

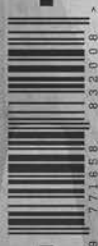
MONTHLY REPORT



# IRAN CASE FILE

Your window on Iran from inside and abroad

October 2021



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

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# IRAN CASE FILE (ICF)

October 2021

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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In October 2021, there were a lot of events and interactions at all levels internally, regionally, and internationally. It seems that some of these developments, including: the IRGC's control of important positions in Ebrahim Raisi's cabinet, the sharp rise in prices and the soaring inflation rate, the victory of cross-sectarian blocs in the Iraqi parliamentary elections, and Tehran's declaration of its willingness to return to the Vienna negotiations before the end of November, indicate Iran's future course of action.

Internally and at the ideological level, the Shiite marjaya in Najaf took a neutral stance towards the parties and the names of the candidates in the recent Iraqi parliamentary elections. However, in a subliminal message and through an implied reference to the Iranian arms in Iraq, the Najaf Marjaya advised its followers not to pawn Iraqi sovereignty to foreign elements, learn lessons from past experiences, and not elect corrupt candidates. It also urged Iraqis to participate in the elections to prevent the recurrence of past government failures, indicating its dissatisfaction with past administrative performances. On the other hand, Iran used the fatwa weapon in order to influence Shiite taqlid incubators against Najaf by issuing fatwas prohibiting the presence of US forces on Iraqi soil and hostility towards the Popular Mobilization Forces.

At the political level, the IRGC secured positions in the new government, particularly key ministerial and leadership positions. Over the recent period, Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi appointed a number of IRGC members as governors in some important Iranian provinces. Interior Minister Ahmad Vahidi, an important leader in the IRGC, played a major role in these appointments. Vahidi's appointment raised fears in the Iranian street about the possible militarization of the Ministry of Interior which may base future decisions



exclusively within a security paradigm. The process of assigning a number of ministries and provinces to members of the IRGC reflects the intention of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei to strengthen the government with figures who are close to him and known for their extremism and loyalty, to ensure the continuation of his hold over all the institutions of the Iranian political system. As part of the Iranian government's efforts to win the confidence of minorities and dispel accusations of discrimination and persecution against them, the Sunni Kurd Abdul Salam Karimi was appointed as an adviser to Raisi on religious minorities affairs.

Economically, the Iranian market saw a sharp rise in prices, reaching unprecedented levels not witnessed since the Iranian revolution in 1979. Leaked data prepared by the Central Bank of Iran revealed that the inflation rate in Iran from August 2020 to August 2021 reached 58.3 percent. Of course, there are many reasons for this high rate of inflation such as the sharp budget deficit and the government's failure to address it, the increased injection of liquidity into the economy, supply and demand imbalances, and poor market management. This rise in inflation will have many repercussions, whether on the individual or society, such as the loss of purchasing power, capital flight and the erosion of the value of savings, as well as the increase in class differences and the unequal distribution of wealth between the rich and the poor. The Iranian government will not be immune from the repercussions of this inflation in the future, especially with regard to the factional protests that

arise from time to time due to the poor economic situation, living conditions, high prices and unemployment.

There were also several developments at the military level. The tensions between Iran and Azerbaijan pushed units of the army and the IRGC to conduct two military drills, the first in the northwestern regions, called the “Khyber Conquerors” drill, and the second in the southeastern regions known as the central desert area, called the “Defenders of Velayat Skies.”

At the level of military relations between Iran and Russia, an Iranian military delegation headed by the chief of general staff of the Iranian armed forces visited Moscow and it was agreed with the Russian side that Iran would buy Russian fighter jets and helicopters. Iran also expressed its desire to develop its navy. On the recent developments in the Iranian nuclear file, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) announced that it was no longer able to verify Iran’s nuclear activities, after Tehran rejected requests to repair surveillance equipment that it claims was destroyed in a cyberattack on a major nuclear facility in June 2021.

At the level of Iran’s interactions with the Arab countries, Iran is aware of the magnitude of the strong relations between the Gulf states and Pakistan, and fears that these relations may have an impact on Afghanistan, contrary to its interests in this country due to the good relations between the Taliban and Islamabad. To prevent this scenario, Iranian diplomacy was active during October towards Pakistan in order to neutralize it and keep it away from any action that would harm Iranian interests. In this regard, the Chief of Staff of Iran’s Armed Forces Major General Mohammad Hossein Bagheri met with Prime Minister Imran Khan. However, these Iranian efforts collide with the strength of Gulf-Pakistani relations and their ramifications on Iran in various fields. In regard to the Iranian-Saudi negotiations, it seems that these negotiations have not yet achieved much progress to warrant optimism despite the cordial atmosphere, due to continued Iranian intransigence in the region and the failure to discuss the outstanding issues.

In regard to Iran’s role in Yemen, the Houthis continued their military escalation in the Ma’rib Governorate to control it, but they suffered heavy losses. During the bombardment, the Houthis targeted residential areas, mosques and educational centers, and dozens of civilians were killed or wounded. This situation led the UN Security Council and the United States to condemn the Houthi violations and call for halting the escalation. In continuation of promoting sectarian ideas, and to consolidate support for the Iranian government, Sana’a held its first conference for Shiite hawzas which included representatives from Iran, Iraq and Lebanon, and the Prophet’s birthday was celebrated in an Iranian manner, meaning that the Houthis have been profoundly influenced by Iran and they are willing to implement Iran’s project in Yemen.

Iraq held its parliamentary elections following a series of significant events starting with the October 2019 protests, the electricity crisis which Iran further exacerbated by refusing to provide Iraq’s share of electricity, Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi’s attempts to transition Iraq towards independence

and sovereignty, and the opposition he faced from Iran and the Iraqi militias affiliated with it because his moves were contrary to Tehran's interests and gains. The electoral lists included three main alliances: Shiite, Sunni and Kurdish, some of which were cross-sectarian demanding Iraqi independence, whereas others were sectarian wanting Iraq to remain in Iran's sphere of influence, such as the Fatah Alliance. The final election results indicated growing Iraqi awareness about the dangers of sectarian alliances and their role in the decline of Iraq's status at the regional and international levels. They voted in favor of cross-sectarian alliances such as the Sadrist Movement and the Sunni alliances. This shift in the Iraqi electoral scene revealed the increase in the level of popular rejection of Iran and its sectarian arms.

In relation to Iranian interactions in Syria, drones attacked Al-Tanf military base, where US and British forces serving in the international coalition are based. The importance of this base stems from its critical strategic location for the international coalition forces and Iran. Iran was accused of being involved in the attack to force Washington to respond to domestic calls for its military role to be replaced with a diplomatic one in order to effectively tackle regional and international crises. On the other hand, Russia is positioning itself as a mediator in a number of Syrian files between local and international parties, with the aim of creating harmony between its interests and the aspirations of other international parties, including Iran and Israel. The visit of Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian to Moscow was part of Russian efforts to contain the escalating tensions between Tehran and Tel Aviv in Syria.

In international affairs, the United States expressed concern about Iran's reluctance to return to the Vienna talks, and the continued expansion of its nuclear program, away from IAEA safeguards. It seems that the recent US pressure and threats against Iran have forced Tehran to respond to European efforts and announce its readiness to start negotiations with the P4+1 group in Brussels before the end of November 2021. In the context of the confrontation between the two countries, the Biden administration intensified its consultations with its allies to pressure Iran and build an international and regional consensus on an approach to tackle Iran's behavior. The United States





also established an unmanned naval space task force called TF 59. In response, Iran added six large units of speed boats and drones to the IRGC's naval and air forces with the objective of attacking TF 59.

Finally, it seems that the diplomatic pressure policy adopted by the European countries in their interactions with Iran succeeded in reaching common ground between the two parties on returning to the nuclear negotiating table. Tehran announced its willingness to return to the Vienna negotiations before the end of November 2021. In spite of this breakthrough, Europe continued to pay attention to the Iranian human rights and terrorism files. In this regard, the German capital, Berlin, witnessed protest rallies demanding the prosecution of Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi for the massacre of political prisoners in the 1980s. There was also another gathering in Berlin in support of political prisoners. In Sweden, the trial of former Iranian judge Hamid Nouri, accused of ordering mass executions and other related crimes, continues.

# Internal Affairs

**T**he Internal Affairs section of the Iran Case File (ICF) is divided into four files. The Ideological File discusses the position the Najaf and Qom marjayas on the Iraqi parliamentary elections. *The Political File* reviews how members of Iran's Revolutionary Guard have assumed significant posts in the Raisi government, explaining the importance of appointing Mamousta Abdul Salam Karimi as Raisi's advisor for ethnic and religious minorities affairs. The Economic File discusses three topics: the current inflation rate and examples of soaring food prices; the reasons behind the inflation crisis and the extent of the government's competency in addressing it; and the consequences of rising inflation on the average Iranian, society and the political system. *The Military File* examines three topics: the objectives of Iran's military exercises, the developments regarding Tehran's military relations with Russia and the nuclear file.



# The Ideological File

*The Ideological File* sheds light on the developments regarding the Shiite religious elites in general and the Iranian ones in particular, and their impact on the Iranian religious and political landscapes as well as their ramifications on the Shiite community in the region. In September 2021, *The Ideological File* touched on the developments regarding Iran-Taliban relations at the sectarian level and its political repercussions in light of the Iranian elite's vision and the Taliban's practices on the ground. This month, *The Ideological File* discusses the Najaf marjaya's position on the Iraqi parliamentary elections and Tehran's employment of religious discourse to counter Najaf's position and influence its taqlid incubators.

## 1. The Najaf Marjaya and the Elections

The Najaf Marjaya believes that the form of the government must be constitutional during the occultation of the Infallible Imam. It believes that elections and selection are the best options to manage political affairs regardless of whatever their shortcomings are. Over the course of history, Najaf has believed that elections are a critical safeguard to curb the exercise of power and motivate popular participation. This was pointed out by the leading Shiite scholar Mirza Naini, who taught the current marja Ayatollah Ali Al-Sistani.<sup>(1)</sup>

This political vision contradicts the one presented by the theory of Wilayat al-Faqih whose ideologues believe that the jurist should rule while the Infallible Imam is absent. They neither believe in elections nor for the public to endorse the ruler, except when the proponents of Wilayat al-Faqih seek to legitimize "the Islamic regime."<sup>(2)</sup>

### 1.1 The Call to Curb External Interventions

Ever since the time of Naini to this very day, Najaf has adopted a non-interventionist position in Iraqi affairs and this position became even more important and strategic post 2003 in order to curb Iran's interference and attempts to dominate Iraq. In addition, this position was important to counter the danger posed by the pro-Wilayat al-Faqih supporters that follow the line of the guardian jurist and believe in the comprehensive nature of guardianship that transcends sect and geography.<sup>(3)</sup>

The aforementioned dimensions are important when trying to understand Najaf's position towards the recent parliamentary elections in Iraq held in October 2021. The Najaf Marjaya had been keen to send messages to its taqlid incubators in relation to the elections since it possesses the biggest Shiite taqlid incubators in Iraq and the Shiite world. It is normal that it seeks to direct these

incubators towards what it deems as worthy priorities — especially in light of the Shiite-Shiite polarization and Iran’s attempts to interfere in Iraqi affairs and diminish Najaf’s centrality. Hence, the marjaya issued a statement in which it urged Iraqi citizens to partake in the fifth parliamentary elections, even though they were not ideal but were better than other scenarios which would be far worse for Iraq.<sup>(4)</sup>

These worse scenarios include Iran’s interventions and leaving the Iraqi arena vacant for Tehran’s proxies to wrest control over all Iraqi affairs or influence the independence and sovereignty of the country — thus impacting the Najaf Marjaya, which has always been the umbrella and historical leadership for Shiites across the world.

