

MONTHLY REPORT



IRAN CASE FILE

Your window on Iran from inside and abroad

February 2022



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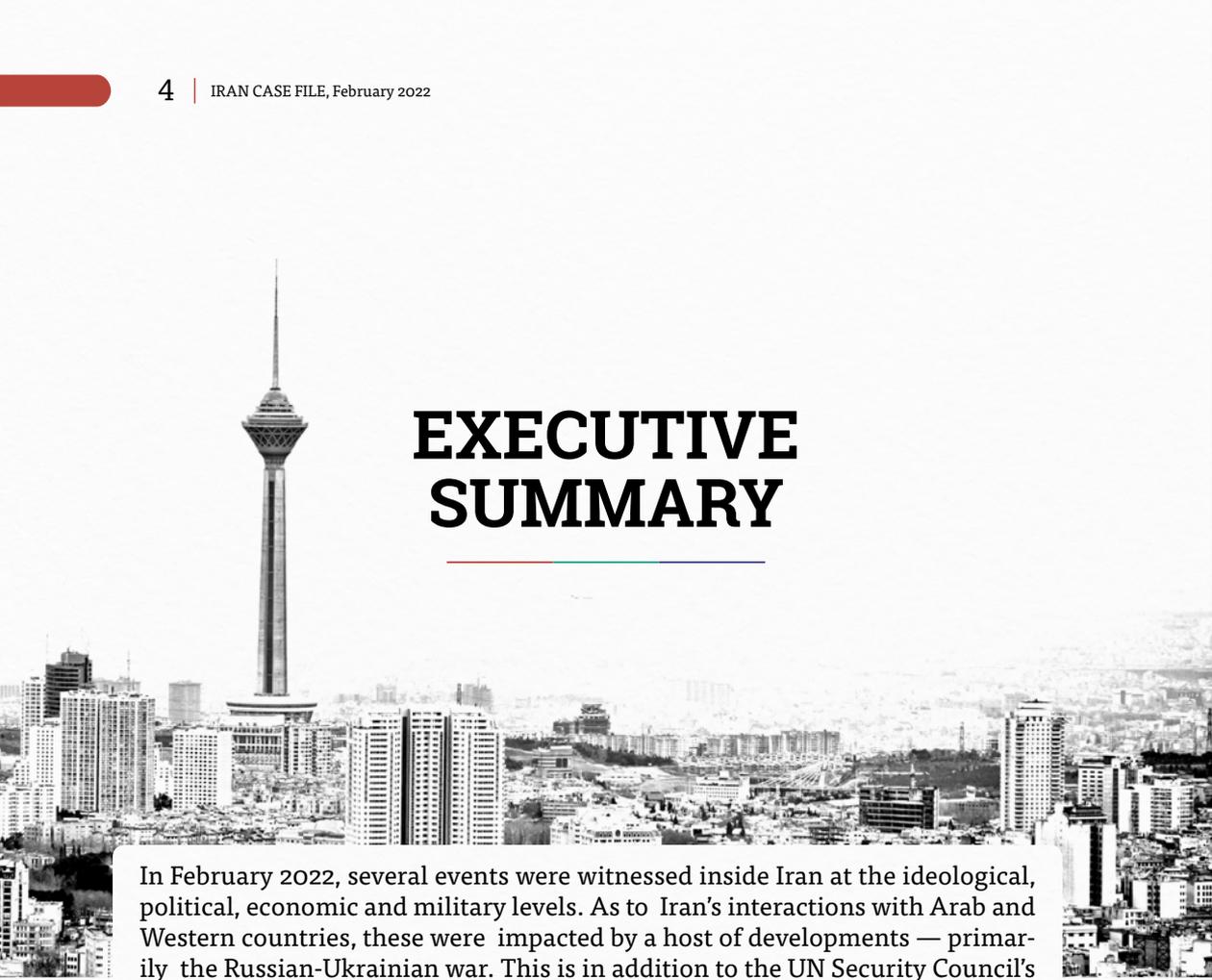
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In February 2022, several events were witnessed inside Iran at the ideological, political, economic and military levels. As to Iran's interactions with Arab and Western countries, these were impacted by a host of developments — primarily the Russian-Ukrainian war. This is in addition to the UN Security Council's decision to designate the Houthis as a terrorist organization, the Iranian failure to rearrange the Shiite camp in Iraq, the nuclear negotiations, and the US realization of the strategic significance of the Arabian Gulf.

Domestically, at the ideological level, the Iranian religious elite continued employing religion to make political gains — with the aim of enhancing the legitimacy of the Iranian political system and strengthening its popular incubators. The politicization of religion is a critical pillar of the ideological character of Iran's post-revolutionary political structure: the establishment rules on behalf of the Hidden Imam, a guardian over Shiite affairs and even over the affairs of all Muslims.

The politicization of religion was apparent in the remarks made by Hojatoleslam Abu Torabi Fard, Tehran's Friday prayer leader, when he said, "Iran is considered among the few defensive forces in the Islamic world." He added, "If it hadn't been for the instructions of the Leader of the Faithful Ali ibn Abi Talib — along with the principles outlined by the supreme leader Ali Khamenei — Iran wouldn't have reached this stature." He invoked Imam Ali to draw a link between his policy and the policy of the contemporary Iranian establishment.

The politicization of religion was also apparent through the pressure exerted by religious seminary students on Iran's Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian. The latter backed down from his remarks regarding the possibility of

direct negotiations with the United States over the Iranian nuclear file. Elsewhere, the Iranian press and some officials invoked the fatwa of the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei rendering unlawful the possession of nuclear weapons. It coincided with the ongoing Vienna talks and the developments at the negotiating table. But the reality of the fatwa suggests that Khamenei rejects the use of nuclear weapons only. The fatwa does not touch on the legality of their manufacturing and acquisition.

At the political level, Raisi's government and the Iranian Parliament have recently faced harsh criticisms due to the poor performance of the former and its failure to make good on the promises Raisi made during his electoral campaign to the people. In addition, the government faced criticism because of the inaccuracy of official data which indicated an improvement in some sectors such as foreign trade and a surge in exports, especially oil exports. The criticisms were so severe that the government was labeled as the weakest government since the victory of the Islamic Revolution in 1979.

The "conservative" controlled Parliament was also branded as the weakest throughout the history of Iranian parliaments in the post-revolution period. Many of its members lack expertise and there is an absence of heavyweight or influential figures who can take up strong positions when crucial decisions are pending for the sake of the interests of the Iranian people.

In an unprecedented move that has several significations, two lawyers filed a lawsuit against the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and former President Hassan Rouhani. The lawsuit accuses Khamenei and Rouhani of the deaths of 100,000 Iranians due to their failure in managing the coronavirus pandemic. On a separate note, the Iranian Minister of Labor Hojjat Abdolmaleki revealed that 1,000 employees, accounting for half of the employees within his ministry, must be dismissed. He said that his ministry has so far sacked 350 officials, reiterating that 120 graft lawsuits have been filed with the judiciary.

At the economic level, despite the cooperation between Iran and Russia over the past years, the economic ties between the two countries remain modest. With regard to economic relations between Iran and Ukraine, they are on a smaller scale. After the Russia-Ukraine war broke out, it is expected that it will have a direct impact on the reality of the Iranian economy, some negative and positive impacts – especially in the fields of strategic food items, digital currency, public finance, and energy. The war offers an opportunity to create new alliances and economic levers.

At the military level, this front has seen a host of developments and events — foremost of which was the reemergence of border disputes between Iran and Pakistan. This came after militias from Iran waged two attacks on Pakistani border guard forces in the Balochistan districts of Nushki and Jaghi, killing several Pakistani soldiers. Over the past years, Pakistan has accused the IRGC of playing a role in the subversive activities inside its territories. Islamabad invited the Iranian interior minister to Pakistan to provide him with evidence proving the involvement of Iranian-based fighters in the attacks. On another front, security officials in Iran are facing an array of security challenges and threats due to the mounting phenomenon of weapons possession among civil-

ians. This phenomenon has raised a genuine concern about Iran facing a serious threat to its internal stability.

At the level of Iranian interactions with the Arab countries — when it comes to Iran-Gulf interactions, it seems that the United States intends to review the strategic significance of the Arabian Gulf region. This is due to several international variables and developments such as the nuclear talks hosted in Vienna, US-China competition and the dangers facing the energy markets as a result of the tensions between Russia and the West. The US president issued a decision to designate Qatar as a main US ally outside NATO. Furthermore, US President Joe Biden held a telephone conversation with Saudi King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud on February 9.

These moves are considered to be US attempts to strengthen the role of the Gulf states and to rectify its past assumptions about the decline of the strategic importance of the Gulf on the global stage. In another move, a delegation from the Iranian Parliament's National Security Committee visited the three UAE islands occupied by Iran. It aimed to follow up the activities of the naval forces of the IRGC on these islands. Iran announced the opening of a civilian airport on the Greater Tunb Island, naming it Imam Ali Airport, with plans to start direct flights between Tehran and the island. These moves indicate the Iranian government's attempts to entrench its occupation of the islands and confer legitimacy on its presence and ownership of the islands by prescription. The moves also prove Tehran's lack of seriousness about improving its relations with its neighbors.

At the level of the Iranian role in Yemen, the UN Security Council approved a resolution to designate the Houthi militia backed by the Iranian government as a terrorist organization — placing it on the sanctions blacklist. By virtue of the resolution, Iran is banned from supplying any kinds of weapons to the Houthi militia. The UN Security Council also condemned the cross-border terrorist attacks carried out by the Houthis targeting civilians and infrastructure in Saudi Arabia and the UAE. It called on the militia to immediately cease its terrorist acts. Due to Tehran being the chief backer of the Houthis, its dismissal of this resolution was expected. It considered the resolution to pose a challenge to the political process efforts and the language used in it was influenced by the political considerations and the pressure exerted by the Arab coalition members. The resolution is expected to have major implications for the Yemeni landscape — fueling popular discontent against the Houthi militia, especially in the regions it controls, with it likely that a front will be created against it involving tribal leaders as well as pundits, media and academic elites. The UN resolution also paves the way for major world powers, especially the United States, to designate the Houthi militia as a terrorist organization.

As to Iraq, it is locked in an unprecedented phase of political impasse against the backdrop of the failure of mediation efforts to resolve the differences among the Kurdish alliances over the post of the president. These efforts also failed to resolve the differences among the Shiite factions on the nature and lineup of the new government and which Shiite alliances are likely to be involved in it — derailing the election of Iraq's president and the designation of

a new prime minister.

Iran's mediation efforts failed to rearrange the Shiite alliances — given the decline of their popularity in Iraq and not having an influential figure such as the former Quds Force Commander Qassem Soleimani who had the ability to bring together all the Shiite parties in Iraq. Iran is attempting to use all possible levers to pressure Sadr to involve all the Shiite alliances that fall under the Coordination Framework when forming a new government. Iran is continuing to throw the security landscape in Iraq into disarray via its militias to force Sadr and his Sunni and Kurdish allied blocs to change their position and prevent them from forming a national majority government — instead of opting for a consensual government. Iran also wants to send warning messages that it will destabilize the Iraqi landscape in order to achieve its political objectives. It will target influential figures in the Iraqi equation in case its allied blocs are excluded from the Iraqi political landscape.

In relation to Iran's role in Syria, Tehran seeks to take advantage of Russia's distraction from the Syrian arena as a result of the war it is waging on Ukraine to enhance and expand its clout in different sectors in Syria. Iran also hopes that the crisis will lead to lower levels of coordination between Russia and Israel in Syria, especially in light of several indications, including the change in the way Israel targets the positions of Iranian militias in Syria. In light of Russia's preoccupation with the Ukrainian crisis and the massive sanctions it is to endure from the United States and the European countries, Tehran has signed an agreement in regard to administrative cooperation with the Syrian government — in a clear step to tighten its control and enhance its strategy in Syria.

In relation to international affairs, it seems that the indirect negotiations between Iran and the United States in Vienna aiming to resuscitate the nuclear deal have seen some progress. It also seems that the two sides have reached a quasi-final formula for an agreement to be signed which only needs some differences to be resolved. The recent period has seen a palpable decline in the impact of US sanctions on Iran. This US complacency led to some economic relief which in turn has curbed to an extent the deteriorating situation in Iran. A number of reports indicate that Iranian oil exports have surged, reaching more than 1 million barrels per day. But the positive atmosphere did not prevent Iran from pursuing its conventional policies, especially when it comes to its missile activities. The IRGC unveiled Kheibar Shekan, or "Kheibar-buster," a long-range and high precision missile. This display carried several meanings and significations such as asserting that Iran will not suspend its missile program and regional interference.

