

MONTHLY REPORT



IRAN CASE FILE

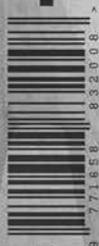
Your window on Iran from inside and abroad

September 2021



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Iran witnessed several political, security, and economic developments in September 2021 which reveal the extent and nature of the challenges Iran has been facing lately. At the ideological level, Iran-Taliban relations and the position of the Shiite Afghans on the group which took control over the country have constituted the most significant interactions between Iran and the Taliban. In a message to those who oppose positively dealing with the Taliban, Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei said that Iran will support Afghanistan under all circumstances, adding that the nature of Iran's relations with governments depends on the nature of their relations with Iran. His emphasis on forging good ties with Afghanistan under Taliban rule reveals the deep coordination between the two parties. The relationship between the Afghan Shiites and the Taliban is still stable; each party has been trying to test the potential reactions of the other. Despite Iran's pragmatism towards the Taliban, it has urged the group to protect and support the Shiite Afghans. The new Afghan government is flexible in dealing with all components of Afghan society, including the Shiites. It has taken steps to confirm its goodwill towards the Shiite community.

On the political level, Iran witnessed considerable developments, most prominently President Ebrahim Raisi's tour of several Iranian governorates. His tour started at the end of August; a few days after his inauguration. These visits represented an attempt to polish his tarnished image as he is accused of being involved in a series of executions and the torture of prisoners as well as to restore the Iranian people's trust in the ruling system, giving them some hope after the growing discontent over the failure of the ruling system to improve the deteriorating living conditions. Some critics doubt the effectiveness of these visits in tackling the deep-rooted crises facing some Iranian governorates.

However, others believe that Ebrahim Raisi is like Mahmoud Ahmadinejad who adopted populism and held direct meetings with governors and citizens but without providing drastic solutions for the country's crises. The second prominent development, at the political level, is the latest appointments in the Foreign Ministry. Three new deputies to the foreign minister were appointed: Ali Bagheri Kani as deputy foreign minister for political affairs replacing Abbas Araqchi; Mehdi Safari and Mohammad Fathali as deputies for economic diplomacy and administrative and financial affairs respectively. Bagheri and Safari are well known for their tough stance on the nuclear file. Therefore, it is expected that Iran's Foreign Ministry is heading towards making a drastic change in its policies to implement "hardliner" perspectives and enhance Iran's expansionist project.

At the economic level, Iran's membership in trade organizations has been mainly limited to regional organizations due to tensions with major international powers, especially the United States which rejects Iran's membership in mega trade organizations such as the World Trade Organization (WTO). Iran is now working to compensate for its exclusion from the WTO and enhance its economic strategy — based on economic diplomacy — by joining regional trade organizations, especially those affiliated to Central Asia and the Caspian Sea such as the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in which it recently became a permanent member.

At the military level, Iran witnessed a host of military and security developments on its borders with neighboring countries. On the Iran-Iraq border, Iranian forces launched a series of attacks targeting anti-Iranian Kurdish parties which use the Kurdistan Region of Iraq as a territory for their maneuvers against Iranian forces. Iran justified the wave of attacks by saying it came in response to the attacks of the Kurdish groups against Iranian forces at the Iran-Iraq border. On the northern border, a crisis looms ahead after Azerbaijan denied permits to Iranian trucks crossing through Azerbaijan in order to reach Armenia. The crisis mounted further following the joint drills conducted by Azerbaijan, Turkey and Pakistan in the Caspian Sea. Iran, in response, conducted a drill on its border with Azerbaijan. This prompted Azerbaijan to respond by conducting another joint drill with Turkey. On the eastern border, Iran witnessed a huge influx of Afghan refugees who are trying to cross the border in different ways. Here, Iranian security forces face considerable challenges amid the rising rates of smuggling following the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan.

At the level of Arab affairs, Iranian interactions with the Gulf states were affected by Iran's refusal to meet the demands issued by the Ministerial Council of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) in its 149th session. It also rejected the remarks of the Gulf leaders and officials delivered at the 76th session of the United Nations General Assembly. Iran-Gulf interactions were also affected by the Saudi-Iran reconciliation. Saudi Arabia still underpins the necessity to include Iran's interventions and activities undermining regional stability and security as well as Tehran's ballistic and nuclear programs in the talks regarding Iran's return to the nuclear deal. These are the major disagreements

that obstruct the path towards reconciliation between Riyadh and Tehran.

In Yemen, the File discusses the developments in Houthi behavior dominated by a sectarian dimension, including the Houthis' horrific policy of sectarian liquidation, the Yemeni people's reaction, and the response of international organizations and parties to this crime, the features of the ongoing identity war instigated by the militia against the Yemeni people advanced through changing the curricula of the new school year as part of a series of moves by the Houthis to instill their sectarian and cultural ideology in society and to influence the impressionable minds of Yemeni children in order to recruit them to the frontlines. On the other hand, the file reviews international and UN efforts to bring peace to Yemen in light of the association between Houthi military escalation and the will and orientations of the Iranian government.

As for Iran-Iraq interactions, the visit of Iraq's Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi to Tehran where he met with Iranian officials was the most prominent incident in September. The visit was highly significant due to many factors: the Iraqi parliamentary elections are just around the corner; the impact of Iran forming political blocs before the elections; the thorny disagreements about the electricity crisis mounted due to Iran halting electricity exports to Iraq; Iranian discontent over Kadhimi's approach to make Iraq an independent state immune to foreign interventions and Iranian dictates. The second significant development was Iran's justification for the attacks against the sites of anti-Iranian Kurdish groups in northern Iraq.

As for Iran's presence in Syria, the visit of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to Russia holds significant implications for Iran. First, Russian strategic interests are in conflict with Iran's future influence in Syria. Second, Assad's visit came just after the visit of the Israeli foreign minister to Moscow where he delivered remarks condemning the Iranian military presence in Syria. Third, Russia is apparently seeking to reach understandings with the United States regarding Syria. Russia aims to exploit the green light given by US President Biden to transfer gas from Egypt and Jordan via Syria's Daraa Governorate to Lebanon to convince the United States to mitigate sanctions imposed on the Syrian government. In return, Russia will guarantee Israel's security through placing pressure on Assad and convince him to back off from the southern Syrian border in Daraa.

As for international affairs, the United States showed keenness to resume talks on returning to the nuclear deal. This was affirmed by US President Joe Biden when delivering his speech before the UN General Assembly. On the other hand, Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi is still adherent to his demands that the nuclear talks should lead to the lifting of US sanctions without crafting a new nuclear deal which secures further guarantees. Though the US administration is willing to return to the nuclear talks, it placed pressure on Iran at several levels: it pushed the nuclear file to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Board of Governors, which may submit the file to the UN Security Council to urge Iran to return to the nuclear talks. The US Department of the Treasury sanctioned individuals and companies affiliated with Iran and Hezbollah. Washington conducted a large-scale coordination with Israel and

other regional powers on Iran. In response, Iran restarted its nuclear escalation by increasing uranium enrichment and boosting its policy “Towards the East,” aiming to create alternatives to counter its international isolation. Iran also enhanced its military cooperation with Russia and used its proxy militias to target US troops in Iraq.

As for European relations with Iran, the nuclear file and the European delivery of COVID-19 vaccines were the most significant developments. Lately, the Europeans have focused on urging Iran to quickly return to the nuclear talks without any delay. This is in addition to urging Iran to respond to the IAEA inquiries. Many European countries expressed their preparedness to support Iran’s efforts to import COVID-19 vaccines via the COVAX facility. Switzerland announced donating 1 million vaccine doses to Iran. Despite this positive cooperation, tensions were not absent between the two sides. German police reportedly arrested an Iranian-German man over his involvement in sending equipment – to be used in Iran nuclear and missile programs – to Iran. Further, the Iranian Foreign Ministry called on the UK to pay its debt to Iran — referring to the incomplete delivery of tanks following a deal signed between the two countries in the 1970s, which the UK later canceled following the 1979 revolution.

Internal Affairs

Internal Affairs is divided into four main files: The Ideological File aims to discuss the common interests between Iran and the Taliban government and Iran's approach of testing the potential reaction of Afghan Shiites and the Taliban to outline the general framework of Iran-Afghanistan relations. The Political File reviews the tour of President Ebrahim Raisi to Iranian governorates as well as the new appointments in the Foreign Ministry. The Economic File discusses three topics: Iran's membership in regional and international trade organizations; Iran's current trade orientations; and the effectiveness of its regional alliances. The Military File sheds light on three topics: rising tensions on Iran's northern and western borders; mounting escalation between Iran and Azerbaijan; the influx of Afghan refugees crossing the Iranian border.



The Ideological File

The past month's *Ideological File* shed light on the scenarios related to the relationship between the Taliban and the Shiite community in Afghanistan — in light of the developments on the ground and the Taliban taking over Kabul, as well as in light of the multiple remarks made by the group, which comforted those at home and abroad concerned about the status of the Shiite minority in the country. This month, the *Ideological File* addresses the ideological developments in regard to the relations between the Taliban and Iran particularly at the religious and sect level — the Iranian elite views the Taliban and its actions on the ground through the aforementioned lens. This month's file also seeks to answer some important questions regarding the Iranian and Taliban strategy to shape their future relations, and their perspectives towards sectarianism and cultism.

1. The Supreme Leader and the Taliban: Common Interests

The *Ideological File* of last July pointed out that the rise of the Taliban could inspire other extremist groups, ranging from ISIS (Daesh) to al-Qaeda as well as all Shiite militias throughout the region — not only the militias loyal to the Velayat-e Faqih ideology or backed by Iran, but also militias deemed not to be loyal to Iran.⁽¹⁾ In a meeting with Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi and his cabinet during this month, Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei said, “Iran will support Afghanistan whatever the circumstances are.”⁽²⁾ He described the United States as “a predatory wolf” in the diplomatic sphere which has been responsible for spreading mischief in Afghanistan over the past two decades of its occupation.⁽³⁾

In a message directed to those who have questions regarding Iran-Taliban relations, he said, “We support the nation of Afghanistan. Governments come and go. What remains is the Afghan nation. The nature of our relations with governments depends on the nature of their relations with us. May God bring the best situation for the nation of Afghanistan.”⁽⁴⁾ In harmony with Iranian policy, the spokesman for Iraq's Kata'ib Hezbollah (Hezbollah Brigades) said that the Taliban's control in Afghanistan is a “great defeat for America and its influence in the Central Asian region.”⁽⁵⁾ On accepting Taliban rule he said, “As a result, acceptance of the Taliban rule is the choice of the Afghan people, and we respect their choice, provided that it does not pose a threat to its neighbors and does not adopt exclusionary Takfiri ideology.”⁽⁶⁾ Shelly Kittleson, a journalist specializing in the Middle East and Afghanistan, interprets Iran's position regarding the Taliban as a deep-rooted relationship between the two sides — predating the Taliban taking over Kabul. She cited

a conference held in recent years in Moscow for talks with the Taliban which involved the leader of the Afghan Shiite Hazara community and Afghan Vice President Mohammed Mohaqiq. The gathering was opposed by the former Ghani government. Mohaqiq for years praised Qassem Soleimani at religious forums and meetings in Iran.⁽⁷⁾ She also drew parallels between the similar situations and complexities experienced in Iraq and Afghanistan — in terms of US intervention, the calls for ending American occupation by the countries and the presence of terror groups operating in both countries with Tehran training and deploying militia groups.⁽⁸⁾ However, some “reformist” leaders continue to reject the idea of holding talks with the Taliban, dismissing what they call the Taliban version of Islam and rejecting Iranian support for the Taliban. Former Iranian President Mohammed Khatami wrote a letter in which he accused the Taliban of breaching human rights and criticized the Iranian elite’s policy of prioritizing political interests over moral values.⁽⁹⁾ He called on politicians to adopt their positions on Afghanistan from the angle of culture and morals, and based on looking after the human identity and the destiny of human beings in society. He then said, “The Taliban version of Islam — as its representatives proclaim — is a symbol of some sort of wrong and reactionary thinking and undemocratic behavior.”⁽¹⁰⁾ He attempted to play on sectarian heartstrings, for the sake of finding supporters for his viewpoint among the religious and seminary incubators to attempt to influence the position of the Iranian ruling elite. He said, “The anti-Shiite position espoused by this sectarian perspective poses a double threat to the Shiites in Afghanistan. However, I do not speak of the racial or sectarian problems, but I rather indicate my concern about the fate of humanity in general and the present and future of the honorable Afghan people from all ethnicities, tribes and sects.”⁽¹¹⁾

Hence, it can be said that despite the significant ideological differences between the Sunni Maturidiyya movement adopting the Hanafi school of jurisprudence and the traditionalist Twelver Shiite ruling elite of Iran, the Iranian mindset until now views the Taliban takeover of Kabul to be better than the US presence in Afghanistan. Dealing with the Taliban is possible, especially after Iran supported the group during years of US occupation in the country. The Iranian government looks at relations with the Taliban from the angle of pragmatic national and political interests while the “reformists” look at the issue from the angle of morals and values. The Iranian mindset condemns the Taliban’s radicalism as the radicalism of the Iranian “conservatives” and reminds Iranians of Afghan Shiites and their standing in the Afghan arena. We will touch on the latter below.

