

MONTHLY REPORT



# IRAN CASE FILE

Your window on Iran from inside and abroad

February 2021



**RASANA**  
المعهد الدولي للدراسات الإيرانية  
International Institute for Iranian Studies

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## RASANAHA

International Institute for Iranian Studies,  
Al-Takhassusi St. Sahafah, Riyadh  
Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.  
P.O. Box: 12275 | Zip code: 11473

### Contact us



✉ [info@rasanahiis.com](mailto:info@rasanahiis.com)

☎ +966112166696

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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**D**evelopments in relation to the Iranian file in February 2021 indicated that the challenges facing Iran's domestic front are accumulating at a rapid pace. This is happening at a time when it becomes clear that the Iranian hope to lift US sanctions is unrealistic. Amid the continuation of the economic crisis and the deepening political deadlock, the Iranian supreme leader has sensed the difficulty in motivating Iranians to go to the ballot boxes for the upcoming election in June. Therefore, four months before the start of the presidential election, he reiterated the importance of a high voter turnout. This comes against the backdrop of the government failing to convince people to vote during the last parliamentary election held in February 2020. The voter turnout did not exceed 40 percent of the electorate, according to official Iranian estimates. The Iranian opposition overseas questioned the data at the time, believing that the actual turnout percentage was much lower than the one announced. The voter turnout during the last Iranian parliamentary election was the lowest in the history of the Iranian Republic.

Former US President Donald Trump was extremely critical of Iran's parliamentary election process, particularly how it was conducted, hence it is expected that the next presidential election will also face stiff criticism from US President Joe Biden because his administration has shown a great deal of interest in the human and political rights files of many countries.

There is no doubt that the performance of the Guardian Council will be scrutinized by the new US administration and its disqualification of candidates based on political reasoning will be criticized.

This forecast is supported by the new US administration's desire to see a

reformist candidate winning the presidential election; this will allow it to engage in more flexible negotiations which will not be the case if a candidate linked to the IRGC or the radicals wins the election.

Aware of this predicament which the Iranian government is facing, reformist groups began to hint at the possibility of boycotting the next presidential election. But it seems that they will not be able to exercise this card given the pressure which will be imposed on them by the supreme leader. Hence, they can negotiate to reap some limited political gains in return for low-profile participation in the elections which would ensure the biggest possible number of pro-reformist candidates participating in the elections. However, we may witness an opposite scenario if the supreme leader and those who oversee the election realize that letting a reformist candidate win the election during this dangerous phase in Iran's relations with the United States, could possibly lead to a breakthrough on a number of issues that are causing pain to Iran. However, the redlines set by the Iranian supreme leader in relation to negotiations with the United States will limit what a reformist president will be able to do.

US sanctions and the rising concerns about a possible boycott of the elections have dominated Iranian affairs in this month and resulted in the Iranian government facing several crisis. At the ideological level, the activities of the Najaf Marjaya and its efforts to support the moves undertaken by the current Iraqi government to restore the country's sovereignty posed a challenge to Iran which backs pro-Velayat-e Faqih armed militias. As the June 2021 deadline for the snap parliamentary election in Iraq fast approaches, there are mounting concerns at home in Iraq about the possibility of Iranian-backed pro-Velayat-e Faqih operatives instigating violence.

Maybe the visit of Pope Francis, the head of the Catholic Church, to Iraq and his keenness to visit the top cleric Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani carried a symbolic message that the international community supports the Najaf Marjaya in its support for the Iraqi government.

Iran had sent several messages via its proxies expressing its opposition to Pope Francis's visit. It seems that there were some attempts in Iraq by Iran's proxies to spoil this historic visit. The visit exposed deep differences between Iraq's political actors. There is a huge gap between the pro-Velayat-e Faqih proxies and the political actors who are loyal to the Najaf seminary and the Iraqi state.

The pro-Velayat-e Faqih loyalists this time, perhaps for the first time ever, accused the Najaf Marjaya of betrayal, as it welcomed and benefited from the visit. This allegation is a clear indication of the Iran-Najaf dispute over domination and control of the Shiite community. Iran wants to strip Najaf of its influence, especially the diplomatic face it presents to the West as a rational option to Tehran's radical and militant model.

As for *The Economic File*, it reflects the realities of Iran's crises and social ramifications, and for the third consecutive year, there is controversy surrounding the general budget bill. This year, the disagreement between the government and the Parliament dragged on for two consecutive months. The debate only ended when the supreme leader directly intervened, especially

as the sources to finance the budget were unclear and unrealistic, in light of oil revenues declining and the government's inability to secure alternative sources. However, the Iranian government was forced to increase the budget after the rial-dollar exchange rate decreased.

Military expenditures increased by 53 trillion tomans (nearly \$2 billion) with funds taken from other sectors. The total military allocation remains unclear and a significant percentage of it is merged into the construction budget.

With the Iranian government finding it difficult to raise oil sales to 1.5 million barrels per day, it is expected that it will not be able to raise the funds needed for the budget bill. The next government will be in a difficult situation. Either the government's spending plans will be suspended or partially disrupted, with the government limiting itself to financing day-to-day operational matters and paying wages, or it will take financing steps to boost liquidity levels, which in turn will double the existing high inflation rate. Perhaps this will lead to popular as well as factional protests by the end of the year. Alternatively, the new government could possibly opt for temporary solutions to develop its popular base when it takes over the presidency.

At the military level, Iran's naval forces (the army and the IRGC) carried out in mid-February a naval drill with Russia and several other countries in the northern Indian Ocean dubbed "Iran-Russia Maritime Security Belt 2021."

It is worth mentioning that this joint drill is the second between the two countries. The first one was conducted in late 2019. China did not partake in this year's drill. This could be because China did not want to agitate tensions with the United States in light of the strained relations between the two countries and Beijing taking into consideration its relations with regional countries which it wants to keep balanced and free of tensions. Among Iran's naval activities, there was suspicion that Iran targeted an Israeli commercial vessel because it was allegedly involved in collecting intelligence data.

Regarding Arab affairs, Iran-Gulf interactions in February were relatively calm, with both sides waiting to know the direction of US policy under President Joe Biden. The month was marked by some degree of escalation which was done to "test the waters" and impose "well-calculated pressure." The interactions in this file included: Qatar's moves to act as a mediator between Iran and the Gulf states and between Iran and the United States, escalating missile attacks against Saudi Arabia by Iran-backed militias, the Iranian media escalation against Saudi Arabia to exaggerate the differences and sow discord between Saudi Arabia and its ally; the United States.

Iran also took advantage of the US position towards Saudi Arabia to undermine the Saudi-US relationship and depict it as fragile. In addition, it suggested that the strategic approximations of the region's countries were wrong, particularly their dependence on the United States to counter Tehran which is hostile to the US presence in the region.

In relation to the Yemeni file, where Iran's interventions are explicit, the developments in the crisis, especially the Houthi military escalation at home and overseas, was linked to regional and international dimensions. The Houthis resumed their escalation after the United States removed the militia

from its list of terror groups. The Houthis increased suicide attacks on Ma'rib Governorate which is rich in oil and gas resources. The Houthis believe that the US position on the Yemeni crisis has tipped the scales in its favor or at least will impede the efforts of the pro-legitimacy Arab coalition forces to thwart attacks targeting the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the Yemeni people.

In relation to Iranian interactions in the Iraqi file, February 2021 saw a mutual military escalation between the United States and Iran, the impact of which spilled over into Syria's territories. The pro-Iran militias in Iraq intensified their attacks using Katyusha missiles against US targets, and the United States responded by striking the headquarters of Iranian militias in eastern Syria. Maybe the pro-Velayat-e Faqih militias carrying out attacks against US targets in Iraq was a testing time for the Biden administration, especially at the military level. The aim behind the attacks was to secure a pressure card to push the United States to remove or ease the sanctions and prevent the United States from deploying troops in Erbil— because the US deployment will allow Washington to have a military presence on the Kurdish borderline between Iraq and Syria and increases its ability to monitor and even thwart the movements of militias and Iran's sectarian schemes in Syria and Iraq. Iran does not want the region of Kurdistan in Iraq turning into a US base to station its forces after their withdrawal from Iraq.

Regarding the US presence in Syria, tensions mounted throughout February between Iran on the one hand and both the United States and Israel on the other. On February 25, the United States carried out airstrikes targeting several facilities and buildings situated at a border crossing point that is used by a host of Iran-backed militias, including Iraq's Hezbollah Brigades and the Sayed al-Shuhada Brigades. Throughout February 2021, the Israeli air force targeted the hotbeds and headquarters of Iran-backed militias in Syria on three occasions. It seems that the actors in the conflict decide the site where they will retaliate, which might be different to where they faced attacks.

When the Iran-backed militias shelled US forces in Iraq, the United States responded by striking militia positions in Syria. When Israel targeted Iranian militias in Syria, Iran responded by targeting an Israeli ship in the Arabian Gulf.

The file also sheds light on Iranian moves to control Syria's collective awareness by implementing several cultural schemes to control Syria's cultural and media content and to exploit the high viewership and popularity of Syrian television series to promote Iranian culture within Syria and across the Arab world.

Iran also intensified its schemes to change Syria's demographic makeup to benefit Shiites and foreigners, particularly Afghan and Pakistani Shiite fighters. This is in addition to IRGC surrogates purchasing homes/land in specific regions across Syria.

At the international level, US-Iran tensions constitute the bedrock of Iran's foreign policy. The file reviews the tenets of Biden's policy towards Iran, casting light on the varying points of view within the Biden administration. A team in the US State Department believes that it is important to link the understandings with Iran with one another to reach a comprehensive settlement on the

outstanding issues. This position is adopted by US Secretary of State Antony Blinken. Another team in the US administration believes that it is important to urgently address Iran's nuclear breaches, considering that Iran's recent steps pose a threat which is immediate and pressing in the medium term.

At the regional level, the United States' policies combined elements of deterrence and offering incentives. The Biden administration revoked the decision to blacklist the Houthis as a terrorist organization and at the same time the United States responded to the rocket attack against its forces in Erbil in Iraq on February 15, 2021, by carrying out airstrikes against the hotbeds of Iran-backed militias in eastern Syria. The United States also agreed to resume a strategic dialogue with Israel regarding the Iranian file and agreed to convene a joint strategic forum on Iran.

On the other side, Iran continues to reject the idea of amending the nuclear deal or adding new issues to the existing deal. There is controversy among Iran's political actors concerning negotiations with the United States in light of the upcoming presidential election. The radicals want to thwart any government initiative to return to the nuclear deal, motivated by their desire to win the presidential election.

The Parliament which is controlled by the radicals consistently mounts attacks against the government because they believe the government wants to give up all of Iran's nuclear capabilities and its viewpoints are not in agreement with the revolution's objectives.

Regarding the course of Iran-Europe relations, the European Troika are exerting concerted efforts to successfully mediate between the United States and Iran, and Europe is dealing with Iran in a more resolute manner than its behavior during Trump's tenure. Europe has regularly condemned Iran's breaches of the nuclear deal. The Europeans have also been more candid and insisted on the need to amend the provisions of the nuclear deal. They also took serious steps to confront Iran's terrorist activities within Europe; for example a Belgian court sentenced the Iranian diplomat Assadullah Assadi to 20 years in prison.



# Internal Affairs

**I**nternal Affairs addresses four files. The first file focuses on the ideological dimensions of the Iranian case, especially the position of Iran and its proxies in Iraq on the visit of Pope Francis to Iraq and his meeting with cleric Sistani. The second file discusses Khamenei's call for Iranian voters to participate in the presidential election and the conservative and reformist positions regarding this call as well as the reformists accusing the Guardian Council of causing a low voter turnout in elections due to it disqualifying and screening candidates. The third file discusses Iran's economic affairs through analyzing the contentious issues surrounding the new budget bill between the Parliament and the government. Most of the controversies between the two revolved around how to finance the budget bill and its provisions. When it comes to the Military File, this highlighted the naval drill carried out by Iran's naval forces (the army and the IRGC) in the northern part of the Indian Ocean with the participation of Russia and several other countries. In addition, this file looks at the claims that Iran carried out an attack targeting an Israeli commercial ship as well as shedding light on the border problems between Iran and Pakistan.



# The Ideological File

The Ideological File sheds light on the developments in relation to the Shiite religious elites in general and the Iranian religious elite in particular, and the impact of these developments on the religious and political landscape in Iran and their implications for Shiites in the region.

The Ideological File last month touched on the Baghdad bombing carried out by the Islamic State (ISIS) and how it was exploited by some parties to make political gains without considering its security and social dimensions. This month, the file casts light on the visit of Pope Francis to Iraq and Najaf and his meeting with Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani. This visit was closely monitored by Iran's religious elite. The file seeks to answer a key question related to the position of the pro-Velayat-e Faqih religious elite on Pope Francis's visit and the impact of this visit on Iran's clout in the Shiite community.