## 1.2 Learning From Past Lessons

The Najaf Marjaya adopted a neutral posture towards the parties and candidates contesting the elections. It did not recommend specific candidates whom the Iraqi people should vote for. But in a tacit message, it advised its followers to learn from past experiences and not to elect the corrupt — in reference to Iran’s proxies in Iraq. In its statement, the marjaya said, “Voters should take lessons and warnings from past experiences and be aware of the value of their votes and their important role in shaping the country’s future. They should seize this important opportunity to make genuine change in the state’s administration and keep away the corrupt and incompetent from the main state apparatuses. This is within the realm of possibility if those possessing awareness come together, participate in the voting effectively and elect worthy candidates. Otherwise, the failures of the past Parliaments and governments will be repeated again.”<sup>(5)</sup> Though the marjaya adopted a neutral posture, it at the same time advised the people to keep away from corrupt candidates, lest the failures of past Parliaments be repeated once again — in reference to its concern about the people reelecting those who have been in power over the past periods. The famous slogan during the Tishreen Protests was reflective of this advice: “What has been tried — and failed — cannot be tried again.”<sup>(6)</sup>

## 1.3 The Marjaya’s Messages

In its statement, the marjaya was keen to convey multiple messages, including the issue of Iraq’s sovereignty<sup>(7)</sup> because of the differences between Najaf and Iran. Najaf believes in a nation-state which has geographic boundaries and refrains from calling for comprehensive guardianship or a globalist government like Iran which seeks to establish a global government.<sup>(8)</sup>

Hence, these differences will impact Najaf’s and Iran’s visions regarding the concept of Iraqi sovereignty. Najaf believes in Iraq’s sovereignty and its national boundaries while Iran’s religious elite sees Iraq as a satellite state under the guardianship of the jurist. This belief — despite being theoretical in nature — is reflective of Tehran’s ideological and sectarian policies. As cleric Mohsen Kadivar stated, “The guardianship of the jurist (Wilayat al-Faqih) government finds itself compelled to remain placed within a specific geographic area. Otherwise, the title ‘the ruler of Muslims worldwide’ connotes that the orders of such types of governments encompass — legally — all Muslims worldwide.”<sup>(9)</sup>

The Najaf Marjaya has warned of domestic actors attempting to make Iraq subservient to external actors, in reference to Iran's role. It said, "The marjaya reiterates to them that they should check the biographies of the candidates in their constituencies and only elect those who are good, have integrity, and are eager to uphold the sovereignty, security and stability of Iraq and who work to protect the country's authentic values and supreme interests."<sup>(10)</sup> The marjaya has reiterated since 2003 the issue of Iraq's sovereignty — to counter Iranian attempts to dominate Iraqi affairs and the country's decision-making process.<sup>(11)</sup>

## 2. Qom and the Elections

Iran exploited fatwas to influence Shiite taqlid incubators to counter Najaf's role. Cleric Kazem al-Haeri issued a fatwa rendering it unlawful to vote for any candidate who called for US forces to remain in Iraq or did not demand them to be driven out of Iraqi territories.

He also rendered it unlawful to elect anyone who deemed the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) to be Iraq's enemy or those who called for the PMF to be integrated into the country's security forces as he believed this would weaken or distort its identity. Anyone who called for its integration according to Haeri were wanting to satisfy foreigners, enemy actors, and the corrupt.<sup>(12)</sup>

### 1.1 Targeting Najaf

We notice that Haeri's fatwa was issued following the Najaf marjaya's statement. It carried a message to counter Najaf's call for integrating the PMF into Iraq's security institutions, a proposal rejected by Iran. Hence, Haeri wanted Najaf to know that the proposal to integrate the PMF would never be accepted by Iran.

Haeri is among those who adopt Wilayat al-Faqih in its absolute version. He rejects multiple guardianships based on the multiplicity of jurists and countries since "the supreme Islamic interest requires in the first place the oneness of guardianship — when possible."<sup>(13)</sup> He is among those who reject the shoura of the jurists theory.<sup>(14)</sup> Haeri was among the jurists who issued a fatwa rendering it necessary to confront the US presence in Iraq under any pretext — legitimizing the acts of armed militias and factions.<sup>(15)</sup>

### 1.2 Jurisprudential Adaptation

When it comes to jurisprudential rules and principles, matters are only deemed unlawful if there are religious texts deeming them to be. When Haeri rendered the election of those who oppose the PMF or call for its integration into Iraq's national army to be unlawful, he in effect made the PMF appear as if it was sacred or infallible — elevating the election of its surrogates to Parliament to an obligatory rank, which goes against established jurisprudential judgment. In addition, he rendered ideological discretionary political and ijtihadi issues to be definitive in their rulings.<sup>(16)</sup> Overall, there is a Qom-Najaf spat over controlling Shiite taqlid incubators and disseminating a specific understanding of Shiism among the Shiite community. The differences over the parliamentary elections is only one indication of this spat which has been ongoing since 2003.

## Conclusion

The dispute over the Iraqi elections and the Najaf-Qom wrangling are reflective of the disputes between Tehran and Najaf particularly in regard to who has the final say over Iraqi affairs and whose interpretation of Shiism dominates the Shiite landscape. Tehran seeks to make its version of Shiism dominate at the expense of Najaf, using its militias as well as its political and military wings to impose a fait accompli on Najaf, which cannot be reversed in the future.

Iran seeks to influence Shiite taqlid incubators and pressure Najaf via counter-fatwas and weak interpretations. The aim is to deprive Najaf of its influence over Iraqi affairs in general and the Shiite community in particular. It is also keen not to let Najaf solely control the Iraqi religious landscape. In addition to creating political and military entities and factions, Iran in parallel seeks to create a religious fait accompli and lay the foundation for the post-Sistani era, bringing to the front clerics who support Wilayat al-Faqih and serve Tehran's project at all levels.

# The Political File

*The Political File* of September 2021 addressed two main issues that shaped the most important political developments inside Iran. The first issue was the internal visits made by Ebrahim Raisi to several Iranian provinces. The second was the new appointments to Iran's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In October's file, we cast light on Raisi continuing to appoint military officers to important and senior positions in his administration. The last of these appointments was when he selected several Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) commanders to be governors over some provinces.

## 1. The IRGC Controlling Key Positions Inside Raisi's Government

After Ebrahim Raisi had tightened his grip over Iran's military, financial and security institutions, the time came for dominating the country's key political positions. This represents a clear bid by Raisi to control all the key cogs of the Iranian political system — with the support and blessing of the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. The IRGC attempted to play a significant role in Iranian public affairs during former President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's tenure but its role has surged under the Raisi government, with its commanders appointed to key positions in the new government.



During the period preceding the last presidential elections, several members of the IRGC registered their candidacies. But it quickly became clear through the hints and remarks of the supreme leader and the “hardliners” that their favorite candidate was Ebrahim Raisi, who was then the chief justice. This prompted the Guardian Council to disqualify the majority of candidates, while other candidates dropped out in favor of Ebrahim Raisi. A third group decided to continue in the presidential race to act as shadow candidates for Ebrahim Raisi, hoping they would get a position in the new government. This happened when Ebrahim Raisi issued a decree in August 2021, whereby he appointed the runner-up and former IRGC commander during the Iraq-Iran War Mohsen Rezaee as his vice president for economic affairs.

He also appointed two individuals who were disqualified to sensitive positions: Ezzatollah Zarghami and Saeed Mohammad. The first is the former head of the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB), who was appointed as the country’s minister of cultural heritage, handicrafts and tourism. The second is the former head of the Khatam Al-Anbiya Construction Headquarters, who was appointed as Raisi’s adviser on free trade industrial and special economic zones. As to those who withdrew to support his candidacy, they also were appointed to ministerial positions. For example, Rostam Ghasemi, was appointed to the Ministry of Roads and Urban Development. He was the Quds Force’s chief of economic affairs.

The IRGC’s share of senior ministerial positions did not stop at this point. Mohammad Mokhber Dezfuli — a senior IRGC commander — was appointed to the second highest-ranking position in the government. He became Raisi’s first vice president. Ahmad Vahidi was appointed as the minister of interior and Esmail Khatib as minister of security and intelligence.

Raisi appointing senior IRGC military commanders to sensitive positions was not limited to the government. He also appointed them to head governorates. Several former and current IRGC commanders were appointed as governors for some important governorates. These appointments point to the intent of the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei on elevating figures close to him to sensitive positions as well as those known for their radicalism and being loyal to the Iranian political system to ensure his grip over all spheres.

In this context, Zeinolabedin Razavi Khorram was appointed as governor of East Azerbaijan. He was one of the IRGC commanders in East Azerbaijan and the West Azerbaijan provinces. Yaghob-Ali Nazari was appointed as governor of Razavi Khorasan. He was an IRGC commander in the same province.<sup>(17)</sup>

The Raisi government also appointed Ahmad Mohammadzadeh as Bushehr’s governor. He was the head of the management and leadership group at the Strategic Center of the Revolutionary Guards. He also was commander of the second naval zone of the IRGC in Bushehr, south of Iran.<sup>(18)</sup> In addition, Mahdi Dousti was appointed as governor of Hormozgan Province. He was an official in the oil, gas, and petrochemicals sector at the IRGC’s Khatam Al-Anbiya Construction Headquarters.<sup>(19)</sup> Finally, Mohammad-Taghi Shahcheraghi was picked as governor of Qom, which is one of the most important Iranian governorates in central Iran.<sup>(20)</sup> He was an IRGC commander in the provinces of Semnan, Tehran and Qom.



Since picking Ahmad Vahidi, who was a commander in the Quds Force, as the minister of interior, there have been mounting concerns on the Iranian street about the militarization of the ministry and the possibility that the new minister could pursue security strategies rather than administrative ones to resolve problems and may impose strict security protocols on the Iranian street in the coming period. This comes in light of Vahidi's military and security background, his horrendous record of suppressing campaigns and the desire of Raisi and Khamenei to tighten their grip on the security file and prevent any threats to the Iranian political system, especially popular protests as their geographic scope has expanded in recent years. These protests pose a threat to the Iranian political system as protestors have called for toppling the political system and have targeted the supreme leader himself. They blame him for the deteriorating socioeconomic conditions.

## **2. Significations of Appointing Mamousta Abdul Salam Karimi as Raisi's Adviser for Ethnic and Religious Minorities Affairs**

In the context of the Iranian government's attempts to win the support of religious minorities and contain their anger in response to their repression and marginalization which they have faced for many years, Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi appointed Mamousta Abdul Salam Karimi — a Sunni of Kurdish origin – as his adviser for ethnic and religious minorities affairs.<sup>(21)</sup>

Abdul Salam Karimi has occupied several positions in the past, including the governor of Divandarreh and president of Payame Noor University in the cities of Mariwan and Sanandaj in the Kurdistan Governorate. He also served as assistant for planning affairs and human resources in the Educational Organization in the Kurdistan Governorate and director of the Imam Al-Shafi Specialized Center for Islamic Sciences in Sanandaj.<sup>(22)</sup>

To understand the significations of Raisi's appointment of Abdul Salam Karimi as his adviser for ethnic and religious minorities affairs, we must consider two important aspects. The first is how the government intends to benefit from this appointment and the second is the position of Sunnis in Iran and to what extent this move will contribute towards ending the injustices and marginalization faced by Iran's religious minorities. In light of the government's awareness of the importance of quelling popular anger against its policies targeting minorities, its appointment of Abdul Salam Karimi can be viewed as a means to regain public confidence, especially from the country's minority groups. Moreover, the government wants to dismiss accusations that it persecutes minorities as well as reverse the negative perception it has because of appointing people based on sectarian lines and discriminating against those who embrace different beliefs. Several Sunni leaders in Iran announced their support for Raisi during the presidential elections held last June. Thus, picking a Sunni for this advisory position is considered as the system rewarding the Sunni community for supporting Raisi and a carrot for the rest of the country's religious and ethnic minorities who support the new government.

Some Sunni parties in Iran declared support for this decision and believe that appointing Abdul Salam Karimi as presidential adviser not only indicates

the government's desire to benefit from a Sunni but also reflects its desire to end the persecution of this community.<sup>(23)</sup>

But some fear that appointing Abdul Salam Karimi could be merely propaganda and a politically motivated move. They question how effective this step will be in ending the injustices and discrimination facing minority groups. Skeptics also believe that past experiences have proven that advisers have little impact on influencing political and administrative decisions.<sup>(24)</sup>

### **Conclusion**

The IRGC has long propagated the idea that it is the only Iranian institution that is capable of making sure that the Iranian political system survives and has the ability to stabilize and uphold the system's unity and revolutionary project. It seems that the appointment of senior IRGC commanders to top government positions reinforces this idea. As for appointing a Sunni adviser, it can be argued that the appointment has not achieved the government's intended objectives. The situation of Iran's minorities will not change unless the Iranian government takes real and sincere steps — away from politics and propaganda — such as granting minorities their constitutional rights, allowing them to freely exercise their religious and cultural rituals and including them in the administrative set-up to manage the country without discrimination.

# The Economic File

*The Economic File* (September 2021) shed light on the nature of Iran's presence in international and regional trade organizations. The October file discusses soaring prices, which reached record highs. In this part, we discuss the following three main topics: the current inflation rate situation and examples of soaring food prices; the reasons behind the inflation crisis and the extent of the government's competency in addressing it; and the consequences of rising inflation on the average Iranian, society and the political system.

## 1. The Current Inflation Rate and Examples of Soaring Food Prices

Perhaps, speaking about the rising inflation rate has not been a new thing in Iran over the past three years. But this month, prices soared to a record-breaking level which has not been witnessed post- or pre-Iranian revolution. This is a very significant and dangerous development. However, this upward trend in prices was expected; it was referred to in Rasanah's past reports that analyzed the Raisi government's economic policies. See June's Iran Case File (ICF).