2. Afghan Shiites and the Phase of Testing the Waters

Afghan Shiites are still testing the waters and outlining their relationship with the Taliban. The relationship between the two sides is still taking shape and depends on several factors, primarily Taliban-Iran relations. The Iranians — despite their pragmatic approach towards the Taliban — urged the group to protect the Shiite community and allow Shiites to practice their religious rituals. They realized that this pragmatic strategy will be more helpful in preserving

the Shiite community compared to protecting them in case of an open military confrontation with Taliban militants hardened by war, infused with ideology and backed by tribal and sectarian incubators. Any confrontation will pose a danger to Afghan Shiites and their relationship with all Sunnis, not only the Taliban. Iran is aware that the Taliban is not a globalist Islamist movement like al-Qaeda and ISIS, but it is rather an Islamic-nationalist group that does not aspire to extend its reach beyond Afghan borders. This is in addition to the huge differences between the Taliban and ISIS, which makes the group — for Iran — less dangerous than other extremist groups, hence it can be interacted with. As a result, Esmail Qaani, the chief of Iran's Quds Force, said, "What concerns us in Afghanistan is that nobody inflicts harm on Iran. America's plan is based on the notion that Iran clashes with the Sunni world. Hence, Iran should work in a way that does not harm its security or allow Washington to achieve its goals."⁽¹²⁾ While concluding his remarks, he emphasized that Afghan Shiites are extremely important to Iran and that "Tehran is attempting to resolve the Afghan issue without resorting to war, ensuring all the ethnic groups partake in running Afghanistan."⁽¹³⁾

Qaani in his final remarks reiterated the need to avoid Sunni-Shiite disputes and the need for Iran to deal with the current government in Afghanistan. These remarks sparked "reformist" criticisms. Fars News Agency, close to the IRGC, was prompted to respond to "reformist" criticisms. It said, "Mobilizing less than 15,000 members of the Fatemiyoun Brigade to fight 100,000 fighters of the Taliban is impossible and could trigger a wider Sunni-Shiite conflict."⁽¹⁴⁾ The news agency further stated, "Qaani himself has warned against this conflict."⁽¹⁵⁾

This wider conflict which the news agency alluded to may include the Iranian home front — especially since Iranian Sunni leaders sympathize with the Taliban. This means that any Sunni-Shiite tension or conflict could naturally spill over into Iran. The Sunni Friday prayer leader in Zahedan, Molavi Abdul Hamid, announced in an interview that Ahmad Shah Masoud cannot defeat the Taliban, calling for negotiations and dialogue between the two sides.⁽¹⁶⁾ On August 17, 2021, Molavi Abdul Hamid delivered a message in support of the Taliban and congratulated them for their triumph. In addition, he called on the people not to be swayed by the one-sided propaganda campaign against the group. He also described the Taliban as a group which "has room for reform and change" and the world needs to give it a chance. He said that if the Taliban are given two or three months, its plans and policies will be evident. He congratulated the Taliban and expressed hope that the group would reform and change itself.⁽¹⁷⁾

On the other hand, the Taliban has so far shown understanding towards Iran's position and its concern for Afghan Shiites, therefore, the group attempts to rally all or at least most Afghans behind it. The Taliban does not seek to escalate against Shiite Hazaras and is attempting to change the policies that it implemented during its first stint in power from 1996 to 2001. Therefore, the group — since it took over Kabul on August 15, 2021 — did not prevent or impede any Shiite religious celebration and reassured Shiite Hazaras about their security. It also undertook some confidence building measures with the

Shiite community. One of its leaders was appointed to a senior position in the intelligence department – a move intended to expand the Taliban’s political legitimacy beyond its existing sectarian, ethnic and Pashtun incubators.⁽¹⁸⁾

This move had a positive impact on Shiite leaders. The Shia Ulema Council in Afghanistan announced its support for dialogue with the Taliban and called for protecting the lives, wealth and dignity of Afghans. In addition, it called for sectarianism and extremism to be avoided and for the Shiite sect to be officially recognized in the Constitution. The council also called for an office to be established to supervise Shiite affairs such as pilgrimages and visits and to administer Shiite mosques, schools and other facilities as is the case in Bahrain, Kuwait and Iraq.⁽¹⁹⁾

Conclusion

Iran seeks to deal with the Taliban pragmatically, keeping its own interests in mind to uphold Afghan security and prevent ISIS operatives from entering its territories — as well as to secure the interests of Afghan Shiites and keep them socially and politically active in a way which serves Tehran’s agenda.

At the same time, the Taliban is aware that Afghan Shiites have regional and international branches and any standoff with them will not serve the group’s interests because they do not pose a danger to its power in the country. Second, any face-off with Afghan Shiites will be portrayed as the Taliban targeting religious and sectarian minorities and will be opposed regionally — perhaps through direct or indirect Iranian intervention. It is likely that the Taliban announced a softer policy towards Afghan Shiites as it wants to break from its own past. It has no intention to engage in conflict — especially as the group is already in an open conflict with ISIS, which targets both Sunnis and Shiites. The group wants to cooperate with the international community to fight ISIS, hence eliminating a violent ideological rival and boosting its political legitimacy and international acceptance.

The Political File

In August 2021, *The Political File* discussed the new Iranian president's official taking over of presidential duties after he had won the latest presidential election. It also shed light on the Iranian Parliament's approval of the new cabinet and the challenges that it will face in the coming period. In September, the political file will discuss two main issues that impacted the most important political developments in Iran. The first development was the internal visits made by President Ebrahim Raisi to several Iranian provinces, while the second development was the new appointments to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

1. Ebrahim Raisi's Internal Tours

Since Ebrahim Raisi's presidential victory, he has visited several Iranian provinces. These visits come in the context of the elaborate promises he made during his presidential campaign. As the Iranian home front is full of challenges that go against Raisi's intentions, he was quick to send political signals and visit several border areas. These visits can be understood in his attempts to rearrange the home front and restore Iranian confidence in the political system following popular discontent and frustration against its policies and failure to improve living conditions and its role in internationally isolating Iran and crippling sanctions being imposed on it. Raisi's visit to the Iranian provinces can be interpreted in three ways. First, Raisi's government is keen to contain the sweeping popular discontent and prevent the internal fragmentation from further snowballing into more ethnic and regional divisions. Raisi started off his internal visits with Ahwaz province at the end of August 2021.⁽²⁰⁾ During September, he visited the three governorates of Sistan and Balochistan, South Khorasan and Ilam.⁽²¹⁾ Raisi also visited Kohgiluyeh and Boyer-Ahmad Province. These visits aimed to offer promises and provide guarantees regarding development projects in the sectors of agriculture, health, and mining. In addition, he aimed to address water shortage issues and understand the problems of the provinces firsthand.

Raisi's political discourse and exploiting the system's media to convey an optimistic outlook about the future of these provinces has succeeded. Nonetheless, suspicions remain about his government's capacity to find radical solutions to the country's repeated crises which sparked waves of protests against the government's policies, especially in response to crises facing the water, electricity and healthcare sectors.

The second interpretation was presented by those who oppose Ebrahim Raisi. They argue that his approach resembles that of the former populist

President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad who depended on face-to-face meetings with locals — both officials and citizens — to develop his support bases among the grassroots, without offering radical solutions on the ground. Regardless of this similarity, judging President Raisi remains premature. Despite his meetings with provincial citizens and officials — especially during his recent visit to Ilam⁽²²⁾ and Sistan and Balochistan⁽²³⁾ previously — Iranians hope that such visits will translate into development projects, thus reducing the pressure on the people because of falling living standards.

The third interpretation is that Raisi's visits are consistent with his foreign policy which aims to prioritize "Turning Towards the East" and focus on relations with neighboring countries. Significant focus is to be given to policies that activate bilateral trade with neighboring countries — with the aim of saving the country from its economic crises stemming from US sanctions and formulating policies to circumventing the sanctions.

This focus could lead to a number of temporary gains. However, the government cannot rely on the aforementioned policies to address the chronic economic crises accumulating since mid-2018 — including inflation, mounting unemployment and a growing budget deficit.

2. New Appointments to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs

Given the harmonious relations between the new Iranian government and the different institutions making up the Iranian political system, it has become patently clear that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs will be the lead in implementing Iran's two-pronged diplomacy-battlefield strategy once directed by Qassem Soleimani —late chief of the country's Quds Force. This means the ministry will operate under the influence of the country's security and military apparatuses that will employ it to boost Iran's expansionist project. Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei spoke clearly of the ministry's role after he levelled criticisms at the military establishment for its intervention in the ministry's affairs.

According to the supreme leader, its role is limited to implementing the policies crafted and approved by the supreme institutions of the Iranian political system. These remarks downplayed the role of the ministry and determined the role that it will play during Raisi's tenure. These statements also underline that several files will remain beyond the control of the Foreign Ministry, underpinning that Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, Iran's foreign minister under Raisi, not only does not object to this — unlike his predecessor Mohammad Javad Zarif — but will ensure the ministry follows the role set out for it.

Following his appointment as Iran's foreign minister, Abdollahian has said that he will continue to follow in the footsteps of Qassem Soleimani when it comes to Iranian foreign policy.⁽²⁴⁾

In the first step to make a radical change in the Foreign Ministry and its direction, the new Abdollahian instructed for a host of new and important appointments to be made at the ministry.

Three deputy foreign ministers have been appointed. Ali Bagheri Kani has been appointed as deputy foreign minister for political affairs instead of chief

Iranian negotiator Abbas Araghchi. Mahdi Safari has been appointed as deputy for economic diplomacy and Mohammad Fathali as deputy foreign minister for administrative and financial affairs.⁽²⁵⁾

The most remarkable reshuffling concerned Abbas Araghchi. He played a critical role along with Iran's former Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif in the nuclear negotiations that led to the conclusion of the nuclear deal between Iran and the six world powers in 2015. He was replaced with Ali Bagheri Kani.

After the US pullout from the nuclear deal in 2018 and Iran's recent entry into a new round of negotiations with the aim of reviving the nuclear deal, Araghchi has been appointed as chief Iranian negotiator.

Despite the "hardliners'" criticism of the nuclear deal and the negotiations delegation — including Abbas Araghchi — the latter's closeness to the circles around Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei helped him assume his new post related to foreign policy. This comes as former Foreign Minister Kamal Kharazi — who heads Iran's Strategic Council on Foreign Relations — also appointed Abbas Araghchi as secretary general of this council upon orders from Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei.

Araghchi's new mission revolves around explaining the policies of the Iranian political system and giving insight into global public opinion to secure Iran's interests.⁽²⁶⁾ It is worth mentioning that the Strategic Council on Foreign Relations was established by Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei in 2006 as an institution parallel to the Foreign Ministry. It includes four committees: the political, economic, security and defense and cultural and scientific committees.⁽²⁷⁾

As for Bagheri Kani who was appointed in place of Araghchi, he previously served as deputy secretary at the Supreme National Security Council for foreign and international policy affairs. He also was a prominent member in Iran's negotiations team over the nuclear file under the government of former Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. The last position he assumed was Iran's deputy judiciary chief for international affairs. He is known to be one of the staunchest opponents of the nuclear deal signed by Hassan Rouhani's government with the six world powers in 2015.

After Ebrahim Raisi taking over the presidency and the "hardliners'" calls for replacing Iran's negotiators, there has been speculation that the nuclear file will be withdrawn from the Foreign Ministry and instead be assigned to the Iranian Supreme National Security Council. Here, it should be noted that the Supreme National Security Council of Iran — chaired by the president of the republic — was in charge of the nuclear file until Hassan Rouhani arrived at the presidency in 2013. During the same year, Rouhani assigned this file to the Foreign Ministry. In recent years, the issue of assigning the Supreme National Security Council with the nuclear file has been the "hardliners'" chief demand. They view the nuclear file from a security and not from a diplomatic perspective.

Nonetheless, the appointment of Bagheri Kani means that Raisi may make him Iran's chief negotiator. However, this will create more challenges and contradictions for him as he will have to lead any future negotiations between Iran and the signatories to the nuclear deal and intensify the efforts to revive the nuclear deal — which he once vehemently opposed.

As for the six world powers who await the resumption of negotiations, Bagheri's duty to lead the negotiations may convey negative signals such as the new Iranian negotiation team possibly breaking away and pursuing a different approach from its predecessor. It is likely to show stubbornness and intransigence, making the negotiations harder and inevitably prolonging them.