## I. The Itinerary of the Pope of the Vatican's Visit

The month of February 2021 witnessed preparations being made for the visit of Pope Francis, head of the Catholic Church. His official itinerary included a visit to Najaf and a meeting with the Supreme Marja Ali al-Sistani as well as a visit to Baghdad, Mosul and the historic city of Ur, the birthplace of Prophet Abraham. A mass was held at Baghdad's Our Lady of Salvation Church which was attacked in 2010, resulting in the deaths of many worshippers.<sup>(1)</sup> A delegation from the Vatican had visited Najaf to coordinate the Pope's visit and set out the important issues that would be discussed by the two religious leaders.<sup>(2)</sup> This visit had multiple indications, which are discussed below:

## II. The Mutual Gains Between the Vatican and Najaf

There are several signals and implications of the Pope's visit to Iraq in general and to Najaf in particular. Each of the two parties sought to maximize gains from the visit.

Najaf believed the Pope's visit would boost its soft power, such as its position among Shiites as well as across the wider Muslim world. It would be seen as a religious institution that calls for openness and inclusion of others. Najaf also wanted the world to know that Shiites in Iraq, under its leadership, believe in peace and dialogue.<sup>(3)</sup>

As for the Vatican, this visit provided an opportunity to make significant gains. There are approximately 450,000 Iraqi Christians, according to unofficial estimates, while their number prior to the US invasion of Iraq reached 1.5 million. Many of them migrated to Europe and the United States after the invasion because of the flare-up of violence, infighting and sectarianism.<sup>(4)</sup>



Hence, the Vatican sought to protect the Iraqi Christians by promoting religious tolerance through establishing communication channels with the largest religious group ruling the country, the Shiites and their Supreme Marjaya. Its instructions are always taken seriously by the religious elite in Iraq and the armed factions alike.<sup>(5)</sup>

The Vatican chose to meet with Sistani as it is well-aware of his position among Shiites. This visit comes on the back of similar visits made by Pope Francis to the Middle East in the past years. Hence, the Pope's visit to Najaf is part of a comprehensive strategy pursued by the Vatican under Pope Francis.<sup>(6)</sup>

### **III. The Concerns of Velayat-e Faqih Loyalists About the Pope's Visit**

Iran sent several messages via its proxies, indicating its opposition to the Pope's visit. These proxies in Iraq attempted to sabotage the historic visit. But the heavyweight Iraqi political and religious elites viewed the Pope's visit as a historic opportunity for Iraq. Therefore, the Velayat-e Faqih loyalists were unable to mobilize popular support against the visit and it was backed by the Najaf Marjaya; the most significant Shiite marjaya across the world. Thus, their move became ineffective.

#### **1. Demonstrations in Najaf Suspended**

The demonstrators in Najaf issued a statement in which it was mentioned that the demonstrations would be suspended until the Pope's visit ended to prevent those who opposed his visit from taking any action. The statement said, "We should clarify the following to everybody: there will be no escalation by protesters across the spots of protests in Najaf in the coming days until concluding the visit of His Holiness the Pope to Najaf and his imminent meeting with the Supreme Marja."

The statement blamed certain parties for attempting to spoil the security landscape during the Pope's visit to Najaf. However, the statement refrained from mentioning the parties explicitly.

“We want to clarify to the honorable dwellers of Najaf and to the free people worldwide that there are deviant parties with suspicious outside and domestic connections, which are known to everybody, seeking to spoil the security situation in Najaf in order to satisfy the entities sponsoring them and with whom they have links.”<sup>(7)</sup>

## 2. Moqtada al-Sadr and Blessing the Visit

Moqtada al-Sadr blessed the visit of the Pope, and he wondered why there was opposition to the visit. He said, “I was informed that there are some people opposed to the Pope’s visit...I say that openness to all religions is commendable and his visit to Iraq is welcome and our hearts are open to him.”<sup>(8)</sup> Sadr’s remarks came in the aftermath of

reported remarks by an Iraqi Shiite militia commander, who said that the Pope is not welcome in Iraq.<sup>(9)</sup>

## 3. Comments by Velayat-e Faqih Loyalists

Loyalists to Velayat-e Faqih announced that they opposed the Pope’s visit after they had expressed some concerns which were not openly announced and they did not question the intentions of the Najaf Marjaya — as it was extremely enthusiastic about the visit. Abu Ali al-Askari, a commander in the Hezbollah Brigades, said, “We shouldn’t be so optimistic about the Pope’s visit and that he will make serenity and peace prevail in our country. He should rather mend his country whose territory is smaller than a district in Sadr city in Baghdad before he proceeds to reform other countries.”<sup>(10)</sup>

He then questioned the principle of interfaith dialogue. “We caution against what is being plotted in the city of Ur under the guise of dialogue among religions, and we call into question the aim behind choosing this place and this time.”<sup>(11)</sup>

## IV. Disputes About the “Humanity Document”

There were reports regarding the signing of a “Humanity Document” between the Pope and the supreme marja in Najaf. The Iraqi ambassador to the Vatican said that the visit of the Pope to Iraq sends a message of peace to the world. He expected that a “Human Fraternity Document” would be signed between Supreme Marja Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani and the Pontifex Maximus (Supreme Pontiff) which would strengthen relations based on mutual trust.<sup>(12)</sup>

He also mentioned that “The major message which the Pope’s visit to Iraq sent included support for dialogue among different religions. The Pope wants to advance dialogue and coexistence among all religious groupings (including sects), whether between the churches (Christian-Christian dialogue) or Islamic-Christian relations.”<sup>(13)</sup>

However, Najaf, in a statement issued by Sistani’s office, rejected the ambassador’s remarks. The statement said, “The remarks of the Iraqi ambassador to the Vatican and others about the nature of the visit of the Pope to the holy city of Najaf are inaccurate.”

Furthermore, the statement denied claims that Najaf had coordinated with the Vatican prior to the visit.<sup>(14)</sup> It seems that Najaf’s denial was because it did not want to face difficulties from those who opposed the visit.

## V. The Position of the Iraqi State: Investing in Opportunities

The Iraqi politicians blessed the Pope's visit to Iraq and Najaf in a bid to strengthen their position in the face of the pro-Velayat-e Faqih loyalists who opposed the visit. Iraqi President Barham Salih said, "The imminent meeting between Pope Francis of the Vatican and the Shiite Supreme Marja Ali al-Sistani will be historic."<sup>(15)</sup>

The statement issued by the office of Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kazemi quoted him as reiterating that "the visit of His Holiness the Pope will contribute to enhancing stability and making the spirit of fraternity prevail in Iraq and across the region."<sup>(16)</sup>

As Najaf had some interest in the Pope's visit such as advancing its position across the Islamic world, opening channels of communication with the Christian West, as do some Sunni religious establishments, and mending relations among different religious groupings, Iraqi politicians believe that such a historic visit will contribute to improving Iraq's image and will allow it to restore its regional position as well as enable it to take advantage of the touristic, economic and religious opportunities that will follow the visit. Maybe the visit will also contribute to curbing the clout of the pro-Velayat-e Faqih loyalists or put a brake on their excesses.<sup>(17)</sup>

## Conclusion

The *Ideological File* discussed the visit of the Pope of the Vatican to Najaf, and his meeting with the Supreme Marja Sistani as well as the position of Iraq's major actors towards the visit and how some of them politically exploited the visit for their own ends.

The visit exposed huge differences among Iraq's actors. There is a significant gap between the Velayat-e Faqih loyalists/the Iranian proxies and the political forces linked with the Najaf Marjaya and the Iraqi state. The Velayat-e Faqih loyalists this time, for the first time, accused the Najaf Supreme Marjaya of betrayal as it benefited the most from the visit. This accusation is indicative of the Iran-Najaf dispute regarding control over the Shiite community. Iran wants to strip Najaf of its effectiveness, especially its diplomatic face which has allowed it to position itself as an alternative to Iran's extremist and militant model.

# The Political File

The Iranian government has already begun to mobilize all its media and propaganda tools to urge competing political currents and their popular bases to extensively partake in the upcoming presidential election scheduled for June 2021.

Since the 1979 Iranian revolution, Iranian governments have been concerned about Iranian participation in elections, particularly of different political currents. Voter participation, in elections (presidential, parliamentary, Assembly of Experts and local councils) is important as it determines the system's legitimacy and indicates its acceptance level among the people.

Three important axes will be discussed in this file: the indications of Khamenei's call for extensive voter participation in the presidential election, the positions of the conservatives and the reformists towards extensive voter participation, and the Guardian Council's contribution towards low voter participation in elections.

## **I. Indications of Khamenei's Call for Extensive Voter Participation in the Presidential Election**

At the present time, Iran is facing a lot of challenges, which include its economic situation worsening, growing general discontent and popular anger at the government's domestic and foreign policies as well as a rising lack of confidence in the government, which is much higher than in previous years. Finally, concerns are growing about a low voter turnout in the presidential election, thus repeating what happened in the last Iranian parliamentary election which witnessed the lowest voter turnout in the history of the country's elections since the 1979 revolution.

These challenges prompted Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei to emphasize the importance of extensive voter participation in the upcoming presidential election. He has argued that this will help in addressing the chronic crises which Iran is facing, and will ensure Iran's future through selecting the best candidate to thwart the malicious designs of enemy states.<sup>(18)</sup>

In an address on the anniversary of the victory of the Iranian revolution, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani quoted the supreme leader's remarks about holding the elections properly but extensive voter participation is more of an important concern.<sup>(19)</sup>

Khamenei's call for extensive voter participation in the presidential election came after several indicators highlighted the possibility of a low voter turnout as witnessed in the last Iranian parliamentary election.

Iranian Minister of Interior Abdolreza Rahmani Fazli mentioned these

indicators. He said, “The atmosphere of the presidential election in Iran is cold and silent since the Iranian street didn’t give huge attention to this election compared to the previous election.” Furthermore, the number of individuals who have expressed their readiness to participate in the presidential race in the past is two times more than the number now. He said that to raise voter turnout requires extensive efforts by the government. <sup>(20)</sup>

To convince Iranians to head to the polling stations and influence their choice, the conservatives started to promote conspiracy theories. They accused Iran’s enemies of attempting to interfere in the presidential election through preventing the election from being held or ensuring a low voter turnout and creating an unsafe environment for the election. In addition, enemies have attempted to defame reputable candidates, spoil the political climate, and instill frustration in the hearts of the Iranian people, thus preventing them from taking the correct decision. This is in addition to impacting course of the elections through supporting some influential groups and providing financial support to them, claiming that enemy states may resort to calling on voters to vote for a certain candidate and promise them that in case a suitable candidate wins, sanctions will be lifted and the economic situation will improve. <sup>(21)</sup>

## **II. The Positions of the Conservatives and the Reformists on the Call for Extensive Voter Participation**

Unlike Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei who wants to gain more legitimacy for the Iranian establishment, the positions of the reformists and conservatives on extensive voter participation in the election is intricately linked to their quest to win the presidential seat. Although there are some conservative currents who are committed to the supreme leader’s call to ensure a large voter turnout in the election, there are other conservative currents who support the idea of cracking down on reformist candidates to ensure they win the election like the last parliamentary election when they captured most of the seats in Parliament.

These conservatives hope that the Guardian Council exercises its authority to disqualify reformist candidates from the presidential election. It is hoped this will secure certain goals:

- Deprive the reformist current of the opportunity to present a powerful candidate who can mobilize voters.
- Instill frustration in the hearts of those who support the reformist current, hence ensuring a low voter turnout.
- Finally, ensuring the conservatives’ control over the electoral landscape in Iran and ensuring their candidates will win the presidential election even if there is a low voter turnout. This goes against the directives of the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, who hopes that there will be high voter turnout. This can then be used to convince internal and external public opinion that the Iranian government has popular support despite the consecutive crises and setbacks it has faced.

As for the reformist current, there are still divergent positions regarding participation in the presidential election. Some reformist factions argue that instead of participating in the election and receiving another blow which will



be added to their record, they should boycott the election and monitor the performance of the government and the Parliament and reshuffle their cards to partake in future elections. Meanwhile, others are calling for participating in the election to defend the interests of their popular base, and not to leave the arena free for the conservatives to take power in the coming period uncontested.<sup>(22)</sup>

The Executives of Construction Party is considered one of the biggest reformist parties which supports this position. The secretary general of the party, Gholamhossein Karbaschi, reiterated in his speech during the fourth national convention of the party the necessity of participating in the next election. He justified this by arguing that withdrawing from the election will not be in the interest of parties, political currents or the country.<sup>(23)</sup>

The reformists calling for participation in the election also voice support for a large voter turnout, but from the angle of this turnout helping them to win the election. They believe that a large voter turnout was a trump card for their current in most of the elections held in Iran so far. In other words, a high voter turnout boosts reformist chances to win the election.<sup>(24)</sup>

It seems that the reformists hope that the supreme leader's call for extensive voter participation will lead to less restrictions imposed on their candidates by the Guardian Council. Hence, their candidates are less likely to be disqualified and a large number of their supporters will vote in the election.

