

MONTHLY REPORT



IRAN CASE FILE

Your window on Iran from inside and abroad

July 2021



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The developments in the Iranian arena during July 2021 indicated the expected direction of Iran after the balance of power, which has always governed the relationship between the political currents, has been eroded with the arrival of the new Iranian president who is expected to support all orientations and policies of the “hardliners” internally and externally. Although the new Iranian president has not yet revealed his cabinet formation, the features of his domestic and foreign policy are reflected in the interactions in the Iranian arena during July.

At the internal and ideological level, the Iranian expansionist project took a new path this month following talks about the Iranian government possibly planning to establish a Shiite mobilization front in Afghanistan similar to the PMF in Iraq and reorganizing the Shiite armed groups it supported in both Syria and Lebanon.

Despite the close relations between Iran and the Taliban, the foregoing step indicates Iran’s desire to impose its presence and preserve its interests in Afghanistan and its growing concerns about the expansion of the militia across various Afghan regions post the US troop withdrawal from the country. It also reflects Iran’s desire to continue interacting with regional files through ideological and dogmatic lenses, away from the diplomatic approach that should govern the relationship between states.

At the political level, Ebrahim Raisi’s victory in the recent presidential election provided a new opportunity for Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei to install one of his close associates to head the judiciary, the intelligence official and judge Gholam-Hossein Mohseni-Eje’i. This individual is under US and European sanctions for his role in human rights violations and is one of the

most prominent Iranian officials accused of partaking in the suppression of intellectuals and opinion leaders and prosecuting political activists when he held various judicial posts. With Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf heading the Parliament, Ebrahim Raisi winning the presidency and Eje'i heading the judiciary, the supreme leader has succeeded in ensuring that those close to him to preside over the three branches of power in Iran. Therefore, it is expected that these branches of power will be in harmony with one another during the coming period to achieve the goals of the "hardline" movement.

At the economic level, the report deals with the economic importance of the Ahwaz region, which is one of the richest regions and the main artery of the Iranian economy in terms of producing oil, gas, and electricity and hosting important industries. In addition, the region has important ports providing outlets for trade and a source of customs revenues as well as mineral and agricultural resources. Despite the huge economic potential that the region possesses, its residents suffer from unemployment, poverty, and a lack of various government services. Since mid-July 2021, this region has witnessed an escalation in protests against the backdrop of water shortages. The Iranian government has violently responded to these protest, leading to protests in a number of Iranian provinces in support of the region's residents and their demands.

At the military level, Iran's navy is still attempting to raise its defensive and combat capabilities, but it seems that the economic difficulties that Iran is experiencing as well as the many setbacks that the navy has experienced in recent years are a major impediment to the navy progressing with its future plans. In light of this reality, Iran has continued to exaggerate its achievements and manufacturing capabilities and fabricates fictitious achievements to shift attention from the navy's deficiencies. The other development in this file is the tense security situation on the Iran-Afghan border after US forces withdrew from Afghanistan and the Taliban gained control over Afghan crossings with neighboring countries, including those on the border with Iran. This situation has raised Iranian concerns about the path that the Taliban will take to seize power in Afghanistan. This file will also address the repercussions of the foregoing developments on Iranian security.

In regard to Arab affairs and at the level of Iran-Gulf interactions, Moscow announced its intention to present an updated version of its proposal regarding collective security in the Arab Gulf region, which would allow Western and regional concerns about Iran to be raised, including concerns around its missile program and regional behavior.

As for Iran's possible interaction with this initiative, Iran believes that it intersects largely with its previous initiative entitled "the Hormuz Peace Initiative." However, the Gulf countries, which have always called for a peaceful solution and the need to establish good neighborly relations, are expected to be receptive towards this initiative. The other development which is addressed in this axis is the Saudi-Omani consensus on developing cooperation between the two countries by establishing the Saudi-Omani Coordination Council headed by their respective foreign ministers to strengthen bilateral relations in various



fields. This consensus was formed after the Sultan of Oman Haitham bin Tariq visited Riyadh for two days. Regarding Iran-Yemen interactions, the Houthi militia's coordination with the Iranian side led to a clear escalation politically and militarily. The militia continued to thwart all regional and international efforts to bring peace to Yemen. The Houthi militia aims to strengthen its negotiating position in any future peace talks through its recent escalation. However, Iran aims to use the Yemeni file as a pressure card during the Vienna negotiations regarding its nuclear program. Houthi-Iranian ambitions have contributed to exacerbating the grave humanitarian situation in Yemen and have increased the suffering of the Yemeni people through forced displacements, the bombing of camps and urban areas. In addition, there have been ongoing bombing campaigns targeting residential homes.

In regard to Iran-Iraq interactions, the pro-Iranian militias increased their escalation targeting US facilities during July. Pro-Iranian militias in Iraq fired 14 missiles at the Ain al-Assad air base in Anbar Governorate. There was also an attempt to target the US embassy three times during July and an area near the US consulate in Erbil was also bombed. On another note, Washington hosted the fourth session of the US-Iraq strategic dialogue. Due to the centrality of Iraq in Iran's expansionist strategy and Iranian concerns regarding the possible impact of this dialogue on Tehran's influence in Iraq, Iran hastened to dispatch Quds Force Commander General Esmail Qaani to Iraq to meet with the leaders of its proxy militias in an attempt to thwart any efforts that might limit its influence in Iraq. Before Qaani's visit, Iran leveraged the water and electricity cards to pressure al-Kazemi government in order to end the US military



presence, and to prove his government's failure in managing Iraq's crises as the Iraqi parliamentary election approaches. At the level of Iran's presence in Syria, Israeli forces launched three air strikes during July on a number of Iranian militia sites. These were intercepted by Syrian-Russian air defense systems, after the Russian side had remained silent in the past regarding Israeli attacks. This Russian position can be read as a tactical consideration to uphold its position as a major force in Syria in order to direct and control regional and international interactions in this country and to reduce the escalation of disputes and provocations in the sovereign areas under the control of the Assad regime, which may thwart the Russian project in Syria. The other development in this file is the Syria-China rapprochement after the visit of the Chinese foreign minister to Damascus. For Tehran, this rapprochement is an appropriate opportunity to balance Russian influence in Syria. As for the third development, the talk regarding the imminent US withdrawal from Syria increased. Iran hopes to expand its influence in Syria following the downsizing of the US presence in this country.

In the context of international affairs, the nuclear negotiations, the future of the nuclear agreement and the US sanctions imposed on Iran formed the core of the interactions in July. Iran asked European mediators to postpone the indirect negotiations with the United States in Vienna until actual power is transferred to President-elect Ebrahim Raisi. The negotiations were suspended until the new Iranian government is formed. This step appears to be in line with the desire of the ruling elite and the supreme leader in particular to provide Raisi with the privilege of signing the agreement and reap its expected gains. This provoked

the anger of the outgoing President Hassan Rouhani. He criticized the Iranian Parliament for disrupting the negotiations. However, the Parliament believes that Rouhani's government failed to lift the sanctions imposed on Iran and the negotiations carried out by his government in Vienna failed to lift the sanctions in order to benefit Iran economically.

It is expected that the transfer of the negotiations file to Raisi's government will lead to further negotiating complications, and his negotiating team may be more hawkish than Rouhani's team, especially after the supreme leader talked about the need to distrust the West and his emphasis on solving problems internally without relying on understandings with the West. However, the United States, which is working to reap the benefits from the nuclear agreement, will not succumb to Iran's militancy and insists on linking its return to the nuclear agreement to Iran's acceptance of future negotiations including discussions about other regional issues in addition to the Iranian missile program and in return it will consider lifting certain sanctions on Iran.

At the level of Iran-Europe interactions, it can be said that the nuclear talks dominated most of the European-Iranian political tensions over the last few months, however, diplomatic calm settled over their relationship during July, except for European condemnation of Iran's excess uranium enrichment. Britain also pointed fingers at Iran over cyber operations carried out by Iranian hackers. There was also Iranian media criticism after the current President of the Council of the European Union Janez Janša criticized Iran's human rights violations. He levelled these allegations during his participation in a march and conference organized by the National Council of Resistance of Iran in the German capital, Berlin, on July 10, 2021.

Internal Affairs

The Internal Affairs file deals with four axes. The ideological axis sheds light on the possible establishment of a Shiite mobilization unit in Afghanistan by Iran to confront the recent expansion of the Taliban after the US withdrawal from the country. It also discusses the so-called Shiite resistance and the revolutionized region through the vocabulary of Khamenei's recent speech. The Political File addresses the decision of Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei to appoint Gholam-Hossein Mohseni Eje'i as Iran's chief justice after Ebrahim Raisi. In addition, his past responsibilities and positions are analyzed since the victory of the Iranian revolution. This file also discusses the accusations levelled against him, the European and US sanctions imposed on him, and the new chief justice's attempts to improve the image of the judiciary and cover up his human rights violations record. The economic axis addresses the economic importance of Ahwaz for Iran as a whole and the diversity of its resources, the challenges facing the Ahwazi people, and the scenarios to deal with the ongoing Ahwazi protests from the perspective of the government. The military axis discusses the efforts of Iran's navy to develop its capabilities and the difficulties it encounters, as well as the security developments on the Iran-Afghan border.



The Political File

The decision of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei to appoint Gholam-Hossein Mohseni-Eje'i — a judge and intelligence official — as the head of Iran's judiciary to replace Ebrahim Raisi has raised concerns among human rights activists about the country's human rights record worsening over the coming period. This is because the incoming official was one of the senior Iranian officials involved in cracking down on intellectuals, pundits, and political activists. He has held different judicial posts and was appointed as Iran's minister of security during the first term of former President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

In this context, the Political File for the month of July 2021 will discuss three main axes: the responsibilities and positions held by Mohseni-Eje'i since the victory of the Iranian revolution, the accusations leveled at him by the United States and the European sanctions targeting him, and finally the steps taken by Mohseni-Eje'i to cover up his human rights violations.

First: The Responsibilities and Positions Held by Mohseni-Eje'i

Mohseni-Eje'i — born in Isfahan's city of Ezhiyeh in 1956 — has held various positions within the Iranian judiciary. However, he rose to prominence when he interrogated Mehdi Hashemi—one of the founders of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps and brother of the son-in-law of Hussein-Ali Montazeri, who was supposed to succeed the founding father of the Iranian revolution Ruhollah Khomeini — over the Iran-Contra affair. Hashemi was sentenced to death for his role in exposing the secret deal Iran concluded with the United States⁽¹⁾ whereby the latter provided Iran with US and Israeli military hardware during the Iran-Iraq War.

He subsequently rose to further prominence when he presided over the corruption trial of Tehran's former Mayor Gholamhossein Karbaschi in 1998.

Following the two abovementioned trials, he was appointed as the Special Clerical Court's prosecutor in 1999. During this period, a number of clerics were arrested and sentenced to imprisonment such as Abdollah Nouri, Mohsen Kadivar and Hasan Yousefi Eshkevari.⁽²⁾

During the first term of former President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, he was appointed Iran's minister of security and intelligence. However, President Ahmadinejad dismissed him after he objected to the president's procrastination in executing the supreme leader's directive to dismiss Esfandiar Rahim Mashaei from his position as Iran's first vice president

and his rejection of Ahmadinejad's proposal to live-stream the trials of the defendants involved in the 2009 uprising.⁽³⁾

After he left the government, he took over as Iran's prosecutor general until he was appointed as the country's first deputy chief justice under Sadiq Amoli Larijani. When Ebrahim Raisi was appointed as the country's chief justice in March 2019, Mohseni-Eje'i retained his position. He remained in the position until he was appointed chief justice in early July 2021.

Second: The Accusations Levelled at Mohseni-Eje'i and the US and European Sanctions Targeting Him

Human rights organizations have accused Mohseni-Eje'i of being a human rights violator and partaking in the assassination of leftist journalist and activist Pirouz Davani, who was killed in what was known as the Political Chain Murders in the 1990s. Over 80 columnists, journalists, translators, poets, and activists were killed in the span of a few years because of their opposition to the policies of the Iranian government.

In light of these human rights violations, the European Union in April 2011 imposed sanctions on 32 Iranian officials, including Mohseni-Eje'i.⁽⁴⁾

The US Department of Treasury also imposed sanctions on Mohseni-Eje'i along with seven other officials in September 2010 for "committing gross human rights abuses" and partaking in the crackdown against protestors who challenged the presidential election results in 2009.⁽⁵⁾

Following the announcement of his appointment as Iran's chief justice, Reporters Without Borders was quick to announce that Mohseni-Eje'i, in light of his notorious record and repressive measures against reporters, was directly involved in the killing of journalist Pirouz Davani in 1998.