As for Mahdi Safari who has been appointed deputy foreign minister for diplomatic and economic affairs in place of Rasool Mohajer, his name was raised following Ebrahim Raisi winning the latest presidential elections — along with Bagheri Kani and Hossein Amir-Abdollahian — for the foreign minister position — but Abdollahian was selected for this post. Mahdi Safari served as Iran's ambassador in Austria, Russia and China. He then served as Iran's envoy to the negotiations regarding the Caspian Sea's legal status.

The position of deputy foreign minister for diplomatic and economic affairs has been created in recent years with the aim of directing Iran's diplomatic missions to play bigger economic roles. Mahdi Safari, in light of Iran's quest for economic diplomacy, calls for cooperation with neighboring countries as one of the strategic policies to alleviate the country's suffocating economic crises. He has also emphasized the need for efficient and effective communication and coordination between Iran's embassies overseas and the ministries regarding economic affairs at home. He is also one of the staunchest opponents of the Rouhani government for not turning to neighboring countries.⁽²⁸⁾ After signing the nuclear deal in 2015, he criticized this agreement, arguing that it does not serve Iran's interests. He also called for replacing some of its terms.

Conclusion

During his recent tour of several Iranian provinces, Ebrahim Raisi made a host of promises and pledged to deliver them. However, the Iranian street has become accustomed and frustrated with the promises made by Iranian officials and is aware that there is no hope in improving the economic and social realities which Iran is experiencing in light of the ongoing belligerency of the Iranian government, its refusal to interact positively with the international community and insistence on moving ahead with its expansionist policies and nuclear ambitions.

The new appointments carried out by Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian — and his position regarding Iranian foreign policy in the coming period — revealed that there is an Iranian intent on continuing with Tehran's radical policies which will not facilitate Raisi's quest in fulfilling his promises but will exacerbate the economic crises and the suffering of the Iranian people.

The Economic File

The August 2021 *Iran Case File* cast light on the economic ties between Iran and its eastern neighbor Afghanistan. In light of Iran becoming a member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), the September 2021 file addresses three topics: Iran's presence in trade organizations, whether regional or international, the nature of Iran's commercial orientations under Raisi's presidency, and the effectiveness of regional economic alliances for Iran's economy, whether the SCO or the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO).

1. Iran's Membership in Trade Organizations

Iran's membership in trade organizations is characterized by entrance into regional — not international — organizations. So far, Iran has not entered the World Trade Organization (WTO), the most prominent international trade organization — which seeks to accelerate the flow of trade and settle trade disputes among its 164 member states plus the member states having an observer status. Though Iran applied for membership to the WTO in 1996, the nature of Iran's antagonistic foreign policy with global countries and Washington's opposition to Iran's accession to the WTO has impeded Tehran's membership.

Iran wants to compensate for its failure to join the WTO by entering regional alliances or organizations—especially those tied to Central Asia, the Caspian Sea and its neighboring countries — to stand up to its international isolation and boost its commercial and economic interests with neighboring countries. This is an important strategic policy to boost Iran's regional influence and its expansionist ambitions. For example, Iran is a full member of the ECO and recently joined the SCO.

The ECO, headquartered in Tehran, was established in 1985 and consists of 10 member states. It initially included Iran, Turkey and Pakistan, and Tehran worked to include more countries from Central Asia and the Caucasus such as Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan (see Figure 1) and Afghanistan. Iran denied Armenia's and Georgia's entry due to Iran aiming to form a Muslim-majority alliance or attempting to create an Islamic common market that includes over 250 million peoples.^[29]

The ECO's vision until 2025 specifically focuses on creating integrated and sustainable economies, a free trade zone, highly educated societies, and strengthening governance via cooperation between member countries.^[30]

Figure 1: Member States of the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO)



Source: Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO).

As for the SCO, its members agreed on September 18, 2021, to give Iran full membership after it was an observer state for many years. The SCO was created in 2001 in China's city of Shanghai. It consists of eight member states plus observer states. The SCO began with China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. India and Pakistan joined in 2017 (see Figure 2) and finally Iran in 2021. However, it may take several years to complete the protocols for full membership.

Figure 2: Member States of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO)



Source: Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO).

The SCO aims to boost security cooperation among member states such as: tackling terrorism, crime, drug smuggling, and combatting separatist movements, and religious or ethnic extremism. This is added to cooperation in various other fields including the political, economic, scientific, technical, and cultural fields, as well as tighter coordination in the infrastructure, energy and tourism spheres. The SCO also aims to move towards creating a new democratic, fair, and rational political and economic order, as stipulated in its charter. ⁽³¹⁾

2. Current Orientations of Iran's Trade

Since Ebrahim Raisi took over the Iranian presidency and his new cabinet was named, the concept of “economic diplomacy” has been repeatedly uttered by various Iranian officials on different occasions — especially by Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian who has promoted this concept.

The use of this concept is nothing new. It was also used by Iranian officials under the former Rouhani government but since Raisi entered the presidential office, the concept has gained more traction. The concept refers to is giving priority to economic and commercial relations as part of Iran's foreign policy. Raisi's new cabinet ministers on many occasions have pointed to the concept and referred to developing relations with Iran's neighboring countries and Eurasia.

The former Rouhani government focused on advancing trade and investment relations with the West after signing the nuclear deal. However, the compass of Iranian trade under Raisi is likely to turn to the East and neighboring countries.

Iran aims to focus on regional alliances to attract hard currency. Tackling the deteriorating domestic economic situation, attempting to mitigate the impact of US sanctions and showing defiance against these sanctions and the West are the most important motives behind Raisi's government raising the concept of economic diplomacy and the slogan of “turning eastwards and to neighboring countries.”

This shift is in light of US sanctions negatively impacting all Iran's economic and living indicators. Inflation is nearing 50 percent and sometimes more, Iran has lost over \$100 billion in oil exports, and investments worth billions have left the country. The unemployment rate is increasing day after day, foreign trade has nearly halved, the local currency has lost nearly 75 percent of its value, the budget deficit has worsened, and the coronavirus has had a deep negative impact as well. In addition, there is lack of Iranian confidence towards the United States in particular and the West in general. As a result, the Iranian government decided to navigate eastwards and towards its neighbors.

In the framework of its trade orientations, Iran aims to establish much-needed infrastructure, whether inside or outside Iran, such as overland roads, railroads and crossroad railways. This includes completing the Basra-Shalamcheh railroad between Iraq and Iran. This is added to completing the construction of the ECO freight train. In this regard, Iranian Ambassador to Pakistan Syed Mohammad Ali Hosseini said, “These days, there is good news about the re-launch of the freight train on the ECO between Tehran-Istanbul-Islamabad.”⁽³²⁾

Iran also seeks to develop ports overlooking the Arabian Gulf such as Chabahar port in cooperation with India to reach out to Central Asian markets or the ports of the Caspian Sea. In this context, Iran's Parliament Speaker Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf recently said regarding the development of Iran's Amirabad port overlooking the Caspian Sea, "The port will be an economic bridge for the country with Eurasia."⁽³³⁾

Furthermore, there are increased domestic calls to use new mechanisms for carrying out financial transactions with neighboring countries. Gholamreza Marhaba, spokesman for the Iranian Parliament's Economic Committee, called for using the annual offering of bitcoins worth \$1 billion in Iran's foreign trade transactions⁽³⁴⁾— despite the fact that this amount makes up a scant percentage of Iran's \$100 billion foreign trade per year.

3. The Effectiveness of Iran's Regional Alliances

For starters, the success of regional alliances at the commercial and economic levels is dependent on many necessary prerequisites such as fluid monetary and financial transactions among allied countries, the provision of goods and services, the integration of production supplies, and an attractive investment climate. Other factors are also important for consideration such as market size and the purchasing power of respective populations, a high degree of political-economic interactions, tax and customs incentives as well as economic and political stability.



Looking at Iran's regional trade alliances with the SCO or the ECO, we find that there remains a host of critical challenges that are impeding the effectiveness of Iran's alliances and thwarting its capacity to secure key economic objectives in the short and medium run. These challenges include the following:

- Obstacles to the fluid flow of trade and remittances as well as impediments to banking cooperation due to the impact of US sanctions on Iran. This is compounded by Iran's refusal to sign the FATF bills related to financial transparency and international anti-money laundering.
- Iran's paltry trade flow with most of the SCO and ECO member countries. Iranian exports to the SCO were below 0.5 percent during 2020. These accounted for \$12 billion — out of \$3.118 trillion that constituted the total value of imports of SCO member states from the outside world. Iran's highest export to a SCO member is to Pakistan with 2.2 percent and Kyrgyzstan with 3.1 percent.⁽³⁵⁾
- Intersecting interests between regional countries — such as India and China — with the West which prompt such countries to prioritize their interests with the West at the expense of regional alliance interests and relations with Iran, which has tense disputes with the United States and the West in general. Tensions are likely to grow with a “hardline” government in power in Tehran.
- Moscow's reluctance to establish a free trade zone that involves SCO member countries. This move could deprive Russia of its political and economic sway over the Central Asian republics that broke away from the Soviet Union in the past. Russia considers these countries as its “historical sphere of influence” and it does not want to lose them to major economic superpowers like China or rising powers like India.
- Regional alliances by some countries are to tackle security threats and secure geopolitical interests rather than for securing economic deals. This is the case of Russia in the SCO.

Despite the substantial impediments that will remain in place in the short run that will continue to curb the effectiveness of Iran's commercial regional alliances, Tehran's trade — though small in terms of the overall value of trade within regional alliances — is quickly growing. Iran saw a 50 percent growth in the value of its trade and a 22 percent growth in weight over five months (from April to August 2021) with ECO member countries, compared with the same period last year.⁽³⁶⁾ If the United States lifts its sanctions or if Tehran finds alternative mechanisms for financial exchange with the outside world, there will be good opportunities for Iran to maximize the commercial and investment opportunities from regional alliances such as the SCO and the ECO. These financial alternatives include expanding the use of bitcoin in commercial transactions. In the long run, China and its currency, the yuan, will have more influence and the yuan will be a direct competitor to the US dollar and possibly even replace it as the world's strongest currency. This comes as China's economy is expected to be the world's leading economy by 2040 in terms of total GDP, which will definitely boost the value of its currency in the international market and weaken the grip of the United States over the global financial and economic system.

Conclusion

Iran has sought to compensate for its exclusion from international trade organizations by joining regional commercial organizations and directing its commercial compass for the time being towards the East, Central Asia, and neighboring countries. To achieve this end, Iran is taking practical steps on

the ground in the field of joint infrastructure projects. Iran's membership in regional organizations could lead to significant economic benefits in the future. However, there are a host of substantial challenges that impede Iran securing major economic benefits in the short run. In light of the existing challenges, it is clear that the ongoing celebration over Iran joining the SCO has more to do with the Iranian political system's propaganda and attempts to boost public morale by spreading "positive news."

The Military File

The August 2021 *The Military File* cast light on the developments regarding the security situation on the border between Iran and Afghanistan following the Taliban takeover of power in Kabul. It also highlighted the developments related to the Iranian nuclear file in light of the ongoing preparations to resume the negotiations between Iran and the P5+1.

In September, several challenges on the northwestern borders arose as a result of the escalation between the Kurds and the IRGC forces. Moreover, the political crisis between Iran and its northern neighbor Azerbaijan further escalated — with military movements. The Iranian security forces continue to face vast challenges because of Afghan immigrants wanting to enter Iranian territories to secure better opportunities and living conditions.

1. The Security Developments on Iran's Northwestern Borders

Iran's forces have launched a spate of attacks against the positions of Kurdish groups on the northwestern border with Iraq. Iran considers these groups to be socialist/leftist and nationalistic orientated, including the Komala Party of Iranian Kurdistan, PJAK or the Kurdistan Democratic Party. These groups are viewed as a security threat by Iran. Tehran is concerned about the growing separatist inclinations of Kurdish groups inside its territories. Iran cited the attacks launched by the aforementioned groups against Iranian forces on the border with Iraq to justify its military responses.