### **III. Accusing the Guardian Council of Causing Voter Turnout to Decline**

The electoral arena is a platform where people exercise their political will and provides an opportunity to evaluate the performance of leaders and statesmen. But exercising this will is impossible when the competitive atmosphere is spoiled via issuing legislation which sets lofty requirements for those wanting to contest the elections.

The Iranian Constitution's articles explicitly state that the ballot box is a must to select people for the presidency, the Parliament, the Assembly of Experts

and local councils. Hence, most currents and factions called on the Guardian Council in light of the electoral season to ensure free and fair elections are held through providing a platform so that all political currents are able to express themselves as well as expanding the electoral arena to allow other political segments to participate.<sup>(25)</sup>

The reformists believe that Guardian Council's decision to disqualify candidates has a direct impact on voter turnout.<sup>(26)</sup> The reformists warn that voter turnout in the presidential election will be low as witnessed in the last parliamentary election if the Guardian Council disqualifies their candidates who are expected to contest the election. But the conservatives — who are interested in ensuring that a low number of candidates participate in the election, exploited the accusations leveled against the Guardian Council to point the finger of blame at their reformist rivals. They said that the reformists are planning to nominate candidates who oppose to the policies of the political system, even though they know that the Guardian Council will disqualify them. They argue that if the reformists resorted to this move, it would prompt people to avoid participating in the elections.<sup>(27)</sup>

### **Conclusion**

The Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei called for wider participation in the elections. Yet, he did not indicate any flexibility or a change in his policy towards domestic and external issues. Further, he did not allow all political factions to participate in this electoral race. This may not be enough to convince Iranians to participate in the election. The general discontent towards the government's failed policies over the years and the possibility of a hardliner winning the presidency may prompt a significant number of Iranians to shun the elections.

# The Economic File

For February 2021, *The Economic File* sheds light on sources available to finance the Iranian budget in the new fiscal year 1400 Hijri Shamsi which starts on March 21, 2021. This issue resulted in lengthy debates and differences between the government and the Parliament regarding the potential ramifications of the sources of finance suggested by the government. Hence, *The Economic File* is divided into two parts. The first part will swiftly explore the nature and points of disagreement between the government and the Parliament in relation to the budget which lasted for more than two months. The second part breaks down the finance sources for the planned budget and their prospective ramifications.

First, the Iranian budget bill for the new year 1400 Hijri Shamsi has reached 854 trillion tomans (\$33.5 billion according to the current exchange rate on the free market and \$203 billion according to the government exchange rate). Despite the huge nominal increase in the new budget bill compared to the past year (596 trillion tomans), it is considered, due to the steep decline in the value of the currency, less in real value than the previous year's budget which reached \$36 billion according to the exchange rate on the free market at that time.

Ambiguity and keeping details unclear were the hallmark of the new budget bill. It was finally approved after the supreme leader intervened after more than two months of disagreements between the government and the Parliament.

The approved budget bill included a 25 percent increase in wages and bonuses for government employees as well as a significant surge in military expenditures by 53 trillion tomans, nearly \$2 billion. The latter was done by shifting allocations from other sectors. The total figure regarding the military budget remains unclear, and a huge percentage of it is integrated into the construction sector's budget.<sup>(28)</sup>

Taxes and customs revenues increased to 49 trillion tomans (\$1.9 billion).

## I. The Points of Disagreement on the Budget Between the Government and the Parliament

The budget bill introduced by the government to the Parliament for approval was met with a harsh response from some lawmakers. The bill was rejected several times before finally being approved. This is nothing new. Such disagreements have occurred on multiple occasions in the past eight years of Rouhani's tenure, with some of the disagreements ending only when the supreme leader intervened.

The objections this time focused on three main points: the budget's expenditures increasing, an unrealistic dependence on oil sales and raising the

dollar exchange rate in the next budget.

Budgetary expenditures increasing by 40 percent compared to the last budget was the first point of disagreement between the government and the Parliament, against the backdrop of the country's prevailing economic depression amid the continuation of US sanctions and the uncertainty gripping the economic landscape. This is in addition to growing concerns about aggravating the inflation rate, with the budget estimated at 320 trillion tomans<sup>(29)</sup> (\$12.8 billion).

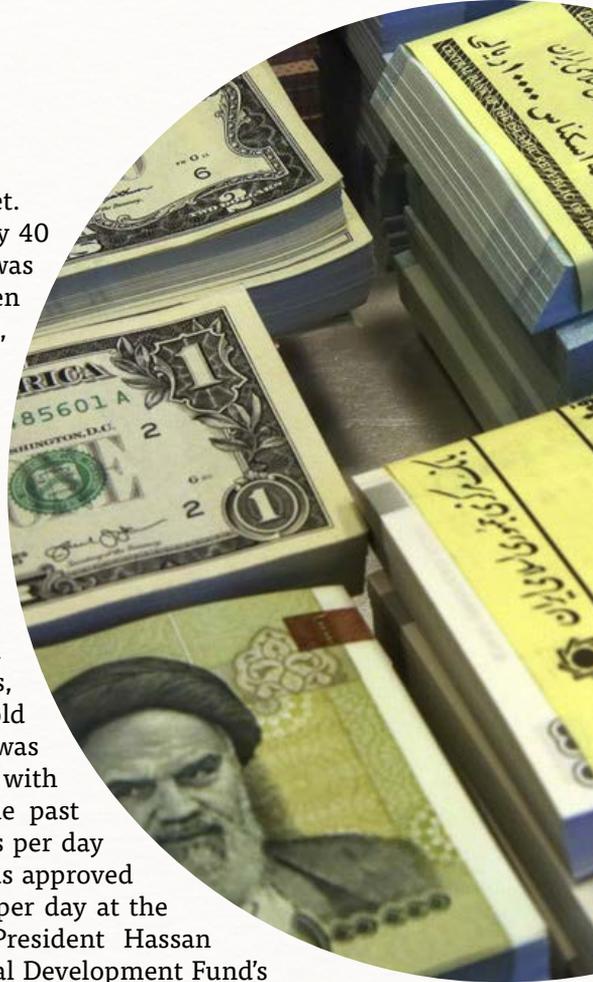
Hence, the government suggested increasing dependence on oil exports, with 2.3 million barrels per day to be sold to finance rising expenditures. This was the second main point of disagreement with the Parliament since oil sales over the past year have not exceeded 700,000 barrels per day at the maximum. Finally, the budget was approved based on exporting 1.5 million barrels per day at the maximum. Khamenei also rejected President Hassan Rouhani's request to reduce the National Development Fund's share of oil revenues from 38 percent to 20 percent to cover the budget deficit.<sup>(30)</sup>

The third point of disagreement was related to the government changing the official exchange rate of 4,200 tomans per dollar to 17,500 tomans. The change was not approved because it was feared it would cause a wave of inflation, especially as the presidential election is scheduled to be held within a few months. But the government was permitted to change the exchange rate in the first six months of the new fiscal year.

## **II. The Available Sources of Finance and Their Potential Ramifications**

The Iranian government's budget normally depends on two main sources of funding, as well as some secondary sources. The main sources are crude oil exports and tax and customs revenues. The two sources combined constitute more than 75 percent of the budget's revenues. There are also secondary sources at varying levels which change in line with circumstances from one year to another such as raising funds via selling government bonds (known as Islamic Sukuk) and selling company shares on the stock exchange as well as selling assets and state-controlled companies. This is in addition to other sources not specified in the official data.

Considering the current circumstances, great dependence will be on tax revenues followed by oil export revenues. Hence, the government relies heavily



on taxation and oil sales to finance its expenditures planned for the 2020/2021 fiscal year. The projected revenues from collecting tax and oil revenues have increased as indicated earlier. Moreover, Iran has sought to unblock its assets frozen in overseas banks. It managed to unblock some assets held in South Korea recently.

Moreover, the Parliament called on entities/companies still owing tax to pay up including companies linked to the Imam Reza Endowment Foundation and other religious entities like The Execution of Imam Khomeini's Order (EIKO), also known as Setad. This is in addition to the companies run by the IRGC, except those which are exempted from paying tax based on orders from the supreme leader.<sup>(31)</sup>

Hence, if the budget expenditures are covered through tax and oil sales revenues, it is likely that the budget deficit will not increase further. Maybe subsidies for basic commodities will continue to harness the new government's legitimacy when it takes office in the coming months. But the government achieving the aforementioned is dependent on the lifting of US sanctions, especially those targeting the oil and banking sectors. This happening is unlikely at the present time. The government has no other option but to take risk and bear the ramifications.

As for the other scenario, given the uncertainty surrounding the swift recovery of the global economy and the demand for oil increasing or the removal of the US sanctions imposed on the Iranian economy, there is a likelihood that the expected revenues will be less than the planned revenues whether from tax collection or oil sales or from customs on domestic businesses.

This was the case during the fiscal year 2020/2021 because the government was unable to collect all the projected taxes due to tax evasion, business closures and low company returns.

The next Iranian government will be in an unenviable situation in case it fails to collect the needed revenues. Its spending plans will face either disruption or suspension, with the government likely to limit itself to financing day-to-day operations and paying salaries. Or the government will take steps to boost its finances such as increasing liquidity. However, this step is likely to hike the inflation rate, resulting in a wave of factional and popular protests by the end of the year. Recently, some Iranian cities saw protests organized by workers and retirees. However, the new government may resort to temporary solutions to gain popular support at the beginning of its term.

This is highly likely, especially if the conservatives win the presidential seat. They are known for their populist policies and raising bright slogans, in spite of their economic ramifications in the long run. Former President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's policies are an example of this. Maybe increasing military spending in the new budget in spite of the country's financial squeeze is indicative of the conservative current's priority.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the new budget bill for the new fiscal year 1400 Hijri Shamsi has been approved after pressure from the supreme leader to settle the differences

between the government and the Parliament. However, there is uncertainty regarding how to finance the budget and achieve its objectives because the budget is dependent on several local and international variables. Hence, the new Iranian president and his government will face a real challenge as soon as they take office in mid-2021, whether related to securing finances for the budget or blowback stemming from the deteriorating socio-economic conditions.

# The Military File

*The Military File* for February 2021 touches on the most salient developments throughout this month. Iran's military establishment has continued its escalation since the beginning of this year as we had indicated in our previous report. Several different military activities have been undertaken amid mounting tensions with the United States in light of efforts to return to the nuclear deal and secure the necessary negotiation tools prior to the talks. The file also casts light on some strategic Iranian movements and the ongoing security challenges and tensions, through reviewing the most significant military drills and the new land and maritime tensions.

## I. The Military Drills

Iran's military forces throughout February conducted several military activities to boost their preparedness and display their deterrence capabilities amid mounting challenges. Their key activities were the following:

### 1. The Joint Naval Drills Between Iran and Russia

The Iranian navy, including both the naval forces belonging to the IRGC and the regular army, carried out a naval drill with Russia and several other countries in the northern part of the Indian Ocean dubbed the "Iran-Russia Maritime Security Belt 2021."<sup>(32)</sup>

The spokesman for the maneuvers Admiral Gholamreza Tahani, said that the floating naval vessels, as well as the air force of the IRGC and the regular army partook in the drills alongside their Russian counterparts including the Russian destroyer *Stoiky* and the logistics ship *KoLa*<sup>(33)</sup> across a maritime area of nearly 17,000 kilometers.<sup>(34)</sup>

According to Iranian sources, the maneuvers objectives included: advancing relations between the navies of Russia and Iran, displaying their strength, securing maritime navigation for movement and trade, combating piracy, exchanging information in the field of maritime rescue, exchanging operational and tactical expertise, and advancing the joint operational liaison and understanding between the two sides. This is in addition to carrying out joint maritime operations, creating the proper environment to supply floating maritime vessels when the need arises.<sup>(35)</sup>

Forming such an alliance (Iran and Russia) is intended to counter the international maritime task force known as the Task Force Sentinel made up of Gulf states and Western countries to maintain navigation security in the Arabian Gulf and the Sea of Oman.

It is worth mentioning that this is the second joint drill between the two countries. The first maneuver was conducted in late 2019. But China did not

partake in this year's maneuvers. This may be attributed to China's efforts to reduce tensions with the United States considering the shifting policies between the two countries and China considering its relations with regional countries, in its quest to keep balanced relations and avoid creating tensions.