It called for establishing an international commission under the supervision of the United Nations Human Rights Council to interrogate him.

On its website, Reporters Without Borders published a report in which it cited the role of Mohseni-Eje'i in the killing of prominent figures such as Dariush Forouhar, Parvaneh Eskandari, and Iran-é-Farda magazine editorial board member Majid Charif as well as the two journalists Mohamad Mokhtari and Mohamad Jafar Pouyandesh.⁽⁶⁾

Mohseni-Eje'i is the first chief justice who is not a member of the Assembly of Experts. Moreover, according to Article 157 of the Iranian Constitution, the head of the judiciary should be a mujtahid, which also Mohseni-Eje'i is not, nor is Ebrahim Raisi who has recently been elected as Iran's president for the next four years. Hence, critics believe that appointing Mohseni-Eje'i as chief justice lacks legitimacy as his appointment violates the articles of the Constitution.

Moreover, his critics accuse him of covering up the crimes and financial corruption taking place in the supreme leader's circle. He also played a major role in dismissing Hussein-Ali Montazeri from his position as deputy supreme leader as well as taking up the files related to his family and those close to him when he was the Special Clerical Court's prosecutor and minister of security and intelligence.⁽⁷⁾

Hence, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei has rewarded Mohseni-Eje'i by appointing him to this sensitive post in light of his loyalty in executing the supreme leader's objectives and policies.

Third: The Steps Taken by Mohseni-Eje'i to Cover up His Record of Human Rights Violations

To mitigate the criticism and concerns regarding his appointment as Iran's chief justice, Mohseni-Eje'i began his tenure by meeting with the families of those detained during the 2019 protests which were held in condemnation of the government's hiking of gasoline prices. He called for the sentences handed down to those convicted during the 2019 protests to be reconsidered and that they should be granted a pardon and released, especially those who have displayed good conduct while serving their sentences. They will be obliged not to commit any further crimes. In another move, Mohseni-Eje'i called on the judiciary head in Ahwaz to release all the protesters who peacefully participated in the recent protests that broke out in the region over the water shortage crisis.⁽⁸⁾

The aforementioned can be viewed as a positive gesture from a chief justice accused of cracking down on protests over the past years. In addition, the aforementioned can be considered as a shrewd move by the Iranian government to prevent the situation in the Ahwaz region from escalating further. The region has witnessed protests against water shortages and the protests have received significant support from different Iranian governorates.

Furthermore, Mohseni-Eje'i undertook an extra step. He asked the minister of justice to take the steps needed to control prices and to crackdown on those involved in raising them. He also called for the government and judiciary to cooperate so that profiteers do not impose further burdens on the Iranian people.⁽⁹⁾

In line with the objectives set out by his predecessor Ebrahim Raisi such as combatting the rampant corruption in Iran, Mohseni-Eje'i directed the regulatory bodies linked to the judiciary to coordinate in order to outline watertight measures and policies to prevent what he called the corrupt from developing further clout inside the judiciary.⁽¹⁰⁾

Conclusion

For years, arbitrary arrests, the absence of fair trials, killings, executions, torture, the handing down of long jail sentences, exiling, detentions, dismissals and the confiscation of properties have continued to be the dominant approach pursued by Iran's judiciary. In light of the new balance of power in Iran after Ebrahim Raisi's victory in the presidential election, it is expected that the three branches of power will work more harmoniously to achieve the policies and objectives of Iran's "hardliners." As a result of this expected harmony, it is likely that the judiciary will continue with its approach, facing little criticism or protest from other government-related institutions, especially facing

little or no opposition from the presidency. Perhaps the unequivocal stance regarding Iran's different security and political issues will be the hallmark of the coming period, which means obscuring the Iranian justice situation more than ever.

The Ideological File

The Ideological File sheds light on the developments related to the Shiite religious elite in general and the Iranian one in particular, and the impact of such developments on the religious and political landscape in Iran and the repercussions for the Shiite community in the region.

This file focused on the reaction of some clerics against the rhetoric of Iran's pro-Velayat-e Faqih elite, which was employed to influence the outcome of the presidential election and the position of the Sunnis regarding the election.

This month, the Ideological File casts light on two closely intertwined issues:

The first issue focuses on the possibility of establishing a Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF)-style militia in Afghanistan by Iran to counter the Taliban's recent advances after the US decision to withdraw from Afghanistan.

The second issue focuses on what is known as the Shiite resistance and instilling revolutionary fervor across the region in light of Khamenei's latest speech. The file seeks to provide answers to the philosophical and ideological questions related to the pro-Velayat-e Faqih jihadi mindset and the way it views regional files from Afghanistan to Iraq and Syria from an ideological and doctrinal perspective, away from regular state norms and universal principals of international law and international relations.

First: Iran and the Taliban: Will Another PMF Be Established in Afghanistan?

After the withdrawal of US and Western forces from Afghan territories, reports have emerged regarding Iran's intentions to step up its efforts to establish a Shiite PMF-style militia to protect the Shiite minority and preserve Tehran's interests.

It could be said that there are two scenarios pertaining to the likelihood of establishing another PMF-style militia in Afghanistan:

The first possibility represented by activating the already operating armed groups and perhaps establishing and resuscitating others, as was the case in Iraq and Syria. This scenario is backed up by the statement issued by an armed group in Kabul — that calls itself Shiite Mobilization — in which it reiterated its intent to fight the Taliban.⁽¹¹⁾

It remains unclear whether Iran is seeking to establish a PMF-style militia made up of Taliban foes, Hazaras, Uzbeks, and Tajiks⁽¹²⁾ or whether it is coordinating, marshaling, and reactivating the existing Shiite armed groups such as the Fatemiyoun Brigade — which gained vast experience in the Syrian war. One has to wait and see whether the threat to create or reactivate existing Shiite fighting groups is real or not or whether it is a message to the Taliban so

that it stays away from the Shiite community to avoid the prospect of sowing the seeds of sectarian conflict.

This scenario assumes that the Taliban is more dangerous to Iranian interests than the United States in light of various security, political, social and sectarian factors.⁽¹³⁾

Hence, Iran will seek to curb and curtail the Taliban through every way possible. Perhaps this belief is supported by some politicians close to the Iranian government who have expressed their concerns in light of the Taliban's expansion.⁽¹⁴⁾ Yet, some Iranian officials expect that the Taliban takeover will pave the way for violence and the resurgence of ISIS.⁽¹⁵⁾

The second possibility assumes that there are no Iranian intentions to establish a PMF-style militia other than reactivating Shiite militias already operating on the ground, which could be deployed to defend Tehran's interests whenever Iran wants. According to this scenario, Iran-Taliban relations will remain stable to a big extent as there are channels of communication that have been continuing over the past years and the two sides need each other.

This scenario is supported by Iranian pragmatist voices who call on the Hazaras and Shiites in Afghanistan not to fight the Taliban because the United States, according to them, is using the "sectarian warfare strategy" in Afghanistan.⁽¹⁶⁾

However, there are Iranian media reports defending the Taliban, differentiating it from ISIS, "Unlike ISIS and Iraq, there are no reports of heinous crimes when it comes to the developments in Afghanistan. The Taliban even announced it will not harm the Shiites in Afghanistan."

According to such reports, there is no news of crimes against innocent civilians or the destruction of homes. Only clashes with pro-government forces have been reported.⁽¹⁷⁾

The Fatemiyoun Brigade's Commander Hojjat Kinabadinejad shut the door on any Shiite-Taliban dispute, saying that the "Quds Force has no plans to fight the Taliban."⁽¹⁸⁾

He said that the Quds Force surrogates abide by the ideology of Iran and the "Absolute Guardianship of the Jurist."⁽¹⁹⁾

He accused the West of seeking to wage a psychological war and instigating religious disputes⁽²⁰⁾ in Afghanistan, reiterating that such a war will fail.

At the same time, it is hard to speculate whether Iran's policymakers are serious or not about changing their strategy regarding the Taliban, and to consider it as a terrorist and pariah movement that should be resisted.

It is likely, according to the foregoing, that the face-off between the two sides will be delayed at least at this stage unless there are substantial changes in the Taliban's strategy towards Shiites and Iran.

It is worth noting that a powerful blast took place last May outside a school in Kabul, leaving more than 60 people dead, mostly schoolgirls.

The Afghan president accused the Taliban of launching this attack, while the Taliban denied involvement in the incident, condemning the killing of civilians.⁽²¹⁾

It is well-established in the Taliban's tenets that it does not kill Shiites merely due to their sectarian affiliation, unlike ISIS, which considers the killing of Shiites as well as attacks against civilians lawful. ⁽²²⁾

The Council of Shiite Scholars of Afghanistan said that a genocide was taking place against Shiites and Hazaras. It stopped short of accusing a specific party, but the remarks seemingly pointed to the Taliban. ⁽²³⁾

Iran's "reformists" regularly accuse the "conservatives" of being sympathetic towards the Taliban because some "conservatives" have praised the Taliban. ⁽²⁴⁾

Moreover, the Taliban's strategy is influencing some pro-Velayat-e Faqih militias aligned with Iran. They now believe that the Taliban's strategy is the way forward.

The commander of Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq made remarks echoing the foregoing. He said: "The Americans have proved that the language of dialogue and reason does not work with them, and the Afghan approach is the only way to drive them out of Iraq." ⁽²⁵⁾

Second: Khamenei and the Military Option

Not far from the Afghan context, Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei warmly praised the Afghan model in what he called the Afghan resistance against the US presence in Afghanistan.

He said: "The Americans have been humiliated in Afghanistan. After the uproar it caused when it entered that country 20 years ago — they drew their weapons, pitted the tribes against one another and opened fire on unarmed civilians — the United States has sensed that it has become entangled in a morass and that it should get out of it along with its might and military apparatuses." ⁽²⁶⁾

He advised the Afghan people: "The vigilant Afghan people should keep tabs on intelligence agencies and the United States' soft-war tools of influence in their country and consciously repel them." ⁽²⁷⁾

Khamenei's remarks were intended to send the message that resistance is the way forward in the region and to motivate Iran's popular incubators. Furthermore, by using the Afghan model, he pointed to the soundness of Iran's strategy in the region.

The supreme leader exploited the hajj pilgrimage this season to justify Iran's approach and lashed out against Tehran's foes, including the Gulf states, other regional powers and the United States and Western countries. "If pelting stones at Satan is not possible at Mina [Hajj ritual] due to the pandemic, then standing up to Satans of domination and expelling them is possible everywhere else." ⁽²⁸⁾

Khamenei justified the policies of the Iranian government under his leadership, asserting that he seeks to take the Islamic world's matters into his own hands and tackle Western arrogance.

He believes that resistance is the only viable solution.

"It is normal that the United States and its allies are allergic to the 'resistance axis.' So they are responding to the Islamic resistance front with all forms of hostility. The subordination of some governments in the region to them is a fait accompli, which in turn helps perpetuate such evils." ⁽²⁹⁾

Instead of calling for tensions to quell in the restive hotspots, Khamenei called for resistance.

“The American media attempts to distort the resolve, will and zeal displayed by zealous young men in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and other countries and the attempts to attribute all this to Iran or any other entity is an insult to those brave and vigilant young men.”⁽³⁰⁾

Khamenei concluded his speech by reiterating his unshakable conviction in Iran’s triumph, and expressed a purely religious and jihadist spirit to motivate the youth and Iran’s popular bases.

“The truthful heavenly promise dictates the mujahedeen fighting for the cause of God will emerge triumphant.” Khamenei quoted the Quranic verse: “O ye who believe! If ye will aid (the cause of) Allah, He will aid you, and plant your feet firmly.”⁽³¹⁾

Khamenei’s stern rhetoric regarding jihad and resistance can be understood in light of regional developments, especially in Iran’s neighboring countries Afghanistan and Iraq. In Afghanistan, the pullout of US troops is considered a victory for resistance forces. Hence, Iran wants to assert its resistance strategy in the face of foes and skeptics alike.

In Iraq, US strikes targeting the positions of militias and factions increased and vice versa (militias striking US bases), which resulted in fueling polarization and raising religious and sectarian tensions inside Iraq. Khamenei’s speech was intended to boost Iran’s resistance strategy and to support armed groups fighting in the region.

Conclusion

The Ideological File this month discusses the issue of Iran establishing a PMF-style Shiite militia in Afghanistan like the ones operating in Syria and Iraq. It also touches on the position of the supreme leader regarding resistance to the US presence in the region.

