

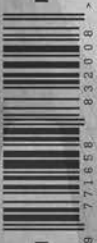
MONTHLY REPORT



# IRAN CASE FILE

Your window on Iran from inside and abroad

August 2021



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

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# IRAN CASE FILE

August 2021

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Some aspects of Iran's policy under the new Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi began to surface in August 2021. In the first month of his presidency, a host of domestic, regional and international developments evolved.

The *Internal Affairs* file, at the ideological level, reviews the Taliban's control in Afghanistan which raised concerns among Iran's political and religious elites. Despite the ideological differences between the two parties and Shiite concern about the return of the Taliban to power, it seems that Iran is seeking to deal pragmatically with the group, yet prioritizing its interests and national security goals above ideological differences, at least for the time being. Iran reshaped its policy towards the Taliban, following the group's messages of reassurance to Afghan Shiites, its general amnesty for all its opponents, its orders to protect the Hussein processions, and its participation in one of the *Husseiniyas* (a Shiite mourning house where Shiites mourn the martyrdom of Hussein; the grandson of Prophet Muhammad).

The *Political File* sheds light on the Iranian Parliament granting a vote of confidence to Raisi's cabinet nominees after extensive discussions by the Parliament's specialized committees. The lawmakers approved 18 out of 19 nominees that Raisi had presented to the Parliament. The new cabinet included ministers affiliated with the "conservatives," including former IRGC leaders, as well as officials close to Raisi. The latter worked with Raisi during his time as chairman of the Razavi Shrine in Mashhad or when he was chief justice.

The "conservative" grip over the Parliament did not lead to all nominees being approved. Some lawmakers rejected some of the nominees because they lacked administrative experience needed to perform their roles. Their criticism eventually led to the rejection of the nominee for the Ministry of Education



portfolio after he was identified as lacking experience and expertise to run this ministry in light of its importance and the multiplicity of crises and challenges facing it.

At the economic level, Iran and Afghanistan's economic and trade relations are important for both sides. Afghanistan is an important market not only for Iranian traders who export consumer goods and food items, but also for the Iranian government as it supplies electricity, gas and oil to Afghanistan. Since the Taliban captured power in Afghanistan, Iran has been working hard to preserve the economic gains it has secured over the years by reaching understandings with the Taliban, aiming to provide the Afghani market with the goods and services that it needs. At the military level, Iran witnessed several developments in August, primarily the appointment of a new commander to head the Iranian navy. The new commander has Kurdish origins and belongs to the Sunni sect, Brigadier General Shahram Irani. This is the first time that a Sunni commander has been elevated to such a high military position. Regarding Iran's nuclear program, Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi replaced the Director of the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran, Ali Akbar Salehi, with Mohammad Islami, a civil engineer who has low-level experience in nuclear affairs and was the Minister of Transportation and City Building during the tenure of Rouhani's government.

Days before Islami's appointment, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) confirmed in a report that Iran had added 200 grams of 20 percent enriched uranium to its stockpile, which it considered a new Iranian violation of the nuclear deal.

In relation to military cooperation between Iran and the Taliban, it seems that there is security and military coordination between the two parties, as some reports indicate that the Taliban let Iran obtain some US military equipment, which was left in the hands of the Afghan army. In return, Iran sent back the Afghan soldiers who had fled but without their equipment.

The Iran and Gulf file in the Arab Affairs section discusses the Taliban's control in Afghanistan and its strategic implications. The file highlights that the Middle East can no longer rely on US guarantees to address potential security risks, adding that the countries in the region are concerned over the chaotic US withdrawal because the same scenario will probably be repeated in Iraq, throwing the region again into a spiral of chaos and wars. Moreover, Washington's miscalculation in Afghanistan which helped the Taliban reap vital gains may encourage Iran to achieve similar gains by employing its militias across the region. Although the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan works in Iran's favor, it is also a challenge; Tehran is concerned over the Gulf's growing influence in Afghanistan.

In relation to Iran-Yemen interactions, United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres appointed the Swedish Hans Grundberg as the new envoy to Yemen to succeed the former envoy Martin Griffiths. The Iran-backed Houthis militia has pre-emptively declared that it is not willing to deal with him, claiming there is no point in holding talks with the new envoy. The legitimate government welcomed his appointment and announced that it would support



him to bring peace to Yemen. It seems that the Raisi government is following the same path that the Rouhani government took regarding providing support to the Houthis, which may further complicate the situation on the Yemeni scene. Signs of Raisi's support for the Houthis emerged after he received a Houthi delegation — which participated in his inauguration. This was the first delegation to visit Iran after Raisi took over the presidency. As for Iran-Iraq interactions, Iraq hosted the Baghdad Conference for Cooperation and Partnership on August 28, in which six Arab countries participated including Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the UAE, Jordan, Kuwait and Qatar, as well as France, Turkey and Iran, represented by its new Foreign Minister, Hossein Amir-Abdollahian.

This conference was of great significance due to a host of reasons: it was held at a time of significant regional and international developments that have raised the concerns of the countries in the region over Iran exploiting these changing dynamics to enhance its expansionist project. These developments included the Taliban capturing power in Afghanistan following the US withdrawal from the country, and the inauguration of the Iranian “hardliner” President Ebrahim Raisi who supports Iran’s revolutionary principles and its interventions in the region.





Baghdad wanted to use this conference to send certain messages to Iran, particularly that it is keen on shifting back to its Arab sphere and it will not allow any country to deal with it as a vassal state. Despite these strong messages, observers of Iraqi affairs have doubts about Baghdad's ability to achieve a breakthrough in regard to Arab-Iran relations in light of Tehran's displeasure with this conference being convened in Iraq.

Regarding Iran's presence in Syria, southern Syria has attracted great attention at the regional and international levels after renewed clashes in Daraa Governorate between residents and Syrian forces backed by Iran's militias. It seems that the visit of the new Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian was of great significance. It is expected that the "hardliner" Foreign Minister Abdollahian, who is well known for his support of the IRGC's regional interventions, will continue to enhance Iran's support of the so-called "axis of resistance."

In relation to International Affairs, Raisi's government appears to be heading towards further extremism.

Iran has revived its anti-US rhetoric, stressing that its foreign policy is based on mistrust towards the West. On the other hand, it seems that the United States is not about to make concessions to the Iranian side after US President Joe Biden indicated that America will turn to other options if negotiations fail. The Biden administration is still committed to its conditions including Iran's regional activities, its ballistic missile and nuclear programs in the nuclear talks, as well as maintaining the arms embargo on Iran. In other words, the United States wants to reach a new agreement, which Iran will reject.

In relation to Iran's interactions with Europe, it can be said that the European countries are working to preserve the channels of political communication with Tehran despite the continuous Iranian violations of the nuclear deal and Tehran's recent hard positions, whether from the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei or Raisi. This desire is supported by the presence of EU officials at the inauguration of President Ebrahim Raisi, despite European accusations against him related to the executions of thousands of political prisoners in the 1980s. However, at the same time, the EU parties realize that they will fall into a political



and diplomatic impasse if they maintain channels of political communication with Iran without criticizing its nuclear violations. In this regard, the foreign ministers of the European Troika countries issued a joint statement expressing their “grave concern” about Iran’s continued enrichment of uranium metal which is used to produce a nuclear bomb. Britain also scathingly criticized Iran after one of its citizens was killed in an Iranian drone attack on an oil tanker operated by an Israeli company.

# Internal Affairs

**I**n the Internal Affairs section, we review four files. The Ideological File touches on rising Shiite concerns over the Taliban's return to power and the messages of reassurance sent by the group to the Afghan Shiite community and Iran. The Political File discusses the Iranian Parliament's granting of confidence to the cabinet's new ministers except the education minister. The file also sheds lights on the ambitious promises and internal challenges facing Ebrahim Raisi in the coming period. The Economic File details the economic and trade relations between Iran and Afghanistan. Finally, the Military File analyzes the appointment of a Sunni commander as the chief of Iran's naval forces, the security situation on the Iran-Afghan border, and the developments concerning the Iranian nuclear program.





# The Ideological File

The Afghan conflict, along with the concerns over representation in the Taliban government, raised the prospect of Shiite-Sunni rivalry — which could possibly impact Afghan-Iranian relations in the future. July's file discussed the reports circulating about Iran's plan to establish a PMF-style force in Afghanistan to counter the Taliban's expansion and defend Afghan Shiites after US troops withdrew from the country. However, it seems that Iran has preferred to pursue a pragmatic approach to the situation in Afghanistan — especially after the messages of reassurance the Taliban sent to the Shiite minority in the country.

This month, the *Ideological File* discusses the scenarios regarding the potential relationship between the Taliban and the Afghan Shiite community in light of ground realities and the Taliban's takeover of Kabul. In addition, this file looks at the multiple remarks made by Taliban leaders to reassure concerned people at home and overseas about its treatment of other sects. Finally, the file also discusses important questions related to the role of Iran's ideology in shaping its relationship with the Taliban against the backdrop of the group's remarks and actions.

## 1. Shiite Concerns About the Return of the Taliban: Between Criticism and Acceptance

Without a doubt, there is an Iranian Shiite concern about the return of the Taliban though this concern is cloaked in diplomatic rhetoric, attempts towards containment, and waiting for the Taliban's strategy regarding governance, the shape of the state, and its position on Afghan ethnic minorities. The Shiite community's reactions have varied, because of their position regarding the Taliban on the one hand, and their relationship with the Iranian government on the other hand.

Keyhan newspaper's editorial last June said that there was no proof of horrendous crimes committed by the Taliban like those committed by ISIS in Iraq. The newspaper mentioned that the Taliban announced that "it has nothing to do with the Afghan Shiites."<sup>(1)</sup> The editorial added, "The Taliban forces of which we speak today are not unified and coordinated and are different from the Taliban that we have always known to chop off heads. The Taliban has also announced a change in approach. But there is a serious need to verify whether these allegations are true."<sup>(2)</sup>

Abbas Gerrlu<sup>(3)</sup> sums up the Iranian position towards the Taliban from two angles. The first angle suggests that the Taliban is a violent group that is no different from the past. The second angle suggests that the Taliban

has changed its policies and approach and has modernized its beliefs. On the possibility of dealing with it, he said, “If the Taliban or any other movement enjoys popular support in this country, Iran’s vision will focus on its ability to deal with realities.”<sup>(4)</sup> Further, the Afghan Shiite community is well-aligned with the Iranian government’s position. In a statement released on August 12, the Fatemiyoun Brigade denied the reports that mentioned it had offered itself to the Afghan government to counter the Taliban.<sup>(5)</sup>

After the Taliban captured Kabul, Hojatoleslam Sayed Issa Hosseini Mazari<sup>(6)</sup> issued a statement in which he opposed the anti-Taliban protests in Iran, calling for tolerance towards everyone whatever his position and to understand whether a person is acting unknowingly or whether he is part of a movement that deliberately intends to fan the flames of sedition and war between the Shiite community and the Taliban in Afghanistan.<sup>(7)</sup> The cleric denied all the allegations about the Taliban committing violations against Shiites in Afghanistan. He asserted the opposite. “Taliban spokespersons have repeatedly spoken of a general pardon and the group has not engaged in fighting with its armed opponents — breaking with its tradition that has been known over the past two decades.”<sup>(8)</sup>

Hence, it seems that the Afghan Shiites will interact with the Taliban as long as it remains committed to its pragmatic approach in regard to Shiites and Iran. Therefore, the likelihood of escalation is not likely in the near future — even though ideological and sectarian differences remain unresolved.

But at the same time, Iranian “reformists” expressed opposition and concern regarding the Taliban takeover of Kabul. Former Iranian President Mohammad Khatami issued a statement in which he described the Taliban as backward, terrorists and violators of basic human rights.<sup>(9)</sup>

He then hinted at the pragmatic nature of Iran’s policy when it comes to interacting with the Taliban, with it being based on common interests. However, he rejected this policy from a moral perspective. “Regardless of all considerations and political and security requirements that politicians take into account as well as the realities and interests they consider to declare their positions, when it comes down to culture, morals and caring for humans and their rights in modern society, we are deeply concerned about these issues.”<sup>(10)</sup>

However, Khatami’s criticism of the Taliban’s version of Islam could be interpreted as taking a shot at the Iranian “conservatives.” Khatami mentioned in the past that the “conservatives” were pursuing the same approach and methodology of the Taliban.<sup>(11)</sup> The Taliban’s version of Islam —as Khatami puts it — symbolizes reactionary thought and undemocratic behavior. This understanding of Islam will lead to nothing but more misery and further backwardness throughout Afghanistan under the Taliban’s leadership.<sup>(12)</sup>

Khatami was also keen to express his concern about the Taliban’s position regarding the Shiite community. He believes that the group’s position poses a danger to Afghan Shiites — equating it with ISIS without any distinction.<sup>(13)</sup> The paradox is that the position of Iran’s “reformists” is similar to their Shirazi adversaries who also believe that the Taliban taking over power in Kabul is an existential threat to the Shiite community in Afghanistan.<sup>(14)</sup> Both agree that the Iranian “conservatives” are close to the Taliban.<sup>(15)</sup>



## 2. The Taliban and Its Messages of Reassurance

The Taliban attempted to allay the concerns of the Shiite community at home and overseas. On August 13, it issued a statement granting a general amnesty and reassured all people regardless of their persuasions and affiliations.<sup>(16)</sup> Moreover, Taliban members attended a Hosseini assembly and reassured the Afghan Shiites. The Taliban commanders ordered Shiite processions to be protected from any attacks while ensuring that Sunni figures were not insulted during the processions.<sup>(17)</sup>

The Russian ambassador to Afghanistan described the initial steps taken by the Taliban towards the Shiites in the country as “encouraging.”<sup>(18)</sup> The Taliban denied responsibility for the statue of a Shiite figure in Afghanistan being pulled down and fixed some Shiite flags that had been torn apart by some of its fighters.<sup>(19)</sup>

The two sides at the moment are “testing the waters” and have imposed self-restraint. The Taliban do not want to engage in an open conflict with Shiites and Iran — especially as there were understandings between Iran and the Taliban before the group entered Kabul. Moreover, Afghan Shiites do not want an escalation with the Taliban after it took over power from the Afghan government resulting in a total collapse of the country’s security apparatuses. This means that any Shiite-Taliban conflict will end up in the Taliban’s favor at least in the medium term.