After the nuclear talks in Vienna witnessing some progress, Iran revitalized its diplomatic activities in February, especially with the European parties. Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian held a phone call with the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell Fontelles. He also held separate meetings with his counterparts in Germany and Britain. As for French President Emmanuel Macron, he continued to hold phone calls with his Iranian counterpart Raisi to discuss political developments and achieve a desired breakthrough at the Vienna talks. Despite

this engagement, tensions broke out in Iran's relations with several European countries. The Iranian Foreign Ministry accused the British government of being behind the establishment of the people's tribunal in London. Three Iranian watchdogs launched the tribunal in response to appeals from the survivors and families of victims who want the Iranian government to be held accountable for the violations it has committed against the Iranian people. But a counsel for the tribunal denied that Britain had any role in its establishment.

Elsewhere, the European Union called on the Iranian government to immediately suspend the death penalty and asserted that there had been a spike in the number of executions — including the execution of women — since Raisi took power as president. Iran responded by saying that the European appeal involves a lot of distortion and lies. The Iranians believe that this appeal has been raised at this time for political objectives.



Internal Affairs

In this month's Iran Case File (ICF), Internal Affairs is divided into four main files: The Ideological File discusses the relationship between religion and politics. The Political File reviews three topics: accusations against the government and Parliament that they are the weakest in the history of the Iranian republic; lawsuits against the supreme leader, former President Hassan Rouhani over their management of the coronavirus pandemic and other corruption cases related to the Ministry of Labor. The Economic File discusses the nature of Iran's economic relations with Russia and Ukraine, the ramifications of the Russia-Ukraine conflict on Iran. The Military File sheds lights on three prominent developments: the attacks of Iran-based militias on Pakistan's border guards; the Russian invasion of Ukraine and how it has dashed Iran's hopes for sanctions relief; and the spike in the possession of weapons among civilians and the consequent security concerns.



The Ideological File

The Ideological File sheds light on the developments pertaining to the Shiite religious elites in general and Iran's clerical establishment in particular. It also spotlights the impact of such developments on the religious and political landscape in Iran and its repercussions on the Shiite community in the region.

The Ideological File of the past month touched on the tensions between the Taliban and the Islamic State-Khorasan Province (IS-KP) and the continued clashes between the two sides. It also discussed Iran's close monitoring of these clashes. In addition, it cast light on the ridicule faced by Sunni scholars in Iran from the country's ruling elite. This month, the file discusses two central questions. First, the relationship between the religious and political spheres and the exploitation of the religious spheres for the sake of political gains. Second, the invocation of Khamenei's old fatwa rendering unlawful the possession of nuclear weapons by Iran's press and some Iranian officials and its discussion from the perspective of its issuance. Moreover, the political context in which it was issued was also raised. For the sake of argument, this discussion is relevant if we assume that the fatwa remains unchanged.

The Relationship Between the Religious and Political Spheres

The Iranian political elite is still rolling out religious discourse in political matters to gain legitimacy or achieve public consensus regarding some disputed issues at home. The Iranian establishment and its religious elite do not spare any efforts to exploit the religious sphere to serve their political agenda. Politicizing religion is the norm in Iran given the fact that the Iranian establishment considers itself a representative of the Hidden Imam and a guardian over Shiite affairs — and even over the entire Islamic world — according to the absolute version of Wilayat al-Faqih.

In this respect, the interim Friday prayer leader in Tehran Hojatoleslam Abu Torabi Fard said that all the power and accomplishments of the Iranian political system in the region and the world over the past four decades are attributed to social development and welfare. He said, "The sustainable insurance system and the creation of a sustainable wealth model are of major importance in Islamic governance. The Leader of the Faithful Ali ibn Abi Talib outlined and clarified methods for amassing wealth in the Islamic world."⁽¹⁾ Abu Torabi Fard indicated that the Islamic Revolution over the past four decades paved the way for national security and strength based on correct religious thought and wise leadership and administration. He said, "Iran is considered among the few defensive forces in the Islamic world. It has achieved this stature due to showing interest in the instructions of the Leader of the Faithful, the powerful



leadership of the resistance front and the supreme leader who sets in place the principles."⁽²⁾

We notice that there is an intertwining of the religious and political spheres and between historical and contemporary events. He even referred to the Leader of the Faithful Ali ibn Abi Talib to draw a parallel between Iranian policy and his teachings.

In the same context, Qom has stepped into the political arena. Several students and teachers in Qom's religious seminary issued a statement addressed to Iran's Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian. The statement mentioned that direct negotiations with the United States are harmful to Iran but they benefit the former. The statement said, "Your strange remarks several days ago about direct negotiations with America left the supporters of the political system, the revolution and the struggle-driven and jihad-oriented Raisi government astonished and annoyed. In some of the astonishing comments you mentioned: we have reached a point in the negotiations where if it is necessary to hold negotiations with the United States to reach a good deal, we will not overlook this."⁽³⁾ Then they reminded him of the orders of the supreme leader, "Why do you want to commit the same foolishness and mistakes made by the government of Rouhani and Zarif, which the supreme leader rendered a red line openly — let alone the logic and rationality of negotiations."⁽⁴⁾

This pressure by seminary notables prompted Abdollahian to retract his remarks on direct negotiations with the United States. He said that his tweet did not signify approval of direct negotiations with the United States.

The Iranian government believes that the continued exploitation of religion will enhance its religious and sectarian legitimacy and strengthen its popular incubators in the face of its opponents across all spectrums. But this exploitation results in Iran losing respect from within the Shiite sect, although the establishment and the religious elite no longer seem to be taking this into account. This approach could ultimately threaten the establishment's personal

and political interests and the survival of the political system which derives its power from its symbolic position within the sect.

The Employment of the Fatwa Rendering the Possession of Nuclear Weapons Unlawful

When the noose is tightened around the Iranian ruling elite's neck due to the nuclear issue, the fatwa of the supreme leader rendering the making of nuclear weapons unlawful emerges. The Iranian leadership reiterates that the fatwa is among the chief reasons why the country is refraining from making nuclear weapons.

The fatwa does not genuinely exist in Khamenei's approved book of fatwas. But it was posted on his website in April 2010 and in his message to the first session of the International Conference on Disarmament and Non-Proliferation. His message mentioned, "We believe that the other weapons of mass destruction, let alone nuclear weapons, such as chemical and microbe weapons are considered a serious threat to humanity. The Iranian people, who have been victims of chemical weapons, understand more than others about the dangers posed by producing and stockpiling these weapons. The Iranian people are ready to dedicate their resources to ensuring the ban of these weapons. We render unlawful the use of these weapons and we believe that it is a duty to spare humanity of this major calamity."⁽⁵⁾

We notice that this wording is not a fatwa in the strict technical jurisprudential sense. It is nothing more than a rhetorical display of political pragmatism. In addition, if we assume that such remarks constitute a fatwa, it does not render unlawful the making of nuclear weapons. Instead, it focuses on the issue of using such weapons. It is necessary to take into account that the fatwa of using nuclear weapons may change according to the country's developments and requirements, its national security interests as well as the views of the supreme leader — who is considered by the Wilayat al-Faqih ruling system as "the leader of Islam and all Muslims."

Some Iranian officials attempted to downplay this fatwa, most notably the former Minister of Intelligence Mahmoud Alavi. He said that if a cat is cornered, maybe it will act in a way different than the way it would behave if she was free. The main focus should be on the person who put the cat in this situation.⁽⁶⁾

Thus, the fatwa of the supreme leader — given his capacity as the guardian jurist embracing the absolute authority of Wilayat al-Faqih — is not merely a fatwa; it is more influential than Shiite laws based on the primary and secondary sources (Quran and Sunnah, and consensus [ijma]) The supreme leader, according to the absolute version of Wilayat al-Faqih, has the right to suspend the observance of religious duties and change religious edicts. So, it goes without saying that this fatwa will be nullified if the supreme leader decides to do this by issuing an opposing fatwa based on the interests he deems important.

The Iranians promote this prohibition of using nuclear technology which destroys the lives of people. This is ironic as Iran has destroyed the lives of people in Yemen and Syria using non-nuclear weapons.

Conclusion

The relationship between the religious and political aspects in Iran seem complex. Religious matters are always used to serve political ends. Every issue through which the government seeks to enhance its legitimacy or strengthen its popular incubators gets politicized. Hence, the remarks of seminary teachers and students regarding the nuclear file are not only viewed as interference in the public sphere, politics and state institutions, but they come against the backdrop of clerics considering it their right to intervene in the public sphere and control the branches of power — in their capacity as representatives of the guardian jurist who wields authority over all institutions in Iran. However, the fatwa of the supreme leader rendering unlawful the use of nuclear weapons is misplaced. He rejects the use of nuclear weapons, without addressing the point whether or not it is lawful to acquire or make such weapons. Hence, the constant Iranian denial of seeking to acquire nuclear weapons has nothing to do with the fatwa. The fatwa did not touch on this matter — if we assume it will remain unchanged for a long time.

In this context, we can arrive at two conclusions. First, the government is no longer concerned with the image of religion or the reputation of the sect as much as its own survival, maintaining its strategic interests and enhancing its political legitimacy. Second, the fatwa rendering unlawful the use of nuclear weapons is used by the government when the pressure on it intensifies. In fact, the fatwa does not address the issue of making or acquiring nuclear weapons — touching only on the issue of using nuclear weapons — which could be bypassed due to the fatwa's jurisprudential considerations which are different from fixed laws and given the overriding authority of the supreme leader's edicts over all the edicts — whether divine or worldly edicts.

The Political File

In January 2022, the Political File shed light on the movements of the Iranian president at home and his visits to the provinces of Qom and Hormozgan — as well as the administrative problems, manifesting in the contradiction between the reality through which the Iranians are living and the positive indicators promoted by Ebrahim Raisi. The February 2022 report, meanwhile, focuses on the severe criticisms against the government and Parliament which have been described as the most ineffective in Iran's post-revolutionary era. This month's political file also discusses the COVID-19 lawsuits against Khamenei and Rouhani and the remarks of the Iranian minister of justice on the dismissal of hundreds of officials and the filing of 12 lawsuits targeting corruption in his ministry.

The Government and Parliament Face Accusations of Unprecedented Incompetence in Iran's Post-Revolutionary Era

Over the past six months, the Iranian street has been monitoring the performance of the government and the extent to which it has fulfilled the electoral promises made by Ebrahim Raisi — especially those related to the economic situation which has experienced significant deterioration day after day. In recent times, the government has published a series of reports suggesting an improvement in some sectors such as foreign trade and a surge in oil exports. Contrary to these official reports, some observers in Iran dispute the claims of the government while others do not sense any tangible change over the past period of the government's tenure. In this respect, economic expert Hossein Raghfar believes that the official reports are inaccurate and do not match the harsh reality endured by Iranian citizens. Amanallah Gherai, an Iranian sociologist, asserts that the living conditions in Iran are totally different from the government reports, accusing it of lying when it comes to limiting inflation.⁽⁷⁾

The criticisms leveled against Raisi's government have gone beyond calling into question the official reports regarding economic indicators. Some Iranian observers and experts, including Gholamali Rajaei, described the current government as the least efficient government in Iran since the victory of the 1979 revolution.⁽⁸⁾

Critics of the government cite several proofs — foremost among these is the incompetence of officials. This means that efficiency levels of present officials are low when compared to ministers and officials of former governments. Some officials do not even have the experience to serve in government. But they have been given senior administrative positions in the Raisi administration. Opponents also cite another proof. Over the past six months, the government has proved that it does not have a plan to resolve the country's crises and problems.⁽⁹⁾

The “conservative” controlled Parliament has faced the same criticisms. It was labeled as the weakest Parliament among the 11 parliaments established in the era following the 1979 revolution.⁽¹⁰⁾

The reasons why the Iranian Parliament is assigned such a label is that a considerable number of its members lack the needed expertise. It also lacks heavy-weight and influential lawmakers who can adopt strong positions on critical issues that serve the interests of the Iranian people or who can form currents or blocs in Parliament to rectify the flawed decisions of the Parliament.

The committee in charge of debating the budget in the Iranian Parliament issued a decision regarding the collection of taxes from free zones as is the case with the other zones.⁽¹¹⁾ This decision led to accusations against the Parliament of incompetency and lack of vision. This decision will exacerbate the economic damage and losses incurred by Iran, prompting the remaining investors and venture capitalists to pack up and head to other countries.