The phenomenon of employing religion and fatwas manifested clearly as well as the aforementioned measures to reinforce revolutionary tenets among the region’s Shiites to maintain Iranian interests in the region. This is in addition to the insistence of Iran’s religious elite to continue on the path of jihad and resistance in a way that only serves Iranian interests. At the same time, Iran neglects the essential interests of the Shiite community represented in stability and national integration and fails to take into account the fragile regional situation and the need for diplomatic solutions over military confrontations and revolutionary strategies.

Hence, it is likely that the Iranian policy of sponsoring militia groups in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria and Yemen will continue, with no adjustments made by Iranian decision-makers or any genuine intent to seek dialogue and resolution.

It seems that the Iranian government believes that the damage caused by retreat or adjustments is more significant than the damage caused by continuing with its current policies. In other words, sectarianism and cultism dominates the mentality of Iran’s pro-Velayat-e Faqih elite, their political vision and foreign policy outlook.

The Economic File

The Economic File of July puts the spotlight on the thorny issue of Ahwaz — one of the richest and poorest regions at the same time. The region has experienced mounting protests since mid-July over the water shortage. Hence, the file first discusses the economic importance of Ahwaz for Iran as a whole and the diversity of its resources.

Second, the file touches on the challenges facing the Ahwazis as well as the scenarios in regard to the government's handling of the ongoing protests in Ahwaz.

The Ahwaz region — or Khuzestan as the Iranian government calls it — is located in southwestern Iran. It is adjacent to the Iran-Iraq border as shown in Map No. 1. Previously, it was called Arabistan — meaning the Land of Arabs.

Ahwaz is believed to have a history older than Iran's entire regions, according to Iranian columnist Seyyed Ahmad Kasravi Tabrizi, who has discussed Ahwazi history in detail in a controversial book released in 1933 titled "One Hundred Years of Khuzestan's History."

He said: "The land that we call Khuzestan today has a deeply-rooted history that is thousands of years older than Iran."⁽³²⁾

In his book, Tabrizi puts forward a great deal of historical evidence proving the antiquity of the region and its non-Iranian roots.

Map No. 1: Ahwaz



Source: Google Maps

There are historical differences regarding whether or not the geographic region named Ahwaz had been part of Iran. Many sources mention that the territories of Ahwaz did not match topographically to Iran's territories — most of which are mountainous—as they bear a resemblance to Arabian territories. The resemblance of the region's environment — the topographical, climate and economic aspects — to Iraq and other Arabian territories on the other side of the Arabian Gulf⁽³³⁾ means that it was connected to Arab territories thousands of years ago and is proof that Ahwaz was never part of Iran's territories. This is added to many other factors such as differences in language, culture, customs, history and so forth. This is a lengthy matter which we cannot discuss in detail here. In the following lines, we will discuss the importance of this economically vital region.

First: Ahwaz's Economic Importance for the Iranian Government

Ahwaz is tremendously important for the Iranian government. It is a lifeline for the entire economy, given its water, petroleum, mineral and agricultural resources as well as its commercial outlets. In other words, this region alone holds the potential for economic prosperity. In the following lines, we will highlight the region's most important economic resources:

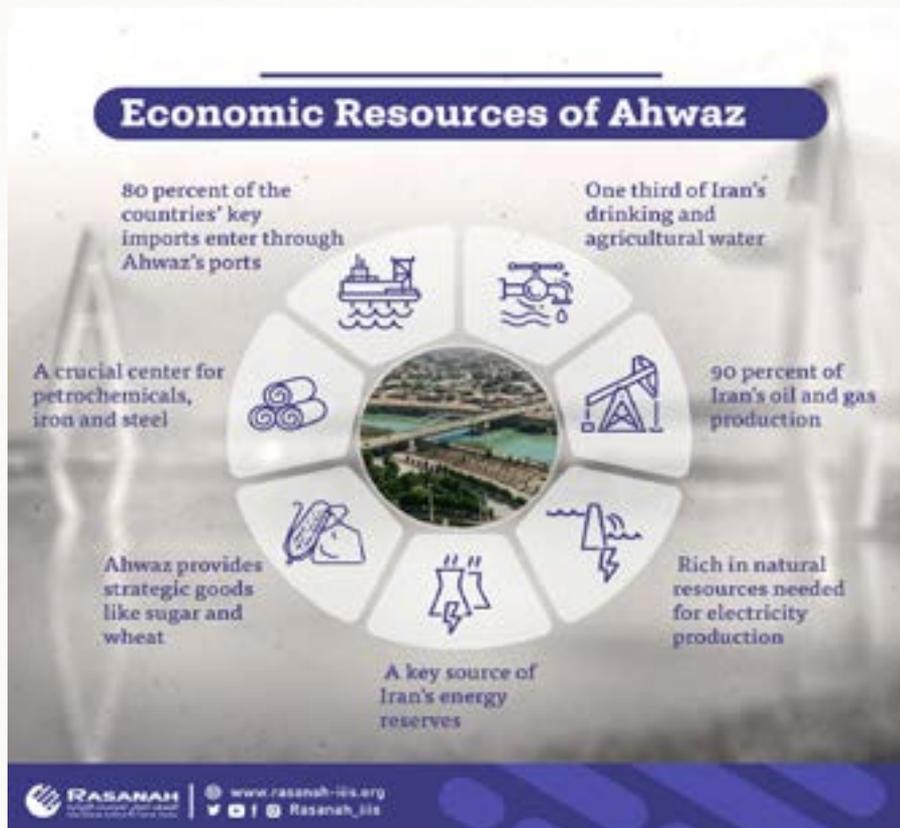
1. **Water resources:** the region is home to five major rivers that make up over one third of the flowing water in Iran, including Karun, Karkha and Jarahi. It is an essential source of drinking and irrigation water for Iran as a whole, not only the region's populace.
2. **Oil, gas and electricity:** the region is the original source of energy production and exports in Iran. It accounts for about 87 percent of petroleum production in the country, 90 percent of gas production and 74 percent of electricity production via dams and natural resources.⁽³⁴⁾ In addition, the region represents the main oil and gas reserves of the country, meaning the region is the most important oil reservoir.
3. **Ports, trade and customs:** the region has four major ports overlooking the Arabian Gulf which are considered to be among the country's most important ports. A huge proportion of Iran's exports and imports are carried out through these ports.⁽³⁵⁾

More than 80 percent of Iran's imports of basic items enter via Bandar Imam Khomeini port in the region.⁽³⁶⁾

This means the region is Iran's most important trade corridor and the main source of its customs revenues.

4. **Industries and minerals:** Ahwaz is a key hub for Iran's petrochemical industries as well as for the country's heavy industries such as iron, steel and construction. In addition, it is vital for strategic food industries such as sugar.
5. **Agricultural resources:** the multiple rivers in the region have made it rich with agricultural outputs that include strategic crops. However, several Arab farmers were displaced after their lands were seized to benefit major agricultural companies.⁽³⁷⁾

Figure 1: The Economic Resources of Ahwaz



Based on the foregoing, we can infer that the region is literally the most important and richest in Iran with various resources, as shown in Figure 1. Its stability means stability for the Iranian government both economically and politically. Its abundant resources benefit the entire 83 million population of Iran. But despite possessing these bounteous resources, the region enjoys only a small percentage of its natural wealth, as we will highlight in the following lines:

Second: Major Challenges Facing the Region

According to an Iranian tally, Ahwaz's population was estimated to be 4.7 million⁽³⁸⁾— until contrary statistics were published in 2016. Meanwhile, other sources suggest that the number is no less than 12 million people⁽³⁹⁾ and most of the people are of Arab ethnicity. This variation in statistics is a problem in itself between the Iranian government and the Ahwazi people. This is the first challenge facing the region, given that the needs of 12 million people in terms of financial appropriations and the provision of various government services are totally different from the needs of nearly 5 million people. This underestimation on the part of the Iranian government has significantly contributed



to the deterioration in the quality of life and living standards — which the residents of the region have been repeatedly denouncing.

The Iranian government not recognizing the actual population of the region is not the only problem. The Iranian government is accused by Ahwazi opposition figures and forces of deliberately working to eradicate the Arab identity of the region's population and even seeking to change the demographic makeup in favor of the Persian ethnic group. In 2005, an official document was leaked from the office of President Mohammad Khatami which revealed the details of such schemes. This is added to monopolizing the economic potential of the region, especially its agricultural lands, and not providing sufficient infrastructure and investment for development compared to other Iranian regions.^{(40) (41)}

Besides the above, the region's population suffers from unemployment, poverty and faces a lack of different government services. A human rights report issued by the UN pointed to the existence of blatant discrimination against the region's residents in the petroleum and gas sector labor markets — the most significant sectors in the region — and that Persians are appointed to senior positions while the Ahwazis hold lower working-class positions. The region's population represents only 5 percent of the petroleum sector jobs in Ahwaz.⁽⁴²⁾

Diverting the courses of the region's rivers to other Iranian regions is one of the dangerous challenges facing the Ahwazis, especially at this moment in time when Iran in general is facing a drought which is considered to be the severest in five decades due to the dip in the rates of waterfall by over 60 percent compared to the past year's levels⁽⁴³⁾ amid a surge in temperatures. This has impacted the production of hydroelectricity from Ahwazi dams, hence impacting Iran as a whole. The most dangerous challenge facing the Ahwazi people in light of the present drought and the diversion of river courses is the shortage in drinking water and the destruction of agriculture and cattle. As a result, many people have been forced to emigrate and leave the region.

Third: Scenarios to Handle the Ongoing Protests

The protests in Ahwaz have been continuing since July 2021 until the writing of this report in late July. Over the past 16 years, the region has witnessed popular protests and repeated upheavals – related to the deterioration in living standards and the government's refusal to acknowledge the economic and political demands of the Ahwazis. In some years, tensions resulted in government and economic facilities being blown up in the region. The Iranian government's response to protests in general and in Ahwaz in particular has always been harsh. It begins with dispersing protesters and firing live bullets at them. It ends with executing protesters like the dozens of Ahwazis following the bombings that targeted oil facilities in the region. This happened in July 2016 after the biggest petrochemicals complex in Iran in the city of Mashour (Mahshahr) in Ahwaz was targeted.⁽⁴⁴⁾

Perhaps this is one of the options the Iranian government will pursue to crack down on the ongoing protests and demands.

Containing the crisis is one of the solutions that the government will resort to, especially as a new “hardline” president is taking over and the government seeks to restore its lost popularity.

Meanwhile, combining the carrot and stick approach could be the likeliest option at this moment in time. The ruling elite and the new President Ebrahim Raisi are aware of the anger on the Iranian street amid the harsh living conditions facing the Iranian people. Hence, they must avoid any eruption on the Iranian street. They could attempt to do this by meeting some of the demands of the Ahwazis or appeasing them as they have done recently. This includes releasing some detainees and sending water tankers to them. At the same time, the government will not allow the protests in Ahwaz to reach a certain scale because it does not want key economic facilities to become dysfunctional or for further damage to be inflicted on the already ailing Iranian economy. On the other side, the government's policies of marginalization mean the continuation of the causes of the protests. This means the protests are likely to be repeated in the future as the root causes have not been addressed.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that the Ahwaz region is literally the lung from which Iran breathes due to its various economic resources including oil and gas,

the production of petrochemicals, minerals, electricity and strategic crops. Therefore, the government will try to control the ongoing Ahwazi protests and address the deteriorating living conditions of the people. However, the government regularly resorts to violence and repression when short-term attempts at appeasement do not work. In view of the many challenges facing the Ahwazis that have not been addressed, the possibility of renewed unrest in this oppressed region will remain.

The Military File

The Military File of July casts light on the most salient military and security developments and challenges in the Iranian arena. This will be discussed through two axes:

First: The Iranian Navy and the Attempts to Rehabilitate Its Fleet

Iran's navy is still seeking and making attempts to boost its capacities and capabilities despite the harsh realities in light of the economic hardship and the continued setbacks it has suffered in recent times due to the damage caused to its most important naval vessels on both sides of the Arabian Gulf and the targeting of its naval vessels by friendly fire. The foregoing resulted in the navy facing capability deficiencies and its warships and frigates lacking the requisite technical upgrades. This caused the navy to incur logistical losses in relation to its most powerful naval vessels and thwarted the implementation of its future plans for which it had previously set a specific timeframe. But the challenges Iran is facing represent an element of pressure, which dictates the continuation of the policy of announcing the commissioning of various naval vessels and alleging that the country has achieved strategic self-sufficiency. This is in addition to exercising what it calls maritime diplomacy, or maritime defense diplomacy, which is based on the belief that advances in weapons capability is the prime guarantee for securing the region's seas.