In a nutshell, the significations of Afghan Shiite-Iranian positions can be summed up in three main points. **First**, a significant number of Afghan Shiite clerics refused to support protests against the Taliban, especially in Iran as they did not want Afghan Shiites to be accused of being loyal to external actors and wanted the truce between the Taliban and Afghan Shiites to remain unmarred.

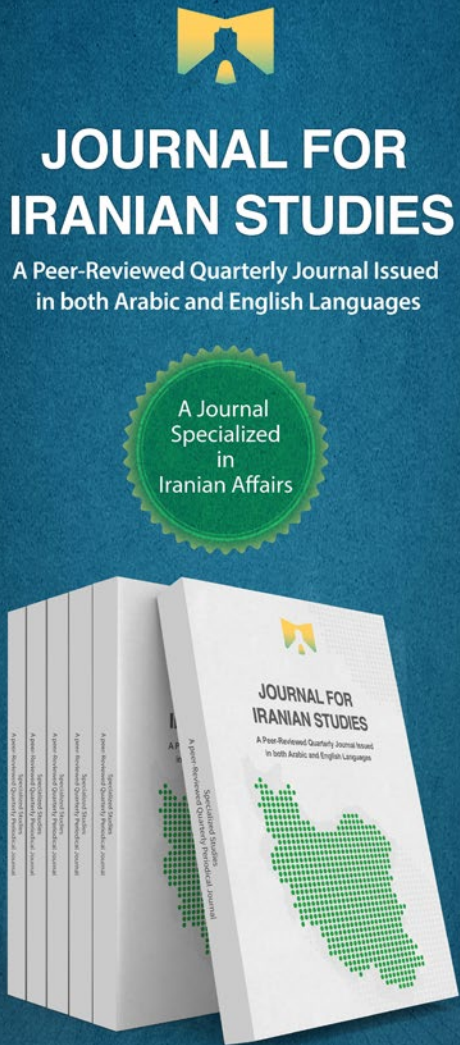
**Second**, the Taliban is aware of the map of disputes with regional powers. Hence, the Taliban’s strategy towards Afghan Shiites is different from the strategy it pursued in the 1990s. The Taliban has sent messages of reassurance to Afghan Shiites and Iran, their regional backyard. In addition, it has sent messages to human rights organizations concerned about the status of minorities under the Taliban administration.

**Third**, it is likely that relations between the Taliban and Afghan Shiites will continue to be determined by the relationship between the Taliban and Iran. However, in the medium term, it is unlikely that there will be a dispute or clash between the two sides. The Taliban wants to implement the revisions and intellectual reforms it has been promising. Iran realizes that it is dealing with a radical group that will not hesitate to use deterrence in case it faces a threat from Tehran — paying no heed to international equations. The Taliban is capable of playing a chaotic role like the one played by Iran in the Middle East. This raises Iranian concerns about a potential confrontation with the Taliban.

## Conclusion

We can say that both sides: the Taliban and Iran along with its Shiite groups are prioritizing their political interests and are opting to generally adopt political pragmatism in their relations. The Taliban wants to promote its new

image so that it can tighten its grip on power, play a regional role and attempt to convince the West to deal with it. Iran wants to contain the Taliban and subdue the euphoria that followed the group's capture of Kabul and US troop withdrawal. Hence, it prioritizes its interests and national security over ideological differences with the Taliban. The Iranian position has impacted the Shiite community inside Iran, with some Shiites welcoming the Taliban takeover of power in Kabul while the Fatemiyoun Brigade denied any plans to use its fighters to counter the Sunni group.




The image shows the cover of the 'JOURNAL FOR IRANIAN STUDIES'. The cover is white with a blue background. At the top, there is a logo consisting of a stylized yellow and orange 'M' shape. Below the logo, the title 'JOURNAL FOR IRANIAN STUDIES' is written in large, bold, black letters. Underneath the title, it says 'A Peer-Reviewed Quarterly Journal Issued in both Arabic and English Languages'. A green circular seal with a serrated edge is placed on the right side of the cover, containing the text 'A Journal Specialized in Iranian Affairs'. At the bottom of the cover, there is a map of Iran composed of small green squares. To the left of the main cover, a stack of several other issues of the journal is visible, showing their spines.

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# The Political File

In the month of July 2021, *The Political File* discussed the decision of the supreme leader of Iran to appoint Gholam-Hossein Mohseni-Eje'i as the new chief justice to succeed Ebrahim Raisi. The month of August 2021 was full of political developments. The new Iranian president officially took over the presidency after a decree by the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and the Iranian Parliament convened his swearing-in ceremony.

Less than a week after Raisi took over power, he introduced his cabinet lineup to the Parliament to discuss whether the prospective ministers were qualified or not. After lengthy debates lasting days, Iranian lawmakers voted to approve most of the proposed candidates. The *Political File* of August 2021 will discuss two main topics: the Parliament's vote approving Ebrahim Raisi's cabinet lineup, the ambitious promises made by Raisi and the most important domestic challenges awaiting the government in the coming period.

## 1. The Iranian Parliament Approves Ebrahim Raisi's Cabinet Nominees Except the Minister of Education

After his inauguration held in the Iranian Parliament, the incoming Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi started to form his new cabinet. He selected Mohammad Mokhber — who had been presiding over the Execution of Imam Khomeini's Orders (Setad) since 2007 and was placed on America's terror list — to be vice president. Raisi also selected Gholam Hossein Esmaeili as his chief of staff. Esmaeili was the judicial spokesman before his appointment to his new post. The Iranian president also reappointed Ali Shamkhani as secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council. He served in this role for eight years under the former government led by Rouhani.

On August 11, Raisi presented a list including nominees for parliamentary approval. After extensive debates that continued for two weeks, the Iranian Parliament, on August 26, approved 18 cabinet nominees out of 19. The Ministry of Education's nominee, Hossein Baghgoli, was not approved by lawmakers, who cited his lack of experience for this role.<sup>(20)</sup>

It is noticeable that all the cabinet ministers are “conservatives.” Most of them are either former IRGC commanders, or senior leaders who worked in the supreme leader's institutions or are close to Raisi himself. Some had worked with Raisi at the Razavi Shrine in the city of Mashhad or while he was Iran's chief justice.

Though the Parliament approved 18 ministers out of 19, the discussions focused on whether the proposed nominees were qualified or not. Some lawmakers objected to some proposed nominees because they believed that they lacked executive experience, and this would hinder their performance. All they possessed were their academic certificates.<sup>(21)</sup>

Jalal Mahmoudzadeh, a lawmaker representing the capital of West Azerbaijan Province Mahabad in Parliament, expressed strong opposition to the cabinet lineup. He believed that it ignored millions of Sunnis who backed Ebrahim Raisi. He wondered: Was not there anyone among the Sunnis whether a Kurd, Arab, or Baloch who could have been nominated to be a cabinet member? He also wondered why no woman was among the cabinet nominees even though women account for half of Iranian society.<sup>(22)</sup>

**Table 1: List of Ministers Approved by Parliament**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Ministry</b>
Ehsan Khandozi	Finance minister
Javad Oji	Oil minister
Ali Akbar Mehrabian	Energy minister
Brigadier Mohammad-Reza Gharaei Ashtiani	Minister of defense and armed forces logistics
Hossein Amir-Abdollahian	Minister of foreign affairs
Isa Zarepour	Minister of communications and information technology
Rostam Ghasemi	Minister of roads and urban development
Hojjatollah Abdolmaleki	Minister of cooperatives, labor and social welfare
Ezzatollah Zarghami	Minister of cultural heritage, tourism and handicraft organization
Mohammad Ali Zolfigol	Minister of science, research and technology
Mohammad Mahdi Esmaeili	Minister of culture and Islamic guidance
Amin-Hossein Rahimi	Minister of justice
Ahmad Vahidi	Minister of interior
Bahram Eynollahi	Minister of health and medical education
Reza Fatemi-Amin	Minister of industry, mine and trade
Esmail Khatib	Minister of intelligence



Name	Ministry
Javad Sadatinejad	Minister of agricultural jihad
Hamid Sajjadi	Minister of sports and youth

Source: “Full Table: 18 Ministers Have Been Approved to the 13<sup>th</sup> Cabinet + Detailed Table,” <https://bit.ly/3yOq4T5>

## 2. Ambitious Pledges and Internal Challenges Facing Ebrahim Raisi

Ebrahim Raisi has made ambitious pledges to the Iranian people, primarily forming a consensual government or a popular government. He called on the country's elites, minorities, and different political blocs to consider his government as “their government” as he put it. He also pledged to wipe out rampant corruption in Iran, support the economy and currency and tackle the ramifications of the coronavirus pandemic outbreak. He also pledged to work to overturn the US sanctions imposed on Iran.

The Raisi government faces a genuine test in front of the Iranian public to make sure the pledges made are fulfilled in addition to finding solutions to the problems facing Iran at home and abroad. At home, Raisi is facing countless challenges. Problems continue to strike the Iranian state—including severe economic deterioration, growing popular discontent, and a health pandemic that is straining the country's healthcare system.

Raisi's internal challenges:

1. Ensuring he makes a series of achievements in light of the huge backing he received from the institutions of the political system. Perhaps it can be said that not a single president—following the death of the late Iranian President Hashemi Rafsanjani—has had more support from government institutions than Raisi.

They have pinned much on him to prove his effectiveness and halt the successive setbacks experienced by the Iranian political system. Hence, any failure will not only be attributed to Raisi, but will also call into question the credibility and efficiency of the entire political system.

2. Resolving the coronavirus crisis. The most urgent challenge facing the Raisi government is to tackle the surging outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic, with Iran experiencing a huge spike in coronavirus-related deaths. This crisis requires decisive and swift decisions to import the necessary vaccines, curb the spread of the pandemic and ensure government-sanctioned health protocols are implemented. Raisi's takeover of office coincided with the fifth wave of the coronavirus pandemic reaching its peak in relation to cases of infection.<sup>(23)</sup>

Raisi is aware of the dimensions of the health crisis. He began his executive term with meetings with the National Task Force for Fighting Coronavirus. IRNA news agency mentioned that Raisi issued nine orders during an emergency meeting with the Task Force following his inspection visit to one of the vaccine centers and Imam Khomeini Hospital Complex in Tehran.<sup>(24)</sup>

The most important orders focused on securing immediate treatment—especially serums and oxygen—reevaluating health protocols, ensuring their implementation and preparing for importing vaccines at the required rate.

According to government statistics, coronavirus infections in Iran have nearly reached 5 million—with deaths surpassing 100,000. There are doubts

over government data with actual cases and deaths expected to be much higher. Iranian health officials have confessed that the real figures related to coronavirus deaths are much higher than the official figures. <sup>(25)</sup>

Raisi is attempting to address the health quagmire by supporting the domestic production of vaccines while not hesitating to import vaccines from abroad.

**3. Improving the economic situation.** The Iranian economy is going through its worst crisis in decades, especially as the US sanctions have restricted the country's foreign trade, causing it to suffer huge losses. This deteriorating economic situation is because the Iranian government has not been able to manage the recent negative developments, whether Iran's international isolation or health crisis. The Iranian political system has not paid attention to the interests of Iranians at home as it has been mainly endeavoring to enrich its expansionist project in the region.

The Iranian economy is facing many difficulties, primarily the rise in inflation rates, the decline in the local currency's value to unprecedented low levels and the exacerbation of unemployment levels among the Iranian people. Raisi will be forced to find a way out of the economic dilemma by any means available. He might resort to the nuclear talks in Vienna and reshape the country's policies towards its neighbors in a way that benefits the future of the Iranian economy.

**4. Winning the confidence of the Iranian street.** In a speech delivered before Parliament, Raisi reiterated the importance of restoring the people's confidence in the government and winning back public confidence depends on making good on his pledges. <sup>(26)</sup>

However, people's waning confidence in the Iranian government is not only limited to issues that are beyond its control. It is also related to the fact that the Iranian people do not believe anymore in the administrative abilities and skills of Iran's consecutive governments. For example, Iranian governments have not tackled yet the long-standing water scarcity crisis and other exacerbating crises such as drought, climate change, and pollution in urban areas. <sup>(27)</sup>

The low voter turnout in the Iranian presidential election indicated the extent of the low confidence in the government and political system. The accumulating political problems—represented in the country's international isolation —along with the aforesaid economic and health problems have agitated popular protests. The last among these popular protests was the one that took place in Ahwaz — a protest that drew sympathy from other governorates — as a result of the severe water shortage and the recurrent power cuts.