On the other side, according to some sources, Indian naval forces partook in these drills considering the Iranian efforts to expand maritime alliances in the region. (See Picture 1).<sup>(36)</sup>



**Picture 1: The Iranian Naval Drills With Russia**

Source: Young Journalist Club: <https://2u.pw/dHG1p>

## **2. Great Prophet 16 Exercise**

The Ground Force of the IRGC conducted its annual exercise dubbed the “Great Prophet 16 Exercise.” Several different tactics were carried out, including paragliding and the shooting of live ammunition by artillery. The new feature this year was the offensive nature of the maneuvers to cope with the strategies newly added to the doctrine of the IRGC, helping it to pursue more offensive tactics, hence strengthening the resilience of its defensive strategy<sup>(37)</sup> and ability to carry out expanded overnight attacks.

Reiterating this, the spokesman for the maneuvers announced that six offensive operations were carried out, with the participation of armored units, aircraft, drones and attack helicopters. (See Picture 2).<sup>(38)</sup>



**Picture 2: A Scene Featuring the Great Prophet 16 Exercise**

Source: Mashreq News, <https://2u.pw/IVmy8>

## II. The Renewed Land and Maritime Tensions

### 1. Iranian-Pakistan Border Tensions

Iran's 959-kilometer-long border with Pakistan is a source of simmering tensions. Now, a frontier that prior to 1979 used to be an important milestone of the hippie trail leading to South-Central Asia and a bridge for Islamabad to Istanbul and onwards to Europe. The once thriving trade route is now a haven for smugglers, criminals and terrorists. From February 20 to February 25, according to various media reports based on eye-witness accounts and analysis of mobile phone clips going viral on social media, Iran used excessive force to stop fuel smugglers, otherwise called "Soukhtbar" and killed at least six people while injuring over a dozen at a checkpoint near Shamsar military base in Saravan city.<sup>(39)</sup>

However, Tehran only confirmed three deaths during live firing while Islamabad returned the body of a Baloch while treating those injured. Though the media reported the deaths of five to 10 Pakistanis in Iran's cross border fire, Islamabad only confirmed one death.<sup>(40)</sup>

Mohammad Hadi Marashi, deputy governor of Sistan and Balochistan province, blamed Pakistani security forces for the gunfire. Islamabad took rare exception to these remarks and classed them as baseless.<sup>(41)</sup> Eye-witness accounts also refute Iran's allegations.

Sanaullah Baloch, a Pakistani lawmaker, demanded in the Baluchi Provincial Assembly the establishment of "a trilateral commission comprising members of the Iranian and Pakistani foreign ministries and Baloch representatives and

elders to probe this unfortunate incident and dig out the reasons for why fire was opened on innocent people.”<sup>(42)</sup> While the Imran Khan government continued to downplay the horrific incident, the Balochistan Provincial Assembly offered prayer for the deceased.

Besides countless smuggling routes, the border running from Koh-i-Malik Salih mountain into the north to Gwadar Bay in the Gulf of Oman has five border points for cargo while pedestrians can move only through Taftan. Gabd, Mand, Katagar and the Chedgi border crossing points operate three days a week for up to 50 trucks and 110 pickup vehicles a day.

Pakistan’s Petroleum Dealers Association estimates that smuggled Iranian petrol accounts for 15 percent to 20 percent of the total fuel consumed in Pakistan. The substandard petroleum is mostly used in Balochistan, Punjab, and Sindh, including Karachi.

On January 3, Prime Minister Imran Khan ordered a crackdown against 2,094 illegal petrol retail outlets and the closure of smuggling routes. The illicit trade is worth between \$6.35 million to \$9.5 million per year, with the volume of fuel soaring significantly above 10 million liters.<sup>(43)</sup> Over the last three decades, Pakistan and Iran have also disputed over the movement of armed non-state actors like Jaish al-Adl and other Baloch militants. Since the start of the Syrian uprising, Iran has recruited young Pakistani Shiites to create the Zeinabiyoun Brigade to fight in Syria.<sup>(44)</sup> The insurgency in Sistan-Balochistan, the second largest province of the 31 provinces of Iran, is becoming a lot harder for the country to brand as terrorism due to the abysmal living conditions and poor services granted to the Sunnis living there. For Pakistan, India post-Trump has reinvigorated its plans to develop Chabahar port which are extremely concerning for Islamabad.<sup>(45)</sup> Hence, the construction of a barbed border fence laden with motion sensors, cameras, searchlights and border posts has been Pakistan’s top priority, an action Iran has not been keen to reciprocate on its side.<sup>(46)</sup> Iranian troops have carried out operations besides occasionally sending drones for surveillance, a few of which were shot down inside Pakistan. While Iran pushes forward with mixed signals, Pakistan seems truly alarmed at the persistent border activity, official and unofficial, that may lead to limited but all-out hostilities between the two sides.

## **2. A Maritime Attack in the Sea of Oman Which Fuels the Iranian-Israeli Escalation**

Though Tehran has officially denied attacking any foreign vessel, the IRGC-aligned Kayhan newspaper confirmed the attack on the MV Helios Ray as “a legitimate target” for it is “a military ship belonging to the Israeli army” and was engaged in “gathering information.” The paper quoted an anonymous official, saying, “This spy ship, although it was sailing secretly, may have fallen into the ambush of one of the branches of the resistance axis.”<sup>(47)</sup>

The attack resulted in an explosion two holes above the waterline about a meter and a half in diameter, which neither sank the vessel nor hurt any persons aboard.<sup>(48)</sup> The attack follows a blast near the Israeli embassy in Delhi on January 29, in which Indian security officials suspect Iran’s hand. (See Picture 3).<sup>(49)</sup>



**Picture 3: The Cargo Ship Targeted at the Sea of Oman**

Source: Syria TV, <https://bit.ly/3c4Dwce>

The chicken games are nothing new between the two states. However, the recent incidents have the potential to take an uglier turn as no proxies were involved and after the attack on Israel's cargo ship near Iran's coastal waters, Israel has continued to target IRGC assets in Syria but with greater intensity.<sup>(50)</sup> The lack of sanctions relief contributed to the Iranian attack against the Israeli ship; Iran was hoping for relief under the new US administration. So far, Israel has not retaliated directly against Iran, possibly considering the stakes of Tehran's neighbors and its rivals in the Gulf. Nothing seems off the table, ranging from a sting operation against key individuals or institutions to launching a cyberattack.

What has gone less-noticed is Iran's increasing intelligence-gathering capabilities despite a lack of hi-tech surveillance and listening equipment. It has shown a lethal combination of open-source intelligence, satellite data and human agents. It was manifested again in the attack targeting the Israeli-owned civilian ship. However, neither Tel Aviv will stop its merchant maritime traffic in the Arabian Gulf nor can Tehran afford to carry on successive attacks in the strategic waterways where its own economic stakes are astoundingly high.

### **Conclusion**

Iran's military forces worked actively throughout the month to back up its negotiating position in anticipation of starting unofficial negotiations. The Iran-Russia naval drills can be seen in this light as well as in the context of Iran's ongoing attempts to create a deterrence force to counter threats to its security.

The month also saw security concerns, which included tensions along the Iran-Pakistan border, and an Israeli cargo ship being attacked. Iran was accused of attacking the ship, which foreshadows future escalation on multiple levels.

## Endnotes

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# Arab Affairs

**A**rab Affairs for February 2021 includes four major files. The first file discusses Iran-Gulf relations in light of Qatari efforts to forge a rapprochement between the Gulf states and Iran, highlighting Qatar's mediation strategy. However, the Qatari efforts did not help in preventing military escalation of Iranian-backed militias against Saudi Arabia nor did it help in stopping Iran from betting on US-Saudi tensions. The second file discusses Iran's interventions in Yemen, the Houthi military escalation, and its political dimensions. In addition, this file discusses the international support for the Yemeni people and the Iranian position regarding this matter. The third file, the Iran and Iraq file, discusses the indications of the renewed US-Iran military escalation in Iraq, and the diplomatic crisis between Turkey and Iran in Iraq. The fourth file, the Iran and Syria file, discusses the developments in relation to Iran's penetration into Syria, and the US-Israeli military strikes targeting pro-Iranian militias in Syria.



# Iran and the Gulf

Iran-Gulf interactions were relatively calm and cautious in February. This was due to anticipation of a new US policy direction under the Biden administration. Part of Iran's escalation included exerting some pressure, yet carefully, and testing reactions. Among the most prominent Iran-Gulf interactions were: Qatari efforts to act as a mediator between Iran and the Gulf states, and between Iran and the United States, Iran-backed militias escalating missile attacks against Saudi Arabia, and the Iranian media escalation against the kingdom to maximize the dispute and the differences between the kingdom and its ally the United States, as well as Qatari efforts to play a mediating role.

In an attempt to revitalize Qatar's mediation role in the aftermath of the Gulf reconciliation process, Qatari Foreign Minister Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim al-Thani delivered on February 16, 2021, a written letter from the Emir of Qatar His Highness Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al Thani to Iran's President Hassan Rouhani. The letter mentioned the desire to strengthen relations between the two countries, and Qatar's willingness to bring Iran and the Gulf states closer together, on the one hand, and Iran and the United States, on the other hand, regarding the nuclear deal.<sup>(1)</sup>



**The Iranian president meeting with Qatar's Foreign Minister al-Thani amid tensions between Iran and the United States regarding the nuclear deal.**

Source: Alhura, <https://arbne.ws/3r44mHB>.

## 1. Iran's President Meeting Qatar's Foreign Minister

During the meeting between the Qatari foreign minister and President Rouhani, the latter mentioned that the development of any country in the region depends on regional peace and stability. He welcomed dialogue and collaboration with the Arab Gulf states, and stressed Iran's commitment to the Hormuz Peace Endeavor (HOPE). He referred to the recent developments in US policy, including Washington's desire to rejoin the nuclear deal.<sup>(2)</sup>

For his part, the Qatari foreign minister described Iran as a friendly regional country, and emphasized the need to develop and expand bilateral relations in all fields, especially within the economic and commercial spheres. He stressed the need for regional countries and the Arab Gulf states to cooperate and reach a consensus to settle outstanding problems. He called for regional dialogue to solve problems between regional countries, and to advance the cause of Iran's Hormuz Peace Endeavor. In relation to the United States rejoining the nuclear deal, he indicated Qatar's support and that Qatar will spare no effort in ensuring that this happens.<sup>(3)</sup>

## 2. Iran's Regional Policy

During the meeting between Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif and Qatari Foreign Minister Mohammed al-Thani, the latter stressed that the region needs dialogue and comprehensive cooperation between regional actors. He announced Qatar's readiness to play a major and influential role. He expressed his hope that issues will be settled quickly within the framework of regional initiatives. After the meeting, Zarif, mentioned on his Twitter account that Iran's active diplomacy moves forward, referring to his meeting with the Qatari foreign minister. He also mentioned that the region is Iran's priority.<sup>(4)</sup>

## 3. Qatar's Mediation Strategy

Qatar seeks to revive its mediation role with the Qatari government taking several factors into consideration. It believes that mediation is in the interest of the Gulf states against the backdrop of the Gulf reconciliation process to bring the Gulf states closer together, particularly their positions on critical issues, most notably tensions with Iran. It believes that playing a mediating role in a file that has regional and international dimensions will strengthen its position regionally and globally, especially with the United States, and mitigate Qatar's embarrassment due to its dual policy in the Gulf region; it shows solid commitment to the Gulf states while maintaining strong relations with Iran. Therefore, this role may help Qatar end this embarrassment. On the other hand, its good relations with Iran, which have improved progressively, might help it succeed in this role.

Probably, Qatar may aspire to be more effective than Oman in this role in light of its good relations with the Biden administration and its expectations regarding the future trajectory of its relations with Washington. Some analysts believe that while Oman's mediation role focuses more on facilitating negotiations to resolve thorny issues such as ensuring the exchange of prisoners between Iran and the United States, Qatar seeks to go beyond this and carve out a more prominent mediation role between the two sides.<sup>(5)</sup>

## I. Iranian-backed Militias Militarily Escalating Against the Kingdom

In spite of the international efforts to end the Yemeni crisis, and the US desire to intervene, the Houthi militia has further escalated its hostilities. This indicates that the Houthis do not care about Yemen's national interests, but rather they seek to act as an Iranian bargaining chip to exert more pressure on the new US administration. This Houthi behavior contradicts the remarks of the advisor to the Houthi's Supreme Political Council. He said that the removal of the Houthis

from the US list of terrorism is a step towards peace in Yemen. The Iranian-Houthi message to the United States and its allies in the Gulf is to remind them of Tehran's ability (military and political) to influence the course of events in the region and warn them that any harm inflicted on Tehran will also impact US allies. We mentioned in our latest Annual Strategic Report that tensions as well as escalation are likely to increase during talks regarding the return to the nuclear deal. This volatile environment and the escalation in Iraq and Syria as well as in the regional seas are indications of increasing tensions and escalation.