Though the present clashes between the Iranian forces and Kurdish groups are nothing new and date back to the past, it seems that the latest moves by Kurdish groups and their ongoing attacks targeting the border areas are a source of concern for Iran. This concern was reflected in the threats and warnings issued by Iranian officials, with the objective to legitimize any escalation launched by Tehran against Kurdish groups. Mohammad Bagheri, Iran's chief of staff, emphasized that Iran would confront Kurdish groups and their activities. He also emphasized the intention of the Iranian army and the IRGC to prioritize efforts to counter the activities of Kurdish groups. On September 19, Bagheri indicated Iran's armed forces — led by the IRGC — would wipe out the presence of terrorist groups, adding that the Iraqi government and the Kurdistan Regional Government must not allow counterrevolutionary groups to make Iraq a launching pad for waging attacks against Iran.⁽³⁷⁾

The IRGC launched attacks using artillery and drones on September 9 against multiple positions belonging to Iranian Kurdish groups inside Iraqi territories. The IRGC hit Erbil province's Sidekan district in the Balkayti region and Choman district in the same province — where Kurdish militants operate.⁽³⁸⁾

Hamza Sayyid al-Shuhada Headquarters, affiliated with the IRGC ground forces, on September 20 hit four Kurdish outposts with projectiles and several drones. The deputy commander of Hamza Sayyid al-Shuhada Headquarters, Brigadier Majid Arjamand Far, indicated that all the Kurdish groups' positions, command centers and ammunition storage facilities were targeted. He added that these groups were in close proximity to the Iranian borders.⁽³⁹⁾

The repeated shelling of Kurdish outposts indicate the growing Iranian concerns about Kurdish groups and their relentless attacks. In addition, Iran fears that Kurdish groups may possibly receive support from the US forces stationed at al-Harir airbase in Kurdistan's Erbil Province in northern Iraq. Yet Iran seeks to use this lever (attacks) to put pressure on Kurdish officials to expel US forces from their territories. Iran is also concerned that popular support for the activities of Kurdish armed groups could swell, hence impacting the Kurdish groups operating within Iran. It is expected that Iran will strengthen cooperation with Turkey which is also combatting dissident Kurdish groups to end any Kurdish ambition for rebellion or independence.

2. Tensions Between Iran and Azerbaijan Running High

Rasanah's Strategic Report for 2020 forecasted that Iran would be prompted to engage in new standoffs on its northern border. Regarding Iranian concerns following Azerbaijan's success in retaking its territories from Armenia with the backing of Turkey and Israel, the report said: "[There is] a new fault line that has emerged on the northern border. It was never on the cards, and it will consume much of its efforts to cover and secure its troublesome border with Azerbaijan."⁽⁴⁰⁾ A primary challenge for Iran comes from the Israeli presence in Azerbaijan and growing concerns that it will establish military bases within Azerbaijani territories to act as launching pads to target Iranian military and nuclear sites.

In light of the aforementioned, the signs of a crisis between Azerbaijan and Iran have once again emerged — with Azerbaijan blocking entry of Iranian trucks heading to Armenia via its territories — citing truckers not having appropriate licenses — and the decision to impose customs tariffs on transiting trucks.

In the aftermath of the trucks crisis, the escalation between Iran and Azerbaijan took on a new dimension following the drills dubbed "The Three Brothers" in which Azerbaijan, Turkey and Pakistan participated in the Caspian Sea.

Iran expressed its dismay at the drills. Tehran also claimed that the agreements signed between the five countries overlooking the Caspian Sea stipulate that any military presence is illegitimate. In response, Iran conducted a military drill on its border with Azerbaijan on September 19, 2021. Iran's ground and air forces participated — including a rapid intervention brigade and armored units. In addition, Iranian artillery, drones, and electronic warfare equipment were used in the drill and helicopters offered firepower support and there were airdrops using parachutes.

Brigadier Kioumars Haydari, commander of the Iranian army's ground

forces, explained the intent behind this drill. He said that the drill was carried out in the context of standing up against ISIS elements that have developed a presence in Azerbaijan during its dispute to reclaim the Nagorno-Karabakh region as well as to counter Israel's overt and covert presence.

He added, "We won't start the war, but we won't tolerate the presence of suspicious elements at our borders." Iran blamed Azerbaijan for its cooperation with Israel near the Iranian border.⁽⁴¹⁾

This Iranian escalation was criticized by Azerbaijan's President Ilham Aliyev who wondered why the IRGC was conducting a military drill on the border with his country. He said, "Of course, any country can conduct drills within its borders. It is a sovereign right. But the question here is: Why are such drills being conducted on our border? This is the question of the Azeri people, not mine." All Azeris worldwide pondered over this question. The crisis also included an Azeri complaint about the Iranian trucks crossing into Azeri territories without having the appropriate license to cross into Armenia.⁽⁴²⁾

The ongoing crisis is still open to several scenarios in light of various escalatory factors; however, the trajectory cannot be predicted. Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein-Amir Abdollahian expressed concern about the Israeli presence and the presence of terrorists in the South Caucasus and northern Iran. In a press conference with his Armenian counterpart in Tehran, he emphasized that his country will not allow some parties to impact its relations with its neighbors.⁽⁴³⁾

The crisis impacted the debates in the Iranian Parliament, with members of Parliament commenting on the matter and levelling accusations against Turkey and Azerbaijan and addressing President Aliyev's remarks. Iranian lawmaker Mahmoud Ahmadi Beigish threatened in a tweet that "if Turkey's misadventures and Azerbaijan's reckless acts continue, we will bring back Nakhchivan and Karabakh to Iran."⁽⁴⁴⁾ He argued that the two regions are part of Iran that separated from the country following its defeat against Russia during the 19th century.

For its part, Azerbaijan has support from the West, Turkey and Israel and is aware that Iran will seek to put more pressure on it. This has happened as there is talk about the formation of a pro-Iranian party in Azerbaijan which perhaps will seek to create a Lebanese Hezbollah-style militia. Amid this crisis, a new militia called Hossainyoun has emerged.⁽⁴⁵⁾ Baku believes that it needs to take preemptive action against Iran's moves to safeguard its national security. Hence, Azerbaijan and Turkey conducted joint drills to prepare Azeri forces on the border areas with Iran — in the Nakhchivan region. Azerbaijan's authorities closed the office of the representative of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and a Shiite shrine in the capital Baku.⁽⁴⁶⁾

3. Afghans' Exodus Towards the Iranian Border

In light of the fragile and unstable situation under the new Afghan government and the lack of employment opportunities for the youth, an Afghan exodus has begun towards neighboring countries in search of better living conditions. Iran is the prime country Afghans have moved towards because of loose security protocols despite difficult terrain in the border region. According to estimates

from the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC), more than one million Afghans have left Afghanistan — mostly heading to the Iranian border, the biggest exodus to Iran as a result of the harsh living conditions, concerns about the nature of the new government and doubts about the government's capacity to improve the economic situation and create job opportunities.⁽⁴⁷⁾

Afghans enter Iranian territories via unofficial crossings and with the help of smugglers who profit from smuggling operations. The Iranian border is an option for Afghans as other countries like Pakistan have closed their borders. Furthermore, Afghans prefer to migrate to Iran for other reasons as well, including their desire to cross into Turkey via Iran and then into Europe.⁽⁴⁸⁾

In light of this exodus, Iranian security and military forces deployed at the Iranian border with Afghanistan are seeing growing challenges. This exodus also places a greater burden on the Iranian economy which will have to shoulder the responsibility of catering to the new immigrants. Smuggling operations will surge further — a dilemma that has been and is still a significant headache for Iran's security forces. This Afghan exodus means that Iran's security forces will be grappling with its ramifications and will raise the alarm bells for a long period of time.

Conclusion

The international variables — including the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, Armenia's loss of territory to Azerbaijan in the recent war, and the subsequent changes to the geopolitical map, in addition to the mounting attacks by Kurdish groups to boost their influence and strengthen their quest for establishing an independent Kurdish state, as well as Iran's efforts to end the US presence in its neighboring countries, have generated major challenges on its northern, eastern and western borders. The Israeli attempts to get closer to Iran's borders has raised Iranian concerns, particularly as the security equation that it has worked to construct will crumble with Tel Aviv's proximity to its territories. The aforementioned have raised the costs and dangers facing Iran, forcing it to reconsider its approximations in relation to regional security, including further incursions into regional countries to keep growing security risks away from its borders. In light of the growing security issues, it has become necessary for Tehran to lay out different approximations for its relations with its neighbors— by forging stable relations that Tehran has always deemed ineffective. The new Iranian government entered office with slogans to improve the economy and relations with its neighbors as well as reentering the nuclear talks with new levers. However, the latest developments will not help in fulfilling the promises made, rather these developments will create multiple dilemmas and challenges for Iran at home and beyond.

Endnotes

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Arab Affairs

Arab Affairs is divided into four files. The first file discusses Iran's refusal to meet the demands outlined by the Arabian Gulf states in the 74th session of the GCC Ministerial Council as well as the Saudi-Iran reconciliation. The second file sheds light on the Houthis' sectarian violence, destroying the future of the Yemeni people; the peace efforts which are hindered by the Houthi military escalation — linked to Iranian orientations. The third file reviews Iran-Iraq relations through analyzing four major aspects: the significance and general context of Kadhimi's visit to Iran; implications and messages of Kadhimi's visit to Tehran; the outcomes of the visit; the motives behind Iran's escalation against Kurdish sites in northern Iraq. The fourth file discusses Assad's visit to Russia; Lebanon's power crisis and the implications of this crisis for Syria; finally, Iran's discontent over the potential loss of economic revenues from resolving the power crisis.



Iran and the Gulf

The file of Iran and the Gulf states last August included the repercussions of the Afghan crisis on relations between the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries and Iran. The altered scenario in Afghanistan poses new challenges to Tehran, which will impact its approaches in the region, including its interactions with the Gulf states. This month's file monitors the interactions between the two sides as the new Iranian government assumes its work. On the other hand, the Gulf states expect the new government to make positive changes in order to move relations with the Gulf forward in light of talks regarding creating a positive environment for reconciliation. Iran has also indicated its desire to prioritize the improvement of relations with its neighboring countries. However, the large number of contentious files between the two sides, and Iran's insistence on solutions that solely represent its view, impede the improvement of Tehran's relations, whether with its regional neighbors or with the international community. The aforementioned will be addressed through the following two axes: 1- the Gulf states' demands and Iran's continuous rejection of their demands, and 2- the Saudi-Iranian reconciliation and the nuclear file debate.

1. Iran's Rejection of the Gulf States' Statement

Iranian reactions to the recent statement issued by the Gulf states were not surprising due to Iran's constant attempts to circumvent the facts, and its efforts to keep intact its pressure tools so that they can be activated when needed, in light of its long struggle with the West. The mistrust continues between the two parties, despite the mutual multiple messages about the need to observe the principles of good neighborliness and establish beneficial relations. However, years of escalation have resulted in many contentious issues, widening the gap between the two sides, making it even more difficult to bridge the trust deficit.

1.1 The Gulf States Insisting on Their Options and Requirements Towards Iran

In emphasizing the firm demands of the Gulf states and their unified stance towards Iran, the Ministerial Council of the Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf, at its 149th session, which included the participation of Iraq's foreign minister as an observer, issued a statement that underlined the need to observe the basic principles stemming from the United Nations Charter and other international treaties governing the relations between states, such as the principles of good neighborliness, respect for state sovereignty, non-interference in internal affairs, the resolution of disputes by peaceful means, no use or threat of force, and the rejection of terrorism and sectarianism.



The statement also expressed the GCC's hope that the era of the new Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi will mark a positive shift to reduce tensions and build confidence between the GCC and Iran, in line with the council's principles as reported to the Iranian side.

