

MONTHLY REPORT



# IRAN CASE FILE

Your window on Iran from inside and abroad

May 2021



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

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May 2021

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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In May 2021, Iran's presidential election diverted attention from the Vienna negotiations. Iran's internal interactions escalated and the Guardian Council's decision to exclude "reformist" candidates and a number of "moderate conservatives" as well as the representative of the "populist" movement former Iranian President Ahmadinejad quickly led to a link between the Guardian Council's decision and the Vienna negotiations on the nuclear deal. The decision was reached in accordance with the intent of the Iranian supreme leader to engineer the Iranian election, who undoubtedly wants a president who can manage the negotiations with the United States in the next stage according to criteria which are consistent with his personal vision regarding Iran's future relationship with the United States. The Iranian election and the Vienna negotiations were the two main axes around which the Iranian situation revolved in May.

At the ideological level, the clerics stressed that the "I will not vote" campaign to boycott the election was blasphemous and not solely a political campaign as it aimed to undermine the divine political system of the Iranian Republic.

On the political level, the Guardian Council's decision ignited a number of political issues, prominently the rash behaviour of the Guardian Council members in excluding candidates. The decision was not based on logical justifications, especially the exclusion of Ali Larijani, the former Parliament speaker for four consecutive parliamentary terms. Participation in the election will delegitimize Iran's political system, especially with the growing likelihood of "reformists" boycotting the election. Economically, Iran sought to improve its ability to export oil without passing through the Strait of Hormuz by announcing the

inauguration of an oil pipeline starting from Goureh, where the oil production fields are, to the port of Jask overlooking the Gulf of Oman outside the Strait of Hormuz. This announcement strengthens Iran's previous threats to close the Strait of Hormuz. The Iranian Case File presents a comparison between the capabilities of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Iran to export their oil without passing through the Strait of Hormuz, and the economic impact of opening the Goureh-Jask pipeline on the Iranian economy in light of the expected lifting of the sanctions imposed on Iranian oil exports.

To activate the Iranian plan to close the Strait of Hormuz, Iran launched a new strategy to dominate Gulf waters. It launched armed fast boats to close the Strait of Hormuz in the event of a new conflict in the Gulf. Satellite images showed the deployment of Bavar-2 flying boats near the naval base in Bandar Abbas, overlooking the Strait of Hormuz. The Iranian army also carried out a maneuver to raise its cyberwarfare capabilities in the Isfahan region which it called the "Sky Shield 1400" exercise. The Iranian armed forces also revealed a number of military products, mainly drones and air-to-surface missiles.

In the context of Arab affairs, Gulf-Iran relations are still in the same phase of stagnation and crisis since 2016, despite the frequent reports of the existence of Saudi-Iran understandings mediated by Iraq. On the contrary, reports have been published about Iran forming armed groups from among its most powerful militias in Iraq and training them in the following areas: drone warfare, on-line surveillance and propaganda. They are directly linked to Iran's Quds Force, the arm of Iran's Revolutionary Guards that manages Iran's proxy militias. The presence of pro-Iranian Iraqi militias provides a platform to counter any Gulf convergence efforts or investments in Iraq and provides Iran with the ability to attack the Gulf states by supplying its militias with missiles or drones that can cross the Iraqi border.

Concerning Iran's presence in Syria, Iran continues its efforts to consolidate its presence there through the establishment of diplomatic consulates in a number of Syrian cities and the establishment of military bases as well as the implementation of its railway project with Syria which passes through Iraqi territory. Given Iran's experiences in the region, especially its experience in Iraq, it can be said that the process of opening a consulate in Aleppo, despite the absence of a large Iranian community, is a prelude to opening a series of consulates in other Syrian cities. Aleppo has multinational militias deployed by Tehran to consolidate its influence in Aleppo. Tehran appointing a new ambassador to Damascus, in conjunction with the opening of the consulate in Aleppo, indicates that Iran is expanding the level of its diplomatic presence in the next stage.

However, with regard to Iran's presence in Yemen, we witnessed a state of discrepancy between the official Iranian position, which supports a peaceful solution to the Yemeni crisis, and the actual actions of Iran, reflected in the sending of ships loaded with weapons to the Houthis which were discovered and seized against the backdrop of discussions taking place under Omani mediation which aimed to activate the Saudi initiative to end the conflict.

At the international level, the Vienna negotiations continued to cast a shad-

ow over US-Iran relations during the month of May 2021. The parties involved in the negotiations are discussing how best to revive the nuclear deal to ensure Iran and the United States return to complying with their obligations. However, it seems that there is a gap in aspirations and positions which have continuously shifted and an agreement has not been reached despite five rounds of negotiations. The atmosphere in Vienna indicates that there is a clear desire by all parties to revive the nuclear deal, but there are still points of disagreement between the two sides which need to be overcome. After breaking this deadlock, a timetable needs to be set for Iran and the United States to return to their obligations under the nuclear deal. As for the rest of the issues that the United States has raised, the understanding regarding these is still ambiguous. Can the United States commit Iran to negotiations to address the outstanding issues files if the sanctions are lifted and the Biden administration no longer holds any pressure cards?

The ongoing negotiations in Vienna constituted the main axis in Iran-Europe relations, despite the European Union imposing new sanctions last month on Iranian officials. Voices were raised inside Iran against the talks with Europe in response to European sanctions related to human rights violations. In the midst of optimism about reviving the nuclear deal and lifting the sanctions, Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif visited three European countries, Spain, Italy and Ireland, to strengthening bilateral political, economic and social relations without neglecting the discussions taking place in Vienna, particularly given the positive atmosphere surrounding them. Three European intelligence agencies (in Germany, the Netherlands and Sweden), revealed that Iran had last year obtained equipment and technical knowledge that would speed up its process to develop weapons of mass destruction.

Iran's situation remained suspended during the month of May 2021 waiting for a post-Vienna breakthrough with the United States with its deepened problems at the internal level: ideologically, politically and economically, while the government attempted to maximize its military capabilities as well as its regional interventions.

# Internal Affairs

**I**nternal Affairs sheds light on four files. The first file discusses the ideological dimension. It sheds light on the religious perspectives towards the election and the pro-Velayat-e Faqih loyalists' employment of the face-off between Hamas and Tel Aviv. The second file touches on the political dimension of the Iranian situation through analyzing the Iranian presidential election candidates, the disqualification of candidates, the government's options for managing low voter turnout and the position of the "reformists" in relation to participating in the election. The third file discusses Iran's economic developments. It casts light on the Goreh-Jask oil pipeline project and its implications for the Gulf states. The fourth file discusses military developments. It sheds light on Iran's military activities; mainly the Sky Shield 1400 electronic warfare maneuvers, countering cyberspace threats, drills in regard to closing the Strait of Hormuz and the technical developments of Iran's nuclear program.



# The Ideological File

The Ideological File sheds light 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 in Iran and its repercussions on the Shiite community in the region.

Last month's Ideological File touched on the position of women in the Iranian presidential election and the objections made by some women to the policy of exclusion of women in the public sphere pursued since 1979.

The Ideological File this month sheds light on the position of the religious elites towards the calls to boycott the presidential election as it is a "charade" election, aiming to enhance the legitimacy of the political system. It also discusses the religious elites' exploitation of the Palestinian question. It attempts to answer questions regarding the extent to which religious discourse has been used in relation to both issues, aiming to explore the reasons behind the remarkable religious involvement in both issues.

## First: The Religious Issue in the Presidential Election

In light of the upcoming presidential election in Iran and the Guardian Council's disqualification of a number of presidential candidates without offering convincing justifications, Iranian youth groups called to boycott the election and launched the #Won't Vote campaign. Those who launched the #Won't Vote campaign indicated that the aim was to "undermine the efforts of the Iranian political system to fix its lost legitimacy."<sup>(1)</sup> According to them, the campaign is a continuation of the December 2018 and November 2019 protests.<sup>(2)</sup>

Meanwhile, some "reformists" believe that a low voter turnout in the presidential election will lead to a government without people, and people without a government. Hence, this will diminish the sense of patriotism and belonging to the homeland and give rise to feelings of estrangement and dissatisfaction. This will have a negative impact on the Iranian state.

These "reformists" argued that having a bad law is better than having no law.<sup>(3)</sup> The solution, from their point of view, was to encourage strong participation in the election, as this is an effective pressure tool that can initiate change. This vision is in line with past attempts to reform state institutions, which have faced genuine hindrances and challenges since the first year of the revolution. They have not succeeded in changing the behavior of the government so far.

It seems that the government feared that the calls to boycott the election would expand, so it resorted to hardline religious discourse. Cleric Ahmad Alamolhoda, Mashhad's Friday prayer leader, reiterated that those who call on the people to boycott the election are disbelievers, and he reiterated that the



Iranian people are in need of a jihadist president whose primary concern is the people and takes inspiration from those sticking to the principles of jihad.<sup>(4)</sup>

Meanwhile, Ahmad Khatami, Tehran's Friday prayer leader, argued that participating in the election is the only means to counter the US centric-globalization and is one of the most important tools of resistance since the enemies seek to thwart voter turnout.<sup>(5)</sup> He described those calling for the election to be boycotted as enemies of the people to strip their campaigns of any legitimacy.

In the same context, Ayatollah Ahmad Jannati, the secretary of the Guardian Council, reiterated that the election is an important and unique opportunity to strengthen the foundation of power and security in the country. "It has been said on multiple occasions that the Iranian system is a grassroots system. Its manifestations appear several times, and elections are one of its manifestations. And this popular presence has enhanced the foundations of the Islamic system." Jannati said.<sup>(6)</sup>

He then quoted the supreme leader as saying that some people are working to make the Iranian people frustrated through distorting the electoral proceedings or the performance of those responsible for it, including the Guardian Council or other apparatuses.<sup>(7)</sup>

Jannati's remarks converge with those of Khatami. Those calling for the election to be boycotted are enemies of the state and the Iranian government is a grassroots government and the aim of those campaigning for a boycott is to render the people frustrated. Such language does not allow for the possibility of considering the fears of the Iranian opposition as legitimate fears in light of the Guardian Council control over the electoral process—which offered no convincing justifications to qualify or disqualify candidates. Moreover, the government resorted to hardline religious discourse, which means that it deems the opposition factions to be state enemies and not political competitors.

