



JOURNAL FOR IRANIAN STUDIES

Specialized Studies

A Peer-Reviewed Biannual Periodical Journal

Year 5, Issue 14, October 2021

ISSUED BY



RASANA
المعهد الدولي للدراسات الإيرانية
International Institute for Iranian Studies

JOURNAL FOR IRANIAN STUDIES

Journal for Iranian Studies (JIS) is a peer-reviewed scholarly journal offers a biannual survey in Iranian affairs, spanning a wide range of subject areas. It offers in-depth analysis and empirically grounded studies exploring key issues in Iranian culture arts, literature, linguistics, economics, politics, as well as in social, cyber and military sciences. JIS is published in three languages; English, Arabic, and Persian. JIS is committed to maintaining high standards through carrying out stringent peer review; therefore, it seeks submissions from researchers experienced in the field of the proposed study.

Rasanah: International Institute for Iranian Studies,

Al-Takhassusi St. Sahafah, Riyadh

Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

P.O. Box: 12275 | Zip code: 11473

For annual subscription:

Contact: JIS@rasanahiis.com

Individuals inside Saudi Arabia: \$32

Individuals outside Saudi Arabia: \$80

Institutes inside Saudi Arabia and abroad: \$160

ISSN: 1658-757X

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AGHAZADEH: CRONYISM AT HOME AND POTENTIAL PRESSURE GROUPS ABROAD

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Abstract

The Iranian political system has distinctive characteristics, mostly related to its authoritarian nature and its complex structure fueled by ideology — and its inextricable relationship with a network of patronage and cronyism that partially depends on well-established Shiite traditions. Accordingly, the aghazadeh phenomenon has emerged. It is not merely a social and political phenomenon related to patronage and corruption. The study raises questions about the role of aghazadehs in Iranian politics and the foreign agenda they embrace, as they often form lobbying groups through which Iran achieves its interests on the international arena. The study also argues that aghazadehs constitute tools of pressure in the hands of the political system — even if aghazadehs seem to have experiences and perceptions different from the ideological vision of the political system. However, the Western powers do not pay heed to the danger they pose to serve their own interests. The study discusses the aghazadeh phenomena through analyzing this concept and the nature of the phenomenon amongst Shiite clerics; the rise of the aghazadeh phenomenon and its manifestations in Iran after the 1979 revolution; aghazadehs overseas; and finally the role of aghazadehs outside Iran.

Keywords: *Aghazadeh, pressure groups, cronyism.*

Aghazadeh (noble-born — a word referring to the children of the Iranian elite) has been extensively used by columnists, analysts, political and social activists and even ordinary Iranians in Iranian political and social discourse over the past two decades. In a nutshell, *aghazadeh* can refer to those who are born to rich, extravagant, and powerful officials. The term entered Iranian colloquialism in the 1990s. It refers also to the children of the elite who turn out to be men or women of influence and wealth. Unlike the past four decades, before the Shiite clerical system was approved and clerics took over power in Iran, this word had a negative connotation. Despite its essential linguistic meaning, the word is used to define political, economic, and governmental profiteering by parents. Or, however, it is better to say that the word refers to the exploitation of blood and marriage kinship relationships. This exploitation and benefiting might be in various spheres, whether in politics, economics, society or the private sphere. Each sphere will differ depending on the individual's reality. To avoid misunderstanding, we should indicate that the word *daukhterzadeh* refers to the same as *aghazadeh* but for women. It refers to daughters of officials within the Iranian government. But the word *aghazadeh* is generally used in political and media discourse. Due to the prevailing patriarchy in Iran, it is quite normal to use the word *aghazadeh*.

As to the phenomenon of *aghazadeh*, the media focuses on how far they live in luxury and profiteer economically — this is its explicit aspect. *Aghazadeh*, however, include implicit aspects: reaching out to the political system and exercising secret diplomacy (the diplomacy of pressure) on behalf of the Iranian government worldwide. The study aims to address the implicit aspects of *aghazadeh*.

1. Aghazadeh: Its Concept and Culture Amongst Shiite Clerics

Many significant developments in Iran, before and after the eruption of the 1979 revolution, have impacted the concept of *aghazadeh*. The general concept of *aghazadeh* and its culture amongst the Shiite clerics are explained as follows:

1.1 The Concept of Aghazadeh

The most important accomplishment of modern governments and democracy is obliterating racial inequality and the phenomenon of noble born people (*aghazadeh*). In light of the phenomenon of *aghazadeh*, the culture of merit became meaningless — with it manifested in hereditary and tribal structures. Unlike past systems, where aristocrats exclusively controlled the production of knowledge and monopolized it, it is impossible today to monopolize knowledge under modern governments. It is no longer possible for the ruling class to elevate their relatives to the rank of “elite or aristocrat” as was the case in the past.⁽¹⁾

In fact, it is worth noting that following the establishment of modern governments and their commitment to ensure knowledge and education are fairly distributed and accessible, government positions are no longer confined to aristocrats. Common people in urban, suburban or rural areas are now able to access all spectrums of knowledge: cultural, scientific, and historical. They can benefit almost equally from educational facilities, and use free e-learning platforms — relatively available to all people.

Thus, claiming today that a specific group enjoys “superior genetic traits” is blatant discrimination intending to elevate the aghazadeh from a low level to one of wealth and power. In fact, aghazadeh has lost its traditional reference to aristocrats in society. It is no longer necessary that it should be linked to aristocracy. Today, aghazadeh can refer to thieves, assailants and even murderers — while exploiting their links to power brokers. As for traditional aristocrats, there had been a need for them to prove their chivalry and aristocracy for social reasons, particularly in the military, political and even scientific fields. However, present-day aristocrats are no longer obliged to prove their honor and morals nor defeat their peers. The reason for this is clear: human communities no longer need to search for moral exemplars or superheroes who claim to represent God. Today's intellectual thought has renounced the idea that aristocrats represent God's shadow on Earth.

1.2 The Culture of Aghazadeh Amongst Shiite Clerics

The phenomenon of aghazadeh is one of the common and well-established traditions amongst Shiite marjas and clerics. A marja or cleric is called *agha* or *seyyed*. Their male children are called *aghazadeh*. This word has historically indicated multiple positive meanings across vast segments of society. There were several reasons for the popular acceptance of *aghazadehs* back then; patriarchy and religion were deeply connected and entrenched in society and other reasons due to the limitations of the study, cannot be listed.

According to unrecorded traditions, the term aghazadeh was defined in the beginning to refer to aides, advisers, and directors of the affairs of the house of the seyed or marja. They gradually learned to manage the internal and external relations of the house. After the father — seyed or marja — dies, his son inherits his economic, social, and political legacy. This tradition continues to be pursued in Iran. There are living examples such as Hassan Khomeini and the son of Ayatollah Hussein-Ali Montazeri.