The GCC statement stressed the need for negotiation to address Iran's nuclear file, and its destabilizing behavior in the region, as well as its sponsorship of terrorism and sectarian militias, its ballistic missile program, and the safety of international navigation and oil facilities. It stressed the need for the GCC countries to participate in the aforementioned negotiations and all regional and international discussions and meetings related to the mentioned matters, given that these files are related to the security, safety and stability of the region

The statement also denounced Iran's ongoing failure to comply with its nuclear obligations and its uranium enrichment beyond the stipulated level and it called on Iran to reverse this step and fully cooperate with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to ensure regional and international security and stability. The statement called on the international community based on international law to honor its responsibilities in light of Iran's repeated attacks targeting oil tankers in international waters. This would ensure that the attacks do not recur and would also help in preserving the movement of trade and oil supplies and in safeguarding security and stability in the region. The GCC statement also did not overlook Iran's ongoing occupation of the UAE islands, calling on Tehran to respond to the efforts of the UAE to resolve the matter through direct negotiations or resort to the International Court of Justice.⁽¹⁾

The United Nations platform was an appropriate forum for the Gulf countries to send their messages to the world and the Iranian government in particular about ways to improve relations and the most important reasons to foster better relations that would serve the interests of the peoples of the region. The Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud - may God protect him - confirmed in a speech delivered via a prerecorded statement for the 76th session of the United Nations General Assembly in New York, Saudi Arabia's permanent commitment to the principles and resolutions of international legitimacy, respect for the national sovereignty of all countries, and non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries. He also underscored the importance of keeping the Middle East free of weapons of mass destruction. Moreover, he stated that his country continues to confront extremist thought based on hatred and exclusion, and the practices of terrorist groups and sectarian militias that destroy people and nations. Regarding Saudi Arabia's relationship with Iran, King Salman underlined Saudi Arabia's vision towards Iran by saying, "Iran is a neighboring country, and we hope that our preliminary talks with it lead to tangible outcomes to build trust and pave the way to achieve the aspirations of our peoples in building relations of cooperation based on compliance with the principles and resolutions of international legitimacy, respect for sovereignty, avoid interfering in internal affairs, and its cessation of all forms of support for terrorist groups and sectarian militias that have brought only war, destruction and suffering to all the peoples of the region." He also stated that Saudi Arabia stresses the importance of ensuring that the Middle East region remains free of weapons of mass destruction. With regard to Iran's nuclear development program, he stated, "The kingdom supports international efforts to prevent Iran from developing a nuclear weapon, and expresses its grave concern over Iranian steps which are contradictory to its commitments and its claims that its nuclear program is peaceful. Furthermore, King Salman emphasized Saudi Arabia's resolute stance against all forms of terrorism, "The kingdom underscores the importance of the international community standing firmly against all those who support, sponsor, finance and harbor terrorist groups, sectarian militias or use them as means to spread chaos and destruction, extending their hegemony and influence."⁽²⁾

On the other hand, the Emir of Qatar Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani said that there is no solution to the differences in views with Iran except through rational dialogue on the basis of mutual respect, and this applies to the nuclear disagreements with Iran and returning to the nuclear deal.⁽³⁾

The speech delivered by UAE Minister of State Khalifa Shaheen Almarar before the United Nations also highlighted the renewed regional dispute between Iran and the UAE over the issue of the three islands, and that his country will never cease to assert its sovereignty over the islands occupied by Iran, stressing that the Iranian occupation is a flagrant violation of international law and the United Nations Charter.⁽⁴⁾

1.2 An Absolute Iranian Rejection

Iran rejects what it considers interference in its peaceful nuclear program, its missile program, and issues related to its deterrent defense policies. It believes

that the GCC demands are in line with US demands. In responding to the UAE's statement that calls for compliance with international law regarding the three Emirati islands occupied by Iran, the Iranian permanent mission to the United Nations issued a statement saying that "the three islands are inseparable swaths of Iranian territory and any claim on them is vehemently rejected."⁽⁵⁾ This is one of the aspects of Iranian inflexibility in dealing with the issues and concerns of neighboring countries, although Iran is in need of the UAE, especially for trade.

While Iranian officials claim that their new government's policy is based on advancing cooperation and developing positive relations with all neighboring countries, Iran's denial of ground realities and refusal to discuss controversial issues in accordance with international laws and regulations, not attempting to find approaches for dialogue and easing tensions, insisting on adopting its own perspective towards neighboring countries while it claims that it is ready to negotiate, reveals a strange Iranian paradox complicating the possibility of rapprochement between Iran and the Gulf states.

Although Iran is expecting to accrue significant benefits from the Gulf countries in order to strengthen its moribund economy which is helped by the fact that the Gulf countries are willing to initiate a new start to benefit both sides, it is clear that the Iranian political system is lost between the possibility of advancing its interests (by rapprochement with Iran's neighbors), and its inability to resolve decades of intertwined crises that can only be undone by taking corrective steps— which will impact badly the beneficiaries of Iran's status quo: most prominently the supreme leader and the IRGC.

2. Saudi-Iranian Reconciliation and the Nuclear File Debate

In an effort to reduce tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia, three sessions of dialogue have been held between the two countries, with Iraqi mediation. According to several sources, new rounds of negotiations were agreed upon after the government of Ebrahim Raisi took office in Tehran. The outstanding issues between the two parties do not significantly differ from the demands of the rest of the Gulf states, but the strong competition between Saudi Arabia and Iran is of great importance and must be considered when reaching an inclusive understanding between the Gulf states and their neighbor Iran.

2.1 The Nuclear Issue, a Basis for Dialogue

It seems that negotiations between Iran and the P4+1 countries represent a crucial issue in the dialogue between Saudi Arabia and Iran as Saudi Arabia stresses the need to link the nuclear negotiations with Iran's other activities including its regional interventions, and its armament and missile program, which pose a great risk to the security of Saudi Arabia and the stability of the region. Saudi Arabia's premise is that Iranian missiles and armaments, which the militias in the region are equipped with, are a major and direct reason for the continued chaos and destruction in the region, undermine regional security, and are an obstacle to regional development. The aforementioned have led to regional instability and have impacted the interests and security of Saudi Arabia.

Three sessions of exploratory dialogue were held between the two parties. There is also a fourth session on the list which was postponed; it was to be held during the tenure of the new Iranian government. Saudi Arabia has expressed concern about Iran's nuclear activities that increase the chances of regional instability. The Saudi Energy Minister Prince Abdulaziz bin Salman, during the IAEA conference in Vienna last September, reiterated Saudi Arabia's position on the need to ensure that the region remains free of weapons of mass destruction and to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons. He expressed his country's concerns about Iran's lack of compliance with international agreements, and Tehran's lack of transparency with the IAEA. He also added that Saudi Arabia supports all international efforts to prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon.⁽⁶⁾ The way to curb Iran's activities is to craft a well-knit agreement including all its destabilizing activities. Returning to the nuclear agreement without such a comprehensive and tight agreement may help Iran enhance its influence and impose its power in the region.

2.2 Iran's Attempt to Find a Pressure Card Against Saudi Arabia

In response to the Saudi energy minister's speech on Iran's nuclear program, Iran's Permanent Representative to the IAEA in Vienna Kazem Gharibabadi said, "Iran is implementing the comprehensive safeguards agreement signed with the agency completely and genuinely, and it fully believes that the failure to fully implement comprehensive safeguards sets alarm bells ringing anywhere, whether in Saudi Arabia or in Israel, and no one should be treated differently in this area. This should be rejected immediately without any prejudice and discrimination." He confirmed that "Iran, the agency and the international community will be very happy if Saudi Arabia and various countries in the Middle East are able to fulfill the same safeguard obligations Iran is currently implementing."⁽⁷⁾

However, Iranian attempts to undermine Saudi Arabia cannot be taken seriously by the international community and the IAEA, since it is enlightened enough and supervises Saudi programs for the peaceful use of nuclear energy, and has no objection to Saudi Arabia exercising its right to use peaceful nuclear energy. Saudi Arabia continuously coordinates with the IAEA to ensure compliance with the requirements regarding the safe use of clean energy, including the use of nuclear energy, one of the pillars of Saudi Arabia's vision for the future.

Conclusion

Gulf-Iranian relations are still in a state of tension. While the Gulf states are attempting to build relations with Iran on the basis of good neighborliness and mutual benefit in accordance with international regulations and laws, Iran still views the Gulf states from the standpoint of its tense relations and conflict with the West. Despite Tehran's commercial dependence on many Gulf states, it still does not prioritize cordial relations with the Gulf countries over militarism and interference in their affairs, which undermines the attempts of the Gulf to coexist peacefully with Iran.

Iran is trying to gain bargaining chips with regard to the nuclear file to counter the mobilization that Saudi Arabia has been supporting internationally to curb its expansionist and military programs in the region. The outstanding files will be initially presented in the negotiations between the two countries, in spite of the complexities and difficulties surrounding them. Resolving the deadlocks is in the interest of both parties and helps to foster normal neighborly relations away from the instability supported by Iran under the pretext of preserving its interests.

Iran and Yemen

In the File of August 2021, the developments in the Houthi-Iranian relationship under the new Iranian government, the Houthi military escalation, and the position of the Houthi militia on the peace process were reviewed. The September File discusses the developments in Houthi behavior dominated by a sectarian dimension, including the Houthis' horrific policy of sectarian liquidation, the Yemeni people's reaction, and the response of international organizations and parties to this crime, the features of the ongoing identity war instigated by the militia against the Yemeni people advanced through changing the curricula of the new school year as part of a series of moves by the Houthis to instill their sectarian and cultural ideology in society and to influence the impressionable minds of Yemeni children in order to recruit them to the frontlines. On the other hand, the File reviews international and UN efforts to bring peace to Yemen in light of the association between Houthi military escalation and the will and orientations of the Iranian government.

1. The Militia's Crimes With a Sectarian Dimension and the Targeting of Future Yemeni Generations

As an extension of the Houthis' exclusionary policies, September witnessed a series of measures undertaken by the militia to increase sectarian strife. These included the liquidation of Yemeni citizens, changing the school curricula to be consistent with the militia's sectarian tendencies, and recruiting children who have been ideologically indoctrinated in summer centers to be deployed to the battlefield.

1.1 Sectarian Liquidation and Replicating the Iranian Experience

On September 18, 2021, the Houthi militia executed nine Yemenis, including a minor under 18 years of age, on false charges. These executions led to wide popular Yemeni outrage and condemnation from the UN and other human rights organizations. The UN, the United States, Britain, France, the Yemeni government and regional countries condemned the brutal executions carried out by the militia after the victims were subjected to a mock trial on false charges.⁽⁸⁾

Many human rights organizations such as Rights Radar for Human Rights, the American Center for Justice, the Yemeni Coalition for Monitoring Human Rights Violations, SAM Organization for Rights and Liberties and others, reported that there were deliberate violations by the Houthi militia, starting with the victims being arrested, denied their right to freedom and kidnapped

for several months without the knowledge of their families. The investigation process witnessed massive violations as well, with the victims denied the right to self-defense to prove their innocence.

The Yemeni Minister of Information Moammar Al-Eryani described this crime as a replication of the Iranian government's practice of liquidating opponents following the Khomeinist revolution, and this crime does not differ from the field executions carried out by terrorist outfits such as al-Qaeda and ISIS. He added that this crime was premediated murder. He also called on international parties to put further pressure on the militia because this crime would open a dangerous door for the liquidation of more Houthi opponents in the future.⁽⁹⁾

The Houthi militia did not just execute the victims, but also informed their families of the confiscation of all their properties including real estate and money and ordered the families of the victims to pay the trial costs, which the Houthis estimated at 3 million Yemeni riyals.

The Yemeni minister of information described the brutalization of the families of the victims as "a great challenge to the international community, which condemned this heinous crime, and it is a flagrant violation of international laws and conventions, particularly the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights."⁽¹⁰⁾

1.2 Recruiting Children to Use Them in Battle

At the beginning of the new school year in Yemen, the Houthi militia made fundamental changes to the educational curricula, and deleted everything related to the memory of the Yemeni revolution against the rule of the Imamate in 1962. This move comes in light of attempts to change all aspects of life in the areas under their control, especially since Abdul-Malik al-Houthi assigned the portfolio of the Ministry of Education to the sister of Yahya al-Houthi, who made major changes to the educational system in Yemen, including to the administration in educational institutions.⁽¹¹⁾

Although the legitimate government and the Houthi militia have agreed not to include education in the current conflict, the Houthi militia has reformulated the educational curriculum with sectarian concepts and expressions of narrow sectarian dimensions. The information official of the Yemeni Teachers Syndicate Yahya Al-Yana'i linked the changes to the curriculum made by the Houthi militia to the creation of a sectarian identity which falls under its attempt to militarize education. This orientation is linked to the Iranian government.⁽¹²⁾

The Houthi militia has attempted to rewrite Yemeni history by including the ideology of Khomeini and the doctrine of Velayat-e Faqih in the school curriculum, such as mentioning the state of Tabaristan, an ancient Alawite state that was in northern Iran, and referring to the Arabian Gulf as "the Persian Gulf". In this regard, the deputy minister of education of the legitimate government said that "The Ministry of Education of the legitimate government is following with great sadness the distortion of the curriculum based on sectarian ideas having absolutely no connection with Yemeni society," and added, "We addressed all international organizations concerned, including

UNESCO and a number of other organizations, which in turn condemned the changes made by the militia in the educational curricula, including and sanctifying sectarian orientations.”⁽¹³⁾

The Houthi militia also continues to lure children in order to engage them in battle. This was confirmed by Yemen’s information minister who said that the majority of fighters involved in the recent military escalation by the Iran-backed Houthi militia were children who were lured by the militia through so-called summer centers. He called on the international community, the UN and child protection organizations to condemn the militia’s crimes against Yemeni children and to bring the militia’s leaders who are responsible for these crimes in front of the International Criminal Court.⁽¹⁴⁾

2. Efforts for Peace Countered by Houthi Military Escalations Linked to Iranian Orientations

Last September witnessed a rise in the Houthi military escalation inside and outside Yemen, coinciding with the actual start of the duties of the new UN envoy to Yemen, and the statements by some leaders of the Iranian military establishment, IRGC officials, who linked the Houthi military positions with the orientations of the Iranian government. We will review the implications of the Houthi military escalation which are linked to Iran’s role and its efforts to undermine the Yemeni peace process.