COVID-19 Lawsuits Against Khamenei and Rouhani

Two lawyers named Mohammad Reza Faqihi and Arsh Kikhosravi filed a lawsuit against the supreme leader, former President Hassan Rouhani and members of the National Committee for Combating Coronavirus in Iran. The lawsuit, filed on February 27, 2022, involved several accusations against senior Iranian officials in charge of combatting the coronavirus pandemic, including the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. They are accused of killing more than 100,000 Iranian citizens, abusing their positions of power, and failing to implement the national protocols related to combating the virus.⁽¹²⁾

The two lawyers justified the complaint filed against the supreme leader by citing the decisions he issued in January 2021 to ban the import of coronavirus vaccines from the United States and the UK. This is in addition to the failure of local medical institutions to produce vaccine doses in sufficient quantities—which caused a major spike in coronavirus related deaths. A few months later, the supreme leader was forced to retract his decision after the situation became so precarious, calling for accessing vaccine doses by any possible means.

Such orders caused delays in importing vaccines, subsequently derailing the vaccination process in Iran. This claimed the lives of a huge number of Iranian citizens from coronavirus infections.

As to the former President Hassan Rouhani, he and members of the National Committee for Combatting Coronavirus in Iran are charged with taking decisions that led to the spread of the pandemic in Iran. This includes refusing to implement and impose health precautions nationwide, refusing to impose a travel ban between cities and countries, the shortage in facilities and medical equipment — let alone several flawed decisions and measures taken by the Rouhani government with regard to managing the virus.⁽¹³⁾

The two have lawyers declared their intention to file this complaint with the Iranian judiciary since August 2021. But the security authorities ordered their arrest. The lawyers were not only detained, but were also charged with destabilizing public order and undermining national security.⁽¹⁴⁾ This move was undertaken with the aim of pressuring them to withdraw their complaint or at least

undermine their credibility in the Iranian street. No doubt, the harsh treatment of the two lawyers by the security forces reveals several Iranian government concerns — foremost of which was the fear that the filing of the complaint would lead to a flood of complaints against Iranian officials and encourage the opening of more cases against the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. Iran's post-revolutionary power structure feared that if the complaint was filed, more complaints would be lodged against powerful security figures and the IRGC over their role in repressing the Iranian people, especially during the ongoing popular protests which Iran has been witnessing since 2009. A considerable portion of the Iranian population would be interested in lodging cases against the aforementioned figures and entities.

Corruption Cases Against Hundreds of Officials in a Single Iranian Ministry

Iranian Minister of Labor Hojjat Abdolmaleki revealed that 1,000 employees, accounting for half of the number of employees in the ministry, should be fired. He said that the ministry has sacked 350 officials so far. He also reiterated that 120 cases against the ministry have been filed in the judiciary.⁽¹⁵⁾ The minister's remarks came in response to the Transparency International report which ranked Iran 150th out of 180 countries on the Corruption Perceptions Index. The figure concerning those who should be fired from the Ministry of Labor attracted international attention since it is quite staggering. In a single ministry, 50 percent of the employees are accused of corruption and breach of trust. This figure poses questions about the effectiveness of the Iranian authorities to fight corruption in the country.

Following widespread public outrage against rampant corruption, the Iranian government has made some efforts to combat corruption, taking steps to reassure the Iranian street that the judiciary is capable of combating it and upholding the rights of the people. These steps included appointing Ebrahim Raisi as chief of the judiciary in March 2019 and entrusting him with the mission of combating corruption in particular. However, the recent remarks of the labor minister about corruption in his ministry indicate that the anti-corruption campaigns waged by Raisi not only failed, but corruption in official institutions has reached record levels. How can a government ministry like the Ministry of Labor which is tasked with pursuing the interests of workers across all sectors in the country be experiencing such high rates of corruption?

Conclusion

Maybe it is too early to label the current Iranian government as the most incompetent government in the history of Iran since the victory of the revolution in 1979. This government is still at the beginning of its tenure and is facing several challenges due to the sanctions imposed on Iran. But there are indicators that back up the forecasts of observers such as the lack of economic programs and plans, poor administrative performance, and the inaccuracy of official reports claiming an economic breakthrough and a decline in the rate of inflation.

The Iranian Parliament, whose tenure is as short as two years, focused intensively on tightening the noose around the former government — with the aim of weakening it and the “reformist” movement supportive of it. After Ebrahim Raisi won the presidency and the “conservatives” seized control of all state institutions, the Parliament’s activities declined. Yet, the lack of competition after the “conservatives” captured the majority of parliamentary seats and the absence of influential and heavyweight parliamentary figures like those in the past have contributed to a decline in the role of the Parliament.

As for the complaint lodged against the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, it is possible that the Iranian government can silence the voices calling for trying Iranian officials accused of committing crimes against the Iranian people. But the accusations leveled against Khamenei and Rouhani by the lawyers remain the focus of attention since their complaint was filed with the Iranian courts, not foreign courts. Moreover, this is an unprecedented development in Iranian public affairs, and it could possibly lead to future consequences. The remarks of the Iranian minister of labor about the widespread nature of corruption in his ministry prove that the steps taken by Raisi, whether when he was head of the judiciary or after taking over the presidency, have had no effect on eliminating corruption or curtailing it. The remarks also prove that corruption is seeing a steady upsurge in government ministries despite the president having adopted a plan to combat corruption. This is most starkly illustrated by the statement of the labor minister that 50 percent of employees in his ministry are corrupt.

The Economic File

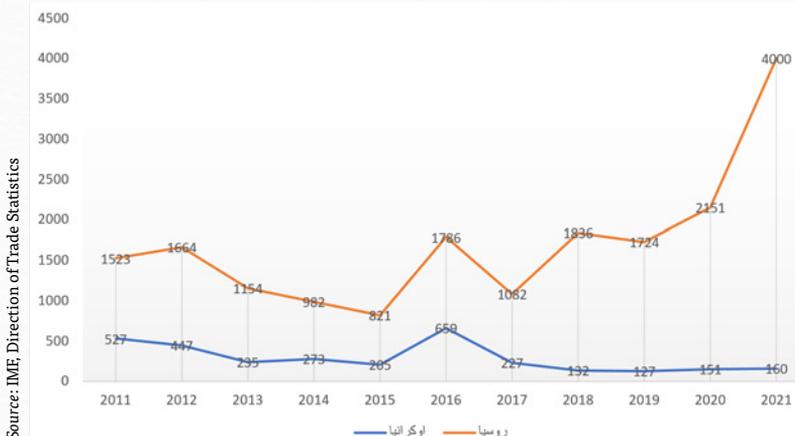
The Economic File of January 2022 threw light on the economic reality in Iran at the beginning of the new year, including the short- and long-term challenges facing the country and the measures undertaken by the Iranian government to address these challenges. The February 2022 report, meanwhile, focuses on the nature of economic relations between Iran, Russia, and Ukraine. The report will also discuss the consequences of the Russian invasion of Ukraine on the Iranian economy in the future.

The Nature of Economic Relations Between Iran, Russia and Ukraine

Trade relations between Russia and Iran have grown over the past years, especially in the food sector which has not faced US sanctions — unlike the arms trade. However, Russia's trade with other countries in the region remains far higher than its trade with Tehran. As to Iran-Ukraine trade, it remains limited and is substantially lower than Tehran's trade with Russia.

Russian customs tallies show that the trade volume between Iran and Russia doubled in 2021, surpassing \$4 billion (See Figure 1) — mostly in favor of Russia — where Russian exports to Iran outweigh Moscow's imports from Tehran. Russia's exports to Iran reached \$3.068 billion in 2021, 115 percent up from 2020. Iran's exports to Russia reached \$967 million, up 21 percent during the same period. Nonetheless, neither of the two countries is considered a major trading partner to the other. Iran's biggest trade partners are China, the UAE, Turkey, Iraq, Afghanistan and a handful of European countries. Meanwhile, Iran's stake in Russia's overall foreign trade was only 0.7 percent in 2021.⁽¹⁶⁾

Figure 1: Iran's Trade With Russia and Ukraine in Million USD (2011-2021)



Prepared by: Center of Studies and Research, Rasanah IIS, 2022.

As to trade relations between Iran and Ukraine, they were in the territory of \$160 million during the past year. They reached their peak in 2016, following the signing of the nuclear deal, however, stretching to only \$660 million. There was a significant decline in Iran-Ukraine bilateral trade — largely focused on food items, oil and fruit — following the imposition of US sanctions.

The Economic Consequences of the Russian-Ukrainian War on Iran

Despite the insignificant and modest trade volume between Iran and Russia — as well as between Iran and Ukraine — the Russian-Ukrainian conflict will have economic and trade repercussions for Iran — both direct and indirect, negative and positive. This is because of the intertwined economic interests in the world on the one hand and the roles that the Russian and Ukrainian economies play at the global level.

A big portion of Iranian imports from abroad include basic food items such as wheat, barley, and corn. The concern for Iran not only lies in the fact that it imports most of these food items from Russia and Ukraine, but also in the fact that Russia and Ukraine are among the biggest exporters of the aforementioned food items worldwide. Therefore, the shortage in these food items on the global market due to the conflict will send their prices soaring — even if there are alternatives such as importing from other countries. On the other hand, the conflict can possibly create potential opportunities for Iran such as meeting the mineral needs of some of its neighbors that had been importing from Russia and Ukraine, such as iron, manganese, and coal. For example, Iran imports huge amounts of corn, amounting to 7 million tons per year, from Ukraine, Russia, Brazil and Romania. Given the conflict between Russia and Ukraine — the only remaining exporter is Romania since Brazil is not yet in harvest season. Hence, reliance on domestic corn reserves, which lasts Iran only one month, will increase⁽¹⁷⁾ until an alternative is found. In addition to the importance of corn in the extraction of oils, it is an essential component of livestock and poultry feed. This will certainly impact the prices of meat and poultry in Iran. The prices of these items had been steadily surging before the Russian-Ukrainian conflict broke out. As to oils, they have become scarce in some Iranian regions for the time being.

The consequences of the conflict have impacted the prices of minerals and cryptocurrency globally following the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This surge has had a knock-on effect on Iran's domestic markets, such as the surge in the price of gold and the significant decline in cryptocurrencies such as Bitcoin and other digital currencies in which the Iranian people have increased investments over the past years — with the aim of increasing trade, investment, and circumventing sanctions. But the exchange rate of foreign currencies slightly declined and stock market indexes increased in light of reports indicating progress in Iran's nuclear negotiations with the West.

Iran began to benefit from the major and swift rise in the price of oil which surged to record levels (close to \$120 per barrel) in the first days of March. Such levels are close to the prices posted in 2011. This price per barrel is also double the price forecasted by the Iranian budget for the next year 1401 Hijri Shamsi

(\$60 per barrel). Iran had drafted its budget on the basis of continued sanctions and exporting scant amounts of oil. However, it started to alter its budgetary estimates when it increased the amounts of oil it expected to export. The Russian-Ukrainian conflict will lead to doubling the expected oil revenues for Iran by at least onefold — even if sanctions remain in place. Provided the sanctions are lifted, an unlikely prospect, Iran's oil revenues will increase more than onefold amid the world's thirst for oil.



A general view of a petrochemical complex in the South Pars gas field in Asalouyeh, Iran, November 19, 2015.
Photo: Ebrahim Noroozi/AP

As to natural gas, Iranian territories possess the biggest gas fields in the world and European markets depend on Russia for securing one-third of their gas needs. Although Iran produces massive amounts of gas, but Tehran exports it in very limited amounts. It currently exports gas to Iraq. Moreover, Iran imports gas from Kurdistan to make up for the shortage in the northern regions. The aforementioned realities are attributed to a number of factors. First, the increase in domestic consumption of gas in Iran. Second, the lack of the necessary infrastructure and investments to export gas due to the long-term sanctions which have obstructed its expansion in the southern Pars field, the biggest gas field on the planet — a massive field possessed jointly with Qatar. Russia has always derailed any competition it has faced in the European markets. This is the present state of affairs. But this situation could of course change when the sanctions imposed on Iran are lifted, especially as the Europeans are intent on reducing their dependence on Russian gas in the future following its invasion of Ukraine. Europe has a pressing need for gas supplies for heating and industrial purposes. This European orientation could lead to investments in Iran's gas sector if sanctions are lifted and prices reaching historic levels could also be a pulling factor.