## Second: Velayat-e Faqih Loyalists and Employing the Palestinian Question

Iran has exploited the Palestinian question, especially during the latest Israeli attack on Jerusalem and on other Palestinian cities. Iran exploited the issue to enhance the government's legitimacy at home and polish its image overseas. It employed religious discourse in this regard. On the other side, Palestinian armed groups contributed to serving Iran's objective by repeatedly praising Tehran's policy. Regardless of the sort of relationship between the two sides — whether it is a strategic relationship or a pragmatic one — the moral dimension is totally absent from the rhetoric of Palestinian factions, such as Hamas and Islamic Jihad. Ziyad al-Nakhalah, secretary general of Islamic Jihad, said: “Our hearts are present at the scene of your struggles, and our prayers for the continuation of your victories are constant. The divine promise has come true.” He then linked the Palestinian struggle with an important tenet of Tehran's policy: the principle of combating the forces of arrogance. “Your struggle is considered as the resistance against oppression, infidelity and arrogance, and such a struggle is pleasing to the Almighty God.”<sup>(8)</sup>

It seems that this rhetoric was not limited, but rather a systematic policy of the government. Ayatollah Alamolhoda similarly said: “Palestine is the front of resistance against the global disbelief, and we should get involved along this line and prepare for countering the global disbelief.”<sup>(9)</sup>

When we compare the pro-Velayat-e Faqih religious discourse with Najaf's, we find major differences. The Najaf Marjaya announced support for the Palestinian people and called on free people to support and display their solidarity with them<sup>(10)</sup> without citing any pro-Velayat-e Faqih references such as disbelief, arrogance and other inflammatory and propaganda-seeking rhetoric. This has led to a divergence between the marjayas of Qom and Najaf on this issue.

## Conclusion

The Ideological File this month sheds light on the use of religious discourse and its employment to cement the legitimacy of the Iranian government. This religious discourse included two features: the exploitation of religion to counter the calls to boycott the election and the Palestinian-Israeli conflict to strengthen Iran's hand in the region. Tehran has sought to further infiltrate the Arab sphere and promote its ideological and cultural clout in Palestine through strengthening relations with some Palestinian resistance factions. In addition, some Palestinian factions praised Iran's leadership. This is indicative of the realpolitik policy adopted by these Palestinian factions and their pragmatism at the expense of well-established political and moral principles. This relationship also diminishes the support they enjoy across the Arab world and causes them to hold the same position as Iran in the collective Arab consciousness.

The most significant conclusions: first, the keenness of the Iranian government and its religious elite to ensure hardline religious discourse is at the heart of thorny issues to cement its legitimacy. In addition, they realize that the use of religion contributes to the continuation of the principles of the Islamic government.

Second, the Iranian government has been seeking to align itself with Sunni and Shiite armed groups in the region — which have the same or different ideological tenets—but it is keen on supporting and cooperating with them to put pressure on its international and regional foes and strengthen its foothold beyond Iran's borders—as part of its agenda to implement the absolute version of Velayat-e Faqih.

# The Political File

The decision of the Guardian Council to disqualify candidates in the presidential election held on June 18 stirred up massive controversy in Iran. As a result of this decision, the Iranian street accused the “hardliners” of attempting to “engineer” the election in favor of Ebrahim Raisi through imposing a specific list that includes candidates who do not genuinely represent the political opposition and the people in Iran.

Four main topics will be discussed in this file: The Iranian government’s selection of seven candidates for the Iranian people (most of them “hardliners”), excluding senior Iranian leaders, the government’s options for dealing with low voter turnout in the presidential election, and finally the position of the “reformist” faction regarding participation in the election.

## **First: The Iranian Government Selects Seven Candidates for Iranian Voters (the Majority Are Hardliners)**

Out of the large list of potential candidates representing the various political forces, the Guardian Council — known for leaning towards the “hardliners”— approved only seven candidates. The candidates included Ebrahim Raisi — the head of the judiciary who is close to the supreme leader and has been accused of killing thousands of political prisoners in the 1980s. This was in addition to the former Secretary of the National Security Council of Iran Saeed Jalili, the deputy speaker of Iran’s Parliament Amir-Hossein Ghazizadeh Hashemi, and the head of the research center of Iran’s Parliament Alireza Zakani — all of whom are affiliated with the “conservative” camp of Ebrahim Raisi. There were rumors that they would drop out of the presidential race to clear the path for Raisi. Maybe the call launched by Hossein Shariatmadari, the editor-in-chief of Keyhan newspaper, directed at the so-called revolutionary forces to unite to prevent the scattering of ballots<sup>(11)</sup> represents an official position by the government given that Keyhan newspaper and Shariatmadari are close to Khamenei.

The other three candidates were the former commander of the IRGC and the Secretary of the Expediency Discernment Council Mohsen Rezaee, the Governor of Iran’s Central Bank Abdolnasser Hemmati and Mohsen Mehralizadeh who was appointed vice president by former President Mohammad Khatami for sports affairs between 2001 and 2005. In the election held in 2005, the Guardian Council disqualified him from the election. But — at the behest of the supreme leader—he was approved and then came in fourth place by gaining 1.3 million votes.<sup>(12)</sup> (See Figure 1).



**Figure 1: Iran's Most Prominent Candidates for 2021 Presidential Elections**

Source: "Presidential election in Iran: Who are the most prominent candidates?" BBC, <https://bbc.in/34JD3ZS>. [Arabic].

### **Second: Excluding Senior Leaders**

The Guardian Council, which once disqualified the late former President Hashemi Rafsanjani in the 2013 election, this time excluded former President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad from contesting the presidential race. This was the second blow dealt to Mahmoud Ahmadinejad after the council also disqualified him from the 2017 presidential election, which resulted in the incumbent President Hassan Rouhani winning a second term.

Perhaps it was expected that former President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad would be disqualified. This is because there has been a change in his rhetoric and remarks, which pose a challenge to the political system and its leaders. He has been displaying fearlessness in recent years through threatening to expose some officials and uncover some files which he had access to during his time as president of Iran. But what was never expected was the disqualification of some leaders who are close to Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei such as the former Parliament speaker Ali Larijani—who was perceived to be the most powerful rival to Ebrahim Raisi due to his "moderate" orientations and the possibility of him gaining support from the "reformists," who voted for and supported President Rouhani in the 2013 and 2017 elections.



Ebrahim Raisi attempted to conceal his collusion with the process of “engineering” the election in his favor after it became apparent that the final list was devoid of a powerful competitor. He leveled indirect criticism at the Guardian Council, and claimed that after the final approved candidate list was announced, he engaged in consultations to make the electoral landscape more competitive and to ensure more voter participation.<sup>(13)</sup>

What was also unexpected is that the head of the Expediency Discernment Council Sadeq Amoli Larijani — Ali Larijani’s younger brother and one of the six jurists on the Guardian Council — criticized the decision of the Guardian Council. He said that he had continuously defended the decisions of the

council, but he found no justifications to defend its recent decision to qualify or disqualify election candidates. He also leveled direct criticism at Iran's security services after he attributed the council's decision to their high-level interference. The security services submitted reports that go against reality — hence influencing the decision of the Guardian Council.<sup>(14)</sup>

This uncharacteristic intervention by Sadeq Amoli Larijani and his criticism of the decision of the Guardian Council may have reflected his desire to see his brother Ali Larijani win the presidential election. But his concerns about Ebrahim Raisi's winning of the presidency were perhaps the principal motive behind his criticism. This is because Ebrahim Raisi accused the inner circle close to Sadeq Larijani of corruption after he was appointed chief justice more than two years ago. In addition, another factor which could have been behind Larijani's concerns about the disqualification of other candidates and preparing the ground for Ebrahim Raisi's victory, was that Raisi winning the election will place him in a good position to succeed Khamenei, thus undermining the aspirations of others hoping to succeed the supreme leader, including Sadeq Amoli Larijani himself.

### **Third: The Strategy Employed by the Government to Deal with the Expected Low Turnout in the Election**

As a result of the strong criticism targeting the Guardian Council after its decision to disqualify some candidates and mounting calls to boycott the presidential election, “hardliners” within the Iranian government realized that the extensive voter turnout — which they have employed over the past year to prove the political system's legitimacy and its popularity with the Iranian people as well as to polish its tarnished image before domestic and global audiences — was not realistic in this year's presidential election. The “hardliners” were aware that using past tactics such as declaring that voting is a fundamental right of the Iranian people or that voting is a religious obligation would not work this time. The Iranian people's resentment of the government's policies has reached a peak over the past years, as result, the “hardliners” resorted to new tactics, such as threatening to punish those who called for the election to be boycotted.

Hossein Ashtari, commander-in-chief of Iran's Law Enforcement Force, threatened to punish all those who called on the Iranian people to boycott the election.<sup>(15)</sup>

These threats were expressed despite the fact that Iran's law does not compel any Iranian to vote. The other tactic employed was to label those calling for a boycott as “unbelievers.” Ahmed Alamolhoda, the supreme leader's representative and Friday prayer leader in the city of Mashhad — and the father-in-law of Ebrahim Raisi, the most prominent candidate in the presidential election — said that: “Boycotting the election in Iran is like renouncing Islam, and those who say that we will not participate in the elections are non-Muslims.”<sup>(16)</sup>

The “hardliner” Ahmed Khatami—one of the six jurists on the Guardian Council—threatened to condemn all those calling for a boycott as “not belonging

to the system of Iran.” He said: “Boycotting elections by some candidates is against the system and the Constitution.”<sup>(17)</sup>

Some forces within the “conservative” movement believed that a high voter turnout in the election poses a direct threat to their interests and objectives of taking control of the executive authority. Nonetheless, the threats made by the “hardliners reflect the fears gripping the government—which is going through a very delicate juncture — that the mass disqualification of candidates could lead to a more polarized stage, hence impacting its future and survival.