2.1 Houthi Military Escalation

In September, the Houthi military escalation inside Yemen coincided with the start of the term of the new UN envoy to Yemen. This military escalation by the Houthis was centered in the Ma’rib Governorate and also included the targeting of civilian sites in Saudi Arabia. Many observers saw the military escalation as a clear message from the militia indicating its rejection of international efforts intending to bring peace to Yemen. Yemen’s information minister described the Houthi escalation as blind submission of the Houthi militia to implement the Iranian agenda in the region, adding that they are indifferent to the high cost of the ongoing war and the worsening human suffering of the Yemeni people.⁽¹⁵⁾

In a statement reflecting the Houthi militia’s involvement in implementing the Iranian government’s agenda and political will in the region, Ghulam Rashid, the commander of the so-called Khatam al-Anbiya headquarters of the IRGC, quoting Iranian Mehr News Agency, said that the Iranian government has formed six divisions of armies in the region, including the Houthi militia.⁽¹⁶⁾ This is a clear indication that the Houthi militia and other militias in the region are connected to the IRGC.

2.2 The Role of the Iranian Government and the Houthi Militia in Disrupting the Peace Process

In spite of international and UN efforts, diplomatic activity and intensive moves in the peace process, especially by the UN envoy to Yemen Hans Grundburg and the US envoy to Yemen Tim Lenderking who held meetings with the parties seeking to bring peace to Yemen, and Yemeni officials in Riyadh, the Houthi militia responded to these efforts by imposing further escalation, showing

the world that it rejects any step towards dialogue in order to serve the Iranian project. The US envoy to Yemen referred to this escalation during his meeting with Yemeni Prime Minister Maeen Abdul Malik in Riyadh, where he confirmed the link between the Houthi militia's intransigence and the subversive Iranian role in the region.⁽¹⁷⁾

Yemen's Foreign Minister Ahmed Awad Mubarak also confirmed the Iranian government's role in the intransigence of the Houthi militia and the disruption of the peace process. He also said that the Iranian government had ordered the Houthis not to support a political solution until they captured Ma'rib.⁽¹⁸⁾

The recent Houthi escalation is linked to the desire of the Iranian government and the militia to disrupt international and UN efforts to bring peace to Yemen by trying to besiege the Ma'rib Governorate, despite the heavy human losses suffered by the militia in Ma'rib and growing calls to halt the escalation .

In contrast to the Houthi efforts to disrupt international efforts to bring peace to Yemen, the legitimate government and the coalition countries, led by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, confirmed their eagerness to work to establish security and stability in Yemen by supporting the political process and the efforts of the UN and US envoys. This was emphasized by the UN and US envoys through the latter's report to the House Foreign Affairs Committee, in which he affirmed Saudi Arabia's good intentions towards the Yemeni crisis and praised its efforts to end the suffering of the Yemeni people. In addition, His Highness Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman stressed Saudi Arabia's sincere desire to put an end to the Yemeni crisis and the seriousness of the peace initiative launched by Saudi Arabia in March during his meeting with US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan.⁽¹⁹⁾

Conclusion

The Houthi militia continues to violate the rights of the Yemeni people and undermine their cultural identity with sectarian dimensions, despite UN and international condemnations of its violations. The statements of Iranian officials have proven that the Houthis' violations and their sectarian dimensions are closely linked to the Iranian government's agenda and aim to serve its project in Yemen. Tehran continues to support the Houthi militia and instructs it to impose further military escalation to increase the complexities of the Yemeni situation, and prolong the Yemeni crisis and the suffering of the Yemeni people to serve its interests at the expense of the interests of the Yemeni people who seek to reach a solution in order to put an end to their suffering, which is worsening day by day.

Iran and Iraq

While the August 2021 File reviewed the objectives and implications of the Baghdad Conference for Cooperation and Partnership held in Baghdad in August 2021, evaluated Iran's discourse at the conference and its repercussions on Saudi-Iran talks in Iraq, and on the future of Arab-Iran relations, this File discusses the environment, significance, messages and results of the visit of Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi to Iran on September 12, 2021, and the motives behind the Iranian escalation against Iranian Kurdish opposition sites in northern Iraq.

1. Kadhimi's Visit to Iran and the Importance and General Context of the Visit

Heading a political, economic and military delegation, Kadhimi undertook a one-day visit to Iran on September 12, 2021, thus becoming the first Arab and international official to meet with Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi since taking office in August 2021. He also met with Admiral Ali Shamkhani, secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council, and many presidential advisers and military leaders.



Source: Media Office of Iraq's Prime Minister, Twitter, September 12, 2021, accessed September 30, 2021, <https://bit.ly/3uvHZ0t>.

The visit was significant for several reasons: firstly, the size of the Iraqi delegation that visited Iran, which included in addition to Kadhimi the ministers for defense, foreign affairs, finance, electricity, water resources,

planning, transportation as well as the national security adviser, the head of the intelligence service, the head of Iraq's Central Bank and the president of the Commercial Bank of Iraq. These individuals were part of the delegation because they understand the outstanding economic, water and security issues with Iran.

However, it is worth noting that Kadhimi did not meet Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei during this visit, unlike during his first visit to Iran in July 2020, which is a sign of possible Iranian discontent over Kadhimi's orientations. These include the Iraqi government's efforts to move from the non-state stage to sovereignty and independence, and to rebalance Iraq's foreign relations. Not meeting Khamenei is also an indication of the Iranian role in political alignments to boost the chances of pro-Iranian alliances in the parliamentary elections to be held in October 2021.

The second issue of significance regarding the visit was the agenda, which, according to Iranian media,⁽²⁰⁾ focused on several files relevant to Iraq's ongoing crises and efforts to alleviate these, namely: the electricity crisis due to Iran's refusal to give Iraq its share of electricity, and the sharp political and partisan competition to win the parliamentary elections to be held in October 2021 amid Iranian fears that its militias in Iraq may lose their electoral influence. This visit was undertaken against the backdrop of security turmoil in Iraq as a result of the US-Iran conflict as the Iranian militias in Iraq attacked American targets repeatedly. Kadhimi seeks to transform Iraq from an arena of tension, conflict and settling scores into an arena for dialogue by mediating between Saudi Arabia and Iran, and the United States and Iran. Kadhimi discussed the developments related to the railway connection project, and the increase in Iranian visitors to Iraq who participate in the Arbreen ceremonies.

The third important aspect of the visit was its timing. It happened at a time when Iraq is witnessing polarization among political factions in light of the impending parliamentary elections and their attempts to have a vital say over government formation by winning the majority of seats in the Parliament and increased attacks by Iranian militias targeting US interests in Iraq, such as the US embassy in Baghdad or the US consulate and military bases in Erbil. Iraq is also facing worsening electricity and water crises due to Iran's complete refusal to give Iraq its share of electricity and its continued block of water flows to Iraq. If Iran's excuse for not exporting electricity to Iraq is due to Baghdad's non-payment of outstanding debts, then Tehran's claim for blocking water flows to Iraq can only be interpreted as a leverage against Baghdad to implement its policies.

Fourthly, the visit came in the context of growing Iranian concerns about Tehran's diminishing influence as Iraq moves forward in returning to its Arab sphere. This was followed by Kadhimi's visits to Arab capitals in a bid to strengthen bilateral relations, and Iraq hosting various Arab conferences on its soil, such as the Baghdad Conference for Cooperation and Partnership, which had a balanced Arab presence. The conference indicated the inclusivity of the Iraqi arena, with Baghdad gathering many Arab leaders on its land during the end of August 2021. This was in line with the Kadhimi government's plan to

balance Iraq's foreign relations, and boost mediation efforts to reduce conflicts in the Iraqi arena.

Fifthly, the visit was carried out at a time when some Middle Eastern countries fear the resurgence of ISIS activity against the backdrop of the US withdrawal from Afghanistan and the Taliban's assumption of power. Iraq is among the countries that fear the return of the terrorist outfit, especially after the US withdrawal from Iraq at the end of December 2021.

2. Implications and Messages of Kadhimi's Visit to Tehran

Kadhimi's visit to Iran demonstrates his commitment to the principles that serve Iraqi security and stability, especially as it is about to hold parliamentary elections. Kadhimi's quest to achieve stability in Iraq is illustrated by his policy of balancing foreign relations by sending messages that Iraq is not affiliated with the Western or Eastern axis, and secondly, the Iraqi government's plan for transforming Iraq from being an arena of conflict into an arena of dialogue, by bringing the American, Saudi and Iranian points of view closer, and reaching a settlement on outstanding issues so as to put the region on an entirely new path.⁽²¹⁾

Kadhimi at this extremely sensitive time for Iraq is looking forward as the country approaches a new round of parliamentary elections and the US plans to withdraw from Iraq. Kadhimi wants to establish calm with Iran's militias in Iraq and with their leaders in Iraq, and wants to prevent Iran from continuing to reshuffle its cards in Iraq which will negatively impact the parliamentary election and its outcomes. The instability caused by Iranian militias in Iraq also impedes Iraq's transition towards sovereignty and independence. Kadhimi realizes that Iran has great influence in the Iraqi arena through the widespread proliferation of its armed militias into the joints of the Iraqi state, and Tehran's possession of political and economic arms with weight and influence in Iraqi territories.

Kadhimi also seeks to prevent the continuous Iranian escalation against the Kurdish community which is attacked by Tehran under the pretext of harboring Iranian Kurdish groups opposing the Iranian political system. The Kurds are an important component in shifting the political scales in the Iraqi parliamentary elections, especially in light of the good relations that bind Kadhimi with the Kurdish parties. Kadhimi also realizes that Iran has important pressure cards in the electoral file. Therefore, Kadhimi does not want to lose one of the influential components in the electoral equation.

The former Iranian Ambassador to Jordan Ahmad Dastmalchian believes that Kadhimi's visit to Iran is closely related to the issue of US troop withdrawal from Iraq as this would mark the beginning of a sensitive political time and Iran would need to be fully informed since it is an influential country in Iraq and West Asia.⁽²²⁾ Some Iraqi specialists highlighted other objectives behind the visit: the importance of discussions with Iranian decision-makers regarding the future of Iraq-Iran coordination to confront the possible return of ISIS el-





ements after US forces pull out from Iraq, building political capital with the Iranian side that supports Kadhimī's second term as prime minister, and facilitating Iraq's transition towards state sovereignty.

3. The Outcomes of the Iraqi Prime Minister's Visit to Iran

The issue of importance for Iraq is the achievement of security and stability through Iranian militias in Iraq halting their strikes against American targets. Iran has reaped some important gains as announced by Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi, namely: the cancelation of visas between the two countries, increasing Iran's share of Arbaeen visitors, and both countries agreeing to complete the railway line between Shalamcheh and Basra. Raisi also called for expelling US

forces from Iraq.⁽²³⁾

Kadhimī said that although there is a common border between Iraq and Iran of about 1,400 kilometers, Iraqi-Iranian relations are much deeper and broader than this border. He expressed his gratitude to the Iranian side for standing by Iraq in the fight against ISIS from the outset. He stated that the Iraqi government and people always support the Iranian people and their government against all the challenges it faces.⁽²⁴⁾

It seems that Iran has benefited more, especially if we look at the large number of Iranians who did not pay visa fees to Iraq in line with the new agreement between the two countries to increase the percentage of Iranian visitors, compared to the number of Iraqis entering Iran. The agreement to implement the railway connection project is mainly in Iran's interest because it is part of the wider Iranian project to establish an Iranian corridor linking Tehran to the Mediterranean through Iraq and Syria. This railway project also limits Iranian concerns about Iraq's implementation of the new Levant project with Jordan and Egypt, which if completed, would be a severe blow to the Iranian linkage project, and would limit its effectiveness.

4. The Motives Behind the Iranian Escalation Against Kurdish Sites in Northern Iraq

In an indication of a new Iranian escalation against the Iranian-Kurdish opposition residing in northern Iraq, the IRGC announced on September 8, 2021 that it targeted Kurdish sites affiliated with the Kurdistan Democratic Party (HDK)⁽²⁵⁾ that opposes the Iranian government and operates in Iraqi Kurdistan, particularly in Sidakan, Joman and Haj Omran in the Erbil Governorate, near the Iraq-Iran border. The IRGC attack was carried out by drones, military fighters and artillery was also used. From September 8, the Iranian shelling targeting Kurdish positions of the HDK continued for about three days. Iran threatened to expand military operations against the party.

The IRGC justified its military escalation against the party's positions because it repeatedly targeted the security of Iranian provinces such as Iranian Kurdistan, Kermanshah and West Azerbaijan by sending subversive groups to undermine security, and implement the plan of "global arrogant forces"⁽²⁶⁾ in reference to the United States.