In the longer term, the current conflict instigated by Russia could fuel deeper divisions in the global economic system. Such divisions could benefit Iran and its rapprochement with the Eastern camp spearheaded by China and Rus-

sia. The divisions could give rise to new entities or economic alliances. What is apparent so far is that the Russian invasion of Ukraine was not a hasty move. It was preceded by Russian preparations to withstand global economic isolation which could drag on for years. Russia hoarded massive amounts of gold reserves and one witnessed the strengthening of economic blocs such as the BRICS, the Eurasian Economic Union, and others. Russia even attempted to create financial payment systems in collaboration with China to be an alternative to SWIFT, from which Russia has recently been expelled. This means we could see growth in the economic rapport between Iran, Russia and China presently. Of course, things will not be confined to economic cooperation, but will extend to their ambitions abroad. From another point of view, the conflict could strengthen or increase the levers at the hands of the Iranian government as a result of the Russian-European division. Iran and the United States will urgently seek to bring down the currently soaring prices of oil and gas by pumping more amounts in the market to reduce production costs and bolster economic growth. It is an opportunity awaited by the Iranian government after the sanctions are lifted. On the other side, Iranian financial resources will bounce back after three hard years — subsequently seeing a breakthrough in the domestic situation in Iran and greater movements overseas.

Conclusion

It appears clear that the economic and commercial relations between Iran and Russia are insignificant. Trade relations between Iran and Ukraine are even more modest. But the Russian-Ukrainian conflict has had a direct impact on the Iranian economic reality — some positive and others negative — especially in the fields of strategic food items, digital currency, public finances and energy prices. There is a likelihood of creating new alliances and economic levers.

The Military File

The Military File of February 2022 touches on the re-emergence of border disputes between Tehran and Islamabad. These disputes arose after Iran-affiliated militias waged attacks on the Pakistani border. The file also discusses the mistrust between Russia and the West following the former's invasion of Ukraine and the impact of this mistrust on the nuclear talks. In addition, the file reviews the phenomenon of the spike in the possession and trade of weapons among Iranian civilians. This comes against the backdrop of mounting popular dissatisfaction against government policies — as well as spikes in the rate of crime and the smuggling of weapons via Iranian borders.

Iran-based Militants Launch Attacks on Pakistan's Border Force

Pakistan and Iran came at odds yet again in February after a deadly twin attack on the bases of the Pakistani Frontier Corps in the Nushki and Panjgur districts of Balochistan in February by Baloch militants killing scores of troops.⁽¹⁸⁾ Armed with sophisticated weaponry, 10 men in two groups purportedly belonging to the Baloch Liberation Army sneaked in from Iran and Afghanistan and attacked paramilitary deployments in two Pakistani border towns. The militants dug themselves in at the military bases, making it difficult to uproot them. It took Pakistan's special forces, gunship helicopters and drones three days to eliminate them. An earlier attack was launched on January 25 at Kech near the coastal town of Gwadar.

Pakistan shares over a 600-kilometer-long border with Iran while 10 percent to 13 percent of its population is estimated to follow the Shiite sect, though not all are aligned to Khomeini's school of thought.

While Pakistan conveyed a stern warning to the Afghan government, Iran was dealt with more tactfully. For over a decade, Islamabad has been suspicious of Tehran's role in its Balochistan Province. Since 2016, when an Indian intelligence officer impersonating as a trader on a valid work visa was arrested for planning sabotage activities against Pakistan from the Iranian city of Chabahar, Islamabad has been ever more wary of Tehran's role in Balochistan.⁽¹⁹⁾ China is investing heavily in Asia's deepest seaport, Gwadar, which is in direct competition with Iran's Chabahar, currently under the administrative control of Pakistan's archrival India. Various Iranian officials have publicly expressed their pessimism about the prospects of operationalizing Gwadar because of an upsurge in Baloch insurgent activities. Islamabad believes this insurgency is foreign-backed, primarily by India via Iran. In stark symbolism, the synchronized attacks coincided with the departure of the Pakistani prime minister to China.⁽²⁰⁾

In this context, Pakistan invited Iran's Interior Minister Ahmad Vahidi a week after the attacks to present evidence of the militants link to Iran's side of the border. The meetings were tense and straightforward, but the details were not leaked to the media as is the norm when it comes to Pakistani affairs related to Iran. Tehran continues to effectively put Islamabad on the defense by using India as a scapegoat. The recent attacks, however, provoked some Pakistani social media influencers to openly criticize the IRGC's influence and operations inside Pakistan as well as its role in carrying out or backing subversive activities, particularly in Balochistan.

Although Vahidi's visit was made to appear routine through his meetings with top government and military officials, he did condemn the attacks in Balochistan. The Commander of the Iranian Border Guards Brigadier Ahmad Ali Goudarzi accompanied the Iranian interior minister on his visit. Pakistan has conveyed to Iran its determination to complete the fencing of its side of the shared border at the earliest. To curb smuggling on the border, the two sides also agreed to speed up the setting up of markets alongside the formation of joint working groups to oversee border management.⁽²¹⁾

Despite back-to-back instances of high-profile military diplomacy, Pakistan's and Iran's forces remain locked into border infiltration issues. No real breakthrough in military-to-military relations is possible in the presence of existing mistrust between the two sides.

The Invasion of Ukraine Saps Iran's Hope for Sanctions Relief

Until the writing of this file, the Vienna talks which have been ongoing for the last 10 months remain in progress with indications of a possible breakthrough.⁽²²⁾ However, in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the accompanying heightened distrust between the Kremlin and the West and the IAEA's longstanding issues with Iran, the revival of the 2015 nuclear deal seems somewhat uncertain now.

The recent visit of the IAEA's Director General Rafael Mariano Grossi to Iran, which usually takes place days before its Board of Directors meeting, did result in a fresh understanding between the two. A shorter timeline of three months was agreed with the UN nuclear watchdog in order to resolve the long-stalled issue of uranium particles found at old but undeclared Iranian nuclear sites. The IAEA has been seeking their location for years.⁽²³⁾ Grossi pledged to present a report before the Board of Directors meeting in June. Hence once again, Iran has possibly averted a critical resolution against it in the March 8 IAEA board meeting. Interestingly, the United States seems very much onboard. For instance, President Joe Biden did not mention Iran or its nuclear program in his State of the Union address except for an unintentional remark about the Iranian people.⁽²⁴⁾

Russia's attack on the once nuclear-armed Ukraine touched a raw nerve of Iran's strategic thinkers, and "hardliners" who turned vocal about the redlines, and conditionalities that they want to stipulate. The motivation for them lies in upholding the status quo, Iran quitting the NPT and becoming a nuclear state. Even the Kremlin fears Kyiv's desperate move to switch its IAEA-safe-

guarded nuclear reactors from producing electricity to enriching uranium to weapons-grade level in order to arm itself by manufacturing a less-sophisticated, hurriedly fabricated “dirty bomb.”⁽²⁵⁾ Technically, though it is far from possible, Moscow is rushing to capture its neighbor’s nuclear reactors. For Iran, domestic stability is dependent on economic stability which has been rocked because of the sanctions. Iranian realists in the government are optimistic about securing an even better deal than the one signed in 2015 under the former US administration of President Barack Obama. Iranian officials are wanting for Iran’s redlines to be respected in order for the nuclear deal to be revived, including the lifting of all US sanctions.⁽²⁶⁾ If the deal is revived, not only will Tehran be able to access global technology markets but also hundreds of billions of Iranian dollars will be unfrozen, boosting its capacity to bankroll its proxies in the Middle East and elsewhere.

Russia, on the other hand, seems ready to sacrifice Iran on the altar of its geostrategy by demanding that the global sanctions against it must not target its relationship with Iran, much to the ally’s shock and frustration. The timing of the Ukraine invasion prior to the nuclear deal’s revival suggests that the Kremlin considered bargaining options. Russia will be one of the top beneficiaries if sanctions against Iran are lifted. Another likely spanner in the works could be Washington’s and the E3 group’s refusal to trust Moscow with Iran’s centrifuges, and President Putin may not accept Beijing to be the alternative.

Washington is mulling over rescinding non-nuclear sanctions on 112 Iranians working in the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei’s office, including those involved in the attack against the US Marine Corps barracks in Beirut, Lebanon, in 1983 and the terror attack against a Jewish community center in Argentina in 1994.⁽²⁷⁾ These sanctions pre-existed the Trump presidency, hence are not related to Iran’s nuclear program. Even if Iran and the US government reach common ground, the US Senate will have to review and approve any prospective deal in sync with the practice adopted by former US President Obama in 2015.⁽²⁸⁾ Nonetheless, amidst scores of unaddressed or unresolved issues raised by the IAEA, an early finalization of a deal to revive the nuclear deal appears unlikely.

The Spike in the Possession of Weapons Among Civilians and Security Concerns

While there is mounting popular discontent at home due to rising poverty rates and deteriorating socioeconomic conditions, there is a spike in the possession and trade of weapons among civilians. The sources providing weapons to civilians are multiple. Iranian law does not permit the possession of firearms without a valid license. Those who possess arms without having a valid license face a tough punishment.

Local estimates indicate that there has been a spike in the smuggling of weapons and their sale in Iran — coinciding with an upsurge in robberies and blackmail in recent years. This phenomenon represents a critical danger facing the Iranian home front. This spike in weapons possession prompted a security official to describe the acute danger looming over the country. Hossein Rahimi, Tehran’s police commander, has said that the phenomenon has led to

security problems and ramifications. He reiterated that the issue had been referred to security officials so that they can deliberate over the matter. ⁽²⁹⁾

Tallies point to a rise in the phenomenon of smuggling weapons via Iran's borders in recent years. The Iranian Border Guard Commander Brigadier General Ahmadali Goudarzi has spoken about an upsurge in the number of civilians possessing weapons compared to 2020. This is in addition to the upsurge in seizing hunting weapons, which has reached 42 percent. He added that among the weapons smuggled via the Iranian border, especially Ahwaz, include US-made weapons and fully automatic machine guns. ⁽³⁰⁾



A host of seized weapons and ammunition.

Photo: IRNA, <https://cutt.us/8yGyT>.

Conclusion

Despite the mutual diplomatic-military movements between Iran and Pakistan, the respective national forces are focused on combating cross-border infiltrations. In light of the mutual mistrust, it does not seem that there will be a breakthrough at the level of military relations between the two sides. Yet, Iran hopes that Russia's invasion of Ukraine will lead to sanctions relief, especially in light of the multiple outstanding issues between Tehran and the IAEA, which remain unresolved.

Elsewhere, Iranian security officials are facing a host of security challenges and threats driven by the spread of weapons possession among civilians. This spike in civilian weapons possession has raised Iranian concerns about possible dangers to Iran's security, especially given the difficulty in controlling the smuggling of weapons in the future.

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Arab Affairs

Arab Affairs is divided into four main files. Iran and the Gulf States discusses the tensions between Iran and the Gulf states in energy markets and its impact on bolstering the Gulf states' role with the United States; Iran's activities in the UAE occupied islands. The second file reviews Iran's relations with the Houthis in Yemen, discussing the implications of the UN Security Council designation of Yemen's Houthis as a "terrorist group;" the divergence between Iran's and the UN's position; the possible ramifications of the UN Security Council resolution on Yemen. The third file touches on Iran-Iraq relations, exploring three main issues: the political deadlock in Iraq and the implications for Iran, Iran's failure in bridging the rift between the Iraqi Shiites, Iran's pressure on Sadr to form a government including Maliki. The fourth file analyzes the profit-loss equation in Syria against the backdrop of the Ukraine crisis and reviews Iran's efforts to entrench its administrative presence in Syria.



Iran and the Gulf States

In the Gulf file for January 2022, we highlighted emerging signs of tension between Iran and the Gulf states. This tension coincided with Tehran talking about its nuclear program with the international community and the increasing complexity in managing this file. As a result, regional developments were closely linked to international developments. One of the manifestations of the tension was the Iranian-backed Houthi militia launching an attack against the UAE. This attack represented an attempt by Iran to demonstrate its ability to pressure the international community. Gulf diplomatic efforts to explore new avenues and secure more leverage so that potential solutions and approaches toward Iran do not conflict with their interests were also discussed. The Gulf file touches on the developments regarding the Gulf-Iran relationship in February. However, these developments could not be isolated from the international interactions taking place regarding the Ukraine-Russia crisis. Iran seized Qatar's invitation to attend the sixth summit of the Gas Exporting Countries Forum to promote its future role in the energy market. This role will allow Iran to circumvent the sanctions and to present itself to the West as a potential solution to the current energy crisis in light of the tensions with Russia. The file also explores the Gulf states realizing once again their negotiating power in light of their vital role in global energy markets. This role offers challenges and opportunities for the Gulf states and will impact their relations with Iran. Finally, this file discusses the recent Iranian activities in the occupied UAE islands.

The Strengthening Role of the Gulf States Because of the Energy Crisis

Given US-Chinese competition for geopolitical and economic clout, and the risks facing global energy markets because of escalating tensions between Russia and the West, the Gulf region has gained renewed strategic importance for the US administration. The month of February was characterized by unprecedented US activity toward the Gulf states, reflecting the increasing importance of the Gulf in Washington's approach in light of the emergence of new variables in the international arena. This newfound strategic importance will increase the Gulf states' abilities to influence the approaches pursued by Washington to manage the thorny issues with Iran, most notably the nuclear file.