Aghazadehs' political, economic, and cultural influence is directly linked to the stature of their father (seyyed). However, following the clerical takeover in Iran, because of the disputes between the clerics, the standing of aghazadehs changed. Some of them joined the opposition against the theocratic regime dominating power in line with Khomeini's vision. Aghazadeh lost their stature. Several of them shifted to normal life such as Mujtaba Taleghani, son of prominent cleric Mahmoud Taleghani who was one of the main members of

the Revolutionary Council.⁽²⁾ Some of them were executed or killed — foremost among them was Hossein Jannati who was executed over his affiliation with the People's Mujahedin Organization of Iran, or the *Mujahedin-e-Khalq*. However, his father Ahmad Jannati, a prominent political figure, continued to maintain his stature as agha and seyyed. His other children also managed to keep their stature.⁽³⁾ Ali Jannati is also Ahmad Jannati's son. He has held various posts in Iran's political system for many years. He was appointed as Iran's minister of guidance, and was the country's ambassador to Kuwait. In addition, he was the minister of interior's political deputy. Meanwhile, other clerics voluntarily relinquished — along with their sons — the stature of seyyed and agha such as Shariatmadari.⁽⁴⁾

In general, it can be said that the phenomenon of aghazadeh spread beyond the official structure of the government — before the theocratic system's pillars were established. The unfair distribution of political, economic and social power occurred but on a limited scale. After the downfall of the Pahlavi monarchy, the aghazadehs expanded gradually to other classes beyond the clerics. Amid the growing political, social, and economic clout of the clerics, the aghazadehs turned to the public space to gain influence with the theocratic ruling system. The sons of those recognized as *marja al-taqlid* (source of imitation) and influential clerics such as Golpaygani, Mesbah-Yazdi, Jannati, Davani, Mar'ashi Najafi, Mohammad-Taqi Bahjat Foumani, Vaez-Tabasi, Alamolhoda, Mahdavi Kani, Rafsanjani, Larijani, Mofatteh and Motahari— were all born to elites. They inherited the economic, social, and political power of their fathers. This overlapping network of aghazadehs; kinship and marriage bonds amongst Shiite clerics turned into a critical problem inside the Iranian ruling system and government.

2. The Growth of Aghazandeh Phenomena and Its Manifestations in the Post-1979 Revolution

After the clerics took over power in Iran, the word aghazadeh evolved with new connotations. Before establishing the Iranian republic, the aghazadehs in most cases held posts as deputies and directors of internal affairs at the house of seyyed. When Khomeini was the head of state, Ahmed Khomeini — as an aghazadeh — managed to partially seize power. He was an effective and influential player on Iran's political landscape. However, the word aghazadeh continued to have the same meaning in Iran's political and social discourse. After Khomeini died and Khamenei ascended to power, this phenomenon of aghazadeh changed gradually. In the beginning, the aghazadehs were mainly benefiting from the country's economy. In the new millennium, the aghazadehs entered the political arena.

1.1 The Aghazadehs in the Economy

These changes started in the post-Iran-Iraq War era; the post-war reconstruction

period was when the IRGC entered the economic arena. The new generation of aghazadehs began engaging in the economy through an illegal relationship with the commanders of the IRGC — enabled by their clerical fathers or those working inside the political system (the army and government). They managed to amass surprising amounts of wealth. “Since then, economic and political corruption has been connected with the aghazadehs,” explained Ali Rabiei, a security and intelligence official who worked as Mohammad Khatami’s security advisor — in his article for *Karvakargar* newspaper in 1998 entitled “Aghazadeh- Profiteering and Economic Corruption.”⁽⁵⁾

Furthermore, the electoral campaigns of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in 2005 and 2009 were the most important entry points for such discourse in the political, social, and economic spheres in Iran. Ahmadinejad and his supporters raised the issue of economic corruption and pointed fingers at Akhar Hashemi Rafsanjani’s sons and Ali Akbar Nategh-Nouri.⁽⁶⁾

Economic corruption cases were leaked related to the sons of clerics and taqlid clerics such as the Sultan of Sugar and al-Makasib Company cases. In addition, allegations were levelled against Nasser Vaez-Tabasi, son of Abbas Vaez-Tabasi, who is the chairman of the Razavi Shrine and the supreme leader’s representative in Khorasan.⁽⁷⁾

Ahmadinejad, who rose to power by raising slogans such as combating corruption and ensuring social justice, paved the way for his relatives, in the shortest time possible through remaining close to the IRGC — to enter the network of profiteering and systematic economic corruption. His tenure can be considered as the period in which the aghazadehs started emerging from beyond the clerical class.

During Hassan Rouhani’s tenure, in the past decade, this phenomenon continued to have an octopus-like spread across the economic arena. And it is still continuing. Some of the aghazadehs have introduced themselves as “people with good genetics.”⁽⁸⁾ They have held different government and semi-government positions.

A 2013 analysis published by *Arman* newspaper regarding the Central Bank’s report indicated how deep the crisis is. According to this report, nearly 9 percent of Iran’s budget of 727,000 billion toman — nearly 80,000 billion toman — was paid in the form of facilitation services to the sons of elite officials or other individuals. There are no reports indicating whether this sum has been repaid to Iranian banks or not.⁽⁹⁾

When investigating the phenomenon of aghazadehs in the economic field, we find that it is not limited to one aspect, just like any other social phenomenon. This phenomenon cannot be limited to one simple reason or more. Yet, the roots of this phenomenon were not discussed in the aforementioned analysis. What concerns us most is the extent of

the aghazadehs' influence, at home, in the economy, their clandestine relationship with the system and the support they will provide to the current Iranian government. They are the bedrock for the aghazadehs overseas — an issue that we will discuss later.

The aghazadehs who benefited from the country's economy are numerous; they cannot be listed in this study. If one is eager to review all the aghazadehs who exploited the economy, he/she needs to conduct a detailed study in this regard. Due to the limitations of this study, I will only mention a few names who have had media coverage.⁽¹⁰⁾

■ **Mohammad Yassin Ramin**

Yassin Ramin is the son of Mohammad-Ali Ramin, a media advisor to former President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, and Mahnaz Afshar's husband, a famous Iranian actress. He was the head of a company called Rayan Roshd Afzar Company (Rayan Roshd) — a company linked to the Iranian Red Crescent. The company acted as a middleman to import medicines amid economic sanctions at the time. Following a complaint filed by the Iranian Red Crescent, he was jailed in 2016 on the charge that he imported expired powdered milk. Six months later, he was released, but the issue is still under investigation.⁽¹¹⁾

■ **Hamid Reza Aref**

Hamid Reza Aref is the son of Mohammad Reza Aref, the vice president in the eighth Iranian cabinet and the chairman of the Reformists' Supreme Council. The remarks he made about his superior rank and distinguished characteristics invoked multiple reactions in Iran's political and media spheres. It is reported that he is a businessman and works in the information technology field. In 2005, Aref, 27-years-old at the time, was one of the individuals who brought the MTN Company from South Africa to Iran to sign an agreement to launch the country's second mobile network operator.

■ **Narges Rabiei**

The name of Narges Rabiei, the labor minister's daughter, came up in one of the presidential debates during the 2017 election. She is one of the most striking examples of

“people with good genetics” in Iran. Importing luxurious clothes from the UK and rumored reports about her profiteering from imports and sales was the reason she was put under the spotlight during the presidential debates.

■ **Elias Ghalibaf**

Elias is the son of Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf, the incumbent Parliament speaker. He is responsible for operating several media outlets such as Tehran Today, Radio Farda and others. According to a report by Khabaronline,

quoting his father, Elias participates in economic activities through the Mehr-e-Hashtom institute at Saadat Abad Boulevard. He has also contributed to establishing a series of schools.

1.2 Aghazadehs as Politicians and Intellectuals

Following the win of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in the 2005 presidential election, Mehdi Karroubi, one of the presidential candidates back then, wrote an open letter to the supreme leader protesting against the meddling of the IRGC, the revolutionaries of the Guardian Council, and the aghazadeh in the election. In this letter, Karroubi, for the first time, mentioned Mojtaba Khamenei, son of Ali Khamenei, and son-in-law of the seventh Parliament speaker at the time Gholam-Ali Haddad-Adel, calling him “Son of Agha” who carried out secret and regular activities for the sake of a certain candidate.

