

MONTHLY REPORT



IRAN CASE FILE

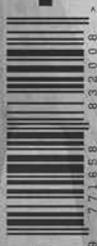
Your window on Iran from inside and abroad

April 2021



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Iran failed to reach a solution to its crisis related to the nuclear deal during April 2021 despite the negotiations that have been going on over the past two months. It seemed clear that there are many intricacies involving Iran's attainment of its objective, which is lifting US sanctions without making a substantial amendment to the nuclear deal. These intricacies which prevented Iran from achieving its objective are also responsible for shaping the Iranian situation this month. At home, at the political level, the conservative movement wishes failure for Rouhani and Zarif in arriving at an agreement to the lift sanctions. Their success will directly affect the chances of the "reformists" in winning the presidential election scheduled to be held this June. It seems that the "conservatives" found an opportunity to politically annihilate Zarif and his team in the leaked audio recording in which Zarif says that Iran gives precedence to the battlefield over diplomacy, in addition to his complaint about Qassem Soleimani's control over Iranian foreign policy and his remarks that the former US Secretary of State John Kerry had been informing him in advance of the airstrikes carried out by Israel against Iranian forces in Syria.

Amid the anticipation generated by the upcoming presidential election, the issue of women candidates for the presidency (the eligibility of women candidates running for the presidency) was raised as is the case ahead of every presidential election. This came through a constitutional controversy about the interpretation of the concept of whether the "political man" (political personality) allowed to run for the presidency means confining the position to male politicians or that the term "man" in this context means the one practicing politics regardless of gender. This produced no change regarding the eligibility

of women candidates for the presidency due to the stubborn position of the Guardian Council rejecting women's participation.

At the economic level, the file discusses Iran's handling of the digital currency bitcoin. The Iranian government allowed the mining of the cryptocurrency and levied fees on this activity after it once blocked it. Maybe this measure comes within the framework of the unconventional solutions to the deteriorating economic situation due to US sanctions. When it comes to assessing the operations of mining bitcoin, the report discusses the possibility that the cryptocurrency could be a new trajectory for the process of supporting terrorism and the activities of armed groups on the same scale in which it could be a partial solution to the economic crisis in Iran.

At the military level, as one of the byproducts of the Vienna negotiations, the Israeli airstrikes targeting the Iranian presence in Syria intensified as a way to voice rejection over the talks' potential outcomes including keeping the status quo unchanged and maintaining the Iranian presence in Syria. The Natanz nuclear facility came under attack following which Iran rushed to point the finger of blame at Israel. In the aftermath of the attack, Iran announced an increase in its uranium enrichment activities to 60 percent purity. One of the recent reports released by the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) pointed out that Iran will step up armed attacks on the United States on Iraqi soil and that Iran's leaders aren't interested in the negotiations in the near future before the lifting of US sanctions or the US return to the nuclear deal to the same extent to which they are interested in armed confrontations.

As for Arab affairs, which recently witnessed the second negotiations trajectory proceeding in parallel with the Vienna negotiations, Iranian sources circulated reports that there are Iraq-brokered negotiations between Iran and Saudi Arabia about easing tensions and addressing the outstanding regional files between the two countries. Following these reports, Iranian political analysts began to lay out the trajectories of these negotiations and its potential outcomes, reiterating the necessity of abandoning tensions between the two countries since this helps to achieve Iranian interests in light of the intensified international pressure on the country.

The Iraqi arena still constitutes the tensest hotspot among the Iranian-American points of contagion. As the CIA report forecast that Iraq would likely become an arena for the pro-Iran armed militias against US targets, the Iraqi prime minister, on the other side, seeks to bring Iraq back to its Arab sphere while maintaining its strong ties with Iran, turning Iraq into a point of convergence for the regional disputants instead of being an arena for a global and regional dispute. In this context, Kazemi toured the Gulf states to enhance economic cooperation with the Gulf states and confer on regional issues. So far, despite the criminal acts perpetrated by the armed militias, the current Iraqi government is proceeding steadily towards ridding Iraq of its crises and restoring its role in the regional sphere.

On the Syrian stage, Iran is facing consecutive Israeli attacks on Iranian oil tankers. This prompted Tehran to seek succor from Russian naval forces to ensure the safety of oil tankers from the point where they leave the Suez Canal

to the Syrian ports.

The joint effort to secure Iranian oil tankers managed to ensure the arrival of four Iranian tankers. But Israel attacked an Iranian oil tanker which was heading to the Syrian port Baniyas, which called into question the ability of the Russian navy to protect Iranian oil tankers. Iranian-Israeli confrontations intensified, going beyond the Syrian arena into the two countries. An Iranian missile was shot down near the Israeli nuclear reactor Dimona following the explosion that hit the Iranian nuclear plant in Natanz. At the same time, Iran is exerting massive pressure to hold the Syrian presidential election without making any substantial change within the Syrian regime, a move that Russia opposes.

At the international level, when it comes to Iranian-US relations, in Vienna in April 2021, the nuclear negotiations between the United States and Iran kicked off. Three Europe-brokered rounds of negotiations were held. After Khamenei gave the go-ahead to the Iranian government to participate in the Vienna negotiations, he once more renounced the outcomes of the negotiations as was the case with the nuclear deal in 2015, as if the negotiations kicked off without his prior approval and permission. The United States attempted to allay the concerns of regional powers opposed to the Iranian negotiations. It held intensive talks with Israel and the Gulf states. It seems that the Biden administration wants to return to the nuclear deal, regardless of what Iran could attain. But it's facing internal pressure in relation to the lifting of sanctions without making any gains altogether. This is in addition to the expected regional resistance to the revival of the nuclear deal in its old version, given the threat it poses to regional security and stability.

Europe is attempting to play a balancing role in the Vienna negotiations. After being well-aware of the serious US moves towards returning to the nuclear deal and the emergence of signals that sanctions will be lifted, Europe has imposed multiple sanctions on Iran over human rights violations during the Iranian government's crackdown on the 2019 protests. Maybe Europe is rethinking its future calculations regarding relations with Iran in light of the potential (American-Iranian) rapprochement and the possible changes it could cause to the political balances in the Middle East in order to make the biggest possible political and economic gains for the European countries.

Internal Affairs

The Internal Affairs section touched on four files. The first among these files sums up the ideological aspects, which sheds light on the constitutional debate about the eligibility of women for the presidential seat. The Political File discusses the dimensions of the audio leaking of Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif's interview which touched on the relationship between the IRGC and the Iranian diplomatic apparatus and the government giving precedence to the battlefield over diplomacy. It also exposes the special relations between Iranian Foreign Minister Zarif and the former US Secretary of State John Kerry. The Economic File casts light on the dimensions of the Iranian government authorizing the mining of the cryptocurrency bitcoin and the impact of this move on the Iranian economy. Militarily, the report casts light on the CIA report on the future activities of Iranian militias.



The Ideological File

The Ideological File touches on the developments related to the Shiite religious elites in general and the Iranian ones in particular, and the impact of these developments on the religious and political landscape and its ramifications for the Shiite community across the region. Last month's Ideological File discussed the outcomes of the visit of the Pope of the Vatican to Najaf, throwing light on the reactions of the Iranian political and religious elites, and the extent of the rivalry between the Qom and Najaf seminaries.

This month, the file discusses the position of women in the Iranian elections, and the protests of some women against the policy of excluding women since 1979 from the public sphere. It attempts to answer questions related to the philosophy of the Iranian religious elites when it comes to excluding women candidates.

1. Women and the “Political Man”

Iranian women are attempting to change the equation related to their political position inherited since the Iranian revolution in 1979. They tirelessly seek to put pressure on the pro-Velayat-e Faqih elite in order to allow them to participate in the presidential elections.

In this context, Mrs. Masoumeh Ebtekar, president Rouhani's aide for women affairs, spoke on two levels. The first was the women's voting bloc and its numbers and its role in tipping the scale in favor of one candidate at the expense of the other. The second was women's right to run for president.

At the first level, in a message to the Iranian women, she said: “We hope women would exercise their right to vote and their right to decide their fate and that they would be effective in this area.”⁽¹⁾ In a bid to remind women of their voting bloc, she said: “Women's votes make up half of the elections' votes. Even in 2017, the participation of women and the votes they cast in favor of President Rouhani surpassed those of men.”⁽²⁾

As for the second level, the right to run for president, Ebtekar voiced opposition to the term “political man.” “They chose the term ‘man’ in the Constitution in order for the matter to transcend the issue of gender. The interpretation of many experts and jurists reiterate that the term ‘man’ has nothing to do with gender, and women can run for president.”⁽³⁾

Within the framework of pressuring the political and religious elite to allow women to run for president, Mrs. Ebtekar alleged that the Guardian Council didn't say that women cannot run for president. The term “man” is absolute, and there are no restrictions in terms of gender.⁽⁴⁾

Amid the tightening and the continued barring, the only solution in her



viewpoint is the continued and ceaseless struggle. “Women who possess efficiency and capabilities should take advantage of their right to contest in the election and partake in deciding its fate. If they don’t do this, we will have nothing but frustration and disgrace.”⁽⁵⁾

She then reminded them of the struggles of Mrs. Talaghani in every election, and that this struggle proves that women can continue to hold on to their cause. But at the same time, she said she won’t run for president.⁽⁶⁾

Over the course of history, the pro-Velayat-e Faqih elite refuse to allow women to assume senior and high-ranking positions within the state. They reject the idea of letting women run for president. This is attributed to the official interpretation which upholds a reductive view of women. Before this, the

spokesman for the Guardian Council justified barring women from running for president so that the issue doesn't involve a legal jeopardy. But cultural issues have something to do with the matter.