The Significance of the US Designation of Qatar as a Major Ally

In the previous file, we had mentioned the indications and implications of the visit of His Highness the Emir of the State of Qatar Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani to the United States, and the possibility of Qatar replacing Russia in

supplying gas to Europe as a result of the conflict between Russia and Ukraine. Moreover, Qatar is to play an intermediary role between Iran and the United States to help in resolving the nuclear file. Given the growing importance of the Qatari role for the United States, Washington quickly announced its intention to designate Qatar as a major non-NATO ally. Despite the divergent views within the United States on the Gulf, some believe that this designation will collectively benefit the Gulf states. As a result of the Ukraine crisis, the United States has been forced to reconsider its stance toward the Gulf and modify its previous assumptions about the diminishing strategic importance of the Gulf region in the international balance. It is worth noting that the “foreign minister of Qatar recently carried an American message to Iran, and the Iranian response was discussed in Washington.”⁽¹⁾ Qatar’s role reflects a US-Iran acceptance of talks through Doha.



The Call With the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques

During a phone call between the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosque King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud and US President Joe Biden on February 9, 2022, the strategic relationship and the importance of strengthening cooperation between the two countries was emphasized strongly once again. The US president expressed his country’s commitment to support Saudi Arabia in defending its territories and people, as well as helping Saudi Arabia to meet its defensive needs. Regarding Iran, King Salman cited Saudi Arabia’s support for Washington’s efforts to prevent Tehran from achieving nuclear capability and stressed the need to work together to counter the destabilizing activities of its proxies in the region. King Salman also stressed the importance of maintaining balance and stability in global energy markets, highlighting the role of the historic OPEC Plus agreement and the importance of maintaining it.⁽²⁾ Under the current circumstances, the call reaffirmed Saudi Arabia’s desire to maintain the decisions of the OPEC Plus agreement, and the development of a new

balanced relationship in favor of both parties. Therefore, Saudi Arabia has a pressure card to bargain with the United States so that the latter does not adopt approaches that impact regional interests, particularly regarding Iran and Yemen.

The Qatari and Iranian governments utilized the occasion of the Gas Exporting Countries Forum in Doha to pass on and exchange political messages serving the interests of the two countries. Iran's President Ebrahim Raisi immediately accepted the Qatari invitation to be the guest of honor at the forum. The Iranian press focused on this forum, and interpreted this invitation as a sign of a breakthrough or a window to reach a solution with international or regional actors. For its part, Qatar seeks to benefit from Iranian gas to meet Europe's energy requirements. The dependence of Western countries on Qatar to meet their energy requirements has enabled Doha to play an active role in maintaining the necessary global energy supplies. Iran may help in this aspect through intermediary arrangements.

During Raisi's meetings on the sidelines of the forum, 14 documents for cooperation in various fields were signed. The global crisis has led to a heightened need for reliable gas supplies, and it is a golden opportunity for Iran as well as a window to export gas by establishing an alliance with Qatar, which will be internationally accepted and relied upon to meet the shortfall in gas supplies if Russian supplies are suspended. This will prevent Russia from using energy as a weapon against the West. If Iran can support the West with gas supplies, it will allow it to successfully circumvent the sanctions, and may help it win concessions from the West and increase its regional clout.⁽³⁾

On the other hand, Iran's promotion of its relations with Qatar will restore its bilateral approaches toward the Gulf, serving its policy of interacting with each Gulf country differently to weaken Gulf unity and to pressure some Gulf countries to respond quickly to its proposals, especially Saudi Arabia, with which it has not succeeded in building trust and restoring relations as in the past.

Good relations between Qatar and Iran can be in the interests of the Gulf states and Iran alike if they are based on intertwined relations and overlapping interests between the two sides of the Gulf. Therefore, Qatar-Iran cooperation conditioned on regional security will contribute to achieving regional interests and developing regional capabilities.

Iranian Activities on the Occupied UAE Islands Expose Iranian Intentions

In an important development that reflects the Iranian government's evasiveness and bad intentions, a delegation of members of the Iranian Parliamentary National Security Committee visited the three UAE islands: the Lesser Tunb, the Greater Tunb and Abu Musa to follow up the activities of the IRGC Navy on these islands, which were included within the fifth zone of the IRGC Naval Force.⁽⁴⁾

On the other hand, Tehran announced the inauguration of a civilian airport on the Greater Tunb island called Imam Ali Airport. In a subsequent step, a

direct flight was inaugurated between the Iranian capital Tehran and the Greater Tunb. The inauguration took place in the presence of the Commander of the IRGC Naval Force Admiral Ali Reza Tangsiri and Mohammad Mohammadi Bakhsh, who seized the opportunity to make political remarks, promote the Iranian government's victories, and attack others. This reflected the Iranian government's endeavor to consolidate its occupation of these islands and to try to legitimize its possession of these islands by force.

This behavior and intransigence comes at a time when the Iranian government has amplified its rhetoric regarding the need to improve relations with neighboring countries. Simultaneously, Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, during a call with his Emirati counterpart Abdullah bin Zayed, stated that relations between the two countries are positive and progressive.

The three strategic islands overlook the Strait of Hormuz, through which about 40 percent of global oil production passes daily. From a military standpoint, Iran's consolidation of its military presence on these islands will offer it a strategic advantage to monitor and control maritime traffic in the Gulf. These steps may represent the start of the militarization of these islands under IRGC influence. Iran is emerging as a permanent threat to the security of the Gulf and the freedom to export energy. These steps demonstrate the insincerity of Iran's statements with regard to seeking calm and harmonious relations with its neighbors. This is reflected in the duplicity and contradictions in the remarks made by Iranian officials. These remarks show that there is no positive change in the Iranian government's approach during the Raisi's era, in spite of what he has claimed.

Conclusion

The Ukrainian crisis has forced several countries to reconsider their political positions. Although Washington recently underestimated the importance of the Middle East and headed toward the Far East, the global energy crisis arose which proved that historical realities cannot be easily dispensed of. The Middle East has always been at the center of global attention and will remain so for the foreseeable future. In this context, US policy has been active against the backdrop of intensifying rivalry between the West and Russia and China. The aforementioned global crisis represents an opportunity for the Gulf states to confront all approaches that do not serve Gulf interests despite US attempts to disengage from the Middle East.

The recent Iranian activities on the three islands disputed with the UAE raise questions about the goals and motivations behind these Iranian moves. They also indicate that these actions may re-ignite tensions between the UAE and Iran, and cast doubt on Iranian statements with regard to rapprochement with the Gulf states. It may be necessary not to overlook these Iranian moves, which will certainly be followed by steps that may negatively impact the security and stability of the Gulf states.

Yemen and Iran

The Yemeni file issued in January 2022 addressed the shifts in the military landscape in the Yemeni arena and the implications of the change in the international position toward the Houthi militia in light of the escalation of terrorist attacks inside and outside Yemen. The Yemeni file in February witnessed an important turning point in the international community's position toward the Houthi militia. This was exemplified by the UN Security Council resolution designating the Houthi militia as a terrorist group. As a result, the UN member countries banned the direct and indirect provision of arms to the Houthi militia and it was also added to the sanctions list. This file will review the implications of the UN Security Council resolution and discuss the divergences between the Iranian and international positions and the possible ramifications of the resolution on the Yemeni arena, particularly on the political trajectory of the country.

The Implications of the UN Security Council's Designation of the Houthi Militia as a Terrorist Group

On February 28, 2022, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution No. 2624 which designated the Iran-backed Houthis militia as a terrorist group. This militia was also added to the sanctions list, prohibiting the supply of any kind of arms to the militia. The UN Security Council condemned the Houthis' cross-border attacks against civilians and infrastructure in both the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the UAE. The UN Security Council called on the Houthi militia to immediately stop all terrorist acts.

The resolution extended the mandate of the UN panel of experts until March 28, 2023, and called on the UN secretary-general to take all necessary steps to re-establish the panel. It also called on all UN member countries to respect and implement their obligations to prevent the supply, sale or transfer of weapons to all militias added to the sanctions list, including those acting on their behalf or in accordance with their directives as outlined in paragraph 14 of Resolution 2216 issued in 2015. The resolution also stressed that the feasible way to resolve the Yemeni conflict is to proceed on the path of dialogue and reconciliation between the various parties within the country, including all Yemeni political elements.⁽⁵⁾

It should be noted that 11 countries voted in favor of the resolution, including all permanent members of the UN Security Council, while Brazil, Norway, Mexico and Ireland abstained.

According to UN reports, the Houthi escalation displaced 12,000 Yemenis each month, with the displacement of approximately 62,000 Yemenis within the last five months. The International Organization for Migration confirmed

that it documented the displacement of 3,000 people during the first week of February after the militia refused to stop the escalation and return to the negotiating table.⁽⁶⁾

The Divergences Between the Iranian and UN Positions

The UN Security Council resolution reflected the position of the organization and all of its associated entities as well as the opinion of the international community. Many international and regional parties welcomed the decision. However, the Iranian response to the resolution sharply differed from the international community's position. Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesperson Saeed Khatibzadeh said that this decision challenged the efforts to resume the political process in Yemen. He said, "Unfortunately, this decision and the ethics used therein are affected by political considerations and pressures by the coalition countries, and it represents a challenge to the existing efforts to resume the political process."⁽⁷⁾

Many observers believe that this Iranian position reflects the government's systematic prevarication; the double standards employed by its diplomatic missions and military institutions — including its proxies in Yemen and its affiliates which provide direct and indirect support to these proxies. The Iranian position expressed explicitly the Iranian desire to continue the Houthi militia's terrorist operations inside and outside Yemen and its intention to support the militia at the military, political and media levels to serve its own political orientations. Regarding the Iranian government's talk about resuming the political process in Yemen, many believe that its efforts are mainly optical at the diplomatic and media levels, whereas, in reality, it does not support the political trajectory as its interests rest on the continuation of the crisis and creating divisions between Yemeni political elements. This dualistic behavior brings to mind the remarks of the former Iranian ambassador to the Houthi militia Hassan Irloo. He described the Saudi initiative as a "war project." The aims of this initiative were to achieve peace in Yemen and prepare common ground to start the political process and it was welcomed by many regional and international parties. The Yemeni Foreign Ministry said that the Iranian position "provides further conclusive evidence to the international community to identify the peace-seeking parties and obstructive parties. The Yemeni government has been warning about the lack of seriousness of this militia, and its trade in the blood and suffering of the Yemeni people in order to achieve its narrow interests, and to impose its extremist ideas and terrorist practices."⁽⁸⁾

The Possible Ramifications of the UN Security Council Resolution on the Yemeni Arena

The UN Security Council's decision was in response to the widespread violations committed by the Houthi militia against the Yemeni people and neighboring countries, in addition, to its incitement of violence through various mobilization campaigns within Yemeni society, and its escalation of attacks on civilian and commercial ships off the Yemeni coast. These aforementioned actions led to a change in the in the international community's position toward

the Houthi militia, resulting in the UN Security Council designating it as a terrorist group like ISIS, al-Qaeda and Boko Haram.⁽⁹⁾

Some believe that the international community's increasing level of pressure against the Houthi militia will continue if the militia persists with its hostile and exclusionary behavior. This will make all countries, especially the Iranian government, companies, networks, and various parties that support the militia in various financial and military ways, reconsider providing assistance to the militia because they are likely to face sanctions over collaboration with a terrorist organization. The resolution will force all the UN member countries to implement everything related to this decision, including a travel ban on militia members, freezing funds, and many other measures that will ultimately contribute to drying up the militia's military and financial resources.⁽¹⁰⁾

Accordingly, it is likely that the designation will contribute to increasing public animosity toward the Houthi militia, particularly in the areas controlled by the terrorist outfit. It is likely that leaders of parties and tribes as well as intellectual, media and academic figures will form a popular and potent opposition bloc against the Houthi militia as this terrorist outfit has besieged the country and isolated it from the world. Furthermore, the formation of such a bloc is ever more likely as the militia has continued with its policy of repression, exclusion, displacing families, and destroying residential homes. In addition, it has looted humanitarian aid and forcibly recruited Yemenis, hence claiming the lives of thousands of Yemenis. To prevent the formation of anti-Houthi positions and the polarization of the Yemeni people, militia leaders may intensify their religious and ideological narrative for political leverage.