#### **Fourth: The Position of the “Reformist” Movement Regarding Participation in the Election**

The “reformists” did not plainly state that they would not cast their ballots, but announced that they do not have any candidates in this election after the Guardian Council disqualified all their nine candidates. In a press statement made by the movement, the “reformists” said that the decision of the Guardian Council not only aims to cut the movement out of the political landscape, but also aims to keep the Iranian people away from the process of decision-making.<sup>(18)</sup>

The spokesperson for the “reformist” movement Azar Mansouri said that the “reformists” will not throw their weight behind any candidate who was not on their list.<sup>(19)</sup>

It seems that the remarks were addressed to Mohsen Mehralizadeh who is affiliated with the “reformist” movement and hopes to gain the support and votes of the “reformists.” Refusing to throw their weight behind Mohsen Mehralizadeh was because the “reformist” movement did not select him in their election list. In addition, the “reformists” believed that it was necessary for him to drop out of the presidential race— because they believed that his approval was a deliberate move by the “conservatives.” The aim behind choosing a “reformist” candidate not selected by the “reformists” was to cause rifts in the “reformists” popular base to increase voter turnout. However, the “conservatives” made sure that the chosen “reformist” candidate was someone who was unknown and did not have a popular base to compete head-to-head with Ebrahim Raisi.

In case the leaders of the so-called “reformists” movement continue to refuse to support Mohsen Mehralizadeh or Abdolnasser Hemmati who is also working to gain “reformists” support, this movement could resort to passive participation. This means they will not refrain from voting nor will they prevent their supporters from heading to the polling stations—but they will not support any specific candidate.

#### **Conclusion**

After the controversy in the Iranian street and within sections of Iran’s political elite which was flared up by the decision of the Guardian Council, some betted on the intervention of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei to re-qualify some candidates who were initially disqualified from the presidential race, especially after the letter that President Hassan Rouhani sent to the supreme leader which called on him to intervene. But the supreme leader paid no heed to this call and

ended the controversy over the matter, commending the Guardian Council and reiterating that the council did what it deemed necessary.<sup>(20)</sup>

This proves that the Guardian Council prepared well-thought-out and agreed upon plans with Khamenei to engineer the upcoming presidential election in favor of the “hardliners” within the Iranian political system. Despite the repeated assertions from the supreme leader on the importance of voter turnout, it has been proven beyond reasonable doubt that Iran’s “conservative” forces orchestrated the election of a “hardline” candidate at the expense of the political system’s legitimacy.

# The Economic File

As part of Iran's efforts to maximize its oil revenues, it is implementing multiple development plans in this sector despite the embargo imposed on its oil exports by the United States. One of these development plans is the Goreh-Jask internal oil pipeline which will transfer oil from Iranian oil fields in Ahwaz north of the Arabian Gulf to Jask port overlooking the Gulf of Oman—outside the Strait of Hormuz. The Economic File provides an analysis of the economic significance of this project and its impact on regional countries.

## First: The Goreh-Jask Oil Pipeline: Specifications and Economic Importance

On May 31, Iran carried out the first trial run to transfer oil via the oil pipeline extending from the Goreh region west of Bushehr Province to the port of Jask south of Iran (Goreh-Jask) without passing through the Strait of Hormuz. Iranian President Hassan Rouhani announced in December 2020 that the process of building the Goreh-Jask oil pipeline would be completed before the end of the tenure of his current government.<sup>(21)</sup>

### Route of the New Iranian Oil Pipeline Goreh-Jask



Source: <https://bit.ly/2SJAmzC>

## 1. Strategic Importance

The pipeline enables Iran to ship and export oil from outside the Strait of Hormuz—which is riddled with geopolitical tensions. The Strait of Hormuz is the most important global waterway for transferring oil and is one of the straits that triggers disturbances due to the geopolitical tensions surrounding it. Up to 20 to 30 oil tankers pass through the strait every day, accounting for 40 percent of the world's oil trade. The strait is 50-kilometers wide and 60-meters deep. It is the outlet for Arab countries overlooking the Arabian Gulf through which they export nearly 90 percent of their oil. According to international law, the strait is part of the high-seas.<sup>(22)</sup>

Through establishing this pipeline, Iran is seeking a new means to export its oil by avoiding the Strait of Hormuz to avoid the instability that this strait is prone to experiencing, which would impact its oil exports.

Establishing the Goreh-Jask oil pipeline represents a strategic project for the Iranian government. Implementing the project will allow Iran to export its oil directly via the Gulf of Oman, bypassing the Strait of Hormuz. The costs of the project—according to what was published by some sources—reaches 1.5 billion euros, including the establishment of warehouses to store oil as a prelude to exporting oil via the new Jask plant.

The Goreh-Jask oil pipeline will allow Iran to ship crude oil to anywhere in the world, especially China, without passing through the Strait of Hormuz—which means that Iran will not be impacted in case navigation in the Strait of Hormuz is disrupted through the laying of naval mines therein. The pipeline is 1,100 kilometers long and has a diameter of 23 inches, with a capacity that reaches 1 million barrels per day. Oil will be stored in one of the 20 tanks and the absorptive capacity of each of these reaches 50,000 barrels in the first phase (totaling 10 million barrels). It will subsequently be loaded onto the huge crude oil tankers in the Gulf of Oman and the Arabian Sea and transferred to the Indian Ocean. The second phase includes boosting the total storage capacity to 30 million barrels at the port.<sup>(23)</sup>

## 2. Economic Importance

The operation of the Goreh-Jask oil pipeline—in addition to the strategic dimension represented in ensuring the continuation of Iranian oil exports in case the Strait of Hormuz faces navigation disruption—enables Iran to make multiple economic gains including the following:

- A. Cutting short the route taken by global oil tankers which intend to ship Iranian oil from the ports north of the Arabian Gulf.
- B. Making up for the decline in the shipment capacity of Iran's ports—like the port of Mahshahr—and not upgrading their logistical capabilities.
- C. Securing raw materials for petrochemical complexes that Iran has established to convert its crude oil exports to post-refining exports and petrochemical materials—especially the Gulf Star project at Bandar Abbas port which uses 50,000 barrels of oil per day and is 344 kilometers away from the port of Jask.
- D. Developing Jask's industrial zone and the free economic zone that was announced.
- E. Providing infrastructure for exporting gas to Oman, which will be concentrated in the Jask region.

## Second: Consequences for the Gulf States

The announcement of operating the Goreh-Jask oil pipeline involves consequences for the Gulf States, given the old and continued Iranian threats to close down the Strait of Hormuz. The threats were issued by Iranian President Hassan Rouhani who threatened to tighten control over the strait and prevent the Gulf states from exporting their oil to the world. Similar remarks were also made by a number of military commanders. In 2008, the then-commander of the IRGC Mohammad Ali Jafari said that his country would impose restrictions on passing through the strait if Iran was to be attacked. In 2012, Tehran threatened to close the Strait of Hormuz in response to US and European sanctions that targeted its oil revenues.<sup>(24)</sup>

This possibility gives Iran greater leverage in negotiations and the ability to compete with the Gulf states when it comes to prices. Using this pipeline reduces export costs. Hence, Iran could sell its oil at a lower price. Although establishing this project does not mean that Iran will dispense with the Strait of Hormuz, it will enhance Iran's ability to export oil and allow it to diversify its exporting hotspots to ensure the continuation of its exports.<sup>(25)</sup>

On the other side, Iran is attempting—through establishing this pipeline—to compete with the alternatives adopted by the Gulf states—especially Saudi Arabia and the UAE—to export their oil in case navigation in the Arabian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz is disrupted. Saudi Arabia's Aramco established in 1992 the East-West pipeline to transfer oil from the country's Eastern Province to Yanbu port on the western coast. The capacity of this pipeline reaches 5 million barrels per day, which makes up 50 percent of Saudi's daily oil production.

Yet the UAE transformed Fujairah port into a platform to export its oil without passing through the Strait of Hormuz –it contains two platforms for exporting crude oil. This is in addition to huge oil tanks and an oil pipeline which transfers oil starting from Abu Dhabi. The oil pipeline is 406 kilometers long and transfers 600,000 barrels per day from Abu Dhabi to Fujairah. Its capacity could rise to 1.6 million barrels per day, which constitutes nearly 60 percent of the UAE's daily oil production which reaches 2.5 million barrels per day. The port has the capacity to receive giant oil tankers.<sup>(26)</sup>

**Table 1: Comparison Between the Capacities of the Alternative Pipelines to Transfer Oil to Avoid Bypassing the Strait of Hormuz**

	Saudi oil pipeline East-West	Emirati oil pipeline Abu Dhabi-Fujairah	Iranian oil pipeline Goreh- Jask
Length	1,200 kilometers	406 kilometers	1,000 kilometers

	Saudi oil pipeline East-West	Emirati oil pipeline Abu Dhabi-Fujairah	Iranian oil pipeline Goreh-Jask
Maximum capacity	5-6.2 million barrels per day	1.6 million barrels per day	1 million barrels per day
The proportion of transfer through the pipeline out of total production (Roughly)	50%	60%	40% • In case the embargo on Iranian oil exports is lifted

Source: <https://bit.ly/3wHTUYQ> <https://bit.ly/3c7bnlx> <https://bit.ly/2SKUIxs> <https://bit.ly/3fEVwgm>

What can be concluded from the table is that the Strait of Hormuz is a bottleneck for all countries though Iran would be hit the hardest if navigation in the strait was disrupted via it resorting to subversive attacks. Iran has no adequate alternatives, and perhaps it will resort to such an option only in case of urgent necessity. However, Iran carrying out limited provocative acts still remains likely.