1. The Element of Time

The Main Naval Challenge The element of time stood as the most salient challenge facing Iran's naval forces and restarting the maintenance works for its major naval vessels that are in a tattered condition. This comes after the sinking of the Damavand frigate and the Konarak support vessel being targeted by a missile from the Iranian frigate Jamaran. Iran's navy announced via Hossein Khanzadi, commander of Iran's navy, that it will commission the Damavand frigate and Konarak in the coming two months — which were scheduled to be commissioned on the anniversary of the Iran-Iraq War.⁽⁴⁵⁾

But the commissioning ceremonies were delayed, according to Khanzadi's announcement, without giving reasons.

Khanzadi announced earlier last month that the Damavand frigate has witnessed an acceleration in its maintenance and rehabilitation work. In addition, he declared that the Holy Week occasion held in September every year will be when the vessel will be brought back into service.⁽⁴⁶⁾

This comes in the wake of the Damavand's sinking after it crashed on the breakwater at Anzali port overlooking the Caspian Sea in 2018.

This is not the first time that the Damavand frigate's commissioning has been delayed or its sailing has been postponed. Khanzadi's remarks were preceded by a statement from the Iranian Minister of Defense Amir Hatami in 2019. He said that the frigate had been rehabilitated ahead of schedule and it will be commissioned in the near future.^[47]

Picture No.1: The Damavand Destroyer in the Caspian Sea in 2018



Source: Fars News Agency: <https://2u.pw/JmIE4>

2. Downplaying Failures

The Iranian navy has never stopped using propaganda to amplify its accomplishments, manufacturing capabilities and the capacities and sophistication of its military technology. This is despite major naval incidents due to unsophisticated technology and poor training. The technological aspects of the Iranian vessels, along with the old spare parts, reflect how outdated Iran's warships are and this impedes Iran's ambition to play a role via its navy in distant waters. The effectiveness of Iran's navy is based on the short-range small speedboats belonging to the IRGC's naval forces. Iran's officials still deliberately resort to fabricating mirage accomplishments to divert attention from the deficiencies of Iran's naval forces. Iran's propaganda machine has promoted the fallacy that the country's navy is capable of operating across open areas and high seas and conducting joint drills with major world powers. This has pushed China and Russia to limit involvement in maritime drills with Iran to specific areas and to engage in partial operations in order to give these maneuvers symbolic significance.

In light of Iran's propaganda regarding the reasons behind delaying the commissioning of the Damavand and Konarak vessels after carrying out maintenance works, the commander of Iran's navy announced that Tehran was working to build an oceanographic research vessel affiliated with the country's naval forces, in addition to a project to build an amphibious vessel equipped with a missile launcher. It will be handed over to the Iranian navy before the end of this year.⁽⁴⁸⁾

Second: The Security Situation on the Iran-Afghan Border

After the US government decided to completely withdraw its troops by August 31 from Afghanistan — nearly 95 percent of NATO forces would have left the country. The Taliban is now controlling the border crossings with China, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Iran and Pakistan. The neighboring countries are looking for methods and ways to deal with the Taliban.

The map for dealing with the Taliban is changing. In the past, the Taliban was dealing with Turkmenistan, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Pakistan. Now, it is dealing with Qatar, Iran, India, Russia, China, Turkey and the United States. The group is no longer placed on the UN terror blacklist and its senior officials have been released. They are now roaming freely across regional capitals. Thus, the radical group has become diplomatically and politically more powerful two decades after the presence of foreign troops in accordance with UN authorization.

The biggest gain for the Taliban was Iran's shift from an archenemy state to a partner serving mutual interests.

1. Realpolitik

Iran has invested massive political capital to appease the Taliban to counter the Saudi and Pakistani influence in Afghanistan. Despite the deep-rooted ties between Iran and the Taliban, on many occasions, the Afghans have not been able to easily accept this rapprochement. For instance, the Afghan Senate in December 2016 launched an inquiry into Tehran's military support for the Taliban.⁽⁴⁹⁾

The Terrorism Financing Targeting Center (TFTC), consisting of seven nations, imposed restrictions on two officers affiliated with Iran's elite Quds Force on October 23 for providing financial and military support to the Taliban.⁽⁵⁰⁾

Iran publicly admitted that it was liaising with the extremist group in December 2018.⁽⁵¹⁾

At the same time, Iran has continuously worked to boost its soft power in Afghanistan.

The month of July witnessed the IRGC and Artesh mobilization of border troops equipped with heavy weapons, surveillance equipment and logistical preparations following clashes and killings in the province of Herat bordering Iran. Some sources announced that Iran's eastern airbases have been put on high alert. However, the IRGC ground force commander, during his latest visit to the eastern border of Iran, said: "Despite the ceaseless war in Afghanistan, no significant incident has so far taken place along Iran's common border with

this country, amid full security and calm prevailing along the eastern border with Afghanistan.⁷⁽⁵²⁾

Presently, concern is running high in Tehran regarding the course that the Taliban will adopt in its pursuit to wrest full control over Afghanistan. Iran's pragmatic relations with the Taliban pose a challenge to Tehran. Its ongoing contacts with the Taliban's political arm in Qatar led it to change its course through hosting inter-faction talks in Tehran and facilitating the group's talks with the Indian delegation led by the Minister of External Affairs Subrahmanyam Jaishankar.⁽⁵³⁾

Skeptics in Iran believe that there is no possibility for the Taliban to take over Afghanistan. Ayatollah Lotfollah Safi Golpaygani blasted Tehran's policy towards the Taliban, describing it as a grave mistake that cannot be redressed. However, there are conflicting opinions when it comes to the media's position towards the Taliban. Keyhan newspaper commended the group but later withdrew the praise.⁽⁵⁴⁾

Press TV also lauded the group, but Etemad newspaper criticized Keyhan newspaper, accusing it of becoming one of the Taliban's mouthpieces.⁽⁵⁵⁾

2. Iran's New Weapon in Afghanistan

The mostly Sunni Taliban is considered to be in direct conflict with Iran's Islamism and Imam Khomeini's version of Shiism — with the Iranian government considering itself to be a guardian for all Shiites worldwide and Afghanistan is not an exception. The small Shiite majority in Afghanistan has benefited Iran not only by protecting its interests in Kabul, but also through providing mercenaries deployed in its proxy wars — most notably the Fatemiyoun Brigade. The largest number of Shiites live in central Afghanistan, along with smaller groupings in the west and south.⁽⁵⁶⁾

To a large extent, the Fatemiyoun Brigade is composed of Shiites from the Hazara community. Several of them were recruited from the refugee camps in Iran. The brigade's force is estimated to be between 20,000 and 50,000 fighters, most of whom participated in the Syrian civil war.⁽⁵⁷⁾

Over the years, Iran has recruited Shiite Afghan refugees to partake in the civil wars throughout the region. On many occasions, Afghan immigrants have been forcibly recruited — otherwise they will be forced to return to their war-torn country.⁽⁵⁸⁾

At this moment in time, the Iranian leadership is trying to promote the myth that the Fatemiyoun Brigade is the only force that can save the Afghan government in its fight against ISIS.⁽⁵⁹⁾ Jomhuri-e Eslami (the Islamic Republic) newspaper stated that Iran aims to create a PMF-style militia in Afghanistan.

3. Strategic Opportunities and Looming Challenges

It is likely that maintaining warm relations with the Taliban will be counterproductive for Iran because the Afghan Shiite community (which has been indoctrinated with extremist ideas and weaponized by Tehran itself) can interpret the situation as a display of weakness on the part of Iran. Tehran will be forced to choose between its strategic interests and the ideological tenets it wants to promote.

Currently, Tehran assumes that establishing good ties with the Taliban could help it shield Shiite Afghans and contribute to calming and securing its eastern borders. This approach is oversimplifying the situation since the two sides are ideologically driven. The threat of ongoing US airstrikes could lead the Taliban to keep its interests aligned with Iran — although temporarily.

Yet a face-off between the Taliban and the Fatemiyoun Brigade is likely. Hence, it is expected that Iran will continue to publicly appease the Taliban while planning to counter any unfavorable developments. The return of Afghan fighters to Afghanistan will — in case the fighting intensifies — impact Iran's military efforts in Syria.

Iran could resort to supporting and arming Sunni militias opposed to the Taliban and outlining a new strategy in Afghanistan. The experience of Quds Force Commander Ismail Qaani — who has an extensive background in dealing with Afghan and Pakistani affairs — could contribute to this.

Conclusion

Iran is currently facing extremely harsh economic conditions and it could suffer further by triggering a new front of dispute on its eastern border. Given the increasing level of tensions and the anger at the western and northern borders, triggering a new front of dispute with Afghanistan adds more pressure on Iran's security forces, giving the Taliban more freedom to maneuver and exercise its influence.

Despite the relative calm characterizing Iran's military movements in July — coinciding with the transitional period of the new Iranian government awaited at home and overseas — the Taliban's progress following the start of the US withdrawal from Afghanistan and the outbreak of protests in several Iranian provinces will place further pressure on Iran's forces, and we may see concerted efforts by them during this month. In this direction, it was announced that an Israeli vessel had been targeted in the Arabian Sea on July 30. Some reports suggest that Iran is behind the incident in the context of the mutual attacks between the two sides and the military confrontations in recent times.

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Arab Affairs

The Arab Affairs file discusses four main axes. The first axis examines the new Russian initiative for Gulf security, the Saudi-Omani consensus for strategic cooperation between the two countries and the strengthening of the Gulf axis to face present and future challenges. The second axis deals with the implications of Iran and the Houthi militia rejecting the political peace process in Yemen, al-Ghadeer Day celebration to entrench Iranian influence in Yemen, and the bombing of Yemeni homes as if they were terrorist outfits. The third axis discusses the indicators and implications of militia escalation at the behest of Iran against US targets in Iraq, and the impact of the fourth session of the US-Iraq strategic dialogue on the proliferation of militias in Iraq, and the interpretations of Tehran's pressure on Iraq via using the water and electricity cards. The fourth axis deals with the implications of the Russian position in regard to Israel targeting Iranian sites in Syria, the Syrian-Chinese rapprochement, Iran's position regarding this rapprochement, and finally the implications of the "US withdrawal strategy" on Iran's role in Syria.



Iran and the Gulf

The file of Iran and the Gulf states in July 2021 reviews the most prominent developments regarding Gulf security and Gulf-Iran relations, most notably Russia's proposal to renew the Gulf security initiative, and the significance of the visit of the Sultan of Oman Haitham bin Tariq to Saudi Arabia. The foregoing will be discussed through two axes: firstly, the new Russian initiative for Gulf security; secondly, the Saudi-Omani strategic consensus on bilateral cooperation to strengthen the Gulf axis to face challenges.

First: The “Revised” Russian Initiative for Gulf Security

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov announced Moscow's intention to present a revised version of its concept of collective security in the Arab Gulf region which would allow for the discussion of Western and regional concerns about Iran, including its missile program and regional problems. ⁽¹⁾

1. The Basic Initiative and Russia's Concept of Regional Security in the Gulf Region

On July 23, 2019, Russia put forward the idea of establishing a security system in the Gulf region based on resolving conflicts, attempting to achieve stability and overcoming crises. The Russian vision is based on a number of tenets that should appeal to the concerned conflicting parties in the Gulf. The most important Russian tenets include the following:

- A.** A single counter-terrorism coalition will be formed involving all stakeholders interested in eliminating the hotbeds of extremism and terrorism in the Middle East including the involvement of media;
- B.** All parties should adhere to international law and to the UN Charter and UN Security Council resolutions. They should also aim for a “democratic and prosperous Middle East that encourages inter-faith peace and coexistence;”
- C.** Peace-making operations can only be carried out in accordance with relevant UN Security Council resolutions or upon the request of the legitimate authorities of the country that has been attacked. Double standards are unacceptable;
- D.** The security system should be based on respecting the interests of all regional and non-regional parties involved in all spheres, including security, military, economic and energy dimensions. It should provide humanitarian assistance to countries and destabilized societies;
- E.** The security system should be comprehensive, whether in regard to addressing real threats, or addressing the decision-making process and the implementation of decisions;
- F.** Progress towards the establishment of a security system should be achieved on a step-by-step basis, starting with the most urgent problems: combating

terrorism, the settlement of the Iraqi, Yemeni and Syrian crises, and the implementation of all agreements reached regarding Iran's nuclear program;
G. Confidence-building measures should be applied and mutual security guarantees in the region should be provided;

H. The establishment of a security system in the Gulf region is considered as part of ensuring security in the Middle East region as a whole.