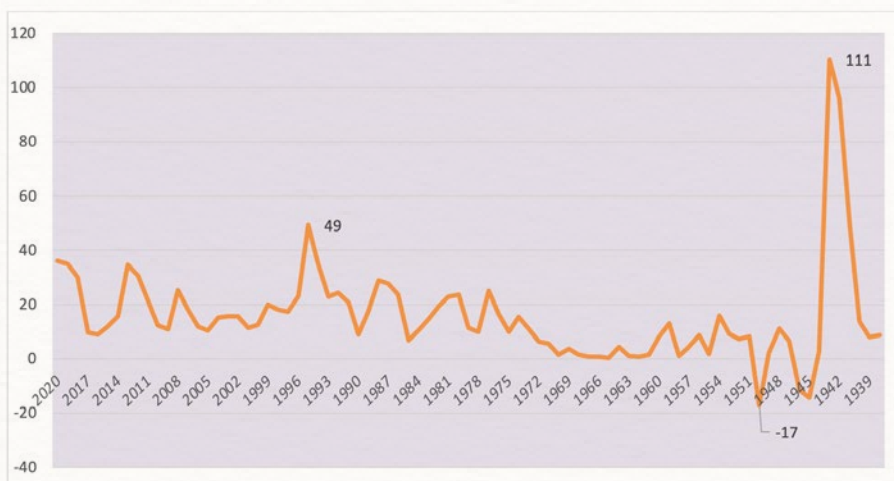
First, we should mention that disclosing monthly inflation data is a critical issue for Iran's political system. The Central Bank of Iran (CBI) stopped disclosing inflation data on its website since 2017.<sup>(25)</sup> Furthermore, contradictions have been apparent in the data published, particularly in the official data on inflation issued by the CBI, Iran's Parliament and the Statistical Center of Iran (SCI).

In October 2021, information was leaked about data prepared by CBI on the current inflation rate in the country. It revealed that inflation had reached 58.3 percent over a 12-month period, ending in August 2021.<sup>(26)</sup> The inflation\* rate is the highest recorded by the CBI since 1943 — even before World War II — which at the time reached 111 percent (see Figure 1).

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(\* ) The period of assessing the annual inflation rate by the CBI differs from that of the World Bank. The fiscal year usually starts from March 2016 to March 2017 for the CBI whereas it starts from January to December for the World Bank.

**Figure 1: Inflation Rates in Iran (1938-2020)**



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In general, the inflation rate began to surge in 2018, reflecting the impact of US sanctions even before their actual reimposition. This surge came after the Rouhani team accomplished a single-digit inflation rate after the nuclear deal entered into force in 2016. Sanctions led to a rise in the cost of importing and a shortage in foreign currencies. Thus, the price of nearly every item increased in the country, including the prices of food, housing, transportation, education, health, medicine and even the price of gas in resource rich Iran increased threefold in 2019, contributing to lowering the budget deficit.

Table 1 indicates the significant surge in the price of essential food items such as rice, legumes, and vegetables. These items make up the table of the poor, hence their price surge increases the pressure on impoverished groups in society.

**Table 1: Food Prices Surge in Iran (September 2021)**

Item	Rate of surge
Iranian rice	56%
Vegetable ghee	90%
Oil, sugar, pasteurized and dry milk	70%
Peeled Peas, cucumber, eggplant	59%

Item	Rate of surge
Lentils	50%
Tomato	132%
Onions	102%
Carrots	294%

Source: Hamshahri Online, <https://bit.ly/30cfiun>

A family of three needs nearly 11 million tomans to live a decent life, while the average income of a working family is 4.2 million tomans, according to the Iranian Supreme Labor Council.<sup>(27)</sup> This means there is a gap of 7 million tomans per month for a family of three to have a decent life.

Table 2 shows the price of essential food items including various protein items. These prices reflect the amount being spent by Iranians on food and drink – a large chunk of spending by the poor is done on these items.

**Table 2: Food Prices Surge in Iran (October 2021)**

Item <sup>(*)</sup>	Price in toman <sup>(*)</sup>
Iranian rice	35,000
Lentils	28,000
Beans	31,000
Peas	21,000
Live chicken	25,000
Veal	120,000
Egg carton (30 eggs)	35,000
Oil bottle (900 ml)	14,000

Item <sup>(*)</sup>	Price in toman <sup>(*)</sup>
Sugar (5kg)	43,000
Carrots	14,000
Red onions	7,000
Tomatoes	15,000

Notes: \* The weight is measured in kilograms unless otherwise stated.

\*The prices are roughly calculated.

Sources: Digikala, <https://bit.ly/3pUYEu2> and Young Journalist Club, <https://bit.ly/3pYmoO3>

Based on the foregoing, the cost of lunch (rice, meat, and a stew) for a small family is nearly 190,000 tomans (\$7 according to the exchange rate on the market). This is a significant price when compared to the income levels of the poor. The poverty line stood at 1.2 million tomans per month in 2020. Accordingly, nearly 35 percent of Iranians — one out of three — live below the poverty line according to the Iranian Parliament,<sup>(28)</sup> meaning they spend less than \$7, which is the minimum spending level needed to meet their basic needs.

The Iranian government provides financial aid to the poorer segments in society, totaling around 60 million Iranians. The aid ranges from 60,000 tomans per month for each Iranian (\$2.2 according to the exchange rate on the market) to 120,000 tomans (\$4.3).<sup>(29)</sup> Other sources indicate that the financial aid provided increased to 200,000 tomans per Iranian each month (\$7.2) for some segments in society.<sup>(30)</sup> When looking at the price levels in Table 2, we can estimate to what extent this financial aid would be beneficial in securing the basic needs of Iranians. A financial provision of 60,000 tomans for each Iranian per month would barely be enough to buy a kilo of rice and a whole chicken.

## 2. The Reasons Behind the Inflation Crisis and the Government's Competency

There are a host of internal and external reasons behind the chronic inflation crisis in Iran. The internal reasons include: a surging budget deficit and the government's policies to tackle it, increasing liquidity, imbalance between demand and supply and poor market management. The external reasons include: US sanctions and their impact on Iran's trade, the rising cost of shipments and domestic production, the ongoing decline in value of the local currency against foreign currencies, especially against the US dollar, hence raising the price of imports.

The government hiking the price of gas two years ago in November 2019 by 300 percent – to tackle the budget deficit— aggravated the inflation crisis as it raised the cost of shipments and transportation – hence increasing the price of items.

The decision prompted mass protests in Iran that left more than 300 people dead after the security forces targeted protesters.<sup>(31)</sup>

It is worth noting that the country's petrol distribution system this month faced a cyberattack, disrupting access to subsidized fuel across the country. The government was forced to reopen fuel stations and offer subsidized prices without the use of electronic cards. Without this quick response there would have been a hike in prices across the country, possibly triggering a new round of protests. On several occasions, a rise in the price of gas had triggered protests across the country. A sharp rise in prices had contributed to toppling past governments in Iran, as will be explained later.

The political system, including the executive branch, has directly contributed to perpetuating and aggravating the inflation crisis. The political system's policies are the number one reason behind the reimposition of sanctions and their continuation until now. The lifting of sanctions is critical to stimulate supply, production, investment and lower the inflation rate after more than two years of economic recession and capital flight.

When it comes to the government, its approach towards resolving crises — particularly the country's deteriorating economic situation as reflected in the sharp national budget deficit — led to unbridled inflation. For instance, for the sake of securing funds through which it could manage public expenditure including wages, subsidies, the operation of facilities and other administrative expenses, the government has increased consumer spending instead of increasing production. The government borrows from local banks, health insurance companies and pension funds, increasing the flow of liquidity in the economy, mostly spent on consumer goods — hence reducing what banks have available for investments. The supply and production levels, meanwhile, have remained unchanged or have slightly increased but not to the required levels. Demand outpacing supply has resulted in surging prices, hence impeding a rise in productivity levels.

The CBI's data revealed that the liquidity pumped into the economy exceeded 39 percent during the period from July 23 to August 22, 2021, compared to the same period the previous year.<sup>(32)</sup> Economically speaking, the liquidity rate should have reflected the gross domestic product GDP growth rate at around 2 percent. In addition, while injecting liquidity, the government should have taken other monetary steps such as raising interest rates to soak up the rising levels of the money supply in the economy to avert excessive inflation. The government needs to find ways to stimulate investment and secure income sources.

### **3. Consequences of the Ongoing Inflation Crisis on the Average Iranian, Society and the Political System**

A chronic and sustained surge in prices has had a severe impact on all segments of society and inevitably threatens the survival of the political system.

At the individual level: The purchasing power of Iranians diminishes amid rising inflation rates, and money loses its value despite a nominal rise in income levels. This reduces the value of savings and leads to capital flight to safe havens. Hence, it has been evident that Iranians have been purchasing real estate in Turkey over the past three years.

Over the span of only five months, from April to September 2021, the purchasing power of workers in late September declined by 32.4 percent compared to the beginning of April, according to the Wages Committee of Iran's Supreme Labor Council.<sup>(33)</sup> This means that if a worker had a wage of 1,000 tomans, the value would be equivalent to only 676 tomans. Hence, a worker's purchasing power declined in a very short period of time, over months not years.

At the societal level, class differences and the gap in wealth between the rich and the poor have widened. The high-income brackets usually benefit from high inflationary conditions, as they possess productive assets or assets whose prices increase when there is a surge in inflation rates. This means that the rich Iranians become richer, whereas the poor and low-income Iranians experience harsh conditions, especially in case the government does not provide them with aid to boost their purchasing power.

Definitely, the widening gap between the classes impacts the security and stability of society; crime and suicide rates increase. It also has social, psychological and even health impacts. According to the Research Center of Iran's Chamber of Commerce, more than 50 percent of Iran's population have been suffering from a decreasing caloric intake since 2017. This means that this percentage of the total population cannot access 2,100 calories per day due to soaring prices.<sup>(34)</sup>

At the level of the political system, we have noticed that a sharp and ongoing rise in prices is and has been a common factor among others that has contributed to the downfall of many political systems across the world. It even led to the collapse of former dynasties/systems in Iran itself, as was the case with the collapse of the Qajar dynasty and Reza Shah Pahlavi taking over power in 1921. This was in light of soaring prices agitating unrest and widespread security chaos across the country. The same happened with his son Mohammad Reza Pahlavi in 1979 after the economic contraction in 1978 (by -14 percent), soaring prices, and other factors, which led to the poor and marginalized supporting the clerics in toppling the Pahlavi system. This means that the current Iranian political system — based on historical precedents — is not immune to the risks and consequences of inflation in the future.

Public and factional protests have repeatedly flared up since the 1979 revolution over deteriorating living conditions, soaring prices and unemployment. Perhaps the last of these protests were in December 2017, which extended across the country, leaving many dead and wounded. Later, there were other protests like the ones over hikes in gas prices in mid-2019.

## Conclusion

The sharp and ongoing rise in prices, especially in food items, has reached a record level which Iran has not experienced since World War II. Soaring prices are a tangible reality among Iranians as their purchasing power declines day after day. In light of this chronic inflation situation as well as the government's and the political system's incompetency, there is an acute danger to the latter's stability in the future. Price surges have triggered many protests over the years and were among the factors contributing to the collapse of dynasties/systems in Iran.



# The Military File

*The Military File* (September 2021) shed light on a number of security challenges that emerged for the Iranian government on the northwestern borders as a result of the escalation between the Kurds and the IRGC forces. The political crisis also escalated — accompanied by military movements — between Iran and its northern neighbor Azerbaijan. The security challenges persisted, exemplified by the increasing infiltration of Afghan immigrants into Iranian territories. This month's file will cover the repercussions of Iran's movements in October to contain the aforesaid challenges, whether through conducting several military exercises to raise the efficiency of its military forces or undertaking a number of diplomatic moves to strengthen its international partnerships. Foremost among these moves was the concluding of a military deal with Russia. All the foregoing comes in the context of Iranian preparations to reenter the talks over the nuclear deal. Tehran hopes to have a comfortable leverage to make the most significant gains at the negotiating table. This file will review the objectives of Iran's military exercises, the developments regarding Tehran's military relations with Russia and the nuclear file.

## 1. Military Exercises

The month of October witnessed the launch of two military drills involving a number of branches and units of the regular army and the IRGC forces in the northwestern and southeastern regions — known as the central desert region. The significance and indications of the maneuvers come in the context of the heightened tensions between Tehran and Baku, the mutual military buildup along their shared borders, and the fiery statements made by the political leaderships of both countries. Tehran is deeply sensitive about the rapprochement between Azerbaijan and Israel, which it believes will threaten its security.