On the other hand, the extent of the militia's terrorist operations inside and outside Yemen is likely to decrease under the weight of increasing international pressure. In addition, the militia may also deal positively with some peace-seeking organizations and forces, especially since the UN resolution has diminished its attempts to impose a *fait accompli* in Yemen. The position of the legitimate Yemeni government and the coalition countries has been strengthened to continue to impose more pressure on the Houthi militia at the military and political levels in order to prepare the ground for its designation as a terrorist organization by major countries, particularly the United States after it has undertaken a series of successive actions against it recently. This may force the Houthi militia to accept the peace process and participate in a political settlement.

Conclusion

The UN Security Council resolution reflects a clear and explicit rejection by the international community of the massive violations committed by the Houthi militia against the Yemeni people, international and humanitarian law, and its threat to international navigation and global trade, as well as the attacks it has launched against civilian and vital sites in neighboring countries. Meanwhile, the Iranian government's rejection of the resolution reflects its orientations in continuing to support terrorist militias at the expense of regional security and stability. Although the Iranian government has adopted many different

ways to support internationally condemned terrorist organizations, especially the Houthi militia, the UN Security Council resolution will significantly limit its ability to support the Houthis militarily and politically, and is considered a diplomatic and political victory for the coalition countries, the legitimate government and the Yemeni people.

Iran and Iraq

The January 2022 file reviewed the impact of the victory of the Sadrist bloc in the first presidential battle, the defeat of the pro-Tehran alliances in the Parliament and the implications of this for Iran's role in Iraq, and Iranian-militia moves to form a consensual government that preserves Iranian influence. Taking into account the most recent developments, the February 2022 file will discuss Iranian influence and the political impasse in Iraq as well as the failure of Iranian efforts to bridge the gap in the Shiite house. It also addresses the pressure on the Sadrist bloc to form a government that includes all pro-Iran Shiite alliances.

Iran and the Political Impasse in Iraq

Iraq has entered the phase of an unprecedented political impasse against the backdrop of the failure of mediation efforts to resolve the differences between the Kurdish alliances regarding the nomination of a presidential candidate, and the disagreements between the Shiite alliances over the nature and form of the new government and their participation in the new administration. This impasse delayed the election of the president and the nomination of a new prime minister according to the constitutional date set for 30 days from the first session of the new Parliament, which was on January 9, 2022. The Parliament set 15 days for electing the prime minister from the date of the election of the president of the republic – however, this has still not happened. The expiration of the constitutional time limit without electing the president of the republic and nominating the prime minister is due to the following reasons:

Differences Between the Kurdish Alliances and Parties Over the Presidency

Since the beginning of the post-Saddam Hussein era, the three presidencies: the president of the republic, the government and the Parliament have been traditionally allocated based on a sectarian basis, with the Kurds selecting the president, the Shiites selecting the prime minister, and the Sunnis assigned parliamentary seats. The Kurds were given the right to present a presidential candidate for the Iraqi Parliament to approve. In the current context, differences erupted between the two largest Kurdish parties, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), over the presidential candidate. This disrupted the nomination of a new prime minister because

the president is the one who nominates the candidate of the largest bloc to form a new government.

The differences between the two largest Kurdish parties are due to the fact that the KDP insists on changing the prevailing rule regarding which party's candidate gets the presidential slot. This rule was established in the post-Saddam era. The KDP is insisting on determining the presidential position and opposes the PUK's involvement in the selection process. The KDP's argument rests on the fact that it secured 31 seats in the new Parliament; nearly twice the number of PUK seats. Furthermore, it depends on its allies: the Sadrist bloc and the Sunni Sovereign Alliance (Azm and Progress) to secure the presidency. Media outlets indicated that they agreed to support the KDP's candidate, Reber Ahmed to win the presidency.⁽¹¹⁾ However, to hold onto the presidential office, the PUK resorted to the old understandings that were agreed between the Kurdish parties at the beginning of the post-Saddam era, resulting in the PUK winning the presidency. On the other hand, the KDP secured the position of the second deputy of Parliament and a ministerial portfolio during the formation of the government, back then.

Based on the approaches adopted by the two strongest Shiite blocs in the Iraqi arena, the Sadrist bloc supported the re-election of Mohammed al-Halbousi by securing a new mandate for the Iraqi Parliament and this scenario is likely to be repeated with regard to President Barham Salih to limit the sectarian formation of the new government, although the KDP, a Sadrist ally, rejects the choice of the PUK. However, political parties that seek to keep Iraq mired in the non-state phase do not wish to see the re-election of the president as was the case with Halbousi. This is because such an outcome would set Iraq on the course of achieving sovereignty, and reduce the influence of Iran's armed militias over Iraqi decision-making, thus weakening Tehran's control over the Iraqi equation via its militias.

Disagreements Between the Shiite Alliances Over the Nature and Form of the New Government

The nature of the political impasse in Iraq was not only limited to the polarization in the Kurdish house, but also extended to the alliances of the Shiite house because differences between the two major Shiite alliances exist over the nature and the form of the new government and the alliances that will participate in it. The first Shiite pole supports the path of extending Iraq's sovereignty and independence and establishing a balance in foreign relations. This pole is led by the Sadrist bloc. On the other hand, the second pole supports the path of chaos, violence and the dominance of Iran's militias over Iraqi decision-making and the pillars of the Iraqi state. This pole is led by the Shiite Coordination Framework which includes pro-Iran alliances such as the Fatah and State of Law alliances.

The crisis between the two Shiite alliances rests on Sadr's insistence on changing the sectarian basis of Iraq to create an independent national majority government that supports the path toward statehood. He refuses to involve the leader of the State of Law Coalition, Nouri al-Maliki, who is close to Iran, in

the new government. On the other hand, the Shiite Coordination Framework insists on forming a consensus government which includes all the coalitions affiliated with it, including the State of Law Coalition. This is strongly rejected by Sadr because Maliki, according to observers of Iraqi affairs during his two terms as prime minister, followed the policy of exclusion and marginalization against the Sadrist Movement, although Sadr supported Maliki at times. In addition, Sadr realizes that the current stage is crucial and that any reversal of the decision of the majority government means that things will return to square one without implementing the reforms which the Iraqi people have been waiting for.

In light of Sadr's position on Maliki, the Iranian-backed Shiite Coordination Framework is increasing the pressure on the Sadrist bloc so that it accepts the formation of a consensus government which includes Maliki through the following:

- Threatening to boycott the parliamentary session to elect the country's new president to cause disruption. Through their non-attendance, the members of the Shiite Coordination Framework are trying to ensure that the needed quorum is not achieved to elect the president. It is a constitutional requirement that two-thirds of Parliament members must be present for the session to proceed. This will delay the selection of the country's president.
- The Shiite Coordination Framework promotes the formation of a political bloc called the National Stability Alliance led by Nouri al-Maliki. It includes 133 deputies from the Shiite Coordination Framework and some Sunni and Kurdish alliances, leading to the formation of the largest bloc in Parliament.⁽¹²⁾ However, in reality the Coordination Framework alliances have around 88 deputies including the PUK's 17 deputies. If the KDP elects the presidential candidate, the number of the putative bloc's deputies will stand at only 105, which is less than the potentially largest bloc; 165 deputies to form the government. Further, a two-thirds quorum of the legislature's 329 members is required to elect the president — unless the Coordination Framework manages to attract a number of Sunni and Kurdish deputies.

The developments on the Iraqi scene reveal the strength of Sadr's position regarding the formation of the new government, particularly for it to be a national majority government, allowing Iraq to move toward full statehood. This position may prompt the Shiite Coordination Framework to reconsider its strategy and join the new government without Maliki, who is expected to join the opposition. Some leaders of the Shiite Coordination Framework are convinced that they need to revise their strategy to end the political impasse. Sadr's position also indicates potential tension between the marjayas of Iran and Iraq with their respective political orientations because Sadr may emerge as a political marja for the new government. This may lead to a political clash against and between the two marjayas, illustrated through the following:

■ **The political clash against Sadr:** This surfaced when the minister of finance in the Kadhimi government opposed Sadr when he refused to respond to the request of the deputy speaker of Parliament, the leader of the Sadrist bloc, Hakim al-Zamili. The latter requested the minister of finance to appear before

Parliament to respond to the popular demands to strengthen the value of the Iraqi dinar. The minister justified his position by saying he came upon a tweet by Sadr, in which he asked Parliament to summon the finance minister to discuss the plummeting value of the dinar. He said, “The government is not responsible to any political party. It is answerable to the Iraqi people through its elected parliament.”⁽¹³⁾

■ **The political clash between Sadr and Khamenei:** This surfaced when Khamenei barred members of the Shiite Coordination Framework from joining the Sadr bloc and urged the Coordination Framework to remain united. Sadr believes that Khamenei’s statements seek to hinder the formation of a new government by the Sadr bloc. This was starkly apparent in Khamenei’s refusal to allow the Fatah Alliance from joining Sadr. Therefore, Sadr rejected Iranian mediators’ proposals to reorganize the Shiite house and Maliki’s inclusion in the new government. He tweeted, “Stop threatening. We will not allow corruption to control us. We will not sell our land for those behind the border. The majority of the people call for a national government.”⁽¹⁴⁾ This reflects the outbreak of a new conflict between two political reference points, which will consequently cast a negative cloud over the already fragile Iraqi equation.

Iran’s Failed Efforts to Bridge the Gap in the Shiite House

For the second time in a row since the results of the Iraqi parliamentary election five months ago, Iran has failed to bridge the gap between the poles of the Shiite house. However, the visit of Quds Force Commander Esmail Qaani to Baghdad, Najaf and Erbil during the second half of February 2022 failed to achieve the formation of a Shiite political bloc to bring together all the pro-Iran coalitions within the Shiite Coordination Framework to form a new government with Sadr’s alliance. This is due to the fact that Sadr insists on a majority government or he will join the opposition rather than being in the same government with Maliki.⁽¹⁵⁾ Until now the KDP remains intransigent in asserting its preferred presidential candidate which indicates its abandonment of Sadr to put pressure on him to accept the Shiite Coordination Framework, including Maliki.

However, it seems that Iran does not want Sadr to join the opposition. The new government will not last more than one year, if not less, if it opposes Sadr’s nationalist agenda, because he has cards and influence through which he can effectively counter the new government. Iran seeks to form a consensual government while the Sadrist vehemently reject the inclusion of Maliki in the new government. Iran is aware of the shift in the Iraqi equation in which pro-Iran alliances have lost popularity. This is due to the rejection of sectarian quotas by Iraq’s younger generation who call for a national government which upholds the principle of sovereignty and independence. Moreover, Iraqis have expressed their desire for the country to achieve a balance in its foreign relations and support regional and international parties that seek Iraq’s return to its Arab surroundings.

Therefore, during his call with Kadhimi on February 5, 2022, Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi stressed on the formation of a strong and cohesive government.⁽¹⁶⁾ He referred to a government that includes all elements such as Maliki so as to maintain Iranian influence in Iraq - the country has important geopolitical, economic and security considerations for Iran's regional strategy.

Iranian Pressure on Sadr to Form a Government That Includes Maliki

Iran continues to use pressure cards against Sadr to force him to accept all the alliances of the Shiite Coordination Framework in order to form a new government with their inclusion. Iran attempts to pressure Sadr via the following:

Continuing to Disrupt the Security Landscape

In February 2022, gunmen reportedly affiliated with Iran's militias in Iraq assassinated senior Iraqi officers and judges, including the Iraqi officer Hossam al-Alawi and the judge Ahmed al-Saadi in Maysan Governorate. This signaled an increase in reciprocal assassinations between Sadr's Saraya al-Salam and the pro-Iran Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq militia in Maysan Governorate, southern Iraq. As a result, Kadhimi sent a large military force to control the situation in the area.

The Hezbollah Brigades' March Toward Anbar

On February 6, 2022, a large heavily armed force from the Hezbollah Brigades which follows Iran's command entered Anbar Governorate in the west of the country. It stationed itself close to the locations of the leader of the Progress Alliance, Parliament Speaker Muhammad al-Halbousi and the leader of the Azm Alliance Khamis al-Khanjar. Many observers considered this military move to be a threat to the aforementioned leaders so that they dissolve their alliance with Sadr to prevent the creation of the largest parliamentary bloc.

Through its militias, Iran aims to destabilize the Iraqi security landscape to pressure Sadr and his allies from the Sunni and Kurdish alliances, particularly to force Sadr to renounce his positions and prevent him from forming a national majority government in favor of a consensual government. In addition, through this destabilization, Iran wants to send a message that the blowing up of the Iraqi arena and assassinations will be the alternative scenario if its alliances are excluded from the new government. Political exclusion will diminish Iran's influence over the Iraqi equation. But Iran will not relinquish its control over Iraq that easily due to its significance in its expansionist strategy. However, the continued use of force by Iran's militias after the decline in its political influence means that Tehran has entered the final chapter in the struggle to maintain its control over Iraq.