Some observers believe that the intensification of Houthi attacks is also a card invested by Iran to put pressure on Saudi Arabia and the United States. Iran also aims to deliver a message to the international community that it controls the Yemeni file, hence any dialogue should be carried out with it directly. Iran also seeks to pressure the Biden administration to rejoin the nuclear deal, distant from any Saudi pressure, and to ensure Saudi Arabia has no role in any US-Iran dialogue.<sup>(6)</sup> (For more on the Yemeni file, please see the Iran and Yemen file)

## II. Iranian Hopes to Strain US-Saudi Relations

Iranian media outlets focused on the future of US-Saudi relations, indicating that their relations will enter a new era, which will not lead to the further strengthening of relations. These outlets assume that Saudi-US relations were strengthened by the previous US administration. Therefore, according to Iranian media outlets, it is not expected that relations between the two sides will continue at the same positive pace as witnessed in the past.

### Iranian Perceptions About the Saudi-US Alliance

Many Iranian affairs experts believe that the era of Saudi Arabia and Israel in the region has passed. Professor Hadi Burhani in an interview with the Iranian Student News Agency, regarding his evaluation of relations between Washington and Riyadh after Biden's contact with King Salman said, "Undoubtedly, the relations between Washington and Riyadh are changing. It will be serious, and for the long-term." He also mentioned that the changes taking place are neither in favor of the kingdom's regional nor domestic policies. He stressed that Saudi Arabia would face new difficulties "If Saudi Arabia does not abandon the Trump era and does not align with regional policies and human rights, it will be in a difficult situation." He added, "This is an important and sensitive moment in the developments of the Middle East. These developments show that the Biden administration is serious about making changes and distancing itself from Trump's extremist policies, and that it will not flatter the US allies in the region: Israel and Saudi Arabia." The professor concluded by saying that "Biden cares about the national interests of the United States and its people, is concerned with peace and stability and refuses to pursue the extremist policies of Netanyahu and Bin Salman in the region."<sup>(7)</sup>

It is worth noting that the former US secretary of state criticized the current US interactions with Saudi Arabia, calling them reckless. He added that Biden aims to restore the US-Iran relationship at the expense of a country friendly to the United States. He stated that "it was political. It aimed at harming a relationship through the use of intelligence in a way that, as a former CIA

director, I would never have stood for," adding, "so I regret that they chose to do this. It was a political stunt." He added that the administration tries to make an important security partner a foe. "I regret that because this administration wants to develop a relationship with Iran and destroy one with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, they chose to use intelligence to do that," the former secretary continued.<sup>(8)</sup>

A writer for Newsweek magazine echoed the former US secretary of state's criticisms by saying "Biden's tough talk on Iran last weekend was a thin veneer covering a policy of profound weakness toward Iran. The policy is doubly bizarre since, thanks in large part to US economic sanctions, Iran is on the brink of collapse. But in their keenness to undo everything that Trump did, the Biden administration is throwing away leverage and giving Khamenei the upper hand. In the process, the administration is increasing the chance of war, losing America's Arab allies and empowering China and Russia at America's expense."<sup>(9)</sup>

Iranian media statements always repeat the futility of the US-Saudi alliance, and exploit the US miscalculation of its relationship with Saudi Arabia, and talk about Riyadh's mistakes in relation to its strategic options. They also highlight that the United States is less willing to have a presence in the region. Therefore, it is more likely to sacrifice its Saudi ally. These Iranian media statements were issued in the wake of the CIA releasing its report about the killing of the Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi. Alwaght news website discussed the expected scenarios regarding Biden's position towards the crown prince and the expected implications of US policies towards the kingdom over the next four years. It also highlighted that the new US government officials have announced, over and over until now, that Washington will reconsider its relations with Saudi Arabia unless Riyadh takes serious action regarding human rights issues, including the release of political prisoners and lifting the ban on women's rights activists.<sup>(10)</sup> However, another newspaper, Akharin Khabar, although it repeated the same points, concluded that collaboration with Saudi Arabia is an issue that the new government in Washington cannot ignore.<sup>(11)</sup>

## Conclusion

Qatar has exerted efforts to act as a mediator and resolve difficulties between the United States and Iran on the one hand, and has attempted to start regional talks between Iran and the Gulf states on the other hand. However, the anticipation of a new US policy resulted in a stalemate, particularly in reaching a solution that could change the present situation. This anticipation was accompanied by Iranian escalation to raise Tehran's demands and negotiating ability, and pressure the US to rejoin the nuclear deal and lift the sanctions.

The US government has taken symbolic steps to encourage Iran to return to the nuclear file, reflected in its approach towards Yemen. However, Iran may read these symbolic steps differently and considers them to be an indicator of Washington's weakness. Therefore, it intensified and escalated its moves in Iraq and against the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia through its proxies.

Iran has also exploited the US position towards Saudi Arabia to undermine US-Saudi relations and to present them as strained, claiming that the regional countries had committed a mistake by depending on the United States. This is in addition to promoting its narrative, which opposes the US presence in the region.

# Iran and Yemen

In February 2021, the developments in relation to the Yemeni crisis, significantly the Houthi military escalation internally and externally, were linked to regional and international political dimensions. The Houthis resumed military escalation hours after the United States announced revoking the designation of the Houthi militia as a terrorist group. After the US move, within a few hours, the UN envoy for Yemen Martin Griffiths visited Iran for the first time since the beginning of the Yemeni crisis. This move was described as evidence of Iran's prominent role in keeping the Yemeni crisis alive and evidence of how it uses the Yemeni file in other files to serve its interests. Iranian official statements regarding Yemen's peace process were similar to those issued by the Houthis after the visit of the UN envoy to Iran. This indicates that the Houthis are extremely dependent on Iran for their political direction.

Considering the international efforts to support the Yemeni people and alleviate their suffering, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was the top donor to the Yemeni people at donor conferences. However, the Iranian role in Yemen was limited to making statements and supplying its Houthi arm with weapons to kill the Yemenis and target neighboring countries and international maritime navigation. We will review the most prominent developments in the Yemeni scene in February in terms of the political dimensions of the Houthi militia's military escalation, and Iran's position on supporting the Yemeni people.

## I. Houthi Military Escalation and Its Political Dimensions

February 2021 witnessed unprecedented developments in the Yemeni crisis and the impact of the new US policy regarding the crisis as well as the US decision to remove the Houthis from its list of terror groups. The political developments in the US position towards Iran's behavior and the Yemeni file were reflected in the Houthi escalation inside and outside Yemen. The Houthi escalation coincided with the visit of the UN envoy to Yemen, Martin Griffiths, to Tehran a few hours after the US decision to remove the Houthis from its list of terror groups. The UN envoy held talks with Iranian officials regarding the Yemeni crisis. Many observers believe that the visit of the UN envoy to Iran is a clear indication of the role of Iran in the course of the Yemeni crisis and its use of the Yemeni file for other political files that serve Iran's interests, such as the Iranian nuclear file. The US administration's new policy towards Iran and the Yemeni file has made the US vision more consistent with the vision of some European parties that are willing to allow Iran to have a presence in Yemen in exchange for concessions in relation to the nuclear file. Yemeni political sources indicated Iran's endeavors to link any political settlement in Yemen with the resolution of



differences between Iran and the United States and the European Union, since it is the only party which can pressure the Houthi militia to engage in a political settlement to solve the Yemeni crisis.<sup>(12)</sup>

Iran's dominant role in Yemen has been mentioned by the official spokesman of the Coalition to Support Legitimacy in Yemen, Colonel Turki al-Maliki, who emphasized that the IRGC is trying to link the Yemeni file with the current international changes. This follows the military escalation of the Houthis in February. He stressed that the coalition has the capabilities to deal with threats that target civilians, explaining that Iran's generals control the militias in occupied Sana'a.<sup>(13)</sup>

Militarily, the Houthis escalated military hostilities after the United States announced its decision to remove the militia from its list of terror group by targeting the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in various attacks during February with ballistic missiles and drones, all of which they were of Iranian origin. Saudi air defense forces responded to all these attacks.

The Houthis increased suicide attacks targeting the oil and gas rich Ma'rib Governorate during February. Yemeni Information Minister Muammar al-Iryani mentioned that the escalation was in response to Washington sending the wrong messages after removing the Houthis from its list of terror groups. He said, "The recent escalation of the Houthi militia confirms its continued role as a proxy implementing the Iranian agenda, its attempts to reproduce the model of the Lebanon-based Hezbollah terrorist organization in Yemen, and its efforts to thwart de-escalation efforts made by brothers and friends, end the war and bring peace to Yemen, and its indifference to the worsening human suffering of Yemenis."<sup>(14)</sup>

In this context, the hardline Kayhan newspaper, which is close to the Iranian leader, linked the Houthi escalation in Yemen to indirect US-Iran confrontations in the region. It said that the Houthi military escalation in Ma'rib

was in response to the US military actions against Iranian sites in Syria. Some observers believe that this escalation allows Iran to escape the confrontation with the United States and it aims to involve Yemen and its people in the hotbed of Iran's tensions and instructs the Houthi militia to kill more Yemenis.<sup>(15)</sup>

Yemeni Minister of Information Muammar al-Iryani indicated that this position by Iranian state-run media clearly reveals the true dimensions of the battle taking place on the Ma'rib front. He described the Houthi militia as Iran's dirty tool to kill Yemenis. He added that "the confession of the Kayhan newspaper, which is close to the Supreme Leader of the Iranian Revolution, Khamenei, that Tehran was behind the escalation of the Houthi militia in Ma'rib and the terrorist attacks on the kingdom, and the attack on a ship in the Sea of Oman, in response to the US raids on Iranian militia sites in Syria, is additional evidence of Iran's hands in all events in the region."<sup>(16)</sup>

## II. International Support for the Yemeni People and Iran's Position

The UN announced that donor countries pledged to finance relief operations in Yemen, with the total amount reaching approximately \$7.1 billion. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was the top donor with \$430 million. These funds will be distributed without discrimination to the Yemeni people, and the donations were welcomed by the Yemeni government and international parties. Secretary-General of the United Nations Antonio Guterres said, "I thank those who have pledged generously, and I ask others to consider about what they can do." This comes at a time when Iran has not pledged any amount of money to alleviate the suffering of the Yemeni people.<sup>(17)</sup>

The spokesman for the Houthi militia, Muhammad Abd al-Salam, criticized the pledges, saying, "They do not help the Yemeni people as much as they help the aggressor countries by giving them the opportunity to cleanse their records and present themselves as donor countries." These remarks by the militia's spokesman coincided with the Ma'rib Governorate witnessing the largest Houthi military escalation. This escalation has targeted civilians in the governorate and the areas in which the displaced Yemeni people were relocated with missiles and ballistic missiles, leading to the killing of many civilians and displacing many Yemeni families.<sup>(18)</sup>

In relation to the indifference of the Iranian government to the suffering of the Yemeni people, recently in particular, by escalating militarily in the Ma'rib Governorate, Minister of Information Muammar al-Iryani said, "The Houthi terrorist militia is trying to justify its recent political and military escalation on several pretexts, but reality confirms that this escalation came into the implementation of Iranian dictates to undermine demands and efforts for calm and opportunities of undermining a peace resolution of the crisis, transferring the conflict to new places and dragging the country into dangerous scenarios and foils."<sup>(19)</sup>

He also said that "the statements of Hassan Nasrallah and the political and media mobilization through the symbols of the so-called 'Iranian Axis' to keep up with the escalation of the Houthi militia on the Ma'rib front shows the true dimensions of the battles there." He added that this "confirms that the militia is leading the implementation of the Iranian expansion project and the policy of spreading terrorism and chaos in the region."<sup>(20)</sup>

On the other hand, many observers believe that the Iranian role in

supporting the Yemeni people is limited to statements and supporting the Houthis politically, militarily and economically, without taking into account the tragedy of the Yemeni people in general. Iran did not participate in any donor conference in Yemen nor did it pledge to reduce the suffering of the Yemeni people. Ironically, speaking to Al Masirah on February 23, 2021, Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif stated that, "Our support for the Yemeni people and its resistance comes from the need to support the oppressed."<sup>(21)</sup>

Observers wonder about the nature of Iran's support for the Yemeni people which is limited to smuggling weapons to the Houthis, in order to escalate further and use the Houthis as a pressure tool to serve Tehran's interests and kill the Yemeni people. In this context, a US Navy destroyer seized a large cache of arms being smuggled by two Iranian ships off the coast of Somalia. They were on their way to the Houthis in Yemen. The US Central Command announced that the destroyer USS Winston Churchill had seized illicit shipments of weapons from two boats during a maritime security operation off the coast of Somalia on February 12, 2021.<sup>(22)</sup>

In light of the Houthis dependence on Iran, during his meeting with the US envoy to Yemen, Timothy Lenderking, to discuss the implications of the Houthi escalation in Ma'rib and the destructive Iranian role in Yemen, Yemeni Foreign Minister Ahmed Awad bin Mubarak, called on the Houthis to end its dependency on Iran and to put the Yemeni people and the country's interests ahead of Iran's agenda.<sup>(23)</sup>

## Conclusion

The Houthi military escalation has been linked with the political dimensions that are connected to US-Iran outstanding issues. There is also a new US vision towards the Yemeni file that is consistent with the US desire to start talks with the Iranian government regarding the nuclear file and other files. The US decision to remove the Houthis from its list of terror groups sent the wrong message to the militia, with the announcement viewed as a green light to carry out further escalation and attacks against the oil and gas-rich city of Ma'rib to strengthen their political position in any upcoming political negotiations, and to strengthen their economic position to finance multiple fighting fronts. The misleading Iranian official statements still mention Iran's support to the Yemeni people, while the truth is that Iranian support is limited to the Houthis to strengthen their military and political position in line with Tehran's interests. The Houthis are totally dependent on Iran, at the expense of the security and stability of Yemen and the region.