### Conclusion

Iran's announcement of operating the Goreh-Jask pipeline marked a major transformation in its routes to export oil, hence reducing its dependence on passing through the Strait of Hormuz. This pipeline also maximizes Iran's ability to establish petrochemical complexes in its southern regions while supporting industrial zones and establishing free economic zones. At the same time, it gives Iran more capacity to implement its previous threats to close the Strait of Hormuz to maritime navigation—which puts geopolitical pressure on the Gulf states which depend on navigation in the Strait of Hormuz to export their oil. The Gulf states—specifically the UAE and Saudi Arabia—when it comes to implementing pipeline projects— took the initiative to mitigate the danger of overly depending on the Strait of Hormuz to export their oil in light of Iranian threats to block navigation in the strait. But—until now—the capacities of these pipelines do not cover the full exporting capacity of the two countries—let alone that of Kuwait, Bahrain and Qatar which depend on the Strait of Hormuz for their entire maritime trade.

# The Military File

The Military File for the month of May 2021 discusses the most salient Iranian military and security developments. It mainly discusses the intensification of Iran's military activities in the field of electronic warfare in the aftermath of targeting the country's nuclear sites and the carrying out of naval drills to wrest control over the Strait of Hormuz. The file also casts light on the developments regarding the ongoing Vienna negotiations in light of the content of a book recently published in relation to Iran's intentions to pursue nuclear weapons. Finally, the file looks at the complications facing the International Atomic Energy Agency amid Iran's pursuit to obtain nuclear weapons.

## First: Military Activities

### Drills to Boost the Army's Capabilities to Counter Cyber threats

On May 25, 2021, the Iranian army kicked off cyberwarfare maneuvers in Isfahan, which it dubbed "Sky Shield 1400." The maneuvers aimed to elevate the capabilities of the army in the field of electronic warfare. At the beginning of the maneuvers, Admiral Habibollah Sayyari – deputy chief of the Iranian army for coordination affairs and commander of the army's strategic base Zulfaqar—said that the Sky Shield 1400 maneuvers are considered the biggest maneuvers to be carried out by the electronic warfare division within the army in recent years. These maneuvers saw the participation of rapid response units and air defense systems of ground, and air defense forces, as well as the army's naval forces across vast swathes of the country. Sayyari indicated that the drill would include carrying out missions of electronic defense to repel small aircraft and attack drones. Moreover, drills would simulate "the infiltration of smart small aircraft and attack drones to destroy predetermined targets"—with coverage from electronic warfare units. There would also be training on aerial interception, cyber defense, watertight and swift examination and analysis of information to monitor and detect electronic signals as well as training on electronic surveillance.<sup>(27)</sup>

On the other side, Iran announced setting up a joint command to protect its nuclear sites from cyberattacks. This announcement came in the aftermath of the explosion at the Natanz nuclear enrichment facility last April. According to an Iranian source, the decision came after it became clear that the main reason behind the explosion at Natanz was the absence of coordination among the different security services responsible for securing the nuclear site. The mission to establish a coordination center was assigned to the General Staff of the Iranian Army.<sup>(28)</sup> But sources indicate that the task may be transferred to the IRGC.

It is worth mentioning that the Iranian army on May 18 conducted a maneuver dubbed “Fath-1” (Conquest-1) to raise the capabilities of the army regarding cyber defense to counter cyber threats. Admiral Habibollah Sayyari indicated that cyberspace today is considered the fifth pillar in the battlefield—one of the effective pillars to strengthen the army’s combat capability. Ignoring cyberspace as a new threat could expose Iran’s combat capabilities to severe risks.<sup>(29)</sup>

### **Iranian Drills: Scenarios in Case the Strait of Hormuz Is Closed**

The National Interest indicated that Iran’s naval forces have launched a new strategy to wrest control over the Gulf via launching waves of armed speedboats. Iran carried out drills and simulated the closure of the Strait of Hormuz in case a new conflict breaks out in the Arabian Gulf. Satellite imagery showed the deployment of Bavar-2 flying boats near the naval base in Bandar Abbas overlooking the Strait of Hormuz. These boats are extremely speedy and have the ability to fly above sea level at low altitudes, hence enabling them to maneuver. According to the author of the article published in the National Interest, Iran does not seek to use these flying boats to inflict direct blows against its foes, but it could use them to destabilize the situation in the Strait of Hormuz if any conflict breaks out in the future. They could also be used for skimming ahead as a prelude to carrying out attacks using bigger boats and ambushing all submarines of different sizes. They are equipped with night-vision goggles, cameras, and real-time datalinks. Their armament is comprised of a single machine gun. Iran also claims it has missile – or rocket-launching capability. But —according to the author of the article – there is little evidence of it so far.<sup>(30)</sup>

**Image 1: The Iranian small boats are characterized by high speed and the ability to fly at extremely low altitudes above sea level. A boat can only carry two individuals.**



Source: <https://arbne.ws/3wWqd6H>

On the other side, the US Department of Defense (the Pentagon) said that a US Coast Guard vessel had fired warning shots at Iranian boats that approached a US Navy vessel in the Strait of Hormuz.

The spokesman for the Pentagon John Kirby accused the Iranian boats of behaving aggressively near US cruisers that were escorting the guided-missile submarine USS Georgia. The statement of the US Department of Defense said that 13 speed boats approached the US naval vessel at a distance of 140 meters. The statement added that the behavior of the boats was unsafe and unprofessional. It is a kind of activity that could lead to somebody getting hurt and could lead to a real miscalculation in the region, and this does not serve anybody's interests.<sup>(31)</sup>

### **Unveiling New Military Products**

In the context of Iran's tireless pursuit to modernize its military capabilities and plug its defense gaps, the IRGC revealed a host of new homegrown military products.<sup>(32)</sup>

They have been manufactured recently to enter service, but their effectiveness has yet to be proved. They include:

**A.** The extra-heavy drone named Gaza—which is a multitask drone for surveillance, combat, and has a flight endurance of 35 hours. The drone can carry 13 bombs and covers an operational range of 2,000 kilometers. It is also capable of carrying 500 kilograms of different equipment to gather intelligence and signals. The drone will join the IRGC's aerospace fleet. Though there is no information or evidence to prove the drone's effectiveness, the announcement foreshadows that Iran is planning to invest in its drone program to plug the gap in its air force fleet, which recently suffered a tragic incident when an F-5 plane crashed and the pilots were killed. This incident indicated its air fleet is old and crumbling.<sup>(33)</sup>

**B.** The 9 D surface-to-air missiles system—which can engage with and destroy targets at a close distance such as cruise missiles and bombs released by jets and drones.

### **Second: The International Atomic Energy Agency Is in Limbo as Iran's Nuclear Program Advances**

Amid reports that there is noticeable progress in the ongoing negotiations in Vienna between the P5+1 countries and Iran on the Iranian nuclear file, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) blamed Iran for not allowing access to nuclear data after Tehran had put in place restrictions after February 23.<sup>(34)</sup>

The IAEA still waits for satisfactory answers to its previous concerns regarding suspicious nuclear activities. Yet Iran has not provided the necessary explanation for the nuclear particles found at three sites where the IAEA conducted inspections.<sup>(35)</sup>

### **A New Book Reveals Iran's Intentions**

The book titled "Iran's Perilous Pursuit of Nuclear Weapons" – authored by David Albright and Sarah Burkhard – sheds further light on Iran's AMAD project and its plans to develop nuclear weapons based on documents stolen from the country.<sup>(36)</sup>

The book reveals that Iran was preparing to test the main components of an atomic bomb in 2003 and carry out an underground test. Analyzing Iran's archive—which proves Iran's involvement in a non-peaceful nuclear program—revealed some aspects related to Iran's nuclear ambitions, mainly a project authorized by the highest authority as well as the budget allocations and organizational coordination.

The book mentions that the documents indicated authorization to develop an explosive nuclear device or to develop nuclear weapons under the government's supervision.<sup>(37)</sup>

In response to increasing pressure from European powers to freeze its nuclear program—and fearing a potential US military attack—Iran stopped working on the project. But intense efforts continued to be made to plug its technical gaps. Most of Iran's scientists and engineers working on the AMAD project were transferred to the Organization of Defensive Innovation and Research (SPND) under the leadership of Mohsen Fakhrizadeh. In addition to the underground facilities – such as the Parchin enrichment installation near Tehran—records confirm that more than 10 foreign experts specifically partook in Iran's nuclear weapons development program. In addition, the documents shed light on other multiple tests in 2003 or before this date. This is in addition to Iran obtaining 5 kilograms of high enriched uranium (HEU) from a foreign source.

Iran also was not heedless of obtaining the capability to deliver a nuclear weapon. It prepared to develop an initial prototype of a missile-launching system using the Shahab-3 missile. Furthermore, the documents reiterate that Iranian scientists tested a neutron detonator in addition to finding proof of Iran's different options regarding suitable testing locations.

### **The desire to return to the nuclear deal pays no heed to the facts related to advances in Iran's nuclear program**

If the information presented by Israel to the IAEA is proven to be true, it is inexplicable how the IAEA's final assessment of the dangers posed by Iran's nuclear activities was somewhat dismissive. This indicates Washington's hastiness to resolve the Iranian nuclear file by returning to the nuclear deal despite it being flawed in light of its focus on competing with China in the East.

Iran did not stop at suspending IAEA inspections of its nuclear activities. But it started enriching uranium up to 60 percent in April—as opposed to 3.67 percent set out in the nuclear deal.<sup>(38)</sup>

Considering the absence of any effective monitoring system, it is possible that Iran will enrich uranium at 80 percent or 90 percent – not only 60 percent –securing the capability to manufacture nuclear weapons.

Considering the evidence proving Iran's breaches of the nuclear deal, the negotiations cannot turn a deaf ear to the significant questions ignored in 2015. Evidence clearly shows that Iran's nuclear program is advancing towards developing a nuclear weapon. And the stakes are increasing because of the existence of diverse delivery systems that have been prepared for a nuclear weapon.<sup>(39)</sup>

## **Conclusion**

It is expected that Iran will continue with the modernization of its military capabilities and plug the defensive gaps it has and enhance its means of deterrence so that it can effectively counter any Western threats. It will also seek to secure negotiation levers through launching military attacks in the Arabian Gulf and the Middle East and cling tight to its nuclear ambitions. This orientation is evident in Iran increasing its military budget, according to what has recently been published by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute.

