

MONTHLY REPORT



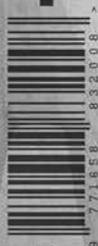
# IRAN CASE FILE

Your window on Iran from inside and abroad

June 2021



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



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June 2021

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# CONTENTS

<b>Executive Summary .....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Internal Affairs .....</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>The Ideological File .....</b>	<b>10</b>
1. Politicizing Fatwas and the Presidential Election .....	10
2. The Sunnis and the Iranian Election .....	12
<b>The Political File .....</b>	<b>14</b>
1. Engineering the Election in Favor of Ebrahim Raisi .....	14
2. The Lowest Voter Turnout Since the Revolution's Victory .....	15
3. Blank, Invalid and Lost Votes .....	15
4. The Major Challenges Facing Ebrahim Raisi .....	17
<b>The Economic File .....</b>	<b>18</b>
1. The Economic Background of the President-elect.....	18
2. Vision and Overall Direction to Run the Economy .....	19
3. Likely Substantial Changes and Potential Economic Results .....	20
<b>The Military File.....</b>	<b>24</b>
1. Russia Supplies Iran With a Satellite .....	24
2. Israeli Infiltrations Reveal the Weaknesses of Iran's Intelligence Apparatuses ..	25
3. Is It Possible to Return to the 2015 Nuclear Deal? .....	26
<b>Arab Affairs .....</b>	<b>31</b>
<b>Iran and the Gulf States .....</b>	<b>32</b>
1. The Positions of the Gulf States on the Election of Ebrahim Raisi.....	32
2. The Future of Saudi-Iran Talks Under the New Iranian Presidency .....	33
<b>Yemen and Iran .....</b>	<b>36</b>
1. The UN Blacklists the Houthi Militias for Violating Children's Rights.....	36
2. International Efforts to Facilitate the Yemeni Peace Process and the Houthi-Iranian Escalation.....	37
<b>Iran and Iraq .....</b>	<b>40</b>
1. The Implications of the US Airstrikes on Militia Sites on the Iraqi-Syrian Border	40
2. The Implications of the Tripartite Summit in Baghdad on Iranian Influence in Iraq .....	41
3. The Iraqi Position on Raisi's Victory and Its Repercussions on Iran's Strategy in Iraq .....	42
<b>Iran and Syria .....</b>	<b>44</b>
1. The Military Escalation in Syria and the Interests of the Actors.....	44
2. The Repercussions of Ebrahim Raisi's Victory on Iran-Syria Relations .....	45

<b>International Affairs</b> .....	<b>49</b>
<b>Iran and the United States</b> .....	<b>50</b>
1. The Win of Raisi: Its Impact on the Relationship With the United States .....	50
2. Outcomes and Repercussions .....	52
<b>Iran and Europe</b> .....	<b>54</b>
1. Europe and Iran's Presidential Election .....	54
2. The Two Parties' Overview Regarding the Nuclear Talks.....	55

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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The Iranian presidential election was the most significant event during the month of June 2021. It opened up discussions about all aspects of the crisis (internal and external) which Iran is facing including the political, economic, social, and cultural ones. The presidential election ended up with Ebrahim Raisi winning. This led to speculation about the government's options and the direction of its policies in the coming period — in light of Raisi's previous positions, orientations and his electoral platform as well his position in the political system and his close relationship with the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei.

At the ideological level, the Iranian government worked tirelessly to convince the Iranian people —who are brimming over with frustration due to the policies of the ruling elite — to head to the polling stations through ratcheting up religious discourse and issuing more fatwas. Both are tools employed by the government to rally the Iranian people to participate in the election. But the government's discourse was countered with an alternative discourse which attacked the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and rendered participation in the election unlawful as well as calling for the election to be boycotted.

At the political level, the Guardian Council's decision to disqualify most of the prominent presidential candidates led Ebrahim Raisi in the first round to win the election by a large margin. This election — boycotted by more than half of the Iranian voting population — experienced events that have not been witnessed since the 1979 revolution. For example, the election resulted in the lowest voter turnout, blank ballots were cast as well as many invalid and lost ballots.

At the economic level, electing a new president, who has new policies and directions makes it imperative to explore his economic vision. This is based on the fact that the economic crises facing Iran poses the biggest challenge to the Iranian government, which it has been experiencing for years.

The “hardline” movement — which Raisi represents — supports a “closed economy” managed by the government. Hence, it is expected that the incoming president will expand the government’s role in public investment and crowd out the private sector which has been severely impacted by US sanctions and the recession which Iran has been experiencing since 2018, particularly after the Trump administration withdrew unilaterally from the nuclear deal. Iran needs to revive the nuclear deal to ensure the inflow of oil as well as other export revenues. The most salient features of Raisi’s government are likely to include a closed and state centric economic system, the imposition of unfair taxes and state control over supply.

But experts question Raisi’s ability to address Iran’s deteriorating economic situation given his modest economic background, limited experience regarding managing economic and political affairs and the ambiguity surrounding his vision to revive the Iranian economy.

*The Military File* in June includes a host of developments. Western journalists have recently raised the issue of Iran’s plan to purchase sophisticated satellite systems from Russia, which will give the country significant ability to track prospective military targets in the Middle East. They also discussed Israeli infiltrations and military operations inside Iran, which exposed the weaknesses of Iran’s intelligence agencies.

On the level of Arab affairs, Gulf-Iran relations remained relatively cool. However, Raisi’s electoral victory grabbed more attention, leading to divergences with regard to his victory and raised a host of questions, including those related to the future of Saudi-Iran talks.

The Iranian president-elect did outline the scope of Iran’s relations with regional countries at his first press conference. He said that improving relations with neighboring countries is a key priority and there is no obstacle to reopening the Saudi and Iranian embassies in their respective countries. However, there is a lack of confidence in Raisi’s remarks due to multiple reasons such as Iran’s regional ambitions and the presence of Iranian-backed proxies in some Arab states. In addition, Raisi’s affiliation with the “hardliners” and the harmony between their positions such as the promotion of Iran’s expansionist plans, means that Raisi’s remarks were merely a “tactical move” with no parallel actions on the ground.

When it comes to Iran’s presence in Yemen, despite the Saudi-led Arab coalition’s commitment to UN-sponsored efforts to resolve the crisis, the Iranian-backed Houthis are continuing with their military escalation inside and outside Yemen. In parallel with Oman’s efforts to find common ground to arrive at a political settlement in Yemen, the UN decided to place the Houthis on its blacklist of groups violating children’s rights in Yemen. The US Department of State said that Washington is fed up with the Houthi escalation, particularly its repeated military attacks, and the threat it poses to civilians whether inside



or outside Yemen. It blamed the Houthis for the ongoing conflict in Yemen.

The Iraqi arena also witnessed consequential events, namely the airstrikes carried out by the US Army against the arms depots and caches operated by Iran's proxies in Iraq's city of Qa'im and Syria's city of Al Bukamal, both located on the Iraqi-Syrian border. These airstrikes were in response to repeated Katyusha rocket and drone attacks launched by militias against US troops and facilities in Iraq.

At the political level, the Iraqi capital Baghdad hosted a trilateral summit that brought together the Egyptian president, the Jordanian king and the Iraqi prime minister. The summit marked the starting point for cooperation between the three countries in multiple areas, such as to counter challenges and regional interventions. The importance of this summit lies in the fact that it pushes Iraq towards the Arab sphere, which angers the Iranian side and prompts it to thwart this movement. It is likely the Iranian government, particularly during the tenure of Raisi, will give the Quds Force the green light to escalate in Iran's spheres of influence, especially in Iraq.

In relation to the Syrian crisis, the influential actors resumed their military escalation. After a short hiatus, Iranian tensions with Israel and the United States have resurfaced once again in Syria. This came after Israeli warplanes bombarded Iranian military positions in Syria amid concerns that the political changes and the radical "hardliners'" ascent to power in both Israel and Iran would lead the Syrian territories to turn into an arena for settling scores between the two sides.



However, US aircraft conducted air raids against Iranian-backed militia groups in eastern Syria. The militias responded with firing multiple rockets at a US military base in Deir Ezzor on the Syrian-Iraqi border. In light of the suggestions of the Iranian president-elect that Iran is not prepared to concede its regional influence, it can be said that Raisi winning the election will have consequences for Syria such as those seen under former President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and the outgoing President Hassan Rouhani. Iran will continue with its intervention in Syria as it is at the heart of its regional project and has cost it greatly in terms of human and financial losses.

At the international level, Ebrahim Raisi's victory poses a significant challenge to the ongoing nuclear talks in Vienna between Iran and global powers. The international parties to the Vienna talks, especially the United States, fear that Raisi will continue to insist on the sanctions being lifted and ask for guarantees to ensure that Washington will not withdraw from any new nuclear deal before Tehran returns to its nuclear obligations. The US reaction to Raisi's victory began with Washington calling into question the integrity of the election. Washington began using its levers to pressure Iran and improve its negotiating position by threatening to withdraw from the Vienna talks. It insisted on keeping in place the non-nuclear sanctions and shutting down more than 30 websites used by the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting.

Furthermore, Iran has activated its levers to pressure Washington. It has linked the issue of handing over surveillance camera recordings from its nuclear sites to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) with the lifting of US sanctions. It also warned that it would delete all recordings in case the United

States did not lift these sanctions. In Iraq, Iranian-backed militias mounted an attack using booby-trapped drones that targeted a site near the US consulate in Erbil. Iran also sent two warships to the Atlantic Ocean. It is likely that Venezuela will receive these two ships to control and obstruct navigation in the Panama Canal. This angered Washington and prompted it to warn Venezuela and other Latin American countries against allowing these two ships to dock at their ports.

Iran's presidential election and the Vienna talks constituted the main axis for Iran-Europe interactions. No European country has welcomed Raisi's election victory due to his record of human rights violations. Raisi's election may result in the European countries facing new challenges, especially related to human rights and dual nationals who are detained in Iranian prisons. In addition, they will have to contend with Iran's rapprochement with Russia and China, which will be at their expense.

In regard to the Vienna talks, after the five rounds of talks ended, held in early June, the Europeans expressed satisfaction with the progress made although there are some outstanding issues such as Iran's missile program and its regional interventions that could thwart reaching a final settlement, But this European satisfaction declined after the sixth round, which saw no new breakthrough due to Iran clinging to its positions and demands, especially those regarding the lifting of US sanctions before finalizing any agreement regarding its nuclear program.

# Internal Affairs

**I**nternal Affairs touches on four files. *The Ideological File* focuses on the reactions of some clerics who oppose the religious discourse and fatwas issued by the Iranian government to rally the Iranian street to partake in the presidential election. It also addresses the position of Sunnis towards this election. *The Political File* discusses the presidential election and incidents such as low voter turnout, blank ballots and missing votes.

The Economic File sheds light on the economic background of President Raisi, his vision related to the management of the Iranian economy, the changes that are likely to occur and the prospective economic outcomes. As for *The Military File*, it casts light on Western media reports that Russia intends to give Iran a satellite. In addition, it discusses Israeli infiltrations into Iran and the significance of weaknesses in Iran's intelligence agencies. The file also answers the question related to whether it is possible to return to the nuclear deal in accordance with the terms of the agreement signed in 2015.



# The Ideological File

*The Ideological File* looks at the developments related to the Shiite religious elites in general and the Iranian ones in particular and the impact of such developments on Iran's religious and political landscape as well as their ramifications on Shiite communities across the region.

The Ideological File of the past month discussed how the Iranian presidential election and the Palestinian question were religiously exploited by the religious elite. It answered questions related to the use of religious discourse regarding the two matters and the reasons behind the significant role of religion in both matters.

This month, the file touches on the counter-reaction of some clerics against the discourse of the pro-Velayat-e Faqih elite that exploits religion for electoral gains and gave a religious dimension to the election.

It also discusses the position of Sunnis regarding the election. The file seeks to answer questions about the relationship between religion and politics and how this has contributed to a lack of confidence in Iran's political and religious systems.

## 1. Politicizing Fatwas and the Presidential Election

The Iranian presidential election was a tense matter among Iran's main actors, especially among the religious and seminary elite. The exploitation of religion and politicizing fatwas to push people to partake in the election intensified.