# Iran and Iraq

This file sheds light on the motives behind the intensified use of Katyusha rockets by pro-Iranian militias against US targets in Baghdad and Erbil in February 2021. However, in January 2021 there was a noticeable decline in the use of such rockets against US targets in Iraq. The file also discusses the reasons why the Biden administration decided to use military force against Iranian-backed militias in eastern Syria close to the Syria-Iraq border. In addition, the file sheds light on the diplomatic crisis between Tehran and Ankara in Iraq and the renewed wave of protests which broke out in the Iraqi Shiite-dominated governorate of Dhi Qar.

## I. Indications of the Renewed US-Iran Military Escalation in Iraq

During mid-February 2021, Katyusha rockets targeted US and Iraqi targets as well as coalition troops in Erbil and Baghdad. In Erbil, the attack, on February 15, 2021 targeted a military air base at Erbil International Airport. US forces were stationed at the airport to support local troops fighting ISIS (Daesh) militants. The attack killed a civilian contractor and injured others including a US soldier. A group known as Saraya Awlia al-Dam, or Guardians of Blood Brigade, claimed responsibility for the attack.

In Baghdad, several targets were hit in the Green Zone, on February 18, 2021, including the US Embassy and Balad Air Base. In addition, several people were injured when the headquarters of Iraq's National Security Service near the US Embassy was targeted.

The strong and deterring response of President Joe Biden in the wake of the attacks was surprising. The US Air Force responded to Biden's signal by bombing targets belonging to pro-Iranian militias including Kata'ib Hezbollah (KH) and Kata'ib Sayyad al Shuhada (KSS) in eastern Syria near the Syrian-Iraqi border. The targets also included Imam Ali Air Base, the most important Iranian base in Syria. US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin said that the United States was "confident that the target was being used by the same Shia militants that conducted the strikes." The US retaliatory airstrikes killed at least 17 pro-Iranian militants, according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights. Saeed Khatibzadeh, the spokesman for Iran's Foreign Ministry, denied on February 22, 2021 that his country was involved in the attacks. Despite Iran's denial, there is evidence that proves Tehran's involvement in the attacks launched by militias against US targets in Iraq. The first piece of evidence is that these Katyusha rockets are the same ones used by the Lebanese Hezbollah. Second, the US Ambassador to Iraq from 2016 to 2019 Douglas Silliman claimed that pro-Iranian militias were behind the attacks. Third, Iraqi security forces found the Katyusha rockets that targeted the US Embassy.<sup>(24)</sup> Fourth, Saraya Awlia al-Dam,



the group that claimed responsibility for the attacks, is a pro-Iranian group which was established after the assassination of Soleimani and Muhandis. Phillip Smyth, a Soref Fellow at the Washington Institute specializing in Shiite Islamist militarism in the Middle East, believes that groups such as Saraya Awlia al-Dam are a new front for Iran's proxies.<sup>(25)</sup> Furthermore, this renewed escalation in Iraq indicates that it falls within Iran's strategy to expel US forces from Iraq. These attacks aiming to secure several Iranian goals are the first real test for the Biden administration. The first goal is to put pressure on the US administration to push it to either ease or lift the sanctions. The second goal is that Iran wants the United States to stop further troop deployments in Erbil since such deployments along the Iraqi border strip with Syria allow Washington to monitor and counter militia groups and thwart Iran's sectarian agenda in Syria and Iraq. In other words, Iran does not want Iraqi Kurdistan to be a safe haven for US troops after they pull out of Baghdad and other Iraqi cities.

President Joe Biden's swift response to the attacks, on the other hand, intended to send several messages to Iran. First, Biden wanted Iran to know that his administration will not be equivalent to a third Obama term and he will not allow Iran to put US forces at risk. Second, the US administration's swift response showed that the use of armed force is possible to demonstrate deterrence, and it seems that this response was well-calculated. The US airstrikes took place outside Iraq, nevertheless, they targeted headquarters belonging to hardline militias who are against US forces in Iraq. Biden did not want the situation in Iraq to worsen and go back to square one, hence US airstrikes took place outside Iraq.

However, the uncontrolled spread and misuse of arms will likely result in dire ramifications for Iraq's security. The country has been facing a difficult dilemma regarding how best to end the conflict between militant insurgents and those who call for disarmament to safeguard national sovereignty.

The fact that Iraq's foreign minister paid two visits to Iran, on February 3, 2021, and on February 27, 2021, and that Iran has strongly denied it instructed the militias to launch attacks against US forces raises some questions. Have some militias broken away from Iran's control and Tehran no longer has the capability to control these militias? Are these militias proactively positioning themselves as influential actors in Iraq independent from Iran because they are concerned about the impact on their interests if Iran and the United States bridge their differences within the framework of potential nuclear talks?

Or is Iran deeply disappointed by the Biden administration's decision not to lift the sanctions before Tehran returns to its obligations stipulated under the nuclear deal?

## II. Features of the Diplomatic Crisis Between Turkey and Iran in Iraq

An indication of a second diplomatic crisis in a period of less than 90 days was when on February 28, 2021, the Turkish Foreign Ministry summoned the Iranian Ambassador to Turkey Mohammad Farazmand following controversial remarks made by Iran's Ambassador to Iraq Iraj Masjedi. The latter had said that Ankara is violating Iraqi sovereignty. Masjedi also criticized the latest Turkish operations against PKK fighters in northern Iraq and called on Ankara to withdraw its troops from the country. The Turkish Foreign Ministry asked Iran's Ambassador Mohammad Farazmand to tell Iran that Ankara expected Tehran to support Turkey's "fight against terrorism" in northern Iraq. In response to Masjedi's remarks, the Turkish Ambassador to Iraq Fatih Yildiz said, "I believe the Iranian ambassador should be the last person to lecture Turkey on respecting Iraq's borders."<sup>(26)</sup>

Meanwhile, Iran's Foreign Ministry summoned the Turkish Ambassador to Iran Derya Ors over Turkey's Interior Minister Suleyman Soylu's remarks regarding the presence of PKK fighters in Iran. In reference to Iran hosting PKK Kurdish militants, Soylu said that there were "525 terrorists"<sup>(27)</sup> in Iran.

Moreover, two weeks before this crisis erupted, Harakat Hezbollah al Nujaba, an Iraqi Shiite paramilitary group, condemned Operation Claw-Eagle 2 launched by Turkey in northern Iraq to rescue 13 Turkish prisoners captured by the PKK. The Iraqi group threatened to attack Turkish targets if Turkey does not change its position in relation to northern Iraq.

Shortly afterwards, Ashab al-Kahf or Companions of the Cave, a pro-Iranian militia group, published footage showing the launch of a missile attacking the Turkish military base in Iraqi Bashiqa. The group also sent reinforcements to the Iraqi town of Sinjar as part of Iran's strategy to protect the PKK.<sup>(28)</sup>

All these incidents indicate that Turkey's presence in Iraq could potentially pose a threat to Iran as much as US forces in Iraq do.

One reason behind the good relationship between Iran and the PKK is that part of the Qandil Mountains, the PKK's main bastion in northern Iraq, is

located inside Iran, allowing PKK fighters to survive many Turkish airstrikes by providing them with a safe haven in these mountains.<sup>(29)</sup>

Although Iran and Turkey maintain cooperative relations to fight ISIS and the Kurds as well as to counter US sanctions, future relations between the two sides will likely be dominated by disagreements over thorny issues such as who takes the lead in the region. There is an overlap between Iranian and Turkish political projects in many areas of influence in the region including Iraq, Syria as well as in Central Asia, the Horn of Africa, the African states bordering the Red Sea and finally in the East African states.

Turkish-Iranian rivalry has escalated in Iraq due to the country's significance in the strategies of Ankara and Tehran. For Iran, Iraq is one of the most important areas of the corridor linking Tehran to the Mediterranean. This corridor is also critical for transferring weapons to pro-Iranian militias in Syria and Lebanon. Additionally, Iran's influence in Iraq enables it to break the US encirclement along its eastern and western borders and ensures that there is no Iraqi political system that rejects Tehran's schemes and returns Iraq to the Arab fold.

Turkey, on the other hand, aspires to regain its leading and historic role in Iraq. However, Iran's dominance over the Iraqi political system is an impediment to Turkey's expansion in Iraq.

Turkey's moves in Iraq are driven by its fear over the Kurdish project in Iraq and Syria as well as by the importance of Iraq to Turkey to withstand Russia's growing influence in the region, particularly in Syria. Turkey's growing influence has resulted in Ankara's isolation from the Arab and Gulf region and has impacted its role in the region.

The Nagorno-Karabakh crisis revealed a rift between Turkey and Iran. Erdoğan attended a military parade in Azerbaijan on December 10, 2020 to celebrate Azerbaijan's victory over Armenia in the Nagorno-Karabakh war and recited a poem about the division of Azerbaijan's territory between Russia and Iran in the 19th century. Tehran considered this poem a direct threat to its national unity. It was feared that the poem would inflame separatist inclinations among Iran's own Azeris as it portrayed their suffering after the complete splitting of Azerbaijan under the Treaty of Gulistan.

The Turkish-Iranian crisis is expected to widen



further if the Turkish operations in northern Iraq, which constitute a source of concern regarding Iran's influence there, continue. The disagreements between the two countries in the context of maximizing respective power and influence in different geographical regions means that relations will always be in a state of constant tension.

### **III. The Implications of the Recent Wave of Protests in the Shiite-dominated Governorate of Dhi Qar**

An enormous wave of protests broke out in Nasiriyah, Dhi Qar, in southern Iraq, on February 24, 2021 and lasted for five days. The protesters denounced poor public services as well as widespread corruption, unemployment, and poor living conditions. They also demanded the dismissal of Governor Nazim al-Waili, corruption cases to be investigated, development projects to be quickly implemented and for those who attacked the protesters to be held accountable.

The protests also saw clashes between protesters and security forces, claiming the lives of five protesters and injuring more than 270 others including 147 members of the security forces. The quick response of Kazemi to the demands of the protesters helped calm the situation. He dismissed Waili and appointed Abdul Ghani al-Asadi, the head of Iraq's National Security Service, as the new governor temporarily. It is worth mentioning that Asadi's appointment as the head of Iraq's National Security Service was not accepted by Iran.<sup>(30)</sup>

Kazemi also formed an advisory council — linked to himself — comprising nine members from the city of Nasiriyah who have shown competence and experience in addressing the city's problems and providing services to its citizens.

He also ordered the establishment of a broad investigation team to find out who killed the protesters and he instructed Asadi to discuss the nomination of five people with the sheikhs of the tribes (tribal leaders) and the elders of the city. One of the nominees would become the governor of Dhi Qar.

Nasiriyah is one of the most important cities in southern Iraq. The city has been suffering from major problems such as unemployment and corruption and the people have been subjected to poor services because pro-Iranian armed Shiite parties and militias, such as the Badr Organization, Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba, Saraya al-Salam and other militias, are stationed there.

Whenever militias are active in any Arab city, province or state, divisions, tensions, and key crises arise, leading crime, poverty, and unemployment to soar. Nasiriyah, therefore, is one of the most important cities that has seen repeated scenes of anti-Iran and anti-militia protests since October 2019. The protesters, in almost every demonstration, expressed their denunciation of Iran's interference in Iraq's affairs by attacking pro-Iranian militia headquarters with bulldozers and burning photos of militia leaders and the leader of the Iranian Revolution (Khomeini).

## Conclusion

The latest events in Iraq in February 2021, show that Iran is not only working to pull US troops out of Iraq but is also attempting to keep the situation in Iraq unchanged. Iran wants a weak Iraq to remain in its grip and thwart Kazemi's efforts to convert the country into an independent state with full sovereignty. Tehran is also trying to gain bargaining chips before any potential negotiations with the United States at the expense of Iraq's security. This is in addition to pressuring the Biden administration to start negotiations and lift the sanctions. Had Iran been concerned about the security and development of Iraq, the protests in southern Shiite-dominated Iraqi cities would not frequently take place. Iran should have transformed these cities into examples of security and development, however, this has not happened.