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# Arab Affairs

**A**rab Affairs addresses three files. The first file deals with Gulf-Iran relations and focuses on the developments regarding the proliferation of Iranian militias in Iraq as well as Gulf attempts to support independent Iraqi decision making. The second file looks at Iran's presence in Yemen by shedding light on the Yemeni peace process, Iran's role, and the implications of the Houthi-Iranian offensive on Ma'rib. The last file covers Iran's presence in Syria and its efforts to consolidate its presence there by establishing a consulate in Aleppo and a new military base, and also examines the developments regarding the railway connection between Iran, Iraq and Syria.



# Iran and the Gulf

Gulf-Iran relations are still seeking a way out of the current phase of crisis and stagnation. The Iraqi government realized that it is in the middle of the crisis between Iran and the Gulf states, and the only way out is to adopt an active role to exit Iraq from the internal polarization which has dominated the Iraqi front for a long time. This was reflected in the Iraqi provision of a platform for a possible rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Therefore, the Gulf-Iran relations file discusses Gulf-Iran rivalry in Iraq, focusing on the proliferation of pro-Iran armed militias in Iraqi territory.

## First: The Developments Regarding the Deployment of Iranian Militias in Iraq

Reuters published a report which mentioned that Iran had established armed groups from amongst its most powerful militias in Iraq, and it had trained them in drone warfare, surveillance and online propaganda. Furthermore, they are directly linked to Iran's Quds Force, the IRGC arm that controls Tehran's allied militias abroad. These new armed groups are fiercely loyal and extremist, and this marks a shift away from Iran depending on large groups to strengthen its influence in Iraq.<sup>(1)</sup> The presence of pro-Iranian Iraqi militias provides Iran with a platform to counter Gulf convergence attempts or investments in Iraq, and they allow Iran to attack the Gulf states, with Tehran providing these militias with missiles or drones that can cross the Iraqi border.

Iran perceives Iraq to be an inalienable part of its regional influence, a bargaining chip with the West in any negotiations, and an arena for settling disputes. Iran also believes that Iraq provides it with a platform to threaten neighboring countries indirectly without being held directly responsible for its hostile actions and provides it opportunities to create reliable cadres to keep Iraq under its hegemony. The Reuters report indicates that Iran's efforts to restructure its militias in Iraq is in response to recent setbacks, particularly after the death of its military mastermind and Quds Force commander Qassem Soleimani who closely controlled and managed the Shiite factions in Iraq. Following the killing of Qassem Soleimani and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, Iraq's large pro-Iranian militias were forced to adopt a less public profile after backlash leading to huge demonstrations against Iranian influence in addition to the internal divisions these militias experienced. Iran considered that these divisions made it much more difficult to control its proxy militias.<sup>(2)</sup> With this recent shift, Iran is trying to keep the management of its proxy militias away from the Iraqi side.<sup>(3)</sup>



## Second: Gulf Efforts to Support the Independence of Iraqi Decision Making

The economy and political support are two key factors contributing to Iraq seeking independence from Iran's influence and hegemony. The Gulf states are seeking to access Iraq to change the equation and to restore Iraq to its Arab space, and support it against Iran.

One of the most prominent Gulf moves to strengthen relations with Iraq was the invitation extended to the Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kazemi to visit the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia at the beginning of last March. One of the most prominent results of this visit as perceived by some was "Iraq's restoration of its balance, and the region's balance as well, starting from Iraq." Iraq's orientation towards its Arab depth is in the right direction and this will contribute to its stability and development after a long pause because of internal political and military conditions. In the same context, the interventions in Iraq's internal affairs led to catastrophic results and delayed development and progress.<sup>(4)</sup> In the wake of this visit, Iraqi politics became active to facilitate Iran-Saudi dialogue in relation to outstanding issues in the region.

At the beginning of this month, His Highness Deputy Minister of Defense of Saudi Arabia Prince Khalid bin Salman bin Abdulaziz visited Iraq heading a high-powered delegation. The visit included important meetings with the Iraqi President Barham Salih and Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kazemi. In addition, a meeting was held with Iraq's Parliament Speaker, Muhammad al-Halbous. During these meetings, aspects of and ways to enhance cooperation were discussed. Five bilateral agreements were signed in several economic and security fields, including the activation of commercial land transport between the two countries.<sup>(5)</sup> It was reported that Saudi Arabia designated the finances to restore the Ibn Al-Khatib Hospital in the Iraqi capital, Baghdad, after a deadly fire tore through the hospital.<sup>(6)</sup> This designation reflects the Kingdom's support to Iraq in difficult times.

On the other hand, the UAE announced an initiative to strengthen economic



and investment relations and cooperation with Iraq, as well as investments estimated at \$3 billion. The joint statement at the conclusion of the official visit of Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kazemi to Abu Dhabi indicated that the Emirati initiative aims to strengthen economic and investment relations, create new opportunities for cooperation and partnership, and fuel economic, social and development growth. The two sides also expressed the need for security and military cooperation, information exchange to combat terrorism, the expansion of cooperation in the field of energy, and the promotion of investment between the two countries.<sup>(7)</sup> The data of the UAE Ministry of Economy shows that foreign trade with Iraq amounted in 2019 to about \$15.1 billion.<sup>(8)</sup>

It can be said that the competition will be intense given the Gulf states' efforts to keep Iraq away from the Iranian sphere and restore it to its Arab fold. Tehran will try to confront this and maintain its presence in Iraq via depending on its proxy militias to influence Iraq's direction. The recent Iranian restructuring of its allied Iraqi militias was to ensure the continuation of Tehran's influence in Iraq and to counter any Gulf efforts to reverse the equation in Iraq. It will be difficult for Iran to compete with the Gulf's political and economic role and the Arab dimension in Iraq. Therefore, Iran will be keen to maintain the strength and momentum of its influence in Iraq via depending on its Shiite militias. Through these militias, Iran adopts a carrot and stick policy with the Iraqi people and government.

## Conclusion

Although strategic differences between Iran and the Gulf states still exist, there are signs of a mutual desire to begin dialogue. Iraq, via acting as a mediator, is interested in benefiting from this dialogue and its outcomes to serve its future interests. It may be able to help in bringing Iran and the Gulf states together. By hosting regional talks, Iraq wants to ensure that the country is not at the center of contention and competition but rather is a place of calm. It seems that there is hope to ease tensions in the region and to reach a compromise solution resulting in coexistence and positive competition rather than conflict and tension.

# Iran and Yemen

The Yemeni file recently witnessed international momentum in the corridors of the United Nations and the UN Security Council as well as international and regional talks in the Omani capital Muscat in May to end the conflict in Yemen. The parties discussed the initiative of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to solve the Yemeni crisis and the US desire to end the Yemeni crisis. On the other hand, the intransigence of the Houthi militia and its insistence on escalating military operations, especially in the governorate of Ma'rib together with the prominent Iranian role in disrupting the political solution in Yemen, are a stumbling block in the path of reaching peace in Yemen. As a result, the discrepancy in the official diplomatic position of the Iranian government and the actual orientation of the IRGC reflects Iran's position towards the Yemeni file, and this has implications and political dimensions in relation to serving Iranian interests. We will review the most prominent international efforts to achieve peace in Yemen and the political dimensions to impede the Houthis and the Iranian government in Yemen's peace process.

## First: Yemen's Peace Process and the Iranian Role

Marking the continuation of regional and international efforts, the Yemeni crisis recently witnessed, especially in early May, unprecedented political and diplomatic moves to reach a suitable Yemeni political settlement. The Omani capital witnessed visits, meetings and discussions which were held by multiple international parties, most notably the UN special envoy for Yemen Martin Griffiths, US Special Envoy for Yemen Tim Lenderking, Saudi Arabia's Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan and Iran's foreign minister. A few days before these discussions, a Houthi delegation was present in the Omani capital. <sup>(9)</sup>

All the parties concerned with the Yemeni peace process have made it a top priority to stop the war. This includes the initiative of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the position of the US administration which has made it a key priority to end the war in Yemen in line with President Biden's dictate. However, the position of the Houthis backed by the Iranian government was and still is a major reason for the stalemate of all initiatives and talks that aim to achieve peace in Yemen.

In a statement after the negotiations, the office of the UN envoy for Yemen announced that it had failed to reach a solution to stop the war, end the Houthi escalation and reduce the risks that threaten the lives of the Yemeni

people. The head of the Houthis' negotiating delegation, Mohammed Fleita, denounced all efforts to implement a ceasefire and end the Yemeni crisis. The Houthis set impossible conditions before the international community in order to disrupt the political process and thwart the efforts to end the war and the Yemeni crisis, and also to give a justification and cover for the military escalation in Ma'rib and their violations of the truce in Hodeidah, ignoring all UN warnings.<sup>(10)</sup>

In a briefing to the UN Security Council on May 12 by the UN envoy Martin Griffiths, he said, "Despite the redoubled efforts in recent months to reach a peaceful solution to the conflict in Yemen, I am unfortunately not here to report that the parties are closing in on a deal." Griffiths reported the seriousness of the military escalation by Houthis in Ma'rib and the astonishing loss of life it had caused, including children who were mercilessly thrown into the battle by the Houthis.<sup>(11)</sup>

In light of UN efforts to end the conflict, the UN envoy met with the leader of the Houthis in Sana'a in late May. After the meeting, he expressed his deep frustration regarding the resumption of the political process. It is worth noting that the US Special Envoy for Yemen Timothy Lenderking explicitly reported the negative role played by the Iranian government in the Yemeni peace process saying, "The negative role played by Tehran in the Yemeni territories has not seen any decline or positive development."<sup>(12)</sup>

It is worth noting that the IRGC Commander Hussein Salami said on May 5, 2021 after the Muscat talks failed, "Currently, the balance of power is shifting to the Houthis' advantage." He instructs the Houthi military and terrorist escalation inside and outside Yemen. He claimed that the air defenses and Saudi Arabia's counterattacks were unable to counter the Houthis' terrorist attacks.<sup>(13)</sup>

This statement by Salami is a clear reflection of the Iranian desire and the Iranian role in disrupting a political solution in Yemen by instructing the Houthis to militarily escalate further. It also reflects the Houthis' dependence on Iran and the decisions made by its military leaders.