Iran's escalation against Iraqi Kurdistan targeting Erbil International Airport which hosts a US base, or areas containing Kurdish opposition elements, at this specific time when Iraq is on the cusp of parliamentary elections, reflects its desire to shuffle its cards and complicate the Iraqi scene before the elections. This is an Iranian attempt to prevent an election result which is unfavorable to Tehran and its proxies in Iraq. This escalation sends messages to Iraq that Iran can inflame the situation in the Iraqi arena whenever it wants, as well as to the Kurdish party opposing the Iranian government not to support the growing discontent in the Iranian Kurdish regions which has grown because of the increasing economic and health crisis due to US sanctions and the coronavirus pandemic.

It is expected that Iranian attempts to shuffle the cards inside Iraq in general and in Erbil in particular will continue even after the parliamentary elections, to force Iraq not to accept the presence of American military advisers in Iraq after the US withdrawal at the end of December 2021 and to confront, as Iran believes, the growing Israeli presence in northern Iraq through the expansion of Israeli intelligence activities in the region.⁽²⁷⁾ There are also other motives for Iran's repeated drone attacks in Erbil; the province is important for Iranian expansion.

Conclusion

It appears from the current Iraqi developments that there are two critical factors that will shape Iraq's future transition towards statehood, its efforts towards achieving independence, its exertions to limit arms to the state, and its attempts to achieve relative balance in its foreign relations. The first factor is the result of the upcoming parliamentary elections and whether the new coalition will support the path towards Iraqi statehood or keep Iraq mired in the non-state phase. The second factor is the US withdrawal from Iraq and the end of the combat missions of the remaining US forces in Iraq. In this context, Kadhimi's visit to Iran comes to appease Iranian militias in order to

ensure that the elections are conducted without external interference, and to quell the Iranian escalation in northern Iraq which also aims to shuffle the cards prior the parliamentary elections.

Iran and Syria

The August 2021 file discussed the reasons and goals behind the Syrian escalation in Daraa, southern Syria, and the implications of the appointment of Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian and its repercussions for the Syrian crisis. In September, the new developments were an extension of the events that unfolded in August in regard to the energy file and its link to the Syrian escalation in Daraa. In this month, the file analyzes the attempts by Syria, Russia and Iran to impose pressure on the rest of the parties concerned with the energy issue in order to gain the greatest amount of consensus and understandings and secure their respective interests. Based on this, the key developments of September can be summarized as follows:

1. Bashar al-Assad's Visit to Russia: Implications for Iran

The unannounced visit of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to the Russian capital, Moscow, on September 14, and his meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin, led to extensive analysis regarding the significance of the visit and the various implications for many regional and international parties concerned with the Syrian crisis.⁽²⁸⁾ This visit came at a time when the Syrian crisis was witnessing diverse moves in various directions, and in the midst of an atmosphere of rapid developments in Syria and the region, which were undoubtedly related to the visit, or impacted the visit in one way or another.

Although the official statement issued after the meeting did not explicitly mention that the Iranian role was discussed at the meeting, this does not mean that this subject was excluded from the discussion between the two parties, for several reasons. Firstly, Russia's strategic interests conflict with any future influence of Tehran in Syria. Iran is concerned about Russia's plans to secure a political solution in Syria that would allow Moscow to control the situation in the long run and conclude agreements that would enable it to recover what it spent and ensure a security and military climate that would allow Assad to rule in comfortable conditions. This outlook would compromise the future of Iran's influence in Syria.

Secondly, the Syrian President's visit to Moscow came after the visit of Israeli Foreign Minister Yair Lapid. In the aftermath of the latter's visit, he issued a statement against Iran's military presence in Syria, and the launch of a coordination mechanism to advance understandings at the military level, especially since Russia had previously objected to some Israeli military operations that targeted several areas inside the Syrian borders. This had prompted Moscow to activate its air defense systems in Syria, which prevented

Israeli strikes from hitting their targets. Tensions, accordingly, dramatically escalated between Moscow and Tel Aviv, prompting an urgent need for dialogue and understandings between the two countries on Syria.⁽²⁹⁾

Thirdly, Russia has exerted efforts to reach an understanding and consensus on the Syrian crisis with the United States in two regions deemed vital by Washington, namely southern and northeastern Syria. Russia aims to lift some of the US sanctions imposed on the Syrian government in exchange for pressuring Assad to eliminate Iran from the southern border of Daraa, as part of Moscow's commitment to prioritizing Israel's security in this region. Russia also seeks to exploit the green light given by the Biden administration to transfer gas and electricity from Egypt and Jordan to Lebanon through Syria.⁽³⁰⁾

On the other hand, the possibility of US troop withdrawal from the northeast of Syria without establishing a consensual settlement with the rest of the parties inside Syria is a source of concern for both Russia and the United States. Moscow and Washington are interested in deciding on the party to deputize for US troops if they withdraw to avoid a vacuum, as happened in Afghanistan, and potential unrest on the Syrian-Iraqi borders, which would be a major opportunity for Iran and its militias in both Iraq and Syria to expand their activities. Iran may exploit the situation resulting from the potential eruption of tensions between Iranian militias and the Syrian Democratic Forces in this region.⁽³¹⁾

All of the above considerations require Moscow to ensure that the Syrian government will never commit violations, and Syrian guarantees as well as Iranian concessions in the country to settle the conflict. To reach this end, Russia, Syria and Iran ought to start a dialogue and coordinate efforts. Perhaps Putin's phone call with Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi, following Assad's visit to Moscow, means that strategic issues were discussed between the Syrian and Russian presidents, including Iran's presence in Syria. This visit also indicates that a new strategy will be undertaken to resolve the Syrian crisis involving Russian and Syrian coordination which would include addressing Iran's role in Syria and the region.⁽³²⁾

2. The Energy Crisis in Lebanon and Its Implications for Syria

Lebanon has been suffering severe political and economic crises, but the fuel crisis represents a dangerous trend that could lead to further volatility in the country. This crisis could directly impact other energy sources such as electricity. At this particular stage, Iran and Hezbollah appear to benefit from this crisis. The Secretary-General of Hezbollah Hassan Nasrallah announced his efforts to resolve the fuel crisis by importing ships loaded with fuel from Iran⁽³³⁾ to Lebanon via Syrian territory. Of course, this initiative by Iran and Hezbollah appears to be humanitarian on the surface, but the real purpose of this initiative is to achieve strategic and tactical goals for Iran in both Lebanon and Syria.

Faced with a range of political concerns, most notably the fear of Iran's growing role in Syria and Lebanon, the United States, through its ambassador to Lebanon Dorothy Shea announced that Egypt, Jordan and the World Bank

had been given the green light to address the energy crisis in Lebanon by constructing the Egyptian gas pipeline via Jordan and Syria to Lebanon. Recently, the repercussions of the nuclear agreement negotiations between the United States and Iran have become evident in regard to the Syrian crisis. It seems that the failure to reach understandings between the two parties regarding Iranian influence in the region, including Syria, prompted Washington to turn a blind eye to the passage of Iranian fuel ships via Syria towards Lebanon, and offer some concessions and facilities, accompanied by some Arab political and economic steps towards the Syrian government, in an attempt to give Syria immediate gains in return for stifling Iranian influence.

Both the Iranian and American moves led to benefits and costs that will be reflected directly or indirectly in the Iranian role in Syria. On the one hand, the Arab Gas Pipeline agreement will have a positive impact for Iran; Tehran considers it a first positive step leading to bigger steps in the future. Further, the gas project undermines the American position on Syria and will contribute to resolving the severe economic crisis in both Syria and Lebanon, especially the crisis regarding energy. On the other hand, Arab openness towards Syria and the implicit Russian-American understanding about cutting Iranian influence in Syria is of concern to Tehran. Therefore, it is expected that there will be Iranian pressure to obstruct the agreement and subject it to Iranian leverage tools, especially since Iran has great influence in Syria and has military forces on the ground and within the Syrian army. Moreover, Iranian militias are present in many Syrian border regions.

3. Iranian Dissatisfaction Over Its Weak Economic Returns in Syria

The Deputy Chairman of the Syrian-Iranian Chamber of Commerce Ali Asghar Zebardast acknowledged Tehran's economic competitive loss to Russia in Syria, and as per his official statement, he believes that economic relations with Syria are moving slowly compared to Russia's and Turkey's economic advantages in Syria.^[34] On the other hand, Mahdi Abbasi, the head of the Iranian Economic Office in Aleppo, Syria, believes that the level of trade between Iran and Syria does not correspond with the number of trade and commercial agreements that were signed with the Syrian side, especially when compared to the number of Iran's competitors in the Syrian market. Iranian exports to Syria amounted to about \$85.5 million, 2.5 percent of total Iranian exports, and \$11 million worth of Iranian imports from Syria, or 1.5 percent of total Iranian imports.^[35]

The aforementioned individuals have highlighted the extent of Iran's dissatisfaction with its economic returns from its diverse investments inside Syria and from the multiple agreements that have been signed in several areas between the two countries. The internal and international moves towards Syria may be the biggest motive behind the mentioned remarks. On the one hand, these remarks came a few days after Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's visit to Moscow, which led to the signing of a number of long-term economic agreements. It was also accompanied by a regional and international openness towards the Syrian arena, including the announcement of the reopening of

the Jaber-Nassib crossing, which will negatively impact Iranian economic ambitions in the Syrian market.

Conclusion

It can be said that Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's visit to Moscow, the issues discussed and addressed, whether about Syria, dealing with Israel and Iran, or forging understandings with the United States and the Arab countries as well as the regional and international moves in Syria, make it likely that the next stage in Syria will witness more developments. In particular, many regional countries may restore their relations with Syria to balance the international presence in the country.

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International Affairs

The International Affairs part discusses Iran's interactions with the United States and the Europeans. The Iran and United States file discusses three topics: US keenness to renew dialogue and Iran's preparedness to resume the nuclear talks; US pressure on Iran, and Tehran's available bargaining chips. As for Iran-Europe relations, the file reviews the most prominent interactions between the two sides in September: the latest developments in Iran's nuclear program; the Iran-UK push and pull policy, European health aid to Iran.



Iran and the United States

The United States still relies on the diplomatic approach to return to the nuclear deal with Iran and to control Iran's nuclear ambitions, seeking to include other issues in the deal through maintaining sanctions. The Raisi government has been working to rebuild internal consensus on the nuclear talks, underpinning the significance of dialogue and negotiations. It, however, wants to overcome the challenges it faced in the first round. The Raisi government wants to resume the Vienna talks from a stronger position and with bargaining chips to help it avoid making crucial compromises. Probably, Iran may, amid the US slouching towards Iran and the absence of alternatives, cross the nuclear threshold under the cover of the potential nuclear talks.

In this part of the ICF, we shed light on the developments in Iran-US relations in September 2021, highlighting three topics: the United States keenness and Iran's preparedness to resume the Vienna talks; US pressure on Iran; and Iran's cards.

1. US Keenness and Iran's Preparedness to Resume the Vienna Talks

Following the formation of the new Iranian government, the United States called on the European parties and Iran to resume talks on reviving the nuclear deal. The US president still believes that diplomacy is the best path to achieve this goal, the White House press secretary said in a statement on September 2021.⁽¹⁾ Biden reaffirmed this position in his remarks before the 76th session of the United Nations General Assembly. "We're prepared to return to full compliance if Iran does the same," President Biden said.⁽²⁾

Iran insisted that the United States is responsible for halting the nuclear deal, raising doubts over the US position — which according to the Iranians is contradictory after Washington imposed new sanctions on the country. The Raisi government, however, expressed some positiveness towards resuming talks if these lead to tangible outcomes. Raisi believes that the talks must lead to the lifting of sanctions without negotiating a new nuclear deal, adding that there must be guarantees for Iran.⁽³⁾

2. US Pressure on Iran

1.1 The US Affirmation of Preventing Iran From Acquiring Nuclear Weapons

The United States insists that it is committed to preventing Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons. The Biden administration, to reach this end, has been leveraging to submit the file to the Board of Governors, which will later submit it to the UN Security Council to urge Iran to return to the nuclear deal. Washington,

meanwhile, is reviewing European concerns over Iran's noncompliance with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) agreement on monitoring equipment concluded on September 21, 2021.⁽⁴⁾

1.2 Further US Sanctions and Iranian Attempts to Mitigate Their Ramifications

The US Treasury Department sanctioned 13 individuals and eight entities affiliated with Iran and Hezbollah. These individuals are from Iran, China, Kuwait, and Lebanon. The sanctioned companies' headquarters are in the UAE and Hong Kong.⁽⁵⁾ The United States and Qatar coordinated measures on September 29, 2021 to counter a major financial network for Hezbollah over funding the group's activities. The US Department of Treasury sanctioned four Iranian intelligence operatives over a failed "plot to kidnap a US journalist." Three Florida residents have been charged in a federal district court in Miami with crimes related to their violations of US sanctions on Iran and money laundering. Google Play removed Iranian applications from its store to halt Iran's e-trade activities.⁽⁶⁾

1.3 Wider US Cooperation With Israel

The departure of Benjamin Netanyahu and the election of a new Israeli prime minister offered a better chance for further coordination between the Biden administration and Israel on Iran. Biden told Netanyahu's successor Naftali Bennett during his visit to the White House, "We're putting diplomacy first and we'll see where that takes us. But if diplomacy fails, we're ready to turn to other options."⁽⁷⁾ The talks resulted in appointing former US Ambassador to Israel Dan Shapiro to the US State Department's Iran policy team, who will be tasked with coordinating with Israel on regional issues related to Iran. They also agreed to conduct a joint exercise in the Red Sea to test the possibility of closing the Gulf of Aqaba and preventing Iranian war vessels from sneaking into the Gulf.