"For example, we didn't have any female minister in any presidential term. But under Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, a woman was appointed as minister. Hence, there's no legal barrier, and maybe in the coming presidential terms we will have a woman president."⁽⁷⁾

But these comments aren't compatible with rejecting the candidacy of Mrs. Azam Taleghani in a number of electoral terms. She protested and held a sit-in, and the Guardian Council didn't render her qualified.⁽⁸⁾ In the elections held in 2005, Mrs. Rafat Bayat, aligned with the "conservatives," ran for president. But the Guardian Council interpreted Article 115 of the Constitution in a way that definitively bars women from assuming this position.⁽⁹⁾

Mrs. Azam Taleghani had called for in the past what Mrs. Ebtekar is calling for today to redefine the term "political man" in a way that includes both men and women in order for it not to be exploited to marginalize half of society and deprive women of exercising their legal right enshrined in the Constitution.⁽¹⁰⁾

2. Khatami and the Position of Women

Former President Mohammad Khatami saw the crisis through which Iranian women live as well as their political and social plight. He said: in a message delivered at the fourth conference of the Association of Muslim Women for Contemporary Religious Thinking, that: "Women, who make up more than half of the country's population, suffer from dual problems caused by historical and social reasons and cultural and mindset deviations."⁽¹¹⁾

He then considered that the Iranian problem lies in despotism. "For our societies and societies like ours, and even humanity and history, despotism was the reason why there is misery. We cannot consider that elections, whatever the manner or the system, are the core essence of democracy."⁽¹²⁾

Hence, the problem doesn't lie in the oppression exercised against women, but it also lies in the oppression exercised against the entire society who suffer from repression and political despotism which imposes its guardianship over the people. "The people who are aware and mature don't need guardians."⁽¹³⁾ Khatami also believes that overseeing the elections shouldn't in any case collide with the people's right to choose. It shouldn't be a form of exercising guardianship over them.⁽¹⁴⁾

Khatami always argued that reforming the conditions of Iranian women cannot be made through partial solutions but is part of a process of comprehensive political, social and cultural reform.

But it's likely that the crisis facing Iranian women assuming the general jurisdiction (the presidency of the republic) will continue due to the traditional and radical rhetoric of the Velayat-e Faqih loyalists. They cite texts and proofs from the religious heritage without any interpretations taking into account the sublime aims or re-interpreting these texts in the context of the changeable and fixed rules and the definitive and speculative principles, as well as the temporal and customary context.

Conclusion

The Ideological File this month sheds light on the continued exclusion of Iranian women from the public sphere and the consecutive presidential elections since 1979 to this day. The file highlights the demands of some Iranian feminists to allow women to run for president and their struggle to reinterpret the constitutional provisions which refer to the so-called “political man.” The most important conclusion is that there’s an insistence by the pro-Velayat-e Faqih religious and political elites on excluding women from the public sphere, especially the presidential position. Second, Iranian feminists continue to struggle in order to obtain their entire political rights in parallel with some reformist voices which reiterate that the solution lies in an overall comprehensive cultural, political and social reform.

The Political File

The leaked audio recording of Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif sparked massive controversy inside and outside Iran. In the recording, Zarif spoke on a host of controversial issues such as the intervention of the IRGC in diplomatic affairs and the role of the late Quds Force chief Qassem Soleimani in steering Iranian foreign policy. The audio recording stirred up a firestorm of criticism in the aftermath of which Zarif was prompted to apologize to the supreme leader and the family of Qassem Soleimani. The leaking of the interview came at a time when Mohammad Javad Zarif is floated as one of the potential hopeful candidates in the presidential election scheduled to be held in June 2021. It also came as Zarif is racing against time in the Vienna negotiations to revive the nuclear deal and lift the sanctions imposed on Iran before the second presidential term of Rouhani ends.

According to the introduction, four main axes will be discussed in this file. They are: the highlights of the leaked interview, consequences and reactions, the position of President Rouhani and the Foreign Ministry on the interview and the implications of leaking the interview at this time.

1. The Most Notable Highlights of the Leaked Interview

The leaked audio recording of Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif included details about the relationship between the diplomatic and military apparatus within the Iranian political system. He likened this relationship to a cold war, blasting the IRGC, especially the former Quds Force chief Qassem Soleimani who imposed his orientations on Iranian foreign policy.

In this interview, Zarif also spoke of the precedence given to those within the military over those working in the diplomatic apparatus. He said: “The battlefield is a priority for the regime, and it determines the country’s policy.”⁽¹⁵⁾

Zarif also offered examples of Soleimani’s interventions in Iranian foreign policy such as Soleimani’s visit to Moscow which came at Russia’s request, without any coordination with the Foreign Ministry. He considered that this policy aimed to obliterate the accomplishment made by the Foreign Ministry in achieving the nuclear deal.

He also reiterated that he referred to Soleimani during the negotiations that preceded reaching the nuclear deal and that the Iranian government exploited diplomacy to serve its military interventions beyond its borders. “On occasions of negotiations, Soleimani always told me to take this point into my consideration.”⁽¹⁶⁾ This made him realize that he is negotiating for the sake of the battlefield.

He also described his role in the country’s foreign policy as “zero” due to the

interferences in the work of his ministry. In another part of the interview, Zarif pointed to the military background of most of the diplomats within the Foreign Ministry.

He asserted that most of the ministry's structure is security-based, noting that there are some entities in the country who seek to make all the apparatuses security-based in order to serve their interests. They are a minority capable of sparking chaos across Iran.

On the downing of the Ukrainian jetliner, Zarif revealed that officials had knowledge from day one that the plane was shot down by a missile. During the meeting of the Supreme National Security Council of Iran held two days after the incident, he wanted to know whether the plane was shot down by a missile in order to find a solution. But he was mistreated and was asked to take to Twitter to deny that the jetliner was downed by a missile.

In another important part of the interview, Zarif said that the “hardliners” in the country attempted to thwart the conclusion of the nuclear deal in 2015 by taking several steps, which began with Soleimani traveling to Russia and ended with the attack on the Saudi embassy in Tehran.

He also accused Russia of not wanting Iran to reach an agreement on the Iranian nuclear program. But when it saw Tehran proceeding towards reaching an agreement, it started to create restrictions. Russia and France suggested asking Iran to renew the UN Security Council mandate every six months in order to continue the nuclear deal.

Zarif also revealed that the former US Secretary of State John Kerry informed him of the Israeli airstrikes in Syria before they were carried out.⁽¹⁷⁾ But John Kerry rushed to deny Zarif's remarks on his Twitter account. He tweeted: “I can tell you that this story and these allegations are unequivocally false. This never happened – either when I was Secretary of State or since.”⁽¹⁸⁾

2. Consequences and Reactions

In the aftermath of leaking the interview of Mohammad Javad Zarif, Hesamodin Ashta, president Rouhani's adviser, resigned from his position and the spokesman for the government Ali Rabiei was appointed instead of him.⁽¹⁹⁾

The resignation came as Ashta is the chairman of the Strategic Studies Center of the presidency, the center which conducted the interview with Zarif. Media outlets pointed the finger of blame at this center, hinting that it was involved in the leak. In another move, the Iranian security authorities banned 20 individuals involved in conducting the interview from leaving Iran.⁽²⁰⁾

The Parliament's Foreign Policy and National Security Committee also summoned Zarif to hear his testimony on the content of the audio recording. Meanwhile, Iranian lawmakers held consultations on questioning him.

In the first comment by the supreme leader on the remarks of Zarif, Khamenei said that some of the remarks of Mohammad Javad Zarif are a grave mistake which no Iranian official should make because the policies of the country are made up of economic, military, social, scientific and cultural plans, including foreign and diplomatic relations.”

He considered that some of these remarks echo hostile comments by Iran's

foes, especially the United States.⁽²¹⁾ Yet, the IRGC mounted stinging criticisms against Zarif's personality. The Commander in Chief of the IRGC, General Hossein Salami, said that the current diplomacy devoid of the logic of power is nothing but merely words.⁽²²⁾

The IRGC also issued a statement published in the daily circular, and accused the Foreign Ministry of being "infiltrated" and that there is organized influence and infiltration from outsiders within the Iranian diplomatic apparatus. Hence, the IRGC doesn't trust the Foreign Ministry. As for the media outlets close to the IRGC, they mounted fierce attacks on Zarif. Fars news agency reported that "Zarif's position and his disagreement with the general orientations of the Iranian revolution were no secret. Of course, these disagreements have become clearer following this audio recording."⁽²³⁾

3. The Position of the Iranian President and Foreign Ministry on the Interview

It seems that the government is deeply concerned about the leaking of this interview. This came after the stinging criticisms leveled at it from political rivals, which reached the point of accusing the government of being behind the assassination of General Soleimani through uncovering his hideouts.⁽²⁴⁾

Therefore, President Rouhani attempted to shirk responsibility by saying that the remarks of Javad Zarif do not represent the government's position. He also ordered Mahmoud Alavi, the minister of intelligence and security, to investigate the publishing and leaking of this interview which he described as a theft and conspiracy and that its aim is to thwart the Vienna negotiations.

Spokesman for the Foreign Ministry Saeed Khatibzadeh responded to questions of reporters on the audio recording, saying that the interview leaked is part of a 7-hour-long interview which was recorded to be saved in the presidency's archive. There were no plans for publishing the interview for the next government to benefit from it.⁽²⁵⁾

Given the scathing criticisms leveled at Zarif over the past few months, the new remarks will make Zarif face more pressure over the coming period. Based on the angry remarks of some Iranian lawmakers, it seems that Zarif will likely be catapulted into a new crisis with the Parliament, which could result in him being questioned.

Hence, he took the initiative to reiterate the good ties between him and Soleimani for nearly two decades, affirming that his remarks came within the context of his call for making smart adjustments in the relationship between the battlefield and the diplomatic apparatus in Iran and "setting priorities in accordance with the legal structures" under the supervision of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei.⁽²⁶⁾

Following the sharp criticism leveled at Zarif by the supreme leader, the former rushed to apologize to the supreme leader for his remarks about Qassem Soleimani. But this apology could not salvage Zarif in light of the polarizations gripping the political arena in Iran these days ahead of the presidential election scheduled to be held this June. Yet the criticisms voiced by the supreme leader against Zarif may constitute an early disqualification in case he intends to contest in this election.

4. The Implications of Leaking the Interview at This Time

The “hardliners” are pushing hard in the direction of aborting the ongoing nuclear negotiations in the Austrian capital Vienna as they fear it could impact the chances of their candidates in winning the presidential elections slated for this June.

Meanwhile, the “reformists” want the United States to return to the nuclear deal, which is the biggest political accomplishment of this movement. Based on the above-mentioned reasons, the competing political movements in the Iranian political arena trade blame the following for the leaking of the interview. The government’s reformist and moderate backers pointed the finger of blame at the “hardliners,” accusing them of leaking the audio recording of the foreign minister in order to abort the nuclear talks which Tehran is holding with the Western powers in Vienna. These talks are encouraged and supervised by Zarif. The “reformists” also said the “hardliners” want to deal an electoral blow to Zarif and boot him from the presidential race for the sake of his conservative foes.