A number of principles need to be observed such as respecting national sovereignty and territorial integrity, and the settlement of domestic issues through national dialogue and within national constitutional frameworks without external interference.⁽²⁾

2. The Revised Initiative

What was mentioned in the so-called "revised" initiative seems to reflect Russia's growing experience in the region and knowledge regarding the roots of the prevailing tensions. It is characterized by idealism rather than realism. Although the proposed principles are considered to be an important basis for any peace process in the region, there are concerns and urgent regional demands which regional countries have prioritized because they are serious threats to the region's security. However, they were not explicitly included in the old Russian proposal.

However, the current Russian proposal addresses the concerns of the countries of the region and the superpowers alike. While Russia supports returning to the nuclear agreement and preventing Iran from possessing nuclear weapons and increasing tensions in the region, the Russian side also realizes that the countries of the region, especially the Gulf states, are still concerned about the Iranian missile threat and Tehran's expansionist proliferation in Yemen, Syria, Iraq and Lebanon and this is one of the major causes of the chaos and arms race in the region, which threatens regional security. Therefore, the Russian minister's reference to these issues was intended to indicate Moscow's seriousness in addressing Iran's missile program and other regional problems. He considers these issues not only as regional concerns but global as well.

3. Dealing With This Initiative

This Russian initiative comes despite the prevailing tensions gripping US-Russian relations. The Russian foreign minister stated that "blackmail, demonization and accusation of only one party is wrong and dangerous," a clear reference to the US policy of pressure on Iran.⁽³⁾ He did not talk about Iran's actions which destabilize the region. However, the current situation appears to be a Russian attempt to enter areas known to fall within the US orbit of influence in light of Washington's plan to reduce its presence in the region. It is expected that the United States will be wary of Russia's expansionist tendency and will reconsider a lot of its calculations to avoid the reoccurrence of what happened following its withdrawal from other countries such as Syria where the vacuum was filled by Moscow. Therefore, the Russian initiative may face US pressure to thwart Moscow's aspiration to become a desirable alternative for regional countries.

With regard to the possible interaction between Iran and the Gulf states through this initiative, Iran believes that this initiative largely intersects with its previously proposed initiative, “the Hormuz Peace Initiative” or “the Alliance of Hope.”⁽⁴⁾ As the revised Russian initiative includes concerns about Iran’s regional activities and its missile program, Moscow will face Iranian intransigence unless there is pressure to force it to adopt approaches that are consistent with the tenets of this new initiative. In addition, Iran is unwilling to adhere to international laws that curb it from interfering in sovereign states. In this context, the supreme leader’s speech on the occasion of Hajj season this year indicated an encouragement of acts of resistance in the region.⁽⁵⁾ This speech suggested that Iran’s escalatory approach is still preferred, rather than risking approaches that may not meet its requirements, and lead to consequent commitments.

The Gulf states have also called for peaceful solutions for the Gulf region, maintaining good neighborliness and non-interference in the internal affairs of states, serving as a basis for coexistence and cooperation. It is expected that the Gulf states will be receptive to this initiative, especially in the presence of a Russian mediator who is acceptable to the Gulf parties and the Iranians. One of the most prominent steps of the Gulf’s positive interaction with Iran and the discussion of possible solutions was Saudi Arabia’s willingness to talk with the Iranian side to address the causes of instability in the region, which has been escalating over the past decades.

Second: The Saudi-Omani Strategic Consensus on Bilateral Cooperation

The Sultan of Oman Haitham bin Tariq Al Said visited the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia from July 11 to July 12, 2021 on his first overseas visit. The discussions between the Sultan of Oman and the Custodian of The Two Holy Mosques King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, in the presence of the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defense His Royal Highness Prince Mohammed bin Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, focused on joint cooperation prospects and ways to develop cooperation in various fields. The two sides praised the cooperation and coordination that has been achieved in the political, military and security fields; serving the security and stability of the two countries.⁽⁶⁾

1. Discussing the Core Issues in the Gulf

The final statement of the Saudi-Omani summit referred to the signing of a memorandum of understanding regarding the establishment of the Saudi-Omani Coordination Council headed by their respective foreign ministers to enhance bilateral relations in various fields. Both sides agreed to direct the relevant authorities to expedite the opening of the border crossing between Saudi Arabia and Oman, which will allow citizens to travel smoothly between the neighboring countries. The statement affirmed the support for the Saudi initiative to alleviate the suffering of Yemen. It also stressed cooperation and the need to seriously deal with Iran’s nuclear and missile file.⁽⁷⁾

2. The Summit's Dimensions in Regard to Regional Issues

The establishment of the Saudi-Omani Coordination Council is an important building block for achieving the shared vision and interests of the two countries. This partnership is in line with “Oman Vision 2040” and “Saudi Arabia Vision 2030.” This rapprochement aims to raise the level of integration in the political, military and security fields. This council is the fourth coordination council that brings together Saudi Arabia with the Gulf states: the Saudi-Emirati Coordination Council 2016, the Saudi-Kuwaiti Coordination Council 2018, and the Saudi-Bahraini Coordination Council 2019.⁽⁸⁾

The political and security fields are of great importance because Oman is known for its mediating role. Therefore, it can help to break the deadlock in the Yemen file. Oman also has good partnerships and relations with Iran and can play an important role to bring together the Gulf states and Iran. In this regard, after the Sultan of Oman concluded his visit to Saudi Arabia, he received a call from the elected Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi during which the development of bilateral relations in different areas was discussed. However, the summit took place amid a tense atmosphere and Iranian statements that expressed Iran's intention to give more attention and priority to diplomatic relations with neighboring countries.⁽⁹⁾ On the security level, there is an urgent need to raise the level of coordination and the exchange of information to enhance the two countries' ability to confront persistent threats, especially those stemming from Iran.

The economic field had a special significance during this visit. It was agreed to expedite the opening of the direct land-road crossing between the two countries to help facilitate the flow of trade, especially as it could be an important channel to expedite the export of oil from the port of Duqm in Oman, which both sides agreed to jointly invest in. This is important for enhancing international energy security in view of the risks to the Strait of Hormuz as a result of Iran's ongoing threats. In addition, trade with Saudi Arabia contributes to enhance stability in Oman and supports its economy.⁽¹⁰⁾

Conclusion

The security of the Gulf is still subject to push and pull factors in light of the struggle between the major countries to expand their areas of influence. While Russia looks forward to entering the region in light of Washington's imminent withdrawal, as happened in Syria, the United States considers Russia to be a competitor in its traditional areas of influence. The success of the Russian initiative is fraught with great obstacles due to international divisions on regional issues, and the huge gap in confidence between Iran and the Gulf states, unless there is mediation which has the ability to add pressure and impose a consensual approach. In the context of strengthening the ability of the Gulf states to face challenges, the recent Saudi-Omani rapprochement can be supportive in confronting the challenges facing the Gulf states, most notably Iranian threats, and can contribute towards achieving an integrated Gulf system.

Iran and Yemen

The Yemeni file witnessed Houthi escalation politically and militarily inside and outside Yemen. The Houthi militia thwarted all regional and international efforts to bring peace to Yemen in parallel with its military escalation. It is supported by the Iranian government which has shared interests with the Houthi militia. The Iranian government is using the Yemeni file as a pressure card in nuclear negotiations with the United States. In addition, the Houthi militia is trying to achieve as many gains as possible by escalating military attacks to strengthen its negotiating position in the future. This has exacerbated the humanitarian situation, with forced displacements and the bombing of camps, urban populations and people's homes. We will review the impact of the Houthi-Iran position on the process for reaching a political solution in Yemen and the most prominent features of the Houthi sectarianism and racism in Yemen.

First - The Impact of the Houthi-Iran Rejection of the Process for Reaching a Political Solution in Yemen

The Iranian government continues to instruct the Houthi militia to engage in further military escalation and obstruct international efforts to bring peace to Yemen. In this context, Yemeni Defense Minister Muhammad al-Maqdashi said that the Iranian government threw its full weight behind the recent battles in Yemen at the beginning of July. This is a clear indication that the Iranian government is behind the Houthi escalation to serve its political interests. A Yemeni news agency quoted the Yemeni defense minister as saying that “the toughness” of the armed forces “will thwart all Iranian ambitions, and the bet is on the armed forces to foil the plans of the terrorist militia and its supporter, Iran, which has used all its capabilities, might and experience in the recent battles.”⁽¹¹⁾

Some sources close to the Houthi militia also indicate that its military escalation is directly supervised by the Iranian “ambassador” to the Houthis, Hassan Irloo, as part of the Iranian government’s drive to obstruct all Yemeni peace efforts and to strengthen the two sides’ position in any upcoming talks after all previous international peace efforts were obstructed, including the Oman mediation.⁽¹²⁾

Many observers believe that the Iranian support offered to the Houthi militia to escalate further militarily is intended to obstruct the Yemeni peace process in order to serve Iran’s political dimensions, interests and orientations, most notably the nuclear talks in Vienna. The Iranian government aims to gain concessions in its favor during the nuclear talks. This was previously

confirmed by Yemeni Minister of Information Moammar Al-Eryani who said that the Iranian government has prevented the Houthi militia from halting its ongoing military escalation and submitting to ceasefire calls so that Tehran's negotiating position is not harmed, at the expense of the security and stability of Yemen and the region.⁽¹³⁾

Iran-backed Houthi belligerence has triggered many local and international responses. The legitimate Yemeni government held the Houthi militia responsible for thwarting all previous peace efforts and blamed it for escalating at all levels.⁽¹⁴⁾ The British Ambassador to Yemen Michael Aron described the Houthi militia's position towards the peace process in Yemen. He said the militia's position was a "big lie." He stressed that according to his experience with the Houthis, they are not serious about participating in a political dialogue for Yemen. The following was the British ambassador's conclusion before he left his post, "The Iran-backed militia is refusing to stop its relentless attacks on Ma'rib despite offers of a ceasefire by the United Nations envoy and Saudi Arabia."⁽¹⁵⁾

As part of the international community's support for the position of the legitimate government, the Acting Head of the UN Special Envoy's Office for Yemen Muin Shreim emphasized the urgent need to eliminate all obstacles preventing the Yemeni government in Aden from exercising its duties in accordance with the Riyadh Agreement. This came during his visit at the end of July during which he met with Yemeni Vice President Ali Mohsen Al-Ahmar, Yemeni Prime Minister Maeen Abdul-Malik, senior Yemeni officials, and the US Special Envoy for Yemen Timothy Lenderking. He also reiterated the importance of carrying out humanitarian and economic measures to alleviate the suffering of the Yemeni people and resuming the comprehensive political process in Yemen.⁽¹⁶⁾

With regard to the US position, it can be said that there is a decrease in US resolve towards the Houthi militia linked to the Iranian government, after the US administration took soft measures against it last month. The US embassy in Yemen held the Houthi militia responsible for the military escalation and for rejecting the peace process in Yemen. It also held the Houthi militia responsible for the threat facing the displaced people of Yemen because of its ongoing escalation. Many observers believe that the US position represents a modification of its previously flexible approach towards the Houthis.⁽¹⁷⁾

Second: Celebrating al-Ghadeer Day in Iran's Manner and Bombing Yemeni Homes Like Terrorist Outfits

1. Celebrating al-Ghadeer Day

In the name of "al-Ghadeer" or "Walaya," the Houthi militia launched a financial collection campaign in their areas of control, focusing on merchants and shops, and organized a series of events, meetings and seminars to promote this celebration befitting Iran. Large billboards displayed the name of this celebration. Many observers believe that this day is an opportunity for the Houthi militia to loot the money of the Yemeni people and recruit children

to participate on the battle fronts. The Houthi militia takes advantage of ideological and sectarian occasions to mobilize more children and tribesmen to support its fighting fronts.⁽¹⁸⁾

It is worth noting that the leaders of the militia issued strict instructions to their supervisors to force Yemenis and employees to participate in the al-Ghadeer celebration. The militia provided more than 20 squares in Sana'a and its countryside for this celebration. Sources stated that the militia provided buses to transport people to participate in sectarian activities, and the supervisors threatened anyone who refrained from participating in the celebration by depriving them of domestic gas. The Houthi militia accused those who boycotted the al-Ghadeer Day activities of being members of ISIS.⁽¹⁹⁾

The Houthi interest in the al-Ghadeer Day celebration can be interpreted as an attempt to impose this day on Yemeni culture and to please the Iranian side, which gives special attention to this celebration. This would explain why the Houthi militia attacked Yemen's late mufti and judge Sheikh Mohammed Ismail Al-Amrani. He had issued a fatwa regarding the so-called al-Ghadeer Day in which he stated that it is not mentioned in the texts of the Sunnah, but was created by Abu al-Hassan Ali bin Buyah three centuries after the migration of Prophet Mohammad. It was first introduced into Yemen by Ahmed bin Al-Hassan bin al-Qasim during his uncle's reign Al-Mutawakkil Ismail bin Al-Qasim. Therefore, it is considered a bid'ah.⁽²⁰⁾