Conclusion

The entire Iraqi political process will get even more complicated. The only way out of this complex situation is to achieve political consensus between the parties to the crisis, because the differences are not limited to the Shiite house only, but are also present within the Kurdish house over the presidential candidate. No solutions to the crisis are in sight at present, especially as influential re-

gional and international actors that can play a role in addressing the crisis are preoccupied with the repercussions of the war in Ukraine. Iran's mediation efforts failed to reorganize the Shiite house due to Soleimani's absence from the scene, whose charismatic personality gave him influence over all Shiite parties, and the decline of Iran's popularity in Iraq. This complex crisis may provoke the Iraqi street again in light of the public's unfulfilled demands and ambitions for an Iraqi government that achieves security, stability and reconstruction after nearly two decades of conflict and security turmoil which have destroyed the country, accompanied by a sharp decline in living, economic and social conditions.

Iran and Syria

The January 2022 report addressed Iran's endeavors to enhance its economic influence in Syria, the various Russian moves in Syria and the implications of these moves. The February report will discuss the most important issue on the international scene: the Russia-Ukraine crisis, Russia as the most prominent player in the Syrian arena, and the ramifications of the Russia-Ukraine crisis on the other actors involved in Syria. This month's file will also discuss the role of Iran in consolidating its presence within Syria's administrative setup and its multiple implications through the following topics:

The Impact of the Ukrainian Crisis and the Profit-Loss Equation in Syria

The military operation carried out by Russia in Ukraine and the Russian-Western tensions ensuing from this operation raise several questions about the possible impact of this Russian behavior on other regional and international actors involved in Syria, especially regarding its impact on Iran's role in Syria in light of the challenges and opportunities that this crisis may present to Tehran. This is in addition to the impact of this crisis on the level of coordination between Washington and Moscow in Syria, where forces exist on the ground from both sides and its impact on Russian-Israeli military coordination in terms of operations targeting several sites of Iranian militias in Syria.

Undoubtedly, the Ukrainian crisis and its related developments represent a wide range of opportunities for Tehran because of the potential impact of this crisis on the trajectory of the Vienna talks. Therefore, Washington may seek to calm and normalize relations with Iran and respond to Iranian demands to separate the nuclear file from all the other outstanding files, specifically the ballistic missile file and the file concerning Tehran's interference in neighboring countries. By calming the situation and responding to Iran, the United States would be able to focus on resolving the existing crisis between Kyiv and Moscow. This crisis also represents another opportunity for Tehran to increase pressure on Israel and strengthen its rapprochement with Russia as an important partner in the Arab region, especially in Syria. It is expected that Moscow will pursue a new policy in Syria by making it a starting point to confront the sanctions and Western isolation if these punitive measures against it increase, especially as Syria plays an important role in Russia's regional strategy. The Russian government has extensive military capabilities, airports and naval bas-

es in Syria. Therefore, coordination with the Iranians in Syria will be important for the Russians in their quest to confront the United States and all the other actors who have sided with Ukraine.

On the other hand, Israel condemned the Russian invasion of Ukraine, describing it as a “serious violation of the international order.” Despite the Israeli condemnation, Tel Aviv is not expected to follow the international community’s approach of imposing economic and political sanctions on Russia. Israel is dealing with the Russian-Ukrainian crisis to ensure the preservation of its interests with the actors involved in the crisis. Israel has strong and solid relations with all the parties to the current crisis, and it shares deep political interests with Moscow, most notably illustrated in the understandings with Russian President Vladimir Putin in 2015 on Syria that prevent Syria from posing a security threat to Israel. In addition, Tel Aviv wishes to continue with its military strikes against Iranian militia sites in Syria.

Therefore, Israel does not want to strain its relations with the Russians and will not adhere to American or European demands against Moscow which are considered as threats by the latter. Therefore, the Israeli government is trying to tread carefully across a diplomatic tightrope to avoid confrontation with one side against the other, which may lead to a flaw in its Syrian action plan, especially if the equation it has established with Russia regarding the targeting of Iranian military sites in Syria during the past few years disintegrates.⁽¹⁷⁾

There have been several indications of a decline in coordination between Israel and Russia over the course of this year. This was most clearly demonstrated in the Israeli use of surface-to-surface missiles to strike Iranian targets, a vivid departure from its usual mode of attack through launching aerial strikes against Iranian positions. This may indicate that Israel is apprehensive about its capability to destroy Iranian targets by launching warplanes in Syrian airspace. This apprehension is in light of Moscow activating its air defense systems in July 2021. The other indication of the decline in coordination between Moscow and Tel Aviv was the announcement of the Russian Defense Ministry on January 21, 2022 that it would carry out a joint air patrol with its Syrian counterpart covering the Golan Heights, the southern Syrian border, the Euphrates River and northern Syria. The joint patrol included exercises that simulated the control of Russian and Syrian pilots over Syrian airspace and they practiced attacks against ground targets.⁽¹⁸⁾ This joint patrol sent various messages most notably: Russia sending a message to the Americans that it has the capacity to open another conflict front with them at the same time as the ongoing Ukrainian crisis with the objective to pressure Israel to act against Washington, or Moscow sending a message to Israel that it is dissatisfied with its military activity in Syria. Therefore, both messages represent a pressure card against Israel and a challenge to its ability to use Syrian airspace to bomb Iranian and Hezbollah sites in Syria.

Iran and the Consolidation of Its Administrative Presence in Syria

On February 21, 2022, the Syrian government signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with Iran focusing on cooperation in the fields of administra-

tive affairs and human resources. According to the official statements issued by both sides, Syria aims to benefit from Iranian expertise in the field of administrative affairs.⁽¹⁹⁾ It should be noted here that the signing of agreements and Iranian delegations visiting Damascus have increased recently with the aforementioned aim to expand Iranian influence given Iran's relentless efforts to dominate Syria religiously, economically and militarily.

The signing of the MoU regarding administrative affairs will contribute to deepening Iran's presence in Syria's infrastructure and administration sectors. This move is in line with Iran's previous efforts to consolidate its influence socially through policies of Shiite conversions, forced demographic change and real estate purchases in most Syrian cities; and economically by investing in infrastructure, signing long-term agreements, and establishing private companies of relatively high importance. Tehran generally depends on signing MoUs with Syria for seeking the following:

- Iran seeks partial compensation for the costs incurred for supporting the Syrian government, which according to many Iranian estimates amounts to nearly \$30 billion since the beginning of the Syrian crisis in 2011.

- MoUs expand and facilitate the work and activities of various Iranian business people and companies in Syria, especially those affiliated with its militias to alleviate the financial burden on the Iranian government's budget. They also facilitate financial transactions and commercial activities related to circumventing the sanctions and provide support to Iranian-affiliated individuals and groups. This serves Iran's expansionist policy not only in Syria but across the entire region. It is worth noting the recent statements of the Iranian government through its ambassador to Syria. He said that his country wishes to transfer what he called "its experiences in evading international sanctions" to the Syrian government.⁽²⁰⁾

- Iran seeks to consolidate its influence in Syrian society and its presence in the public and private institutions of the Syrian state to replicate its experience in Lebanon which enabled Hezbollah to penetrate the Lebanese public sector and the country's official institutions.

Conclusion

The Ukrainian crisis and the Russian preoccupation away from the Syrian arena represent an important factor which Iran seeks to exploit to strengthen and expand its influence across various sectors in Syria. Tehran also hopes that this crisis will limit the scope of Russian-Israeli coordination in Syria, especially as there are several indicators pointing to this direction. These include the change in Israel's mode of targeting Iranian militia sites in Syria and the implications of the Russia-Syria joint patrol which was carried out on the latter's borders adjacent to Israel. In addition to the above, against the backdrop of the Russian involvement in the Ukrainian crisis and as part of Iranian endeavors to exploit the opportunities offered in Syria, Tehran signed an administrative cooperation agreement with the Syrian government in an explicit step aimed at imposing its control and strengthening its strategy in Syria.

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International Affairs

International Affairs reviews Iran's interactions with the United States and Europe. It comprehensively discusses Iran-US relations analyzing four main developments: the progress in the nuclear talks; the declining impact of US sanctions; the unresolved thorny issues; and the future implications and outcomes. It also touches on Iran-Europe relations, reviewing the most prominent interactions; the course of nuclear negotiations in Vienna in light of Iran's relations with the Europeans; Iran's blistering condemnation of the people's tribunal held in London; finally the calls by the European Parliament to halt the death penalty in Iran.

Iran and the United States

Amid the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the most prominent world crisis since the beginning of the 21st century, the eighth round of the Iran-US indirect talks in Vienna in order to revive the nuclear deal were in progress. It seems that the two parties have almost reached a semi-final draft of the nuclear deal, yet they still need to resolve some thorny issues.

The positive atmosphere surrounding the talks helped in mitigating Iran-US mutual tensions. Iran is also in a better position since the US administration restored some sanctions waivers. This was reflected in Iran's foreign policy moves. There are, however, some unresolved issues that were not included in the talks.

In this month, we shed light on Iran-US relations, and the developments that have taken place. We discuss the following major topics: the progress in the Vienna talks, the declining impact of US sanctions, the unresolved thorny issues, and the ramifications of the latter.

The Progress in the Vienna Talks

The Vienna talks witnessed a prominent development; the Biden administration restored the sanctions waivers – cancelled by the former US President Donald Trump in May 2020 under his “maximum pressure” strategy toward Iran. The sanctions waivers allow foreign companies to participate in Iran's non-military projects such as at the Bushehr nuclear power plant and the Arak heavy water plant. The sanctions waivers help in the transportation of surplus enriched uranium and heavy water as well as in the maintenance and development of these facilities and others.⁽¹⁾

The US move shows that it intends to remove the obstacles hindering Iran from returning to its nuclear obligations in light of the latest understanding with the IAEA. The mutual release of prisoners indicates the progress the two sides have made at the talks. Probably, a deal will be concluded to release Western prisoners in return for part of Iran's assets abroad to be unfrozen.

Washington, however, to the very last minute, has placed pressure on Iran to weaken its resistance and renounce its conditions. It has stipulated a shorter timeline to conclude the talks before resorting to alternative options. Iran still insists on its “redlines” and adherence to its conditions: lifting all the sanctions, verifying their removal, and providing guarantees. The Secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council Ali Shamkhani said, “Verification and providing a guarantee is an integral part of a good deal.”⁽²⁾

In the United States, there is no consensus surrounding the Vienna talks,



The setting of the nuclear talks held in Vienna.
Photo: Reuters.

with political currents differing over them. The Republicans oppose the conclusion of any deal with Iran without including its ballistic missile program.⁽³⁾ The United States Special Envoy Robert Malley has mentioned that this demand is irrelevant as the talks primarily focus on Iran's nuclear capabilities. While the talks are closing on a deal, some Iranian political currents have called on the government not to give up on the country's nuclear achievements, and to secure guarantees to ensure that Washington will not exit the deal again in the future. Some regional powers, most prominently Israel, have expressed their concerns over the ramifications on regional security if a deal is reached. These concerns exist despite US assurances and attempts to push the Gulf states and Iran to the negotiating table. Washington wants to avoid any regional confrontation in order not to impede the ongoing diplomatic efforts.

Iran's Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian said the United States and Iran had "never been so close to reaching a deal as we are today."⁽⁴⁾ Time is running out; some thorny issues remain unresolved such as lifting the sanctions and providing guarantees as well as some disputes over Iran's "peaceful" nuclear activities. Iran has attempted to throw the ball into the United States' court, reiterating that it has completed its part and the remaining issues must be resolved by Washington. It is intent on holding the United States responsible in case it withdraws from the deal once again. The Iranians believe that rising world crises; the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the strategic competition between the United States and China will curb the former's ability to launch a war in the Middle East. Further, this will undermine the effectiveness of Washington's military threats which aim to secure more advantages over Iran in the nuclear talks.

The Declining Impact of US Sanctions

Due to the US sanctions, Iran is suffering paralysis and facing harsh conditions at home. But the US sanctions waivers have contributed to an economic breakthrough, thus helping in mitigating the deteriorating economic conditions. Iran's foreign trade has grown to 38 percent in the first 11 months of the Iranian year, confirming the declining impact of US sanctions.⁽⁵⁾ Statistics from TankerTrackers, an independent online service, show that Iran's daily crude oil exports have reached about 1 million barrels per day over the past months,⁽⁶⁾ most of which were exported to China. Apparently, the Raisi government has managed to reach the highest rate of oil sales in the past months. The Biden administration probably overlooked Iran's oil sales to create a positive atmosphere and encourage Iranian cooperation at the Vienna talks in order to revive the nuclear deal. According to Washington, reviving the deal is the most significant matter.