As for the “conservatives,” they considered that leaking the interview at this time is aimed to achieve several ends. On top of these ends come blaming the IRGC, especially in case the ongoing Vienna negotiations on the nuclear deal fail and make the presidency appear as if it has no role in running the country and that the problems are not solved by changing the president, hence, dissuading the people from casting votes in the next presidential election.

Conclusion

This isn’t the first time in which Mohammad Javad Zarif has opened a window for the outside world to reveal the disagreements, disputes and battles going on within the corridors of the Iranian government. Perhaps his famous resignation in 2019 is a case in point. But the recent leaked audio recording gives a great deal of credibility to all outside analyses about the role of the IRGC in intervening in regional countries. Yet, the recent revelations prove that Zarif and a number of his predecessors in the Foreign Ministry were nothing but puppets in the hands of the IRGC who execute only what they are asked to do.

The Economic File

The month of April's *Economic File* centers around bitcoin in Iran; a cryptocurrency. The Iranian government has shifted its negative outlook towards bitcoin and has decided to make it permissible after previously banning bitcoin trading and cracking down on its traders. Hence, the file will shed light on the genesis of this currency and its importance for the Iranian people as well as its future growth in Iran.

1. Bitcoin's Genesis Globally and the Start of Its Use in Iran

Bitcoin is a digital or virtual decentralized cryptocurrency which is not controlled by a government or a central bank. It is totally encrypted where only its users can control it. It is traded after decrypting it through what is called coin mining. The currency is stored in the form of a balance in digital accounts which can only be accessed by owners to purchase or sell real items.

Bitcoin was first launched in 2009 by a group of young Japanese men. At the time, a bitcoin unit was valued at less than one cent due to a lack of confidence in it. After its gradual spread and promotion, its price has surged. The currency has recently become convertible into conventional currencies in some countries following its increasing use. Its price is characterized by a degree of sharp volatility. The price of a single bitcoin unit rose to nearly \$20,000 in December 2017. For years, its price stabilized below the level of \$10,000. However, its price shot up in September 2020 surpassing \$60,000 in April 2021 per bitcoin unit.

Iran's attitude towards bitcoin swiftly went from one extreme to another. The Iranian government had launched a crackdown on bitcoin traders, with a heap of accusations levelled against them. The Iranian government also banned its use locally until 2019 and shut down thousands of mines, and accused bitcoin owners of causing power outages across the country.

However, Iran's policy towards bitcoin shifted following the tightening of US sanctions on the Iranian economy. It issued licenses to mining farms in return for a fee. It also provided electricity to them at special prices. Moreover, the Iranian government also attracted investments in the cryptocurrency field. By the end of April 2021, Iran's Central Bank had approved the use of bitcoin to pay the dues of Iranian imports.

In Iran, there is an increasing number of what is known as mining farms which use many large and power-intensive servers, taking advantage of the government's energy subsidies. These mining farms decrypt and carry out financial transfers. The energy subsidies attracted foreign companies, especially from China, to work in Iran. According to an owner of a bitcoin mining farm in Iran, the cost of operating a mining farm is high and investment

in it is more profitable for the Chinese than the Iranian people, who pay high prices for electricity.⁽²⁷⁾

2. The Importance of Bitcoin for Iran

The huge economic suffering which both the Iranian people and government have experienced over the past two years is no secret for those who follow Iranian affairs. This is due to the ongoing US sanctions on the economy, the plummeting energy prices, and the ramifications of the consecutive waves of COVID-19 on the business sector in Iran. The combination of these problems led to chronic inflation, with food, medicine and house prices surging. This inflation emptied the pockets of the Iranian people, causing millions of families to fall under the poverty line. In addition, these problems caused a chronic shortage in hard currencies owing to foreign trade being disrupted, which led Iran's foreign exchange reserve stockpiles to diminish, declining to a dangerous threshold of only \$4 billion according to the latest statistics of the International Monetary Fund. Iran possesses billions of dollars in frozen assets overseas which it cannot obtain due to the sanctions on its banking sector.

Therefore, the interest of the Iranian youth grew in cryptocurrencies such as bitcoin, particularly after they found that it is possible to pay using bitcoin and access their needs from outside Iran without worrying about sanctions. They cannot transfer money or buy online using well-known financial payment systems such as Visa, MasterCard and PayPal.

The desire to ease the growing demand for the dollar which has become a scarce hard currency, with one dollar valued at more than 23,000 tomans compared to nearly 4,000 tomans per dollar in early 2018, also encouraged the Iranian government to drastically shift its policy regarding bitcoin.

Circumventing US sanctions is one of the main aims behind the shift in the government's policy towards bitcoin. It can be used to import the government's essential needs and pay their price without having to worry about sanctions. Furthermore, bitcoin can be used by entities who need to work in the dark such as the IRGC to carry out financial transfers to armed groups or even to engage in money laundering.

Bitcoin can possibly become one of the revenue sources for the government. It could collect taxes from bitcoin traders and fees from mining farms or provide electricity at a high price, as it is doing right now.

3. The Growth of Bitcoin in Iran, Its Use and Future Prospects

The propaganda related to investing in bitcoin in Iran has increased. Interest in bitcoin has increased, and it will increase further as the government will allow its use to pay import dues. Iran's subsidized energy also attracts venture capitalists to establish what is known as mining farms from both inside and outside Iran, especially from China in the first place and from other countries to a lesser degree such as Russia and Turkey. On this basis, some Iranians are promoting the idea that bitcoin will be the best means to circumvent US sanctions on the country.

However, despite the propaganda surrounding bitcoin, its promotion and the hype surrounding it, it can be safely said that it will not be a panacea to all the problems resulting from US sanctions. Maybe it will be nothing more than a tool but less common than other tools used by Iran to circumvent sanctions such as smuggling. This is due to a host of economic, technical and security reasons such as the following:

- The steep decline in the value of Iran's currency makes the value of bitcoin astronomical for many Iranian business owners who need to carry out financial transfers beyond Iran.

- Dealing with cryptocurrencies requires deep technical knowledge and the availability of special and sophisticated equipment and computers. This is added to hefty capital investments which raises the cost of individual transactions. Furthermore, bitcoin not having an application on cell phones has curbed its spread.

- The energy consumption of bitcoin decrypting (mining) equipment is intensive and costly. This prompted the Iranian government to sell the electricity used in bitcoin mining equipment at export prices. Last summer,⁽²⁸⁾ bitcoin mining items (approximately 45,000) were confiscated following an increase in electrical loads that caused power outages in Tehran.

- Bitcoin itself is facing technical and security problems that remain unresolved. It needs international and institutional recognition in many countries, as well as for more financial institutions and international companies to transact in it. Many central banks are viewing it with suspicion, given that it is linked to suspicious financial transactions. This is in addition to bitcoin being financially dangerous and extremely volatile. It is not ruled out that bitcoin will face government and financial restrictions in the future. Accordingly, The Economist magazine described bitcoin in 2018, along with other cryptocurrencies, as useless in addition to lacking transparency and security in the block chains. Cryptocurrencies are nothing but a bubble that could explode at any time.⁽²⁹⁾ This is added to the very slow processing of financial transactions. Each process involves deciphering many codes and complex mathematical equations (encryption algorithms) before any financial transaction. This means that only a few companies have accepted to deal in cryptocurrencies so far.

- The modest volume of dealings conducted using it compared to Iran's needs from the outside world, which ranges from \$40 billion to \$70 billion per year.⁽³⁰⁾ The Iranian government, meanwhile, previously announced in January 2021 that the value of annual bitcoin mining reached \$660 million.⁽³¹⁾

- Intelligence services may be able to expose Iran's suspicious financial transactions. According to Michael Sexton, a fellow and director of the Cybersecurity Initiative at the Middle East Institute, the use of bitcoin did not prevent the United States from disclosing bitcoin addresses of Iranians subject to sanctions and cracking down on their suspicious financial transactions.⁽³²⁾ This means that bitcoin is not totally immune as rumored.

To this day, there is foggy surrounding the future of digital cryptocurrencies, including bitcoin and its feasibility as a safe investment. Some expect it will collapse at any moment and others warn against it as many

central banks from different countries worldwide did. On the other side, some have become overly optimistic about bitcoin's approval, promotion and the extent of its influence globally, not only in the commercial field, but also in the geopolitical one.⁽³³⁾ UK national security adviser Mark Lyall Grant has argued that the digital crypto role of China's currency (yuan) gives Beijing the ability to bypass traditional global banking systems, defy the position of the dollar, and influence global policy.

On the other side, some people see that there is a possibility for such cryptocurrencies to grow in importance in the future amid the development of technology, the growth in insurance systems regarding their risks and more global companies transacting in them.⁽³⁴⁾ But in this case, increasing levels of transparency will curb the basic role of bitcoin for Iran: to circumvent sanctions.

Conclusion

Some Iranians using bitcoin or the Iranian government approving the use of it to pay for imports will not be a panacea leading to foreign trade to return to pre-sanctions levels or improve the country's financial woes or ease the embargo on the banking sector which has prevented transactions with the outside world. It is nothing but a tool which could be less effective than other Iranian tools which Iran has used to circumvent sanctions.

Hence, the future of bitcoin's growth in Iran is fraught with challenges due to several technical and financial reasons. Therefore, its role will be extremely limited in reducing Iranian demand for foreign currencies or paying import dues. But it may have an effective role in carrying out suspicious financial transactions to conceal the parties involved and the size of the transactions.

The Military File

The Military File for the month of April 2021 sheds light on the most salient Iranian military activities. Iran's military activities in April were marked by escalating tensions between Iran and Israel through limited reciprocal attacks in the maritime domain. This is a continuation of what was witnessed during the month of March. The Iranian army also carried out a scheduled military drill on Iranian Army Day, showcasing homegrown systems. Furthermore, the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) dedicated part of its annual report to assess Iran's military and nuclear capabilities. This file will discuss the following axes: 1- the Iranian Army Day maneuver, 2- the CIA's annual assessment of Iran's nuclear capabilities and 3- the expansion of maritime tensions between Iran and Israel and their significance.

