of the joint forces in Yemen revealed the details of a Houthi cell which was apprehended; it is linked to the IRGC terrorist network. It was caught smuggling Iranian weapons to the Houthi militia. The investigations uncovered information proving the involvement of the IRGC in smuggling weapons to the Houthi militia using several methods and through various stages. This terrorist cell had previously smuggled Iranian weapons and money to the ports of Hodeidah, Salif and Ras Issa and had also smuggled weapons from the Sea of Oman to Mahra. The investigations revealed the identities of Houthi officials who run

smuggling operations in several areas in Yemen under the supervision of Muhammad Ahmad al-Talbi whose nickname is Abu al-Jaafar al-Talbi. He is a major general and the director of procurement at the Houthi Ministry of Defense.⁽¹⁶⁾

The Yemeni Minister of Information described the Iranian government's continuous supply of weapons, military experts and funds to the Houthi militia as a flagrant violation of international resolutions related to the Yemeni crisis. He also called on the international community and the permanent members of the Security Council to extend the ban on the sale of arms to the Iranian government, on the grounds that the terrorist activities of the Iranian government threatens the security and stability of Yemen, the region and international peace.

He also described the results of the investigations proving the Iranian government's involvement in the smuggling of arms as a clear indication of the Houthi militia's exploitation of the Stockholm Agreement to use the ports of Hodeidah, Salif and Ras Issa to smuggle more Iranian weapons.⁽¹⁷⁾

In relation to Houthi terrorism, the American newspaper, *The Washington Post*, published an article stating that the American administration is reviewing whether to designate the Houthi militia as a terrorist organization because of the militia's affiliation with the terrorist IRGC. This potential US move aims to further isolate the Iranian government and limit its destructive role in Yemen via financing the Houthi militia to create further complications in the Yemeni arena. This is done to serve its expansionist project in the region at the expense of Yemen's security and stability. In light of Yemeni President Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi's call to the international community to impose further pressure on the Houthi militia and the Iranian government and to implement the Security Council resolutions in relation to the Yemeni crisis, he also added that his government extended the hand of peace, made concessions and did everything in its power to support the efforts of the UN and its envoy in Yemen to reach a permanent and comprehensive peace in Yemen. "Yemen will not accept the Iranian experience on its soil, under any circumstances and challenges," he said.⁽¹⁸⁾

It is worth noting that the Houthi militia, triggered by Iran, escalated terrorist operations in September externally by targeting civilian areas in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and internally particularly in the Yemeni city of Ma'rib, amid the silence of the UN Special Envoy for Yemen Martin Griffiths, which annoyed the legitimate government. Here the Yemenis recalled the UN position on the 2018 operation to liberate Hodeidah and how Griffiths exerted efforts to stop the battle for what he called "humanitarian" purposes. Thousands of Yemeni families, including many thousands of internally displaced people, in Ma'rib face multiple risks because of the Houthi escalation. The International Organization for Migration reported that 334 families were displaced because of the escalation in fighting in the governorate during the first week of September alone. The camps for displaced people in Ma'rib, exceeding more than 90 camps, are the most severely affected by the Houthis' military escalation.⁽¹⁹⁾

With the ongoing Iranian support to the Houthi militia, the representative of the Houthi militia to the Iranian government, who is referred to by the militia and the Iranian government as the Yemeni ambassador to Iran, Ibrahim Dailami, revealed that the Houthi militia received 750 scholarships at Iranian universities in various scientific and applied disciplines. The scholarships covered all academic levels: bachelors, masters, and PhD. Some observers believe that this Iranian generosity to the Houthi militia is part of the ideological invasion that the Iranian government undertakes to win many supporters so as to deepen the state of sectarian division in Yemen. Informed sources reported that the militia will offer these scholarships to their members to study religious sciences in Qom city. As a result, they will be an additional tool for the Iranian project

in Yemen. These students will most probably be trained by the IRGC to implement the Iranian terrorist agenda.⁽²⁰⁾