### 1.1 Fatwas to Mobilize the Iranian People

Velayat-e Faqih loyalists intensified their discourse which made it obligatory to participate in the presidential election. They deemed it to be unlawful to abstain from the election. They were trying to make participation in the election obligatory though it is still arguable and not considered absolute in Shiite Islamic texts. Accordingly, their calls were met with an opposing current that called for the election to be boycotted. Velayat-e Faqih loyalists' politicization of the presidential election reached its peak when Ahmad Khatami, Friday prayer leader of Tehran, said: "This vote means voting yes again in favor of the regime of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Those who did not vote yes to this regime in the beginning of the revolution, June 18 of this year is the day where they can renew their allegiance to the Islamic system."<sup>(1)</sup> At the same time, the supreme leader's representative to the IRGC Haji Mustafa said: "A revolutionary, religious, young, Velayat-e Faqih-inspired and change-oriented person will solve the country's current problems. We need a government that is obedient to the supreme leader and considers that society's basic law is hinging on the supreme leader."<sup>(2)</sup>

From the viewpoint of the supreme leader's representative, the next government should be obedient to the supreme leader's orders and prohibitions, only then will Iran's entire problems be resolved. The supreme leader via issuing fatwas engaged in the election crisis. He issued multiple fatwas, in which significant exploitation of Shiite jurisprudence was apparent. He argued that partaking in the election was "wajib" (obligatory act) "fard al-ayn" (obligatory on every individual), not "fard al-kifayah" (obligatory on the whole community, which can be discharged by enough members of the Muslim community). He also said that the participation of women does not hinge on them receiving permission from their husbands.<sup>(3)</sup> He then set conditions — from his point of view— on who should be elected as president such as: following in the footsteps of Khomeini, having a revolutionary mindset, non-indulgent in worldly pleasures and other characteristics not enshrined in Iran's Constitution. The Guardian Council's approval of certain candidates means that all of them need to be on an equal platform in terms of qualifications and eligibility so that there is no need for a second approval from the supreme leader.

## 1.2 An Attack on Khamenei

In response to the politicized fatwas and "making voting a doctrinal issue," dissenting voices arose. Moreover, these voices used religion and fatwas to counter the government's discourse and narrative. Ayatollah Mahmoud Amjad blasted Khamenei for calling on the Iranian people to partake in the election. He accused the supreme leader of imposing ignorance on the Iranian people with the intention to perpetuate religious dictatorship.<sup>(4)</sup>

He said: "In the current situation, there is only one voice in the country. This vote is for Khamenei and the participation in this show is to deny the rights of the Iranian people. Doing this is morally and religiously forbidden."<sup>(5)</sup> He continued, "I do not impose a certain position and I believe that in political affairs, every person uses his own discretion. The [...] force closed the door on the freedom to breathe and made ignorance prevail throughout people's lives."<sup>(6)</sup>

This marja in the past opposed the supreme leader as well as Velayat-e Faqih loyalists. Amjad blamed the supreme leader for the bloodshed since 2009. He said: "He is solely responsible for the blood that has been shed in the country since 2009." He also noted: "The Iranian government has made grave mistakes as a result of overconfidence" and called on Khamenei to repent to God and introduce reforms in the country.<sup>(7)</sup>

On the other hand, the Qom Seminary Teachers Society lashed out at Amjad, describing him in a statement as ignorant and a Kharijite. The society also said that he is foolish, bankrupt, and disobedient to the supreme leader.<sup>(8)</sup> The head of religious seminaries Alireza Arafī considered the remarks made by Amjad as imprudent<sup>(9)</sup> and said that "the remarks of Amjad contradict the divine commands" and "he should wait for the divine punishment."<sup>(10)</sup> Therefore, the matter between the two camps resulted in deep religious polarization, with each side weaponizing religious fatwas against the other to make their arguments more plausible and to refute the others' arguments. But it is noticeable that the government's loyalists used language such as "Kharijites," "disobedient

to the ruler,” and “foolish” as well as other derogatory terms to characterize their opponents. The chief aim of such remarks was to degrade any cleric who attempted to criticize the government and its policies.

## 2. The Sunnis and the Iranian Election

The position of the Sunnis towards the Iranian presidential election is strange in its entirety. They are known to lean towards the “reformists.” But this time all indications point to the fact that they backed Raisi in the presidential election. They also responded to the call of the supreme leader and Velayat-e Faqih loyalists to partake in the election and not to boycott it.

The Sunni Friday prayer leader in Bandar Abbas Abdel-Baith Qetali said: “The presidential election is among the most important elections in the country, and the people should intensively participate in it in response to the supreme leader’s call.”<sup>(11)</sup> He then thanked the Iranian government, saying: “The election is a right and civilian duty and we have important elections in the country due to the regime in Iran, and all people are capable of participating in it.”<sup>(12)</sup>

Qetali probably made these remarks because he was positive Raisi would win the election, so he had indirectly presented the demands of Sunnis to the new Iranian president in exchange for Sunni support in the election. The Sunnis are perhaps now waiting to see if their demands are met by the president-elect. Qetali said: “I ask the next president of the republic to treat equally all ethnic groups and segments in the country as they are all on an equal footing. And we expect that the next president will pay attention to the Sunnis and empower them by allocating them administrative positions.”<sup>(13)</sup>

In the same context, a parliamentary delegation met with Sunni scholars. The scholars reiterated the need for extensive public participation in the election.<sup>(14)</sup> Hajj Ghaldi Kamali, member of the Jurisprudential Council of Sunni Schools of Knowledge, announced that the Sunnis had chosen their favored presidential candidate, and said that Ebrahim Raisi was the candidate supported by the Sunni community in North Khorasan in the presidential election.<sup>(15)</sup>

Sheikh Mohammad Ali al-Amini, member of the Sunni fatwa body in southern Iran, took a position close to this one, saying: “The people’s participation in the election will be synonymous with unity and solidarity as in the past. This national and Islamic consensus is the passport of success for the Islamic Republic of Iran in all fields.”<sup>(16)</sup> Thus, the Sunnis responded first to the supreme leader’s call to partake in the election and second to the call of Velayat-e Faqih loyalists to elect Ebrahim Raisi. The Sunnis adopted this position to make political gains, especially given the fact that they were fully aware that with the Guardian Council disqualifying heavyweight candidates that the election of Raisi was inevitable. So they intended to make some gains, ease the pressure on them or at least to maintain the status quo without it being reversed by the new government.

## Conclusion

This month, *The Ideological File* shed light on the use of fatwas in Iran’s presidential election by the “reformist” and “conservative” camps. It also

touched on the position of Sunni imams and scholars towards the election. The exploitation of religion and fatwas to mobilize the Iranian people to partake in the election was apparent. The aforementioned fatwas were probably a result of the ruling elite's awareness that the Iranian people resent the political system and the economic conditions in the country. So, the ruling elite worked hard to mobilize the largest number of voters to ensure that the government's legitimacy is not questioned. Yet they considered it to be forbidden to boycott the election and held that calls for a boycott represented a war on Islam. Moreover, it was revealed that some Sunni scholars resorted to the strategy of quelling tensions with the government. They preferred pragmatism over confrontation and demanded their denied rights. This is because all the pre-election indicators pointed to Raisi's victory. Therefore, the Sunnis attempted to make political gains or at least preserve the status quo without incurring more losses in case a "hardline" president like Raisi took over the Iranian presidency.

# The Political File

The presidential election — won by the “conservative” candidate Ebrahim Raisi — was the main event in Iran during June 2021. As a result of the anger on the Iranian street in response to the policies of the Iranian government and the decision of the Guardian Council to disqualify a number of heavy-weight presidential candidates, approving only seven candidates, including Ebrahim Raisi, more than half of the Iranian voting population refused to cast their votes. This led to the lowest voter turnout in the history of the presidential elections held by the Iranian government since the 1979 revolution.

*The Political File* of June 2021 discusses four main topics: the engineering of the presidential election in favor of Ebrahim Raisi, the lowest voter turnout since the victory of the 1979 revolution, the blank votes, invalid and lost ballots and finally the key challenges facing the new Iranian president in the coming period.

## 1. Engineering the Election in Favor of Ebrahim Raisi

The decision of the Guardian Council to disqualify several prominent “reformist” and “moderate” candidates reflected the government’s plan to clear the path for the “hardline conservative” movement to take control of Iran’s institutions. This is in addition to the government attempting to strengthen its pillars in the face of domestic and external pressures and to inject new revolutionary blood in light of the revolution weakening and its supporters dwindling. Over the past years, the Iranian government has been paying special attention to ensure the largest number of Iranians partake in elections. The government has wanted to prove that it is legitimate and accepted by the Iranian people. In the lead-up to the presidential election, the Iranian supreme leader on numerous occasions called on the Iranian people to actively participate in the election. However, the decision of the Guardian Council to disqualify many candidates indicates Khamenei’s lack of concern toward the level of public participation and his desire to engineer the election in favor of Raisi, who is likely to be obedient to him over the coming four years. It is reasonable to believe that the supreme leader is preparing him politically and intellectually to be the next supreme leader.

After the decision of the Guardian Council to disqualify all nine “reformist” candidates, the movement failed to agree on backing a specific candidate. They even did not agree on throwing weight behind their representative Mohsen Mehralizadeh who dropped out of the presidential race two days before the voting began. Yet, there was no consensus among the movement’s factions on supporting the “moderate” representative Abdolnasser Hemmati.

The “conservatives” took advantage of the “reformist” fragmentation to rally around Ebrahim Raisi. Both former Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council Saeed Jalili and Member of Parliament Alireza Zakani dropped out of the presidential race in favor of Raisi.

This led to the presidential race being limited to four candidates instead of seven. This meant that the votes were not scattered as much, resulting in Raisi winning comfortably without the need for a runoff.

## 2. The Lowest Voter Turnout Since the Revolution’s Victory

Ahead of the election, there were a host of factors that indicated a low voter turnout at the polling stations, namely: the belief that the presidential election would not be free and fair, a lack of confidence in the Iranian government, the failure of successive governments, especially the Rouhani government to improve the economic situation, rampant financial and administrative corruption, the heavy crackdown on the protests witnessed in 2017 and 2019, human rights violations, the breach of basic freedoms such as the freedom of expression and the imposition of severe social and political restrictions.

But after the mass disqualification of candidates and announcing a final list of only seven candidates, most of whom were “conservatives,” all the forecasts suggested that the experience of the parliamentary election held in February 2020 — where the “conservatives” captured the majority of seats — would be repeated. That election saw the lowest turnout in Iran’s electoral history — whether parliamentary or presidential — since the victory of the revolution, reaching only 42.57 percent.<sup>(17)</sup>

In the recent presidential election, the turnout reached 48.8 percent: 28, 933, 004 Iranian voters cast their ballots out of 59, 310, 307 eligible Iranian voters.<sup>(18)</sup> Following this poor turnout, the forecasts turned out to be accurate. It is the second lowest voter turnout in Iran’s electoral history — whether parliamentary or presidential — held by the Iranian government and the lowest ever in the history of Iran’s presidential elections. The lowest recorded voter turnout was previously seen in the election held in 1993 — won by Hashemi Rafsanjani — the turnout reached 50.6 percent.<sup>(19)</sup>

The outcome of the presidential election resulted in Ebrahim Raisi winning the presidency by gaining 17,926,345 votes — nearly 61.9 percent of the votes — a huge margin compared to the other candidates. Former Secretary of the Expediency Discernment Council Mohsen Rezaei came in second after winning 3,412, 712 votes — 11.79 percent of the votes. Former Governor of Iran’s Central Bank Abdolnasser Hemmati came in third by winning 427, 201 votes — 8.38 percent of the votes. Amir-Hossein Ghazizadeh Hashemi, from the Front of Islamic Revolution Stability, was last after winning only 999,718 votes, less than 1 million votes — 3.45 percent of the votes.<sup>(20)</sup>

## 3. Blank, Invalid and Lost Votes

The recent election brought to the limelight a new phenomenon not heard of during past presidential elections: the unprecedented rise in the number of blank and invalid votes, as well as losing more than 440,000 tickets. When

it comes to blank ballots, voters entered the polling station but did not cast a vote for any candidate. According to the Ministry of Interior, the total number of blank votes, let alone invalid votes, reached 3,726,870 ballots — making up 12.8 percent of the total votes<sup>(21)</sup> which means that the blank and invalid tickets came in second behind Ebrahim Raisi since their number was greater than the number of votes won by the candidate Mohsen Rezaei.

Such a phenomenon — especially the blank votes — is linked to a host of factors, primarily: the Iranian people protesting against the disqualification of dozens of candidates, voters turning up to polling stations but without selecting a specific candidate to avoid accusations of boycotting, hence ensuring that they will not be held accountable by some bodies that monitor voter participation and avoiding the possibility of being dismissed from work and not giving up work opportunities. In addition, there are other reasons as to why Iranian voters cast blank votes. For example, the presidential election was held side by side with the municipal elections. Many of the voters were not interested in participating in the presidential election. They headed to the polling stations to vote only in the municipal elections on the basis of purely service-centric motives. But the authorities forced them to vote in the presidential election as well. Therefore, many of them intentionally cast blank votes to protest at the authorities forcing them to vote in the presidential election.