1. Iranian Army Day

Iranian Army Day is one of Iran's most significant military occasions. It is marked on April 18 every year. This day witnessed the showcasing of some weapons produced and developed locally.

1.1 Unveiling Short-range Air Defense Systems

Two new low-altitude air defense systems, dubbed "Majid" and "Zulfiqar," affiliated with Iran's air defense forces' units, were unveiled. They were mounted on locally manufactured Aras tactical military vehicles. The "Zulfiqar" low-altitude air defense system was mounted on a mobile launcher. Meanwhile, the "Majid" air defense system consists of electro-optical fire control detectors and a dual-launcher and was mounted on Aras military vehicles. Both systems are designed to hit low-altitude targets, especially cruise missiles. ⁽³⁵⁾





Figure 1: Zulfiqar and Majid air defense systems mounted on Aras vehicles

Source: Fars News Agency, <https://bit.ly/3gju8VT>

1.2 The Absence of Some Military Components

This year's celebration was different from the ones witnessed in the past due to the absence of some military components, especially fighter jets. In addition, parades carried out by infantry troops were missing. Iranian officials attributed this to the spread of the coronavirus pandemic. However, according to analysts there are multiple reasons behind the mentioned military components being absent. For example, Iran's fighter jets are old, and a limited budget has meant they have suffered from a lack of spare parts. Moreover, Iranian pilots lack preparedness to carry out air formations because they have not carried out the necessary exercises due to the inadequate conditions at the main airbases.⁽³⁶⁾

On the other side, Iranian Army Spokesman Brigadier General Shahin Taqikhani announced that the infantry troops would skip the parade, and the parade would consist of part of the army's drone force, homegrown Iranian equipment and environmental defense equipment.⁽³⁷⁾

The parade also saw the participation of a number of Iranian drones, including the Mohajer-6 multifunctional drone and the Mohajer 4 and Mohajer 2 dedicated to reconnaissance. This is added to the Raad 85 and Basir affiliated with the army's ground forces plus high-altitude air defense drones such as Arash, Kian 2, 10th Shahrivar, Mohajer 4, Ababil, Kaman 12, Mohajer 2, Safir, SadiqandSattar.⁽³⁸⁾

2. The CIA's Annual Assessment of Iran's Capabilities

According to Iran Wire,⁽³⁹⁾ the CIA report indicated that Iran poses a constant threat to the United States and its allies in the region. According to this CIA assessment, Iran will seek to continue to support Shiites in other countries, moving ahead with its projects to gain clout in neighboring countries,

circumventing the international pressure against it, and curbing the threats that risk the political system's stability. In addition, it will seek to reduce US clout in the region.

The CIA annual assessment indicated that Tehran will continue to seek to achieve its objectives using various tools. This comes despite the economic collapse gripping the country and the objections to its regional activities. These activities in the region earned Iran a bad reputation and created impediments for it. The CIA report pointed to Iranian tools, including an expansion in Iran's nuclear program, as well as Tehran purchasing and amassing weapons and carrying out proxy attacks.

The CIA report also indicated that Iran will take escalatory measures this year. Iran sees itself in a struggle against the United States and its allies in the region. It believes that they seek to place curbs on its regional clout and topple the government at home. The CIA assessed that Iran will mount attacks against the United States and its allies in the region, using every possible means to achieve its objectives and make diplomatic and economic gains from the international community. Yet the CIA stated that Iran's leaders are not interested in direct negotiations with the United States in the near future until Washington lifts the sanctions or returns to the nuclear deal. Iran's moves to stir up problems in Iraq will continue, and Iraq will be Iran's main sphere of influence this year.

The CIA report also specified that pro-Iranian militias in Iraq are the biggest threat to US personnel in the country, noting that these militias essentially carried out attacks targeting US forces and sites in Iraq last year. Iran will seek to solidify its presence in Syria due to its objective to entrench its regional clout and continue to support Hezbollah as well as to threaten Israel. In addition, Iran will continue to launch via its militias ballistic missiles, cruise missiles and drones to threaten US allies, especially Saudi Arabia.

The CIA report, in the conventional section, indicates that Iran's military strategy based mainly on deterrence and the ability to repel attacks, was evident when Iran fired ballistic missiles at US bases in Iraq to avenge the killing of Qassem Soleimani, the late Quds Force military chief.

According to this CIA report, Iran possesses the biggest ballistic missile arsenal in the region. Despite its economic problems, the country will continue to seek to develop and modernize its conventional weapons. Yet it will continue to use its network of proxy groups and affiliated militias in the region to solidify its objectives, protect its strategic depth and gain options to respond to attacks. Furthermore, the Quds Force and its proxies in the region will remain at the center of Iran's military strategy. The most significant point that the CIA mentioned regarding Iran's nuclear activities was that Iran has yet to take the essential steps necessary to manufacture nuclear weapons. Nonetheless, the CIA report pointed to Iran's breaches of its obligations under the nuclear deal in response to the United States withdrawing from it. The CIA report also did not overlook Iran's adeptness in carrying out cyberattacks which are a significant threat to the United States and its allies, as well as Iran's ability to carry out espionage operations through hacking information systems.

3. The Widening Scope of Grey-zone Maritime Operations Between Iran and Israel and Their Implications

The flurry of tit-for-tat grey operations between Iran and Israel peaked in April, which spanned from land to air and maritime domains. The pretext for the soaring chicken games is the ongoing indirect talks in Vienna which intend to reach a consensus on a mechanism to ensure Iran's compliance with its obligations under the nuclear deal and Washington rejoining it. Though neither side seeks an all-out war, the dangers of miscalculation are enormous, and the resulting escalation can risk maritime operations in the Red Sea and the Arabian Sea.

An explosion rocked Iran's underground nuclear enrichment facility in Natanz on April 10 prompting Tehran to raise the enrichment bar to 60 percent. Then came an attack on the Israel-operated Hyperion Ray vessel near the port of Fujairah in the Gulf on April 13. It was preceded a week earlier by a powerful blast on Iran's Saviz ship in the Red Sea, allegedly moored for a long time there as an intelligence-gathering asset.

The Wall Street Journal and The New York Times, however, reported Israel's hand in attacking multiple Iranian vessels in 2020 as well as others earlier that were allegedly ferrying weapons and fuel to Hezbollah.⁽⁴⁰⁾ Haaretz, an Israeli newspaper, termed the attacks as an "economic warfare" operation against Iran's illicit supply chain.⁽⁴¹⁾

The grey-zone operations became more alarming when a surface-to-air missile fired from southern Syria was intercepted deep inside Israel while flying towards its secret Dimona nuclear reactor. In the short term, Tel Aviv responded by attacking various sites inside Syria. Hamas, meanwhile, launched a barrage of missiles towards Israel, prompting punitive airstrikes amidst heightened tensions. The head of Mossad, Yossi Cohen, had to delay his trip to the United States after the recent Gaza flare-up.

On May 1, the Israeli spy chief had multiple reported high-profile meetings in Washington, the most newsworthy being his interaction with US President Joe Biden.⁽⁴²⁾ His trip intended to prevent the United States from rejoining the Iranian nuclear deal amid the likelihood of Washington lifting its sanction on Iran. The Vienna talks, which according to Iran⁽⁴³⁾ are making slow progress, have prompted intense lobbying from the Israeli side.

The Vienna talks regarding the United States rejoining the nuclear deal and ensuring Iran's compliance with its nuclear obligations are likely to take longer than Tehran's wishes and expectations. Given Iran's awareness that Israeli attacks targeting its supply chains of arms, cash and illicit trade networks will continue, Tehran reportedly dispatched more units of Bavar 373 air defense systems to Syria, marking an overt response to Israel while signaling discomfort with allies like Russia which has not averted Israeli airstrikes targeting Iranian positions in Syria.⁽⁴⁴⁾ Last year, it was reported that Israeli F-16s had destroyed Iran's air defense system in Syria.⁽⁴⁵⁾ Reinforcement of air defenses in Syria will be merely a belated tactical defensive move, with little impact on the larger picture.

Conclusion

It is expected that the grey-zone operations between Iran and Israel will continue over the coming period. In case the Biden administration insists on returning to the Iranian nuclear deal, the dispute between Iran and Israel will become much more tense. Maybe Tehran's nuclear plants will come under more subversive attacks. Meanwhile, Israeli commercial ships and airspace will come under more Iranian attacks.

In light of the Iranian-Israeli escalation, global supply lines in the Gulf and the Red Sea will remain vulnerable to sudden flare-ups. This makes the global economy, which has been negatively impacted by the fallout from the coronavirus pandemic, vulnerable to any conflict that may disrupt the supply chain of raw materials.

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Arab Affairs

Arab Affairs includes three files. The first file focuses on Iran and the Gulf countries and discusses the reconsiderations of Iran's policy towards its neighbouring countries, and Tehran's growing interest in talking about negotiations between Saudi Arabia and Iran. The second file focuses on Iran and Iraq and discusses the repercussions of Iraq's rapprochement with the Arab environment on Iran's influence, the implications of Iran's position on Iraqi mediation between Riyadh and Tehran, and looks at the US-Iraqi strategic dialogue. The third file Iran and Syria sheds light on Iran's position on setting a date for the Syrian presidential elections, the lack of a political solution in Syria and the extent to which Russia has been successful in protecting Iran's oil tankers heading towards Syria.



Iran and the Gulf States

This file reviews Gulf-Iranian interactions against the backdrop of international developments in March including new US pressure, attempts to restart nuclear talks, growing US-China rivalry in the region, and escalating Iran-Israel tensions which cast a shadow of doubt over Gulf-Iranian relations. The features of a new approach between Iran and the Gulf states are now visible. There are also reported negotiations to bridge the widening gap between Iran and the Gulf states, particularly between Saudi Arabia and Iran. The changes in Gulf-Iran interactions will be addressed as follows: the reconsiderations of Iran's policy towards neighboring countries, and growing Iranian interest in talking about negotiations between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

1. The Reconsiderations of Iran's Policy Towards Neighboring Countries

Due to Iran's preoccupation with its negotiations with the major powers in relation to its nuclear file, its efforts to carve out a leading position in the region, and because of its hostility towards the Gulf states, it has long neglected an interest in developing its relations with neighboring countries, especially the Gulf states. The Iranians may start to realize the seriousness of neglecting this relationship with the Gulf states, following the international consensus to curb Iran's nuclear program and its destabilizing activities, and the setbacks its military project has faced because of Israeli attacks, whether inside Iran, with Israel targeting Iranian nuclear sites and figures, or attacking Iranian military forces in Syria and beyond in territorial seas. All these factors have prompted some Iranian thinkers to criticize Iran's foreign policy. The reconsiderations of Iran's foreign relations have been shaped by Iran's media and government officials; both eager to develop Iran's relations with its neighboring Arab Gulf states, and the impact of this will be visible in the future.