## Conclusion

Although Raisi has frequently reiterated that he decided to run for president independently and will make his own decisions, facts on the ground indicate otherwise. He won the presidency because of the full backing he received from the “conservatives” within the Iranian political system. He will not be able to take decisions that they oppose. This is added to lawmakers' huge support for his government's ministers. It is quite likely that the Raisi government will be the most coordinated government with the “conservative” run institutions, especially the IRGC which showed huge support for Raisi in the last election and took a considerable portion of the ministerial positions.



# The Economic File

In July 2021 we discussed the economic importance of Ahwaz for Iran, the challenges facing this vital region and the options available to the government to handle this crisis. *The Economic File* of August 2021 touches on the economic and trade relations between Iran and its eastern neighbor Afghanistan. The file also discusses the nature of bilateral relations over the past years and the nature of the Iranian economic role in Afghanistan. Finally, it looks at the future relations between the two countries in light of the recent developments after the Taliban took over power in mid-August 2021.

Iran boosted its economic relations with Afghanistan after US forces entered Kabul and the Taliban control over the country collapsed in 2001. Before this time, economic relations between the two countries were weak. Over the past two decades, Iran has played an important economic role in Afghanistan, particularly in the commercial, investment and development spheres. It offered huge financial assistance and loans in a bid to enhance its clout and influence within the territories of its poor eastern neighbor that forged a security and military alliance with its arch-foe the United States. Afghanistan has a Shiite minority community, concentrated in the cities on the border with Iran.

When the Sunni group took over power in mid-August 2021, trade was suddenly suspended between the two countries and concern has mounted among traders and businessmen about the ambiguous policies of the Taliban. Iranian forecasts about the future trajectory of economic cooperation with Afghanistan under Taliban rule and control of customs fees in general have varied.

Afghanistan is counted among the poorest and most destitute countries worldwide — whose economy relies on assistance from world donors although it possesses untapped mineral resources worth trillions of dollars. Since the Taliban took over, outside financial assistance has stopped, and the United States has frozen Afghan reserves of up to \$9 billion. The country is now suffering from capital flight, a decline in the value of local currency, inflation, and a shortage of basic items. Meanwhile, the Taliban in the past depended on opium exports, imposing taxes and trading in real estate and consumer items.

## 1. The Nature of Trade and Economic Relations Between Iran and Afghanistan

The two countries maintain economic and commercial relations that are vital for both — with Iran having the upper hand and wielding the bigger influence on the course of this relationship. This is in line with the Taliban plan to extend its geopolitical and ideological clout into neighboring countries.

Yet, Iran uses Afghanistan economically to circumvent US sanctions and



boost its dollar resources. Afghanistan on the other hand has benefited from securing goods, commodities and financial assistance from Iran — as well as Iranian investments in infrastructure, and opening up commercial and shipping routes with the outside world via Iranian territories.

Afghanistan is an important market, not only for Iranian traders but also for the Iranian government. It is a consumer market consisting of 39 million people. Afghanistan lacks various consumer goods and food items, as well as machinery which is provided by Iranian traders. They are transported by hundreds of trucks every day via the border crossings such as Herat and Dowqarun in Razavi Khorasan Province and Mahirood in South Khorasan — plus energy sources provided by the Iranian government to Afghanistan such as electricity and gas.

**At the commercial level,** we find that Afghanistan significantly depends on imports from abroad. More than one-third of Afghanistan's imports come from Iran alone. This comes as Iran's exports to Afghanistan doubled several times over the past 20 years after the United States had ousted the Taliban government in 2001. Iranian exports to Afghanistan surged from about \$75 million in 2000 to \$236 million in 2002, one year after the Taliban's ouster, to \$549 million in 2011, and then to \$1.40 billion in 2020, reaching a peak of nearly \$1.706 billion in 2015. While Iranian imports from Afghanistan are extremely low, they amounted to \$11 million in 2020.<sup>(28)</sup> In other words, the trade balance between the two countries is absolutely in Iran's favor (data from the International Monetary Fund).

Afghanistan is high up on Iran's export list. The country ranked fifth in terms of the biggest destination for Iran's exports after China, Iraq, the UAE, and Turkey. Iran exported goods to Afghanistan worth \$728 million during the last three months from March to July 2021. Afghanistan's position among the five most important destinations for Iranian exports reflects Tehran's importance in creating jobs for Afghans, and the country is an important market and outlet for Iranian commodities — hard currencies such as the dollar are scarce in light of the US sanctions on Iran. Afghanistan's city of Herat on the border with Iran has played an important role in influencing the exchange rate of the dollar against the Iranian toman.

**In the development field,** Iran participated in the reconstruction of Afghanistan in the post-Taliban years. It pledged in 2002 to provide \$560 million for reconstruction — the biggest sum outside the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. It provided another \$100 million in 2006, \$50 million in additional grants and \$300 million in loans in 2008. Iran has invested massively in infrastructure, and social facilities like schools — while expanding the scope of its cultural and religious ties. Iran alone — between 2007 and 2013 — provided \$50 million to combat drug trafficking.<sup>(29)</sup>

Iran also funded the Khaf-Herat Railway Project with \$75 million. It is a 140-kilometer (90-mile) railway running from Khaf in northeastern Iran to western Afghanistan. The project is part of Iran's development aid to Afghanistan. When the project is completed, it is expected to transport 6 million tons of goods and approximately 1 million passengers annually.

Additionally, there are many projects in the spheres of infrastructure, education, agriculture, culture and communication such as television stations — partly or fully funded by Iran. Moreover, Iran's soft power institutions have participated

in development projects in Afghanistan such as: Khatam-al Anbiya Construction Headquarters, an IRGC-affiliated engineering company, in addition to other quasi-governmental organizations or charitable organizations linked to Iranian clerics.<sup>(30)</sup>

**In the logistical and investment field**, Iran pledged, in partnership with India, to carry out the groundwork and establish the infrastructure needed such as roads, rail networks and bridges connecting Chabahar port in the south of Iran with the Iran-Afghan border in northeast Iran.

Afghanistan secured an essential maritime route to the outside world via Iran given that it is a landlocked country. Both Iran and India will use Afghan territories as an outlet to export their commodities and, more importantly, as a trade corridor for their goods to reach Central Asia — a vital goal for India in the context of its political and economic competition with its neighbor Pakistan, which possesses a rival commercial route: Gwadar port in partnership with China. This project is a rival to the Chabahar port project.

In addition to the economic interests that Iran reaps because of its involvement in Afghanistan, there are important security dilemmas with economic dimensions. These include ensuring some sort of stability for Iran's eastern neighbor — especially in the cities close to the borders to stop the influx of millions of Afghans into Iran which is already hosting 3 million Afghan refugees. Iran is experiencing crippling economic conditions, hence it cannot host additional Afghan refugees.

## **2. The Trajectory of Economic Relations Between the Two Countries After the Taliban's Takeover**

As soon as the Taliban took over the capital Kabul, panic spread among Afghans who rushed to the airports. This panic — of course — rubbed off on the traders. The country saw a swift surge in the exchange rate of the dollar against the Afghan currency and outlets selling consumer goods and fuel faced a shortage. It was natural for trade between Iran and Afghanistan to be suspended as traders feared for their goods and capital during the early days of Taliban rule.

However, the Taliban realized the gravity of the situation. It sought to reassure traders, especially in neighboring countries. It significantly lowered customs fees. Moreover, it asked Iran to resume fuel exports to Afghanistan after reducing customs fees on fuel by 70 percent. This move came in response to Tehran suspending its fuel exports on August 6 due to the security situation in the country.

However, Iranian traders and businesspeople are still concerned about working in Afghanistan, according to Hamid Hosseini's remarks, the spokesman of Iranian Oil, Gas and Petrochemical Products Exporters Union.<sup>(31)</sup> What will be the fate of the economic and trade relations between Iran and Afghanistan following the Taliban's capture of power?

Despite the messages of reassurance sent by the Taliban from time to time to traders at home and abroad, there is no doubt that capital flies out of countries where concern, foggy and uncertainty about the future prevails. Hence, it is natural to see the levels of trade between the two countries decline until the security situation improves and traders' fears concerning their capital vanishes. Once this happens, trade levels between the two countries might return to past levels and even surge because a huge part of Afghanistan's basic goods is secured via trade with Iran, in

addition to technological equipment, and machines . It is worth mentioning here that Afghanistan relies on Iran's electricity, oil, and gas. Thus, it will not be easy for Afghanistan to give up on Iran.

In an interview with ISNA news agency on the future of trade between the two countries after the Taliban returned to power, the head of Iran-Afghanistan Joint Chamber of Commerce Hadi Nabizadeh agreed with the aforementioned assessment.<sup>(32)</sup>

On the other side, there is an array of factors that makes it difficult for Iran to abandon Afghanistan in the future: Due to the aforesaid economic reasons; the country is very significant for Iranian merchants. It is also a source of hard currency after many Afghan traders moved their capital out of the country on condition that Afghanistan restores its inflow of dollars from international donors, which used to come to the country regularly. But this depends on the future policies of the Taliban. Further, the new government's policy was disclosed by new Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian. The policy known as "economic diplomacy," aims to enhance Iran's political relations with countries where it has economic interests.

However, there are security and sectarian considerations related to Tehran's expansionist schemes in neighboring countries — that are threatened after the Sunni dominated Taliban took over power in its eastern neighboring country. This is compounded by Tehran's fears of shouldering the burden of more Afghan refugees who are infiltrating the sprawling border between the two countries.

Finally, the absence of Iran's role in Afghanistan in various spheres, especially the economic one, means ceding the scene to be dominated by rivals aching to fill the vacuum left by it such as Pakistan, China, and Russia. It will also thwart Iranian investments accumulated over at least the past 10 years — the investments from which Iran not only sought to serve economic objectives, but also to achieve political, security and ideological goals.

Hence, it is likely that Iran will defend the gains it has made in Afghanistan and will tirelessly attempt to enhance its economic presence in the country. Perhaps it will use the country as a transit corridor to reach out to Central Asian markets — while outlining formulas for understandings with the Taliban that ensure achieving this end.

## Conclusion

Iran has forged important economic, trade and investment relations with Afghanistan over the past two decades. Both countries are and have been dependent on each other. When the Taliban took over the country, trade between the two sides was suspended. But it resumed again upon demands and messages of reassurance from the Taliban as it needs Iranian goods, fuel and commodities and Iran needs the hard currency in return for exports. In the long run, Afghanistan is considered to be part of Iran's logistical projects that are connected to its expansion into Central Asian countries. Iran has spent and contested with major countries in the region to expand its logistical projects in Central Asia. Therefore, Iran will work to find understandings with the Taliban that will maintain its long and short term achievements.



# The Military File

*The Military File* for the month of July shed light on Iran's maritime efforts to sustain its naval vessels despite the technical difficulties it is facing. It also threw light on the developments on the Iran-Afghan border and the impact of these developments on relations between the two countries. This month's file casts light on the significations of appointing a Sunni commander of Kurdish origin as chief of the Iranian naval forces. The move is unheard of in the history of Iran's treatment of minorities. It also sheds light on the developments related to the security situation on the border between Afghanistan and Iran following the Taliban takeover of power in Kabul. Finally, the file reviews the latest updates in the Iranian nuclear file.

## 1. Appointing a New Navy Chief From the Sunni Sect

The appointments of commanders for Iran's naval forces since mid-August 2021 have been laden with significance. The appointments led to vast analyses and opinions from analysts inside and outside Iran. Primarily, the appointment of a Sunni, Admiral Shahram Irani as Iran's naval chief to succeed Admiral Hossein Khanzadi — for the first time in Iran's history led to much talk.

In addition, there have been multiple opinions suggesting that the timing of Hossein Khanzadi's sacking coincided with a decline in the performance of Iran's naval forces and in light of successive mistakes made by Khanzadi.

### 1.1 Successive Maritime Blunders

The decision issued by Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei on Tuesday, August 17, 2021, to appoint Shahram Irani as the new naval chief in place of Hossein Khanzadi included thanking the latter for leading the navy for four years. However, it did not indicate that Khanzadi would be appointed to another post — unlike his predecessor, breaking from past practice — whether in the navy or elsewhere in a different military post.

The decision came after Iran's navy, throughout the tenure of Hossein Khanzadi, experienced incidents and disasters in its naval zones whether in the Arabian Gulf, the Caspian Sea or along the Iranian coast overlooking the Sea of Oman. Furthermore, Iranian naval vessels were hit by friendly fire during a military drill last year. Admiral Shahram Irani's appointment indicates he has some skills worthy to elevate him to this naval rank.

Admiral Shahram Irani graduated from Imam Khomeini Naval University, specializing in navigation and command of ships. Irani also obtained a master's degree from the AJA University of Command and Staff. The new naval chief is also a professor at the Imam Khomeini Naval University and the AJA University of Command and Staff.