To avoid linking the poor voter turnout and the blank ballots with the government's dwindling legitimacy, some circles close to the Iranian government tried to present a different dimension to the phenomenon. They alleged that the voters who cast blank votes were expressing their rejection of the four candidates, not their dissatisfaction towards the whole political system. Those who cast blank votes still partook in the election and did not boycott it, indicating that they support the Iranian system of government.<sup>(22)</sup>

Here, the supporters of this position wanted to convince the Iranian street that leaving a ballot blank is not proof of dissatisfaction towards the entire political system but is a rejection of the four candidates. But the reality suggests that this phenomenon is because of public anger and dissatisfaction towards the government's policies, including the mass disqualification of candidates and the positioning of Ebrahim Raisi to succeed the supreme leader over the coming four years.

There is another controversial issue that arose amid the Iranian presidential election; 440,000 votes went missing. According to the Ministry of Interior's report, this ballot number is not added to the blank and invalid ballots. They are also not added to the votes won by all the four candidates. On this issue, it was believed that the invalid votes were due to the fact that some voters took the ballots and didn't place them in the ballot boxes, while others simply tore them up. The third interpretation suggests that some voters who participated in the presidential election threw their tickets in the municipal elections ballot boxes. These elections were held in parallel with the presidential election.<sup>(23)</sup>

#### 4. The Major Challenges Facing Ebrahim Raisi

The economy poses the greatest challenge to the new government. The Iranians want a swift reversal to their deteriorating living conditions, with the latter exacerbated by US sanctions. Hence, the new President Ebrahim Raisi will need to form a strong government comprised of ministers who have the capability to run the country's economic affairs.

In addition, Ebrahim Raisi is faced with the Iranian government's declining legitimacy, which was evident with more than half of the Iranian people boycotting the presidential election. Raisi will also find himself in a difficult predicament, as he needs to meet the expectations of the "hardliners" via implementing Iran's expansionist plans and also fulfil the promises he made at his first press conference in which he alluded to improving Tehran's relations with its neighboring countries.

Other international files are awaiting Ebrahim Raisi, namely the negotiations taking place in Vienna over the nuclear deal. However, Raisi was one of the members of the "death commission" that ordered the execution of more than 5,000 political prisoners in 1988. The European Union imposed sanctions on him in 2011 over charges related to human rights violations.<sup>(24)</sup>

In 2019, the Trump administration placed him, along with eight other individuals, on the US sanctions blacklist.<sup>(25)</sup> Following the announcement of Raisi's election victory, Amnesty International hastened to call for him to be tried for committing crimes against humanity and indiscriminately detaining hundreds of peaceful protesters, dissidents, and advocates of human rights as well as those advocating for the rights of Iran's minority groups.<sup>(26)</sup> This means he will face many obstacles, especially when it comes to forming relations with the West and when he intends to travel to the United States and Europe.

#### Conclusion

With Raisi winning the election, the "hardline" movement has tightened its grip over all key institutions of the political system. But the new president, who will be inaugurated in early August, will face numerous thorny and complicated challenges, primarily those related to Iran's economic predicament, which his predecessor failed to improve. Furthermore, he will face ongoing US sanctions, the declining popularity of the Iranian government due to public anger against its policies and relations with neighboring states.

# The Economic File

The Iranian presidential election was the highlight of the month of June 2021 and resulted in “hardline” candidate Ebrahim Raisi winning the election. From this perspective, *The Economic File* this month discusses the economic vision of the next president when it comes to his economic background and economic platform; his overall direction in regard to running the economy; and the likely substantial changes and potential consequences.

## 1. The Economic Background of the President-elect

Despite presiding over heavyweight economic institutions in Iran for three years such as Astan Quds Razavi, the incoming president has limited economic experience as reflected in his economic platform. This is not because he is a cleric and Iran’s former chief justice or that he has a team of specialists but because Raisi’s economic platform lacked details about his economic vision. His remarks on the economy during the presidential election were ambiguous and he focused on slogans such as restoring the country’s revolutionary zeal and ending corruption. This is in addition to not outlining the mechanisms needed to solve and address Iran’s economic problems.

Raisi made at least 50 campaign promises such as improving socio-economic conditions, boosting production, increasing exports, creating a million jobs every year, bringing down inflation to a single digit and providing housing.<sup>(27)</sup> But he did not provide details on how he intended to fulfil his promises, despite the fact that fulfilling some of these promises is impossible. He did not explain how he would create 1 million jobs per year — a highly exaggerated figure. His predecessor Hassan Rouhani failed to achieve half this figure during his tenure. Furthermore, the labor force added every year to the market is less than this projected job creation figure. However, Raisi is convinced that his government’s effective management can resolve the country’s economic problems. In his electoral remarks, he focused on ending corruption and wise management to turn insolvent government-run companies into successful ones. But maybe he was heedless of the fact that combating corruption requires a package of reforms, including policies to improve deteriorating socio-economic conditions.

Again, he did not provide details of how he would tackle the corruption that cuts across the state, with Iran ranked 149 in terms of corruption levels according to the rankings issued by Transparency International. He mentioned once, without providing details, how he would transform 40 massive companies<sup>(28)</sup> associated with Astan Quds Razavi to prevent them from incurring losses and to make them profitable as witnessed when he presided over the foundation.

Astan Quds Razavi foundation oversees the Imam Reza shrine in Mashhad

— one of the most significant Shiite religious shrines — and receives large donations, with a big part of these being reinvested to build schools, universities and hospitals as well as in industrial, agricultural and tourism companies which are affiliated with the foundation. These companies generate much needed revenues that boost the government's popularity and help in serving its objectives at home and abroad. Iran does not disclose the wealth and assets owned by its endowments and charitable foundations such as those operating under the IRGC. They are not subject to taxation or parliamentary questioning. But their wealth and assets are estimated to be worth billions of dollars.

## **2. Vision and Overall Direction to Run the Economy**

One cannot understand President-elect Ebrahim Raisi's economic vision without understanding the overall economic direction of the "hardline" movement in Iran given that he is one of its members. He in fact has been described as the most conservative from among the "hardliners." He is not the first Iranian president to be associated with this movement — as the last one was Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005-2013).

The overall economic direction of the "hardline" movement is based on populist policies and slogans. The "hardliners" typically present ambiguous economic plans and statements, with no consideration to practical aspects. In addition, they do not consider whether the plans can be implemented, nor do they consider their long-term outcomes such as Ahmadinejad distributing oil revenues to the people. In the following lines, we shed light on the overall economic direction of the "hardline" movement and its vision in relation to running the economy:

### **1.1 Economic Policies**

The "hardliners" in general are supportive of a closed and state-centric economy. This means it is expected that Raisi's presidency will witness an increase in the role of the state, particularly in public investments, leading to the crowding out of the private sector. The latter has already suffered due to US sanctions. In addition, Raisi has raised reservations about cooperating with many Western countries in case the sanctions are lifted, as well as reservations over some of the agreements signed by Rouhani

This could lead to capital flight and further brain drain (the emigration of highly qualified people) and fuel protests in the future. In return, the government would be able to decrease unemployment through increasing demand for less-educated workers. It might also improve public infrastructure amid an increase in government investments.

### **1.2 External Policies**

Lifting the economic sanctions on Iran and reviving the nuclear deal are key priorities for the new Iranian government for two main reasons. First, the "hardliners" are likely to increase their popularity and support base — as was the case with the "reformist" movement that took advantage of the 2015 nuclear deal. Second, the Iranian government, the political system and the public's need to resume the inflow of oil revenues — with the price of oil soaring

along with the prices of other exports that generate much needed income for the political system. When imports bounce back, this will lead to a decline in the prices of food and medicine, rendering the latter available after periods of scarcity and high prices.

In one of his campaign interviews, Raisi announced that the issue of lifting US sanctions will be the epicenter of the foreign policy of his government.<sup>(29)</sup> On the other side, it is expected that Iran's foreign relations will be oriented towards the East, particularly towards China, Russia, Central Asia and the East Asian countries as well as towards some neighboring nations, notably Iraq.

### 1.3 Financing

The current budget deficit reached nearly 450,00 billion tomans (\$100 billion according to the official exchange rate) in the 2021 budget, according to Mohsen Zanganeh, a member of the parliamentary Planning and Budget Committee.<sup>(30)</sup> The budget depends on revenues which were hit hard by the sanctions including oil sales and tax collection.

As a result, the financing crisis will continue for a long time as long as the sanctions remain in place. It will be the biggest challenge facing the Raisi government and will prompt him to swiftly find a solution to get the sanctions lifted. How can the government secure the money needed to finance its projects and enhance the public's confidence in the Iranian government, especially in its first year to restore the eroding prestige of the clerical government? The Raisi government will likely resort to some or all of the following means to address this issue:

- Tap into the undeclared funds and resources of the state such as the firms and finances belonging to the military and religious establishments through granting them permission to run mega projects for the government, or through selling government companies and assets to these powerful establishments. In addition, the government could take advantage of their smuggling networks as long as the sanctions remain in place.
- Print bank notes to pay wages and run the day-to-day operations of the state and its institutions. However, this would risk hiking the inflation rate and further erode the value of the national currency as witnessed under the governments of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and Hassan Rouhani.
- Exert pressure to reclaim Iranian assets frozen overseas.

## 3. Likely Substantial Changes and Potential Economic Results

Despite the failures of the “reformists”— who were the backbone of the Rouhani government over the past three years— some of them were experienced technocrats from various fields. Regardless of the current deteriorating economic situation, the “reformist” technocrats in many cases relied on economic theories to run the country's economic affairs and were to an extent open to the world. But it seems that this movement is heading for a long hibernation after their disqualification from the presidential race and with the “hardliners” cementing their control over state institutions. This is added to the “reformists” losing popularity over the past three years because of increasing economic suffering, which led a huge percentage of society to

boycot the presidential elections, especially the young.

With the “hardliners” controlling power but without a clear economic vision, it is expected that the Iranian economy is heading for substantial changes such as a movement towards heavy centralization and a closed economy which will be based on the principle of “trial and error.” They will implement a specific economic strategy, discover its outcomes step by step, if it fails, they will simply implement another one. They do not manage economic affairs based on strong theoretical underpinnings. Days ago, a practical example occurred which is indicative of the changes that we expected. One hundred Iranian economists<sup>(31)</sup> signed a letter which contained dangerous advice for the new president, calling on him to implement their ideas. We will shed light on some of them, and then will move on to their likely impact. They included:

- Avoid dependence on the free market to determine economic policies and mechanisms.
- The active and effective presence of the state in the economic sphere is necessary and inevitable. The rise of a powerful Iran is dependent on a strong bond between the government and the people. The people will not be strong without an active and effective government.
- The existence of free market thinking results in dependence on external political and economic factors which can cause economic volatility.



- The government's primary mission is to revive the country's heavy industries and infrastructure, as well as to control supply and distribution networks from every angle and to fully control the stock market as well.

- Privatization allows stakeholders and middlemen to steal capital and increase speculation. The private sector is unable to bear big risks at this moment in time.

- The necessity to fully utilize the untapped capability of Islamic assets such as Khoms, Zakat, and endowments. Furthermore, to empower Khoms-sponsored companies to play an important role in financing production.

Looking at the foregoing, it is clear that Iran is headed towards a dangerous economic direction as well as towards one which is likely to be contradictory. The foregoing have important implications:

- Populist approaches via non-scientific theories: the call for the government to fully control supply and distribution channels runs counter to the tenets of both traditional and Islamic economics. It is practically impossible for the government to fully control all internal trade networks. This has yet to happen in a contemporary state, nor did it happen during the era of the Islamic caliphate. The most surprising aspect is that the signatories of the letter — 100 economists — are affiliated with major universities in the country and most of them are working for well-known universities such as Al-Mustafa International University, Allameh Tabataba'i University, and others. This means we are facing a new phase in which the private sector will be destroyed as well as the free market under the cover of following certain economic "theories."

- The existence of powerful institutions: asserting the dominate role of the government and its pillars in the coming phase and ensuring that institutions that serve the political system like the IRGC, and religious bodies are fully supported and facilitated. This is added to the tax exemptions that these organizations receive and the calls to boost their economic roles by diverting Khoms funds towards these entities. This applies to the companies operating under the IRGC.