He wrote, “News has spread about your revered son Mojtaba’s support for one of the candidates. I was worried about the recurrent reports for fear that this support could be related to your own viewpoint. But my past experiences and what I know well about you made me assured that this support is based on his personal viewpoint. Afterwards, I heard that one of the elites told you that the Son of Agha — your son — supports so-and-so. And that you told him that your son is Agha, not Son of Agha.”⁽¹²⁾ Mojtaba Khamenei should be considered the most important among the aghazadehs nowadays in Iran. He has a direct role in Iran’s overall policies. Discussing his role and stature requires a detailed study in a separate paper.

However, there are many aghazadehs in Iran’s social and political spheres; they have been endeavoring, unlike the aghazadehs in the economic sphere, to enter the political arena. Some of these aghazadehs have even become major bosses and well-known within the political system, including individuals like Ali Motahari, Sorna Sattari, Ali Jannati, Mahdi Khazali, Mohammad Reza, Alireza Beheshti, Mohammad Mehdi Tindgoyan, and Mohammad Mehdi Mofatteh. Some of these aghazadehs — as mentioned above — received more coverage from media outlets. In some way, they forged relations with political currents and figures in recent years.

■ Farid al-Din Haddad Adel

Farid al-Din is the son of former lawmaker Ghulam Ali Haddad-Adel. His most notable appearance on the political landscape was when he accompanied Ebrahim Raisi in the 12th presidential election — when Raisi went to the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB) to record an interview. Farid al-Din was there, which demonstrated his seriousness about entering the political arena. Of course, he has not been distant from political and media activities over the past years. He was a member of the panel that outlined policies for some conservative media outlets such as Banjarah, Muthalath and Javan weekly

newspaper. Farid al-Din also operates Farhang School, one of the most famous schools in Iran. His father is its founder.⁽¹³⁾

■ Mohsen, Faezeh, Mehdi and Yasser Hashemi

Mohsen Hashemi, son of the late Hashemi Rafsanjani, is one of the most controversial aghazadehs in Iran. His name is and has been — along with other members of his household —reverberating across society as “robbers of the public budget.” For 13 years, he had been the chairman and CEO of Tehran Metro company. He then entered the city council as he was put on the list of the “reformists.” He remained in the council until 2021.⁽¹⁴⁾

Faezeh is one of Rafsanjani’s daughters. In addition to her political activities, she has also carried out some media activities. Her presence in the fifth Parliament, her role as editor-in-chief of the banned magazine Zan and her imprisonment for six months on charges of spreading propaganda against the political system are among the main points when it comes to describing Faezeh Hashemi.⁽¹⁵⁾

As for Mehdi Hashemi, he was chairman of the Iranian Fuel Conservation Organization. He then headed to the UK to continue his education. When he was sentenced in 2015 to 10 years in prison on bribery charges, his father advised him to return to Iran.⁽¹⁶⁾

Yasser Hashemi is another son from the Hashemi household. His name is connected with Azad Islamic University and the Expediency Discernment Council. He was the head of his father’s office at the Expediency Discernment Council’s research center. At the same time, he was the head of the office of the board of trustees of Azad Islamic University. He lost both positions following his father’s death.⁽¹⁷⁾

■ Mohammad Alikhani

He is the son of Ghodratollah Alikhani, the former lawmaker representing Qazvin Governorate and one of the notables in this governorate. Mohammad Alikhani was a lawmaker representing Qazvin in the seventh Parliament. In the fifth term of the governorate’s council election, he managed to get on the city council after winning the required votes; he was backed by the “reformists.” He also served as the deputy head of the Transportation and Traffic organization in the Tehran Municipality and worked as an advisor to the minister of oil in the eleventh government.⁽¹⁸⁾

■ Fatima Hussaini

She is the daughter of Safdar Hosseini, the former head of the National Development Fund of Iran. She was born in 1985 and was elected to the Parliament after her name was placed on the “reformists” list. She said that she held a PhD during the parliamentary election campaign for Parliament, even though, she only holds a Master’s degree.⁽¹⁹⁾

■ The Araghchis

Seyyed Abbas Araghchi, former spokesman for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, served in different government positions, such as political assistant to the foreign minister, and Iran's ambassador to Tokyo. Araghchi has three sisters and three brothers. Most of the family's members work in business and trade. He lost his father when he was 17. Araghchi has two elder brothers — one of them is a member on the board of the Exporters Union and the other is a member of the Vendors Union. Araghchi's nephew, known as Seyed Ahmad Araghchi, served as the vice president of the Central Bank of Iran. He looked over foreign currencies from 2017 to 2018. After the fluctuations experienced by the foreign exchange market after Valiollah Seif's dismissal from his position as governor of Iran's Central Bank, he was dismissed as well, and then arrested and imprisoned.⁽²⁰⁾

■ Fatemeh Javadi

Fatemeh Javadi is the niece of Javadi Amoli, a famous cleric in Iran. She held the position of Iran's vice president and headed Iran's Environmental Protection Organization (IEPO) during the first government of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. After being appointed to the latter position, she appointed her husband as her adviser. According to her, environmental protection was his field of study and he had experience regarding this matter.⁽²¹⁾

■ Meysam Mozaffar

He is the son of Hossein Mozaffar— a former lawmaker and one of the directors of Ghalibaf's election campaign. He served as the CEO of Tehran Taxi Organization for a while. In response to criticism regarding his son's appointment to the Tehran Taxi Organization, Hossein Mozaffar said, "In the past, Meysam was a deputy head in the culture and art authority in the municipality. Before this, he was deputy head of the municipality. Even before being appointed to these positions, he occupied positions that our ministers were never appointed to. Meysam was deprived of serving in senior positions because he is from the Mozaffar household. He has been working in the organization since he was 18. He was responsible for organizing meetings for 2,000 people. He was an adviser in the Kish Free Trade Zone project and the director general of Iran Students Union. He also served as a young adviser to the president and was a member of Iran's Information Technology Board and deputy head of the municipality's cultural organization. He was also nominated to become the head of a municipality in one of the regions."⁽²²⁾

3. The Aghazadehs Outside Iran

As we mentioned, if we wanted to count the aghas and aghazadehs linked to the Iranian political system, the number will be far greater than the

one announced by different Iranian media outlets at home and overseas. According to reports mostly issued by government linked news agencies over different periods, we estimate that the size of the aghazadeh community overseas ranges from 3,000 to 10,000 people. For example, a report, quoting members of the Education and Research Committee in the Iranian Parliament in April 2019, said that the number of aghazadeh members residing outside the country for studying purposes was 3,000.⁽²³⁾ Another source indicated that the sons of officials residing outside the country were nearly 5,000.⁽²⁴⁾ The Trump administration's Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin announced that the number of children of Iran's elite (aghazadehs) in the United States was nearly 5,500. In a remarkable statement, he concluded that the assets of the Iranian aghazadehs in the United States — immovable and personal assets — reached nearly \$150 billion (more than twice the foreign exchange reserves in Iran in 2020 according to statistics of the International Monetary Fund).⁽²⁵⁾ It is worth mentioning here that the remarks of the US treasury secretary were made in previous years, this amount of money is only monitored by US banks, so what about other countries! On the other side, Tabnak website — owned by Mohsen Rezaee — announced in a single report that the number of educated aghazadehs in the UK was about 4,000 individuals.⁽²⁶⁾