He has undertaken many naval duties throughout his service. Irani was

the commander of all types of heavy and light surface vessels — including submarines, support vessels, Vand-class frigates and Kharg corvettes.<sup>(33)</sup>

In addition, he was appointed as commander of operations of the army's first naval zone in Bandar Abbas. He was also deputy chief of operations in the naval forces. Irani was also deputy chief for maritime and military training.<sup>(34)</sup>



**Picture 1: Chief of the Iranian Naval Forces, Admiral Shahram Irani**

Source: Ensafnews: <https://cutt.us/qmKGV>

## **1.2 Maneuvering Through Sectarianism**

The decision taken by Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei to appoint Shahram Irani as the new naval chief caused a huge stir inside Iran. The move is considered a first in the country's history – a Sunni military officer of Kurdish origin is appointed to a top military position.

The Sunni bloc in the Iranian Parliament welcomed the move and considered that the decision of the supreme leader has “disentangled the deadlock” and opened the door for Sunnis and for the government to take advantage of their efficient cadres to run the state. However, some analysts believe that if the state had not been discriminating against the country's ethnic minorities, it would not have taken four decades for the government to realize that there are people from its minority groups who deserve appointments to key posts. Otherwise, the appointment is viewed as symbolic and sends a message to quell the increasing anger at the political system after a wave of protests in light of growing popular dissatisfaction and mounting calls against the marginalization of religious and ethnic minorities. The move also coincided with the new President Ebrahim Raisi's taking over the presidency. However, this appointment is nowhere



near in importance when compared to the naval chief's counterpart in the IRGC. This institution oversees Iran's important security and military bodies and completely controls the country's military establishment — including the regular army and its different branches.

## 2. The Iranian Security Situation on the Border With Afghanistan

Since mid-July, in the context of Iran's efforts to secure its interests in Afghanistan, Iranian forces have intensified their presence and are on high alert along the border with Afghanistan. It seems that Tehran is considering different options to secure its interests in its neighboring country — whether by waging proxy warfare, directly intervening, working with the Taliban, or maintaining the status quo.<sup>(35)</sup>

Weeks before the fall of Kabul, the activities on the Afghan border with Iran received huge attention from those tracking satellite imagery and from OSINT experts.

### 2.1 Iran's Friendship With the Taliban

Since the collapse of the Ghani government, Iranian contact with the Taliban has intensified leading to many outcomes. It appears that both sides have relayed messages back and forth and have amicable relations at the moment. The Ashoura gatherings in Afghanistan witnessed the participation of Afghan commanders. Some reports also disclosed information that Iran — via the Taliban — had obtained US military hardware once possessed by the Afghan army. In return, Iran returned the Afghan soldiers fleeing Afghanistan — without their equipment.<sup>(36)</sup>

The Taliban did not object to this. It is likely that the Taliban had sought to improve its relations with Tehran to put pressure on the West during the negotiation phase.<sup>(37)</sup>

Afghanistan had been a source of US technology for Iran during the period of America's occupation which lasted for two decades. In addition, fleeing Afghan soldiers sold their military equipment to Iran. Hence, the Taliban's relations with Tehran have become interlocking and of mutual benefit.

The United States left several valuable assets that its forces deliberately rendered dysfunctional before evacuation. So, it is likely that the Taliban will seek help from Iran to operate these military assets by benefiting from the experience of Iran's military technicians who have much experience and have managed to continue to operate US jets for nearly four decades.<sup>(38)</sup>

Though the US Army announced it had destroyed multiple weapons and equipment which it could not take out of Afghanistan, it seems that it was unable to destroy all the weapons. Of course, the Taliban will not waste time to retrieve the weapons and equipment left behind — giving the group new capabilities.

The booty left by the United States will not be confined to the Afghan borders but will spill over into Iran. Some media outlets circulated images showing the transfer of a huge number of US Humvee armored vehicles via a truck from Afghanistan to Iran. This led the former acting Afghan Minister of Defense Bismillah Khan Mohammadi to describe Iran as a bad neighbor, in reference to



Iran's attempt to exploit the circumstances which Afghanistan is facing.<sup>(39)</sup>

Given that Iran is keen to possess US weapons and technology, it cannot be ruled out that the transfer of weapons was based on prior coordination between Iran and the Taliban. Many of the weapons the Taliban retrieved need repairing and the group does not have the necessary skills to do this and operate them.

## **2.2 Dangers of Dealing With Iran**

The Taliban government dealing with Iran involves grave dangers. This will impede the group's quest for international legitimacy — especially from the United States.

The Taliban desperately needs to keep the door open to all international donors, humanitarian and financial assistance and to gain official recognition. It is not in the interest of the Taliban to pursue dealings that isolate it from the international community — let alone the dangers posed by Iran's intervention in Afghan internal affairs.

Given the interlocking relations between the two countries, the mutual activities will continue, whether officially or via illegal means. The border areas will remain under the observation of global intelligence services, and this could curb the forging of strong ties between the two countries.

## **3. Developments Regarding Iran's Nuclear Program**

### **3.1 Appointing the New Chief of the Iranian Atomic Energy Organization**

Under the newly formed government, and amidst the negotiations over the Iranian nuclear file with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), the Iranian president has replaced the head of the Iranian Atomic Energy Organization (IAEO) Ali Akbar Salehi with Mohamad Islami. The nuclear scientist was replaced with a civil engineer and a graduate holding a business administration certificate, who was once the minister of housing and transport. He is considered to be close to the IRGC but has little experience regarding the nuclear file and other issues such as participating in multilateral talks.

Islami's predecessor Salehi was not only a scientist and a recognized negotiator, but he was also one of those who contributed to smuggling dual-use technology for Iran's nuclear program.<sup>(40)</sup>

Although the strange pick took people by surprise, it may indicate an attempt by the supreme leader to exercise more control over issues of vital national interest such as the nuclear program, especially at this delicate juncture.

### **3.2 Worrying Developments**

Before the appointment of Islami, the IAEA said on August 14, 2021, that Iran had added 200 grams of uranium enriched up to 20 percent to its stockpile — which constituted a breach of the nuclear deal. Iran alleges that the enriched uranium will be used in a research reactor. However due to its past suspicious behavior, fears linger about Iran potentially using it to develop a nuclear bomb.<sup>(41)</sup>

The prime source of concern is that Iran seeks — in conjunction with this — to install another chain of sophisticated centrifuges to enrich uranium at higher levels, according to the IAEA.<sup>(42)</sup> At the present, Iran has installed a new chain consisting of 153 sophisticated IR-4 centrifuges to raise the enrichment

of uranium up to 60 percent. It is worth noting that the timespan needed for producing high enriched uranium used for manufacturing nuclear weapons (at 90 percent purity) is far shorter than the timespan required for reaching the purity rate of 20 percent. In May, Iran told the IAEA that it installed 164 IR-6 centrifuges to enrich uranium at 60 percent purity.

### 3.3 The Future of Negotiations Remain Foggy

In his inaugural address, Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi pledged to support any diplomatic initiative to lift US sanctions since nuclear weapons have no place in Iran's defense doctrine. He also said that Iran will support all that is needed to develop its national strength.<sup>(43)</sup>

Realities on the ground are somewhat bleak. Currently, Iran is not abiding by the IAEA monitoring safeguards as the special agreement signed in February expired on June 25. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs told the press that no decision has yet been made — whether positive or negative — on extending the monitoring agreement. With the IAEA guarantees put on hold, Iran continues to make the UN unsure as to whether it will share or delete the collected data and video footage on its nuclear site. Independent satellite imagery shows ongoing construction works at the Ardakan Yellowcake Plant in addition to excavation works at Saghand mine — which raises questions about the scope of technological advancement and the stockpile of Iranian nuclear materials.<sup>(44)</sup>

Later in August, Iran informed signatories to the nuclear deal that it is ready to resume the stalled nuclear talks within two or three months.<sup>(45)</sup> Although Iran did not make an official statement, the country attempts to keep the door open for negotiations in anticipation of further UN Security Council resolutions or any additional sanctions against it.

## Conclusion

Iran is still facing worsening challenges at home and abroad while the political system is not willing to make policy changes that could help it save the country from its present woes. The popular discontent across the country requires deep solutions that go beyond any superficial signals like the appointment of a Sunni military officer as naval chief. The changes on the Afghan scene and the concomitant threats have come at an unfavorable time as Iran awaits a return to the nuclear deal. The Taliban's relations with Iran will face great international scrutiny and the international community will closely watch the shifts in the group's behavior as it announced that it seeks to build a state — abandoning some of its old ideas, though temporarily.

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# Arab Affairs

**T**he developments in the Arab Affairs file primarily center around four files. The first file discusses the strategic implications of the Taliban's capture of power for the Gulf states and Iran, and Tehran's fears of the Gulf states' influence and moves in Afghanistan. The second file discusses the decision of the United Nations secretary-general to appoint a new envoy to Yemen, the position of the Houthi militia and the legitimate government regarding this appointment, and the new Iranian government's support for the Houthi militia. The third file addresses the Baghdad Conference for Cooperation and Partnership, shedding light on Iraq's motivations for organizing this conference, its importance in light of Arab-Iranian participation, an evaluation of the Iranian foreign minister's speech at the conference, the implications of the conference for the Saudi-Iranian talks in Iraq, and the future of Arab-Iranian relations. The fourth file deals with the military escalation in Daraa, the resurgence of Israeli escalation in Syria, the appointment of Hossein Amir-Abdollahian as Iran's minister of foreign affairs, and the implications of his appointment for Iranian-Syrian relations.



# Iran and the Gulf

July's Gulf and Iran file addressed the amended Russian proposal for Gulf security and the likely responses to it by Iran and the Gulf states. It also discussed the implications and the importance of the visit of Oman's Sultan Haitham bin Tariq Al Said to Saudi Arabia, and the details of the final statement regarding the relationship between the Gulf states and Iran. The developments in the month of August in Afghanistan are of great significance for both Iran and the Gulf states. The withdrawal of the United States from Afghanistan after 20 years will create a new reality and a vacuum which will impact Afghanistan and its neighboring countries, and lead to international interactions impacting the future of regional countries. What has taken place in Afghanistan can be described as one of the most significant geostrategic developments witnessed this century. This file reviews the implications of the developments in Afghanistan on the balance of the relationship between Iran and the Gulf states through the following topics: the strategic implications of the Taliban capturing power for the Gulf states and Iran; and Tehran's concerns regarding Gulf influence and moves in Afghanistan.

## 1. The Strategic Implications of the American Withdrawal From Afghanistan for the Gulf States and Iran

The withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan was a strategic decision that Washington had made much earlier. In fact, it was discussed over several presidential terms and US officials expressed their desire to focus US efforts on containing the Chinese threat. The US policy of heading East implied a lack of interest in the Middle East. America's hasty withdrawal from Afghanistan is in line with its new direction towards the East. Accordingly, the new realities dictate that these regional countries will face the following dilemmas:

1. They can no longer count on American guarantees to address security risks. The commitment of the American administration to preserve the security of the Gulf has declined as illustrated by its intention to leave Iraq and halting technical support to Gulf forces. In addition, the American administration wants to find a peaceful solution with Iran, despite its cross-border transgressions and violations of US interests. The US withdrawal from Afghanistan is further proof of the United States no longer wanting to ensure Gulf security. Therefore, the Gulf states perceive this US retreat as an alarm bell to rethink their security approaches, and to deal proactively with new developments taking place in the region.



2. They are concerned that America's hasty withdrawal from Afghanistan will probably be repeated in Iraq and in other countries, leading the region to spiral once again into a vortex of chaos and destructive civil wars. However, the outcomes of the Baghdad Summit for Cooperation and Partnership, the tour of the UAE National Security chief to many regional countries and recent Gulf moves are preventive steps to curb Iran's attempts to entrench further its hegemony across the region.

3. They know that US miscalculations in Afghanistan, and the Taliban's successes, will grant Iran and its militias a powerful propaganda opportunity that they may exploit to reap like that of the Taliban's in light of the US retreat, which is viewed by Tehran as a victory. This US retreat has resulted in a surge in escalation and militias not agreeing to security solutions in the region, most notably the Houthi militia continuing to reject the peace process in Yemen.

## 2. Iranian Fears of Gulf Influence in Afghanistan

For Iran, the withdrawal of the United States from Afghanistan is a gain and a challenge at the same time. The absence of the United States from Iran's neighboring countries is a strategic goal for Tehran. Iranian media outlets and officials have consistently pursued this strategic goal, most recently Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian expressed this in his speech at the Baghdad Conference for Cooperation and Partnership. He said "The Americans do not bring peace and security to the peoples of the region. Rather, they were the main element of insecurity." He added that this insecurity exists across various regional countries.<sup>(1)</sup>

However, who will fill the vacuum in Afghanistan post-US withdrawal is a source of concern for the Iranian government. The Taliban controlling the Afghan landscape is an ideological challenge for Iran. Tehran, according to its previous statements, aspires to create a degree of consensus between the elements of the former government and the Taliban to ensure some level of stability after America's withdrawal. However, the Taliban's monopolization of the political scene may not serve Iran's security goals for many reasons, particularly the ideological nature of the group and its connectivity to actors hostile to Iran – Sunni states, specifically the Gulf states.

Iran is aware of the significant financial capabilities of the Gulf states and their soft power represented by Sunnism which binds them together with the majority of Afghans, specifically the Taliban. In addition, Iran is aware of the good relations between the Gulf states and Pakistan, Afghanistan's neighbor, which is believed to have sponsored the Taliban to counter India's influence.