- Call for a closed and state-centric economy: there will be no free market or fair competition and the government could fully control the stock market. In other words, any non-government company or company which is dissatisfied with the government will not be able to participate in the stock market (stock exchange) neither will they be able to secure financing from shareholders.

- Depend on imposing unfair taxes: the levying of taxes is a well-known source of income and is applied worldwide. But the problem is in the unfair distribution of tax revenues and the exemptions granted to some companies and institutions. In addition, excessive taxes are imposed on some sectors, hence raising the costs of production, and inevitably leading to companies becoming insolvent.

## Conclusion

The total absence of the "reformist" movement and the "hardliners" cementing their control over state institutions will open the door for populist ideas to dominate the economic sphere as is the case in Iran's political, domestic and external spheres. In many cases, these populist ideas do not follow systematic theories and principles — hence the consequences will be hard to predict.

The ambiguity of the results will deepen in case the government's economic team is limited to economists (as previously explained) who theorize that the economic system must not be beyond the control of the clerics or those who are close to and loyal to the clerics. But on the other side, populist decisions in the first years of the government's tenure could help it restore some of the ruling system's eroding support and popularity in the country, whether this approach is adopted or not will be revealed in the coming months.

# The Military File

In June, *The Military File* discusses the important points of the reports published by Western newspapers about Iran obtaining a Russian-made satellite system as well as what was revealed by the chief of Israel's intelligence agency Mossad about Israel's influence and clout inside Iran.

The file also addresses whether it is possible or not for the Vienna talks to succeed in ensuring compliance in line with the terms of the 2015 nuclear deal.

The following Topics will be discussed: Russia supplying Iran with a satellite; Israel's infiltrations and how they expose the weaknesses of Iran's intelligence apparatuses and whether it is possible or not to fashion an agreement in line with the 2015 nuclear deal.

## 1. Russia Supplies Iran With a Satellite

### 1.1 High Precision System

According to a report published by The Washington Post newspaper, Russia is preparing to sell Iran an advanced satellite system (Kanopus-V). It has an unprecedented ability to track potential military targets throughout the Middle East and beyond.<sup>(32)</sup>

The satellite will be launched from Russia, and the control system will be handed to a Russia-trained Iranian team. Iran will control the satellite from a facility in Alborz governorate near Tehran. The deal comes in the aftermath of shuttle tours of IRGC commanders to Russia.<sup>(33)</sup>

The system is equipped with a high-definition surveillance camera that enables Iranian forces to advance their spying and eavesdropping capabilities. This will allow Iranian forces to keep a close eye on strategic sites and facilities in the region.<sup>(34)</sup>

For his part, the Russian president dismissed the details of the report as nonsense, but at the same time reiterated the military and technical cooperation between Russia and Iran. According to him, what was published was false news.<sup>(35)</sup> Meanwhile, Washington has yet to comment on the matter.

### 1.2 The First Arms Deal Undertaken by Iran After the Lifting of the UN Embargo

This deal between Iran and Russia comes after the UN arms embargo on Tehran was lifted in October 2020. Even though the embargo was only confined to conventional weapons, obtaining this system will help in improving the performance of Iran's conventional weapons.

We should take into consideration the fact that Tehran lacks capabilities to protect its airspace against airstrikes. It lacks equipment at its radar stations. For

example, there have been multiple explosions that have hit Iran's key nuclear facilities. It is believed these explosions were the result of aerial attacks by Israel. Furthermore, the ongoing spate of setbacks suffered by Iran's domestic satellite launch testing backs up the point of Tehran lacking sufficient capabilities to defend its airspace. Despite launching the Noor-1 satellite into space and the accompanying media uproar, its effectiveness is minimal,<sup>(36)</sup> which prompted Iran to turn to Russia.

In general, Tehran turning to Russia serves the interests of both countries. Tehran is fully aware that Moscow appears to be in much more competitive in its outlook and has a deeper military presence in multiple spots, especially at the current moment in time against the backdrop of its tensions with the new US administration. This is added to Russia's desire and ability to compete head-to-head with the United States, unlike China. On the other hand, Moscow sees a benefit in using Tehran to hedge against the United States and being the main supplier of Iran's military equipment. The Russian president's denial of this satellite deal could be because he wants to avert unilateral US sanctions against Tehran as well as against those carrying out dealings with it. Russian companies could be hurt if sanctions were applied. At this point, it is possible that Moscow does not believe that this deal will provoke sensitivities among its friends in the region, compared to deals including the sale of missiles or attack warplanes to Iran.

## **2. Israeli Infiltrations Reveal the Weaknesses of Iran's Intelligence Apparatuses**

In clear defiance of the Iranian government, Israel's former spy chief Yossi Cohen said in a televised interview on June 11, 2021, addressing the Iranians: "Our dear friends. First, you have been infiltrated. Second, we can see you. Third, the age of lies is over." The remarks referred to Israeli infiltrations and operations inside Iran which have targeted multiple nuclear and military facilities as well as Iranian nuclear scientists. In addition, Israel has smuggled an Iranian nuclear archive out of Iran.<sup>(37)</sup>

### **2.1 An Israeli Warning Message**

Perhaps Cohen wanted to send a message to throw Iran's security landscape into confusion. Since 2010, when Iran's nuclear reactor was targeted by a sabotage cyberattack, with the United States and Israel standing behind this attack, the attacks on Iran's nuclear facilities as well as on the country's nuclear scientists have continued. The last of these attacks was the assassination of the head of Iran's nuclear team Mohsen Fakhrizadeh and the attack targeting the nuclear reactor at Natanz.<sup>(38)</sup>

To undermine Iranian denials, Cohen described the explosion at Natanz, saying that a huge quantity of explosives "were built into a marble platform used to balance the centrifuges." He also pointed out that the assassination of Fakhrizadeh was carried out by a remotely operated machine gun fixed to a pickup truck. The machine gun later self-destructed. He also pointed out that the agents who smuggled Iran's nuclear archive were not Israelis. In addition,

he said these agents were still alive, and some had left Iran. <sup>(39)</sup>

Cohen also intended to send a message to Iran's scientists. He wanted them to know that if they continued with their nuclear activities that Fakhrazadeh's fate awaits them also. He said this in the context of Israeli efforts to prevent Iranian scientists from partaking in Tehran's nuclear program – urging scientists to abandon their work. In response to a question about whether his message had been delivered to Iran's nuclear scientists, Cohen said that they see what has happened to their friends, referring to the nuclear scientists who had been targeted in the past. <sup>(40)</sup>

## 2.2 Accusing Iran's Spy Chief of Being an Israeli Agent

After the former Israeli spy chief's interview was published regarding Israel's intelligence clout inside Iran, the country's former President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad said that the highest-ranking Iranian intelligence official was an Israeli agent. He also attributed Israel's success in its operation to Tel Aviv's extensive outreach and its infiltration into Iran's intelligence and security apparatuses. He accused Iran's intelligence agency of keeping critical news from the Iranian people. For example, it only revealed the Iranian nuclear archive had been stolen when it had already become public knowledge. <sup>(41)</sup>

Ahmadinejad blasted Iran's intelligence for not tracking the perpetrators and following up on intelligence lapses. According to Ahmadinejad, Iran's intelligence agencies wait for operations to take place, and eventually disclose them as conspiracies. And at some point, they reveal the identities of some individuals who are framed, execute them and close the case.

Cohen's and Ahmadinejad's remarks about Israeli operations reveal the weaknesses of Iran's intelligence apparatuses and their inability to respond to Israel's infiltrations. These remarks put the Iranian intelligence apparatuses in a deeply awkward situation as the Iranian people expect more from them and expect further Israeli operations to undermine Iran's defense frontlines and weaken the axis of resistance. These Israeli infiltrations reflect Tel Aviv's desire to curb Iran's nuclear capabilities and target the masterminds of its nuclear program.

## 3. Is It Possible to Return to the 2015 Nuclear Deal?

The eventful month of June is finally over. The sixth round of the Vienna talks between Iran and the P5+1 have ended fruitlessly without a date set for their resumption. Iran's presidential election has brought the “hardliners” to power once again with Ebrahim Raisi's victory. Israel witnessed new changes in its government. Iran not only refused to comply with its monitoring obligations to the UN nuclear watchdog – the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) – but also refused to renew the bare-minimum agreement to provide access to images of its nuclear sites. <sup>(42)</sup>

### 3.1 The Most Prominent Developments

For the E3 and the United States, the situation is alarming as Iran increased enriching uranium to 60 percent without the mandatory IAEA oversight and uranium particles were discovered at undeclared nuclear sites. <sup>(43)</sup> “The

agreement has expired ... any of the information recorded will never be given to the International Atomic Energy Agency and the data and images will remain in the possession of Iran,” said Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf, speaker of Iran’s Parliament.<sup>(44)</sup> In his first post-election interview, President-elect Ebrahim Raisi categorically stated that the missile program is non-negotiable — this led to concerns about Iran’s intentions. In June, the Biden government was also engaged in tit-for-tat attacks against Iran’s proxies on the Syria-Iraq border, adding more complexities to the ongoing nuclear talks with Iran.

On June 19, Bushehr nuclear power plant was temporarily shut down for a “technical overhaul,”<sup>(45)</sup> and another sabotage operation was launched against Iran’s Atomic Energy Organization building.<sup>(46)</sup> So far, there are no reports of Iran retaliating against Israel, which indicates that the nuclear power plant’s closure did not result from a foreign sabotage attempt. Indications point that if Israel’s sabotage activities against Iran’s nuclear assets including its facilities continue, they will be the outcome of a tacit agreement between the Biden and Bennet administrations, as the former is close to the new Israeli government.

### 3.2 The Return Does Not Seem Easy

July is likely to be a month of backdoor diplomacy and the nuclear issue is likely to be kept low-profile. Iran will formally announce its next foreign minister and top nuclear negotiator. It is likely that Abbas Araghchi might continue in his role as Iran’s chief representative at the nuclear talks. What appears as further posturing from Iran, Iran’s Foreign Ministry confirmed the setting up of an “adaptation committee” with the mandate to vet any prospective nuclear deal for consideration by Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei.<sup>(47)</sup>

President-elect Raisi has been subject to US sanctions since 2019, which can be another irritant in direct talks between the two states. According to Washington, lifting the sanctions may negatively impact its interests, however, President Biden is a pragmatic politician who may choose to take this step to build trust — given the fact that the trust deficit between the two states hinders negotiations.<sup>(48)</sup>

Some of Iran’s moves such as its refusal to comply with IAEA monitoring obligations are easy to reverse to improve the atmospherics of the negotiations but reversing others such as deactivating the centrifuges installed after the nuclear deal are much more difficult. Likewise, it will be almost impossible to get Iran to disclose the quantities of its enriched uranium stockpiles and heavy water.

### Conclusion

Iran is still exercising its policy of pressure to impose a fait accompli on the ground through engaging in confrontations on several fronts. Perhaps they have reached their peak. It could be said that Iran has reached the peak of its defiance against the West since signing the nuclear deal. It has used all its tactics to exert more pressure on the West amid widespread forecasts that Tehran’s position regarding the nuclear talks will unlikely change under the new Iranian government. Perhaps Washington does not have sufficient

patience to endure further Iranian provocations. Yet there may be a US plan to take precautions, especially as Iran has rejected IAEA demands and has abandoned its commitments to the nuclear deal. However, the US airstrikes on the Iraqi-Syrian borders are a warning message to Iran in order for it to adjust its behavior. It seems that the ball is now in Iran's court.

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# Arab Affairs

**A**rab Affairs sheds light on four files. The first file addresses the reactions and positions of the Gulf Cooperation Council countries on the election of Ebrahim Raisi, the future of Saudi-Iran talks under Iran's new president and Saudi reservations regarding the possible response of the Iranian government to the calls for calm. The second file deals with the UN resolution to add the Houthi militia to its blacklist of groups responsible for the violation of children's rights, the international efforts to resolve the Yemeni crisis and the continuing Iranian-Houthi escalation. The third file discusses the impact of the tripartite summit between the Egyptian president, Jordanian King Abdullah II and the Iraqi prime minister regarding Iranian influence in Iraq, and the implications of US military strikes against militia sites on the Iraqi-Syrian border. The fourth file discusses the ramifications of Ebrahim Raisi's victory on Iran-Syria relations and the military escalation in Syria as well as the interests of international actors in the Syrian crisis.