It stands to reason, given the huge numbers of aghazadeh community members, that the properties of aghas and their children residing abroad are much more than what they have in the United States. This is a clear proof of the mounting power of the lobbies of the Iranian government in Europe, South America and even in Asia. The young aghazadehs who are wasting their time on Instagram lack proper intellectual potency and social support to change or instrumentally influence international policies. The following are the names of some aghazadehs overseas who are sometimes mentioned in media outlets:⁽²⁷⁾

- **Maryam Fereydoun:** Daughter of Hassan Fereydoun who is former President Hassan Rouhani's younger brother, resides in London, and works as an accountant.
- **Ali Fereydoun:** Son of Hassan Fereydoun, works as a senior engineer at an educational company in New York to educate the city's poor citizens.
- **Tannaz Rouhani:** daughter of Hassan Rouhani. She is one of the four children of the former Iranian president. She now lives in Austria.
- **Seyed Hossein Mousavian:** A high-profile former Iranian nuclear negotiator. He served in different government positions after he graduated from the University of Sacramento in California. He is now a researcher at Princeton University.
- **Eissa Hashemi:** The son of Masoumeh Ebtekar who famously scaled the wall of the US embassy to storm it and was also an adviser to former President

Rouhani. His father, Mohammad Hashemi Esfahani, occupied the US embassy in the early days of the revolution. Eissa now resides along with his wife Maryam Tahmasi in the United States. The members of the aghazadeh community residing in Los Angeles all seem to be working in the academic field.

■ **Mahdi Zarif:** Son of the person who is possibly the clandestine founder of the National Iranian American Council (NIAC). This person is the son of former Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif. Mahdi is in partnership with a company named Verison in the United States. And it is likely that he is one of the founders of NIAC.

■ **Sajjad Khoshroo:** Son of the Iranian ambassador to the UN. He is the son-in-law of Hossein Fereydoun and the husband of Maryam Fereydoun. In spite of the legal implications, he may have connections to money laundering networks within the government. He is now working to get a PhD from Oxford University. He is the son of Mr. Khoshroo Khoshbakht. Both of them are lawyers.

■ **Leila Khatami:** Daughter of former Iranian President Mohammad Khatami. She resides in New York and seeks to maintain a top spot in social circles.

■ **Emadeddin Khatami:** Son of Mohammad Khatami and a member of the Central Council of the Union of Islamic Iran People Party. According to news agencies close to the IRGC, he left the country — possibly settling in the United States. It is worth noting that Narges Khatami is another daughter of Mohammad Khatami and has resided in the UK for years.

■ **Ehsan and Niloofar Nobakht:** Children of Ali Nobakht, who is a member of the Iranian Parliament. Both of them work as professors of medicine at George Washington University and UCLi University. They are busy serving as citizens of the United States. Ali Nobakht is the brother of Mohammad Bagher Nobakht, Hassan Rouhani's aide and president of the Planning and Budget Organization under the government of prudence and hope.

■ **Fatemeh Larijani:** Daughter of long-serving lawmaker Ali Larijani, one of the Iranian officials constantly issuing death threats against the United States via chanting slogans such as "Death to America." Fatemeh resides in Ohio. She studies medicine.

■ **Sasha Sabhani:** Daughter of the former Iranian ambassador to Venezuela who lived a luxurious lifestyle there.

■ **Naeimeh Eshraghi:** Granddaughter of Ruhollah Khomeini. This hijab-wearing member of the aghazadeh community lives in Canada. She reportedly performs prayers in Canada better than she did in her homeland, Iran. Her name has come to the fore recently after she posted an anti-US Facebook status.

■ **Hossein and Hassan Shamkhani:** They are the sons of Ali Shamkhani, secretary of the National Security Council of Iran. Hossein, the elder son, is the director of a maritime navigation company. He graduated from a

US university. Both of them are not concerned with a certain country and shuttle between different countries continually. Ali's nephew, Mohamed Hadi, is also an expert on political affairs in Moscow.

■ **Mohsen Moradian:** Son of Mortaza Moradian, former Iranian ambassador to Denmark. The wedding party of this son — who married the Iranian model Anashid Hoseini — recently sparked media uproar.

■ **Mahmoud Reza Khavari:** The biggest trickster in the Iranian government's history: He, members of his family and his associates run a wide array of companies and commercial institutions in the furthestmost parts of the world. They run a giant group working in money laundering internationally, including a chain of restaurants in the United States and Canada and contracting companies in the Gulf states.

■ **Ehsan Tabish:** Son of Mohammad Reza Tabish, head of the top housing body under President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. He has served in different positions within the Iranian government. He enhances the interests of the government through his recreational trips abroad.

■ **Azadeh Haddad-Adel:** Daughter of Gholam-Ali Haddad-Adel: She also has undertaken activities related to human development in the East and in the West, starting from Japan and then in America. She has worked to serve humanity. It is said that Gholam-Ali's son-in-law born in the United States hails from the family of a US martyr.

There are also other names of the aghazadeh community that appear in the media from time to time. They include: the six children of Saghaian-Nejad (the former head of Qom Municipality), nephew of Mostafa Tajzadeh, children of Mohammad Reza Khatami (brother of Mohammad Khatami), granddaughter of Mohammad Yazdi (former member of the Guardian Council and former chief justice), Zahra Takhshid, daughter of Mohammad Reza Takhshid (the "reformist" head of the faculty of law in Tehran).

Moreover, there is Nematallah Postinduz, the chief executive of Iran's automotive company SAPIA. He is close to Esfandiar Rahim Mashaei who was appointed — after his resignation from his position — as chairman of National Iranian Copper Industries Co. Aref, Nematallah's son, lives in Los Angeles.

If we want to mention each one of those involved in economic corruption respectively, we will be unable to get sufficient information about them. But there is still more to tell. The number of aghazadehs were leaked through media outlets not as a result of follow-up efforts by international tribunals or human rights advocacy groups, but because of personal and partisan score-settling between members of the different factions within the structure of the political system in Iran.

4. The Role of Aghazadehs Abroad

The aghazadehs have played a significant role for Iran abroad that can be unfolded as follows:

4.1 Pressure groups for the Political System

The Iranian government, formed in 1979, sought — like all governments— to expand and enhance relations with other countries. But this was not as easy as was imagined in the beginning. The treaties and equations concluded before Khomeini and the clerics assumed power in Iran did not last due to the internal complexities of the 1979 revolution and the country's multilayered policies towards the regional and global powers. Attacks, like storming the US embassy, revealed that there was no channel of communication established in parallel with regular diplomatic relations to facilitate international relations.

This communicative vacuum was more evident in the Iran-Iraq War. The government sent multiple delegations to different countries to purchase weapons and ammunition. The delegations' efforts came to naught due to the arms embargo. Iranian officials gradually felt the necessity to establish lobbies to circumvent restrictive international laws. Over time, the Iranian government managed to accomplish this goal with the help of other governments like Gaddafi's in Libya.

But after several years, Iran added other departments to its lobbying platforms. These new departments had to be managed by new pressure groups and clients. They had to turn threats into opportunities. This would not have happened without the aghazadehs.

The aghazadehs, who were not born before the establishment of the Iranian republic, their fate and mission has been assigned since their birth. They were spread across the world to entrench the clout of the Iranian political system to the maximum extent possible while enjoying the petrodollar extravaganza, taking selfies beside swimming pools and driving luxury cars. They spread across the world, introducing themselves as the extravagant aristocratic guards of the Iranian republic and expanded the government's court as much as possible. In fact, the aghazadehs are an oligarchy and they became known as the privileged. This group has only become the explicit representation of the aghazadeh phenomenon, but the main part of the iceberg of the aghazadehs (the greatest part of the aghazadeh community) continues their work implicitly as pressure groups — away from public attention and the uproar of the media.