1.1 *The Greatest Challenge for Iran*

The former Iranian diplomat Nasratullah Tajik has said that the most important challenge for Iran's foreign policy is to carve out interactions with neighboring countries. He explained that Iran has not been able to convert its comparative advantages in the region into a competitive advantage in terms of Tehran's interactions with its neighboring countries. Referring to Iran's foreign policy weaknesses in relation to building constructive relations with neighboring countries, he said that Iran borders 15 countries, but over the past few years, Tehran has not adopted a successful approach regarding how to develop interactions with these countries. He added that each country has different political and social systems and Iran was not able to convert its comparative

advantages in the region into a competitive advantage in terms of interactions with neighboring countries for several reasons such as: Iran's foreign policy weaknesses, internal issues such as poor decision-making, poor circulation of information between institutions involved in foreign policy decision-making, and the country's weakness in operating across different sectors/institutions to achieve foreign policy goals that those involved in this field aim to fulfil.⁽¹⁾

In his description of the importance of Iran's relations with the Gulf states, Nasratullah Tajik said that Iran's interactions with its southern neighbors are more important than with the other nine countries in the West, East and North. He regretted that Iran has not been able during this period to manage or solve the existing challenges in the interactions with its neighboring countries, noting that space must be provided so that all regional countries can take advantage of the region's geopolitical aspects. The economy is at the heart of Iran's interest in developing its relations with the Gulf states.

1.2 Economy: A Key Factor in Iran's Interest to Develop Its Relations With the Gulf States

Despite Iran's antagonistic relations with the Gulf states and its repeated threats to destabilize these countries, Iran's economic weaknesses have prompted it to look towards repairing relations with the Gulf. It still relies heavily on trade exchange with the Gulf states. In this regard, the significant trade exchange between Iran and the UAE can be highlighted; the latter is of great significance to the Iranian economy, especially considering the embargo imposed on Iran. On April 2, 2021, Iran's customs spokesman Rouhollah Latifi stated that Iran's trade with the UAE rose to more than 20 million tons to a value of \$14 billion. He indicated that the UAE was Iran's second largest trading partner for the Iranian year 1399, which ended in March 2021, and the third largest importer of Iranian goods after China and Iraq. It ranks third by a margin after China in terms of importing Iranian goods.⁽²⁾

As one journalist noted, it is important to note that economic imperatives are driving the strengthening of Iran's relations with the countries of the southern Arab Gulf, especially Saudi Arabia, rather than political and security dimensions. In this case, it is hoped that an economic breakthrough will automatically lead to the alleviation of political and security concerns.⁽³⁾

Given Iran's difficult economic conditions, access to the Gulf's commercial markets via the UAE or other Gulf states is of utmost importance to Tehran, and it can influence Iran's approach to various other issues. IRNA, the Iranian news agency, quoted Farshid Farzanegan, the chairman of the Iran-UAE Joint Chamber of Commerce as saying that "The proximity of the Emirati ports to the Iranian market, the logistical infrastructure, the financial and banking system, the interest of businessmen from both sides, and the important role of Iranians who reside in this country are among the reasons for increasing trade exchange." He added that "The UAE is a regional trade center and linking the Iranian market to this center will increase Iran's regional exports. While countries such as Qatar, Oman and the UAE have taken steps to improve relations [with Iran], it is more likely that better conditions for regional trade will prevail." He considered that the holding of Expo 2021 in the UAE is an opportunity to facilitate relations.⁽⁴⁾

2. The Growing Iranian Interest in Talking About the Negotiations Between Saudi Arabia and Iran

Many Iranian newspapers discussed the report published in The Financial Times newspaper about secret talks between high-ranking Saudi and Iranian security officials in Iraq.⁽⁵⁾ Although the two countries did not officially announce these talks, the Iranian media paid great attention to them. IRNA, the Iranian news agency, mentioned that the talks between the two countries are not surprising. It reported that the principle of dialogue between the two Muslim countries and other neighbouring countries, even in unpleasant circumstances, is natural. In the case of Iran and Saudi Arabia, there have been talks over the ritual of Hajj. Nowadays, unusual interactions, including the normalization of relations between Israel and some Arab countries, seem normal; however, some media outlets tried to describe the dialogue and the contact between Saudi Arabia and Iran as something unusual. Western media dealt with the report of talks in a negative way, portraying the talks as strange and unbelievable.⁽⁶⁾

Reza Nasiri, an Iranian international relations analyst, mentioned that there is speculation that the talks did not focus on direct bilateral issues, various issues were on the table, including the Yemeni war. The principle of talks between these two great and important Islamic states on any level should be welcome and seen in a positive light. These talks will benefit both countries as well as the wider region.⁽⁷⁾

Nasiri highlighted the importance of relations with Saudi Arabia, by saying “what is very striking is that the Iranian side negotiated with the Saudis through the Supreme Council for National Security not the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, meaning that the negotiations are at a higher level than the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The message that can be inferred from these talks is that Saudi Arabia did not negotiate with the Iranian Foreign Ministry and engaged in a dialogue with the Supreme Council for National Security.” This indicates that the issue (Saudi-Iran relations) is important, and that resolving Iran’s problem with the United States, particularly regarding the nuclear agreement on the one hand and with Saudi Arabia on the other hand, is not an issue that can be solved by ordinary diplomats. The most important issues are mostly discussed by Iran’s higher authorities or their representatives, because resolving the problem with Saudi Arabia is of great importance to the Arab Gulf region and the Islamic world.⁽⁸⁾

For its part, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia did not comment on the news of these talks. However, his Highness Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman in his response to a question about the Saudi Arabia’s relationship with Tehran indicated that Iran is a neighboring country and the country aspires for a good and distinguished relationship with Iran. He stated that Saudi Arabia does not want the situation to be difficult with Iran and it wants a prosperous and growing Iran. “We have interests in Iran and they have interests in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to propel the region and the world to growth and prosperity” . His Highness added that the problem is with Iran’s negative behavior, such as its ongoing attempts to develop its nuclear/ballistic missile program, and its continuous support for militias in some regional countries. He indicated

that Saudi Arabia is working with partners in the region and the world to find solutions to Iran's negative behavior and he is hopeful that they will be addressed and good and positive relations will emerge that will benefit everyone.⁽⁹⁾

Conclusion

It seems that international changes, the increasing political and economic pressure on Iran, Gulf reconciliation and the return of Arab cohesion, have pushed Iran towards developing a more conciliatory approach towards the Gulf states. This moderate language in Iranian newspapers about the importance of relations with the Gulf states, especially with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, is a sign of a possible change in Iran's behavior in the future.

Iran and Iraq

During April 2021, the Iraqi arena witnessed fundamental transformations not only regarding Iraqi rapprochement towards the Arab sphere, but also regarding Iraq's commitment to openness towards the United States as an important strategic partner for the country. These transformations genuinely threaten Iran's interests in the Iraqi arena. Therefore, this file will discuss the implications of Arab rapprochement on Iran's influence, the indications of the Iranian position on Iraqi mediation between Riyadh and Tehran, Iran's position on the US-Iraq strategic dialogue (third session), and finally Iranian reactions towards Iraqi moves to achieve an external balance.

1. The Implications of Iraq's Rapprochement Towards the Arab Sphere for Iran's Influence

April 2021 witnessed two significant developments indicating Iraq's movements towards the Arab sphere. The developments were the following:

- **Kazemi's Gulf tour:** at the end of March 2021, Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kazemi made an important visit to Riyadh, and then to Abu Dhabi. These visits resulted in the signing of several agreements and memoranda of understanding with the Saudi and Iraqi sides in several fields such as finance, commerce, economics, culture and media. The two sides agreed to establish a joint Iraq-Saudi investment fund, to complete the Iraqi-Gulf power interconnection project, and to advance investment opportunities for Saudi companies in Iraq and Saudi Arabia's role in Iraq's reconstruction efforts.

During his visit to Riyadh, Kazemi sent a strong message to Saudi Arabia to reassure it that Iraq would not be a backyard to target its security. He said, "We will not accept any aggression against the Kingdom." He added, "There were no attacks."⁽¹⁰⁾ This remark was in reference to what some intelligence reports indicated that Iraqi territory during the past months was the source of attacks targeting Saudi Arabia via pro-Iranian militias.

Many media reports indicated that Kazemi offered to mediate between Saudi Arabia and Iran to bring both countries closer to together in order to resolve their outstanding differences, advance security and stability in Iraq and contribute to balancing Iraqi foreign relations.

- **About Gheit's visit to Baghdad:** the Arab League Secretary General, Ahmed Aboul Gheit, visited Iraq on April 10, 2021, during which he discussed with Iraqi Foreign Minister Fuad Hussein ways to strengthen Iraq's Arab relations and the outcomes of Kazemi's visits to Saudi Arabia and the UAE. He stressed the Arab League's support for the Iraqi government in its intent to return to the Arab sphere. He said, "We are ready to help Iraq in everything it needs."⁽¹¹⁾

This remark reflects the Arab League's support for Kazemi's policies regarding

Iraq returning to its Arab sphere, its independence in decision-making, imposing the writ of the state over all Iraqi territories and limiting weapons to the state. It also supports Iraq's openness and attempts to balance its foreign relations. The Arab League aims to push Iraq to deal with the challenges that the country is facing currently as a result of pro-Iranian militias refusing to hand their weapons over to the state and their resistance to Iraq returning to the Arab sphere.

These meetings are an extension of several Arab and Iraqi meetings held between Egyptian, Jordanian and Iraqi officials to advance inter-cooperation. All of these meetings signal two important indications: a shift in Iraq's foreign policy orientation towards the Arab sphere, and an Arab awareness at the institutional and national levels of this shift to end Iran's clout in Iraq to ensure the Iraqi government is independent in its decision-making.