# Iran and Syria

Syria has seen a host of developments in relation to Iran's role in the country in February 2021. These developments include Iran's attempts to extend its influence and control over Syria's economy and culture and to boost the influence of its proxies in Syria. Meanwhile, these Iranian attempts have been met with escalation from both the United States and Israel, as both countries targeted several Iranian-backed militias across Syria. February also saw growing tension between Turkey and Iran over Iraqi Sinjar which impacted Tehran's influence in Syria. Considering these developments, this file discusses Iran's dominance over Syria and the exchange of messages between Syria and Iran about the latest developments in the country.

## I. The Latest Developments in Relation to Iran's Dominance Over Syria

The previous monthly files and the latest *Annual Strategic Report* issued by the International Institute for Iranian Studies (Rasanah) indicated how Tehran has prepared for the post-conflict phase in Syria undeterred by whether Assad remains in power or not. In either case, Iran aims for a permanent military presence in Syria, thus, it has already established and armed proxy militias there. It has also strengthened its political role in Syria through the country's parliamentary elections as well as its cultural and religious role through ongoing recruitment and promotion of Shiism since its involvement in the Syrian conflict.

This file, however, sheds light on Iran's ongoing attempts to exert influence in Syria. Recently, Iran has been working to craft a pro-Iran social awareness in Syria, and to advance its influence within Syrian culture through media projects. These projects intend to spread "Iran's religious content" to change Syria's culture.

This means that Syrians will watch the same Iran-directed content aired on Iranian television channels, ultimately serving the Iranian political system's project.

In this context, the head of Iran's Union for the Production and Dissemination of Content in Cyberspace Saeed Mashhadi announced launching a technology research center in Syria.<sup>(31)</sup>

This move supports Iran's ongoing efforts to influence Arab public opinion through many media platforms, and to create a media and religious aura surrounding its leaders and fighters via the use of religious and sectarian slogans. In addition, Iranian efforts intend to export the principles of the revolution to the Arab world; something Iran has been working on since 1979.

Within the framework of these efforts, Iran announced that it will soon open a cultural and sports center near the city of Sayyidah Zaynab in the suburbs of

Damascus where Iranian-backed militias are most active. The project is called “the Complex of the Martyr Colonel Haitham Suleiman” and flags of Iranian-backed militias were hoisted on its building next to the Syrian flag. It was financed by the Iranian branch of the Jihad al-Binaa Foundation, which has been operating in Syria since 2015 with the aim of securing Iran’s ideological goals under the cover of carrying out humanitarian development projects.<sup>[32]</sup>

Meanwhile, the Syrian Parliament approved amendments to Law No. 11 (2011) which concerned the ownership of real estate by non-Syrians. These amendments sparked major concerns over potential demographic changes in the country. The new amendments end the restrictions that limited foreigners to one residential unit and they are now free to dispose of property without waiting two years after purchase. These amendments will enhance opportunities for the Iranian government and its institutions to penetrate further into Syrian society and create pro-Iran social communities, which enable Iran to stay in Syria for the long term.

The head of the Iran-Syria Chamber of Commerce Keyvan Kashefi resolved a number of problems in trade exchange between the two countries; most of which are related to difficulties in the shipping and transportation process as well as the inaccessibility to some land ports in Iraq to transfer shipments from Iran.

This prompted the Iranian government to search for alternative maritime routes enabling it to bypass US sanctions. On February 12, Iran announced the launch of a direct shipping line from the port of Bandar Abbas in Iran to the Syrian port of Latakia.<sup>[33]</sup>

To understand the motivations, several questions about the real potential gains from this project (alternative maritime routes) can be raised. First, what is the real goal behind the project? Does Iran only seek to expand trade and economic cooperation between the two countries? Or does it seek to turn this shipping line into a new Iranian gateway to smuggle weapons and to avoid the continuous targeting of Iranian-backed militias?



These questions are posed because several reports have highlighted that there is no clear economic benefit or advantage from reactivating the shipping line. Thus, Iran's announcement is more for propaganda purposes than for achieving tangible economic benefits. This analysis is supported by the fact that the shipping line is a one-direction line from Iran (the exporter) to Syria (the importer). Moreover, the volume of annual trade between Iran and Syria reached approximately \$83 million in 2020 which is significantly less than the volume of trade before the start of the civil war in Syria. Iranian exports to Syria reached approximately \$73 million and Syrian exports to Iran reached approximately \$10 million.<sup>(34)</sup>

## II. Syria and the Exchange of Messages Between Tehran and Its Opponents

In February, tensions escalated between Iran and the United States and Israel. As the escalation increased, Syria was the perfect place to carry out a response and for messages to be exchanged between Tehran and its opponents. The reason why Syria was “perfect” for Iran's foes is because conflict here will neither trigger a dramatic escalation leading to a war nor significantly impact the regional and international environment.

The first message was transmitted by the US airstrike on February 25, which targeted facilities and buildings located at a border crossing point used by several Iranian-backed militias, including Kata'ib Hezbollah and Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada.<sup>(35)</sup>

The US airstrikes came two weeks after the attacks by pro-Iranian militias targeting the US Embassy complex in the Green Zone in Baghdad and Erbil airport, in addition to the attack on a US base north of Baghdad.

In fact, the timing of the airstrikes is not the only indication of Washington's motive behind the attacks. The US airstrikes sent an implicit message that the United States is willing to rejoin the Iranian nuclear deal but this does not mean that Tehran can force the United States by attacking its troops to soften its position on Iran and to make compromises.

The recent US move can also be viewed as a tit-for-tat response, which is a traditional tactic used before negotiations to gain more bargaining chips. By launching these airstrikes, Washington wanted to demonstrate that it is prepared for a military response in case Iranian-backed militias continue their attacks on its facilities and troops in Iraq as well as in the wider region. The US airstrikes also restrain Biden's opponents — whether at the national or international level — who criticized his hesitation about confronting Iran's growing influence in Iraq and Syria for fear that negotiations over the Iranian nuclear file would fail.

The location of the US airstrikes in the Syrian city of Abu-Kamal close to the Syria-Iraq border, rather than choosing to strike Iranian-backed militias in Iraq, indicates that the United States did not want to embarrass the Iraqi government and trigger more escalation with Iran and its militias in Iraq where Tehran has considerable influence and control.

The second message sent to Iran on Syria's territories came after Israel's air force targeted the military sites and headquarters belonging to Iranian-backed

militias three times during February 2021.

The first Israeli airstrike took place on February 4 and targeted Damascus International Airport in Syria and Hezbollah positions in Quneitra while the second and third airstrikes targeted sites in the vicinity of Damascus on February 15 and February 28, respectively.

The last Israeli airstrike came as a response to the attack targeting an Israeli-owned MV Helios Ray cargo ship in the Gulf of Oman, which allegedly was carried out by Iran. Although Iran has officially denied the Israeli claim that Tehran was behind the attack on the Israeli vessel, there are some hints that suggest that this claim is true. For example, the hardline Kayhan newspaper which is close to the country's supreme leader implicitly acknowledged that "the attack on the Israeli ship in the Gulf of Oman is revenge for the recent Israeli attacks and crimes in the region."<sup>(36)</sup>

Both the US and Israeli escalation against Iran coincided with reports regarding the arrival of US logistical and military reinforcements at the US military base in the al-Omar oil field in Deir Ezzor, against the backdrop of a noticeable increase in Iranian reinforcements for its militias and forces on the banks of the Euphrates in front of US bases. These Iranian military reinforcements included new arms shipments through Iraq to pro-Iranian militias in the countryside of Deir Ezzor, eastern Syria.<sup>(37)</sup>

## Conclusion

Tehran is still betting on preserving its gains and advancing its strategic influence in Syria by attempting to gain broader acceptance – economically and socially – with the Syrian government.

Albeit with somewhat slow and secret steps, Iran, based on what has been said in this file and other previous files, started to realize tangible benefits from its efforts. The US, Israeli and Turkish military escalation against Iranian-backed militias indicate that Syria's territories will witness further military escalation in the coming period.

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# International Affairs

**T**he International Affairs file regarding US-Iran relations discusses Biden's policy towards Iran and Tehran's position on returning to the nuclear deal. The Iran and Europe file reviews the European efforts to advance the diplomatic approach to resolve the Iranian nuclear deal crisis; the decisive European positions to counter Iran's terrorist operations via sentencing Asadullah Assadi, a former Iranian diplomat, to 20 years in jail. He was sentenced for his role in a foiled bomb plot which intended to target a rally organized by Iranian dissidents.



# Iran and the United States

The Biden administration has unveiled the general framework of its policy towards Iran. The most important tenet of this policy is “smart diplomacy,” which pursues the diplomatic track while benefiting from Trump’s sanctions. The Biden administration, through this policy, hopes to forge a more comprehensive understanding with Iran. To benefit further from Biden’s diplomatic approach, Iran is likely to opt to reshuffle its cards to increase its leverage in talks; for example it increased uranium enrichment and suspended the implementation of the Additional Protocol (AP). This has led to uncertainty about the future of Iran’s nuclear program and mitigated pressure that would have forced Tehran to make costly strategic and political concessions. In this file, we will discuss three main topics: tenets of Biden’s policy towards Iran, Tehran’s position on returning to the nuclear deal, and finally the most significant findings will be presented.

## I. Tenets of Biden’s Policy Towards Iran

Reviving the nuclear deal via activating the diplomatic approach has been a key goal for the Biden administration. However, it conditioned rejoining the nuclear deal with Iran fully observing its obligations stipulated under the nuclear deal and refused to coordinate a synchronized return to the deal, as suggested by the Iranian government.<sup>(1)</sup>

However, within the Biden administration there are different views regarding the United States returning to the nuclear deal. The foreign policy team headed by US Secretary of State Antony Blinken believes in implementing all tracks of understanding with Iran to reach a comprehensive settlement, which includes resolving all disagreements. The second team headed by US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan believes that the United States should first promptly tackle Iran’s nuclear breaches because the latest Iranian moves pose immediate threats which cannot be addressed later. The second team argues that current realities and maximum pressure must be used to reach an additional agreement (complementary agreement) to tackle Iran’s aggressive behavior in the Middle East and its ballistic missile program. Sullivan is the first one in Biden’s administration who has said that each file needs to be discussed separately.

President Joe Biden supports Sullivan’s point of view. His administration has undertaken some steps to build trust with Iran. It allowed South Korea to unblock Iranian assets: \$1 billion in cash and the rest to be transferred through the Swiss Humanitarian Trade Arrangement (SHTA) channel, which was approved during the Trump term to help in the transfer of humanitarian goods to Iran, such as food and medicine that are exempt from US sanctions.

The US ambassador to the UN withdrew Trump's move to trigger the snapback mechanism. The Biden administration also discussed options to mitigate Iran's financial woes without lifting the economic sanctions. Some options include encouraging the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to lend Iran money, thus allowing it to fight the coronavirus pandemic, which has been impeded due to sanctions. Such options could provide Iran with much needed humanitarian aid and encourage it to take similar de-escalation steps, hence paving the way for negotiations.