Iran realizes that the Taliban government will behave differently to when it was merely a militia. The previous cooperation between the two sides served a common interest, the withdrawal of the United States from Afghanistan. Given that it is now in power, the Taliban will consider Iranian support to any element inside Afghanistan, such as the Fatemiyoun Brigade, as external interference, and will not allow this support to continue. In addition, the Taliban government will aim to control intra-trade movements with Iran, if it has the capability to do so. The Taliban government is expected to seek convergence with the

United States and NATO to avoid sanctions and gain international legitimacy and recognition. This will have a negative impact on Iran's relations with the Afghanistan government.

The Gulf states, particularly Saudi Arabia, are the most prominent regional powers that Iran considers to be unwelcome competitors in Afghanistan. Iranian media outlets' discussions often center on the existing relationship between the Taliban and the Gulf states, especially with Saudi Arabia's political and security apparatuses. The Taliban is sometimes seen as one of Saudi Arabia's tools for regional competition. This Iranian perspective suggests that Saudi Arabia can obtain, in one way or another, a leverage against Iran, which can be used to counterbalance Tehran's interference in the Yemeni file.<sup>(2)</sup>

One of Iran's fears surrounding Gulf influence in Afghanistan is the possibility for Gulf states to develop understandings and coordinate with other Sunni states, such as Pakistan, Turkey and Iraq. If such coordination takes place, it will allow the Sunni states to form a Sunni crescent encircling Iran strategically, limiting its options towards regional countries and forcing it to moderate its behavior and defuse regional crises.

### 3. Gulf Moves Towards Afghanistan

For several decades, the Gulf states have suffered greatly as a result of Iran's imperialist ambitions, and it is likely that Afghanistan will achieve its desired goal of compelling Iran to follow a different approach through the use of pressure. Afghanistan has strong religious and economic ties with the Gulf, and there is a history of the Gulf states supporting Afghanistan, which has created acceptance inside Afghanistan about the role of the Gulf states.

For the foreseeable future, it is expected that there will be instability in Afghanistan due to several factors, most notably the proliferation of weapons, the struggle for power and interests between different parties that want a role in the new Afghan government. The Taliban may think it has an absolute right to form the new government because it was the only representative of the Afghan people in the negotiations with Washington and also it successfully managed to take over the country and overthrow the government. However, the difficult economic conditions and the spread of ISIS and al-Qaeda could also lead to instability in Afghanistan.

The Gulf states entering the Afghan scene will be important. It is expected that the Taliban government will accept and welcome the assistance and political support of the Gulf states, given the good relations between the two sides. The Gulf states are expected to strengthen their relations with Afghanistan on the basis of their religious duties and strategic interests, and to prevent the growth of Iranian influence in Afghanistan that could lead to Tehran maximizing its potential and capabilities to impose its will on the region, and gain more bargaining power and pressure tools to leverage in other files related to Yemen, Iraq and Gulf security.

The Gulf states' historical support for Afghanistan's struggle against the Soviet occupation could strengthen its ability to influence the situation in the country. In spite of the Taliban's tense relations with Saudi Arabia after the



group refused to hand al-Qaeda members (Saudi nationals) to the Kingdom, Riyadh supported the Afghan reconciliation process sponsored by Qatar in 2020.<sup>(3)</sup> The Gulf states adopted a unified position towards the current situation in Afghanistan, and called on the Taliban and all Afghan parties to preserve life and property. They also expressed their hope for Afghanistan's situation to swiftly stabilize.<sup>(4)</sup> Saudi Arabia called on the Organization of Islamic Cooperation to convene an emergency meeting to discuss the developments in Afghanistan. The meeting called on the Taliban and all parties to avoid exploiting Afghanistan as a safe haven for terrorism, reconcile, and respect international agreements. The Saudi delegate to the organization also indicated that Saudi Arabia stands in partnership with the member states of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, by the brotherly Afghan people and their choices that are made by the Afghans without interference.<sup>(5)</sup> This conference strengthened Afghanistan's affiliation with the Sunni world and rehabilitated Saudi Arabia's pivotal role in Afghan affairs.

The Taliban does not have serious concerns over potential Gulf cooperation with anti-Taliban groups, however, it is concerned about Iran. Thus, the Gulf role in Afghanistan is most likely to be effective and fruitful.

## Conclusion

The shambolic withdrawal of America from Afghanistan shifted many pillars on the regional scene, and opened avenues that were previously blocked to both the Gulf and Iranian parties. Despite the temporary breakthrough for Iran and its joy over the humiliating withdrawal of the United States, the complexities of the Afghan scene, the developments in the Taliban's ideology, and its needs during this period, which are different from when it was fighting against US forces, means its relationship with Iran is on an equal footing and perhaps could take on a hostile outlook. The Taliban is committed to establishing an Islamic government, a move that may generate an ideological clash with Iran. Tehran will face challenges in regard to crafting its relations with Afghanistan in light of the latter's ideological perspectives as well as regional and international considerations. Tehran needs to recraft its policies to safeguard its economic benefits and reduce looming risks.

It is likely that Saudi Arabia will continue to use the Afghan card for gaining concessions from Iran, especially in the Yemeni file, but Saudi Arabia's success in developing an influential role in Afghanistan remains contingent upon the regional parties that have distinguished relations with the Taliban.



# Iran and Yemen

In the context of Yemen, the July report discussed the Houthi militia's behavior, the sectarian dimension of the conflict and the indications of the Iranian-Houthi rejection of a political solution. The August report is an extension of the issues discussed in July. It also includes the latest developments in the Houthi-Iranian relationship under the new government, the indications of the new Iranian government's ongoing support for the Houthi militia, which is reflected on the military scene through the Houthi escalation inside and outside Yemen, the Houthi's position on the peace process in light of its negative stance towards the new Swedish UN envoy Hans Grundberg. This indicates that the militia will continue to reject all peace efforts and escalate further. The Houthi militia will initiate a new series of political maneuverings with Iranian political and military support. This file discusses these issues via the following: the implications of the Houthi position regarding the appointment of the new UN envoy, and the characteristics of the Houthi's relationship with the new Iranian government.

## 1. The New UN Envoy to Yemen: Peace Opportunities and Challenges

On August 6, 2021, the Secretary-General of the United Nations, Antonio Guterres, announced the appointment of Sweden's Hans Grundberg as the new envoy to Yemen, succeeding the former envoy, Martin Griffiths. There are differences in the positions of the legitimate government and the parties that support the peace process on the one hand, and the pro-Iranian Houthi militia on the other regarding the appointment of the new UN envoy. The positions of the two parties on the appointment of the new UN envoy indicate the nature of the future challenges and opportunities that the new UN envoy will encounter in bringing peace to Yemen. We will review the implications of the two sides' positions on the appointment of the new UN envoy for Yemen.

### 1.1 The Position of the Houthi Militia

Before the new UN envoy undertook any move regarding the political process in Yemen, the Houthi militia preempted his movements and declared their intention not to deal with him. The so-called head of the Houthi negotiating delegation, Mohammed Abdulsalam, stated that there was no point in holding talks with the new envoy.

Many observers believe that the early Houthi rejection to hold any peace talks reflects the militia's refusal and intransigence towards a political solution, and its ongoing attempts to disrupt all international efforts which aim to reach a peaceful settlement to alleviate the suffering of the Yemeni people. The Houthi militia is exploiting humanitarian aid channels to secure its demands, namely

the opening of Sana'a airport to facilitate the smuggling of Iranian planes without restrictions. This indicates that the Houthis will initiate a new series of maneuvers to thwart the peace process and escalate further. The Houthi position on refusing to enter discussions with the new UN envoy is an extension of its stance towards former UN envoys. The former UN envoy, Martin Griffiths, directly indicated this. He concluded his term in office by declaring that he had failed to persuade the Houthi militia to engage in peace talks that would end the suffering of the Yemeni people.<sup>(6)</sup>

In this context, US Department of State Spokesperson Ned Price said, "The Houthis are responsible for the suffering of the Yemeni people, and they are responsible for the worst humanitarian catastrophe in the world." Observers believe that the US statement is part of the United States' continued imposition of political and diplomatic pressure on the Houthi militia to force them to respond to increasing international calls for peace to end the war in Yemen.<sup>(7)</sup>

Many observers believe that the Houthi position poses a real challenge to the new UN envoy and creates difficulties for him to tackle the Houthis' intransigence, which is considered a stumbling block in arriving at a political settlement in Yemen. The Houthi militia has consistently maintained its policy of political shuffling. Some believe that the Houthi military escalation in August aimed to sense the new envoy's reaction, and pressure him to adopt a different approach to the one pursued by his predecessors, i.e., to take tougher measures against the Houthi militia. Further, the legitimate government and the coalition countries welcome any peace initiative for humanitarian reasons to end the suffering of the Yemeni people.

## 1.2 The Position of the Legitimate Government

Unlike the Houthis, the internationally recognized legitimate government and many international parties welcomed the appointment of Hans Grundberg as the new special envoy to Yemen. The Yemeni Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates issued a statement confirming that the Yemeni government would provide full support to the new envoy with the aim of resuming the political process to bring peace and stability to Yemen. According to the Foreign Ministry's statement, the Yemeni government will extend its hand to reach a just and peaceful resolution to the Yemen crisis agreed upon nationally, regionally and internationally and end the war ignited by the Houthi militia's coup against the legitimate government.<sup>(8)</sup> The position of the legitimate government is in line with regional and international efforts to bring peace to Yemen.

A statement made by the official Yemeni news agency, Saba, confirmed the Yemeni government's position to support all efforts to achieve peace to alleviate the suffering of the Yemeni people who are facing the worst humanitarian crisis in the world, caused by the Houthi militia which continues to obstruct all international efforts to reach a settlement to end the suffering of the Yemeni people. The Yemeni government expressed hope that the new UN envoy will resume political efforts to reach a comprehensive ceasefire in light of an international consensus to end the war and arrive at a political solution through dialogue and negotiations, especially since the new envoy has diplomatic experience and expertise in Yemeni affairs.<sup>(9)</sup>

Some observers believe that the support extended by the legitimate government and the international parties seeking peace in Yemen to the new UN envoy is an opportunity for the envoy to develop further cooperation with the parties seeking peace in Yemen to find fertile ground for a political solution.

## 2. The New Iranian Government's Support for the Houthi Militia

With regard to the Yemeni crisis, there were direct indications that the Iranian government would follow the same path as that of the previous government by supporting its pro-Houthi militia at the political and military level, thwarting any expectations in political circles that the new government would adopt a different approach. The Iranian government's ongoing support for the Houthi militia will add further complexity to the crisis in Yemen. We will review the most prominent characteristics of the new Iranian government's relationship with the Houthi militia at the political and military level through the following points:

### 2.1 Characteristics of the New Iranian Government's Relationship With the Houthi Militia

The new Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi took the first step in shaping Iran's foreign policy by meeting a delegation of representatives from the Houthi militia, headed by the militia's spokesman Mohammed Abdul-Salam. This move, as many believe, contained many messages with political dimensions and confirmed at the same time the intention of the Iranian establishment, represented by the new government, to pursue the same course as in the past with regard to its relationship with the Houthis. Iran intends to use the Houthis as a political card to serve its interests, hence it will continue to support the Houthis and instruct them to escalate further at all levels.<sup>[10]</sup>

Yemeni affairs observers believe that Iran's ongoing support for the Houthis, in spite of the changes at the helm of the Iranian government, is the main reason for the Houthi militia's intransigence and lack of cooperation in finding a political solution and its refusal to interact with the UN envoy.

This is confirmed by the way in which the Iranian government celebrated the symbols of its militias in the region, including the symbols of the Houthi militia, during the inauguration of the new President Ebrahim Raisi. Yemeni Minister of Information Muammar al-Eryani stated that "Iran's celebration of its militias during the inauguration of the new president gives a clear indication of the nature of its future approach." With regard to Raisi's meeting with the Houthi delegation in Tehran, Muammar al-Eryani said that this gives an indication that "the new government will adopt the same approach of the previous government, and that these positions do not give cause for optimism about the possible change of Tehran's hostile and destabilizing approach towards the security and stability of the region."<sup>[11]</sup>

### 2.2 Houthi Terrorism Linked to the Iranian Government

On Saturday, August 21, 2021, the Yemeni government announced the killing of 10 leaders of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards on Yemeni soil, specifically in the Ma'rib Governorate. The Yemeni Minister of Information stated that the



killing of these individuals confirms the extent of the Iranian government's involvement and its destabilizing role in Yemen and the region. He said, "The killing of Haider Sirjan, one of the so-called Iranian experts, and nine others, including Musa al-Qahazi and Ahmed al-Sahari, who pretended to hold the rank of colonel, following an airstrike by the Coalition to Support Legitimacy on Houthi militia positions on the Sarwah front, the Ma'rib Governorate, confirms the size and level of Iran's involvement and its destabilizing role in undermining the security and stability of Yemen."<sup>(12)</sup>

Al-Eryani indicated that Haider Sirjan worked in the field of military training and rehabilitation, specializing in mountain infantry. He also added that Sirjan was an expert in preparing tactical combat plans and worked before that on the fronts of the West Coast until June 5, 2021. He was then sent on June 6, 2021 to the Ma'rib front in place of the former member of the Lebanese Hezbollah Mustafa al-Gharawi who was killed last May in an Arab coalition airstrike on the Sarwah front. The battle is an extension of the Iranian expansionist project in the region and the consolidation of its influence through its terrorist tools.<sup>(13)</sup>

As part of the Houthi military escalation supported by Iran, the Houthi militia targeted the Al-Anad air base in Yemen using missiles and drones, causing a large number of deaths and injuries. Yemeni officials accused the Houthi militia of carrying out this attack, while the Houthi militia did not claim responsibility for this attack. Many observers believe that the Houthi militia not claiming responsibility for this attack is part of its attempt to create mistrust between Yemen's political components, recalling that the militia targeted the same base in early 2019 with Iranian-made drones.<sup>(14)</sup>

On the other hand, the Coalition to Support the Legitimate Government announced on August 30, 2021 that it intercepted a ballistic missile launched towards Najran and that the Houthi militia launched a booby-trapped drone targeting Abha International Airport. The coalition announced the interception of another plane on the same day, describing these attacks as war crimes. The coalition affirmed that it has taken all measures required to deal with Houthi threats in line with international and humanitarian law.