## **Second: The Implications of the Houthi-Iran Escalation on Ma'rib**

Despite international condemnations regarding the Houthi military escalation in Ma'rib Governorate and international calls for an immediate cessation of military operations, the Houthis' military operations continued in the surrounding areas of Ma'rib. The battles witnessed heavy human losses, including the killing of children who were thrown by the Houthis into the battle.

Many observers consider the Houthis' insistence on military escalation in Ma'rib as a major impediment in regional and international efforts to end the war in Yemen. The governorate is home to gas and oil fields. There is also a power plant in the governorate that provides approximately 40 percent of Yemen's electricity. There are international companies such as Exxon Mobil Corp and Total SA in the governorate. Therefore, the Houthis believe that controlling this governorate is a top priority.<sup>(14)</sup>

The Houthis seek to control Ma'rib before considering any political settlement, to use it as a negotiating pressure card to strengthen their

political position in any upcoming peace talks. The Iranian side bets on the Houthis taking control of Ma'rib because this is a pressure card that it can take into talks regarding the nuclear agreement, according to analysis published by the US news agency Associated Press. Some believe that the Iranian government is trying to trade the Yemeni file for something more permanent, in reference to the Iranian nuclear deal.<sup>(15)</sup>

This explains the Iranian government's interest in the Ma'rib battle, and on this matter there is great interaction between IRGC leaders, Iran's media and the Iranian government's parties in the region. It also attempts to exercise its propaganda role. Hezbollah's Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah claimed that the Houthis' control over Ma'rib will have significant repercussions on the political solution. Many consider this position to be consistent with the Houthis' point of view. The two sides believe that military escalation will bring them political and economic gains, even if this is at the expense of the Yemeni people's blood.<sup>(16)</sup>

In this regard, the economic assistant to the Quds Force Commander Rustom Qassemi announced that the Iranian government had supplied weapons to the Houthis to militarily escalate further. He also mentioned that there are military advisers in Yemen to support the Houthis. The Foreign Ministry denied Rustom Qassemi's remarks and claimed that his remarks do not reflect the official position of the Iranian government. The Foreign Ministry mentioned that the Iranian government's support for the Houthis is solely political and that it supports the efforts of the United Nations to find a political solution to the Yemeni crisis.<sup>(17)</sup>

While the remarks of the leaders of the IRGC reflect the reality and the desire of the Iranian government to fuel the conflict in Yemen, the statements of the Foreign Ministry reflect support for a peaceful solution in Yemen. This divergence serves the interests of the Iranian government for other political purposes. Rustom spoke out openly about this in response to Iran's Foreign Ministry. He stated that the Foreign Ministry is involved in the negotiations game and that they have forgotten the policies of the revolution. It is worth noting that the International Institute for Iranian Studies highlighted in its report published in March 2021 the implications and dimensions of the discrepancy between Iran's military approach towards the Yemeni file and the diplomatic path it pursues simultaneously to serve its interests.<sup>(18)</sup>

## Conclusion

Houthi attempts to fuel the conflict in Yemen continue, and the Iranian government continues to instruct the Houthis not to take any serious step towards ending the Yemeni crisis. Iran provides them with weapons, advisers and media propaganda to militarily escalate further on Ma'rib. The Houthis have targeted populated neighborhoods and camps for the displaced, which has exacerbated the humanitarian situation in Yemen, prolonged the crisis and the suffering of the Yemeni people, and hampered the process of reaching a political settlement. The international efforts and the Saudi peace initiative have isolated the Houthis. The Houthi-Iranian behavior is a major factor behind the existing stalemate to find a

political solution to the crisis. Therefore, international parties criticized the Houthi escalation and Iran's behavior resulting from the discrepancy in its position. On the one hand it calls for a political solution, whereas on the other hand it supports the Houthis to militarily escalate in Ma'rib, thus further complicating the path towards peace in Yemen.

# Iran and Syria

The most prominent developments in Syria-Iran relations took place during May, particularly regarding Iran's consolidation of its strategic presence inside Syria. Iran on the one hand managed to simultaneously pursue a diplomatic and military track through the opening of its first consulate and established an additional military base in Aleppo. On the other hand, Iran strengthened its economic role by reviving the railway project linking it to Iraq and Syria and to the Mediterranean Sea.

## **First: Iran's Presence in Syria Strengthened by a New Consulate and Military Base**

In an unsurprising move, Tehran opened a consulate in the Syrian city of Aleppo following a visit by its Foreign Minister Javad Zarif to Damascus on May 12, 2021 during which he met with Bashar al-Assad and Foreign Minister Faisal al-Mekdad to discuss ways to strengthen bilateral relations. According to the statements of the two foreign ministers, this move aims to strengthen economic, commercial, and cultural relations between the two countries.<sup>(19)</sup> However, beyond the reasoning that Zarif and Mekdad mentioned, it can be said that this move may have other implications<sup>(20)</sup> regarding Iran's position on the Syrian political and security scene, particularly post-presidential elections in the country. The Iranian consulate based in Aleppo can play a role in implementing a long-term program to serve Iran's interests in Syria, particularly among the other actors who are no less involved in the country, such as Russia and Turkey.

Considering Iran's past in the region, especially its experience in Iraq, it can be said that the opening of a consulate in Aleppo, despite the absence of a large Iranian community except for multinational militias deployed by Tehran to consolidate its influence in Aleppo, is a prelude to a series of consulates that Tehran will open in other Syrian cities. This perception is reinforced by Tehran's appointment of a new ambassador to Damascus<sup>(21)</sup> in conjunction with the consulate's opening. This gives the impression that there is an Iranian move to expand its diplomatic presence in the coming period, especially as the question of whether Bashar al-Assad will remain in power or not has now been settled. This is supported by Zarif's previously declared willingness for Tehran to participate in overseeing the recently concluded Syrian election.<sup>(22)</sup>

Tehran may also have wanted to strengthen its military presence via using a diplomatic cover in response to the United States intensifying its rhetoric and field escalation against Iran's presence in Syria and the crowding out of Russia's as well as Turkey's presence in the region. This is reinforced by Iran's moves and the movement of its proxy militias which have deepened and expanded their role in this country. A new Iranian military base was recently established in the north of the village of Hattin near the Euphrates River in the countryside

of Maskanah east of Aleppo, an area opposite the areas where the Global Coalition and the Syrian Democratic Forces are situated in Aleppo. Tehran has strengthened its newly established base with military equipment and machinery in addition to continuing its recruitment of new fighters led by the Afghan Fatemiyoun Brigade in the eastern countryside of Aleppo. The number of recruits has risen to about 805 following an intensification in recruitment in early February.<sup>(23)</sup>

## Second: Update on the Iran-Iraq-Syria Railway Network

In conjunction with the announcement of the opening of its consulate, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani indicated that work on its railway project has resumed. The railway will connect Iran with Iraq, Syria, and the Mediterranean Sea. A network of railways will run from the city of Shalamcheh in southwestern Iran to Basra in southern Iraq to the Syrian city of Latakia on the Mediterranean Sea, funded by Iranian investments in the coming years.<sup>(24)</sup> This project is of great importance to the Iranian government as it contributes to strengthening its influence in the region by reaching the Mediterranean Sea. This project also has economic significance as it will link commercial cities to each other. Among the cities Rouhani referred to were Abadan, Shalamcheh, Khorramshahr, Basra, Aleppo, and Damascus. Thus, Iran's consulate in Aleppo – which will be a prelude to other consulates opening in the future – will play a general role in the governorate.

Both the Iranian and Syrian governments are counting on this project for economic and political objectives. From the Syrian perspective, this project also has political dimensions such as overcoming the sanctions imposed on Syria. In addition, it also has economic dimensions such as transit fees that will go straight to the Syrian treasury. Lastly, Syria will benefit from the shipment of goods from Iraq and neighboring countries, including oil.<sup>(25)</sup> Iran is depending on this project- which is considered an Iranian dream – because it will pass through the countries considered to be of strategic importance to Tehran and its militias that are deployed along this line. It will also guarantee it a supply route to transfer weapons to its most prominent arm, Hezbollah, in Lebanon. Iran will also reap economic and political benefits that will compensate it for the losses it has incurred in Syria.

Although this project is not a new one – as discussions about linking Iran to Syria by rail began in 2012 when Iran signed a memorandum of understanding with Iraq for the construction of this railway – it has not yet been completed. Approximately 32 kilometers of this line is needed to complete the link between the Iranian city of Shalamcheh and the Iraqi city of Basra. Successive Iranian governments failed in their attempts to implement the Shalamcheh-Basra railway project.<sup>(26)</sup> The delay on the Iraqi side however is due to non-compliance by the Iraqi side and its reservations about transferring land to the Iranian Mostazafan Foundation (Bonyad-e Mostazafan). Recently, the Iraqi government agreed to link Iraq with Iran by completing the project linking the cities of Basra and Shalamcheh.<sup>(27)</sup>

The other main problem impeding the completion of this line is not related to the Shalamcheh-Basra line, but rather to the completion of the Deir Ezzor-Al Bukamal railway adjacent to Iraq, which is more than 147 kilometers long. Only a small part of this railway has been completed. The new line is part of the

international transport hub west and east of Syria's ports – via Aleppo to Iraq, Iran and the East Asian countries – and constitutes a strategic corridor for Syria and Iraq, particularly for their transit operations.