4.2 A Network to Circumvent Sanctions

Through registering multiple companies in recent years, the aghazadehs have established a complicated and coherent economic network that bypasses sanctions and restrictions. They are directly connected to the global trade network and make little effort to establish communication links with the

banking network inside Iran. Definitely, no country will object to attracting massive investments to allow hard currencies to flow into its economic cycle. It is also logical that countries should not ban the activities of legal and registered companies which have not committed any breach.

Given the abovementioned observations, it can be said that the Iranian government has not only had one treasury in recent decades for its hard currency, but has had two treasuries. These are run by officials from Iran's political system and aghazadehs overseas. In addition, it had been alleged that the reasons behind seizing billions via government officials, sending petrodollars to European and Canadian banks and so on have become clearly understood. It has also been understood why none of the senior officials can be sued.

4.3 Bridges to Communicate With Opponents

It should be said that the aghazadeh phenomenon in Iran is related to the principle of pressure groups. This is because in the end, neither the structure of the political system nor the international supporters of the Iranian political system are ready to terminate these clandestine bridges. Therefore, neither Iran's foes who benefit from the aghazadeh pressure groups nor those who superficially criticize the political system display much objection to this phenomenon. For instance, on August 30, 2019, Mashregh News wrote that the aghazadeh crisis in Iran reaches new heights day after day.⁽²⁸⁾

The phenomenon turns into a hotly debated question in Iran's media outlets each time a new issue arises. It has recently been revealed that all the six children of Mr. Saghaian-Nejad, the president of Qom Municipality, lived and studied in the United States. As usual, the reports generated public backlash. In the end, the head of the municipality said — in response to the public outrage — “My family serves Velayat-e Faqih and the sect, and care about observing morals. Some of my children traveled abroad to acquire scientific knowledge. All of them have become ambassadors of the government.” Meanwhile, one of this official's sons spoke in an interview with an anti-revolutionary network, making strange remarks that have nothing to do with his father describing him as a “revolutionary.” Hamed Saghaian-Nejad, introduced by his father as an ambassador of Iran's political system, preferred to speak to Manoto (Me and You) television network – an anti-Iran network – instead of to state-run media outlets. He received questions from Masih Alinejad. Second, he totally contradicted the remarks of his father. He announced explicitly in the interview, “I have an opinion different from that of my father. Maybe when he expressed his viewpoint it was for domestic consumption. I am not an ambassador for the government. I am an ordinary citizen.”

The aforesaid is just one of hundreds of other controversial episodes that have emerged in recent years; Iranian officials played a role in diverting the public's attention from the country's main issues through promoting such circuses.

Through the media, the government puts officials under pressure and tightens the noose around them. It prepares reports for domestic consumption that are directed to the traditional supporters of the political system. Following the first report, another report is prepared with the aim of stirring up public opinion against nominal and actual opponents to the political system — whether at home or overseas. In reality, the government seeks to play both sides against the other. In other words, the government's legitimacy should not be hampered, nor should the popularity of its opponents. The stature of the lobbies formed overseas maintain their standing as groups committed to maintaining human rights and individual freedoms — as well as the stature of the aghazadehs who serve within the structure of the government. Moreover, any member of the aghazadeh community who manages to present himself as a civilized person who is committed to human rights and clearly convinces the opposition that he defected from the political system (even if he needs to denounce his own father) will have a greater chance to spread the revolution's aspirations beyond Iran's borders, double his petrodollars and expand his circle of supporters amongst the opposition groups and even amongst the religious and ethnic groups.

4.5 Oversea Supporters to Protect the Political System

The controversial reports related to the aghazadehs' studying or undertaking economic activities in the West always provoke uproar in Iran's media for a certain period of time. However, it should be said that all this uproar was not to hold the officials accountable or end the phenomenon of the aghazadeh. But the political system did this in order to create an ambiguous media landscape aimed at tarnishing the image of some officials for political, partisan, and even personal score-settling. The greatest part of the audience often concluded that these conflicting reports are a result of partisan or even personal score-settling between politicians of the Iranian government. Meanwhile, they are unaware of the unbreakable chain that binds together all the elements of the political system with unbelievable strength.

It is natural to analyze retrospectively to have a better understanding of the entrenched pillars of the Iranian political system in different countries over four decades. Only then will we realize that several of yesterday's aghazadehs have become aghas and elites. We will even realize that several of the government's allies overseas who are not apparently considered aghazadehs who protect the Iranian political system.

4.5 The West Inaction in Addressing the Aghazadeh Phenomena

Dual behavior marks the policy of Western governments towards the aghazadeh community and the growth of Iranian lobbies in the West. Despite expressing their resentment over the aghazadehs, Western governments have exerted scant efforts to curb the influence of aghazadeh community members.

In fact, their position on the aghazadehs is predictable and pragmatic. It is the result of the continued international diplomatic pressure on Iran on the one hand and the efforts of global companies and institutions on the other to extract the biggest possible portion of natural and human resources from colonized countries like Iran.

The most recent reaction related to the aghazadeh community came from former US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo. He announced that he was considering the matter regarding the presence of children belonging to Iranian officials in the United States. He also wrote a post on his Twitter account, saying: "The individuals busy destroying the lives of the Iranians were sending their sons overseas to complete studying, shopping and benefiting from the freedoms in the US."⁽²⁹⁾ In light of these remarks, former US envoy on Iran at the US Department of State, Brian Hook, used the term "expelling" in an investigation on the extradition of children belonging to Iranian government officials. He considered the presence of children belonging to Iranian officials in the United States as "hypocrisy."⁽³⁰⁾

However, none of the aforementioned US politicians had the desire to cut the aghazadeh community out of the equation of the ongoing ploys between the two sides. No Iranian official has expressed shame, nor has any child of an Iranian government official relinquished their extravagant lifestyle in the West.

The reactions of European officials have been no different when compared to the Americans. They showed even greater heedlessness and sometimes organized their political meetings with the government in Iran via aghazadeh backchannels.

5. Conclusion

The issue of aghas and aghazadehs within the Iranian political system and exposing some of the negative personalities among them in the media who are not major actors whether in terms of social legitimacy or political popularity, is only the visible tip of the iceberg of the Iranian lobbies. The rest of the iceberg reaches out to international arenas across the globe; they cannot be counted. Many of us know nothing about them. The aghazadehs, in this equation, only play the role of the government's money broker. Aghazadehs often operate in clandestine lobbies that can cause major shifts in regional and global arenas. This fact is not hidden from the international community, which sees no reason to prevent the aghazadehs from enjoying the splendors of the Western world. The aghazadehs do not care about who rules the Western countries as long as they provide safe and secure banks for their money. What is important here is the issue of the dollars deposited in the banks of Canada, the United States and Europe. On the other side, the aghazadeh community members make up the lobbies who play a mediating role in international policy.