## Conclusion

Based on the latest developments in the Yemeni crisis during August, most prominently the Iranian government's use of the Houthi militia as a pressure tool to serve its interests and political agenda, it seems that the Yemeni scene is on the brink of further complications in the coming period. The extent of the challenges facing the new UN envoy to Yemen with regard to peace efforts will become clearer in the near future. If the new UN envoy takes a similar approach to that of his predecessors in interactions with the parties to the conflict and deals with the coupist militia and the internationally recognized legitimate government on an equal footing, his mission may be destined to fail. Therefore, he must single out the Houthis as the party that obstructs the peace process and take resolute action against the Houthis to force them to accept UN proposals for peace in Yemen.

# Iran and Iraq

The ICF issued in July shed light on the implications of Iraqi militias escalating against US targets, and the impact of the fourth round of the US-Iraq strategic dialogue on militia deployments across the country. In August, Iraq organizing and hosting the Baghdad Conference for Cooperation and Partnership was the most prominent event in Iraq. The conference highlighted the extent of Baghdad's ability to lead an independent regional effort to restore its role with the help of international and regional actors. The Iraq file in the month of August discusses the environment, importance and objectives of the Baghdad conference, and evaluates Iran's discourse at the conference and its implications for Saudi-Iran talks. Finally, the future of Arab-Iran relations are analyzed.

## 1. The Environment and Importance of the Baghdad Conference for Cooperation and Partnership

On August 28, 2021, Iraq hosted the Baghdad Conference for Cooperation and Partnership in the midst of rapid regional and international developments. The conference participants (leaders and representatives from Egypt, France, Iran, Jordan, Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and the UAE) discussed points of convergence and ways to reduce existing regional conflicts to serve regional stability on the one hand, and restore Iraq's regional position on the other hand.

The conference was of great significance for a number of reasons :

- The conference took place at a time when pro-Iranian militias had launched successive Katyusha missiles against US positions in Iraq and Iran had repetitively targeted commercial ships and oil tankers near the Arabian Gulf. Moreover, the conference was convened in light of the complexity of the Saudi-Iran conflict due to Iran's ongoing expansionist practices, particularly in its grey areas, and the Houthis continuing to target the Kingdom with Iranian-made ballistic missiles. In addition, the conference was held in the midst of pivotal regional and international developments. There are regional concerns that Iran is exploiting changing regional dynamics to expand its influence, especially in Iraq. The Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan after the US military withdrawal is one these changing dynamics; in addition to the inauguration of the "hardliner" Ebrahim Raisi as the new president of Iran. Raisi is considered a close ally to the *Wali-e Faqih* [the Supreme Leader] and a strong supporter of Iran's revolutionary principles. It is expected he will strengthen the influence of pro-Iranian arms abroad.
- Iraq successfully managed to hold a high-level conference, in terms of the number of countries that participated in light of their unstable relations



due to long standing security disturbances in the region — except for three countries: Jordan and Syria that held a tripartite meeting with Iraq in Baghdad in June 2021. Iraq was able to bring together conflicting and feuding parties that have not met for years. The two major regional rivals Saudi Arabia and Iran attended the conference, represented by Saudi Foreign Minister Faisal bin Farhan and Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian. Likewise, President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi represented Egypt, despite the severance of relations with Turkey, which was represented by its Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu. In addition to Qatar's Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al Thani, the Vice President and Ruler of Dubai Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid al Maktoum of the UAE, Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah al-Khalid al-Sabah of Kuwait, King Abdullah II of Jordan, and French President Emmanuel Macron attended the conference. The Secretary-General of the Arab League Ahmed Aboul Gheit and the Secretary-General of the Gulf Cooperation Council Nayef al-Hajraf also attended the conference.



■ Via the conference, Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi tried to project Iraq as an equivalent not a vassal state. He rejected external interference in the sovereign affairs of countries by highlighting the cases of Lebanon and Yemen and spoke about the targeting of ships and oil tankers in the Gulf. In addition, he discussed Iraq's share of water resources and the impact of events in Afghanistan on the regional security equation. Most of the examples highlighted are complicated because Iran interferes via its arms. There is a possibility that Iran might exploit the events in Afghanistan to continue with its expansionist plan.



## 2. Iraqi Motivations for Organizing Such a Conference With Arab-Iranian Participation

Through organizing this conference, Iraq intended to achieve several goals:

- To hint that it will not accept the violent settlement of external conflicts on its territories, and it will not launch attacks against other countries in case they use Iraq as an arena to settle scores. Iraq also wanted to express its desire to play a role in diffusing tensions and conflicts and moving away from merely relaying messages to playing a part in really settling issues between conflicting parties. This would help in restoring regional (especially Iraqi) security and stability, and improve the economic, political and security situation in the country. Moreover, it would help Iraq in moving forward with its ambition to transition from a non-state to a state phase.

- Iraq wanted to indicate to Iran that it is moving back to its Arab surroundings by inviting six Arab countries (Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, the UAE, Kuwait and Qatar) to the conference. Moreover, Iraq's subordination to other countries is over now, which means Baghdad via the conference wanted participating as well as non-participating countries to consider it as an equivalent, not a vassal state.

- Iraq intended to play a role in reducing regional conflicts and Arab disharmony to benefit Iraqi security, especially in light of the Arab participants desiring to move towards a phase of rapprochement and diffusing tensions with each other, particularly with Iran more than ever after the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, which resulted in the Taliban capturing power in the country. Accordingly, some Arab and Gulf countries are reconsidering whether or not it is practical to depend on the United States to ensure stability in the region. The new Arab policy shift was noticed clearly at the Baghdad conference where foreign ministers of Saudi Arabia and Iran sat together at one table for the first time. Furthermore, at the sidelines of the conference, other Arab leaders held unprecedented meetings for the first time such as the Egyptian president with the Qatari emir; the Qatari emir with the ruler of Dubai, and the Iranian foreign minister with the ruler of Dubai.

However, whether Iraq will achieve its goals or not is dependent on two prominent future variables: First, the orientation of the new Iraqi government after the results of the parliamentary election scheduled on 10 October 2021. Second, the US military withdrawal from Iraq and the termination of the combat role of the remaining US troops in the country after December 31, 2021. Overall, these two variables can change the nature of balances inside Iraq and prevent Iraq's transition to a sovereign state or an arena where regional understandings are reached.

## 3. Evaluation and Implications of the Iranian Foreign Minister's Speech at the Baghdad Conference

All indicators, starting from Iran's low diplomatic representation, Abdollahian's speech, and the Arab participation at the conference, expressed Iran's dissatisfaction as the gathering was convened in Tehran's most important sphere of influence for its geopolitical, ideological,

economic and military calculations. Abdollahian led the Iranian delegation at the conference despite the fact that the invitation was for Iran's new president. The Iranian foreign minister began his visit to Iraq at the shrine of former Quds Force Commander Qassem Soleimani, indicating that Tehran's main concern is to avenge Soleimani's death by pressing to expel US forces from Iraq, hence allowing it to dominate the country unilaterally.

Abdollahian's speech included remarks that violated Iraqi sovereignty. He requested the removal of US forces from Iraq and blamed the United States for the security turmoil in the country as if Baghdad has no sovereignty of its own.<sup>(15)</sup> The speech ignored the widespread militia deployment in Iraq and its dangerous repercussions. Abdollahian criticized Kadhimi's government for not inviting Syria, he said, "I would like to emphasize the role and support of regional nations in stabilizing and restoring security to Iraq including the friendly and brotherly country of the Syrian Arab Republic. I would like to express regret that Syria is not attending this summit."<sup>(16)</sup> His remarks were viewed as Iran infringing on Iraq's sovereignty as Abdollahian expressed discontent over not inviting Syria. Conference participants have no right to object or endorse invitations, as this is the responsibility of the host country, Iraq.

The bitter irony in Abdollahian's speech was that he believes in diplomacy to achieve the goals of the Iranian revolution, while highlighting that Iraq faces serious turmoil due to the emergence of terrorist groups.<sup>(17)</sup> He turned a blind eye to his country's role in exporting the Iranian revolution to Iraq which led to the spread of corruption, Iraqi state institutions weakening, the spread of violence, terrorism, and unemployment, as well as the electricity and water crises. He also emphasized Baghdad's role in promoting dialogue while his country generally does not engage in constructive dialogues, neither does it translate its words into deeds. Iran still pursues its expansionist project in the region.

Another mistake was that the Iranian foreign minister indicated that the volume of trade between the two countries amounted to \$300 billion,<sup>(18)</sup> while Kadhimi corrected the figure and said it was only \$13 billion. He also violated internationally recognized diplomatic norms and traditions by not adhering to his position (unlike the other participants) in the second row with the foreign ministers during the group photo and stood in the first row with the invited leaders and presidents, reflecting the true image of Iranian arrogance.

#### 4. The Implications of the Conference on Saudi-Iran Talks in Iraq

On August 15, 2021, Iraj Masjedi, the Iranian ambassador to Iraq, revealed that the talks that took place between Iran and Saudi Arabia in Iraq revolved around the opening of embassies and resolving the existing problems between them, especially the Yemeni issue. He also announced the temporary suspension of talks while power is transferred in Iran and a new government is formed.<sup>(19)</sup>

It is foreseen that the Arab and Iranian participation at the conference will prompt the resumption of Saudi-Iran talks after the formation of the Iranian government. The two countries want more meetings to reduce the tensions that flared up after Riyadh severed diplomatic relations with Tehran in 2016. In April 2021, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman expressed Saudi Arabia's desire to establish "good and distinguished" relations with Iran.<sup>(20)</sup> For his part, Iran's new President Ebrahim Raisi in his inaugural speech expressed his country's desire to extend the hand of friendship and goodwill to all countries in the region, especially neighboring countries. He also stressed the need to resolve regional crises through real dialogue with regional countries.<sup>(21)</sup> In early August 2021, the head of the Council and Internal Affairs Commission of the Iranian Parliament Mohammad Saleh Jokar announced his country's readiness to hold meetings with neighboring countries to achieve regional harmony.<sup>(22)</sup>

## 5. The Implications of the Conference for the Future of Arab-Iran Relations

Despite the message Iraq sent at the Baghdad conference, observers are doubtful that Iraq can make a breakthrough in Arab-Iran relations. This is because of Iran's discontent with the conference being held in the capital of its western neighbor that has great geopolitical importance as well as the absence of influential regional leaders such as the leaders of Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Iran. Rahman Ghahremanpour, an international and regional affairs expert, echoed the same opinion saying if the leaders of Saudi Arabia, Iran and Turkey accepted Kadhimi's invitation to the summit, we would have witnessed an effective regional breakthrough. Nevertheless, it was difficult for them to participate given the state of competition among the three countries to take the mantle of regional leadership.<sup>(23)</sup>

It is unlikely for Iran to change its behavior in the Middle East during Raisi's era because he is a revolutionary officer who strongly supports the continuity of Iranian expansion and clout — a reality stirring further Arab anger. Iran's behavior in the region is generated from its revolutionary ideology. The Iranian political system has crafted a solid strategy and has exerted all efforts available, whether through money or blood, to enrich its imperial expansionist project.

Iran is also diligently seeking to develop ballistic missiles and it has continuously targeted oil tankers near the Arabian Gulf, the Arabian Sea and the Strait of Hormuz to gain more leverage to improve its negotiating position at the suspended Vienna negotiations. In addition, Iran wants regional leadership, which the Arab and Gulf States reject as they oppose the Iranian project. This reduces the chances of the conference's success in converging the positions of the participants.

The Iraqi government sponsoring the conference and its outcomes such as non-interference in the internal affairs of countries and respect for national sovereignty, has a very short lifespan, as it has only about a month left in power, and a new parliamentary election is scheduled for October 2021.



This election could result in a new government with different perspectives regarding whether to bring Iraq back to its Arab surroundings or not, or it could be Iranian bound. Iraq is suffering from economic, political and security crises, because of Iranian interference.

### Conclusion

Despite the conference being considered as an important stepping stone in Iraq's transition to an arena of understanding, there are impediments that prevent the reduction of tensions, such as Iran's ambitious plan in respect of its vital areas that fall within its comprehensive expansionist strategy. Any easing of tensions must be accompanied by Iran stopping support for its arms, terminating the so-called oil tanker wars, stopping the Houthis' repeated ballistic missile attacks against the Saudi capital, which Iran has used as a pressure card to improve its negotiating position at the suspended Vienna negotiations with global powers. Thus, the difficulty of reducing regional tensions will continue, especially in light of the Gulf and Arab parties wanting Iran to change its regional behavior.