1.4 US Team on Iran Includes Officials With "More Hawkish" Stances on Iran

Robert Malley, US special envoy to Iran, formed a covert group to negotiate with US officials who adopt "more hawkish" stances on Iran — including officials who worked for the Trump administration. It seems that the Biden administration have prepared an alternative plan if the current nuclear talks with Iran fail.

1.5 Coordinating Efforts With Regional Powers

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken discussed with the Arabian Gulf states efforts to forge a unified approach to establish a permanent solution to the Yemeni conflict, continue on the diplomatic path to return to full compliance with the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), and counter Iran's continuous aggressive behavior in the region. On the regional level, Washington funded the Lebanese army with \$47 million. It believes that supporting the Lebanese army will help it to be a counter-power to Hezbollah and will enhance its role in the future.



1.6 Using Dual-Nationals as Bargaining Chips

Two thousand days after the arrest of UK-Iranian activist Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe in Iran, Blinken called on the Iranian authorities for the immediate release of Ratcliffe and all dual national detainees in Iran.

3. Iran's Bargaining Chips

3.1 Nuclear Escalation

The IAEA stated that Iran produced 10 kilograms of uranium enriched to 60 percent purity and 84 kilograms of uranium enriched to 20 percent purity. It is a great spike in production in comparison to the production level recorded three months ago. Iran, apparently, is keen to continue its uranium enrichment activities before returning to the nuclear deal. It called on IAEA Director General Rafael Grossi to hold talks in Tehran, in an attempt to avoid passing any resolution by the Board of Governors condemning Iran. Though the recent agreement between Iran and the UN watchdog on monitoring equipment and installing memory cards in cameras reduced tensions, Iran again did not comply with its commitments. It denied access to UN inspectors who were seeking to visit the Karaj centrifuge assembly site to reinstall cameras. The UN watchdog condemned Iran's violation of the deal.

3.2 Enhancing the "Heading Towards East" Policy

Iran has been working to find alternatives to counter the isolation imposed by the United States and mitigate sanctions. Its membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) boosted its policy towards the East. Iran has an



opportunity to increase its exports to the organization and enhance its regional and international stature because China and Russia, Iran's neighbors, are members in the SCO.⁽⁸⁾ Iran also wants to expand its trade relations with Afghanistan following the US withdrawal — given the fact that Afghan traders played a pivotal role in supporting the Iranian rial through the daily influx of dollars, estimated at \$5 million daily, before the US withdrawal.

3.3 Trade Cooperation and Alternative Financing Mechanisms

During his trip to New York for the United Nations General Assembly, Hossein Amir-Abdollahian was quite keen, when meeting his counterparts, to discuss possible ways to enhance economic and trade relations with Iran as well as finding alternative financing mechanisms. Iran and Venezuela forged a new cooperation strategy to pay debts including striking a new oil “barter” deal with Iran.⁽⁹⁾ The new Iranian Oil Minister Javad Oji has adopted a program known as “energy diplomacy” which aims to increase oil and gas exports to Iran's neighbors, especially Iraq and Turkey.

3.4 Joining an International Front Resisting the United States

Iran believes it is necessary to form an international coalition comprising the countries affected by US sanctions, i.e., to establish the “Club of Sanctioned” countries to tackle their problems and defeat US sanctions through concluding deals between the club members. Iran along with other countries affected by US sanctions, China and Russia, seek to create alternative financial channels to SWIFT – which is dominated by the United States – through virtual currencies and curb US hegemony over the global economy through SWIFT. China has

actually allowed Iran to trade via virtual Chinese currencies to circumvent US sanctions. In return, Iran sent oil tankers from Iran to Syria, reaching Lebanon to confirm that sanctions are ineffective.

3.5 Military Cooperation With Russia

Iran will soon receive Superjet-100 aircraft, according to Iranian sources quoting Russian news sources. The director of Sukhoi said, “The delivery will be soon and the deal concluded after negotiations will make create benefits for Iran.”

Alireza Nazari, an Iranian lawmaker, said that Iran has developed drone technology to the extent that Iranian-made drones are able to fly at low altitudes. He claimed that the defense systems of Iran’s foes cannot detect them, adding that Iran’s drone capability has shaken Iran’s “enemies” to the extent that they have formed a specialized working group to monitor this issue. The Israelis met with the Americans and proposed a mechanism for regional cooperation to counter Iran’s drones, he said.⁽¹⁰⁾

3.6 Military Pressure on the US in Iraq

The Iran-backed militias in Iraq conducted attacks against US bases at Erbil Airport and the US consulate. According to Iran, Al-Harir airbase, located at Erbil Airport in Iraqi Kurdistan, where US troops are extensively deployed, helps the separatist Iranian-Kurdish groups against Iran.⁽¹¹⁾

4. Outcomes and Prospects

Though Washington and Iran are eager to return to the nuclear talks, the way to return to the negotiating table is still ambiguous. Iran’s foreign minister said that Iran is reviewing the outcomes of the previous rounds. So, it is still not confirmed whether Iran will resume talks on the same path — which were halted on August 21, 2021 — or if Iran will return with a new framework. Iranian officials are still adherent to lifting all sanctions and preventing the inclusion of other thorny issues in the negotiations such as the country’s ballistic missile program, terrorist acts and regional behavior. They, apparently, tasked the National Security Council to play the pivotal role in negotiations.

It seems that Iran has been playing for time in the talks, showing a tougher stance on its major demands. The Iranian government, at the same time, continues with its policies and political maneuvers, on several levels, to mitigate the ramifications of US sanctions and to avoid making crucial compromises — by trying to counterbalance US and European pressure.

The United States still maintains its sanctions policy towards Iran, imposing new sanctions to push Iran towards negotiations. Despite Iran’s maneuvers, the United States and the Europeans seem adherent to their position. Iran will probably not be able to reap more gains through its nuclear blackmailing amid the mounting economic crisis the Raisi government is facing. The situation at home is on the brink of erupting into large-scale protests. Therefore, due to these conditions, Raisi might be forced to quickly return to the negotiating table without securing guarantees.

Conclusion

Both parties, Washington and Tehran, are waiting to return to the negotiating table. Each country has its own relative estimations of the negotiation outcomes. Iran thinks that it has a better opportunity in this phase of reviving the nuclear deal without making crucial compromises. If the disagreement between Washington and Iran continues, the potential ramifications will be considerable for both. Iran has become closer to crossing the nuclear threshold under the cover of nuclear talks. The Biden administration, then, will face a challenge in providing diplomatic alternatives because the maximum pressure policy will require greater efforts, and may hinder Washington's foreign policies towards China and the Middle East. At the same time, it will be costly for Iran to continue with its nuclear policy, posing considerable dangers to the Middle East. If Iran insists on its nuclear policy, it should be prepared for unexpected international sanctions and potential international consensus against its nuclear breaches.

Iran and Europe

The ICF of August discussed the context of political communications between Europe and Iran as well as the European attempts to forge ties with the new Iranian government while pressuring Tehran on its human rights record and their temporary disagreement on maritime security. In September, however, the Europeans focused more on issues related to Iran's nuclear program and returning to nuclear negotiations. Iran and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) held a sequence of meetings to reach a satisfactory settlement on installing cameras at Iran's nuclear sites and Iran's cooperation with the requirements and inquiries of the UN watchdog inspectors. In this part, we review Iran-Europe relations through discussing three main topics: issues related to Iran's nuclear program; the Iran-UK push and pull; and European humanitarian aid to Iran.

1. Nuclear Deal Issues

Most of the European interactions with Iran during September focused mainly on urging Iran to quickly return to the nuclear talks without delay, urging Tehran to cooperate and respond to the IAEA inquiries. Following his meeting with Iranian Foreign Minister Iran Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, EU High Representative Josep Borrell expressed his "concern about the overall trajectory of the Iranian nuclear program."⁽¹²⁾ He reaffirmed again the great importance of a quick resumption of the Vienna talks without postponing the return to the deal.

Following serious tensions between the UN watchdog and Iran in recent months regarding installing monitoring cameras at Iran's nuclear sites, the agency managed to conclude a deal with Iran that new memory cards would be installed into cameras monitoring the country's nuclear program. No further details were disclosed about the deal. It seems, however, a satisfactory agreement between the two sides was forged by Vice-President of the Iranian Atomic Energy Organization Mohammad Eslami and the head of the IAEA Rafael Mariano Grossi.⁽¹³⁾

There are other considerable political tensions and complexities regarding Iran's nuclear activities. According to reports, the German police arrested a German-Iranian man, suspected of exporting equipment allegedly used in Iran's nuclear and missile programs in a blatant violation of European sanctions. The suspect, identified as Alexander J., had shipped equipment worth 1.1 million euros to an Iranian whose company in Iran was blacklisted by the EU.⁽¹⁴⁾ The Europeans, in spite of this, are still keen to push the Iranians forward to return to the nuclear deal while activating diplomatic and legal levers of pressure to deter Iran's nuclear breaches.

2. Iran-UK Push and Pull

Political skirmishes continued to mount between the UK and Iran. Iran's Foreign Minister tweeted that in a phone call with former UK Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab, he called on the UK government to pay its old debts to Iran (before Liz Truss was appointed foreign secretary).⁽¹⁵⁾ The debts go back to the 1970s when the UK concluded a defense deal to sell Iran tanks. Iran paid for the undelivered tanks. Britain did not deliver all the tanks. The contract was canceled following the topple of the Shah and the clergy's domination of the ruling system. The Iranians have repeatedly used this story to place pressure on Britain and tarnish its international image as a country committed to international charters and bilateral contracts. The rising tensions between the two countries have been evident in many incidents, for example the Tanker War and the detainment of British-Iranians by the Iranian government. Before Abdollahian and Truss met on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly session, the husband of Zaghari-Ratcliffe, an Iranian-UK detainee, called on Truss to defend the rights of UK citizens when meeting with the Iranian foreign minister. He accused the Iranian authorities of using his hostage wife as a bargaining chip to extract the payment of the debt from the UK.⁽¹⁶⁾

3. The Context of European Health Aid to Iran

The Europeans have always adopted a dual policy in their political interactions with Iran. On one side they use diplomacy, offering incentives for further Iranian cooperation. On the other side, they impose sanctions over Iran's human rights violations and terrorist acts. In September, many European countries offered to deliver health services to Iran; they sent a considerable amount of European COVID-19 vaccines while others expressed their willingness to provide Iran with vaccines in satisfactory deals.

Some European countries expressed their support for the Iranian government's efforts to receive vaccines through the COVAX facility; the global vaccine procurement mechanism. Switzerland donated 1 million COVID-19 vaccines to Iran. Iran's Foreign Ministry Spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh expressed his country's gratitude for this Swiss move.⁽¹⁷⁾ Mehr News Agency reported that 1.5 million COVID-19 vaccines were sent from the Netherlands to Khomeini International Airport. The vaccines were directly delivered to the Health Ministry in the presence of experts from the World Health Organization (WHO) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF).⁽¹⁸⁾

The Europeans use health aid as a soft power tool to persuade Iran to comply with their policies as well as political, economic, and military objectives. Here, we cannot overlook the current regional and international tensions and interactions; the Europeans are fully aware of Iran's rapprochement with Russia and China. Iran has never stopped condemning the West, emphatically declaring its policy of "Heading Towards the East" and cooperating with neighboring countries. The Europeans are concerned about losing their investment opportunities and economic relations with Iran. Upon the aforementioned review, it becomes apparent that Iran-European relations mainly rely on: a return to the nuclear deal in order to lift sanctions and ensure Iran's commitment to restrict

its nuclear program; health aid to induce Tehran to allow European access to the country's investments, economy, and political influence when the Iranian disagreements with the West are resolved.

Conclusion

European relations with Iran in September 2021 mainly revolved around pushing Tehran toward returning to the nuclear deal and finding the appropriate ground for establishing trade and economic ties. The Iranians, however, do not now seem interested in economic and investment cooperation with the Europeans; their top priority is to lift sanctions to save their deteriorating –almost collapsed – economy. To reach this end, they have resorted to placing pressure on the Europeans through their “Look East” policy and doubting the feasibility of their relationship with the Europeans, who – according to the Iranians – always operate in accordance with US policy.

Endnotes

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