Conclusion

The Iranian government is still trying to undermine all efforts for peace in Yemen through military support and by issuing inflammatory official statements. It instructs the Houthi militia to escalate militarily in violation of the Security Council resolutions related to the Yemeni crisis to create more complications in the Yemeni arena. This military escalation aims to prolong the Yemeni crisis in conformity with the Iranian will to serve Iran's expansionist project at the expense of the security and stability of Yemen and impose more suffering on the Yemeni people through the subordination of the Houthi militia to the Iranian government and the militia's adoption of Iran's sectarian policies leading to tensions between the political components in the Yemeni arena in exchange for the Iranian government's military, political and cultural support.

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International Affairs

The Iran Case File's (ICF) International Affairs segment reviews Iranian interactions with the United States and the Europeans, shedding light on the US move to reimpose UN sanctions and intensify its maximum pressure campaign against Iran. It also examines the available options to Iran to counter US pressure and the implications of the US elections on the Washington-Tehran relationship. Moreover, it discusses the European opposition to the US move to reimpose UN sanctions on Iran, and Tehran's violations of human rights following the execution of the Iranian wrestler Navid Afkari.



IRAN-US RELATIONS

Iran-US relations witnessed significant developments in September 2020; most prominently attempts by the US to trigger the snapback mechanism despite international opposition. In spite of the current disagreements between Washington and the world powers, there is low possibility that they will adhere to US sanctions on Iran. Tehran considers this to be a win situation. This is in addition to the continuation of the US maximum pressure campaign and Iranian reactions and alternative options available to Iran to address the current challenges. This part of the ICF discusses the US pressure strategy and its attempts to reimpose UN sanctions on Iran; Iranian reactions and available options; and finally, the most significant consequences of the current Washington-Tehran confrontation.

I. The US Move to Reinstate UN Sanctions on Iran

Washington has defended its right to trigger the snapback mechanism and reimpose all UN sanctions on Iran from September 20, 2020. US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo confirmed that all sanctions will be reimposed on Iran, including sanctions on the purchase and sale of weapons. However, the international community did not welcome the US move. The JCPOA Joint Commission reaffirmed on September 1, 2020 that the United States is not a participant in the nuclear agreement and cannot trigger the snapback mechanism embedded in the deal or in UN Resolution 2231.

Abdou Abarry, Niger's Permanent Representative to the United Nations as well as the President of the Security Council for the month of September stated that the council is committed to the position of the former President of the Security Council Indonesia's Dian Triansyah Djani in relation to reinstating sanctions on Iran. The United Nations still believes that Washington does not have the right to trigger the snapback mechanism. While addressing the UNSC, António Guterres, Secretary-General of the United Nations said the United Nations will not take any action against the US move due to the legal uncertainty surrounding the US call to reinstate sanctions. On September 10, the UK, France and Germany reaffirmed their objections to the United States' initiation of the snapback mechanism against Iran. Also, Russia and China expressed their objections to the US move and confirmed their commitment to the nuclear deal.

On September 20, 2020, Washington unilaterally declared that all UN sanctions against Iran were restored, including the sanctions on the purchase and sale of arms. But, it is not clear how effective these sanctions will be amid the current position of the world powers. Washington has taken a unilateral step to address the potential risks of the arms embargo on Iran expiring on October 18, 2020. The United States will prevent Iran from getting Chinese and Russian arms, and reselling weapons to its proxies in the region, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said. US Special Representative for Iran and Venezuela Elliott Abrams affirmed that Washington will enforce "full" US sanctions on any international arms manufacturers who deal with Iran.

Amid the Trump-Biden presidential debates, US policy towards Iran has become a hot topic of criticism. Joe Biden, the Democratic candidate, has been immensely critical of President Trump's failure to extend the arms embargo on Iran and Washington losing the support of close allies in the United Nations.