### 1.1 Khyber Conquerors Drills

The ground forces of the Iranian army earlier in October conducted a military exercise dubbed the “Conquerors of Khyber” in the northwestern region on the border with Azerbaijan. Several armored brigades partook in the drills, as well as rapid intervention brigades, artillery battalions, helicopters and drones. The maneuvers involved artillery shelling of mockup targets, with support from air force and ground force units. As Brigadier Kioumars Haidari, commander of the ground force of the Iranian army, indicated, the maneuvers intended to evaluate equipment and weapons, and they were of particular significance given the overt and covert presence of Zionist elements in Azerbaijan. This is

in addition to the presence of a considerable number of ISIS terrorists from the region's countries, who entered Azerbaijan during the dispute between Armenia and Azerbaijan following an invitation from one of the region's countries. The commander reiterated that the maneuvers were a message to them.<sup>(35)</sup>



**Picture 1:** Khyber Conquerors Maneuvers

Source: Tasnim News Agency, <https://tn.ai/2581866>

## 1.2 Defenders of Velayat Skies Air Defense Maneuvers

The joint air defense drills dubbed “Defenders of Velayat Skies” started on October 12, 2021, with the participation of a number of air defense units of the Iranian army along with the IRGC Aerospace Force. Brigadier General Qader Rahimzadeh, commander-in-chief of the Khatam al-Anbia base, said that the maneuvers aimed to improve the combat preparedness of air force units, assess the capability of homegrown air defense systems to confront the different systems and ensure comprehensive defense, covering all directions of threats and repelling electronic and cyber warfare attacks. This is in addition to improving the level of human knowledge and skills, as well as the level of cooperation and coordination between the army's and the IRGC's command and control centers in the context of the country's unified air defense umbrella.<sup>(36)</sup> During the maneuvers, Iran tested the Joshan and Khatam missile systems for the first time. The Joshan missile system is a modified version of the Khordad 15 air defense system which uses a passive radar system. It was tested for the first time in the maneuvers. It proved successful and destroyed the targets spotted by the integrated air defense network, according to the statements issued in the aftermath of the maneuvers.<sup>(37)</sup>



**Picture 2:** The launch of the homegrown air defense systems during the “Defenders of Velayat Skies” maneuvers

Source: Fars Media Cooperation, <https://bit.ly/3oYzom>.

## 2. Developments in Russia-Iran Military Ties

A delegation led by General Mohammad Bagheri, the chief of staff of the Iranian army, visited Russia from October 17 to October 21 to discuss ways to advance ties with Moscow. During the visit, the two sides agreed that Iran would purchase Russian fighter jets and helicopters.<sup>(38)</sup> There was also talk of an Iranian desire to develop its navy which is suffering from a deterioration in effectiveness following a spate of maritime incidents over the past few years. This was the focus of General Bagheri’s visit to Moscow. The delegation visited the command of the Russian navy in Saint Petersburg and met with Vladimir Lvovich Kasatonov, the deputy commander-in-chief of the Russian navy, who accompanied the delegation during a tour through the Russian naval bases. General Bagheri also made a visit to the city of Kronstadt, 30 kilometers west of Saint Petersburg, which is the seat of the command of Russia’s Baltic Fleet. He undertook a tour there aboard Russian warships and submarines. In his remarks to Iran’s state-run radio, he said that “concluding the arms deals will deepen in the near future our relations to a big extent.”<sup>(39)</sup>

The visit reflected an aspect of Iran’s military diplomacy. It aimed to enhance relations with Russia and ensure Russian support of its positions, especially Moscow’s support regarding its approximations towards the Taliban government. Tehran believes that Russia wants to reach an understanding with the Taliban government and perhaps recognize it officially. This would weaken Iran’s approximations towards Afghanistan. However, Iran attempts to preserve the Russian position supportive of it in the context of the nuclear talks. The military deal which Iran seeks to conclude with Russia indicates an Iranian desire to overcome its weaknesses, whether regarding its air force or navy.

### 3. Latest Developments in Iran's Nuclear File

The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) announced that its monitoring and verification program in Iran in regard to a few nuclear sites is “no longer intact,” after Tehran refused requests to repair surveillance equipment damaged following an attack on a major nuclear site in June.<sup>(40)</sup> In response to Iran's refusal to repair the surveillance equipment, IAEA Director General Rafael Grossi said that the attack had not “paralyzed” the agency's monitoring program. “It hasn't paralyzed what we are doing there, but damage...has been done, with a potential of us not being able to reconstruct the picture, the jigsaw puzzle.”<sup>(41)</sup>

#### 3.1 Low Expectations of Progress in the Nuclear Talks

Telephone conversations held between the parties to the nuclear deal and Iranian officials may still yield some results, but the rhetoric from the Iranian government decreases optimism regarding the success of the nuclear negotiations. Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian told Iran Daily, “If there is a serious will in Washington to return to the deal, there is no need for all these negotiations at all.”<sup>(42)</sup> Underplaying Iran's violations of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) and non-compliance with IAEA monitoring and safeguards, he suggested that President Biden should issue an executive order to revive the nuclear deal. Iran decided to discontinue parleys to revive the JCPOA in April ahead of the presidential elections. If things continue at the current pace, there might be no further preparatory consultations in 2021.

In September, Abdollahian said, “The Americans tried to contact us through various channels in New York, and I told the mediators that if America's intentions were serious, it must demonstrate its goodwill by releasing at least \$10 billion belonging to Iran.”<sup>(43)</sup> Washington has refused to offer “a goodwill gesture.”<sup>(44)</sup>

Tehran's ongoing violations of JCPOA obligations restrict the United States from showing flexibility. Not only is it accumulating more crucial knowledge about uranium enrichment and centrifuge development, but it has also stockpiled significant quantities of highly enriched uranium (HEU).

Though Iran has officially declared possession of HEU beyond the 60 percent enrichment level, Mohammad Eslami, chief of the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran last month stated that the country possesses only 12 kilograms of HEU at 20 percent.<sup>(45)</sup> Tehran requires 170 kilograms of uranium enriched at 20 percent to further process it to above 80 percent to fabricate one nuclear bomb. The JCPOA restricted enrichment to 3.67 percent while the other signatories agreed to provide Iran with 20 percent enriched uranium for its research facilities.

#### 3.2 An Iranian Maneuver to Gain More Time and Leverage the Nuclear Deal's Participants

In September, Iran signed a deal with the IAEA for minimal compliance with the agency's monitoring obligations to escape the wrath of the IAEA Board of Directors but later denied inspectors access to monitoring equipment at the

Karaj plant. Iran's ambassador to the IAEA Kazem Gharibabadi stated that since the cameras are being investigated by authorities, "equipment related to this complex are not included for [IAEA] servicing."<sup>(46)</sup> Tehran's pretext rests on the Israeli sabotage attack launched in June targeting the uranium centrifuge workshop causing "severe damage," which it had earlier claimed to have averted. One of the IAEA surveillance cameras was destroyed, and another was damaged. More than six weeks after the temporary deal, Iran is still not ready to provide videos of the site or access to the agency's staff to repair its damaged equipment.

In compliance with IAEA obligations, Iran is supposed to share all the monitoring videos and allow inspectors access to its declared sites. Iran's refusal stems from the huge embarrassment over its failure to avert the sabotage attack at the centrifuge workshop. The IAEA has categorically stated that it has only limited access to Iran's nuclear facilities which is not enough to provide full knowledge about its activities.

### Conclusion

Iran's moves, whether at the military or political levels, show that it is sensing the dangers resulting from the strategic shifts in the regional sphere and the elements pressuring the Iranian government as a result of the security tensions mounting on its border, whether with Afghanistan or Azerbaijan. Iran is increasingly concerned about the threatening Israeli role in Azerbaijan. Iran's movements come in the context of these variables in order to raise the efficiency and preparedness of its armed forces and send a message of deterrence to its foes.

On the other side, the Iranian military visit and the resulting deals and understandings with Russia — given its timing — came in the context of Tehran wanting to ensure Russian support in regard to many regional files. This is in addition to plugging the gaps in Iran's military systems.

Awaiting the return to the nuclear talks, the Iranian government is attempting to make the biggest gains through recommencing talks with strong levers and wants to play on the element of time to pressure the countries that desire its speedy return to compliance with the nuclear deal to contain its nuclear program. The aforementioned was reflected in the maneuvers in dealing with the IAEA.

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# Arab Affairs

**A**rab Affairs is divided into four parts. The first part, Iran's interactions with the Gulf states, reviews two topics in respect of Iran's influence on the Gulf ally, Pakistan and the ongoing talks to deescalate tensions between Riyadh and Tehran in light of various benefits and thorny regional issues. The second part discusses the Houthi military escalation and its continuous strategy to entrench sectarianism in Yemen. The third part reviews the results of Iraq's parliamentary elections and the final vote shares of alliances. The fourth part explains the motives and indications of the targeting of the Syrian al-Tanf military base, and the Russian role in balancing the escalation of tensions between Iran and Israel in Syria.





# Iran and the Gulf

The file of Iran and the Gulf states for August 2020 included the ramifications of the Afghan crisis on relations between the Gulf Cooperation Council countries and Iran. The changing landscape in Afghanistan poses new challenges to Tehran which will impact its approaches in the region, including its interactions with the Gulf states. The September file addressed the ongoing negotiations between Saudi Arabia and Iran, which are taking place against the backdrop of international pressure variables on Iran. This month's file monitors Iran's moves to improve its relations with Pakistan given the shock waves for Iran and the scattering of its cards in Afghanistan following the Taliban takeover of power, making Pakistan an arena of interaction between Iran and the Gulf states to play a possible role in the unfolding events in Afghanistan. The file also forecasts the outcomes of the Saudi-Iran talks, given the circumstances surrounding the two countries.

## 1. Pakistan, a Gulf Ally, Under Iranian Influence

Iranian diplomacy was active towards Pakistan during the month of October following a period of tensions caused by the events in Afghanistan's Panjshir Valley. Iran indirectly accused Pakistan of interfering in Afghan affairs and supporting the Taliban government, and considered these acts as undermining its interests. This was preceded by tense relations in the aftermath of Pakistan arresting an Indian intelligence officer within its borders who had infiltrated its territories through Iran.

The strong relationship between Pakistan and the Taliban is a cause for concern for Tehran, given that the existence of a government that is not loyal to it has negative implications for it. In addition, Tehran is likely to be isolated further, especially following its deteriorating relations with Azerbaijan. The strong relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan will result in the opening of land and air crossings to Afghanistan and this will reduce Kabul's dependence on Tehran. Therefore, this will harm Iran's economic interests and also means the end of future investment opportunities for Tehran in Afghanistan.

### 1.1 The Successive Visits of Iranian Delegations to Pakistan Indicate Tehran's New Approaches

In a surprise visit on October 15, 2021, the Chief of Staff of Iran's Armed Forces Major General Mohammad Hossein Bagheri, heading a high-ranking military delegation, visited Pakistan. It included many significant activities. He agreed with the Pakistani side to cooperate in the field of shipbuilding and submarine maintenance after the delegation visited the shipyards in Karachi and inspected the construction of warships, boats and submarines.

Bagheri met with Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan along with the Pakistani defense and foreign ministers. During the three-day visit, the Iranian delegation also met with other Pakistani political and military leaders, most notably the Commander of the Pakistan Navy Admiral Muhammad Amjad Khan Niazi. The delegation also visited the Pakistan Army Heavy Weapons Production Complex and the Pakistan Aeronautical Complex.<sup>(1)</sup>

The two sides also agreed on the importance of cooperation in the field of maritime security, conducting joint exercises and exchanging maritime visits. They also agreed to share training experience, enhance cooperation in the field of countering drug trafficking and maritime terrorism and to expand cooperation regarding student exchange programs and other educational issues. Iran also asked Pakistan to cooperate with the Iranian Maritime Security Center in Chabahar, which will officially open soon.

This visit coincided with another important visit. An Iranian delegation from the Iran-Pakistan Parliamentary Friendship Group made an official visit to Pakistan on October 17, which lasted for five days. Ahmed Amirabadi Farahani, the head of the Friendship Group, pointed to the importance of the visit given the current circumstances in Afghanistan and stressed the need to resolve regional crises and reach a common understanding.<sup>(2)</sup>

Pointing to the two coinciding visits, Farahani indicated that the presence of the two delegations simultaneously in Pakistan demonstrated the importance of joint collaboration, negotiations and identifying common points between the two countries on regional issues. He added that Pakistani officials stand next to the Iranian people and have an emotional affinity to the Iranian revolution, and that the Pakistani government stands next to the Iranian people and government in the face of strife in the region. In a significant sign to re-establish common ground, Farahani made it clear that Pakistan has opposed the normalization of relations with Israel and that Islamabad supports the Palestinian people on humanitarian and Islamic grounds.