### **Conclusion**

Iran is continuing to refute all interpretations that point to its declining influence and control in Syria and Iraq. This is evident via Iran's latest moves this month such as the opening of a consulate in Syria's economic capital, Aleppo, a city that has a large presence of pro-Iranian militias. This is also evident in the opening of a military base nearby. In addition, Iran announced its plan to revive the railway project linking Iran with Iraq all the way to Syria and the Mediterranean Sea. These moves highlight the reality of Iran's new plan to strengthen its influence in Syria and open the door for its economic and military moves.

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# International Affairs

International affairs address the US-Iran and the Europe-Iran files, both of which discuss the Vienna negotiations and the course of the talks. Firstly, the US-Iran file discusses the details of the third, fourth, and fifth rounds of negotiations. This is followed by looking at the factors which have impacted the Vienna negotiations such as Republican opposition in Congress, the Iranian presidential election, and Israeli pressure on the United States as well as international pressure. The report then discusses US pressure on Iran and finally the opportunities and challenges in relation to returning to the nuclear agreement. Secondly, the Europe-Iran file discusses the developments regarding Iran's nuclear file and US sanctions and the issues connected to the ongoing dispute between the European and Iranian sides. In addition, this file discusses the revelations concerning Iran's activities to develop weapons of mass destruction, the final judgment in the case of the Iranian diplomat Assadollah Asadi, the detention of foreigners in Iran and their use as leverage against the West, and finally the Iran-Ukraine negotiations regarding the downing of the Ukraine passenger plane.



# Iran and the United States

The Vienna negotiations during May 2021 continue to cast a shadow over US-Iran relations. The parties to the negotiations are discussing the revival of the nuclear agreement and the return of both Iran and the United States to meeting their obligations. Yet there seems to be a gap in expectations and positions. This gap has prevented an agreement being reached despite five rounds of negotiations. This report will address several elements, including: the nuclear negotiations in Vienna, the factors impacting the Vienna negotiations, ongoing US pressure and the opportunities and challenges regarding a return to the nuclear agreement.

## First: Vienna Negotiations Between Iran and the United States

The Vienna negotiations between Iran and the United States are still ongoing, and the rounds of negotiations, areas of disagreement and agreement can be noted as follows:

**1. Third round of negotiations:** The third round of nuclear negotiations ended on May 1, 2021. This round revealed limited and slow progress contrary to expectations and hopes. Despite the United States indicating a positive response in relation to lifting some sanctions, this was not convincing to Iran, as it demands all Trump-era sanctions to be lifted. Areas of difference between the concerned parties became more apparent when discussions regarding nuclear obligations arose. The United States demanded adding new nuclear obligations, particularly related to the destruction of advanced centrifuges after it became apparent that Iran had made important strides in enriching uranium and developing a nuclear bomb. Iran did not want to put the brakes on any experience it may have gained from working on advanced centrifuges or was not interested in destroying them.<sup>(1)</sup> Furthermore, the United States put forward issues related to improving the terms of the nuclear agreement as well as issues concerning Iran's ballistic missile program and de-escalation in the region – something that Iran is not willing to discuss in Vienna. Ultimately, this round ended without achieving a breakthrough.

**2. Fourth round of negotiations:** The fourth round of negotiations started on May 7, and it was agreed in this round to start with technical talks and for the working committees to draft the agreement. According to the Iranians, the United States had linked the partial lifting of sanctions to regional issues and human rights. It became clear that there are a number of details which are disputed, and the US secretary of state expressed that any step taken by the United States regarding the nuclear agreement will depend on the extent of Iran's readiness to comply once again with the agreement. This compliance



should also be a starting point for commencing negotiations regarding other outstanding issues with Tehran with the aim of limiting its activities in the region.

This round of talks ended. Meanwhile, the interim agreement allowing the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to monitor some of Iran's nuclear sites is expected to expire soon. Iran has threatened to implement the Iranian Parliament's decision to shut down IAEA surveillance cameras at its nuclear sites, ultimately severing international monitoring of Iran's nuclear program. However, an agreement was reached between Iran and the IAEA to extend indirect monitoring of Tehran's nuclear sites until the end of June.

**3. Fifth round of Vienna negotiations:** The agreement between Iran and the IAEA paved the way for the start of the fifth round of talks on the May 25. The parties expressed a desire for this round to be the last one, especially as all parties were anticipating the impact of the Iranian presidential election held in mid-June 2021. The election, however, is expected to have a negative impact on the course of negotiations given the victory of the "hardline" candidate Ebrahim Raisi who is known for his hostile positions against the nuclear agreement and the United States.

### **Second: Factors Impacting the Vienna Negotiations**

The Vienna negotiations took place in May 2021 against the backdrop of influencing factors such as:

**1. Opposition by Republicans in Congress:** The Biden administration's return to the nuclear agreement is being impeded by the Republicans who have rejected negotiations with Iran. On May 12, 44 Republican senators sent a letter to Biden demanding that he refrain from negotiating with Iran because of its expected support to Hamas if billions of dollars were released to it. Biden had previously received a similar letter in March 2021 when several lawmakers had submitted a bill requiring the president to seek congressional endorsement of any agreement he intends to sign with Iran. Despite doubts that the bill will pass because of the Democrats having a majority in Congress, opponents of the agreement may be able to attract more supporters to their side.

**2. Iran's presidential election:** The Guardian Council's decision to determine the eligibility of candidates for contesting the presidential race on June 18 set the stage for a "conservative" win. Ebrahim Raisi, a "hardline conservative" has won the election. Raisi's arrival to the presidency before the deal is signed will undoubtedly have implications for the ongoing negotiations. Iran will resist further any amendments to the nuclear agreement and the inclusion of other outstanding issues such as its ballistic missile program and destabilizing behavior in the region which will impede international efforts to revive the nuclear deal. However, there may be an inclination to end negotiations before the election. If the agreement is signed beforehand this will allow Raisi to reap the economic benefits that will ultimately restore the popularity of the "conservative" faction - which has declined in recent years. Raisi's electoral victory is also considered to be a pressure card to use against the United States to quicken its return to the nuclear agreement.<sup>(2)</sup>

**3. Israeli pressure on the United States:** Israel has been pressing to persuade the Biden administration not to rejoin the nuclear agreement or at the very least to consider its concerns, given that reviving the nuclear deal will be disastrous for Israel's national security. To reassure Israel, Biden received Mossad Chief Yossi Cohen at the White House and assured him that Washington has a long way to go in the talks with Iran before it agrees to rejoin the nuclear agreement. Biden also confirmed that his country will continue to seek Israel's view on Iran in the future. The two parties also agreed to establish a working group to focus on Iranian drones and missiles.<sup>(3)</sup>

**4. Mediators and international pressure:** The Europeans are playing a mediating role between the United States and Iran – taking into consideration the importance of reviving the nuclear agreement to control the Iranian nuclear program – especially after Iran's escalatory measures regarding uranium enrichment. The Europeans seem more inclined towards the US position that Iran should return to its commitments and stop its escalatory measures. China and Russia also have a firm position regarding the necessity of reviving the nuclear agreement. However, both parties believe that the United States should take the first step towards returning to the nuclear agreement since it withdrew initially. This will ultimately strengthen Iran's position in future negotiations.

### **Third: US Pressure on Iran**

Despite the current negotiations in Vienna, the United States is partially pursuing its pressure policy on Iran as explained below:



### **1. Secondary Sanctions**

The United States continues to impose secondary sanctions on entities and individuals who violate its sanctions on Iran. A federal jury in Texas convicted Mehrdad Ansary, a 39-year-old Iranian citizen, for scheming to obtain and ship “dual-use” equipment to Iran in violation of US sanctions. Furthermore, an American woman was arrested and charged by the US Department of Justice for illegally exporting goods to Iran.<sup>(4)</sup> These US measures are in addition to prominent US figures warning major businesses against dealing with Iran.

### **2. Confronting Iranian Moves in the Region**

The United States also continues its pressure on Iran at the regional level. On May 8, the US Navy’s Fifth Fleet said that the guided-missile cruiser USS Monterey (CG 61) seized an illicit shipment of weapons from a stateless dhow in the international waters of the North Arabian Sea. The seized weapons are like those previously sent to the Houthis in Yemen. According to an initial investigation, the ship “came from Iran, again tying the Islamic Republic to arming the Houthis.”<sup>(5)</sup> On May 10, the US Department of Defense noted that a US Coast Guard ship fired approximately 30 warning shots after US naval vessels encountered a group of 13 vessels from Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Navy (IRGCN) in the Strait of Hormuz.<sup>(6)</sup>

### **3. The Pressure Imposed by the International Atomic Energy Agency**

The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) issued a report on Iran’s violations of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). The report noted that the IAEA was unable to fully verify the total volume of Iran’s enriched uranium stockpile. The IAEA is also concerned that the technical discussions between itself and Iran have not yielded the expected results. The IAEA said Iran’s stockpile of enriched uranium is around 16 times the limit stipulated in the 2015 nuclear deal that was signed with global powers. Moreover, it has said that Iran has failed to explain traces of uranium found at several undeclared

nuclear sites, possibly setting up a fresh diplomatic clash between Tehran and the West and possibly derailing wider nuclear talks.<sup>(7)</sup> The IAEA's report represents a pressure card against Iran during the ongoing negotiations.

#### **Fourth: Opportunities and Challenges Regarding a Return to the Nuclear Agreement**

There are real opportunities and challenges facing the revival of the nuclear deal, the most important are discussed below:

**1. The Absence of Direct Negotiations Between Iran and the United States**  
Although the current negotiations are moving much faster when compared to the negotiations leading to the 2015 nuclear program, the absence of direct negotiations between the two parties prolongs the negotiations at such a critical time.

**2. There is a lack of trust, particularly on Iran's part.** Iran is doubtful whether the United States will fulfil its commitments or not (i.e. lift the sanctions) and it is concerned that the United States may reimpose sanctions on Tehran in the future under any pretext via the snapback mechanism once it rejoins the nuclear deal.