Yet, Trump has insisted that his policy toward Iran has been successful and it will bring Iran back to the negotiating table if he is reelected. Trump is quite positive that he will win and will make the Iranians sign a new nuclear deal within a week or a month because Iran's economy has been deteriorating sharply, with its GDP declining to 27 percent. The United States is intensifying its maximum pressure campaign on Iran, and it has imposed a new batch of sanctions. Table 1 outlines the new US sanctions in September 2020. It is evident that the United States intensified its sanctions targeting Iran domestically, regionally and internationally.

Table 1: US Sanctions on Iran (September 2020)

Date	Sanctions
September 1	The attorney of the Northern District of Florida announced that Colin Fisher pleaded guilty to federal charges of carrying out an illegal transaction and acquiring equipment for a buyer in Iran.
September 3	Eleven Iranian companies and three individuals were sanctioned over helping Iran to export petroleum products in violation of US unilateral sanctions.
September 8	The United States sanctioned two entities and 45 individuals of Iran's Cyber Army, which is affiliated to Iran's intelligence unit and the IRGC.
September 21	The United States imposed sanctions targeting Iran's Ministry of Defense and two individuals who play an integral role in uranium enrichment, in addition to five Iranian scientists. It also imposed export restrictions on 27 entities and individuals associated with Iran's nuclear program.
September 25	The United States sanctioned Judge Seyyed Mahmoud Sadati, who is reported to have been involved in the appalling case of Navid Afkari, and Judge Mohammad Soltan, who is responsible for sentencing Baha'is in Iran on dubious charges.

II. Iran's Options to Address US Pressure

Resistance and confrontation have been Iran's best strategy to counter US pressure. The Iranians are fully aware of the fact that Trump's policy does not intend to trigger a war but to impose comprehensive sanctions on Iran. Thus, Iran can continue to withstand US sanctions without surrendering to its demands to enter negotiations. This can be clearly noted in Iran rejecting Russia's offer to mediate in order to establish direct talks between Tehran and Washington. Also, Iran called for the countries targeted by Washington to form a coalition in order to address the sanctions on Tehran. Iran believes that any talks with Washington before the presidential elections will benefit Trump and that the US has reached the maximum extent of sanctions it can impose.

Iran rejected US threats after Washington blamed it for planning to target the US ambassador to South Africa. Iran claimed that US accusations were baseless and the South African government confirmed it did not find any evidence supporting US claims. Iran however is afraid of a potential US attack before the presidential elections, which Trump would use to bolster his election campaign. Hossein Salami, Chief Commander of the IRGC, threatened to target US interests if the Trump administration attacked Iran.

Moreover, Iran condemned Washington for reinstating UN sanctions and welcomed the UNSC's rejection of the US move. Iran's Ministry of Foreign Affairs affirmed that the United States would receive a serious response if it takes any measures against Iran and Washington will be held responsible for all the dangerous consequences. Also, Iran threatened to not comply at all to its commitments under the JCPOA if the UN sanctions are reimposed as a result of the US move. It added that it will produce uranium for peaceful nuclear purposes without any limits and increase uranium enrichment. This is in addition to producing 90,000 SWU for nuclear fuel production; producing and storing heavy water of any quantity; operating centrifuges and halting the implementation of the Additional Protocol (AP).

The position of the Europeans and the UNSC members on the US move to trigger the snapback mechanism has been the most significant gain for Iran in countering the US pressure. Iran confirmed its success in upholding the nuclear deal and its cooperation with Russia, China, and the European Troika (E3). To further increase the gap between the European and the US positions, Iran responded to the demands of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), giving the IAEA access to two suspected former nuclear sites. The IAEA Board of Governors' Report issued on 4 September 2020 IAEA confirmed Iran's collaboration and stated that Iran and the IAEA had agreed to enhance their mutual cooperation.

III. Implications of US Presidential Elections

Without a doubt, Washington is facing challenges in reinstating UN sanctions on Iran. It is expected that further risks will arise, risking the US maximum pressure campaign while Iran will reap more gains to uphold the nuclear deal. The world powers will pose unprecedented challenges for Washington, paving the road for them not to enforce US sanctions. Iran can seize the opportunity and purchase weapons from the arms markets to support its proxies and allies in the region as the arms embargo is due to expire on October 18, 2020.