2. Bombing Yemeni Homes Like Terrorist Outfits

The Houthi militia continues to blow up the homes of their adversaries. This is part of the plan to increase force displacements, terrorize people and take revenge against adversaries. The Civil Authority for Victims of House Explosions issued a report during which it documented the Houthi militia's bombing of more than 816 homes in a number of Yemeni governorates since the militia's coup in 2014. The authority indicated in its report that "the governorate most affected by the bombing of houses is Taiz Governorate with 151 houses, followed by Al-Bayda Governorate with 124 houses, then Ibb Governorate with 120 houses."⁽²¹⁾

The Yemeni minister of information stated that the bombing of residential homes is no different to the behavior of terrorist outfits like "al-Qaeda" and ISIS. He said that "the Houthi militia deliberately blew up citizens' homes in the manner of terrorist organizations ISIS and al-Qaeda, terrorizing citizens and systematically taking revenge on anyone who disagrees with it." This came after the Houthi militia blew up Hussein Saleh Al-Barmani Al-Humayqani's house in the Al-Zahir Al-Humayqan District, Al-Bayda Governorate. This was part of the Houthi's demographic plan to forcibly displace people and replace them with loyalists.⁽²²⁾

It is worth noting that the Executive Unit Organization for Camp Management's statistics showed that the Houthi militia has forced 4 million Yemenis to flee from their homes to other governorates. The organization stated that approximately 115 children were forced to flee their homes in 2020, and 25,000 children and their families were forced to leave their homes in the first half of 2021, where the Ma'rib Governorate hosts approximately 2.2

million displaced persons, which accounts for 60 percent of the total displaced population.⁽²³⁾

In this context, the Yemeni Shura Council called on the international community, the UN Security Council, international organizations and the UN and American envoys to work hard to stop the crimes committed by the Houthi militia against humanity and the Yemeni people. In its statement, the Shura Council called on the international community to assume its responsibilities by putting an end to the terrorist crimes against civilians and civilian targets. The council's statement considered the Houthi's crimes and the systematic destruction of villages to force displacement as war crimes and part of the Houthi's policy of collective punishment. The statement also indicated that these crimes are in addition to previous ones including the destruction of homes belonging to politicians, journalists, sheikhs and other citizens.⁽²⁴⁾

Conclusion

The month of July witnessed the Houthi militia continuing to obstruct all international efforts to bring peace to Yemen. The Iranian side supported the Houthi escalation, adding to the complexities to serve Tehran's expansionist agenda and political interests. The Houthi militia not only rejected international efforts to stop the war but has worked to increase the complexities on the Yemeni scene, worsen the humanitarian condition in Yemen and increase the number of displaced people from Yemen's governorates. The Houthi escalation has targeted Yemeni citizens in populated neighborhoods and camps, and it has bombed residential homes and has systematically displaced Yemenis in line with its sectarian outlook and policy to demographically change the areas under its control.

Iran and Iraq

The July 2021 report looks at the manifestations of Washington's military targeting of militia positions along the Iraqi-Syrian border and the implications of Ebrahim Raisi's victory in the Iranian presidential race regarding Iranian influence in Iraq. The report examines the implications and manifestations of Iranian militias attacking US targets in Iraq. It also studies the impact of the fourth round of the US-Iraq strategic dialogue on the proliferation of militias in Iraq. Lastly, it examines the reasons behind Iran using water and electricity as bargaining chips to pressure Iraq.

First: Manifestations of Pro-Iranian Militias Escalating Against US Interests in Iraq

Pro-Iranian militias escalating against US interests in Iraq intensified in July 2021. Pro-Iranian militias in Iraq bombed the Ain al-Asad Air Base in Anbar Province with about 14 rockets.⁽²⁵⁾ The militias also targeted the US Embassy three times. The first of these attacks took place on July 8, the second on July 9, and the third on July 29, 2021. The militias also targeted Camp Victoria near Baghdad Airport and Erbil International Airport near the US Consulate. They also targeted logistical support convoys of the international coalition with Katyusha rockets and mined drones.

Iraqi officials revealed a surge in the frequency of attacks against US targets in Iraq since the beginning of 2021. There were about six drone attacks between April and July 2021, while there have been as many as 55 drone and missile attacks since January 2021,⁽²⁶⁾ according to Pentagon statistics.⁽²⁷⁾ Each attack included dozens of missiles, while the use of drones marked a shift in the level of engagement due to the drones' ability to bypass US defense systems that Washington had established to protect its targets from militia attacks.

Despite Iran's repeated denial of responsibility for the attacks against US targets, there are numerous indications of its involvement in the Iraqi arena as part of its expansionist plans. To further elaborate, the first of these attacks took place just two days after the meeting of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Intelligence Chief Hossein Taeb with the leaders of pro-Iranian militias such as Hezbollah, Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq and the Sayyid al-Shuhada Brigades in Iraq on July 6, 2021, during which Taeb urged these militia leaders to escalate against US targets.⁽²⁸⁾ Furthermore, on July 21, 2021, Iraqi Foreign Minister Fouad Hussein requested Iran to intervene and stop militias from launching attacks,⁽²⁹⁾ despite this request violating the principles of national sovereignty and the independence of Iraqi decision-making.

By intensifying escalation against US targets in Iraq – while continuing negotiations over the Iranian nuclear file in Vienna and in light of Raisi's awaited inauguration and Washington escalating against militia targets in Syria and Iraq – Iran aims to maximize its pressure cards to force the United States to abandon its link between lifting the sanctions on Iran and the inclusion of Iran's ballistic missile and regional file in the nuclear negotiations.

Iran also seeks to create chaos in Iraq ahead of the elections scheduled for October 2021 through highlighting al-Kazemi government's incompetence in a way that would ultimately delay the elections on the one hand and influence Iraqis' electoral inclinations on the other hand by encouraging them to consider electing someone from the hardline currents affiliated with Iran, instead of someone from the moderate currents which Iran undermines for its failure to run the government.

Intensified escalation against US targets must be taken into consideration before the fourth round of the US-Iraq Strategic Dialogue is held in Washington to influence its outcomes: namely the demand to remove US troops from Iraq.

Second: The Implications of the Fourth Round of the US-Iraq Strategic Dialogue Regarding Iranian Influence

On July 26, 2021, Washington hosted the fourth session of the US-Iraq strategic dialogue to continue the discussion regarding the schedule of the US military withdrawal from Iraq. This was also addressed in the last three sessions: June 2020, August 2020, and April 2021.

The most important outcome of the session, which is likely to cast a shadow on Iran's influence in Iraq, was a reiteration of the reached agreement to end the combat mission of US forces in Iraq. Other outcomes included the following: the bases hosting US personnel and members of the international coalition are Iraqi bases which function in accordance with existing Iraqi laws, the presence of international personnel in Iraq will be to support the Iraqi government in the fight against ISIS, the security relationship will fully transition to a training and advisory relationship and there will be no presence of US combat forces in Iraq by December 31, 2021.⁽³⁰⁾

The outcomes of the Biden and al-Kazemi meeting raise a set of important questions: does the agreement to end the presence of US combat forces reassure Iran that the US forces remaining in Iraq after December 2021 will not fight against Tehran and its militias? Do the Iraqi and American governments anticipate a larger and broader Iranian incursion into the joints of the Iraqi state if US forces withdraw or end their military operations, especially given the proliferation of uncontrolled arms across the Iraqi state and Iran's moves to control the empty areas?

Due to Iraq's centrality in the Iranian expansionist strategy, only a few hours after the results of the visit came out, the Commander of the Iranian Quds Force General Esmail Qaani made a quick visit to Iraq to meet with the PMF Commander Abu Fadak al-Mohammadawi and other militia leaders including the Commander of Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq Qais al-Khazali and the Commander of Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada Abu Alaa al-Wal'ai as well as the representatives of



Saraya al-Khorasani and Kata'ib Hezbollah. The purpose of this visit was to pressure the Iraqi government in order to prevent it from implementing its agreement with the United States.⁽³¹⁾

It is expected that al-Kazemi will contact the Iranians to persuade them to pressure the militias to calm down in Iraq until parliamentary elections are held and a new government is formed, especially given the multiple crises facing Iraq. However, the events on the ground prove how difficult it is for al-Kazemi to achieve de-escalation, ensuring that the militias will never carry out further attacks against US targets.

Third: Iranian Pressure on Iraq via the Water Card

The Iraqi government has officially accused the Iranian government of stealing Iraq's water. The Iraqi Minister of Water Resources Mahdi Rashid al-Hamdani announced on July 10, 2021, that Iran had completely cut off the water flow to Iraq, explaining that "the water flow from Iran has reached zero."⁽³²⁾ He also hinted to resorting to the UN to secure Iraq's rightful water resources from Iran.

Iran has a strong pressure card against Iraq, which is used among other cards, to pass its policies. The former seeks at this time to pressure al-Kazemi government to end the US military presence, and to prove the failure of his government in managing the crises as the parliamentary election approaches

through controlling the flow of water that flows from the Karkheh and Karun rivers which supply Diyala, Salah al-Din, Sulaymaniyah, and Wasit with fresh water. The Sirwan and Lower Zab rivers also supply the Tigris with water. The water that flows from Iran (see Map No. 1) accounts for about one third of Iraq's annual water supply, amounting to about 70 billion cubic meters.⁽³³⁾

According to the Iraqi economist Dia Al-Mohsen, Iran has resorted to a policy of redirecting rivers, building dams, and cutting Iraq's water supply to revive its arid areas at the expense of Iraqi water security. He pointed out that Iraq owns more than 40 million acres of agricultural land, of which only 25 percent had been invested in. However, Iraq used to export various agricultural crops but import everything today.⁽³⁴⁾

The Iraqi expert's remarks tie in with what is concluded in a report published by the Dur Untash⁽³⁵⁾ research center. This report states that the Iranian government aims to turn Iraq into a barren land to force Iraqi citizens to emigrate. Mohsen added that Iraq was once among the most fertile countries due to the abundance of fresh water but has become a dry, semi-desert land where humans and animals suffer drought. Due to the presence of the historical Tigris River, Iraq was the main source of drinking and agricultural water, however, it has become almost dry and one can cross it on foot because Iran has constructed more than 40 dams.⁽³⁶⁾



Map (1): Iranian Water Resources to Iraq

Fourth: Iran's Role in Complicating the Iraqi Electricity Crisis

The power blackout suffered in the majority of Iraqi provinces, especially the Shiite dominated southern provinces, was because the national electricity network faced a near-total breakdown in the early hours of July 2, 2021. Iraqi power plants were bombed many times throughout July 2021 by militias - indicating the Iranian role in complicating the crisis.

Militias used to regularly target the Iraqi electricity network to pressure successive Iraqi governments to make concessions in their favor or to publicly undermine them so that Iraq would continue to be mired in a cycle of violence which would enable Tehran to implement its goals. On July 2, 2021, an Iraqi security source revealed that the militias targeted the electric towers on orders from Iran. He explained that the statements issued by Iran holding ISIS responsible are inaccurate because all the towers that were detonated were within the districts of the PMF factions.⁽³⁷⁾

Iran also reduced gas supplies to Iraq, and then at the end of June until the beginning of July 2021, Iran suspended the provision of electricity to Iraq completely under the pretext of Baghdad's accumulated debts. This complicated the crisis because the Iranian share of gas and electricity is equal to approximately one third of Iraq's total electricity production of about 16,000 megawatts, according to the statements of the former Electricity Minister Majid Mahdi Hantoush. Meanwhile, Iraq's electricity requirement is about 30,000 megawatts⁽³⁸⁾ in order to have electricity throughout the day.

In the same context, the former Iraqi Electricity Minister Qassim al-Fahdawi revealed the presence of outside hands in reference to Iran and its arms that disrupt Iraq's investments in gas-associated oil. He said that "there are conflicts that have linked the stability of the electricity supply with Iranian participation." He added, "the former Minister of Electricity Jabbar Ali Al-Luiebi attempted to invest in associated gas in the Nahran Omar field, but he faced great difficulties and challenges posed by the interests of some political parties and the external influence on this file." He noted that "this field could have provided 75 percent of gas supplies from Iran at a low cost."⁽³⁹⁾

Iran is aware of the political impact of the crisis on successive Iraqi governments in the summer. Therefore, it refrained from exporting energy to Iraq to pressure al-Kazemi to limit his inclinations towards the Arab fold, especially in the field of energy.