Iran's concerns over Pakistan are related to its exertions to gain some control over the volatile situation in Afghanistan as it is fearful of losing its control and influence in the country. It also realizes that Pakistan has the final say in influencing the Afghan landscape. Therefore, Iran is trying to win over Pakistan and mitigate any Pakistani moves that do not serve its interests, until it draws up a strategy to deal with the new government in Kabul.

## **1.2 What Does this Mean for Gulf-Pakistan Relations?**

It was not surprising that Iran carried out an active diplomatic relations campaign with Pakistan, which has strong relations with countries that have anti-Iran tendencies, to try to find common points of cooperation to bring them together, especially considering Iranian concerns about the latest developments in Afghanistan. Iran is concerned that Pakistan's strong relations with the Gulf states may have a negative impact on it as there may be an opportunity for the Taliban government to deepen its relations with the Gulf, hence creating further complications for Tehran. Therefore, Iran seeks to neutralize the Pakistani position by finding common interests, such as fighting extremism which threatens both

countries, and unifying positions towards the Palestinian casuse as Tehran is aware of Pakistan's Islamic sentiments regarding Palestine. Iran has tried to exploit this issue as reflected in the remarks of the chairman of the Iran-Pakistan Parliamentary Friendship Group. Iranian officials discussed with Pakistani officials the possibility of participating in important economic projects. The head of the group stated that the Pakistani Parliament had approved an Iranian proposal to form the Iran-China-Pakistan Friendship Group, pointing out that there are common interests between the three countries in the region.<sup>(3)</sup>

The Gulf states have solid relations with Pakistan. In addition to their economic interests in Pakistan, the presence of Pakistani workers in the Gulf, and Gulf investments in Pakistani projects, Gulf soft power and influence is strong in Pakistan because of the importance of Mecca and Medina to the Pakistani people. Therefore, the Gulf's role, though it dwindles at times, still outweighs Iran's role. The best example in this regard was the outcome of the visit of the Pakistani prime minister to Saudi Arabia, in which he expressed his deep gratitude to the Kingdom for depositing \$3 billion in the Central Bank of Pakistan as financial assistance in light of Pakistan's difficult economic situation and \$1.2 billion worth of oil supplies. He announced his country's intention to transform the Saudi-Pakistan relationship into a deep, diverse, and mutually beneficial strategic partnership. He also mentioned that he was committed to exploring new and non-traditional areas of cooperation to strengthen their historical relations.<sup>(4)</sup>

## 2. Reducing Tension Between Tehran and Riyadh Has Multiple Benefits

When Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan was asked about the effectiveness of the talks with Iran he said, "As for the question about negotiations with the Iranian side, the fourth session has already taken place on September 21, 2021," adding, "These talks are still in the exploratory phase, and we hope that they lay the foundation to address the outstanding issues between the two parties, and we will strive and work to achieve this." Iran's Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Saeed Khatibzadeh described the talks as "good."<sup>(5)</sup> However, the Saudi foreign minister recently stated that the talks, though they were cordial, did not warrant optimism because of a lack of progress.<sup>(6)</sup>

Theoretically, there are many significant benefits awaiting the two countries and the region if bilateral relations improve, but this depends on Iran's commitment to international law and the principle of good neighborliness and ending its futile policies which have adversely impacted the region's countries, including Iran itself.

### 2.1 Iran's Reasons for Continuing With the Talks

The reasons why Saudi Arabia decided to talk to Iran are constantly discussed in the Iranian press. These discussions in the press include the view that Saudi policies failed to change Iran's behavior and positions in relation to various regional files. It seems that this sort of propaganda aims to achieve a moral victory for the Iranian government in order to propagate the notion that Iran's approaches have borne fruit, and that Saudi Arabia was forced to resort to negotiations. However, the Iranian government at home faces growing complexities and crises yet it refuses to admit it. This led the Iranian people to compare their harsh living conditions

to that of Saudis, whether in terms of Saudi progress in human rights, the economy and investment. Saudi Arabia undoubtedly sees through the routinely employed Iranian tactic to prolong discussions. Iran hopes that this will lead to a temporary calm, thwart international consensus and weaken the Gulf states. Nevertheless, Saudi Arabia is still seeking to maintain communication in the hope that Iran realizes the importance of grasping this opportunity and changing its behavior and approaches, given the positive benefits this could bring. If Iranian negotiators prove to be insincere with no genuine desire to resolve the outstanding issues, and Iran's intransigence continues, Tehran will miss an opportunity that may not easily occur again in the future.

## 2.2 The Thorny Issues Between the Two Countries

Security issues are still a major concern for both countries, but each country looks at them from different angles. Saudi Arabia wants to restore peace in Yemen and devote itself to other issues that are critical to its future plans. However, Iran looks at the region's issues in the context of its longstanding conflict with the West and has invested a lot in militias across the region. It argues that it is not possible to change the status quo although the regional and international conditions have changed. There are also other files such as Iran's support for terrorist militias and its ongoing developments in its nuclear and ballistic missile programs that have upset the military balance in the region.

Regional developments such as Washington's withdrawal from Afghanistan, raised Iran's fears and concerns especially about the Gulf playing a role in Afghanistan through Pakistan. Iran's relations with its northern neighbor Azerbaijan are also strained. This crisis may provide space for other regional actors such as Turkey and Israel to intervene and support Azerbaijan. All these factors may pressure Iran and force it to deal more seriously with the ongoing talks in Iraq in order to alleviate the pressure it is facing.

## Conclusion

Given the escalating challenges facing the Iranian government, which is mired in a cycle of crises, it has become difficult to maintain its current approaches, and it has realized the need to change its strategy. The Iranian government also finds that the easiest way to circumvent the emerging problems in Afghanistan is to improve its relationship with Pakistan. In so doing, Iran is looking for transitional solutions to control the situation in Afghanistan so that it does not have to make concessions in other regional and international files.

In light of the solid relations between Pakistan and the Gulf states, especially with Saudi Arabia, it is not easy for Iran to use Pakistan to facilitate its efforts. This will probably impact Iran's negotiations with Saudi Arabia and help in breaking the stalemate; prompting Iran to react positively to Saudi calls to resolve the crises in the region. Further, Pakistan realizes that solving Afghanistan's problems requires funding from other countries to help Afghanistan survive this critical situation. Iran will undoubtedly need to have a strong relationship with Pakistan which it lacks at present, making it unable to rely on a Pakistani-Iranian role in Afghanistan.

# Iran and Yemen

The September 2021 Iran Case Report discussed Yemen's peace efforts amid Houthi-led military escalation and its attempt to influence the country's future generations through creating sectarian divisions and distorting the domestic educational system. In October, the Houthi militia advanced its sectarian agenda by organizing a sectarian conference, including hawza representatives from Iran, Iraq, and Lebanon. The Houthi militia also intensified its military escalation in the governorate of Ma'rib. In this month's report, we review the implications of the ongoing Houthi military escalation in Ma'rib and the international position regarding this escalation. This report also highlights the salient points regarding the Houthi militia's promotion of sectarian ideas as reflected in the first conference it held which brought together representatives from various hawzas in the region. In addition, the Houthi militia marked the celebration of the Prophet's birthday in accordance with Iranian traditions in an attempt to entrench Khomeini's ideology in Yemeni society.

## 1. The Ongoing Houthi Military Escalation

Despite the international community's and the UN's condemnation of the Houthi militia's military escalation, it intensified its military operations in Ma'rib and launched drone and ballistic missile attacks against the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

### 1.1 The Implications of the Ongoing Military Escalation in Ma'rib

In October, the Houthi militia intensified its military operations in the governorate of Ma'rib, in line with its policy to take control of this strategic governorate, in spite of the heavy losses it sustained while fighting on the outskirts of Ma'rib. The Houthi militia sent fighters to take control of key sites within Ma'rib to eliminate the governorate's strategic depth and for short and medium-range Katyusha missiles to target vital areas and civilian-populated neighborhoods not only in Ma'rib but also in other southern governorates. These Houthi moves aimed to enable the Iranian government to gain control of Bab al-Mandab which is next to the Strait of Hormuz. Thus, the Iranian government will be able to control the movement of international trade in the Middle East. Some sources confirmed that the abovementioned missiles were seized by the Houthi militia from the Yemeni army's stockpile in 2014. They upgraded these missiles with Iranian help as well as with assistance from other militias such as the Lebanese terrorist outfit Hezbollah. <sup>(7)</sup>

The Houthi militia committed many violations including the targeting of residential areas and mosques in Ma'rib's Juba district. The militia also attacked an educational center with missiles, killing civilians and wounding 29 others including women and children. This deadly attack was launched just a day after Abdul Latif al-Qibli's house, a tribal leader in Ma'rib, was targeted. It resulted in the killing of 13 civilians and neighboring homes were damaged.<sup>(8)</sup>

The director of the Human Rights Office in Ma'rib, Abd Rabbo Jade, said that the Houthi militia's crimes in the Juba district were equivalent to war crimes. At the same time, he was surprised that the UN and international human rights organizations were relatively silent about the killings committed by the militia and the mass displacement from the governorate's southern districts.<sup>(9)</sup>

The Houthi militia wants to control Ma'rib's natural resources and this is completely in line with Iran's expansionist schemes to aid its quest to secure a viable state in the Arabian Peninsula that orbits around its interests and to control the last strongholds of the legitimate government in Yemen's northern regions.

## 1.2 The UN Reaction to the Houthi Escalation

The UN Security Council's member states issued a statement condemning the Houthi militia's military escalation against vital areas including airports in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. They stressed the need to halt the Houthi escalation in Ma'rib. The UN Security Council also condemned the militia's recruitment and use of children in the war as well as its violation of humanitarian and international human rights law. The Security Council also stressed the importance of holding to account those involved in committing human rights violations in Yemen. At the same time, the GCC states welcomed the Saudi peace initiative in Yemen, which received support from the international community and the legitimate Yemeni government. This initiative reflected a strong commitment to the unity, sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity of Yemen and also reflected Saudi Arabia's concern over the lack of progress in the Yemeni peace process.<sup>(10)</sup>

The United States also condemned the Houthi escalation in Ma'rib. It accused the Houthi militia of impeding the movement of civilians and humanitarian aid, stressing that the militia was preventing Abdiya's residents from accessing basic services. This was reflected in a statement issued by the US Department of State on October 16, 2021. The department's spokesperson Ned Price said that Washington condemned the Houthi escalation in Yemen and described it as a blatant disregard for the wellbeing of Yemeni civilians. Washington called on the Houthi militia to immediately halt its attack against Ma'rib and heed the growing calls for it to participate in the UN-led inclusive peace initiative.<sup>(11)</sup>

While briefing the UN Security Council, the UN Special Envoy to Yemen Hans Grundberg condemned the Houthi escalation in Ma'rib on October 14, 2021. He said, "The military escalation on the ground has taken an alarming turn, and Ma'rib and its surroundings, including Shabwa and al-Bayda, remain the epicenter of the war." He reiterated that the escalation in the Abdiya district by the Houthi militia had caused a tragic situation for thousands of civilians and stressed that this escalation must end quickly.<sup>(12)</sup>

## 2. The Promotion of Sectarian Ideas and Khomeini's Ideology

The Houthi militia has continuously adopted policies and behavior reflecting exclusionary sectarian tendencies. In October, there were several instances illustrating the Houthis' promotion of sectarianism in line with the Iranian approach by exploiting religious occasions, holding conferences to spread Iranian slogans and promoting a culture of sectarian hatred.<sup>(13)</sup>

The Houthi militia organized a sectarian conference in Sana'a which included representatives from hawzas in Iran, Iraq and Lebanon. This conference was the first of its kind in Yemen. The main objective behind this conference was to promote exclusionary sectarian ideas, serving Iran's schemes.<sup>(14)</sup>

Some observers believe that holding a Shiite conference in Sana'a was not accidental but was done to transmit several messages, most notably providing ideological justifications for the military and terrorist escalation inside and outside Yemen. These messages reflect the Iranian government's desire to use Yemen as a base to attack Saudi Arabia. The main focus of this conference was to overthrow what they called "the guardianship of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia over the Two Holy Mosques." This clearly indicates the threat that the Houthi militia poses as it implements terrorist policies serving the IRGC and the Iranian government.