**3. The United States does not want to lift the sanctions before it reaches a comprehensive agreement with Iran which would expand the scope of the 2015 nuclear deal.** The United States wants to amend the nuclear deal's time limit, address Iran's advanced centrifuges, its ballistic missile program and destabilizing regional behavior.

**4. An impasse over who takes the first step;** Iran believes that the party that withdrew from the nuclear deal must return to it. This position, is to some extent, backed by some European countries. The Biden administration, on the other hand, is fearful of losing its influence to reach a better deal if it was to lift the financial and oil sanctions on Iran.

**5. Disagreements over the lifting of US sanctions;** The United States does not want to lift all its sanctions on Iran. Rather, it only wants to lift the nuclear sanctions, and keep in place the other sanctions related to Iran's ballistic missile program and destabilizing regional behavior. In addition, it wants to negotiate the suspension of the other sanctions in accordance with updated decisions every three or six months. Iran, on the other hand, vigorously rejects such a step-by-step approach and rejects any temporary solution. Iran insists on limiting the negotiations regarding the nuclear program and insists that the United States must lift all the sanctions imposed since May 8, 2018 in return for Tehran's commitment to the nuclear deal.

#### **As for the opportunities regarding a return to the nuclear deal, some points need to be noted:**

**A.** The current Vienna negotiations are ongoing despite the differences because of the mutual desire to revive the existing nuclear deal.

**B.** There is international support to revive the nuclear deal and an international desire to control Iran's nuclear program, considering the estimations that Iran will be capable of developing a nuclear bomb within a few years.

**C.** Iran needs the nuclear deal to address its economic crisis, particularly in the aftermath of the coronavirus outbreak.

**D.** The United States seeks to control the situation in the Middle East and to confront geopolitical changes in the region and the world.

**E.** The 2015 nuclear deal has no alternative and the Biden administration has strongly criticized the Trump administration's maximum pressure strategy against Iran.

### **Conclusion**

The Vienna negotiations indicate a clear desire among all parties to revive the nuclear deal. Yet, there are disagreements between the two sides (Iran and the United States) that will not be overcome unless political compromises are made. Afterwards, a timetable needs to be set for Iran and the United States to return to their obligations under the nuclear deal. However, there are real questions about how the United States will resolve the rest of its concerns with Iran. One question is whether or not the United States can address its concerns with Iran if its sanctions, a pressure card, are removed on Iran.

# Iran and Europe

Even though the European Union imposed new sanctions on Iranian officials last month, the nuclear talks between Iran and the 4 + 1 group (the European troika, Russia and China) advanced (fourth and fifth rounds) without any obstacles despite internal Iranian opposition to European sanctions in response to human rights violations.

Recently, the fourth round of talks between global powers and Iran regarding the latter's nuclear program was held in Vienna. Then the fifth round began in June and the concerned states were optimistic that an understanding could be reached concerning Iran's compliance with the nuclear deal.

This part of the report highlights the developments in relation to the Iran-Europe relationship with a focus on the updates regarding Iran's nuclear program and US sanctions. In addition, the outstanding issues between Iran and Europe will be discussed.

## **First: Developments Regarding Iran's Nuclear Deal and US Sanctions**

In early May, Iran's Deputy Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi, mentioned that the negotiations had reached a point of maturity. Expecting the US sanctions to be lifted soon, Araghchi said that negotiations are still progressing in regard to the removal of the sanctions imposed on certain Iranians, entities and institutions.<sup>(8)</sup> At the conclusion of the fourth round of the nuclear talks, Araghchi said that an agreement (framework) had been reached but the details had not been finalized, as delegates returned to their capitals for consultation and they will return to complete the negotiations.<sup>(9)</sup>

The European troika (Germany, Britain and France) sensed tangible progress in the nuclear talks. However, they stressed that various outstanding issues should be addressed before finalizing the agreement. They also stressed that the IAEA should engage in the negotiations with Iran so that it can continuously monitor Iran's nuclear activities.<sup>(10)</sup> However, Iran's representative to the IAEA Kazem Gharibabadi confirmed that Iran and the IAEA have agreed to a one-month extension on a deal on surveillance cameras at Tehran's atomic sites. The arrangement gives the UN watchdog limited access to monitor Iran's nuclear plants after the initial three-month deal expired.<sup>(11)</sup>

Amid the optimistic signals that the parties to the nuclear negotiations will revive the nuclear agreement and lift US sanctions on Iran, Iran's Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif visited three European countries (Spain, Italy and Ireland) with the aim of promoting bilateral political, economic and social relations. The Vienna talks were discussed during Zarif's visits. Iranian media outlets considered Zarif's visits to be a diplomatic endeavor to push the

three European governments to revive their commercial ties and investment activities with Iran once the sanctions are lifted.<sup>(12)</sup>

Italy was Iran's largest trading partner in 2017 at a trade rate of €3.4 billion and Italy is ready to invest at least \$30 billion in Iran if the sanctions are lifted. Spain, on the other hand, had been purchasing oil from Iran which accounted for 9 percent of its total oil imports from 2015 to mid-2018. Iran's foreign minister also held a virtual video conference attended by some 100 Iranian and British business executives and commercial attaches to the Iranian embassy in London and the British embassy in Tehran. The aim was to explore trade and investment opportunities once the sanctions imposed on Iran are lifted.<sup>(13)</sup>

Nevertheless, lifting the sanctions on Iran and resuming economic relations between Iran and multiple global actors is not as straightforward as many Iranian officials suggest via their statements and actions. The results of the fifth round of the nuclear talks are encouraging. Yet, the details regarding the mechanisms are difficult and complex. One example is the advanced centrifuges recently installed at Iran's nuclear sites. Another is the need to extend Iran's "breakout-time" i.e. the time necessary to produce enough enriched uranium to make a nuclear bomb.

## **Second: Outstanding Issues Between Europe and Iran**

While Iran and Europe are keen to benefit from reviving the nuclear deal, particularly through trade and investment opportunities which are important to Europe, there are still contentious issues that impede political harmony in bilateral relations between Iran and European countries, such as:

### **1. Disclosure of Iranian Activities to Develop Weapons of Mass Destruction**

Three European intelligence agencies in Germany, the Netherlands and Sweden revealed that Iran, last year, sought to obtain technology for developing weapons of mass destruction and continued to work on nuclear devices. The Swedish report noted that "Iran also conducts industrial espionage, which is mainly targeted against Swedish hi-tech industry and Swedish products, which can be used in nuclear weapons programs. Iran is investing heavy resources in this area and some of the resources are used in Sweden."<sup>(14)</sup> Although such reports are not the first to disclose that Iran hides information about its suspicious nuclear sites where uranium is enriched and it intends to develop a nuclear bomb despite its repeated claims that its nuclear program is peaceful, such reports issued at such a critical time are likely to impede the current nuclear talks.

### **2. Assadollah Asadi: The Final Verdict in the Iranian Diplomat's Case**

The Iranian embassy in Brussels condemned the verdict issued by a Belgian court which sentenced the Vienna based Iranian diplomat Assadollah Asadi to 20 years in prison. The embassy's statement was issued after Asadi decided against appealing the verdict. Asadi was convicted of planning a bomb attack targeting an exiled Iranian opposition group in France, the Mujahedeen Khaleq or M.E.K. The embassy's statement declared that "Iran reserves its right to use all the legal mechanisms, including the Optional Protocol Concerning the

Compulsory Settlement of Disputes.” Iran believes that the Belgian court’s ruling against Assadollah Asadi violates the 1961 Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations.<sup>(15)</sup>

### **3. Detention of Foreigners in Iran and Using Them as Pressure Cards Against the West**

The arrest of European tourists or dual nationals (either Iranian-European or Iranian-European) in Iran have increased since the Trump administration withdrew from the nuclear deal in mid-2018. An Iranian court in Mashhad indicted French tourist Benjamin Briere in May, the month when nuclear deal talks reached their climax, on charges of “corruption on earth” and spreading “propaganda” against Iran. European countries condemned Iran’s actions and accused Iran of arresting Western nationals to use them as pressure cards, particularly over the past two decades.<sup>(16)</sup>

Among these detainees are Iranian-British dual nationals Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe and Anusheh Ashuri, Iranian-Swedish national Ahmad Reza Jalali, Iranian- Swiss businessman Kamal Alavi, Iranian-Austrian national Massoud Mossaheb, and Iranian-French anthropologist Fariba Adelkhah who is still under house arrest in Iran and plenty of other detainees and prisoners held in Iranian prisons.

### **4. Ukrainian-Iranian Negotiations Regarding the Downing of the Ukrainian Plane**

A third round of negotiations between Iran and Ukraine on the downing of Flight 752 will be held on the second and third days of June in the city of Kiev. Ukraine’s Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs and the head of the Ukrainian delegation in Tehran Yevhenii Yenin expressed his country’s opposition to Iran’s final technical report on the incident. Yenin also expressed disappointment that Iran was unresponsive, as it did not release the names of the suspects and did not respond to Ukraine’s proposals regarding joint investigations. He also stressed the determination of his country along with other concerned states to seek the truth before calculating the compensation owed in accordance with the details of the events that led to the downing of the plane.<sup>(17)</sup>

## **Conclusion**

The progress made in the nuclear talks between Iran and the 4 + 1 group, particularly the fifth round, resulted in positive signals and indicated the international resolve to overcome the differences which were caused by President Trump’s withdrawal from the nuclear deal in mid-2018 and Iran’s gradual violations of its obligations under the deal. Europe, however, still has security and political concerns regarding Iran, notably Iran’s missile program, its destabilizing actions, its flagrant violation of human rights, its support for terrorist attacks on European territories, its detention of European nationals for political objectives, its downing of the Ukrainian plane and its efforts to obtain equipment and techniques related to the development of weapons of mass destruction. In any case, Europe and the Middle East are waiting for the outcome of the final rounds of the nuclear talks and the mechanisms through which all outstanding issues will be addressed.

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