Conclusion

The above data reveals two important results: firstly, Iran has leveraged a lot of its pressure cards simultaneously against Iraq and the United States to expel US forces from Iraq on the one hand, and to obstruct the inclinations of the Iraqi government to move towards the Arab fold, and thwart the attempts of the Iraqi government to reduce Iranian influence in many areas; secondly there is an unprecedented state of Iranian confusion over Tehran's influence in Iraq, due to Iraq's moves to return to the Arab sphere and the growing Iraqi public opinion rejecting foreign intervention, especially Iranian. This anti-Iranian opinion is in response to Iranian efforts to redraw the Iraqi scene so as

to increase the chances of its loyalists in the upcoming parliamentary election and these efforts violate Iraqi international and regional interests. This means that Iran and its militias are posing extensive challenges to the Iraqi state and its prestige, which requires Iraqi, Arab, and international solidarity to confront it.

Iran and Syria

The events witnessed in the Syrian arena this month represent a continuation of the previous month's developments as tensions on the security and political levels continue to escalate. Accordingly, this month's report will address Syrian-Iranian relations based on the following three axes:

First: manifestations of the Russian position against the Israeli targeting of Iranian positions in Syria; second: the Syrian-Chinese rapprochement and the Iranian position. Finally: the implications of the US exit strategy for Iran's role in Syria.

First: Manifestations of the Russian Position Against the Israeli Targeting of Iranian Positions in Syria

Israeli forces had conducted three airstrikes in July targeting several Iranian militia positions in the provinces of Aleppo, Homs and Damascus. Israel's targeting of Iranian interests in Syria is no longer news, as Israel over the past 10 years has intermittently increased its pressure on the Iranian presence in Syria, highlighting the course and pattern of relations between the two. What is new though are the remarks by the Deputy Head of the Russian Center for Reconciliation in Syria Rear Admiral Vadim Collet concerning the interception of Israeli missiles by Syrian-Russian defense systems, as well as Russia's upgrade of Syrian missile defense systems.⁽⁴⁰⁾ Russia used to remain silent about Israeli attacks on Syrian army positions and other Iranian targets.⁽⁴¹⁾

This new Russian position can be interpreted as tactical rather than representing a strategic shift in Moscow's management of the Syrian file.⁽⁴²⁾ As Moscow strives to maintain its position as a major power in Syria to lead and control international and regional interactions, especially in light of the change in leadership in the United States, Israel and Iran. Russia also continues to search for new arrangements and understandings in Syria under the Geneva Conventions, which gives Russia greater latitude to assume the role it seeks to eventually play in regard to Syria's future.

In the context of Russia strengthening its approach in Syria and striving for stability on the political and security levels, Moscow's position can also be interpreted in light of its attempts to establish an artificial peace between Iran and Israel to minimize the escalating differences and provocations in the Syrian regime's sovereign areas – as these escalations may hamper Russian efforts. In contrast, the increased threats to Russia and Iran in neighboring Afghanistan, Iraq and Lebanon necessitate mutual understandings and greater coordination between the two countries. In order to strengthen this relationship, Russia needed to send positive signals towards Iran, which materialized in the Russian objection to Israeli airstrikes.

Finally, this new Russian position towards Israeli raids on Syria is likely to be transitory and non-permanent and will not affect Russia's strong relationship with Israel. The two countries' relationship was similarly tested in 2018 when Russia accused Israel of shooting down a reconnaissance aircraft near Latakia with 15 Russian military personnel on board. Despite this incident, Moscow did not compromise its relationship with Israel.

The end of the current crisis between the two countries is viewed as an unlikely scenario, in case Moscow toughens its position towards Israeli airstrikes on Syria as opposed to the position it adopted during the 2018 crisis.

Second: Syrian-Chinese Rapprochement and the Iranian Position

The visit of Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi to Syria on July 17 conveyed several messages. The visit which coincided with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's fourth presidential inauguration,⁽⁴³⁾ was driven by several interests and threats that combine Syrian, Chinese and Iranian concerns on several fronts. A matter that obligates the three parties to reconsider the Syrian file from another perspective.

For Tehran, Chinese involvement in the Syrian file represents an opportunity to counterbalance Russian influence in Syria, given the emerging differences with Russia regarding its influence in Damascus, reconstruction, the Israeli security file, and other issues. Coinciding with that, regional and international developments are pushing Tehran to accept Chinese intervention – at least in the short term – due to the dire economic circumstances in both Iran and Syria which necessitate such involvement. Politically, Iran is also in dire need of strengthening its negotiating position after faltering in the last round of negotiations regarding the Iranian nuclear agreement.

While China seeks to consolidate its presence in the region both politically and economically through its Belt and Road initiative, Syria is seen as an important crossing point for China and an important part of the completion of this project through Pakistan, Iran, Iraq and Syria all the way up to the Mediterranean Sea – a project that is also important for Iran.⁽⁴⁴⁾ Thus, Syria's position is of great value to the Chinese project, especially since the strategic memorandum of understanding signed between the two parties in March this year included an understanding and convergence of interests on the Syrian map.

Moreover, the United States announcement to withdraw its forces from Afghanistan and Iraq opened up hope for some powers, including China and Iran, to strengthen their cooperation according to the vision adopted by both sides: namely gaining greater influence in the sensitive geopolitical regions and “resisting unilateral dominance” in the world. This was reinforced during Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi's meeting with Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif in Damascus and by the statement issued by the Chinese Foreign Ministry declaring its readiness to work with Iran to counter unilateral policies in the region.⁽⁴⁵⁾

Yet, Chinese involvement in Syria faces several obstacles and threats. On the one hand, the Syrian regime can play on the contradictions to obtain more

gains and consolidate its position through raising the level of competition between Russia, Iran and newly-joined China in regard to capturing economic opportunities in Syria. After the Chinese step, the two countries sent their delegates to Damascus to win additional contracts and compete for Syrian contracts. For its part, Iran sent its Parliament Speaker Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf along with an economic delegation through which it announced it had reached a comprehensive cooperation agreement with Syria. However, the terms of the agreement were not disclosed. As for the Russians, a large Russian delegation comprising representatives of 30 federal executive bodies and organizations, headed by Lieutenant General Mikhail Mizintsev, head of the Russian Coordination Headquarters and head of the National Defense Management Center, also touched down in Syria. This influx of delegates highlights the race to exploit the regime's incompetence and its dependence on foreign assistance. It also signals the intensifying competition between the three poles over Syria.⁽⁴⁶⁾

On the other hand, the Chinese economic presence in Syria is a threat to the already weak Iranian economic presence, which is unable to meet Syrian domestic needs and achieve economic and commercial gains despite strategic frameworks and agreements between the two countries, and despite the unprecedented level of political and military relations between the two countries.⁽⁴⁷⁾

Third: The Implications of the US Exit Strategy for the Iranian Role in Syria

Several questions are being raised against the backdrop of increasing speculation regarding the imminent withdrawal of US combat troops from Iraq and the leaving behind of a small force in charge of advisory and training missions focusing on counterterrorism operations in both Iraq and Syria. These questions include the implications, albeit partial, of this US withdrawal for the future of Iran's military presence: namely Iranian-backed militias in both Iraq and Syria, as well as the future of the US military presence in Syria's regions on the border with Iraq.⁽⁴⁸⁾

The US exit strategy from Iraq serves not only Iran's economic and political interests but also its proxies in both Syria and Iraq. This will aid Iran in filling the security and military void that the US withdrawal will create. This withdrawal might even transfer the attacks on US forces by Iranian militias to the Syrian arena. Through this, Iran will attempt to achieve its goal in Syria: to reduce US influence and expand its influence instead.

The US withdrawal from Iraq also raises many questions about the fate of US troops in northeast Syria. Realistically speaking, there may not be any changes to the US presence in this region, as US military deployments are still present in Syria. There are also no signs that the United States is withdrawing its forces from northeast Syria and Al-Tanf base near the shared borders with Iraq and Jordan. US forces are likely to remain in Syria in the medium term at least, while American and Russian relations are likely to witness the first steps towards rapprochement in various files such as aid and humanitarian crossings.

Furthermore, US allies in northeast Syria and Israel are likely to benefit from the presence of US forces in the context of stability and security.

Conclusion

The developments regarding Iran's role in Syria are an extension of the developments taking place in the areas surrounding Syria. The Russian position against Israeli airstrikes targeting Iranian areas of interest and its fortification of its air defense systems cannot be seen as a Russian coup against Israel and a strengthening of Iran's role in Syria. Rather, it represents a tactical move in order to allow Moscow to advance its position in Syria and promote the idea of a gradual restoration of Syria's political, security and economic stability. However, the US withdrawal from Iraq presents an opportunity for Iran's affiliated militias and for Tehran to expand its influence in Iraq and Syria. However, Iranian ambitions appear limited as the Biden administration has yet to disclose its decision on whether to withdraw from Syria or not at this stage. It also appears that Syria is presently excluded from the United States' troop withdrawal plan in the Middle East.

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International Affairs

This file discusses Iran's interactions with the United States and Europe. In regard to Iran and the United States, the following elements were addressed, namely the transfer of the Vienna negotiations to Raisi's government, the US conditions to return to the nuclear agreement, pressure cards, the two sides continuing with their hostile policies as well as the results and repercussions of these developments. Regarding Iran-Europe relations, the developments in relation to the nuclear negotiations file are outlined, and status of the Europe-Iran relationship during July 2021 is evaluated.



Iran and the United States

Iran asked the European representatives to put the indirect talks with the United States in Vienna on hold until President-elect Ebrahim Raisi takes over and the next Iranian government is formed, and talks were actually put on hold. Parties to the Vienna negotiations are likely to reshuffle their cards and prepare for the next critical round of talks. This report therefore tackles the important developments in July 2021 including the Raisi government's expected handling of the Vienna negotiations, Washington's conditions for returning to the nuclear deal, the two sides' pressure cards and continued hostile policies. Finally, the results and implications will be discussed.

First: The Transition of the Vienna Negotiations to the Raisi Government

Iran's Foreign Ministry expressed hope for the completion of the talks to revive the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (the nuclear agreement) in Vienna after the inauguration of the Raisi government. In its most recent 22nd report on the 2015 nuclear deal, Iran's Foreign Ministry confirmed that the current negotiations held by the outgoing Rouhani government have brought both sides closer to a "possible framework agreement to lift sanctions," although the reality shows that there is a wide gap between the two sides.⁽¹⁾

In Iran, it seems that the ruling elite and the supreme leader in particular wants to give Raisi the privilege of signing the nuclear deal and reap its potential benefits. Therefore, the Rouhani government was informed that its role in the Vienna negotiations had ended and Raisi's government will take charge of the talks. The 2015 nuclear deal remains a controversial issue among the two wings of power in Iran, as Rouhani leveled accusations against the Parliament and the "hardliners" and held them responsible for the inadequate progress in the nuclear talks. The "hardline"-dominated Parliament, on the other hand, declared that the rounds of negotiations in Vienna failed to effectively lift the sanctions and end the resulting economic pressure on Iran and that the government's negotiating team was unable to lift the sanctions. Raisi has in fact formed a committee to measure the progress made in the negotiations. It concluded that the Iranian negotiating team in Vienna, led by Abbas Araghchi, was weak.

For this reason, Iran decided not to come back to the negotiating table before Raisi's inauguration and had conveyed this to the European officials acting as interlocutors in the indirect US-Iranian negotiations. According to officials familiar with the nuclear negotiations, a seventh round of negotiations in Vienna is expected to be held around mid-August.⁽²⁾

Iran's supreme leader outlined the country's policy towards the Vienna talks when he considered the Rouhani government's experience as evidence that "the West should not be trusted." "Governments should never operate their programs relying

on negotiations with the West, because they will definitely fail,” Khamenei stressed.⁽³⁾

Iran wants all the sanctions that have been imposed on it since the US withdrawal from the nuclear deal to be lifted first before it complies with its nuclear obligations. The United States, however, insists not to give Iran this privilege and to lift the nuclear sanctions step-by-step.

Iran also wants guarantees that the current US government or any subsequent government will not exit the nuclear deal and that sanctions and restrictions will not be reimposed on Tehran using the snapback mechanism. However, Washington has said it cannot give such guarantees as this is not in the natural course of diplomacy. In addition, international law does not bind the United States to remain a party to any nuclear agreement signed.