Kazemi's Gulf tour is undoubtedly a step in the right direction because it will increase the Saudi and Emirati desire to provide assistance to help in Iraq's development and economic and commercial recovery to rebuild the country after long periods of insecurity, economic deterioration and political fragmentation due to the deployment of militias across the country. These moves will also limit Iran's control over the Iraqi arena.

2. The Implications of the Iranian Position on the Iraqi Mediation Between Riyadh and Tehran

On April 20, 2021, the Iranian Ambassador to Baghdad Iraj Masjedi announced that his country supports Baghdad's mediation to bring Tehran and its neighbouring countries,⁽¹²⁾ in reference to Saudi Arabia, closer together. This announcement came in response to circulating media reports that Baghdad had hosted under the auspices of Kazemi low-level talks between Saudi and Iranian delegations on April 9, 2021 to bridge the gap between the two countries in preparation for high-level diplomatic talks to defuse tensions between them on regional issues.

Saudi Foreign Minister Faisal bin Farhan believes that the differences between his country and Iran can be resolved if Iran stops its aggressive behavior. He said, "We want Iran to stop its activities that destabilize the region and its aggressive behavior." He added, "If Iran is ready to do so, this will open the doors not only for rapprochement, but also for partnership."⁽¹³⁾

Kazemi proposed Iraqi mediation between Riyadh and Tehran because of the positive impact of easing Saudi-Iranian tensions on Iraq, such as preventing Iraq's transition into a confrontational zone where there is constant escalation to settle accounts, strengthening Iraqi national sovereignty, independence in decision-making, limiting weapons to the state, balancing Iraq's foreign relations, curbing pro-Iranian militias, and limiting regional conflicts, hence contributing towards stability and security in the region.

If Iraqi mediation efforts succeed, Iraq can implement the agreements signed with the Arab and Gulf countries since Iran and its armed militias that are widespread in Iraq are the biggest impediment to the implementation of these agreements. Further, if the mediation efforts succeed, Iraq can stop foreign

forces from exploiting its own resources in regional conflicts, which it had no hand in creating and instead invest these resources in the reconstruction process and for the benefit of Iraqi statehood, especially in the areas liberated from ISIS.

3. Iran and the Third Session of the US-Iraq Strategic Dialogue

Iraq did not stop at moving towards its Arab sphere to achieve a sense of balance in its foreign relations and tackled head on the pressure of pro-Iranian militias. In March 2021, the Iraqi government also submitted a formal request to the Biden administration to resume the strategic dialogue between the two countries. The latter responded positively and stated that the third session of the strategic dialogue in Washington would be held on April 7, 2021. The session was held, and the discussions focused on various issues such as security, terrorism, economics, energy, politics and the environment.

Among the prominent outcomes of the strategic dialogue was a shift in the mission of US and coalition forces to focus on training and advisory tasks, thereby allowing the redeployment of any remaining US forces from Iraq, and training, equipping and assisting Iraq's internal security forces to ensure that ISIS can never threaten the country's stability again. In addition, the dialogue emphasized that US and coalition personnel are present at Iraqi bases, and their presence is solely to support Iraq's efforts to fight ISIS.⁽¹⁴⁾

Iran is fully aware of Kazem's aims behind his attempts to approach the Arab sphere on the one hand and initiate the third session of the strategic dialogue which started under the Trump administration on the other hand. The aims revolve around sending a message to Tehran that Iraq rejects its ongoing interference, and it is searching for influential allies and regional and international partners to prepare a suitable atmosphere to hold parliamentary elections in October 2021. It is hoped that a new cross-sectarian alliance will form a new Iraqi government; upholding Iraq's independent decision-making and limiting Iran's influence. This can only happen with Iraq's openness at the Arab, regional and international levels.

Pro-Iranian militias usually respond to the strategic dialogue sessions by launching missiles against US targets to abort the talks. Three days before the launch of the third session of the strategic dialogue, two missiles landed near the Balad military air base, which hosts US forces. As a result, on the day when the third session began, Kazemi asked the Iranian leadership to curb its militias or it would be confronted and exposed, according to two Iraqi officials.⁽¹⁵⁾

Realizing the seriousness of the implications of Kazemi's moves towards the Arab sphere and US gains in Iraq, Iranian decision-makers rushed towards Iraq to preserve Tehran's influence and gains and to ensure the implementation of the rest of its plans. As soon as Kazemi ended his visit to Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, Esmail Qaani, the commander of the Quds Force, quickly undertook a two day visit to Iraq between April 4 and April 5, 2021 during which he met with senior Iraqi officials, leaders of political blocs and militia leaders. The meetings were structured around ways to expand bilateral relations.

On April 11, 2021, Iran's Minister of Cooperatives, Labour and Social Welfare Mohammad Shariatmadari visited Iraq during which he and his Iraqi counterpart

Adel al-Rikabi signed a five-year cooperation document (2021-2026). It included the formation of a joint committee between the two ministries for the exchange of delegations and inked cooperation agreements in technical and vocational education fields. Furthermore, the document emphasized the sharing of resources and standards for trainers and trainees between the two countries. Finally, the document emphasized participation in national skills competitions to be held in the two countries, and cooperation and the exchange of experience in the fields of welfare and social security.⁽¹⁶⁾

During the visit of Iraq's National Security Adviser Qassem al-Araji to Iran on April 12, 2021 to discuss security issues, Ali Shamkhani, the secretary of the Supreme National Security Council mentioned that the withdrawal of foreign and US forces from Iraq will lead to security and stability. He also expressed his concern about the increased activity of ISIS in Iraq and its ambition to maintain a presence in different governorates and undermine Iraqi security.⁽¹⁷⁾ However, Shamkhani overlooked the presence of more than 70 armed militias in Iraq that tamper with Iraqi security and practice terrorism, threatening the security and stability of Iraq and the Iraqi people.

April 2021 did not end up without a visit by Iran's Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif on April 24, 2021 to Iraq during which he met with his Iraqi counterpart Fuad Hussein to discuss common issues according to media reports, and to deepen political relations to ensure that Iraq remains within Iran's sphere of influence and to limit Kazemi's moves and his foreign orientations.

These Iranian visits at all levels to Iraq usually increase when the Iranian leadership is in great danger, thus making it anxious and concerned over its gains and influence in its most important arena of influence which is critical to inaugurating the so-called Shiite crescent and linking Tehran to the Mediterranean. These visits were in the context of Iraq's shift towards the Arab sphere and the United States. Iran has made sacrifices at a financial and human level to try to ensure this shift never happens, because such a shift would inevitably end its clout in Iraq.

These Iranian visits also aim to reassure pro-Iranian militia leaders of the centrality of Iraq in Iran's expansionist strategy on the one hand, and to impede the regional and foreign moves of Kazemi so that Iraq remains within Iran's sphere of influence on the other hand. Iran is concerned that Iraq will shift away from its axis of influence, thus threatening its political, economic and security interests and preventing it from using Iraq as a key link with the rest of its spheres of influence in Syria and Lebanon.

Conclusion

Iran is facing a critical challenge in one of its most important spheres of influence, with Iraq shifting towards the Arab sphere and showing openness towards its archenemy, the United States. This will impact the fortunes of pro-Iranian alliances in the upcoming Iraqi parliamentary elections. However, this does not mean that Iran will sit idle when an important component of its expansionist strategy is being compromised, and it has made enormous sacrifices at the financial and human level to widen its influence in Iraq because of its importance in its strategy.

Iran and Syria

Syria experienced new dynamics at a rapid pace which coincided with developments in several regional and international issues. The nuclear tension between Iran and Israel continued to escalate. The responses between the two parties varied, and Syria was the appropriate arena for exchanging messages. Meanwhile, Iran's cooperation with Russia dominated developments in the month of April, as the two sides attempted to strengthen and stabilize their political interests inside Syria. Accordingly, April's file deals with the following axes: the announcement of the date for the Syrian presidential election and the lack of a political solution, Russia's protection of Iranian oil tankers bound to Syria, and the messages of mutual deterrence between Iran and Israel and their impact on the Syrian file.

1. The Announcement of the Date for the Syrian Presidential Election and the Lack of a Political Solution

The Assembly of the Syrian regime set a date for the next Syrian presidential election. The election will be held on May 26, 2021, and this decision went against all the political speculation and against Russian efforts to reach a political solution in Syria. In addition, the decision was made despite no international and regional consensus on the Syrian file. Russia attempted to achieve a consensus through several diplomatic tours to Arab countries during March, and visits to Damascus and Tehran during the first half of April.^[18]

The Syrian election has political importance at the external level. It demonstrates that either the supporters of the regime in Moscow and Tehran aim to impose a *fait accompli* on the rest of the regional and international actors, because they failed to postpone the Syrian presidential election, or that they were unable to reach a deal that is compatible with the international community to postpone the elections in exchange for political or economic gains. According to the available data, Iran has always supported the idea of holding the Syrian presidential election to keep the regime in office, thus ensuring no fundamental change in its security and political structure and no disruption to its political solution plan in Syria.

Although the Syrian regime and its Iranian and Russian allies are determined to hold the Syrian election, the regime and its supporters face several internal and international challenges that may lead to political and media opposition in the election. Among the most prominent of these challenges is the absence of local opposition, economic and political crises that threaten to undermine the election, and international refusal to recognize its legitimacy and result. Thus, setting the date for presidential elections will thwart a potential political settlement for the Syrian crisis in the foreseeable future. It also means that



the regime's allies, whether with or without intent, failed in promoting their initiatives for a political settlement.

2. Russian Protection of Iranian Oil Tankers Heading to Syria

Iran has established, in cooperation with the Syrian regime and Russia, a joint operations room to secure Iranian oil tankers bound to Syria. They will be escorted by Russian warships when they arrive at the Mediterranean gate of the Suez Canal, until they reach Syrian territorial waters to protect them from piracy or any other targeting, in a reference to protecting Iranian ships from Israeli airstrikes.⁽¹⁹⁾ The announcement of this joint operations room is in light of combined efforts by Moscow and Tehran to strengthen the Assad regime, remove the obstacles facing it, save the Syrian economy, buttress the great media promotion and statements of Syrian regime officials regarding the actions they have allegedly undertaken to manage the deteriorating economic situation, supply fuel and provide loaves of bread, which has become a dream for many Syrian citizens. This announcement is an attempt to solve the dilemma of Iranian tankers being targeted amid the maritime conflict between Tehran and Tel Aviv.