# Iran and Syria

This part of the ICF highlights a host of developments in the month of August in Syria, particularly in southern Syria where much global and regional attention has been focused. During the month, the Daraa Governorate once again witnessed mutual clashes between citizens and Syrian government forces backed by Iranian militias. These developments raised concerns that Iran's role was the reason behind the campaign of airstrikes launched by Israel against various sites in Syria during this month. Moreover, the appointment of Hossein Amir-Abdollahian as Iran's foreign minister raised many questions about Iran's role and policies in Syria in the coming period. In this part, we discuss three topics: the military escalation in Daraa and the political calculations of international powers; the indications of the renewed Israeli escalation in Syria, and the impact of Amir-Abdollahian's appointment as Iran's foreign minister on Iran-Syria relations.

## 1. The Military Escalation in Daraa and the Political Calculations of International Powers

Daraa in southern Syria has been under continuous military escalation since July 29, ending the relative calm which prevailed over the past three years after the Russian-brokered "settlement" reached in late 2018 between the Syrian opposition and the Syrian government. The situation in the country has returned to square one. The escalation began when Assad's forces imposed a siege on the Al-Balad neighborhood in Daraa Governorate, which lasted for a month. Then, pro-Iranian militias along with the Syrian military's pro-Iranian Fourth Division stepped up an offensive against the neighborhood.<sup>(24)</sup> This escalation cannot be analyzed independently from the Russian foreign minister's moves in March 2021. The purpose behind the moves was to reach an Arab consensus regarding the rehabilitation of the Syrian regime. Moreover, they cannot be analyzed separately from the Jordanian king's recent visit to both the United States and Russia. This visit reflected a Jordanian strategy to achieve a regional balance at a time when regional and international powers are simultaneously competing with one another. As the region needs more mediation and political, economic and security partnerships that take into consideration the stability of the southern region in Syria,<sup>(25)</sup> Jordan's strategy is based on two proposals in regard to Syria and Lebanon. The first proposal is an international road map to achieve peace in Syria. This was presented at the US-Jordanian meeting and included Jordanian as well as Russian and Israeli understandings to end the Syrian crisis through implementing security and economic arrangements in Syria. As a result of these understandings the Naseeb-Jaber crossing was re-opened. Both

Jordan and Syria have betted on this crossing as it is a vital economic lifeline to mitigate the ramifications of the economic crises in both countries.

The second proposal aims to solve Lebanon's power problems by supplying the country with electricity and gas through importing Jordanian electricity via Syrian territory while Egypt supplies natural gas to Lebanon through Jordan and Syria.

Seemingly, the aforementioned understandings to supply Lebanon with electricity and gas through Syria and the subsequent economic benefits for both Beirut and Damascus are part of a gradual approach to ease the economic restrictions on the Syrian regime and strengthen coordination and cooperation with Russia. This gradual approach started with the re-opening of the Naseeb-Jaber crossing and the removal of international sanctions imposed on officials close to Assad. The interests of all parties remain aligned to narrowing Iran's room for maneuver and containing it in Syria.

The military escalation in Daraa took place while both Assad and Iran-backed militias had their own reasons behind the escalation. Assad wanted to impose his own conditions and gain as many concessions as possible. He wants to recapture the remaining parts of the country and eliminate any impediments that may hinder his plans or the implementation of the understandings with Russia and the United States. For Assad, Daraa, which borders Jordan and Israel, is of strategic importance, especially as the recent escalation in the governorate raises the Syrian regime's concerns about the future of ongoing regional understandings.

On the other hand, Iran's participation in the military escalation was driven by its sense that any Russian-Jordanian-Israeli agreement in Daraa will be at the expense of its role in southern Syria. Iran also resorted to military escalation in Iraq to exert more pressure and gain further bargaining power in southern Syria. In addition, by escalation in both Syria and Iraq, Iran aims to strengthen its position in the nuclear negotiations with the West.

Meanwhile, Russia's position in light of the developments in Daraa seems more cautious. Russia does not want to be involved in military escalation which it was able to avoid in 2018 but it wants to shift the crisis in its favor. Thus, it stayed away and limited its involvement to a political role. Russia's move to present a roadmap to resolve the ongoing crisis in Daraa ensures that the governorate will remain a point of discussion among the Americans, Israelis, and Jordanians over Syria's future.<sup>(26)</sup>

It is likely that tensions in Daraa will continue in the coming period due to conflicting interests among many countries and the lack of desire among these countries to reach an understanding.

## 2. The Indications of the Renewed Israeli Escalation in Syria

Tensions have started to resurface between Israel and Iran's allies in the region. Israel has carried out two airstrikes against targets in Syria. The airstrikes coincided with the tensions in southern Syria and the failure of the negotiating committee in Daraa and the Russian delegation and the Syrian military officers to reach an agreement. The Israeli raids also came amid the rising tensions



recently between Hezbollah and Tel Aviv, which are considered part of the shadow war between Tehran and Tel Aviv. This conflict is attributed to regional rivalry over Syrian territory and regional waterways important to world trade.

The first airstrike was launched on August 17 and targeted two military sites in southern Syria. The first was a Hezbollah outpost and the second was the Brigade 90 Syrian army's office in the Syrian village of Hader in the town of Quneitra.<sup>(27)</sup>

The second airstrike came almost two days after the first one and targeted sites in Rif Dimashq and Homs with missiles.<sup>(28)</sup> Just hours after Hezbollah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah issued a warning, Israel struck an oil tanker heading to Lebanon from Iran via Syria. The attack sent a message with different interpretations.

Some analysts believe that the Israeli attack on a Hezbollah military outpost on the Syrian-Israeli border and the killing of four Hezbollah members was part of an Israeli strategy to keep Iran's influence away from its borders. This analysis is supported by the fact that Israeli military aircraft dropped leaflets over southern cities in Syria. This move implicitly confirmed Tel Aviv's reports about the existence of Hezbollah's officers in southern Syria, particularly Jawad Hashem, who has recently become the most wanted man in Israel.<sup>(29)</sup> Other analysts, however, believe that the Israeli attack came as a response to Nasrallah's announcement that the oil tanker was heading to Lebanon from Iran. The Israeli response aimed to limit the scope of escalation with Hezbollah within the Syrian-Israeli borders.

### 3. The Impact of Amir-Abdollahian's Appointment as Iran's Foreign Minister on Iran-Syria Relations

On August 25, the Iranian Parliament approved the formation of the new Iranian government presented by Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi, including the appointment of Hossein Amir-Abdollahian as the country's foreign minister.<sup>(30)</sup>

Abdollahian is familiar with regional affairs and Iran's role, as he worked formerly as the deputy foreign minister for Arab and African Affairs. At the time, he dealt with issues related to Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, and Yemen and played a prominent role in setting the foreign policy of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, especially during the Syrian crisis in 2011. He has also visited Syria several times in the past few years where he met with Assad and repeatedly reiterated that Syria is the frontline of the "axis of resistance."

In his first remarks as foreign minister, Abdollahian expressed his country's desire to "institutionalize the achievements of the axis of resistance in western Asia." He also emphasized the need to continue to support armed groups in the region. "Iran will proudly support our allies and the resistance front." Such remarks highlight the new foreign minister's vision regarding Iran's foreign policy. His remarks definitely raise the concerns of Iran's neighbors as the Quds-linked diplomat is expected to reflect the "hardliner" approach of the Raisi government in the region which is experiencing many tensions.

## Conclusion

The developments in southern Syria will likely remain a hot topic in the coming period due to its connection to the ongoing escalation between Iran and Israel on the Syrian-Lebanese border and its relevance to the talks regarding Iran's nuclear program. Parties to the nuclear negotiations are trying to eliminate each other's bargaining chips, which could make southern Syria an arena for regional and international conflicts. This analysis is supported by the "hardliner" approach of the new Iranian government and the comments made by Abdollahian during his visit to Syria.

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# International Affairs

**I**n this part of the ICF, we discuss Iran's interactions with the United States and Europe. This part sheds light on the "hardliner" approach and anti-US rhetoric adopted by the Raisi government; Iran's search for a new negotiation track in the Vienna talks; and the US threats and conditions; finally, the mutual US-Iran escalation. With regard to Iran-Europe relations, we review the European attempts to maintain diplomatic channels as well as pressure on Iran, concluding with the ramifications of the ongoing disagreement regarding maritime security.



# Iran and the United States

The absence of trust still dominates US-Iran relations, as explained in the ICF issued in July 2021. After Ebrahim Raisi came to office on August 25 2021, US-Iran relations have become much more complex amid rising anti-US ideological rhetoric in Iran. This has impacted the nuclear talks in Vienna which started in April 2021. The Iranian government, apparently, is heading towards further nuclear escalation and is aiming to take a tougher negotiation position, meanwhile the United States is indicating that there is not much time left to resolve disagreements and revive the nuclear deal. It is worth mentioning that US President Joe Biden stated that the United States is prepared to turn to other options if the ongoing negotiations fail.

Amid the ambiguity concerning the Vienna talks, this part of the ICF sheds light on the latest developments in US-Iran relations by reviewing the following: the Raisi government's pursuance of a more "hardline" policy and embracing an anti-US rhetoric; Iran's search for a new approach in relation to the Vienna talks; US threats and conditions; US-Iran mutual escalation; and finally, results and prospects will be explored.

## **1. The Raisi Government: Adopting a More "Hardline" Approach and Reviving Anti-US Rhetoric**

Unlike the Rouhani government, the Raisi government has adopted a tougher position towards the United States in particular, and the West in general. The general principles of Iran's foreign policy, based on distrust in the West, have been reaffirmed. Iranian leaders have reportedly expressed that the country's new foreign policy aims to resist pressure, never rely on other countries to resolve crises; endeavor to thwart US sanctions through economic diplomacy; rely on the country's internal capacities; enhance the "Look to the East" policy primarily focusing on Asia and Iran's neighbors; resist US hegemony; and expand Iran's cooperation with Islamic countries. Further, the policy intends to support Iran-backed proxies in neighboring countries; boost cultural diplomacy, i.e., restore Iran's soft power which has declined sharply in recent years; call for regional dialogue with neighbors based on Iran's announced initiatives. The new government believes that only regional countries can achieve security in the region; this approach is against US interests and goals.<sup>(1)</sup>

## **2. Iran's Search for a New Approach in Regard to the Vienna Talks**

In his inaugural speech on August 5, 2021, President Raisi said, "Sanctions against Iran must be lifted, and we will support any diplomatic plan that achieves this goal." Deputy Secretary-General of the European External Action Service Enrique Mora attended the inauguration ceremony and met with Iran's Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian and the latter hinted that the Raisi government is willing to return to negotiations as soon as possible.<sup>(2)</sup>

Despite Raisi's seemingly positive remarks that the government is willing to

resolve current disagreements once sanctions are lifted, the internal dynamics of the Vienna talks suggest that another approach will be taken. Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei is to adopt a tougher policy and the new president will embrace this as well. “The policy of pressure and sanctions will not make the Iranian people give up on their rights, including the right to development,” Raisi said.<sup>(3)</sup> In general, Iran will not allow the nuclear talks to turn into talks of attrition, rather it intends to follow new tactics to confront the US conditions laid down in the negotiations.

Therefore, it can be said that Iran will probably return to the negotiating table, however, the Raisi government will leverage to forge a new negotiation track. The Iranian Parliament’s bills, particularly the “Strategic Action Plan to Lift Sanctions and Protect the Iranian Nation’s Interest,” may play a role in identifying a new negotiation track — the Supreme National Council and the Foreign Ministry are also expected to play a broader role in this regard. These official bodies work simultaneously to achieve specific goals: reach concrete outcomes; maintain Iran’s nuclear achievements; and avoid making any integral concessions in response to US conditions.

### 3. US Conditions and Threats

US State Department Spokesperson Ned Price said, “If President Raisi is genuine in his determination to see the sanctions lifted, well that is precisely what’s on the table in Vienna.” The United States, however, laid down a host of conditions to revive the nuclear deal, which Iran disclosed on August 2, 2021. Washington conditioned reviving the nuclear deal with including other files in future talks, most prominently: Iran’s expansionist activities in the region (Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen, as an example); making amendments in the nuclear agreement’s text, i.e., crafting a new deal, a condition Iran completely rejects.<sup>(4)</sup>

The United States rejected Iran’s demands: the lifting of sanctions on 500 Iranian individuals, allowing Iran to enhance its position in international trade markets; permitting businesses to remain in Iran in case Washington decides to withdraw again from the nuclear deal, and discussing a compensation package in light of the economic harm resulting from businesses exiting Iran once the US withdrew from the nuclear deal. Further, Washington’s proposed demands – to be addressed in the new deal - are irrelevant to and were never identified in the former nuclear deal. It also affirmed that Iran needs to return to full compliance under the deal before the lifting of sanctions.