The Houthi militia took advantage of the Prophet's birthday to propagate Iranian culture in Yemeni society. During this occasion, the militia disseminated Iranian sectarian slogans and ideas which promote a culture of hatred towards other sects and replicated Iranian traditions to celebrate the Prophet's birthday. Abdul-Malik al-Houthi, the Houthi's leader, gave a speech on October 7, 2021. In his speech, he described all those who were against the militia's approach in celebrating the Prophet's birthday as infidels and hypocrites.<sup>(15)</sup>

Hassan Irloo, the terrorist IRGC officer who was appointed as ambassador to Yemen by the Houthis, took advantage of the Prophet's birthday to project himself as the guardian and ruler of Sana'a and the Yemenis. He spoke about guardianship over the Yemeni people, "The Yemeni people, by adhering to the approach of the Great Prophet will not give up their resistance and will not submit to the forces of aggression and arrogance." This provoked widespread public discontent in Yemen. Some Yemeni circles questioned how the Houthi militia allowed Irloo, a foreigner, to speak as if he was the guardian of the Yemeni people. He behaved as if he was the ruler of Sana'a during the birthday celebration.<sup>(16)</sup>

### Conclusion

The Houthi militia and the Iranian government continue to defy the wishes of the Yemeni people and the international community to end the war in Yemen by finding common ground to initiate dialogue and reach a political settlement to the crisis. The Houthi militia responded to these wishes with further escalation in the strategic governorate of Ma'rib. The militia was supported by the Iranian government, which is seeking a foothold in the Arabian Peninsula. The promotion of sectarian ideas by the Houthi militia is part of its strategy to influence the Yemeni public to serve the Iranian government's political

interests and legitimize its expansionist ambitions in the country and the peninsula. This means that the international community and regional actors must search for new mechanisms to deal with the Houthi militia and reduce the danger its poses to Yemen's and the region's stability and peace.



# Iran and Iraq

The report published in September 2021 reviewed the implications of the Iraqi prime minister's visit to Iran on September 12, 2021. In October, the report analyzes the impact of Iran's role on the following: the early Iraqi parliamentary elections that were held on October 10, 2021; the electoral alliances; the election results; and the transformations and impact of the electoral scene on Iran's role in Iraq.

## 1. Iran and the Atmosphere of the Early Parliamentary Elections

The elections were held in light of several variables that cast a shadow on the Iraqi scene, the first of which was the outbreak of the October 2019 popular protests that took place in all governorates, including the south, with dense Shiite populations, who protested against the prolonged electricity and unemployment crises and Iranian interference. The protesters raised slogans hostile to Iran such as "Iran go outside, Iraq remains free."<sup>(17)</sup> The protestors set fire to the Iranian consulates in Najaf and Karbala, burnt the Iranian flag, pelted shoes at pictures of Iranian leaders,<sup>(18)</sup> and targeted militia headquarters. The protests prompted Adil Abdul-Mahdi to resign from the presidency in November 2019.

The second variable is the electricity crisis which Iran has further exacerbated by refusing to provide Iraq with its share of electricity under the pretext that it has not cleared its outstanding debts. Iran's share is about one third of Iraq's total electricity production.<sup>(19)</sup> Iran has used it as a pressure card against the Kadhimi government to thwart its plans to achieve Iraqi independence and sovereignty because Iraqi independence threatens Iran's interests and its imperialist agenda. The third variable centers on Iraq turning into an arena to settle scores between the United States and Iran. The latter, through its militias, embarked on the military path against US targets in Iraq, to strengthen its negotiating position and push the United States to lift the sanctions.

The electoral atmosphere provides insight into Iran's efforts to influence Iraqi party alignments prior to the elections as it sought to create pro-Iran alliances that would enable its political arms to form the largest bloc to nominate the new prime minister in accordance with its interests to ensure that it preserves its gains and can implement the rest of its plans in the country.

## 2. Electoral Alliances and Competing Currents

To achieve a majority, 165 out of 329 seats, to nominate the prime minister, several coalitions competed in the Iraqi elections, as follows:

- **Shiite alliances:** Some of these were cross-sectarian, calling for Iraq to

transition towards sovereignty, independence and to move closer to its Arab sphere such as the Sadrist bloc led by Muqtada al-Sadr, and the National State Forces Alliance headed by the leader of the Wisdom Movement Ammar al-Hakim. There were some sectarian alliances which maintained that Iraq should remain within the Iranian sphere of influence such as the Fatah Alliance headed by the Secretary-General of the Badr Organization Hadi al-Amiri who is close to Iran. He brought together in addition to his organization, a number of parties which represented some Iranian militias such as the Sadiqoun Movement headed by the Secretary-General of Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq Qais Khazali, the Rights Movement headed by the spokesman for the Iraqi Hezbollah Brigades, Iran's strongest ally in Iraq, Abu Ali al-Askari, and the State of Law Coalition headed by the former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki who is also close to Iran.

■ **Sunni alliances:** These included the National Progress Alliance led by Iraqi Parliament Speaker Muhammad al-Halbousi, Iraq Azem Alliance led by businessman Khamis al-Khanjar, the National Project Alliance led by businessman Jamal al-Dari, and the Salvation Front Alliance led by former Parliament Speaker Osama al-Nujaifi. These alliances aspired for an independent and sovereign Iraqi state.

■ **Kurdish alliances:** These played a major role in determining the largest bloc, most notably the Kurdistan Democratic Party led by the former President of Iraqi Kurdistan Massoud Barzani, and the Kurdistan Coalition led by Lahur Sheikh Jangi Talabani who co-chairs with Bafel Talabani the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, the second largest Kurdish party in Iraq.

■ **Those who boycotted the elections:** A number of new movements that were born out of the October movement, and some old alliances, such as the National Alliance and the Civil Democratic Alliance, boycotted the elections. It seems that there are a number of reasons behind the boycott, including: not holding accountable those involved in the killing of protesters, continued corruption, the failure to address the electricity and unemployment crises, and the uncontrolled proliferation of illegal weapons.

A review of the structure of the political alliances indicates the ongoing divisions between the alliances since the 2018 elections. The Shiite alliances were divided into more than five alliances, while the Sunni alliances amounted to four. Iran's two rival militias: Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq and the Iraqi Hezbollah Brigades ran in the elections under two different alliances; the political wing of Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq ran in the elections under the Fatah Alliance, while the political wing of Hezbollah under the Rights Movement.

The divisions between the alliances led to the problems witnessed in each electoral cycle, which is the inability of one coalition to achieve a majority of seats. The divisions are linked to the growing differences between the military and political wings backed by Iran after Soleimani's death, the decrease in Iranian financial support, and the conflict between the two marjayas: Qom and Najaf. The Iraqi Shiite marja Ali al-Sistani rejects Iranian control over Iraq, and considers this as an Iranian attempt to reduce the influence of the Najaf Marjaya in favor of Qom, especially since there is a historical dispute between the two marjayas over the theory of Wilayat al-Faqih.

### 3. Election Results and Alliance Quotas

According to the new law of 2020 concerning the election of lawmakers, the Parliament is comprised of 329 seats, including 83 quota seats: 74 seats for women, five for Christians, one seat for the Feyli community,<sup>(20)</sup> one seat for the Shabak community, one seat for the Yazidis, and one seat for the Sabians.<sup>(21)</sup> The seats won by each alliance according to the preliminary results were as follows:

- **The Sadrist bloc:** It ranked first with 73 seats, which will give Sadr a better position in the negotiations regarding the selection of the individual who will hold the highest executive position in the country.<sup>(22)</sup> The Sadrist bloc's electoral victory is due to its cross-sectarian stance, its awareness of the street's concerns and issues with it emphasizing the need to address the electricity and unemployment crises. In addition, it stood against quotas, promoted the national dimension, spoke about limiting arms to the state, and called for Iraq to return to its Arab surroundings. Sadr's supporters had previously chanted against Iran in Iraq, stressing the need for independent Iraqi decision-making.<sup>(23)</sup>

Following the announcement of the preliminary results, Sadr issued a statement, "It is the day of the victory of reform over corruption and militias, a day when sectarianism and ethnicity were abolished." He added, "All embassies are welcome as long as they do not interfere in Iraqi affairs. From now on, arms must be confined to the hands of the state...it is time for the people to live without occupation, terrorism, or militias that kidnap, intimidate, and detract the prestige of the state."<sup>(24)</sup>

- **The National Progress Alliance:** Unlike the 2018 elections, in which Sunni alliances ranked at the bottom, the National Progress Alliance, one of the most prominent Sunni alliances that ran in the elections, made great progress by displacing the Fatah Alliance, which ranked second in the 2018 elections, by taking second place with 38 seats. This reveals the return of Sunni voter confidence in their leadership, the beginning of Sunni awareness about the power of the electoral vote to achieve some balance with Shiite alliances.

- **The State of Law Alliance:** The alliance which is close to Iran took a higher rank in the 2021 elections, as it won fourth place in the 2018 elections with 26 seats. It ranked third in the 2021 parliamentary elections by winning 37 seats, meaning the coalition is able to mobilize for the elections.

- **The remaining alliances:** The Kurdistan Democratic Party ranked fourth place with 32 seats. The Iranian-backed Fatah Alliance suffered a significant setback in the 2021 elections by falling from second place in the 2018 elections, in which it won 47 seats, to fifth place in the 2021 elections by winning 14 seats only, meaning that it lost 33 seats in the 2021 parliamentary elections. This may be due to the growing awareness of the Iraqi voter about the danger of Iranian-backed alliances for Iraq's future.

The Shiite forces in general and the Fatah Alliance in particular suffered a resounding defeat. The announcement of the Shiite Coordination Framework and the Fatah Alliance was not surprising given their total rejection of the results because of the repercussions they have on the future of Iran-backed alliances. The leader of the Fatah Alliance Abu Mithaq al-Masari asserted that a huge injustice was committed against the Fatah Alliance in the elections.<sup>(25)</sup>

The Shiite Coordination Framework announced its complete rejection of the election results.<sup>(26)</sup> The failure to recognize the results is raising the stakes of the Iranian-backed coalitions to force the winning coalitions to make concessions in their favor in any negotiation process to nominate the prime minister.

Many Iranian writers have criticized the results of the elections. Hassan Hanizadeh, an expert of Middle Eastern affairs, questioned the integrity of the elections by saying, “The elections have been rigged. The next Parliament will move towards lowering the level of relations between Iran and Iraq.”<sup>(27)</sup> The writer Muhammad Wafabour criticized Muqtada al-Sadr, saying, “Sadr has an unstable personality. His words and actions cannot be relied upon.” He also said, “The Sadrist movement is the cause of the country’s instability in recent years, unlike the Popular Mobilization Forces which is the basis of relative stability in Iraq today. The riots in the street over the past three years were all led by Sadr’s supporters.”<sup>(28)</sup> These remarks express Iranian concerns over the election results which rejected Iran-backed alliances.

#### 4. The Shift in the Electoral Scene and Limiting Iran’s Role

The election results reflected the shift in voter behavior, which has been evident since the 2018 elections. People are aware of Iraq’s rich civilization and its affiliation with its Arab surroundings as they dealt a resounding blow by not voting for sectarian Shiite alliances except for the State of Law Coalition. The Fatah Alliance fell to fifth place after it was in second place in the 2018 elections. The Victory and Wisdom alliances fell significantly behind by winning four seats, meaning that they lost 58 seats compared to the number of the seats they secured in the 2018 Parliament.

The youth play the most influential role in changing the Iraqi equation to the detriment of the Iranian-backed alliances. They played a prominent role in overthrowing the government of Adil Abdul-Mahdi in November 2019 against the backdrop of the October 2019 protests, and brought forward the date for holding the elections from 2022 to October 2021. Therefore, the importance of the younger generation in countering the Iranian project in the Arab region cannot be underestimated. The younger generation is not interested in the Iranian project. The defeat of Iran-backed alliances reflects Iran’s misunderstanding of the intellectual transformations taking place among the youth segments.

The decline in turnout in the elections from 44.5 percent in the 2018 elections to 43 percent in the 2021 elections reveals the ongoing crisis of voter confidence across the entire electoral process, and is an indication of the street’s indifference to the calls of politicians and clerics to participate in the elections. Despite of the marjaya’s calls encouraging people to take part in elections, the 2021 elections witnessed lower turnout when compared to the 2005 elections.

The differences between the poles of the Shiite forces widened as the Sadrist bloc made progress. Sadr’s affirmation to move Iraq towards the path of statehood based on sovereignty and independence and moving Iraq closer to its Arab sphere resonated with the people. On the other hand, the election results were rejected by the Shiite Coordination Framework and the Fatah

Alliance. It is expected that the divisions between the poles of the Shiite forces will widen further at every stage as the alliances exert efforts to complete the electoral battle to designate the new prime minister. The divisions may reach acute levels because they revolve around the shape of the state, the way it is managed, and the shape of its alliances and foreign relations.