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IRAN AND THE STRUGGLE BETWEEN REGIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL POWERS IN AFGHANISTAN AFTER THE US WITHDRAWAL

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Abstract

The US withdrawal from Afghanistan on August 31, 2021 is a significant turning point in the history of Afghanistan, ending a complex and long period of American control over the course of Afghan politics. Accordingly, Afghanistan and its neighbors, particularly Iran, embarked on a new strategic game in Central Asian, with its features still not apparent. It is clear that Iran has prepared well for America's withdrawal from Afghanistan by building relations with the Taliban, enhancing its economic and cultural influence inside the country, and establishing alliances with China and Pakistan. Nevertheless, Iran anticipates potential challenges and intersections with other regional players, namely Turkey, India and perhaps with some Gulf countries. Expecting a potential strategic vacuum in Afghanistan following America's withdrawal may lead us to an inaccurate reading of the current and upcoming phase in Afghanistan. Washington did not completely withdraw from the Afghan battlefield. Its impact in the country will remain in place via some neighboring countries, such as Pakistan, Iran and perhaps Turkey. These countries will play a functional role that may converge and intersect with the interests of Washington and other countries concerned with the Afghan file. Thus, Afghanistan will remain a complex arena, subject to change at any moment.

Keywords: *Afghanistan, Taliban, and US withdrawal.*

Introduction

Iran is a significant country in Asia; it has tangled interests with many regional countries, most prominently with Afghanistan. This is due to Afghanistan's strategic location at the heart of the interactions in Central Asia and its ability to impact regional stability as a whole. The United States' invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 and the presence of its troops there for nearly 20 years was a continuous concern for Iran. Undoubtedly, the US presence in Afghanistan and the consequent numerous and intertwined regional and international arrangements for nearly two decades posed many challenges to Iranian policy. Thus, it became necessary for Iran to adapt to the new emerging realities in Afghanistan. It has become, over time, an important arena for testing strategic balances in Asia and an indicator of the cooperation and conflict trends between the regional powers surrounding Afghanistan, including Iran, of course. Afghanistan has remained an arena for testing international relations between major powers such as Russia, China, the EU, NATO, Japan and others.

Undoubtedly, the United States' withdrawal from Afghanistan at the end of August 2021 marks the beginning of a new chapter not only in Afghanistan's history, but also for regional security and the balance of power equation in Asia generally, and Central Asia particularly. Therefore, to understand, analyze and forecast Iran's role in regional and international interactions surrounding Afghanistan during the current period, one needs to review the regional and international polarization regarding Afghanistan before Washington's withdrawal, and to identify the opportunities or challenges for stakeholders. This paper discusses in detail the expected Iranian position on the upcoming developments in Afghanistan, attempting to identify the potential regional and international consensus points regarding Afghanistan's future; the expected differences; and the possible change in the nature of the regional and international balance of power equation in regard to the Afghan file particularly and Central Asia generally.

This paper aims to answer two main questions: how will the United States' withdrawal from Afghanistan impact Iran's strategic vision towards the country and the availability of opportunities for cooperation and the prospect of conflict between regional and international powers wanting to fill the perceived strategic vacuum in the country (Russia, China, Pakistan, India, Britain, and France)? How will Iran deal with the powers concerned with Afghanistan that hope to play a new role in the country such as Turkey and Qatar?

1. The General Picture of the Regional Scene Around Afghanistan Before the United States' Withdrawal

To better understand the reality in Afghanistan, one should understand the regional and international arrangements in the past years, whether these relate to the United States' exertions that led to its expected withdrawal from the country (it had been previously and openly discussed by former US President Barack Obama, former US President Donald Trump, as well as by the current US President Joe Biden); or the efforts of other countries such as Russia, China, Pakistan, Iran and India to carve out a role in the country, either independently or via certain regional arrangements.⁽¹⁾

In addition, for a full picture and better understanding of Iran's potential position on Afghanistan, this paper addresses the regional and international interactions before America's withdrawal.

1.1 Washington's Acceptance and Recognition of Regional Powers' Interest

Past conflicts in Afghanistan have historically had an international rather than a regional dimension. Before the United States got involved in the country, Afghanistan had been caught within a cycle of historical conflict between Britain and Russia. Later, it was part of the Cold War struggles between the United States and the former Soviet Union in the 1970s and 1980s. This struggle between the two great powers contributed to Afghanistan's colonial legacy, with little contribution from regional countries. By the end of its withdrawal from Afghanistan, Washington accepted the role of other actors in the country, including Iran. Sometimes it encouraged some regional actors, such as Pakistan and Turkey, to play a certain role to complement its plan, such as hosting talks with the Taliban to press the movement to stop the civil war and embrace the political path leading to peace.⁽²⁾

By leaving room for other countries in Afghanistan, Washington has changed its initial strategy from when it first entered the country. Back then, it relied on exploiting the differences between the countries concerned with Afghanistan, without involving them in managing the country's affairs during its occupation. At the regional level, the United States has exploited the rivalry between India and Pakistan to place pressure on Islamabad via opening up space for New Delhi's expansion in Afghanistan. The United States also encouraged Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan to play a role in influencing the Tajik, Uzbek and Turkmen communities in Afghanistan. As for Iran, the United States took advantage of the differences between the Taliban and Tehran to secure Iranian support for its invasion of Afghanistan, hence it eliminated Iran's strategic opposition. This is reflective of Washington's use of Iran in Afghanistan given its ability to influence the position of Shiite Hazaras in the country like the green light given to Iran in Iraq.⁽³⁾

1.2 The Intensification of International Competition in Afghanistan

Before America's withdrawal, many international players were involved in Afghanistan; the conflict over the country was no longer limited to two countries (the United States and the former Soviet Union) – as before - but now included Russia, the NATO member countries, China, Japan, Germany and other European countries such as the Netherlands and Austria. Unlike the early years of the Afghan war, the situation before Washington's withdrawal saw cooperation and flexibility between the United States and its international rivals with regard to managing their respective interests. The United States allowed Britain and France to play an important role in Afghanistan, either independently with both countries supporting the political system via supervising Afghan general elections or under the umbrella of NATO. Countries such as Japan and Germany called for sending troops to join the coalition forces in Afghanistan. There was also apparent cooperation with Russia when Moscow allowed the passage of US supply planes through its airspace thus saving them from potential attacks if they passed via Pakistan and Afghan territories. In return, Russia secured arms contracts, supplying the Afghan army and police with weapons.⁽⁴⁾

1.3 The Growing Importance of Afghanistan for Iran and Regional Countries

Over the past two decades, Afghanistan has developed a significant position in Central Asia, especially as an energy transfer route. Furthermore, strategic cooperation projects that have been implemented during the past years, whether between Pakistan and China, or India and Iran, have bolstered Afghanistan's regional position. This has brought Afghanistan into the strategic calculations of the aforementioned countries, due to its strategic location, as it occupies an important geostrategic position. Owing to its central location within Asia, Afghanistan and the wider region of Central Asia are pivotal in providing access to other regions. The late Zbigniew Brzezinski in his book "The Grand Chessboard" published in 1997, mentioned that Afghanistan and Central Asia constitute a "geopolitical pivot." Brzezinski explains, "Geopolitical pivots are the states whose importance is derived not from their power and motivation but rather from their sensitive location and from the consequences of their potentially vulnerable condition for the behavior of geostrategic players." Afghanistan's significance, according to an energy perspective, is its geographical location, which can be a transit corridor for oil and natural gas exports from Central Asia to the Arabian Sea. This includes the possibility for constructing pipelines to export oil and natural gas through Afghanistan. Moreover, the country has vast natural resources, namely oil and gas, gold, copper, iron, cobalt and lithium, as well as uranium and rare earth elements.⁽⁵⁾

2. Iran's Strategic and Tactical Preparations

It seems that Iran had prepared for the moment when Washington would eventually withdraw from Afghanistan. The withdrawal took place at the end of August 2021. It was chaotic to a great extent. The Iranian celebration following the withdrawal was not surprising. Tehran attempted to exploit the withdrawal politically and militarily to demonstrate "the power of resistance," and to blame the United States and its allies for Afghanistan's predicament. The chaotic US withdrawal led international media outlets and some European politicians to describe the withdrawal as "shameful" and they criticized Washington directly and indirectly. Iran also took advantage of this major event to pressure Washington in other countries such as Iraq and Syria, and it began to talk about the fate of governments and leaders who cooperate with US occupying forces in Iraq.