Second: US Conditions to Return to the Nuclear Deal

The United States spent months negotiating a possible return to the Iranian nuclear deal to make real gains. Despite its willingness to lift some sanctions, the United States, during the fifth and sixth rounds of negotiations, demonstrated a seriousness of purpose in the context of returning to the nuclear deal. Iran’s Ambassador and Permanent Representative to the United Nations Office and International Organizations Kazem Gharibabadi said the United States and the West tied lifting some sanctions and removing the IRGC’s designation as a foreign terrorist organization with the condition that Iran agrees to future negotiations on “regional issues.” Washington also refused to revoke the executive order that allows for sanctions to be imposed on foreign individuals and entities involved in conventional arms-related activities. Furthermore, it has not expressed a willingness to lift the non-nuclear related sanctions imposed on over 500 natural and legal persons by the Trump administration. The United States has also refused to revoke Countering America’s Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) and is not willing to offer guarantees that the former US administration’s behavior towards the nuclear deal will not be repeated. Unconcerned about Iran’s losses following Washington’s illegal and unilateral withdrawal from the nuclear deal, the Americans have listed additional demands regarding Iran’s nuclear activities and obligations beyond the ones mentioned in the existing nuclear deal. The Americans do not want to return to their nuclear obligations until they are confident that Iran will also return to its obligations.⁽⁴⁾

Third: The Two Sides’ Pressure Cards and Continued Hostile Policies

In light of the delay in the Vienna talks, the expected tough Iranian position in relation to the negotiations and the US conditions to return to the nuclear deal, the parties continued their hostile policies, as follows:

A. The United States

1. The United States has waived sanctions on Iran’s oil trade allowing it to access its frozen funds in South Korea and Japan. Nonetheless, the waiver does not allow the unfrozen funds to be transferred to Iran and they can only be used to settle Iranian debts in South Korea and Japan. This sends an implicit message that as long as the nuclear deal is not revived, Iran will not be able to conduct business transactions at the international level and will only be able to trade limited types of goods.⁽⁵⁾

2. In its annual publication the “Trafficking in Persons Report,” the US State Department placed Iran in the lowest-effort category (Tier 3).⁽⁶⁾

3. The US Commerce Department said it blacklisted 34 entities based in Russia, China and Iran for economically cooperating with the Iranian government and eight of these entities were added to the economic blacklist for their role in facilitating the export of US items to Iran.⁽⁷⁾

4. An Iranian national living in Canada who was arrested by US authorities pleaded guilty to exporting goods to Iran, thus violating US sanctions against the country.⁽⁸⁾

5. Four Iranian nationals have been charged by US authorities with plotting to kidnap an Iranian-American journalist based in New York, Masih Alinejad, along with other offences including sanctions violations, bank and wire fraud, as well as money laundering.⁽⁹⁾

6. About 200 accounts run by a group of hackers in Iran were taken down after they targeted US military personnel and people working in the defense sector. This move was part of an Iranian cyber-spying operation.⁽¹⁰⁾

7. The humanitarian swap agreed with the United States and the United Kingdom in regard to releasing 10 prisoners has been delayed until mutual understandings are reached in relation to the nuclear deal.⁽¹¹⁾

B. Iran

1. Iran has not renewed the monitoring agreement with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) which expired on June 24, 2021.

2. Iran prevented IAEA inspectors from accessing the Natanz nuclear site on July 1, 2021, in response to the site being attacked in April 2021.

3. Iran told the IAEA that it intends to enrich uranium up to 20 percent purity for the purposes of producing reactor fuel. These Iranian moves are viewed as part of Tehran’s negotiating tactics to increase its pressure cards before the Vienna talks resume.⁽¹²⁾

4. Iran has kept up reasonable oil production and export levels.⁽¹³⁾

5. Iran is making efforts to advance its relations and cooperation with the two eastern powers China and Russia, both of which are competitors to the United States. In this context, Iran parallel to its consultations with the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and Central and Southeast Asian States, participated in a joint military exercise with the Russian navy on July 25, 2021.

6. Pro-Iranian Afghan militias in eastern Syria launched a missile attack against the US-led coalition in the Al-Omar oil field. Furthermore, the Conoco gas processing plant located near a US military base in Syria’s Deir Ezzor Province was struck by a mortar shell on July 10, 2021.

7. US forces in Iraq were targeted with rockets and drones six times in one week, and a military base which houses US soldiers was targeted with at least 14 rockets, injuring two people. The armed groups responsible for the attacks in Syria and Iraq said that such attacks will continue until the complete departure of US troops from both countries. Iran denied responsibility for the attacks, nonetheless, Brigadier-General Amir-Ali Hajizadeh said that the peoples of the region and the IRGC will not allow the Americans to implement their schemes.⁽¹⁴⁾

8. A cargo ship under partial Israeli ownership was attacked in the northern Indian Ocean on July 3, and on July 30 another Israeli ship was attacked, killing two of its crew members.

Fourth: Results and Implications

Despite the lack of trust between Iran and the United States, the two parties agree on the need to resume negotiations. The new Iranian government's handling of the Vienna talks will add further complications to the negotiations. Raisi's negotiating team will likely be tougher than Rouhani's, especially in light of the supreme leader's remarks that the West should not be trusted and that Iran's domestic problems can be solved without depending on forming understandings with the West.

However, Raisi is not in a position to alter the US position at the Vienna talks. Therefore, Raisi and Iran's "hardliners" will be severely harmed in case the negotiations fail, and this outcome is probable, especially if the Biden administration continues to insist on making substantive amendments to the 2015 nuclear agreement such as imposing conditions for subsequent negotiations including Tehran's regional behavior and missile program, and linking the lifting of sanctions to reaching an agreement to resolve these outstanding issues.

Despite the policy of nuclear blackmail, Raisi is fully aware that if Iran possesses a nuclear weapon, it will represent the violation of an international redline. Thus, Iran's overwhelming desire to revive the nuclear deal but without conceding ground could lead to it facing significant harm. The potential failure of the negotiations could lead to Biden reversing his Iran policy, with it ultimately being much harsher than Trump's. For these talks to succeed, the Raisi government must weigh between the political and economic difficulties that Iran will face in case the talks fail on the one hand and the benefits it will gain in case it returns to the nuclear agreement on the other hand.

Under the current circumstances, the Americans have an opportunity to trap Iran's "hardliners" who have the final say after Raisi won the presidential seat and directly reach a new agreement with them which is not subject to internal criticism. In case this is not possible, the United States should maintain its maximum pressure policy and turn Iranian public opinion against Iran's "hardliners" and the supreme leader. Moreover, the recent Iranian protests have given the Biden administration another pressure card and have rehabilitated the Trump administration's pressure strategy.

Conclusion

To conclude, it can be said that despite the divergence in positions between Iran and the United States regarding the Vienna negotiations and the ongoing bilateral escalation, both countries are searching for a balanced agreement. Such an agreement would on the one hand allow Raisi to address Iran's worsening internal situation and boost his government's legitimacy as his election was questionable. Moreover, it would allow the Biden administration on the other hand to reach a comprehensive agreement in a way that settles the substantial differences with Iran that are equally important to the nuclear deal itself. Otherwise, the Raisi government will face significant difficulties, especially if the Biden administration decides to return to Trump's approach towards Iran.

Iran and Europe

As the Vienna nuclear talks dominated most European-Iranian political engagements in recent months, diplomatic calm prevailed over the course of events between the two sides in July 2021. However, the month saw some tensions such as Europe's condemnation of Iran's uranium enrichment violations.

In addition, Europe accused Iran of carrying out cyberattacks and Slovenian Prime Minister Janez Janša who presides over the Council of the European Union criticized Iran over its human rights violations.

This part of the report deals with the events that took place in July in accordance with two dimensions:

First, monitoring developments in regard to the Vienna nuclear talks, and second, evaluating the Iran-Europe relationship during the month.

First: Monitoring Developments in Regard to the Vienna Nuclear Talks

IAEA Director General Rafael Grossi announced to the IAEA Board of Governors that Iran intends to use indigenously-produced uranium enriched up to 20 percent U-235 in the manufacture of fuel for the Tehran Research Reactor (TRR). Foreign ministers of the European Troika (France, Germany and Britain) issued a statement expressing deep concern over Iran's production of enriched uranium metal up to 20 percent U-235. The statement stressed that the move was "a serious violation" of Iran's commitments under the JCPOA.⁽¹⁵⁾

Iran's Ambassador and Permanent Representative to the United Nations Office and the Vienna-based International Organizations Kazem Gharibabadi said that the development in regard to this matter (i.e. enriching natural uranium) began about three months ago and that the IAEA had been informed of Tehran's move nine days earlier.⁽¹⁶⁾ The Vienna nuclear talks have reached a dead end after six rounds of direct negotiations between Iran, the European Troika, Russia and China. The European representatives are playing the role of diplomatic intermediaries between Iran and the US negotiating team.

The seventh round was postponed until the new Iranian government comes into office in August 2021. "We were prepared to continue negotiating but the Iranians requested more time to deal with their presidential transition," said US State Department spokesperson Jalina Porter.⁽¹⁷⁾

The IAEA director general said that the pause in the Vienna talks had placed the agency in an "uncomfortable position." "We still have a number of questions, issues that we are trying to clarify with Iran, and we will have to wait and start anew with the new team when they are in office," Grossi told AFP in an interview.⁽¹⁸⁾

Second: Assessing the Iran-Europe Relationship in July

The European states have always used the carrot and stick policy with Iran since the Trump administration's withdrawal from the nuclear deal in mid-2018 and continued to put pressure on Iran over its human rights violations and its support for terrorist activities. Meanwhile, the Europeans have also attempted to contain Iran's nuclear program by offering diplomatic concessions or establishing significant economic partnerships. Iran, on the other hand, has always sought to achieve its interests and to take advantage of the benefits stemming from its relationship with Europe. Iran also tries to respond to Europe's pressure via issuing political condemnations and media propaganda whenever it feels this is needed.

The Iranian government expressed outrage over Slovenian Prime Minister Janez Janša's participation in an event organized by the National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI) held in Berlin on July 10, 2021. During the event, Janez Janša emphasized that Iran's political system needs to be held accountable for its human rights violations and called on the international community to be more decisive with Iran in regard to this matter.⁽¹⁹⁾

Iran asked Europe to clarify its position in light of Janša's participation and remarks at the NCRI event. Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif called the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs Josep Borrell expressing Iran's condemnation of Janša's participation and remarks. Borrell said that Janša's opinions do not reflect those of the EU, although Slovenia will preside over the Council of the European Union for six months.⁽²⁰⁾

On another note, Britain raised awareness regarding the threat of Iranian cyberterrorism as well as of similar threats posed by other countries hostile to it. MI5 Director-General Ken McCallum warned against threats coming from states or state-backed organizations in Russia, China and Iran and urged the public to be vigilant in light of rising terrorist threats.⁽²¹⁾ Previously, the cybersecurity company Proofpoint disclosed an electronic espionage operation carried out by an Iranian group who pretended to be British-based academics. The group compromised a website belonging to the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London in an attempt to steal information.⁽²²⁾

In dealing with Iran, Europe seeks to find some middle ground. It has yet to officially comment on the ongoing Iranian protests which have expanded due to the shortage of water in Ahvaz.

The European Union has long criticized the flagrant human rights violations committed by Iran's security forces against protesters in previous years and in response has imposed economic sanctions on Iran. The most recent sanctions included blacklisting the former Deputy Commander of Iran's Revolutionary Guard Hossein Salami and seven members of Iran's Basij militia last April in response to a deadly crackdown unleashed by Iran's authorities in November 2019.

However, the current Iranian protests come at a critical time in light of the Vienna nuclear talks reaching a significant stage and the concerned parties delaying the talks until Raisi is inaugurated as Iran's president. Furthermore, the scope of the current protests cannot be compared to the nationwide protests

in 2019, which if repeated now, would force Europe side with the Iranian people in order to uphold their human rights despite the likelihood of complicating its political relationship with Iran. This relationship is already strained by diplomatic spats and the Iranian economic slowdown because of US sanctions on Tehran.

Conclusion

The European countries have expressed serious concerns about the IAEA report on Iran's production of enriched uranium metal up to 20 percent. Although the Vienna talks have reached a dead end, the West still hopes to find a common ground with the new Iranian government so that the nuclear deal can be revived and Tehran returns to its nuclear obligations, especially observing the uranium enrichment limit stipulated in the nuclear deal. The Iran-Europe relationship witnessed other developments in the month of July, including British security warnings in response to cyberattacks by an Iran-linked group. Moreover, the European high representative for foreign affairs tried to find some middle ground with Iran. He said that the Slovenian prime minister's participation at the event organized by the NCRI and his ensuing remarks do not reflect the opinions of the European Union.

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