The aforementioned electoral transformations reveal the features of a new Iraqi equation, and they exposed the schemes of Iran and its plans. Popular rejection of Iran and its sectarian arms grow, because people voted in favor of the cross-sectarian Sadrist bloc, and delivered a blow to the Fatah Alliance, the closest ally of Iran, which casts a negative shadow on the future of the Iranian role in Iraq.

The results also reveal the emergence of a national bloc against sectarian divisions. The results indicated to the world Iran's failure in making Iraq a model to be followed by other countries. This bloc maximizes the chances of transitioning Iraq towards statehood, rendering Iran's efforts to achieve its transnational project a mere illusion that cannot be implemented in light of the emergence of a young Iraqi generation which rejects clerics and politicians. Therefore, the expected scenario is that the Sadrist bloc will obtain a majority and designate a new prime minister to form a consensus government or reach a settlement agreed upon by the alliances, with a greater role for Sadr.

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# Iran and Syria

The file of September 2021 reviewed Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's visit to Russia and its implications for the rest of the regional and international parties concerned with the Syrian issue. It also dealt with the developments in the Lebanese energy crisis and its repercussions on Syria. In October, the file examines the motives and dimensions related to the targeting of the Syrian Al-Tanf military base, which hosts international coalition forces. It also discusses the Russian role in balancing the escalation of tensions between Iran and Israel in Syria.

## 1. The Motives and Implications of Targeting Al-Tanf Military Base in Syria

On October 20, drones targeted al-Tanf military base, which hosts US and British international coalition forces, near the Syrian-Iraqi-Jordanian border triangle.<sup>(29)</sup> The so-called "Syrian Allies Operations Room" was most likely responsible for the attack, in response to targeting Iranian interests in Syria through an intense aerial bombardment campaign from the base.<sup>(30)</sup>

The importance of the base stems from its critical strategic location. The international coalition uses the base to provide logistical support and facilitate military operations in Syria and Iraq. On the other side, while the base is located near the Syrian border with Iraq, Iran considers al-Tanf as a part of the "Shiite Crescent" which it needs to implement its expansionist schemes in the region. The attack raises several questions regarding the motives behind the attack, its indications and dimensions.

The recent attack is considered as Tehran's attempt to heighten its diplomatic and military pressure on the United States. In addition, America's political elite is calling for Washington's military presence to be replaced with a stronger diplomatic role in order to deal appropriately with regional and international crises. In this context, Tehran wants to exploit the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, push the agreement for US forces to withdraw from Iraq in late December 2021 forward, increase pressure on the US presence in Syria, and leverage the presence of other international and regional parties involved in the Syrian conflict such as Russia and Turkey.

Despite Turkey and Russia having conflicting strategic interests with Iran in Syria, these countries share an interest in putting pressure on the US presence in the country. This is in addition to pushing the United States to withdraw from Syria completely, especially after Washington intensified its presence by deploying several military and armored vehicles as well as boosting its ammunition during October 2021. Moreover, the US administration extended the national emergency with respect to the situation in Syria – declared on October 14, 2019 — for another year.<sup>(31)</sup>

Targeting al-Tanf military base coincides with settlements and understandings between Russia, the United States, Jordan, and Israel in southern Syria. This area extends from the west to the north of Daraa towards the land border of al-Tanf in the east. These settlements and understandings are not directly in the interest of Iran because they stipulates the complete withdrawal of its militias from the border area with Israel, which it was using as a pressure card against the United States and Israel. However, in the end, it will secure an Iranian goal, albeit indirectly, to settle its Syrian ally (Bashar al-Assad) and reimpose his security control over the governorate of Daraa. Moreover, the attack will push all parties to resolve the remaining conflicts between the various forces in Syria, whether American or Turkish, through pressuring them inside their bases, primarily al-Tanf base, east of the Euphrates.

Another motive is related to Iran's strategy of direct targeting, which it employs as a tool for countering the deterrence strategies of its rivals. Iran does this to thwart the Israeli understandings with both the United States and Russia during this phase.<sup>(32)</sup> This follows the Israeli targeting of Iranian interests in Syria from al-Tanf military base which occurred in October 2021,<sup>(33)</sup> and the increasing possibility of targeting more Iranian sites in light of the recent meetings between Russia and Israel. Moreover, these meetings could result in new settlements and understandings, especially in light of Israeli intelligence reports which claim that Iran seeks to install surface-to-air anti-aircraft missiles in several countries in the region.<sup>(34)</sup>

Targeting al-Tanf base can also be considered as an Iranian response to the recent parliamentary elections in Iraq on October 10, in which its allied political parties lost a significant number of seats. In addition, the attack on al-Tanf can be seen as an attempt to compensate for Iran's declining influence in Iraq by intensifying its gains in Syria and Lebanon.<sup>(35)</sup>

In general, following the Iranian escalation against al-Tanf, the United States imposed new punitive measures against Iran's drone program. These punitive measures indicate the level of tensions between Iran and the United States and Israel. The two latter allies sought to raise their level of coordination to respond to Iranian threats. The Biden administration wants to reaffirm its seriousness in taking into consideration Israeli interests in its upcoming negotiations with Tehran. The mutual coordination is reflected in the remarkable synchronization between the recent US punitive measures and the Israeli strikes against Iranian militias in Syria, which continued until October 30, 2021. In contrast to similar practices over the past years, when Israeli planes launched air raids on Iranian targets in Syria, and qualitative bombing attacks using surface-to-surface missiles.<sup>(36)</sup>

## 2. Russian Mediation and Containment of the Iranian-Israeli Escalation in Syria

Moscow projects itself as a mediator in several Syrian files between local and international parties to create a conducive environment for its common interests and aspirations with international parties, including Iran and Israel. The Russian strategy aims to preserve the minimum interests of Israel and Iran to contain the escalation between them and take advantage to enhance its role in Syria.



In this context, Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian's visit to Moscow and the meeting with his Russian counterpart, Sergey Lavrov, was to mobilize any political and military support given the escalating tensions between Tehran and Tel Aviv and the latter's opening of multiple fronts against Iranian influence, whether inside or beyond Syria's borders.<sup>(37)</sup> On the other hand, Moscow, which is working vigorously to promote international and regional openness towards Syria, is seeking to identify points of balance and understanding with Iran and curb any Iranian role that might obstruct its policy, which experienced a positive turn in recent weeks. We recall here the US-Russian understandings and Jordan's, Egypt's, Lebanon's, and some Arab Gulf states' openness towards Damascus.

To increase the areas of influence and scope of activities for its militias, Tehran formed a new IRGC-affiliated brigade called the Hashemiyoun<sup>(38)</sup> in eastern Syria, and established a second military base in the northeastern part of al-Bukamal, which is considered a US-Russian-Turkish area of shared influence. The recent Iranian deployment serves Moscow on the other hand. Russia can deploy its forces in significant geographic areas for various key international actors. Moreover, the Russian deployment can be used to put pressure on other parties to secure Moscow benefits at all levels. This will allow Russia to act as a mediator and further expand its role. Accordingly, on October 21, Moscow deployed its troops in eastern Syria on more than one front. It also tried to penetrate areas that were quite difficult to enter in the previous years, such as the right bank of the Euphrates River, where it conducted security patrols, and Deir Ezzor Governorate, which it penetrated recently.<sup>(39)</sup> It is noteworthy that the Russian moves followed a meeting with a US military delegation at Lafarge base near Ayn al-Arab city, northeast of Aleppo, and a few days after the attack on al-Tanf base on the Syrian-Iraqi border.

While Russia realizes that keeping Iran away from Syria reflects an urgent Israeli demand and is in line with the interests of several other regional countries, it sought to strengthen its role as a regional mediator in Syria. This was clear during the multiple visits of Israeli officials, especially the recent meeting between Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett and Russian President Vladimir Putin. These meetings sought the renewal of military and security understandings between Russia and Israel, especially in light of the US withdrawal from the region, and the Israeli apprehension about Iran's increasing influence on the southern borders of Syria — Moscow has anticipated Iran's growing influence there and has taken preemptive steps in Daraa to address it.

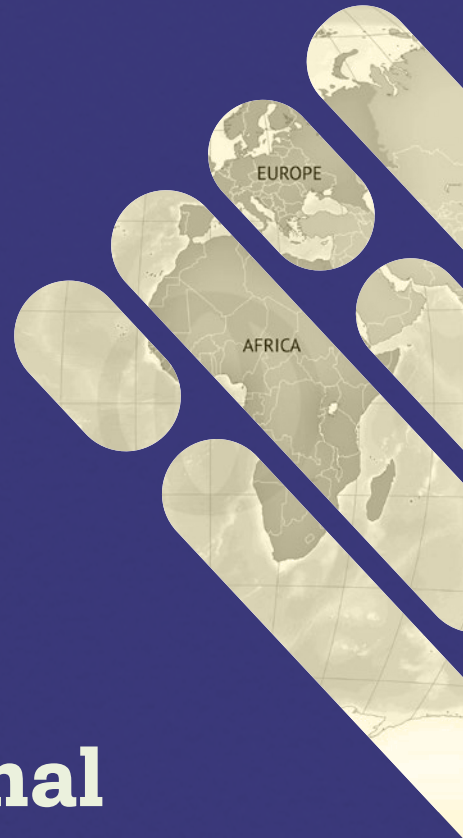
## Conclusion

Reviewing the latest developments in Syria, it appears that the future of the Syrian crisis is related to two main factors. First, Russia's ability to manage the changing balances between the international and regional powers involved in the Syrian conflict. Second, the escalating tensions between Iran and Israel. These factors may influence the resolution of the current stalemate in Syria through balancing the competing interests of the different parties and moving towards a comprehensive settlement. Alternatively, tensions will continue with regard to qualitative military escalation, which will lead to further complications for all the parties in Syria, which may keep the conflict going on for years to come.

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# International Affairs

**I**nternational Affairs discusses Iran's relations with the United States and Europe. As for the Iran and United States part, the file discusses five topics: the US and Iran positions on the nuclear talks in Vienna, sanctions and pressure points between the two countries, confrontation at the regional and international levels, and the future of their relations. As for Iran's relations with the Europeans, the file reviews the most significant interactions in October: signals to return to the nuclear talks in Vienna, and their disagreements and conflicts regarding human rights issues.



# Iran and the United States

The developments in Iran-US relations in September led to fluctuations which continued throughout October. Iran is still betting on time to circumvent the sanctions, exploiting current regional and international developments, especially since the US administration is no longer viewing Iran as a foreign policy priority. Washington, however, has reaffirmed its diplomatic approach towards Tehran. This was illustrated with the start of the nuclear talks in Vienna which were suspended when Ebrahim Raisi ascended to the presidency in June 2021. The United States could turn to other options against Iran as the latter is stalling negotiations to return to the nuclear deal. This is in addition to the possibility that Iran's nuclear program might be out of control amid Iran's increase of uranium enrichment and its installation of more centrifuges. Given the current ebbs and flows, competition and rivalry are still dominating the United States Iran policies towards the region and the world.

In this part of the ICF, we shed light on the latest developments in Iran-US relations in October 2021, discussing four main topics: the US and Iranian position on the nuclear talks in Vienna; mutual pressure and sanctions; confrontation at the regional level; and confrontation at the international level.

## 1. The US and Iranian Position on the Nuclear Talks in Vienna

The United States expressed its discontent over Iran stalling to return to the nuclear talks in Vienna, amidst Iran's continuous expanding of its nuclear program beyond the IAEA's watch. US patience with Iran seems to be running out to the extent that some observers doubt the possibility of reviving the nuclear deal. Washington, therefore, has been preparing other alternatives to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons if the negotiations fail and Iran continues to blatantly violate its commitments under the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).<sup>(1)</sup> Perhaps US pressure pushed Iran to be more responsive towards European endeavors in regard to returning to negotiations. Iran promised to start talks with the P4+1 in Brussels before the end of November 2021 – but without the United States. These talks, possibly, pave the way for wider negotiations in Vienna, expected to include the same issues and with the United States participating indirectly.

Apparently, Iran is heading towards negotiations after preparing a host of major demands: setting a specific timeline to avoid wasting time; a practical lifting of all sanctions (especially secondary sanctions imposed after concluding the nuclear deal); a proposal and mechanism for the future nuclear deal's provisions; guaranteeing that the United States will never again withdraw from the renewed deal.<sup>(2)</sup> Iran also wants guarantees that no signatories will unilaterally withdraw

from the deal's commitments. This is in addition to including Iran's ballistic missile program and regional influence in the negotiations.<sup>(3)</sup> Washington and Tehran seek to gain more bargaining chips to strengthen their positions in the nuclear talks in Vienna. Washington has been working to build international consensus on Iran while pushing the IAEA to condemn Iran's violations to force the latter to return to the nuclear talks. Tehran continues to be ambiguous over the status of its nuclear program while hindering the UN watchdog's supervision and monitoring. The Iranian Parliament still perceives its legislation entitled the "Strategic Action Plan to Lift Sanctions and Protect the Iranian Nation's Interest" as an aspect of the country's national strength.