Iran's customs reported that the country's trade increased with the United States threefold compared to the same period last year. This figure indicates that the Biden administration has largely reduced its pursuance of the sanctions imposed on Iran. Trade for the period from April 2021 to January 2022 reached \$83 million. Though it is not a big amount, it is an indication of how US policy toward Iran is changing in light of the Vienna talks.⁽⁷⁾

It seems that Iran's appetite for making an economic recovery has increased due to the breakthrough with the United States; it has intensified its economic diplomacy in preparation for the lifting of the sanctions in order to reap as much economic gains as possible. In the same vein, the Iranian Parliament passed a bill to enhance economic ties to help boost Iran's foreign trade. The Iranian government has also renewed its efforts to sign trade and economic agreements with neighboring countries including Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Pakistan, Iraq, Turkey, Qatar and Oman. The Iranian government has also discussed collaboration opportunities with many countries, especially in the European Union. Iran has presented itself to the world as a major energy source, especially as an exporter of gas and a prime market for investment, particularly for Europe which may face a gas supply crisis in light of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Iran has removed many shackles and has more room to maneuver and play a more effective role at the negotiating table. This was apparent in the meetings of Iran's foreign minister with his Western counterparts and leaders of international organizations on the sidelines of the Munich Security Conference 2022. Iran also held discussions with South Korea and Japan to restore their economic cooperation and establish a possible mechanism for financial exchange. Iran discussed with South Korea the possibility of releasing its frozen oil revenues. According to the Iranian state-run IRNA, Iran's trade with Russia, Turkey, Iraq, and Southeast Asia has recorded unprecedented growth.⁽⁸⁾

Unresolved Thorny Issues

Despite a positive atmosphere surrounding the negotiating table, Iran has not changed its conventional policy, especially when it comes to its ballistic missile program. The IRGC unveiled the long-range Kheibar Shekan, or “Kheibar-buster” strategic missile which is highly accurate. This revelation sent many messages, and confirmed that Iran’s ballistic missile program is a redline and highlighted the significance and stature of the IRGC despite the possibility of a nuclear deal being concluded.⁽⁹⁾ The Republicans in the US Congress oppose Iran’s missile program. The Biden administration apparently postponed discussing the program in order to focus on reviving the nuclear deal.

Washington and its allies also did not manage to include Iran’s regional behavior in the talks, but kept in place their deterrent forces to confront Tehran’s destabilizing activities in the region. On February 23, 2022, the US Department of the Treasury designated members of an international network that is accused of funding the Houthi militia’s war in Yemen. Before the designation, Kenneth F. McKenzie Jr., the commander of the United States Central Command visited the UAE to bolster its defenses in response to the attack launched by the militia against the country, and reiterated the Pentagon’s latest announced measures. The US Department of Defense announced the deployment of the guided-missile destroyer USS Cole and F-22 combat jets to the UAE as the recent Houthi militia’s missile attack triggered the US troops deployed in the country to respond.

In light of the latest international developments, Iran’s position on the Russian invasion of Ukraine has evolved in accordance with its relations with Washington. Iran’s supreme leader did not support the invasion or call for it to stop. However, he considered Ukraine to be a “victim of crises created by the United States,” and he added that the Ukraine crisis confirmed that “the United States cannot be trusted.”⁽¹⁰⁾



Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei speaks during a meeting via video conference with people from East Azarbaijan in Tehran, Iran, February 17, 2022.

Photo: Sayed Saeed Reza Razavi/Mehr News Agency.

Iran pursues its “Look to the East” policy to balance its relations with the United States and the West. It has coordinated its position with Russia and China in relation to the Vienna talks (Iran receives support from both of them) and has focused on strengthening its bilateral relations with the two countries in the economic, military and cultural fields.

Implications and Outcomes

The Vienna talks have been progressing, and they are expected to settle all the differences and revive the 2015 nuclear deal. Iran will achieve a significant advantage if its nuclear threshold (the time needed to manufacture a nuclear bomb) is less than one year and is not considered. Iran has managed to increase its number of sophisticated centrifuges and increased its levels of enriched uranium. The 2015 nuclear deal was based on the fact that Iran had only one whole year remaining to manufacture a nuclear bomb.

Despite the current understandings regarding the nuclear file and the possibility of reviving the 2015 nuclear deal, the crisis of mistrust between the elites in the two countries is still present. The mistrust does not solely arise from the nuclear deal, but also from their mutual negative attitudes — due to their deeply rooted ideological differences.

Tehran is concerned that Washington will revive the nuclear deal without providing future guarantees, so it can re-trigger the snapback mechanism or the Republicans may reverse the deal when back in power as one witnessed during Trump’s era. Iran will probably give up its condition of future guarantees, because Washington cannot actually provide effective guarantees to Iran, given the legal hurdles. In case the 2015 nuclear deal is revived without future guarantees, Iran will be able to reduce its nuclear obligations once again; according to Tehran this is a sufficient lever in case Washington refuses to provide future guarantees.

The current understandings contributed to the declining impact of the sanctions. In response to declining pressure, the Raisi government’s position at the negotiating table was strengthened and Iran gained room to maneuver better regionally and internationally. Iran now is preparing to boost its relations with countries across the world. However, the Raisi government still faces dilemmas at home. Domestic criticism has been escalating in response to Raisi’s broken promises. The Ukraine crisis has probably slowed down the pace of the Vienna talks but its impact is limited, as a deal is likely to be signed soon. There is international consensus to tackle Iran’s nuclear program and progress has been made at the Vienna talks. The Ukraine crisis nor other crises will negatively impact the likely outcome of the talks.

Conclusion

Undoubtedly, reaching a deal regarding Iran’s nuclear file will greatly ease tensions between Washington and Tehran. This was noticeable before the signing of the nuclear deal in 2015. Yet full normalization of relations is not likely given

the ideological and cultural differences. The Iranian elite still believes that it will not be submissive to the United States because it is a hegemonic power. Moreover, the Americans still consider Iran as a “rogue state.” The two sides have been unable to resolve all the issues; most prominently: Iran’s ballistic missile program and regional behavior. Needless to say, some regional countries are not content with concluding a deal with Iran and are prepared to confront its danger alone.

Iran and Europe

In the January 2022 Iran Case File, we discussed the intertwining aspects of the relations between Iran and Europe, and their convergence in the nuclear talks despite their media clashes. The January file also reviewed their divergence on issues related to terrorism, espionage, and human rights. In February 2022, several indications emerged suggesting that the two sides are close to reaching a satisfactory settlement to revive the 2015 nuclear deal. The Iranians threw the ball into the European court claiming that they have exhausted all possible compromises; however, the Europeans still expressed the necessity of resolving all remaining problems as soon as possible before it is too late.

In this file, we will discuss Iran-Europe relations through analyzing three prominent developments: the course of the nuclear talks in light of Iran's relations with Europe; the Iranian government's condemnation of the Iran Atrocities Tribunal (Aban Tribunal); and the European Parliament's demand to abolish the death penalty in Iran.

The Course of the Nuclear Talks in Light of Iran's Relations With Europe

Amid reports of being inches away from reaching a nuclear deal in Vienna, the two sides intensified their diplomatic efforts. Iran's Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian and his Western counterparts used diplomatic channels to express their position on the nuclear deal proposed at the negotiating table in Vienna. This was reflected in the phone call between Abdollahian and Josep Borrell Fontelles, the high representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy as well as in Abdollahian's separate meetings with his German and UK counterparts. French President Emmanuel Macron and his Iranian counterpart Ebrahim Raisi continued their phone calls discussing the political developments and efforts to achieve the desired breakthrough at the Vienna talks.

However, the two sides are still pointing fingers at each other in the media to either secure some leverage over the other to make further compromises or to buy more time and avoid accusations of hindering the nuclear talks. In his interview with The Global Conversation website, Iran's foreign minister justified his country's position in a bid to win over global public opinion. He said that Iran went to the talks with the objective to reach a good deal, not for the "sake of negotiations," and that his country is not facing international isolation. He stated that Iran has only endured some problems due to the sanctions and the inaction of the E3 group. He insisted that Iran has shown flexibility in Vienna and proposed initiatives to reach a desired settlement, now it is the West's turn to resolve the outstanding issues.⁽¹¹⁾

After the short-lived atmosphere of goodwill in Vienna, it is expected that reaching a satisfactory deal for all parties is just around the corner — given the endeavors of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and the Western signatories' eagerness to achieve a deal as soon as possible, although Washington argues that some issues remain unsolved. Nevertheless, the Ukrainian crisis has impacted the nuclear talks and has probably pushed the West to hasten the signing of a new deal with Iran — with the Europeans aiming to compensate for their economic losses, or reap gains in the energy market, or to simply to settle Iran's nuclear file with minimal losses.

A People's Tribunal on Iran's 2019 Protests

Iran's Foreign Ministry Spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh expressed his condemnation of the Iran Atrocities Tribunal (Aban Tribunal) which was established following Iran's brutal crackdown on the 2019 protests, describing it as irrational behavior on the part of the UK government. In response, Hamid Sabi, an Iranian human rights activist and the lawyer heading the prosecution team said, "This court is not affiliated with any government, it is an independent, non-governmental and international people's court, and no government, including the British government, has the authority to interfere or hinder its proceedings."⁽¹²⁾

The tribunal aims to handle the cases submitted by the families of the victims of the 2019 protests, gather testimonies, and collect data and evidence against Iranian military officers and senior officials in Iran's political system, including the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei.

Iran's concerns over this tribunal reflect its legal and political weaknesses even though the people's tribunal is non-binding under international law. The tribunal only aims to draw international attention to the 2019 crackdown, urging the international community to take the necessary steps in line with international law through the relevant UN-affiliated bodies. The Iranian government considers this tribunal to be a platform to level accusations against it and represents a failed attempt by the Europeans to put pressure on it. The Iranian government has condemned this tribunal because of several concerns. Most prominently, it undermines Iran's image internationally and drags the country's political elite into lawsuits due to its oppression, torture and killing of Iranian protesters.

It is worth mentioning here that the London-based people's tribunal was initiated by three human rights organizations: Justice for Iran, Iran Human Rights and Together Against the Death Penalty (EPCM). The tribunal was established in response to protesters and victims' families calling for justice to be sought at the international level, and for the crimes of the Iranian government to be exposed. The tribunal continues to hold hearings, hoping to make a final judgment and issue legal documentation regarding the violations committed to trigger a UN-led trial, urging countries — especially those countries that legislate sanctions against individuals/countries committing human rights violations— to sanction all individuals involved in the crackdown on protesters.

The European Parliament's Demand for the Death Penalty in Iran to Be Halted

The Europeans continue to place pressure on Iran regarding its human rights record. The European Parliament issued a resolution calling on Iran to immediately halt the death penalty as a step toward completely abolishing or reducing the handing down of this type of punishment. The Europeans assert that the number of executions, including the execution of women, has increased dramatically. According to reports published by human rights organizations, in 2021 alone, at least 15 women who faced an “unfair” trial were executed. The Deputy Head of the Iranian Judiciary and Secretary of the High Council for Human Rights Kazem Gharibabadi claimed that the European resolution was flawed and did not reflect the facts, adding that it was issued for political purposes.⁽¹³⁾ There have always been squabbles between Europe and Iran over human rights violations and terrorism. Undoubtedly, the West uses such violations as bargaining chips to place pressure on Tehran. However, Europe's political motivation does not undermine the unavoidable fact here; Iran's arbitrary executions and denial of fair trials, and its persecution of political opponents through levelling unfounded charges ranging from fraud to threatening national security.

The Europeans routinely place pressure on Iran over its human rights record. The Iranians often adopt a defensive position and respond through media outlets either by raising objections, rejecting European demands, questioning the official data issued by European institutions or calling on the Europeans not to interfere in Iran's internal affairs and respect international law. The Europeans are very keen to contain the looming danger of Iran's nuclear and missile programs, yet tactfully and pragmatically, they use Tehran's human rights violations as a bargaining chip to push it forward when they reach a deadlock. The European pressure on Iran has not led to any tangible success such as truly reforming Tehran's human rights record.

Conclusion

This month the Europeans continued to condemn Iran's human rights violations and highlighted the consecutive executions carried out in the absence of fair trials. The people's tribunal in London invoked Iran's ire, which was described as an irrational move on the part of the British government in light of the ongoing nuclear talks in Vienna. An atmosphere of optimism prevailed in February in regard to reaching a breakthrough that leads to a new nuclear deal — satisfactory to all the participants at the Vienna talks.

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