Although the joint operations room has been able since its establishment to secure the arrival of four Iranian ships to Syrian ports, an airstrike that targeted an Iranian oil tanker near Baniyas on the Syrian coast undermined Tehran's efforts to protect and secure the arrival of oil supplies to Syria, and exposed the failure of joint operations between Tehran and Moscow. In addition, it raised a discussion about what exact benefits Iran gains from Russian protection given

its inability to prevent Israeli air attacks targeting its land and sea supplies.

On the other hand, according to reports on the attack on an Iranian oil tanker, Russia had provided protection for the smuggling of missiles and ammunition from Iran to Syria by sea after the increase in Israeli attacks against Iran's smuggling operations. Therefore, Tehran under Russian protection has sought to find alternative maritime routes for smuggling, whereby missiles are transported in ships and oil tankers escorted by Russian ships to ensure that the shipments reach Syrian territory. Some of these weapons are stored in Syria, while other weapons are stored in Lebanon.⁽²⁰⁾

3. The Exchange of Deterrent Messages Between Iran and Israel and Their Impact on the Syrian File

The escalation between Iran and Israel increased from the mutual targeting of ships in the waters of the Arabian Gulf and the Mediterranean Sea, to deliberate Israeli sabotage operations targeting energy generators inside the Natanz nuclear site to influence Iran's negotiating position at the Vienna talks. On April 22, the confrontation between the Israeli and Iranian sides moved to the next phase when an Iranian missile fell near Israel's nuclear reactor Dimona. In response, the Israeli occupation expanded its airstrikes by carrying out at least 11 raids targeting missiles and weapons depots in Syria. An air defence base in Al-Dumayr and another east of Damascus International Airport were targeted as they were believed to be Iranian sites. Israel wants to repel what it sees as Tehran's military expansion. Finally, a center to transport and manufacture missiles and advanced weapons was targeted.

Iranian media has raised many times the possibility of damaging Israel's Dimona nuclear reactor. This move would not be reckless but a calculated move based on threat perceptions according to the Iranians.⁽²¹⁾ Mohammad Hossein Bagheri, the chief of staff of Iran's Armed Forces, confirmed that Israel will not be able to target Syria's territories continuously without a response.⁽²²⁾ Based on these remarks, it is more likely that Iran does not want a real confrontation with Israel, but rather seeks to create a military balance, in order to establish and legitimize its presence in the areas near the borders of Israel. On the other hand, the launch of Iran's missile confirms how the Revolutionary Guard, through the Quds Force and its pro-Iran militias, has transformed Syria into a rocket launcher and warehouse for storing offensive missiles, which gives it an advantage and a frontal defence force with which it can implement its agenda, attack many sites in neighbouring countries and threaten the stability of the region as a whole.

Conclusion

It can be concluded from the developments related to the Syrian file during the month of April that Russian efforts to reach a political solution regarding the Syrian file failed. Instead, an announcement was made to bring the date of the Syrian presidential election forward despite regional and international rejection of the election because it does not comply with United Nations resolutions. On the other hand, Syria, Iran and Russia agreed to remove

economic obstacles and strengthen the internal political position of the Assad regime. The conclusion of this file indicates that the existing tensions between Iran on the one hand and Israel on the other hand will continue. After the “war of ships” threatening navigation in strategic waterways, it seems that Israel and Iran have entered into a “war of nuclear reactors.” This tension will either stop or subside depending on the outcomes of the Vienna talks.

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International Affairs

This part of Iran Case File (ICF) is divided into two main files. First, "Iran and the United States" discusses the Iran nuclear talks in Vienna, disclosing the internal reactions and opposition to the talks, the resistance of regional countries, outcomes and challenges. Second, "Iran and Europe" reviews in detail the European sanctions imposed on Iran over the latter's human rights violations and the European reactions over Iran increasing its nuclear enrichment.



Iran and the United States

The Iran nuclear talks in Vienna commenced in April 2021 with the United States. Three rounds of meetings were held with Europe's mediation efforts. According to the remarks of all participants, the talks were resulting in positive signals despite the fact that the two main sides (Washington and Tehran) were cautious; their discussions were complicated by internal opposition and also met with regional resistance. In this part of the ICF, we discuss four major areas: the Iran nuclear talks in Vienna; internal positions and opposition to the talks; regional resistance to the talks; and finally, the outcomes and challenges facing the talks.

1. The Iran Nuclear Talks in Vienna

The efforts of the Europeans and the JCPOA Joint Commission have been fruitful in pushing for reviving nuclear talks with Iran. The mediation efforts managed to establish indirect talks in Vienna between Iran and the P4+1 (the United Kingdom, France, China and Russia plus Germany) and the US delegation headed by the administration's special envoy for Iran, Rob Malley. The outcomes of the talks are reviewed as follows:

1.1 First Round

The first round of the Iran nuclear talks started on April 2021. Iran entered into negotiations based on three basic principles: it will not retreat from its nuclear measures in this phase, lifting sanctions (to be in one move), followed by a period in which Iran verifies that sanctions are removed. On the other side, it seems that the United States revoked, to some extent, its condition (Iran's return to full compliance with its commitments before returning to the nuclear deal) as Washington was seemingly ready to partially lift sanctions, or accept the step-by-step return.

Following the first round, two expert-level groups were formed by the JCPOA Joint Commission. The first group is tasked to identify the measures to be taken by the United States to lift sanctions. The second group is responsible for identifying the measures to be taken on Iran's return to full compliance with its nuclear commitments. The participants discussed the outcomes of the two expert groups: "on lifting sanctions" and "nuclear commitments" which were concluded by the two groups and the two sides: Iran and the United States. It was agreed to resume joint negotiations within one week in Vienna after the delegates returned to their countries for further discussion. ⁽¹⁾

1.2 Second Round

Before resuming the talks on April 15, Iran had increased its uranium enrichment to 60 percent and installed 1,000 advanced centrifuges following a cyberattack on the Natanz nuclear facility, for which Iran held Israel responsible. Several

official meetings were held in this round; it was suggested that sanctions should be lifted for 120-180 days. However, Iran rejected this proposal. A third expert-level group was established; assigned to identify sequencing issues, i.e., coordinating the procedures and timetable for implementing the moves to be taken by all participants in fulfilling their obligations. They are also tasked with revising the verification method and timeline.

Abbas Araghchi said, “The sanctions are divided into two parts, sanctions with a general aspect and sanctions that have a specific aspect. General sanctions include air, sea, banking, and insurance sanctions. Specific sanctions include sanctions against individuals.” He added that the United States agreed to lift all general sanctions while specific sanctions will be discussed in the third round of talks in Vienna.⁽²⁾

1.3 Third Round in Vienna

The third round of talks was held from April 27 to May 1, 2021. The third expert group held its first meeting on April 28, 2021. Challenges started to emerge in pushing the talks forward; disagreement intensified between Washington and Tehran on non-nuclear sanctions. Iran seeks to lift all sanctions, which the United States rejects, asking Iran to stick to the “step-by-step” principle. Despite the pressure exercised and the discussions held by the delegates, this disagreement was not resolved in this round. The E3 (UK, France, and Germany) expressed in a statement that the success of the ongoing talks is not guaranteed. The head of the Iranian delegation Abbas Araghchi said the negotiations had “reached a maturity,” yet the United States said they were not clear. The delegates returned to their home countries for further discussion, preparing for a fourth round to resolve the remaining obstacles.

2. Internal Positions and Opposition to the Iran Talks in Vienna

After Khamenei gave the green light to his government to join the talks in Vienna, he detached himself from its outcomes as was the case in the 2015 nuclear deal — as if the government joined the talks without taking his permission. “Officials have determined that we should negotiate. We have no arguments about this, but the talks should not become attritional,” Khamenei said.⁽³⁾ At the same time the “conservative” current was keen to closely watch the talks. The Parliament listened to Abbas Araghchi’s explanations on the ongoing talks, urging Araghchi not to negotiate directly or indirectly with the Americans. The Parliament decided to monitor the talks, ensuring that no new parties were involved nor new regional issues discussed.⁽⁴⁾ The “conservatives” refused the move-by-move negotiation process, reechoing the position of the supreme leader; sanctions must be lifted before Iran returns to its commitments. The “hardliners” accused the government of seeking to acquire special privileges for the “reformists” in the upcoming presidential elections.⁽⁵⁾

On the other side, the Biden administration faced internal pressure to take a tougher position on Iran, maintaining sanctions, and returning to the nuclear deal without sufficient guarantees. In this context, 170 Democrats and Republicans submitted a letter to President Biden, asking to conclude a comprehensive deal or maintain sanctions. Biden realizes that he must avoid

inciting the anger of the US Senate, especially the Republicans, given the fact that he needs to first resolve urgent internal issues such as the COVID-19 crisis and ensure the delivery of humanitarian relief to American workers in the country.

In the same vein, around 300 academic and civil activists residing in the United States sent a letter to President Biden, asking him to continue to impose sanctions, and not to give the Iranian government any privileges unless it stops—in a way that can be verified— human rights violations in Iran, terrorism outside Iran, and funding its destructive proxies in the region.⁽⁶⁾

3. Regional Resistance to Talks in Vienna

The cyberattack at Iran's Natanz facility was launched before the commencement of the second round of the Iran talks in Vienna. It was viewed as an expression of regional resistance to the talks, especially the role of the United States and Europe — sponsoring the talks — focused their efforts on reviving the 2015 nuclear deal. They failed to include regional issues and concerned regional countries in these talks as they had promised. They also could not forge a new comprehensive nuclear deal, which addresses the “sunset provisions” in the 2015 nuclear deal and Iran's ballistic missile program and its threats against the region. Apparently, the discussion of these files was postponed as happened in the 2015 nuclear deal.

The United States tried to ease the rising tensions in regional countries opposing the Iran talks in Vienna through holding several talks with Israel and the Gulf states. The head of the US delegation Rob Malley had held a video meeting with officials of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) to discuss with them the outcomes of the talks with Iran and reviving the nuclear deal.