Iranian celebrations over America's withdrawal did not last long. A few weeks after the withdrawal, Iran faced a new and complex reality in Afghanistan. Thus, Iran had to alter its strategy and manage its relations with the Taliban as well as with regional and international powers vying to "fill the strategic vacuum" in the country. Iran's leadership is well aware that the international and regional game in Afghanistan has just begun following Washington's withdrawal, which was the orchestrator of the balance of power equation on the ground as it was the dominant power in the country.

In light of the above, it is important to understand how Iran prepared for America's withdrawal and how it will deal with the future realities in Afghanistan. In addition, it is critical to look at how Iran will manage the balance of power equation in light of the competition between regional and international players involved in the country.

2.1 Strategic Considerations Regarding Iran's Exertions in Afghanistan

Iran has embraced a relatively constant strategic line towards Afghanistan to achieve the following goals:

- Strengthen the fragile security equation in Afghanistan (especially at the economic level).^{(6)*}
- Strengthen its alliances with some Afghan communities such as the Hazaras and Tajiks to prevent Afghanistan's unrest spilling over to Iran.
- Boost ties with the western Afghan provinces bordering it to make them dependent on its electricity, fuel and cross-border trade, as is the case with Iraq now.^{(7)*}
- Ensure the establishment of a central government in Kabul that is able to manage domestic affairs and extend its writ, especially within territories bordering it, however, without allowing the establishment of a strong Afghan state, which could potentially pose a threat to it. (It is worth mentioning that

relations between Iran and Afghanistan during the 17th and 18th centuries, especially in Kandahar, were hostile). Prevent any regional or international power from turning Afghanistan into a base.⁽⁸⁾

- Stand against any attempts to dismember Afghanistan into small states, i.e., prevent the redrawing of the regional map by creating newer smaller states such as: the Pashtun state or the Baloch state, which would threaten the complex structure of Iran.

2.2 Iran's Tactics to Establish Influence Inside and Around Afghanistan

To implement its aforementioned strategic vision, Iran opened up greatly to Afghanistan in the post-2001 period, and took advantage of the tense relations between Kabul and Islamabad due to the latter's support for the Taliban. This was reflected via several tactical and strategic steps undertaken by Iran, such as the following:

- Granting Afghanistan a permit to use Chabahar port on the Gulf of Oman for transit purposes.

- Financing and building expensive infrastructure projects, such as constructing a bridge and building the main road linking Chabahar with the Afghan border.

- Involving India in a project linking Afghanistan to Chabahar port, which allows New Delhi to bypass Pakistan and access Afghanistan and Central Asia (through establishing the Delaram-Zaranj Highway, a trade route that competes with the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor and Gwadar port in Balochistan).

- The inauguration of the first railway line in December 2020, funded by Tehran, linking the city of Khuff in northeastern Iran and Gurian city in western Afghanistan, which is 140 kilometers long.

- Establishing other infrastructure, educational, and cultural projects and communication channels such as television stations, which were partially or wholly funded by Tehran, to influence the perspectives of Afghanistan's elite and to co-opt the Afghan street.

- Rapprochement with the Taliban and overcoming their differences, establishing hospitals to treat wounded Taliban fighters, sending some Taliban members to Iranian hospitals for treatment, and providing them with weapons and training. The ice has melted to such an extent that Tehran pays the salaries of Taliban fighters in some areas, such as Farah, according to the statement of a former Taliban official provided to a local Afghan radio station.⁽⁹⁾

It is clear from the aforementioned that the Iranian calculations in Afghanistan are more complex than one can imagine. This may explain the reasons behind Iran's attempt to build good relations with the Taliban in recent years particularly. In 2016, Iran hosted the former Taliban leader Mullah Akhtar Mansour who was killed in a US drone strike in a remote

area of southwest Pakistan, near the Afghan border. This was followed by meetings which were made public when the Iranian Foreign Ministry hosted a dialogue session with political leaders affiliated with the Taliban in January 2021. Former Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif participated in this session. This was considered at the time as Iran shifting from a policy of coordination to a policy of diplomacy towards the Taliban to contain it. Some decision-making institutions in Iran showed a sympathetic attitude towards the Taliban. Ahmad Naderi, a member of the Iranian Parliament's National Security Committee, announced in October 2020 that Tehran needed to reconsider its position on the Taliban, as the movement is deeply and widely rooted in Afghan society. An IRGC commander highlighted the common interests between the Taliban and Iran; opposing the US presence in the region. Kayhan newspaper, affiliated with the Supreme Leader's Office, and which reflects the thinking of Iran's decision-makers, talked about the qualitative change in the nature of the Taliban, stressing that the movement is no longer the same extremist entity that governed the country in the past. It also mentioned incidents verifying this change. Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid said to Tasnim News Agency, affiliated with the IRGC, during an interview that the movement "guarantees that its Shiite brothers will not be discriminated against," indicating that the movement had changed its perspective from what it held in 2000.⁽¹⁰⁾

2.3 The Iranian Position After the United States' Withdrawal

The political system in Tehran welcomed the withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan, and considered it a victory for the "Axis of Resistance." In addition, it considered it a victory for its objective to expel US troops from near its borders. Despite celebrating the US withdrawal, Iranian decision-makers found themselves facing various worries; including: threats facing Iranian interests following the Taliban taking over power in the country, the likelihood of new disturbance zones arising near the Afghan-Iran border, and multiple economic and security ramifications in light of the new Afghan developments. The Taliban's dominance over the joint border crossings with Iran has increased Iranian political and security concerns in spite of the movement's recent efforts to reassure its neighbors, including Iran. Tehran is still apprehensive about the Taliban as it adopts a hardline Sunni ideology; competing with Iran's Wilayat al-Faqih doctrine. Iran's concerns about the Taliban are due to the movement's nature, ideology, and the complexities of dealing with it.⁽¹¹⁾

In terms of dealing with the new developments in Afghanistan, opinion in Tehran is divided into two: one opinion supports the idea of rapprochement with the Taliban, and finding ways to deal with it. The other opinion is in complete opposition to the first, and followers of this opinion have called

on the Iranian government to adopt a rejectionist and anti-Taliban position towards the movement's "absolute" control over Afghan territories.⁽¹²⁾

It seems that the most realistic opinion is the one that underscores the need to soften Iran's position towards the Taliban, cooperate with it to prevent the rise of ISKP (Islamic State-Khorasan Province) near Iran's borders, and to support its position towards US forces to expel them completely from Afghanistan. This is in addition to thwarting proposals to bring back US troops indirectly; like the Turkish proposal to securitize Kabul Airport.