# Iran and the Gulf States

Over the past period, and amid tensions between Iran and the Gulf states, news of talks between Saudi Arabia and Iran, mediated by Iraq, captured great interest. It seems that these talks grabbed the attention of analysts and now they are analyzing the impact of Raisi's victory on Saudi-Iran talks. He is affiliated with the "hardline" current and analysts are forecasting whether he is likely to create harmony with the Gulf states amid a tense regional and international atmosphere. This topic is discussed through the following: the positions of the Gulf states on the election of Raisi and the future of Saudi-Iran talks under Iran's new president.

## 1. The Positions of the Gulf States on the Election of Ebrahim Raisi

### 1.1 A Direct Saudi Position

Saudi Arabia has always questioned the Iranian president's ability to bring about actual changes. It believes that decision-making rests with the supreme leader. Past experience under previous Iranian presidents has led Saudi Arabia to believe that decision-making in Iran has never been in the hands of any Iranian government. In reality, ultimate decision-making power rests with a revolutionary system. As a result, the commitments of Iranian governments lack credibility. It appears that a lack of confidence is the main factor that prevents Saudi Arabia and other parties from pursuing rapprochement with Iran. They expect Iran to undertake real actions on the ground rather than merely announce slogans.

As the first Saudi response in the aftermath of the Iranian election, Saudi Foreign Minister His Highness Prince Faisal bin Farhan said that Saudi Arabia's interaction with new Iranian President-elect Ebrahim Raisi will depend on the reality on the ground, "From our perspective, the foreign policy in Iran is run by the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, and therefore our interactions with Iran will be based on the ground reality, and this is what we will judge the new government on, regardless of who is in charge."<sup>(1)</sup>

### 1.2 Gulf Congratulatory Messages Reflect Optimistic Expectations

Some Gulf countries took the initiative to deliver goodwill messages and hoped for the start of a new chapter in relations and to achieve constructive neighborly relations. The UAE President Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan, Vice President and Prime Minister Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, and the Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi and Deputy Supreme Commander of the Armed

Forces Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed, sent three telegrams to congratulate Iranian President-elect Ebrahim Raisi on his victory.<sup>(2)</sup> “We congratulate His Excellency President-elect Ebrahim Raisi for winning the presidential elections in the Islamic Republic of Iran in its thirteenth session,” Vice-President and Prime Minister of the UAE Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum said in a statement tweeted by Dubai’s media office.<sup>(3)</sup>

The Emir of Qatar Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani also sent a telegram to Ebrahim Raisi, congratulating him on his victory. The Qatari emir wished the elected Iranian president success and hoped for further development and growth in their bilateral relations.<sup>(4)</sup>

Oman’s Sultan Haitham bin Tariq sent a congratulatory telegram to Ebrahim Raisi for winning the presidential election. He wished him success in leading the Iranian people to further progress, and prosperity, and affirmed Oman’s commitment to enhance strong bilateral relations and cooperation in various spheres to advance the interests of the peoples of Oman and Iran.<sup>(5)</sup>

The Emir of Kuwait Sheikh Nawaf Al Ahmad Al Jaber Al-Sabah, the Kuwaiti Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al Ahmad Al Jaber Al Sabah, and the Kuwaiti Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Khaled Al Hamad Al-Sabah sent congratulatory messages to Ebrahim Raisi on his election as Iran’s new president.<sup>(6)</sup>

The congratulatory messages from the Gulf states may reflect diplomatic protocol on the surface, but in reality they indicate a desire to establish good neighborly relations with Iran. It can be concluded from these messages that the Gulf states are seeking calm and rapprochement with Iran and using Raisi’s victory to send messages that reflect their desire to establish positive relations to foster development and growth among regional countries rather than perpetual conflict. At the same time, it seems that the Saudi experience regarding rapprochement with the Iranian government has matured, and Saudi Arabia is aware of the need for the Iranian side to show tangible developments rather than deceptive slogans and role-playing.

## 2. The Future of Saudi-Iran Talks Under the New Iranian Presidency

Despite this difficult stage and the associated international interactions, which will no doubt put pressure on the new Iranian president, the reality indicates that the Iranian government is burdened by multiple conflicts, economic crises and international isolation. Therefore, the Iranian government needs calm to end international pressure, as well as to end Saudi mobilization against its Iranian actions. From this angle, Raisi can be considered as one of the key interim tools to bring about a change in the existing equations, with his positions likely to converge with the supreme leader’s positions.

### 1.2 Raisi Clarifies the Lines of Contact Regarding Relations Between Iran and Saudi Arabia

In his first press conference, President-elect Raisi stated that one of his government’s foreign policy priorities would be to improve relations with neighboring Gulf countries and to reopen its embassy in Saudi Arabia. “Regarding the relationship with the Saudis, we would like to establish relations

with all countries around the world, especially with our neighbors, and Saudi Arabia,” adding that Iran “sees no obstacle to reopening the two embassies in the two capitals.”<sup>(7)</sup>

However, Raisi called on Saudi Arabia and its allies to “stop hostilities in Yemen.” This reflects the centrality of Yemen in the Saudi-Iran conflict.<sup>(8)</sup> This statement may be an encouraging start to advance Saudi-Iran coexistence on various outstanding issues, and it must be translated on the ground to prove that Tehran’s calls for calm are serious. The problem between Iran and the Arab countries, especially the Gulf states, mainly Saudi Arabia, is the long-standing lack of trust due to many factors, most notably Iranian regional ambitions, reinforced by Iran’s proxies in some Arab countries which Tehran uses to further its expansionist agenda.

Iran’s Foreign Ministry spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh officially expressed the Iranian position regarding negotiations with Saudi Arabia by saying that his country “hopes to reach an understanding with Saudi Arabia.” He added, “We hope that the talks between Iran and Saudi Arabia will be brought to a conclusion successfully.”<sup>(9)</sup>

Undoubtedly, the resumption of talks with Saudi Arabia will be one of the issues that the new president will have to deal with. He stated in his first meeting with the media that he has no objection to reopening the Saudi embassy in Tehran. Although this Iranian position was previously stated by Iran’s Foreign Ministry, it clearly indicates that Tehran’s senior leadership has taken the decision to initiate actions to reduce conflict in the region as the Iranian government faces burdens on several fronts. Raisi is expected to continue this foreign policy line.

## **2.2 Saudi Arabia Expresses Its Reservations About the Iranian Government’s Possible Responsiveness to the Calls for Calm**

Saudi Arabia’s Minister for Foreign Affairs His Highness Prince Faisal bin Farhan believes that talks with Iran are still in their infancy and that they are at an “exploratory” stage. In an interview with Agence France-Presse while attending two international summits in Paris, he said that he hopes “that the Iranians believe that it is in their interest to work with their neighbors positively leading to security, stability and prosperity in the region. If they can see that this is in their interest, I can have hope. Currently, we are at an early stage of discussions.”<sup>(10)</sup> He further mentioned that Iran’s politics is not dependent on the president, but is controlled by the supreme leader, and that the coming period will show how serious the Iranian government is in discussing regional issues.

## **2.3 The Complexities of the International Environment Are Reflected in the Talks**

The relations of both Saudi Arabia and Iran with international actors will have a great impact, especially on the decisions of the Iranian side. The latter may consider any success in the nuclear talks as a reason not to make any concessions to resolve the outstanding issues with Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states. Saudi Arabia believes that its strong international relations and the use

of its international standing to discuss important issues in the region is one of the ways to expose Iran's belligerency, and to besiege it, and to force the Iranian government to adopt approaches to resolving outstanding issues, most notably Iran's regional interference, its nuclear and missile program.

### **Conclusion**

There are many obstacles hindering any potential rapprochement between Iran and the Gulf states, especially Saudi Arabia, given their intertwined problems in the region: most prominently Yemen. This is in addition to Iraq, Syria and Lebanon and their disagreements over Iran's proliferation and military threats to the Gulf states by purchasing weapons that undermine stability. Therefore, President-elect Ebrahim Raisi's ability to bring about a qualitative leap in Iranian relations in the region seems impossible. However, Saudi Arabia believes that the Iranian messages reflect the current trend of the Iranian government to relax its policy of regional confrontation, even if only temporarily. President-elect Raisi may play a role to push for rapprochement because any success will reinforce the revolutionaries, allow Iran to take a breath, and curb the Saudi mobilization against Iran's orientations. On the other hand, Saudi Arabia will not be easily deceived by Iranian maneuvers, especially in the absence of clear understandings.

# Yemen and Iran

In June, the Yemeni file witnessed regional and international efforts to establish peace in Yemen amid the intransigence of the Iran-backed Houthi militia and its ongoing military escalation inside and outside Yemen. This led to further international pressure on the Houthi militia because it disrupts the political solution at the behest of Iran. It is clear to the international community which party is responsible for obstructing the peace process in Yemen and the solution to the Yemeni crisis. The UN has once again added the Houthi militia to its blacklist of groups for violating children rights, and has imposed sanctions on the financial networks of the Houthi militia and blocked its websites — which are funded by the Iranian government. These websites incite further military escalation and bloodshed. Meanwhile, the Saudi peace initiative and the Arab coalition to support the legitimate government aim to reach a political settlement in Yemen. In this month, the Yemeni file discusses the UN blacklisting of the Houthi militia for violating children's rights, international efforts to facilitate the Yemeni peace process, and the Houthi-Iran escalation.

## 1. The UN Blacklists the Houthi Militias for Violating Children's Rights

On June 18, 2021, the UN added the Houthi militia to its blacklist of groups for violating children's rights in Yemen. The militia was mentioned in the report of UN Secretary-General António Guterres regarding children and armed conflict particularly in the context of abusing and recruiting children since 2016. The UN reported that the Houthi militia killed and maimed 250 Yemeni children.<sup>(11)</sup>

### 1.1 Ongoing Violations

Many Yemeni activists and human rights organizations believe that the Houthi militia's crimes against Yemeni children greatly exceed the crimes mentioned in the UN report. Yemeni human rights groups have monitored many militia violations of children's rights in Yemen and the mutilation and forced recruitment of thousands of children since the onset of the Yemeni crisis. The Yemeni Human Rights and Freedoms Network documented 20,977 violations by the Houthis against the children of Yemen. The military escalation of the Houthi militia displaced 43,000 children from January 2017 to March 2021. The violations include killing, kidnapping and forced displacement and depriving children of education. During this period, the militia killed 343 children, including 31 infants.<sup>(12)</sup>

### 1.2 The Importance of This Designation

The Yemeni public and many regional and international parties welcomed the

UN resolution, and they called on countries to follow the example of the UN and called for designating the Houthi militia as a terrorist organization because of the threat it poses to the security and stability of Yemen and the region. They also believe that Houthi crimes against the men, women and children of Yemen equate to war crimes.<sup>(13)</sup>

The Executive Director of the Yemeni Coalition for Human Rights Monitoring Mutahar Al-Badhiji said, “The decision to add the Houthi militia to the blacklist of groups violating children’s rights is a step in the right direction, because it will increase pressure on the militia to limit or halt the grave human rights violations, specifically against children.” The Director General of Curriculum at the Ministry of Education Mukhtar Al-Mashushi described the UN decision as a great achievement, praising the role of the media and activists in contributing to reaching this decision. He also said that this designation is a weapon through which the Iran-backed militia can be pressured.<sup>(14)</sup>

It is worth noting that Iran’s official media agencies reacted to the UN resolution in a way that supports its militia to fuel further violence against the people of Yemen. Mehr News Agency, which is closely linked to the Iranian supreme leader, said that this decision was taken in accordance with the dictates of the United States. An Iranian newspaper quoted the so-called head of the Houthi Revolutionary Committee Muhammad Ali Al-Houthi who said that the militias will respond to the UN decision by organizing a march with the participation of children under the control of the militia.<sup>(15)</sup>

Human rights activists in Yemen believe that when Houthi militia leaders talk about a march organized with the participation of Yemeni children, it reflects the exploitation of children in Houthi camps who are indoctrinated with “sectarian ideologies” as part of the Iranian government’s scheme to create a generation of extremists in Yemen. Some sources report that the Houthi militia has recruited more than 300,000 children from all areas under its control, established over 2,500 training camps under the cover of education or the so-called “summer education” centers in which intensive ideological and military courses are held. This exercise is defined as the largest entrapment of generations in the history of Yemen. The militia devises field programs for children who are recruited so that they can visit military training centers and learn about the different types of weapons and ammunition. At these centers, they are also shown videos that justify bloodshed, incite hatred towards other sects and neighboring countries and excommunicate anyone who refuses to submit to the Iranian government’s project under the pretext of the so-called “axis of resistance.”<sup>(16)</sup>

## 2. International Efforts to Facilitate the Yemeni Peace Process and the Houthi-Iranian Escalation

In view of the international efforts and moves to resolve the Yemeni crisis, the Sultanate of Oman has made consistent diplomatic efforts to find suitable ground to reach a political settlement in Yemen. An Omani delegation visited the Yemeni capital Sana’a and held talks with the Houthi militia to resolve the Yemeni crisis. However, the Omani delegation left Sana’a without making any

progress due to the Houthi militia's insistence on obstructing all efforts to find a political solution to the crisis.