## 2. Mutual Leverage and Sanctions

As diplomatic activity remained dormant in October, the Biden administration continued to leverage Iran. The United States warned its citizens of forging any financial connection to the Imam Reza Shrine as well as against involvement with persons, programs and authorities blocked under US sanctions. The US Treasury blacklisted six Iranian targets – two entities and four individuals. These targets are linked to Iran's UAV activities, including activities that threaten US interests. Washington continues to place pressure on Iran via imposing secondary sanctions on countries collaborating with Iran. It also maintains its restrictions on vessels heading towards Iran's ports. To this end, North Korea cooperated with the United States by freezing Iran's assets. The Financial Action Task Force (FATF) announced on Friday, October 22, 2021 that Iran is still blacklisted. The FATF revises its blacklist every three months.<sup>(4)</sup>

To counter US sanctions, Iran continues its strategy of active resistance to successfully overcome the harsh economic and security conditions — without depending solely on the return to the nuclear deal as the only way to tackle internal crises. President Ebrahim Raisi directed all ministries and governmental bodies to cooperate in thwarting US sanctions and to regulate the prices of basic items. The first vice president is in charge of coordinating the government's actions to thwart US sanctions.<sup>(5)</sup> Raisi proposed a broad development program for trade with Iran's friendly countries, including logistical and financial cooperation by using local currencies.<sup>(6)</sup> Iranian governmental bodies implemented Raisi's directives by concluding bilateral agreements with several countries, especially with Iran's neighbors to circumvent sanctions and restrictions and creating a bilateral financial channel. This is in addition to holding trade exhibitions, hastening the implementation of joint programs, and bartering goods to promote trade.<sup>(7)</sup>

The Raisi government enhanced its policies towards Iran's neighbors, endeavoring to increase trade with regional organizations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU).<sup>(8)</sup> Securing membership in these regional organizations will provide Iran with a better trade environment at the international level, given the strong cooperation between the members of these organizations in variant fields including the energy sector. Iran, therefore, calls for the activation of the SCO Energy Club to enhance energy exchange and defeat US sanctions on oil exports. The SCO includes the largest oil and gas producers and consumers in the world.<sup>(9)</sup>

### 3. Confrontation at the Regional Level

As part of its deterrence strategy against Iran's influence in the region, the United States formed TF 59, a US Navy task force designed to integrate artificial intelligence to operate a new series of drones; Loyal Wingman drones. In response, Iran added six large batches of newly armed speedboats and attack and cyber drones to the IRGC's naval force to disrupt the TF 59 operations.<sup>(10)</sup>

Israel plays a regional role to confront Iran in order to defend itself in cooperation with the United States. It attacked Iran-backed Shiite militias in Syria several times. It targeted T-4 (Tiyas) Airbase (Homs Province) on October 8. The attack, according to Syrian sources, was launched from al-Tanf base in the Jordanian and Iraqi border triangle. It also attacked Palmyra on October 13, then Rif-Dimashq Governorate on October 30. The Israeli attacks aim to curb the influence of Iran's militias in Syria and halt Hezbollah's arms trafficking into Lebanon.<sup>(11)</sup> Iran suspects that the United States and Israel were behind the cyberattack which paralyzed its petrol distribution network on October 26.<sup>(12)</sup>

Iran countered the US deterrence, targeting several US sites in October 2021. It launched a drone attack against the US al-Tanf base— used by the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS. Further, the IRGC navy intercepted US speedboats in the Arabian Gulf.<sup>(13)</sup>

### 4. Confrontation at the International Level

The United States was keen to collate transatlantic consensus and regional cooperation against Iran. Tehran adopted a policy of looking towards the East, strengthening its ties with US competitors. The Biden administration, in response, held further discussions with its allies to leverage Iran and build international and regional consensus on Iran's behavior. A delegation headed by US Special Envoy for Iran Robert Malley visited Russia, the Gulf states, and the E3 (UK, France and Germany). The US delegation aimed to listen to the views and assessments of all countries, discussing what they should do in the future.

The global and regional powers share the same concerns with the United States regarding Iran's position on resuming talks. They are willing to cooperate with Washington to address Iran's nuclear program. They all, including Washington, adopt diplomacy as their main approach to reviving the JCPOA and lifting sanctions, paving the way to cooperate with Iran economically. The United States believes that there is still an opportunity to find alternative solutions to the thorny issues — which remain unresolved after six rounds of talks – to make Iran comply with its commitments under the nuclear deal in return for lifting US economic sanctions. This approach will help the Europeans and countries in the region to develop their economic relations with Iran.<sup>(14)</sup>

As part of its policy of “looking to the East” to counterbalance US moves, Ebrahim Raisi stressed in a letter to his Chinese counterpart on the need to enhance and expand mutual cooperation in all fields: economic, political, and cultural, and to implement their Comprehensive Strategic Partnership;<sup>(15)</sup> they have already conducted most of its legal, regulatory and operational measures.<sup>(16)</sup> Heading towards the East will definitely help Iran enter Asian markets and circumvent US economic sanctions.

Iran adopts the same policy towards Russia. It wants to forge a similar strategic partnership with Moscow and enhance its economic ties. To achieve this end, Iran's foreign minister visited Moscow. In the same month, the Chief of Staff of the Iranian Armed Forces Major-General Mohammad Bagheri also visited Moscow to discuss developing their joint military and defense cooperation and combating terrorism in addition to exchanging views on the latest regional and international developments. They also discussed ways to implement their arms deals, concluded after the lifting of the arms embargo on Iran in October 2021. These deals include the purchase of fighter jets, training jets, and combat helicopters from Russia.<sup>(17)</sup>

Furthermore, as part of its policy to counterbalance the United States, Iran enhanced its relations with Venezuela. They concluded a 20-year cooperation agreement in the political and economic fields. They had earlier signed an oil export deal.

It is reported that Iran delivered long-range ballistic missiles to Venezuela. According to reports, two Iranian cargo ships were headed towards Venezuela, possibly carrying sophisticated weapons. US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said, "I am absolutely concerned about the proliferation of weapons, any type of weapons, in our neighborhood."<sup>(18)</sup>

## Conclusion

Iran has adopted a multifaceted policy towards the region and the world. Iran wants to test its ability to circumvent US sanctions and counterbalance US pressure while buying time to gain more bargaining chips for the nuclear talks in Vienna. The United States is still adopting diplomacy towards Iran while maintain its pressure strategy. Washington, however, is placing greater priority on diplomacy as stated earlier.

The policies of the new Iranian government have so far been ineffective in tackling the country's deteriorating internal crises while the country is at the brink of economic collapse, leading to a decline in the legitimacy of the Raisi government which was already facing a legitimacy crisis since the presidential elections. He is rehashing the same policies that had been tried and tested by the Rouhani government. Though US diplomacy has granted Raisi greater room for maneuver, yet it still cannot help Iran make essential internal changes neither does it mitigate the pressure on the government. US sanctions still threaten countries that want to deal with Iran before returning to the nuclear deal. Therefore, Iran is likely to return to the nuclear talks before the end of November.

The Raisi government will be keen to use its nuclear achievements as a bargaining chip to avoid making essential concessions in the nuclear agreement. It will probably resort to holding talks with regional countries, most prominently, Saudi Arabia, to avoid including its regional behavior and ballistic missile program – which is non-negotiable and a symbol of sovereignty for Iran – in the nuclear talks in Vienna. The West mainly aims to tackle the Iran nuclear issue rather than merely returning to the nuclear deal. This is in addition to addressing Iran's regional behavior and ballistic missile program. How and what concessions the West will make in this regard will be revealed in the nuclear talks to be held in Vienna in the upcoming few weeks.



# Iran and Europe

In September 2021, Iran and the Europeans had gone through a cycle of ebbs and flows in regard to returning to the nuclear talks in Vienna; the Europeans called on Iran to quickly return to the negotiating table as tensions were rising between IAEA and Iran. In October 2021, we witnessed rising tensions between Iran and the UK over financial and human rights issues, while some European countries delivered humanitarian aid (COVID-19 vaccines) to Iran. In this part, we discuss the developments in Iran-Europe relations by reviewing: Iran's signals to return to the nuclear talks in Vienna and their disagreements on human rights issues.

## 1. Signals of Iran's Return to the Nuclear Talks in Vienna

The most noticeable points denoted from Iran-Europe political rhetoric were signals to return to the nuclear talks in Vienna; discussions on the timing and conditions to return, as well as the measures to be taken in this regard. Iran seems willing – yet cautious – to return. We see worrisome signs in Iran's political rhetoric; the Iranians are concerned about how beneficial the final outcomes of the talks will be for Iran. Iran consistently and repeatedly affirmed that all US sanctions must be lifted, hoping to reap financial and political gains if it accepts imposing restrictions on its nuclear program. It, therefore, has been keen to launch talks with the Europeans before resuming the nuclear talks in Vienna.

The Europeans continued their diplomatic pressure on Iran to push it to resume the nuclear talks in Vienna. A European delegation headed by the EU's chief negotiator on the Iranian nuclear deal, Enrique Mora, visited Tehran in mid-October to urge Iran to resume talks in Vienna. Ali Bagheri, Iran's chief negotiator and deputy foreign minister, received the delegation. After they met again in Brussels, Bagheri tweeted on October 27 that Iran would resume the nuclear talks before the end of November.<sup>(19)</sup> The Europeans, however, still have concerns over Iran's violations of its commitments under the nuclear deal, especially Iran's breach of the deal's limits on its uranium enrichment stockpile.

The Europeans, therefore, intensified their diplomatic pressure through sending delegations to Tehran and meeting with Iranian representatives. They also issued statements expressing their concerns and condemnation of Iran's violations. The latest statement was issued by the E3 group of France, Germany and the UK along with the United States on the sidelines of the G20 Rome Summit. The four countries expressed “grave and growing concern” over Iran's nuclear violations.<sup>(20)</sup> Iran continues to voice dismay at such statements, claiming its nuclear program is for peaceful purposes.

## 5. Disagreements on Human Rights Issues

Following the collapse of the Ghani government and the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan, the issue of Afghan refugees drew attention from the Iranian government. Iran has used the refugees as a bargaining chip against the Europeans in their negotiations whether on issues related to its nuclear program, human rights, terrorism etc. Iranian Ambassador to Belgium Gholamhossein Dehghani spoke at a webinar held by the International Center for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD), criticizing Western countries for closing their borders to halt the influx of refugees into their territories.<sup>(21)</sup>

The Europeans maintain pressure on Iran on issues related to human rights and civil liberties. Gatherings of civil society groups and individuals erupted in Europe, protesting against the Iranian government. The Society of Political Refugees and other human rights organizations held in Berlin the first Iranian rally on Saturday October 9, 2019, calling for a host of demands: the abolition of the death penalty, the unconditional release of all political detainees. The National Council of Resistance of Iran organized a rally calling for the arrest and trial of Iran's President Ebrahim Raisi in Scotland when attending the Glasgow Climate Change Conference over his involvement in the 1988 massacre of political prisoners.<sup>(22)</sup> The Europeans, when dealing with Iran in general, focus on issues related to human rights and terrorism and use the carrot and stick policy. For example, the trials of Iranian officials are still active in Europe. Hamid Nouri faced a trial in Sweden on October 15 over involvement in the mass execution of political prisoners in 1988.<sup>(23)</sup> The ongoing investigations related to his trial may lead to the confirmation of the direct involvement of Ebrahim Raisi in the 1988 massacre. The British and French governments have been placing pressure on the Iranian government to release dual-national political prisoners, especially Iranian-British prisoner Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe. In response, Iran has used refugees as a bargaining chip to highlight Western governments' human rights failures.

## Conclusion

The most significant interactions between the two sides were on resuming the nuclear talks in Vienna. Despite their usual disagreements on human rights issues and the growing rallies organized by human rights bodies in Europe that are emerging from the Iranian government's torture and arbitrary detention of political prisoners, the two sides reached common ground in regard to returning to the nuclear talks. They announced the resumption of the nuclear talks scheduled for the end of November 2021. This political settlement would not have been achieved without the Europeans' intensified diplomatic pressure; they consecutively and simultaneously issued statements with the United States, confirming that their patience has run out over Iran's intransigence in regard to resuming the nuclear talks.

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