The United States has prepared alternatives in case the Vienna talks are doomed to failure. US Special Envoy for Iran Robert Malley stated that they are preparing alternatives if the Vienna talks reach a dead end. US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said that if Iran continues to increase its nuclear activities, “there will come a point [...] where it will be very hard to return back to the standards set by the JCPOA,”<sup>(5)</sup>

### 4. The US-Iran Escalation

The United States maintained the sanctions imposed by the Trump administration and added new sanctions. On July 13, 2021, the US Department of the Treasury designated individuals and businesses involved in an international oil smuggling network that supports the IRGC Quds Force. According to IRNA, an Iranian news agency, the sanctions reduced oil revenues by \$100 billion while the country is facing a snowballing economic crisis – the foreign exchange rate is rising and the budget deficit is widening due to sanctions on Iranian exports.<sup>(6)</sup>



At the regional level, the Biden administration resorted to military deterrence to counter Iran-backed militia attacks in Iraq and Syria on its troops. Iran is concerned over the latest developments in Afghanistan amid rising suspicions that the United States intends to make Afghanistan a hotbed of chaos and instability. Following the Raisi government's tougher position and its nuclear breaches, the United States coordinated with Israel on Iran's nuclear file. The new Israeli prime minister and the United States are working to forge a new joint strategy to be prepared for a scenario in which Iran will not be part of the nuclear deal.

At the international level, the Biden administration has made serious moves to rebuild the transatlantic consensus against Iran and engage regional countries regarding Tehran. This was apparent in the remarks made by the US secretary of state regarding the attack on an Israeli tanker in the Gulf of Oman. After accusing Iran of being behind the attack, the US secretary of state promised to lead a collective response in retaliation against the Iranian attack. Furthermore, this was illustrated in the similar positions adopted by Washington and other regional countries regarding Iran's nuclear violations and the delay in returning to the negotiating table in Vienna.<sup>(7)</sup>

However, the Raisi government has not announced yet when it will resume the nuclear talks, neither has it disclosed its conditions for returning to the negotiating table. The Iranian Parliament is still committed to the "Strategic Action Plan to Lift Sanctions and Protect the Iranian Nation's Interest" bill.<sup>(8)</sup> Iran's Foreign Ministry Spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh said his country "will pursue its peaceful nuclear program based on its needs, sovereign decisions and within the framework of safeguarding its obligations until the full and unconditional implementation of the JCPOA by America and other parties."<sup>(9)</sup> The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) verified that Iran used a mode of advanced centrifuges to enrich to up to 60 percent at the Natanz nuclear plant, adding that "Iran was using 164 IR-6 centrifuges to enrich up to 60 percent and was now using that cascade and another of 153 IR-4 machines for that work." The IAEA confirmed that Iran had made progress in the enrichment of uranium metal.<sup>(10)</sup>

The new Iranian government's regional policy primarily aims to strengthen its relations with proxy militias and pro-Iran governments. The leaders of the Palestinian resistance in Gaza, the Hamas Movement, and a Houthis delegation attended Raisi's inauguration, all were seated in the first row. They met with senior Iranian officials. Though Iran expressed its willingness to open dialogue with neighboring countries, it reaffirmed its support to its proxy militias within the "Axis of Resistance," which the new government views as the bedrock for its regional policies. Tehran continues its efforts to maintain its clout in Afghanistan in light of the Taliban's takeover of the country. The US withdrawal provides Tehran with a significant geopolitical opportunity.

To counter the transatlantic rapprochement, Iran resorted to boost its policy towards the East. It continues its work in developing strong relations with China and Russia. According to Russia's Defense Ministry, joint naval drills will be carried out between Russia, Iran, Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan in the Caspian Sea in early September 2021. The speaker of the Iranian Parliament Mohammad Bagher

Ghalibaf believes that Iran's military collaboration with Russia hinders US moves to destabilize regional security. Russia, Iran and China announced that joint naval drills will be carried out from late 2021 to early 2022 in the Arabian Gulf.<sup>(11)</sup>

## 5. Outcomes and Prospects

President Raisi, unlike his predecessor Rouhani, is in harmony with all state institutions as they share one ideological perspective, especially with the Parliament and the Revolutionary Guards. He also enjoys a very distinguished relationship with Iran's supreme leader, therefore it comes as no surprise that he will be the chairman of the Supreme National Security Council.

The current internal cohesion and harmony between the state institutions and the new president is expected to be enhanced further by the unified ideology of the political system led by the supreme leader. This ideology boosts the legitimacy of the political system and ensures its survival. They all believe that the nuclear deal is an American trap to push Iran off its revolutionary track, thwart its independence, and dominate the Iranian people ideologically and culturally. Hence, we expect that the new government will adopt a much more "hardline" position on negotiations. It will not be flexible in meeting demands related to halting its nuclear and ballistic missile programs and changing its regional behavior, neither will it implement the US conditions. The Iranian government will remain committed to its basic conditions, first of which is the lifting of sanctions before complying with the nuclear deal once again.

Though the government is titling towards a "hardliner" approach to achieve the best possible outcomes, the recent remarks of the supreme leader on combining both the revolutionary and traditional paths indicate that Iran is not expected to give up on the diplomatic track. Here we have to take into account that the Raisi government cannot just overnight solve the country's internal deteriorating crises amid US sanctions. The United States is still flexible and willing to continue its diplomatic track with Iran as Robert Malley said Washington is ready to make compromises on "difficult issues" if Tehran does the same.<sup>(12)</sup>

## Conclusion

In a nutshell, if Iran continues blackmailing the nuclear signatories through committing more nuclear breaches, the nuclear talks in Vienna are doomed to failure. Washington, then, will shift its policy toward adopting a tougher position and resorting to other alternatives — the Biden administration has recently mentioned that it would consider new options but without identifying them. The United States will then have a reasonable justification to mobilize a transatlantic coalition against Iran and Tehran will not be able to withstand its ramifications. Yet, the return to negotiations will most likely be decided within a few weeks due to the pressure and crises that the Raisi government has been facing so far. When Iran returns to the negotiating table in Vienna, we will know whether the Raisi government will resume Rouhani's track or will forge a new negotiation track. And we will know whether the United States will meet Raisi's demands or will succeed in imposing its own agenda on the negotiations.

# Iran and Europe

Europe continues to play a mediating role between Iran and the United States to revive the nuclear agreement, even if its diplomatic activity has reduced as we mentioned in the July report. As Iran was preoccupied with ensuring the smooth transition of power and the installation of Ebrahim Raisi at the head of the new Iranian government, Europe sought during August to establish a political relationship with the new administration, while increasing its pressure on Iran over its human rights file and nuclear program.

In this part, we will review the positions of the European and Iranian parties towards each other through three analytical perspectives. These positions are consistent with the approaches adopted since the Trump administration withdrew from the nuclear agreement in mid-2018 and the interactions between the two sides remain largely the same. The aforementioned will be analyzed via the following: maintaining effective political communication channels, European pressure and its consequences, and the dispute over the security of maritime navigation.

## 1. Maintaining Effective Political Communication Channels:

The European parties have kept in place political communication channels with Iran. Their relationship with the Iranian side has never reached the point of complete rupture, despite the fact that Raisi's administration is linked to the closed and narrow circle of Supreme Leader Khamenei, which has been stepping up its nuclear violations. Iran also has not halted its criticism of Western countries and presented foreign policy programs that exclude Europe and its Atlantic ally, the United States, from any political or economic calculations with itself in the coming days.

The first indication of European intent to keep in place effective contact with Iran was evident when EU officials attended the inauguration ceremony of Iranian President Ibrahim Raisi, in spite of suspicions surrounding his involvement in the execution of thousands of political detainees in 1988. The EU delegation visited Tehran, led by Deputy Secretary-General of the European External Action Service Enrique Mora and it was accompanied by the EU Ambassador to Vienna Stefan Klement and Bruno Scholl, head of the EU's Iran taskforce.<sup>[13]</sup>

The EU is seeking to activate diplomatic tracks with the new administration, especially since the nuclear talks in Vienna have concluded six full rounds, and it is waiting for Iran to return to the negotiating table with a new team. Nabila Massrali, spokesperson for the European External Action Service, explained that the priority of the EU is to overcome the impediments faced by the parties to the nuclear deal to return to the implementation of the Joint Comprehensive



Plan of Action (JCPOA).<sup>(14)</sup>

The Iranian side is aware of its critical need for European support to lift the US sanctions. It recognizes that the path to economic recovery comes through the nuclear talks. Therefore, even if Iran's political rhetoric has escalated, it fully hopes that the US sanctions will be lifted. Although he condemns the West, President Raisi had previously indicated that he did not oppose the nuclear talks. Speaking with French President Macron during a telephone conversation, he acknowledged the need to preserve the rights of the Iranian people in any upcoming negotiations. The French President replied that Iran should resume nuclear talks as soon as possible.<sup>(15)</sup>

The European and Iranian parties are aware of the need to maintain political relations so that there will be avenues for dialogue in order to overcome any impediments that may hinder the negotiations between the concerned countries in relation to the Iranian nuclear file. This political relationship will also ensure that Europe maintains an uninterrupted line of contact with Iran if conditions change, and also provides Iran with an indirect means of talking to the American side.

## 2. European Pressure and Its Consequences

Since Ebrahim Raisi won the Iranian presidential election, the European parties have realized that they face a political and diplomatic impasse before the world in regard to their humanitarian principles and values. However, the interaction with the new Iranian president is an indispensable option, but at the same time it carries diplomatic risks, most notably because Raisi is accused of committing heinous crimes when he was a member of the death committee that carried out mass executions in 1988.

The visit of a high-ranking EU delegation and French President Macron's phone call with Raisi may indicate the defeatism of the European side and how easy it is for the Europeans to negate their own values. However, the reality and the big picture are different. The trial of Hamid Nouri, the former judge in the Iranian judiciary who is accused of participating in the executions of detainees in 1988, commenced in Sweden on August 10.<sup>(16)</sup> This trial has important implications because it is the first trial of an Iranian official accused of "crimes against humanity," and the first to be held against suspects involved in the 1988 massacre, indicating that there will be a subsequent series of accusations and greater disclosure of concrete evidence proving the involvement of high-ranking Iranian officials.

European diplomacy towards Iran always moves along two parallel courses, while maintaining a political relationship and imposing pressure in relation to files such as human rights, terrorism and nuclear activity. On August 19, 2021, the foreign ministers of the three European Troika countries issued a joint statement expressing their "grave concern" about Iran's continued production of uranium that could be used to produce a nuclear bomb, according to the report of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).<sup>(17)</sup>

The European statement was not the first. As we indicated in July's ICF, the three European countries issued a statement specifically denouncing Iran's

intention to use domestically produced enriched uranium at 20 percent U-235, which confirms beyond any doubt that Tehran's nuclear program is not for peaceful and civilian purposes.

The European policy in relation to the nuclear file is questionable and surprising, as it has not been effective. Last month, Iran, through its Permanent Ambassador to the United Nations Kazem Gharibabadi, notified the IAEA of its plan. This demonstrates Iranian indifference to European condemnation. However, the Europeans devote particular attention to the reactivation of the nuclear deal. Therefore, they are aware of Iran's actions that aim to win negotiating cards by increasing its nuclear excesses. They denounce Iranian violations but at the same time intensify their diplomatic attempts to bring Iran and the United States back to the negotiating table.

### 3. The Dispute Over the Security of Maritime Navigation

The third feature in the relationship between the two parties is the sharp divisions over different periods, especially when hostile incidents take place with Iranian involvement, such as Iran's attempts to obstruct the flow of oil tankers in international waterways and its subsequent impact on global trade. During the current month, tensions increased between Iranian and British parties following the killing of a British citizen in a drone attack on an oil tanker operated by an Israeli company. Several international parties pointed the finger at Iran, including the United States and Britain. Britain also summoned the Iranian ambassador, Mohsen Baharvand, warning Iran to stop actions that undermine international peace and security.<sup>(18)</sup>

The escalation of the British side increased. Prime Minister Boris Johnson stressed that Iran "should bear the consequences of what it did," and British Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab indicated that Britain and its allies were planning coordinated responses to Iran's violation of the security and safety of maritime navigation. This raised the Iranian side's fears and prompted its Foreign Ministry to summon the British Chargé d'Affaires to Tehran to protest Raab's remarks.<sup>(19)</sup> Iran's Ambassador and Assistant Permanent Representative to the United Nations Zahra Ershadi denied Iran's involvement in the incident, and said at the UN Security Council meeting held on August 9, "In regard to the Mercer Street incident, I firmly deny these false allegations."<sup>(20)</sup>

The Iranian-British division has impacted the course of the European-Iranian relationship as a whole. However, the European parties have ensured in general that the division is at the level of the bilateral relationship between Britain and Iran, while holding Iran responsible in anticipation of retaliatory attacks that may be carried out by Israel or countries that support its position such as the United States and Britain. The EU has taken advantage by imposing pressure on Iran, whether at the bilateral level between a specific country and Iran, or via multilateral action to push Iran to return to compliance with the nuclear deal and to submit to its such as limiting its ballistic missile program. On the other hand, Iran has been trying for years to prove its ability to hurt international and regional powers by undermining the security of maritime navigation.

## Conclusion

The interactions between Europe and Iran were apparent when the former attempted to keep its political contact with Tehran and impose further pressure on it in regard to its human rights file and nuclear activity. In addition, tensions simmered with Iran over the security of maritime navigation. Therefore, the two parties still attempt to keep in place channels of communication, despite the expansion of disagreements post-Raisi coming to power. It is likely that the European parties during September 2021 will keep their mediation role between Iran and the United States to revive the nuclear deal, and continue with their pragmatic efforts to find common ground with the new Iranian administration.



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