## 2.1 Houthi Intransigence

The Houthi militia's ongoing determination to obstruct a political solution through practicing political manipulation and escalating militarily inside and outside Yemen to gain negotiating power in future talks places greater responsibility on the international community to move more effectively against this militia. The Houthi militia demonstrated its unwillingness to explore peaceful options to end the Yemeni crisis, while the Arab coalition led by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is committed to suspending military operations in line with international efforts to make way for a political solution in Yemen.<sup>(17)</sup>

In this context, Yemeni Minister of Information Muammar Al-Eryani stated that the Houthi militia continued its military escalation amid the efforts made by the UN envoy Martin Griffiths and US envoy Tim Lenderking. He pointed out that the militia intensified its military attacks against the Ma'rib Governorate by using ballistic missiles, which led to dozens of deaths and injuries among the displaced, coinciding with the visit of the Omani mediation delegation to Sana'a.<sup>(18)</sup>

Regarding the positive messages sent by the Arab coalition to support the legitimate government, the Yemeni minister of information stated that the Iran-backed militias responded to these messages with further military escalation by launching more booby-trapped drones to attack civilian targets in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. At the same time, the international community called on the Houthi militia to stop its escalation and opt for peace.<sup>(19)</sup>

Commenting on the recent briefing of the UN Special Envoy for Yemen Martin Griffiths to the Security Council on June 15, 2021, Eryani said, "We hope that the Houthi militia, funded by Iran and governed today by an Iranian Revolutionary Guards officer, will accept peace and put an end to the bloodshed that has been caused since their unfortunate coup. We hope that the efforts of the UN envoy Martin Griffiths, the US envoy Tim Lenderking and the brotherly and friendly countries will succeed, despite our long and bitter experiences in dealing with these militias, which have proven that they do not understand the language of politics, peace and agreements."<sup>(20)</sup>

## 2.2 US Actions Against the Houthis

US State Department spokesman Ned Price said: "The United States of America is beyond fed up with Houthi escalation, the continued military attacks and the threat to the lives of civilians, whether inside or outside Yemen." The US State Department spokesman held the Houthi militia responsible for the ongoing conflict in Yemen, stressing that it will not win militarily in Ma'rib.<sup>(21)</sup>

It is worth noting that the US Department of the Treasury imposed financial sanctions on a Houthi-Iranian smuggling network that helps fund the Quds Force and the Houthi militia in Yemen, led by Houthi leader Tehran Sa'id Al-Jamal who resides in Tehran. This network generates tens of millions of dollars' worth of funds from suspicious sources such as money laundering and smuggling networks that illegally sell Iranian oil. A significant portion of these funds are

channeled through a complex network of intermediaries in multiple countries to the Houthi militia. The US State Department stated that this network enables the Houthi militia to carry out deplorable attacks inside and outside Yemen. It also confirmed that since the onset of the Yemeni crisis, the Houthi militia has relied on the support of the Revolutionary Guards, especially the Quds Force, to launch military campaigns against the internationally recognized legitimate government as well as against the Arab coalition countries, despite the growing calls for peace. <sup>(22)</sup>

Many observers believe that these US moves are a step in the right direction, especially as they coincide with the UN resolution to blacklist the Houthi militia, and that the US and UN positions and steps directly demonstrate that the Houthi militia is the obstructing party in the peace process in Yemen, thereby paving the way for stronger action to be taken against this militia in the future. Forecasts suggest that the US administration is gradually moving to tighten financial pressure on the militia and perhaps reclassify it as a terrorist group. On the other hand, some believe that linking the Iranian nuclear file and the ongoing talks in Vienna to the Yemeni file casts a shadow over the complexities of the Yemeni scene, which would make the American position more ambiguous towards the Houthi militia. However, everyone realizes that the Iranian government is using this militia as a pressure card in the talks.

## Conclusion

International and regional efforts to achieve peace in Yemen continue amid the intransigence of the Houthi militia because of its dependence on the Iranian government and its submission to Iranian government dictates. The Houthi militia has reacted negatively to all peace initiatives, including the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's proposal, the plan of UN envoy Martin Griffiths to establish a ceasefire, and the efforts of the Sultanate of Oman by escalating militarily further inside and outside Yemen. This makes it clear to the international community that the Houthi militia and the Iranian government intend to continue the military escalation to achieve political and territorial gains at the expense of the suffering of the Yemeni people. The decision of the UN to blacklist the Houthi militia and the imposition of US sanctions were in response to the Houthi positions that halt the efforts to achieve a political settlement, and the Houthi violations against Yemeni children. This suggests that the international community will support the position of the new UN envoy to take stronger action against the militia's destabilizing behavior which undermines the security and stability of Yemen and the region.

# Iran and Iraq

During June 2021, the Iraqi arena witnessed fundamental developments that are expected to cast a shadow over Iranian influence in the country. Therefore, the report's axes will focus on the impact of the US airstrikes on the sites of pro-Iran armed militias, the repercussions of the tripartite summit in Baghdad on Iranian influence in Iraq, and the implications of Ebrahim Raisi's victory in the Iranian presidential election for Iran's role in Iraq.

## 1. The Implications of the US Airstrikes on Militia Sites on the Iraqi-Syrian Border

On June 28, 2021, in response to an instruction from President Joe Biden, the US Army launched airstrikes on sites and ammunition depots of pro-Iran armed militias in the Iraqi cities of Bukamal and Qa'im on the Iraqi-Syrian border. The airstrikes killed five militia members and were carried out in response to repeated Katyusha rocket and drones attacks by militias against US targets in Iraq. This is the second retaliatory attack against militia sites which President Biden has ordered since he took office in January 2021.

The airstrikes come at a delicate juncture. The militias' influence and power in the Iraqi equation is set to increase against the backdrop of the victory of one of the most prominent figures of the "conservative" current in the Iranian presidential election on the one hand, and after the United States and France recently warned Iran that time is running out to return to the nuclear deal and not to rely on the prolongation of the negotiations to give it time to develop nuclear activities on the other hand. These airstrikes also came at a time of heightened military escalation against US targets by Iran's proxies. The number of militia attacks against US targets since the beginning of 2021 was more than 40, including five drone attacks,<sup>[23]</sup> most recently on June 26, 2021, when Iran-backed militias with three drones targeted an area near the US Consulate in Erbil.

By carrying out airstrikes on militia sites, which were described as limited, Biden's administration aims to deliver messages to Tehran, mainly that Tehran should not test Washington's patience by directing militias to strike US targets, and that Washington separates between the ongoing diplomatic efforts with Iran by sitting at the negotiating table to revive the nuclear deal and retaliatory military attacks against militia positions to protect US goals and to prevent serious escalation. The Biden administration does not want the situation to degenerate into a full-scale conflict because the airstrikes did not take place in the heart of Iraq's provinces but instead occurred on the border strip between Iraq and Syria. Thus, these airstrikes were limited in their impact.

The airstrikes indicate that the US administration is aware of the danger of the

continuity of militia escalation against its targets in the Iraqi arena, especially with the qualitative development in the weapons used by the militias. The type of drones used in the attack raised concerns in Washington about the growing militia capabilities because it can – according to US military experts – evade the defenses Washington has set up in Iraq against repeated missile attacks against US targets. In this regard, the Commander of the US Central Command General Kenneth McKenzie expressed concern that “The proliferation of drones could erode the American advantage in air surveillance and targeting.”<sup>(24)</sup>

Ironically, Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh expressed Iran’s condemnation of the US airstrikes, saying: “Washington must correct its mistakes and stop its interference in the region.”<sup>(25)</sup> However, his country is primarily responsible for the escalation. Tasnim News Agency indicated that recent months have witnessed a rise in the frequency of drone attacks in Iraq against US targets, such as those drones that targeted the Patriot system’s radar at Ain al-Assad base and the CIA’s hangars at the Erbil base.<sup>(26)</sup>

## 2. The Implications of the Tripartite Summit in Baghdad on Iranian Influence in Iraq

On June 27, 2021, the Iraqi capital Baghdad hosted the third tripartite summit that brought together Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, Jordanian King Abdullah II, and Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kazemi, to complement the two previous summits that were held in Cairo in 2019 and in Amman in 2020. The aim was to outline the details of a new phase of Egyptian-Jordanian-Iraqi cooperation.

The summit was of great importance in many aspects; it undermined Iran’s influence in the region on the one hand, and encouraged Iraq to move forward towards its Arab fold on the other hand. The first aspect is the weight and the influence of the three countries in regional and international equations. The second aspect is the results of the summit itself, which affirmed the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of the three countries, and reinforced security and intelligence cooperation and coordination, and electrical interconnection projects and the exchange of electric power between the three countries.

The summit also focused on linking energy transmission networks between Iraq and Egypt through Jordan, building a pipeline to export Iraqi oil through Jordan, cooperating in the agricultural and industrial sectors to enhance industrial and agricultural collaboration and integration between the three countries, reactivating the movement of transport and shipping through the port of Nuweiba-Aqaba to the Karama-Trebil crossing, transporting passengers between the three countries on a single comprehensive ticket, and facilitating visas between the three countries.<sup>(27)</sup>

The third aspect was to reinforce commitment to the Arab Gas Pipeline project or the so-called “New Levant” project, which Kazemi disclosed to The Washington Post for the first time during his visit to Washington in August 2020. He then explained that it is a project of economic integration and geographical linkage between the three countries similar to the European model.<sup>(28)</sup> The project is based on Egypt’s huge population of 100 million people, Iraq’s great oil wealth with the second largest oil reserves in the region after Saudi Arabia, and

then Jordan as a geographical link between Egypt and Iraq. Jordanian political analyst Abdullah al-Hadidi explained: “Because of the pipeline, Egypt and Jordan get discounts of up to \$16 per barrel and Iraq in turn imports electricity from Egypt and Jordan, and attracts investments from the two countries.”<sup>(29)</sup>

Through this project, Iraq will balance its foreign relations and shun the policy of polarization and sectarianism adopted by Iran and its arms in the Iraqi arena. Iraq also reiterates the policy of disassociation, and that Mesopotamia is a hub for the exchange of benefits and common interests and not a field of conflict and military confrontations to settle intraregional scores.

However, the implementation of the outcomes of the summit on the ground will curb Iranian influence in Iraq, because it will negatively impact the Iran-Iraq balance of payments by lowering the level of trade between the two countries. Iraq is expected, at least partially, to reduce its dependence on Iranian goods and its electricity imports which Tehran uses as a strong pressure card against the Baghdad government so that it sticks to Iran’s and keeps Iraq within the Iranian sphere of influence, especially since the electrical linkage project between Iraq and the Gulf states is still under construction. According to Kazemi, “We have started the electrical connection project with the Gulf countries, and have completed 85 percent of the work in Iraq, and in 2022, the entire electrical connection project with the Gulf states will be completed.”<sup>(30)</sup>

Due to Iran’s concerns about the future of its military arms in Iraq if Iraq returns to its Arab surroundings, even if this is not an easy matter and faces difficult challenges given the extent of Iranian penetration into the joints of the Iraqi state and institutions, the militias, on Iran’s orders, held a military parade in Diyala with the Popular Mobilization Forces which showcased the weapons manufactured in Iran. This military parade coincided with the start of the tripartite summit. In addition, the area near the US consulate in Erbil was targeted by a drone. However, this is what happens every time Iraq tries to return to its Arab or international fold as Iran seeks to keep Iraq within its sphere of influence on the one hand and thwart Baghdad’s moves on the other hand. This explains the pro-Iranian militias firing Katyusha rockets in response to the first round of the US-Iraq dialogue in Baghdad.

### 3. The Iraqi Position on Raisi’s Victory and Its Repercussions on Iran’s Strategy in Iraq

The results of the Iranian presidential election attracted wide Iraqi interest as members of the three branches of government, several influential political and religious figures in the Iraqi equation, such as the leader of the Wisdom Movement Ammar al-Hakim, the President of the Supreme Islamic Council Hammam Hamoudi and Secretary-General of the Nujaba Movement Akram al-Kaabi, congratulated Raisi on his victory in the presidential election. Iraq’s official news agency also reported that Raisi invited Kazemi to visit Tehran, due to the centrality of Iraq in Iran’s strategy by virtue of the determinants of geography, politics, economy and security.