By using Trump's presidential powers, Washington resorted to unilaterally imposing sanctions on Iran. It aims to prevent Iran from importing, exporting and delivering weapons as well as thwarting any attempts to violate US sanctions. The Trump administration had succeeded in achieving international compliance with its unilateral sanctions on Iran, therefore, it is possible for it to impose effective sanctions on Iran's arms trade as well. The Trump administration, however, may resort to military

escalation in order to deter Iran from exploiting the arms embargo expiring to entrench its influence. However, the US Congress and regional and international powers have opposed a potential military strike against Iran by Trump due to its ramifications for regional security and stability.

It is quite hard to predict the future of Iran-US relations amid the current developments. Tehran is awaiting for the outcome of the US presidential elections. It bets on US policy shifting with a change in the US administration.

IRAN-EUROPE RELATIONS

Iran-Europe relations witnessed two significant developments: Washington's decision to trigger the snapback mechanism, which affected European endeavors to maintain the nuclear deal, and Tehran's execution of Iranian wrestler Navid Afkari despite the international calls to halt his execution. This led the Europeans to condemn Iran's ongoing human rights violations. In this part of the ICF, we discuss two major topics: European opposition to UN sanctions being re-imposed on Iran and its human rights violations.

I. European Opposition to Reinstate UN Sanctions on Iran

The 30-day period leading to the snapback of the past UN sanctions expired on September 19, 2020. On August 20, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo notified the president of the UN Security Council that Washington intends to restore virtually all UN sanctions on Iran due to Tehran's significant non-compliance to its JCPOA commitments. On September 19, Washington confirmed its decision to reinstate UN sanctions on Iran and tighten pressure on the Iranian political system, preventing it from concluding any arms deals — even after the expiration of the arms embargo on October 18, 2020. The Europeans have continued to tread the same path since the outset of the snapback disagreement; opposing the US bid because Washington — according to the Europeans — is no longer a participant in the JCPOA after Trump's withdrawal from the agreement in May 2018.

The foreign ministers of the E3 issued a joint statement, in which they argued that the United States is not a JCPOA participant since its withdrawal from the agreement in 2018. "Consequently, the purported notification [...] received from the United States and circulated to the UN Security Council Members, is incapable of having legal effect," they added.

The E3 attempted to hinder and question the legality of the US move. Many EU officials and representatives rejected the unilateral US decision to reinstate UN sanctions on Iran. French President Emmanuel Macron said at the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) meeting that the European participants of the JCPOA will not support the US move to reinstate UN sanctions on Iran.

China and Russia, also JCPOA participants, aligned with the Europeans, affirming that the US move is illegal because Washington had withdrawn from the agreement, so it does not have a right to impose sanctions on Iran due to its non-compliance with its JCPOA obligations.

Now the political climate is vague due the current disagreements. Countries are not sure whether the United States will be able to effectively implement its sanctions or the Europeans will manage to halt or decline US sanctions using their own reasoning. Further, it is not clear whether there would be a compromise reached by international arbitration

UN Secretary General António Guterres said the legal uncertainty surrounding the US move meant it was not possible to announce that UN sanctions had been re-imposed.

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo expressed his discontent over the European position. They tell us privately they don't want the arms sales to come back [...] They are very concerned about these arms sales," Pompeo told Fox News. "They have not lifted a finger, they haven't done the work that needs to be done" nor have they presented an alternative option to the US snapback, Pompeo added. "They're still wedded to this silly nuclear deal that was signed now five years ago."