4. Outcomes and Challenges of the Iran Talks in Vienna

The Iran talks in Vienna are viewed as a significant achievement for both Washington and Tehran as it restored diplomacy and trust between the two countries. The issues and problems of negotiations, which hinder reaching an agreement, were identified. These talks might become marathon talks just like the talks held before the 2015 nuclear deal. However, the future of the talks is still ambiguous; there are several conflicting views between the two sides, especially those related to Iran's demand to lift all sanctions before returning to full compliance with its commitments.

The most prominent challenges are as follows:

- Identifying the sanctions to be lifted: Iran does not accept categorizing sanctions into nuclear and non-nuclear sanctions as it wants to lift all sanctions while ensuring that new sanctions will not be imposed in the future. President Biden faces difficulty in passing any decision to lift sanctions on Iran despite the Democrats enjoying a majority in both houses of the US Congress. The sanctions Iran wants to be lifted are imposed under the US laws of human rights violations and terrorism. This is another procedural obstacle Iran is facing in reviving the nuclear deal before the highly anticipated Iranian presidential elections on June 18, 2021.



■ Iran's presidential elections are around the corner: the United States wants to reach an agreement with Iran before the Iranian presidential elections to avoid facing a reversed Iranian policy if the "conservatives" dominate power and diplomacy declines. The return to the nuclear deal still needs time and patience; there are many complicated details, especially those related to US sanctions, which amount to over 1,600 sanctions. Further, verifying the lifting of sanctions needs time.

■ Amending the nuclear deal: although the Biden administration has been flexible in the talks, the US policy towards Iran is still adherent to utilizing maximum sanctions to force Iran to accept the amendments in the nuclear deal and thorny issues outside the nuclear itself, i.e., its threats in the region etc. Iran rejects any amendments to the nuclear deal. If it was forced to accept, it will in return ask the United States to fulfill its obligations, lift the Dispute Resolution Mechanism (DRM) under the 2015 nuclear deal and verify the US commitment to lifting sanctions. These Iranian conditions might not be accepted by the United States.

■ Regional resistance: regional powers reject the revival of the nuclear deal without making amendments, including verifying that Iran will not have the capability to acquire nuclear weapons in the future, curbing the dangers of Iran's ballistic missile program, and changing Iran's behavior in the region. Regional powers are prepared to address US policies if their interests are not taken into consideration— as was the case with the 2015 nuclear deal.

Conclusion

The United States wants to reach an agreement with Iran before Iran's presidential elections. On the other hand, Iran desperately needs to return to the nuclear deal. However, they are in a race against time; they might not reach their desired agreement before the Iranian presidential elections in light of the gap between each side's demands and expectations. Iran remains unwavering regarding its demand for the lifting of sanctions before returning to nuclear compliance while the Biden administration wants a step-by-step return to the nuclear deal in order to achieve some gains as it is facing internal pressure to return to the nuclear deal without reaping any gains. Further, the Biden administration is facing mounting regional resistance to the return to the 2015 nuclear deal because it poses threats to regional stability and security and hinders Biden's plans of heading towards the East to counter China's danger.

Iran and Europe

During the two past months, understandings and diplomacy prevailed between Iran and the Europeans after the latter exerted efforts to revive the nuclear deal and bring the United States and Iran to the negotiating table. However, in April the European Union (EU) imposed new sanctions on top ranking military commanders for human rights violations, which have been renewed annually since 2011. The European move came at a critical time as Europe, China and Russia have joined the rounds of the direct talks in Vienna with Iran. The Europeans brokered between the P4+1 and the US delegation in Vienna to revive the nuclear deal and return to compliance and reach an agreement.

This part of the ICF investigates in detail the European imposition of sanctions on Iran, highlighting the Iranian reactions. It discusses Iran's increasing uranium enrichment and evaluates the impact of the ongoing interactions on the future of the Iran nuclear talks in Vienna.

1. Reasons for European Sanctions and Iranian Reactions

The Council of the European Union decided to renew the sanctions on Iran for human rights violations for one year; to April 13, 2022. This year, the council imposed sanctions on eight high-ranking Iranian officials. The new sanctions include travel bans and asset freezes on the listed individuals. The previous sanctions include a ban on exports to Iran of equipment used for internal repression by the government's forces, or equipment for monitoring telecommunications to restrict the freedom of the Iranian people. It is worth mentioning here that these measures were first imposed in 2011 and have been renewed annually since then.⁽⁷⁾

According to the council, the reason behind imposing sanctions on eight Iranian individuals and three entities (prisons) is due to their role in the systematic repression against protestors in the November 2019 demonstrations in Iran. The new list of sanctions now comprises a total of 89 individuals and four entities. The list includes IRGC Commander Hossein Salami because he "bears responsibility for serious human rights violations," according to the council's statement.⁽⁸⁾ It also includes Gholamreza Soleimani, head of the Basij organization; Hossein Ashtari, commander of the Iranian police force; Mohammad Pakpour, commander of the Revolutionary Guards Ground Forces; and Gholamreza Ziaei, former director of Evin Prison.⁽⁹⁾

Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh said that Iran condemns the EU sanctions and considers it as lacking any credibility, adding that Iran will in return halt cooperation with the EU in many fields. "In reaction

to this EU measure, the Foreign Ministry of the Islamic Republic of Iran stops all comprehensive talks with the European Union, including human rights discussions, as well as all forms of cooperation emanating from those talks, especially in the fields of terrorism, illicit drugs and refugees,” Khatibzadeh said.⁽¹⁰⁾ Iran’s President Hassan Rouhani had threatened the EU through calling for the halting of all forms of cooperation with Europe — including drug trafficking and refugee flows into Europe — if the EU does not help Iran circumvent US sanctions.⁽¹¹⁾

2. Iran’s Increasing Uranium Enrichment

Iran informed the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) that it will increase uranium enrichment to 60 percent, i.e., threefold from their previous percentage, making Iran 30 percent away from its breakout time (the amount of time needed to produce a nuclear bomb). The Iranian media reported that the increase in uranium enrichment came in response to the external attack against the Iranian nuclear facility, Natanz, the largest uranium enrichment site. However, EU officials, especially the E3, view this Iranian move as undermining the achievements they have made in the efforts aimed at reviving the nuclear deal. A European diplomat describes the Iranian statements as “maximum provocation,” aiming to gain more leverage and impact the ongoing negotiations in favor of Iran.⁽¹²⁾

In a joint statement, the E3 expressed shock and resentment over Iran’s decision to increase uranium enrichment to 60 percent saying, “This is a serious development since the production of highly enriched uranium constitutes an important step in the production of a nuclear weapon [...] Iran has no credible civilian need for enrichment at this level.”⁽¹³⁾ They mean that the sharp rise in uranium enrichment is not limited to merely civilian purposes; the core aim behind it is to acquire a nuclear bomb — unlike the remarks repeatedly echoed by Iranian officials that Iran’s nuclear program is designed for peaceful purposes.

3. The Impact of Current Interactions on the Future of Nuclear Talks

In response to EU sanctions, Russia’s Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov publicly mocked the EU measures, condemning imposing measures on Iran, which will lead eventually to curbing the nuclear talks.⁽¹⁴⁾ It is the first time that the EU has imposed sanctions on individuals since 2013. The timing of the imposition of these sanctions does not mean the EU lacks coordination between its members, rather it is a tool that the EU uses to continue its “carrot and stick” policy towards Iran. As Iran celebrates gaining privileges in the negotiations through increasing uranium enrichment, the EU tightens pressure further on Iranian officials to ensure Iran will comply with the EU promoted principles of freedom and peace and to direct Iran’s policies towards the desired European track.

In the context of the Vienna talks, EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell confirmed that the United States and Iran show a real goodwill to maintain the 2015 nuclear deal. Borrell’s response came against the backdrop of positive responses from various international sides

participating in the negotiations, which according to Wang Qun, the Chinese envoy to the United Nations, are accelerating in pace.⁽¹⁵⁾

Whether US sanctions will be lifted or kept in place has not become clear as yet. However, the sideline talks —outside the official nuclear talks— indicate the participants made noticeable strides in the previous rounds. ““Sanctions... on Iran’s energy sector, which include oil and gas, or those on the automotive industry, financial, banking and port sanctions, all should be lifted based on agreements reached so far,” Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi said. The E3 diplomats had hoped for better progress in the talks as they moved slowly in the last week of April. “We have yet to come to an understanding on the most critical points.”⁽¹⁶⁾

The most significant outcome of the nuclear talks in Vienna is establishing three expert working groups, each group is tasked with specific missions as follows: lifting sanctions; Iran’s compliance with its nuclear commitments, and coordination of the procedures of implementing the obligations of the two sides. So, the nuclear talks were not affected by the related interactions in April. Iran’s decision to increase uranium enrichment to 60 percent has achieved Iran’s aim; pushing Western participants to speed up the pace of talks and agree —by identifying the methods and amounts in detail— to lifting US sanctions through the expert working groups.

The E3, along with their Atlantic ally, Washington, seek to prevent Iran from acquiring the capability to produce a nuclear bomb. Nevertheless, they are fully aware of Iran’s diplomatic maneuvers and tactics aimed to gain more cards for the negotiations. Though Iran expresses its intention to continue increasing uranium enrichment to unprecedented levels, it cannot in a short time repair the damaged centrifuges. Without a shadow of a doubt, neither Tehran nor Washington will completely respond to the demands of each other. Iran is just around the corner from achieving its aspired gains; some breathing space for its economy by lifting US sanctions. However, the United States will not give up on all its demands and avoid bringing to the negotiating table Iran’s ballistic missile program and its funding of destructive proxies in the region.

Conclusion

The EU imposed new sanctions and renewed old sanctions on Iran over human rights violations for one year. The EU measures triggered Iranian reactions; Iran announced to halt all forms of cooperation with the Europeans, including terrorism drug trafficking and refugee flows. Following the cyberattack on Natanz, Iran decided to increased uranium enrichment to 60 percent— a move which caused significant concern among the Europeans and accelerated the pace of nuclear talks. Despite mounting tensions, the Vienna talks were not negatively affected in April. In a nutshell, all the participants in the nuclear talks are wary of the diplomatic tools exploited in the talks, so it is a pretty far-fetched possibility that one side will respond to all the demands of the other.

Endnotes

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