A change in the Iranian presidency does not usually draw much attention from statesmen and national decision-makers as he does not have the powers to influence the foundations of Iranian policies. The entire system is run by the supreme leader who has broad supra-constitutional powers through which

he determines internal and external policies. However, Raisi's victory received attention from the Iraqi leadership for several reasons including:

1. Iran has wide-ranging influence in the Iraqi arena which is reflected in strong bilateral trade relations, particularly Iranian gas and electricity exports to Iraq. In addition, Iran is one of the important water sources for Iraq. There is also a wide proliferation of Iran-backed militias in Iraq.
2. The Iraqi leadership is aware of Raisi's influence in the Iranian government over the few next years. He is one of the most prominent figures of the "conservative" movement close to the supreme leader and he was even described as "the Leader's candidate." He is also the son-in-law of the supreme leader's representative, Mashhad Friday preacher Ayatollah Ahmad Alamolhoda. He has strong relations with the Commander of the IRGC Hossein Salami, the Commander of the Quds Force Ismail Qaani, and the Parliament Speaker Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf. Raisi is one of the revolution's men and supports revolutionary principles and Iran's imperialist ambitions. In his first press conference after the announcement of his victory, Raisi stressed his commitment to the revolutionary approach and upholding Iran's regional influence by saying: "Khomeini's approach will continue and I will follow the path of Qassem Soleimani."<sup>(31)</sup>

Therefore, following the victory of Raisi, it is expected that the Quds Force will be given free rein in Iran's arenas of influence, especially Iraq, and Iranian interference will continue in Iraq with the support of the militias founded by Soleimani, especially the pro-Velayat-e Faqih militias that adopt the revolutionary approach to have the final say in Iraqi decision-making and to control the joints of the Iraqi state, and to influence the alignments of political alliances before the upcoming parliamentary elections to be held in October 2021. Therefore, ensuring the dominance of the pro-Iran Shiite arms and allowing them to form the new government and preventing the formation of a government similar to the Kazemi government that seeks to return to the Arab fold.

However, this does not mean that there are no challenges for Raisi in the Iraqi arena. It suffices to mention the challenges stemming from popular perceptions regarding the dangers of Iranian influence in the southern Shiite provinces, Iraq's desire to balance its foreign relations, and the Arab and Gulf support for Iraq to bring Iraq back to its Arab surroundings.

## Conclusion

Despite the talk about the expected changes in favor of Iran's influence due to Raisi's victory, Iran faces real obstacles in the Iraqi arena which curb the ambitions of the Quds Force and militia fighters toward achieving significant achievements. These obstacles were illustrated in the Biden administration's separation between diplomacy and force in dealing with the Iranian files, and the Iraqi official and popular efforts to bring Iraq back into the Arab fold under an Arab alliance that includes Iraq, Jordan and Egypt, in addition to the Gulf efforts to move closer to Iraq. This will create a strong Iraq capable of making independent decisions, allowing it to no longer be an arena to settle scores and ignite conflicts. In addition, it will enable Iraq to end the policy of polarization.

# Iran and Syria

The Syrian file witnessed several events and developments during June 2021. These include the military escalation that many Syrian cities faced. A number of regional and international powers were involved in this escalation for different goals and interests. This escalation coincided with the reemergence of discussions via international conferences and meetings regarding the Syrian file after a long lapse. However, due to Iran's influence in Syria, speculation is growing about Iran's prospective political direction because of the change in Iran's presidency and whether the Syrian file will be impacted by the change in government. Accordingly, this month's report reviews the developments in Iran-Syria relations through two main axes: the military escalation in Syria and the interests of the actors involved in the crisis, as well as the repercussions of Ebrahim Raisi's victory on Iran-Syria relations.

## 1. The Military Escalation in Syria and the Interests of the Actors

Syria witnessed heightened security tensions and military escalation in June, owing to the multiplicity of actors and their conflicting objectives and policies. On the one hand, the Syrian regime and Russia continued their military escalation this month in the de-escalation zone in northwestern Syria. The Russian escalation in Idlib was expected and preemptive for several international considerations; Russia wants to achieve new strategic gains in northern Syria light of the imminently approaching date to extend cross border access to deliver aid to the region. The UN Security Council voting session will be held on this issue on July 11. This escalation also comes at a time when the political arena is witnessing movements by international actors, including the US-Russia summit held on June 16, the bilateral talks held by the United States with Turkey on the sidelines of the NATO Summit in Brussels.<sup>(32)</sup>

Amid continuing tension between the Syrian regime and Russia on the one hand and Turkey on the other hand in Idlib, Iran's tensions with both the United States and Israel reemerged on the Syrian arena. On June 8, Israeli planes bombed Iranian military sites on Syrian territory, after a hiatus for several months owing to the hostile security environment inside Israel.<sup>(33)</sup> With a change in the Israeli government, it is expected that its positions will not differ from the outgoing government, particularly in regard to foreign and security issues. There are internal calls on the new Israeli government to prioritize countering Iran's influence in the region, particularly in Syria and its ballistic missile program.<sup>(34)</sup>

On the other hand, Syria witnessed a mutual escalation between the United States and Iran, as each party targeted the military headquarters of the other

on border sites inside Iraq and Syria. On June 27, 2021, in President Joe Biden's second military move against Iran, US jets targeted operational and weapons facilities belonging to Iranian-backed militias, such as Kata'ib Hezbollah and Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada.<sup>(35)</sup> Iran-backed militias responded by launching several missiles at a US military base in Deir Ezzor on the Syrian-Iraqi border.<sup>(36)</sup> The US military operation did not come only as a result of Washington's awareness of the danger posed by these militias,<sup>(37)</sup> but it is also related to the ongoing nuclear talks in Vienna; given the fact that it was carried out two days after Washington and Paris warned Tehran that time is running out to return to the nuclear agreement.

## 2. The Repercussions of Ebrahim Raisi's Victory on Iran-Syria Relations

The Iranian presidential election and its results captured regional and international attention, especially after Ebrahim Raisi won the election. This victory raised several questions about Raisi's foreign policy outlook and how he intends to resolve domestic and external files, especially the Syrian file. Although Raisi's policies towards regional countries have not been detailed, it is clear that he is from the "hardline" movement and is close to the IRGC which dominates Iran's foreign policy under the guidance of the supreme leader. So it is expected that there will be insignificant changes in his foreign policy, especially regarding the Syrian file which is critical to Iran's regional orientation. In addition, the differences that arose during the last period, specifically between President Hassan Rouhani and the IRGC over Iran's regional role, will lessen during the upcoming presidential period, and the Syrian arena will face a unified Iranian policy and discourse, rather than several diverse and interrelated policies and discourses.<sup>(38)</sup>

Raisi's remarks, which were made during his first press conference, indicate some aspects of Iran's foreign policy towards Syria in the coming days, as he hinted at Iran's unwillingness to give up its regional influence,<sup>(39)</sup> and its strong support for the Iranian axis of resistance. Syria is within the vital area of Iranian influence in the region and a cornerstone of the Iranian axis of resistance.<sup>(40)</sup> These remarks are consistent with Raisi's previous statements in 2017. He once said that Syria represents our borders, our identity, and our point of attack.<sup>(41)</sup>

Accordingly, the remarks of the new Iranian president, who will be inaugurated in August, clearly indicate that Iran will not stop supporting its proxy militias that are fighting throughout the Middle East. On the contrary, Iran's influence in Syria is expected to grow.<sup>(42)</sup>

## Conclusion

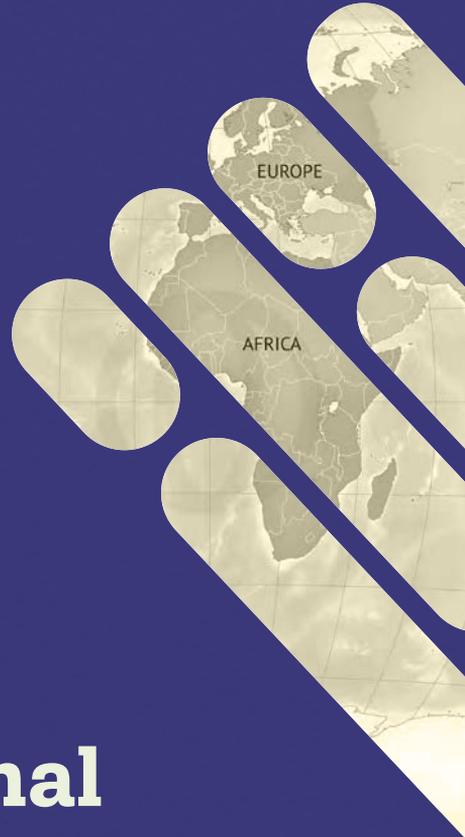
The recent escalation seems to be driven by negotiating goals and intends to push forward the regional and international understandings regarding Iran and Syria via the use of the military option. This military and political tension will most likely continue to prevail until the picture becomes clearer in the coming months, especially after the commencement of seventh round of Vienna talks regarding the Iranian nuclear program, and the UN Security Council session in July to extend cross border access via Bab al-Hawa to deliver humanitarian aid.

Amid the changes in the government in Iran and Israel and extreme right-wingers ascending to power in both countries, it seems that the Syrian arena will witness another military escalation between the two parties during the next stage. It can be said that tensions will characterize foreign relations under Iran's president-elect, not only because of his right-wing mindset but also because any outcomes of the Vienna talks will be directly linked to Iran's regional interactions. Iran will not make concessions regarding its ballistic missile program and regional role.

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# International Affairs

In this part of the Iran Case File (ICF), we discuss Raisi's presidential election victory and its impact on Iran's relationship with the United States. Further, we shed light on the latest developments in the nuclear deal talks in Vienna, and the US-Iran mutual cycle of escalation and its outcome. In the Europe and Iran file, we review the European position on the outcome of Iran's presidential election and the assessment of the Iranians and the Europeans regarding the progress of the nuclear talks in Vienna.



# Iran and the United States

The Iranian presidential election was held as talks in Vienna, aimed at reviving Iran's 2015 agreement, were progressing. The "hardliner" Ebrahim Raisi won the election, triggering debate over his victory's impact on the nuclear talks and relations with the United States. This happened while US-Iran relations were facing a serious test and tensions on integral thorny issues. In this part of the ICF, three main topics are discussed as follows: first, the win of Raisi and its impact on the relationship with the United States; second, the mutual escalation between Washington and Tehran; third, Iran's threats; finally, outcomes.

## **1. The Win of Raisi: Its Impact on the Relationship With the United States**

The United States expressed doubts about the validity of Iran's presidential elections, which resulted in the win of Ebrahim Raisi and deprived the Iranian people of exercising their right to free and fair elections. Following his appointment by Khamenei as chief of the judiciary, Raisi was subject to US sanctions in 2019 over human rights violations.<sup>(1)</sup> Raisi's position on the United States and the West seems in line with that of the supreme leader's hardline stance. He had criticized Rouhani for betting on the West. Therefore, their relationship is expected to face serious challenges. Raisi said that he would not meet Biden.<sup>(2)</sup>

On the other side, the United States affirmed to continue its policy towards Iran despite Raisi's win and to continue the indirect nuclear negotiations in Vienna. Raisi said that his upcoming government will support the nuclear talks in Vienna but it will link it to the future of Iran; the new the government neither will it allow negotiations to be exhausting.<sup>(3)</sup>

### **1. Developments of the Vienna Talks**

The fifth round of nuclear talks in Vienna ended in June 2021. The disagreements on the methods to return to mutual compliance with the nuclear agreement remained unsolved. They have not reached an agreement so far on the sanctions to be lifted in the upcoming new deal. Iran wants to lift all sanctions while the United States believes that sanctions related to terrorism cannot be lifted. The Europeans and Americans have been repeatedly pushing the talks to include Iran's ballistic missile program and regional behavior in the coming talks. A 20-page draft agreement was concluded, including solutions to the remaining obstacles such as: future regional configurations and access of inspectors to all nuclear sites in Iran.

The negotiators returned to Vienna on June 11, 2021 where they commenced

the sixth round of talks, meanwhile, Washington lifted sanctions that were imposed on former Iranian officials. Iran regained its vote in the UN General Assembly after the United States enabled Tehran to use funds frozen in South Korea to pay its dues, sending positive signals regarding the nuclear talks.<sup>(4)</sup> However, this round did not achieve its aspired goal; resolving some thorny issues seemed quite difficult while all negotiators were lacking political will. The talks, perhaps, would be postponed until the new Iranian government, headed by Ebrahim Raisi, takes office in August 2021.