In a nutshell, it seems that the European position against its ally, the United States, is stemming from strategic considerations; they are ardently keen to safeguard the nuclear deal. They seek to seize all opportunities available to the international level to avoid submission to the United States. Moving forward with their calculated policies, the Europeans aim –in the long run – to reap diplomatic, political, and economic gains for the benefit of their own peoples. As the US presidential elections are just around the corner, the European decision-makers hope that the US position will change with a new administration. Thus, they believe that their gains from the nuclear agreement are still achievable. However, when reading the current political developments, it becomes apparent that the return to the current nuclear deal without any amendments is a thorny issue considering the fact that the Americans intend to reinstate sanctions on Iran by targeting entities and individuals, and the Iranian presidential elections are likely to change Iran's internal balance of power. The current political climate indicates that developments are going against the European will.

II. Iran's Human Rights Violations

The Iranian authorities on September 12, 2020 executed Iranian wrestler Navid Afkari, 27. He was charged with killing a security guard during the anti-government protests in the summer of 2018. The Europeans called on the international community to convince the Iranian government to halt the execution of the wrestler. Two days before carrying out his execution, Bärbel Kofler, Federal Government Commissioner for Human Rights Policy and Humanitarian Assistance at the Federal Foreign Office, said, "I call on those responsible in Iran to suspend the death sentence against Navid Afkari and to enable him and his brothers, Vahid and Habib, to have a fair trial in keeping with the principles of the rule of law."

Following the execution, the European Union issued a statement condemning the execution of Navid Afkari and stressing that human rights remain a bedrock principle in dealing with Iran. "We will continue to engage with Iranian authorities on this issue including through the local EU representation in Tehran and also on individual cases such as this recent execution," the statement said.

Iran overlooking the international criticism prompted the Europeans to express their criticism by undertaking more overt actions. The scheduled visit of the Iranian foreign minister to Germany where he was expected to meet with his German, French and UK counterparts on Monday September 14, 2020 was cancelled. Iran's Foreign Ministry dismissed that the Europeans were registering their condemnation to the execution of Navid Afkari by cancelling their scheduled meeting with Iran's foreign minister. "It is logistical problems," the ministry said.

The Guardian newspaper reported that Iran's ambassadors to the European Troika were summoned so that the E3 could lodge their complaints against Iran's treatment of political prisoners and the detention of dual nationals. However, other sources reported that the E3 warned Iran that its actions were endangering their mutual relations.

Germany, on behalf of the Europeans, issued an urgent statement to the United

Nations Human Rights Council, to condemn Iran's human rights violations including arbitrary arrests, unfair trials, torture, and other practices which blatantly confirm the systematic oppression of opposition voices demanding basic human rights by the Iranian government. Iran's Foreign Ministry spokesperson Saeed Khatibzadeh condemned the European joint statement saying, "[Iran] considers the European Union's move to issue a joint statement at the Human Rights Council to be unacceptable."

When reviewing the political climate, it becomes clear that the Europeans usually use Iran's human rights record as a bargaining chip to increase its leverage over the Iranian government. Yet, human rights violations have increased to a disturbing level in Iran. We can still recall the political escalation following the story of the French-Iranian academic Fariba Adelkhah, who was sentenced to five years in jail over charges of compromising national security. The European discontent over Iran's human rights violations snowballed after Iran turned a deaf ear to the international pressure to halt the execution of Afkari. The Europeans, specifically the E3, issued strong statements and undertook strong actions to express their objection to Iran's violations.

Conclusion

Iran-Europe developments in September centered on European opposition to the US reinstating UN sanctions on Iran and European condemnation of ongoing human rights violations in Iran. A comprehensive reading into the latest European moves reveals that the European pressure on Iran reflects a carrot and stick approach toward Tehran. Yet they are fully committed to the nuclear agreement in the face of growing US pressures and at the same time they are placing further pressure on Iran over its notorious human rights record.

IRAN CASE FILE

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The International Institute for Iranian Studies (Rasanah) is an independent, private, nonprofit think tank, committed to providing comprehensive insights into Iranian affairs at the domestic, regional and international levels through adopting rigorous research methods in all of its publications and by attracting highly qualified researchers from around the globe.

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