The United States has opened discussions with the Europeans to coordinate their positions in relation to Iran. The United States accepted a European proposal to mediate between the two sides (Washington and Tehran), thus paving the way for diplomatic negotiations. Undoubtedly, the United States, during the Biden administration, can mobilize the Europeans as well as other regional and global powers. However, these moves may prove to be pointless as long as Iran is not willing to reciprocate.<sup>(2)</sup>

The US regional policy includes deterrence and incentives. It reversed the Trump administration's decision to designate the Houthis as a terrorist organization and is eager to end the war in Yemen through initiating dialogue with Iran on the crisis since it is considered to be an important actor in the country. At the same time, Washington retaliated against the latest Iranian missile attack targeting US troops in Erbil, Iraq, on February 15, 2021; it launched airstrikes targeting Iran-backed militias in eastern Syria.<sup>(3)</sup>

The United States resumed a strategic dialogue with Israel in regard to



the Iranian file. Tel Aviv and Washington agreed to reconvene their bilateral strategic group on Iran — it was established in the early months of Obama’s term, following Netanyahu’s visit to the White House in 2009.<sup>(4)</sup>

In response to Iran suspending the implementation of the AP and Tehran escalating its nuclear breaches, Washington submitted a plan to the IAEA Board of Governors regarding Iran’s decision to restrict cooperation with IAEA inspectors. The plan called on IAEA member states to explicitly express their deep concerns about Iran’s step to restrict IAEA inspections and suspend the implementation of the AP. If the US plan is accepted, the Europeans will tilt towards the US position. Probably, one of the European Troika countries would trigger the snapback mechanism in light of US pressure, with Washington eager to push Iran to start talks.<sup>(5)</sup>

## II. Iran’s Position on the Return to the Nuclear Deal

Iran has rejected the US demand to amend the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) or to include other outstanding issues in the existing deal. Iran argues that it is an international agreement; the UN Security Council unanimously adopted resolution 2231 (2015) endorsing the JCPOA. It claims that it has not violated any provisions under the deal since the US withdrawal. The JCPOA was formed to address Iran’s nuclear program, it cannot be expanded to include other files, Iran argues.<sup>(6)</sup> Iran’s Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif has said that no talks will be held beyond the framework of the JCPOA.<sup>(7)</sup>

According to Iranian officials, Iran’s top priority is to lift US sanctions,

especially those imposed on the country's oil exports and financial transactions, which have hit the Iranian economy very hard. Iran's aim is to resolve its stifling economic crisis. Therefore, Tehran calls on Washington to lift all the sanctions first – in reality – before starting any talks. At home, the Iranian government managed to unite all political currents to adopt a unified position on this issue. The International Court of Justice (ICJ) found it had jurisdiction in respect of all claims brought by Iran against the United States in the case concerning *Alleged Violations of the 1955 Treaty of Amity, Economic Relations, and Consular Rights*. The ICJ rejected on February 3 two of “the preliminary objections raised by the United States to which the subject-matter of the dispute does not relate to the interpretation or application of the Treaty of Amity.” Iran believes the ICJ judgment proves its claims are lawful. The case will move into the merits phase.<sup>(8)</sup>

However, Iran's political currents disagree in regard to dealing with the Biden administration. The Rouhani government wants to improve its image before leaving office and strengthen the reformists' chances of winning the presidential elections to be held in June 2021. Thus, the Rouhani government is keen to invest in reviving the nuclear deal and restimulating the economy. The conservatives aim to thwart the moves of the Iranian government in relation to reviving the nuclear deal for political reasons: most prominently to increase their chances of winning the presidential elections. The hardliner-dominated Parliament has harshly criticized the Iranian government, alleging that the government is willing to compromise all of Iran's nuclear achievements and its [the Rouhani government's] views are not in line with the goals of the Iranian revolution.<sup>(9)</sup>

It seems that the Rouhani government is keen to benefit from the current diplomatic breakthrough. Iran's Foreign Minister Zarif asked the Europeans to help in coordinating the United States and Iran returning to the nuclear deal in a synchronized manner.<sup>(10)</sup> Zarif has said that EU Foreign Policy Chief Josep Borrell should play a role in helping this coordination as he is the coordinator of the Joint Committee of the JCPOA — he can also discuss with Iran and the United States the steps needed to synchronize their mutual return to the deal.<sup>(11)</sup>

Iran is preparing for any potential talks by increasing its bargaining chips to strengthen its position. Iran increased uranium enrichment to 20 percent and informed the IAEA of this. It also plans to install 1,000 advanced centrifuges within three months, and suspend the implementation of the AP, which provides IAEA inspectors access to Iran's nuclear sites. The Iranian government needs to ensure that there is a balance between the Parliament's strategic plan to counter sanctions and its current diplomatic approach. Thus, the surveillance cameras are to remain in place for three months based on an agreement between the government and the IAEA, this period is intended to allow space for all participants to return to their commitments under the nuclear deal. The Parliament rejected the government's agreement with the IAEA. In response, the government argued that the agreement was needed to keep in place the diplomatic track.

### III. Consequences and Findings

Despite their divergent positions, Tehran and Washington are committed to the diplomatic approach and expressed their acceptance of a European mediation proposal. Each party has laid down its conditions and are waiting for the talks to start. Both parties are keen to maintain their pressure and bargaining chips to maximize their gains in negotiations. Diplomacy is still the most preferable option for both Washington and Tehran as it serves their vital interests and none of them can endure escalation for a lengthy period. In addition, the international community desires to revive the nuclear deal. They have taken steps in practice to advance the diplomatic approach. These steps can be built upon. The status quo is now suitable to begin mediation and forge reconciliation, especially by the Europeans.

However, there are several challenges that impede the implementation of the diplomatic approach; most prominently the disagreements on which party will take the first step, and what safeguards will be offered by each party as well as the ongoing US sanctions. In addition, US internal political disputes over returning to the nuclear deal impede the diplomatic track, particularly disputes regarding mutual safeguards and whether a comprehensive agreement including all files must be reached or not. Furthermore, timing is an important impediment to the diplomatic track, as there is a dispute over the actual time Iran needs to return to the deal or whether Iran will use this element to delay its return. This in addition to the internal political dispute in Iran in regard to returning to the nuclear deal in light of the presidential election quickly approaching; this political dispute is no longer merely about who will benefit the most in the upcoming presidential election but it has turned into a conflict between the government and the IRGC. Despite its bargaining chips, Iran's position is weak. The Iranian government is fully aware that it may face harsher sanctions than those imposed by Trump — if it does not show any flexibility towards US demands. Thus, Iran will calculate thoroughly its moves and probably will not continue its escalation. Yet, it is likely to concede much less than what is demanded by the Biden administration: amend the nuclear deal, include other critical files, and allow other regional powers to participate in the talks.

Though US sanctions are still imposed on Iran, the Biden administration was keen to send a message to Iran and other regional countries by launching airstrikes targeting Iran-backed militias on the Syria-Iraq border. Through these airstrikes, the US administration has indicated that Washington's deterrence policy is still alive and the Pentagon has provided President Biden with other options to counter Iran's danger. The United States has adopted the diplomatic approach because of its strong position and not because of Iranian threats. Undoubtedly, the Biden administration knows that by removing the sanction it loses a significant pressure tool against Iran and reduces the chances of Iran returning to the nuclear deal.

## Conclusion

In a nutshell, we can say that the Biden administration holds important cards. It is quite unlikely that it will simply abandon the sanctions and the pressure imposed by Trump on Iran. Strong coordination between the E3 and Washington will mean more pressure on Iran. Iran is likely to face a crisis if it does not respond to the diplomatic approach and continue with its nuclear escalation; the Iran file will eventually be submitted to the UN Security Council. However, Iran might tilt towards forging an understanding with Washington in line with the flexibility demanded, i.e., it will negotiate first its return to the nuclear deal, then with less interest it will discuss other files regarding its regional behavior and ballistic missile program. Finally, it will push for follow-up negotiations, which will not lead to a binding agreement. The follow up approach will start after the United States lifts the sanctions and revives the nuclear deal. We expect to witness further moves to build trust between Washington and Tehran and probably they will agree to end the escalation; however, building trust will take time and further diplomatic steps until reaching a stage where they can revive the nuclear deal. Finally, it is worth mentioning that Iran has less options in regard to returning to the nuclear deal compared to the Biden administration.

# Iran and Europe

Most of Iran-Europe interactions during February 2021 revolved around the nuclear deal; Iran's mass media coverage blamed or placed further pressure on the Europeans, the other main party to the deal, because of their failure to ensure the deal's signatories complied with their commitments stipulated under the deal. In addition, there was coverage focusing on Iran's inability to lift the US sanctions which have been imposed on Tehran since 2018.

The bedrock of Iran-Europe relations has been the attempts to revive the nuclear deal. Seeking to make a diplomatic breakthrough, the Europeans continued to coordinate with their Atlantic ally, Washington, in February to reach a satisfactory understanding to return to the negotiating table. Iran has put on the table many bargaining chips; most prominently, suspending the implementation of the Additional Protocol (AP) to pressure its rivals to make concessions prior to any prospective negotiations in order to mitigate the impact of its snowballing economic crisis. In this file, we review the latest developments in relation to reviving the nuclear deal in light of Iran-Europe relations by discussing two main topics. First, reviving the spirit of diplomacy between Washington and Tehran, and second, the reactions in the aftermath of Belgium convicting the Iranian diplomat Assadollah Assadi.

## I. Efforts to Revive Diplomacy

Iran and the United States have been at odds over who should be the first to return to its nuclear obligations, especially since Iran moved to increase its levels of enriched uranium in January. In early February, Iran's Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif mentioned that Iran can return to fully complying with its obligations under the nuclear deal "in less than a day." Yet he called on EU Foreign Policy Chief Josep Borrell to play a mediating role between the 2015 nuclear deal signatories and to help in establishing a mechanism to synchronize US and Iranian moves in returning to the nuclear deal.<sup>(12)</sup>

The E3 (UK, Germany and France) on February 12, called on Iran to end its violations of the nuclear deal, especially its move to increase uranium enrichment. The E3 call came against the backdrop of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Director-General Rafael Grossi announcing to the agency's member states on February 10 that IAEA inspectors had confirmed that Iran had produced 3.6 grams of uranium metal at a nuclear facility in Isfahan.<sup>(13)</sup> In response, Iran's Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif criticized the E3, accusing them of not fulfilling their obligations under the nuclear deal.

A second significant development in relation to attempts to revive the nuclear deal was Iran's decision to suspend the implementation of the AP and consequently stop the so-called

“voluntary transparency measures” by February 23.<sup>(14)</sup> The IAEA chief promptly launched talks with Iranian officials in Tehran to convince them to reverse their decision. The talks eventually led to a temporary agreement on February 21, which allows IAEA inspectors to continue monitoring Iran’s nuclear sites for up to three months. Iran’s Foreign Ministry considered this temporary agreement to be a significant diplomatic victory.<sup>(15)</sup>

The US-European coordination to deal with Iran has continued since a virtual meeting was held involving the E3 foreign ministers and their US counterpart Antony Blinken on February 5.<sup>(16)</sup> Though the Biden administration has repeatedly mentioned that Iran must comply with its nuclear obligations as a condition before starting diplomatic talks, the administration has indicated its willingness to negotiate directly with Iran in an informal meeting proposed by the Europeans to revive the nuclear deal. Iran rejected the European proposal because it believes that the US and European actions towards Tehran have not changed. According to Iranian Foreign Ministry’s spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh, the “time was not right” to hold such informal talks.<sup>(17)</sup>

February ended without breaking the deadlock in reviving diplomacy. The US administration sent mixed signals in relation to reviving the nuclear deal. On the one hand, it expressed a strong desire to return to the nuclear deal as indicated by US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan, whereas on the other hand, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said that Washington intended to include further provisions in the deal including Iran’s ballistic missile program and its regional behavior. It is likely that Washington and Tehran will engage in lengthy talks until the United States decides to amend the nuclear deal.

The Europeans are playing a diplomatic role to revive the nuclear deal because they are concerned about the threats posed by Iran’s ballistic missile program and are aware of the concerns of regional countries over Iran’s hostility. French President Emmanuel Macron has mentioned that it is imperative that regional powers such as Saudi Arabia are involved in any future talks. Iran rejected the European proposal because it was concerned that a prompt response to holding an informal meeting would lead it to make a series of concessions, hence losing bargaining chips when the official talks start. Therefore, Iran continues with its nuclear breaches and avoids reacting positively to Europe’s diplomatic initiatives.

## **II. The Conviction of the Former Iranian Diplomat Assadollah Assadi**

For the first time in European history, an Iranian diplomat has been convicted by a Belgium court for involvement in terrorist activities since the 1979 revolution. The Iranian government rejected and condemned the verdict; Belgium’s ambassador to Iran was summoned to inform him of the government’s protest against the verdict handed down by a court in Antwerp, Belgium.<sup>(18)</sup> The spokesman for Iran’s Foreign Ministry Saeed Khatibzadeh claimed “the detention, the judicial process and the recent sentencing are illegal and a clear violation of international law, especially the 1961 Vienna Convention” because Assadi had diplomatic immunity.<sup>(19)</sup>

Assadi was handed down a 20-year jail sentence because of his role in a foiled

bomb plot which targeted a rally organized by Iranian dissidents in France.<sup>(20)</sup> Assadi denied any involvement in the bomb plot and refused to testify and appear before the court. Without a doubt, his conviction led to diplomatic tensions between Tehran and some European capitals. The Europeans refused to allow Assadi to hide behind his diplomatic immunity card, because they believe he transferred explosives to Switzerland; a clear violation of international and diplomatic norms. His conviction was based on tangible evidence verified by the court, so it was a fair trial.

### **Conclusion**

The E3 has been exerting all efforts possible to find a diplomatic way to revive the nuclear deal. Even though not official, the Europeans proposed an informal meeting between Washington and Tehran, hoping it would pave the way to reaching common understandings which would then encourage both parties to hold official nuclear talks about returning to the nuclear deal. The Europeans remain concerned about Iran's ballistic missile program and its terrorist activities on European soil – carried out by individuals loyal to Iran's ideology or by diplomats like Assadi. Iran's position is perplexing; it calls on the Europeans to play a mediating role while criticizing the Troika for not fulfilling their obligations under the nuclear deal. February, which witnessed diplomatic tensions, ended with Iran rejecting the European proposal to hold an unofficial meeting with Washington. Tehran is hoping to keep its pressure card for prospective official talks.

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