## **2. Mutual Escalation Between Iran and the United States**

Since the Vienna talks did not decisively resolve the disagreements between Washington and Tehran, each party resorted to place pressure on the other, reshuffling the cards to strengthen their position in the negotiations to secure a better deal. Their escalation is noticed on many levels as follows:

### **1.1 Not Extending the IAEA's Monitoring Deal and the US Threatening to Withdraw From Negotiations:**

Iran has not decided yet if it will extend the IAEA monitoring deal, which was extended by a month in May 2021. In an attempt to place pressure on the UN watchdog, Iran asserted that data from surveillance cameras at Iran's nuclear sites will not be handed over to the IAEA unless US sanctions are lifted when the agreement ends. Iran warned that it will delete all camera data if Washington does not lift sanctions.<sup>(5)</sup> On the other side, Washington warned Iran of not extending the camera deal with UN inspectors, threatening to withdraw from nuclear negotiations. "This process is not going to be open forever," a senior US State Department official said in a special press briefing.<sup>(6)</sup>

### **1.2 The US Insistence to Maintain Non-nuclear Sanctions**

Iran confirmed that it will not return to compliance with the 2015 nuclear deal unless US sanctions are lifted. There has been a clear internal consensus to lift sanctions imposed on the energy, funding, banking, and insurance sectors.<sup>(7)</sup> However, the United States has continued its sanctions imposed on Iran. The US authorities closed 33 websites used by Iran's Radio and Television Union (IRTVU) and three websites operated by the Iran-backed Kata'ib Hezbollah. Washington is also determined to maintain specific sanctions even if a new agreement is reached with Iran. These are non-nuclear sanctions, which President Biden himself does not have direct power to lift. "I would anticipate that even in the event of a return to compliance with the JCPOA, hundreds of sanctions will remain in place, including sanctions imposed by the Trump administration. If they are not inconsistent with the JCPOA, they will remain unless and until Iran's behavior changes," Blinken told a Senate committee.<sup>(8)</sup>

### **1.3 Building Alliances**

The United States began to reconsider rearranging alliances in countering Iran whether with the Europeans or regional powers. According to Biden administration officials, by taking this step Washington will be able to secure a better position to question Iran because the tools needed to counter Iran's

ballistic and regional activities will be available once a deal is reached.<sup>(9)</sup> In the same vein, US President Joe Biden met with Israeli President Reuven Rivlin, assuring that Iran “Iran will never get a nuclear weapon on [his] watch.” “My commitment to Israel is ... ironclad,” Biden told Rivlin at the commencement of their meeting in the Oval Office.<sup>(10)</sup>

On the other side, Iran maintains good and evolving relations with both Russia and China, providing Tehran with an effective diplomatic and political backup in the Vienna talks. Russia criticized the United States for maintaining sanctions despite taking part in negotiations while China asked Washington to move to complete the comprehensive lifting of sanctions.<sup>(11)</sup> The US envoy asked Iran to explain the presence of uranium particles in three undeclared locations. The Russian envoy urged not to politicize the issue, considering that the particles do not pose a danger in terms of nuclear proliferation.<sup>(12)</sup>

#### **1.4 Military Confrontation and Regional Deterrence**

Using its proxy, the Houthi militia, Iran continues to hinder the political settlement in Yemen. It is likely that Iran relies on the Yemeni crisis to advance in the Vienna talks. The Iran-backed militias launched three bombed-drone in Iraq, targeting an area near a site for the US consulate in Erbil, the capital of Iraq’s northern Kurdistan region. In a backlash response to deter Iran, US airstrikes were launched against facilities used by Iran-backed militias. These facilities were used to attack US troops.

#### **1.5 Maritime Confrontation in the Atlantic**

Iran sent two warships to the Atlantic in an unprecedented mission to show off the strength of the Iranian navy. It is reported that they were carrying small boats and torpedoes that were recently used to harass US naval ships in the Arabian Gulf. It is believed that Venezuela probably aims to use these warships to disrupt maritime navigation in the Panama Canal, one of the world’s vital waterways.

The United States stated that it monitors the movements of the two ships, warning Tehran against handing weapons to Venezuela. It also managed to convince the Latin American governments to prevent the ships from anchoring at their ports. As a result of US pressure, the two ships changed their route from the Atlantic to the western coast of Africa.

## **2. Outcomes and Repercussions**

The win of Ebrahim Raisi is a serious challenge for the nuclear talks in Vienna. His government will be less pragmatic than that of Rouhani and more adherent to lifting US sanctions as a first step before returning to compliance with the nuclear deal. It will also be more strict in ensuring that sanctions are actually lifted before heading to make any compromises, ensuring further guarantees that the United States will not withdraw from the deal and neither will it impose new sanctions. The Raisi government is expected to be inflexible about negotiations regarding Iran’s ballistic missile program and regional behavior.

Further, Raisi will maintain his absolute loyalty to the supreme leader and his governing apparatus, given the fact that he is a potential candidate

to succeed Khamenei. So, he will be the trusted man to safeguard the values and principles of the Iranian revolution. In terms of foreign policy, Raisi will insist on maintaining Iran's regional influence and placing pressure on the US presence in the region. The aforementioned expectations will create major challenges for Iran's international and regional relations and diplomatic efforts to revive the nuclear deal.

It is never mentioned that there are still disagreements on the measures to be taken in order to implement the understandings concluded in the Vienna talks. Biden cannot lift all sanctions on Iran yet as Washington wants Iran to return to full compliance with the nuclear deal amid its mounting nuclear violations. The European negotiators along with Washington want to include a provision in the new nuclear deal obligating Iran to enter follow up negotiations to resolve issues related to its ballistic missile program and destabilizing behavior in the region. However, the Raisi government will not agree to it.

There is still a valid opportunity for Raisi to mitigate the harsh conditions at home resulting from US sanctions, regain the trust of the "conservatives," tackle the legitimate crisis the current political system is facing, and control the snowballing social tensions and protests — threatening the survival of the political system. Concluding a new deal with the United States will lead to the influx of tremendous amounts of money to the government's treasury, enabling it to implement an emergency economic recovery program. In addition, China and Russia support Iran. International parties, including the United States, want Iran to return to the nuclear deal as they are concerned that Tehran will reach its breakout time as it still continues to work on its nuclear program and decrease its commitments. This enhances the possibility for reaching better understandings.

## **Conclusion**

The progress of talks in Vienna has become slow following Raisi's victory in the presidential election, however, the final say in negotiations is for the supreme leader. Continued progress on negotiations is in favor of Iran, taking into account that the internal social and economic crises are still present, jeopardizing the legitimacy of Raisi who aims to succeed Khamenei as well as the legitimacy of all "hardliners." Iran will continue with negotiations as it has a fateful interest in lifting sanctions. Without a doubt, Raisi's background will affect his relationship with the United States and the economic gains, which the Biden administration may reap from Iran— given the fact that Iran is now shifting to the East and relying on Russia and China to be the two balancing strategic powers against the United States and Europe.

# Iran and Europe

International efforts continued in June between the remaining parties to the nuclear deal: the P4+1 (France, UK, Russia, China + Germany). They held direct meetings with the Iranians to negotiate the revival of the nuclear deal while the Americans remained indirectly involved. June witnessed the final outcome of Iran's presidential race, resulting in the victory of Ebrahim Raisi, former judiciary chief, who is subject to US sanctions over human rights violations. In this part, we discuss the dynamics of Iran-Europe relations, reviewing two crucial topics: the European position on Iran's presidential election and the Iran-Europe assessment of the future consequences of the nuclear negotiations.

## 1. Europe and Iran's Presidential Election

Ebrahim Raisi, a close ally of Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, won the country's presidential election. None of the European capitals congratulated him on his victory.<sup>(13)</sup> Raisi is notorious for his chilling record of human rights violations, raising concerns among European leaders. Since they have to deal with this new president-elect, the Europeans advocating for human rights and freedoms are facing a very critical test.

Raisi was subject to US sanctions for facilitating and supporting the systematic repression against the 2019 protestors in Iran. He had been a member of the four person "death commission" that supervised the 1988 massacre of political prisoners from the People's Mojahedin Organization of Iran (PMOI/MEK).<sup>(14)</sup> In response to the election of Raisi, Secretary General of Amnesty International Agnès Callamard said, "That Ebrahim Raisi has risen to the presidency instead of being investigated for the crimes against humanity of murder, enforced disappearance and torture, is a grim reminder that impunity reigns supreme in Iran."<sup>(15)</sup>

These human rights accusations complicate the European initiatives aiming to improve living conditions in Iran. Europeans very often resort to pressuring the Iranian government through imposing economic sanctions in response to Tehran's human rights violations. Yet, the country's human rights record will be deteriorating further since the head of the executive power is accused of being involved in repression, killings and massacres. The Europeans are highly concerned about the situation of dual national detainees, who, according to European governments, have not been subject to fair trials and on many occasions made coerced confessions under duress.

Iranian decision makers, on the other hand, are cautious about the possible complexities that may arise against the backdrop of the pro-Velayat-e Faqih

“hardliners” taking over presidential office. The “hardliners” instruct their top leaders to incite enmity towards the West, urging them to join anti-Western blocs. Therefore, Iran is moving closer towards Russia and China at the expense of the Europeans. Here, the Europeans are fully aware of the potential economic losses and difficult obstacles hindering their political influence. They, in parallel, take into account issues related to destabilizing regional security and stability and the possible conflict and escalation between peer powers in the region — given the fact that the new Iranian government is completely in line with the positions adopted by the IRGC and its expeditionary branch the Quds Force in destabilizing the region.

## 2. The Two Parties’ Overview Regarding the Nuclear Talks

Both parties, the Iranians and Europeans, reacted differently to the ongoing nuclear talks in Vienna. By the end of the fifth round in June, the Europeans and their American ally expressed considerable satisfaction with the negotiation outcomes, highlighting the remaining differences that hinder reaching a final agreement. At the opening of the sixth round, EU delegation to Vienna press attaché Alain Georges Matton said that the concerned parties have made progress and are willing to exert further efforts to include political and technical levels. However, Tehran’s envoy to the negotiations was not optimistic about reaching an agreement in this round.<sup>(16)</sup>

The fifth and sixth rounds were concluded without reaching the desired goal; a settlement that satisfies all parties involved was not accomplished, neither was the disagreement between Washington and Tehran resolved. European hopes to revive the nuclear deal started to fade and the European parties became more reserved, adopting a much harsher tone when outlining their demands to Iran. Though at the beginning of June they turned a deaf ear to the UN watchdog’s complaints regarding Iran’s refusal to explain the presence of uranium particles at undeclared nuclear sites,<sup>(17)</sup> the US secretary of state threatened by the end of the sixth round to withdraw from the talks, blaming Iran’s decision makers. “There are some very significant differences that remain. I can’t tell [...] whether we’ll succeed in overcoming those differences. It mostly depends on decisions that are made in Tehran by the supreme leader,” Blinken said in an interview with RAITG1.<sup>(18)</sup>

A critical disagreement arose following the sixth round: the debate over the three-month monitoring agreement between Iran and the IAEA, first concluded in February 2021 and extended in May 2021 for a month. Since the expiration of the deal on June 24, Iran has not decided anything regarding the deal. “Still no decision has been taken about agreement or no agreement, or how to continue or not to continue cooperation with the International Atomic Energy Agency,” Foreign Ministry spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh said.<sup>(19)</sup> The Europeans with their American ally have been trying hard to mitigate the crisis of undeclared nuclear sites — where uranium particles were found. They also aspire to restore the landmark nuclear agreement and expand it to include Iran’s consent to restrictions in regard to its ballistic missile program and destabilizing regional behavior.

## Conclusion

The outcome of Iran's presidential election has not affected the ongoing nuclear talks in Vienna since Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei controls all executive state affairs. Nevertheless, the election outcome will definitely pose different challenges for the Europeans in the long run, especially on issues related to Iran's human rights record, dual nationality detainees, and foreign relations with Russia and China. By the end of the sixth round, the nuclear talks reached a deadlock. The Europeans and Americans blame the Iranians for hindering the road to reaching a common ground for all parties involved. The Iranians are still adhering to their demand for lifting US all sanctions and are refusing to discuss Iran's ballistic missile program and its destabilizing regional behavior.

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