Given the uncertainty, Iran undertook several steps in September 2021, including the evacuation of its consulate in Mazar-i-Sharif, although the Taliban stated that it would respect diplomatic missions, the Iranian army and the IRGC, declaring a high alert status on the country's eastern borders after the Taliban seized control of Herat's border crossing, and dispatching further military equipment to the border areas. Iran supplied the fifth air defense base and the 14th air base of the Iranian army in Mashhad, including attack helicopters and reconnaissance aircraft, and two squadrons of F-5 and Mirage F1 EQ/BQ. This Iranian move is a hedging step to mobilize forces in preparation for any emergency situation, and potential shifts in the Taliban's positions which might impact Tehran's interests such as moving closer to Pakistan or Saudi Arabia

Obviously, Iran, in the short and medium term, will be keen to encourage the Taliban to open up to other political forces, to achieve a level of stability there, thereby preventing the country from sliding into another cycle of civil strife; the most significant immediate threat to Iran as this would increase the number of Afghan immigrants to Iranian territories — adding another source of security and social concern. In addition, the instability on the border with Afghanistan will be another concern for Iran as it will lead to the smuggling of weapons and drugs and will consequently destabilize the security and economic situation in Balochistan. The instability resulting from another cycle of civil strife in Afghanistan will have a negative impact on the Iranian economy, due to the suspension or decline of exports to Afghanistan, which amounted to \$2.3 billion during the last Iranian year while other sources indicate that it reached \$4 billion. This placed Kabul in fifth place on the list of Iranian trade destinations.

3. Interests of Regional Powers and Their Visions for the Post-US Withdrawal Phase in Afghanistan

Undoubtedly, a large part of the current phase of the intersections of regional interests in Afghanistan was established in the pre-withdrawal period through the efforts of some countries, including Pakistan, China, India and others. These efforts were closely connected to the perspectives of each country in line with their respective interests. According to these countries, Afghanistan

is a potential threat or opportunity to access, expand and perhaps enjoy greater regional influence. The perspectives of the most important regional stakeholders in Afghanistan are summarized as follows:

3.1 Pakistan

Afghanistan is one of the most important arenas for Pakistan's regional role since it is a neighboring country. It shares a 2,400-kilometer border with Afghanistan. Pakistan also hosts nearly 1.4 million Afghan refugees. It is one of the countries that has the strongest relations with the Taliban. The movement merged in northern Pakistan at the beginning of the 1990s. Pakistan maintained its relations with the Taliban except during the early years of the US occupation since Pakistan supported the United States' efforts to overthrow the movement.⁽¹³⁾

■ **The recognition of the Taliban:** With regard to recognizing the Taliban government in Afghanistan, Pakistani Minister of Information Fawad Chaudhry said that any recognition of the Taliban administration "will be a regional decision" taken after consultations with regional and international powers.⁽¹⁴⁾ He wrote a lengthy article in *The Washington Post* explaining his country's vision for the post-US withdrawal from Afghanistan, acknowledging that "in the past Pakistan made a mistake by choosing between warring Afghan parties." He also mentioned that this mistake will never happen again.⁽¹⁵⁾ Some observers believe that this acknowledgement reflects Pakistan's willingness to build ties with the Taliban again.

■ **Pakistani concern about Iranian moves:** Pakistan will work to win over the Taliban, and shift it from Iran's predominant hegemony. Iran's access to Pakistan's northern borders, a region of a complex Afghan-Pakistani sectarian mix with a history of conflict, may pose a threat to the stability of the country.

■ **The ideal option for Pakistan:** The best future scenario for Pakistan is having a weak Afghan government, with no nationalistic tendencies among Pashtun tribes, meaning that they will not ask for establishing their own state.

■ **Possible option in the short term:** The possible option at the moment and likely to be played by Pakistan inside Afghanistan is to support the Taliban's accession to power, but with the prominent political participation of various parties and other local groups, such as representatives of the former government, Tajiks, Uzbeks, Hazaras and others. This type of coalition government will eventually be able to secure international legitimacy, meaning that Kabul will easily receive international support and allow it to stabilize the situation in the country. This will enable Pakistan to achieve its economic and strategic goals and counter Indian and Iranian moves, or at least balance them.

■ **Rebuilding influence:** Pakistan believes that it can rebuild its influence with the Taliban since trade in Afghanistan mostly takes place through Pakistan,

including basic products such as flour, rice, vegetables, cement and building materials. In addition, Pakistan wants to establish an economic bridge with the Central Asian republics via Afghanistan, thereby helping to connect the country to the wider region's economy. This economic dependency could encourage the Taliban to cooperate with Pakistan on a range of issues, including security.

■ **Reducing Indian influence in Afghanistan:** Given the Pakistani desire to get closer to the Taliban, Islamabad will be able to significantly increase its influence and strengthen its strategic depth in comparison to India. Furthermore, Islamabad will try to control the internal tensions of the Baloch minority, the Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (Army of Jhangvi) and the Pakistani Taliban. In fact, Taliban control means less influence for India in the country. Pakistan was particularly troubled by the presence of Indian consulates in Jalalabad and Kandahar. It has always perceived this presence as an Indian way to support anti-Pakistan elements, such as the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (the Pakistani Taliban) in the north and various Baloch rebel groups in the south.

■ **Prospective role of the Taliban in decreasing terrorist threats against Pakistan:** Pakistan mainly wants to achieve one aim from its relationship with the new Kabul administration ; to avert terrorist attacks by the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan from its safe havens within Afghan territories.

■ **Including Afghanistan in the Pakistan-China Axis:** Islamabad wants Kabul to join the massive China-Pakistan Economic Corridor project, which includes infrastructure projects worth \$62 billion.

3.2 India

The rise of the Taliban after America's withdrawal undoubtedly has been a source of great concern for New Delhi. India fears that a possible rapprochement between the Taliban and Pakistan will undermine its presence in Afghanistan. The signs of discomfort were clear during the withdrawal process, as India evacuated its entire diplomatic staff, which included more than 190 employees from the Afghan capital, Kabul.

Against the backdrop of the recent developments in Afghanistan and the Taliban's control over Afghanistan, the Indian government headed by Prime Minister Narendra Modi faces trouble because New Delhi has adopted an anti-Taliban policy for decades. Nevertheless, all indicators show that the Indian government will remain open, waiting, and anticipating the Taliban's next steps during the transitional period and beyond, especially regarding potential levels of rapprochement between the Taliban, Pakistan, and China.

Some Indian circles fear that Indian investments in Afghanistan are at risk now that the Taliban are in power. During the past two decades, Indian investments in Afghanistan amounted to more than \$3 billion, i.e., 2.6 billion

euros in the infrastructure sector, including more than 400 projects across Afghanistan.⁽¹⁶⁾

India is perhaps one of the biggest losers from the recent developments in Afghanistan and the rise of the Taliban. From New Delhi's perspective, what happened is a victory for radical extremism which is problematic for India and could result in hostilities. The Taliban will not hesitate to carry out terrorist operations inside India, according to its calculations. Observers believe that Afghanistan under the Taliban will pose security challenges to India. Over the years, anti-Indian armed groups such as Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammed have been operating along the Afghan-Pakistan border. From the border region, these groups have launched attacks in India. In the wake of the Taliban's control of Afghanistan, these groups are likely to become more emboldened, seize more territories and increase their influence, leading to further attacks against India.⁽¹⁷⁾

3.3 Turkey

Despite its geographical distance from Afghanistan, Turkey managed to become a regional player in Afghanistan, either by joining NATO forces operating in Afghanistan before the US withdrawal, or through securitizing and re-opening Kabul Airport in cooperation with Qatar.⁽¹⁸⁾

Apparently, Turkey will try to keep some military presence in Afghanistan and will try to persuade the Taliban to accept its role. Qatar may assist the Turks in this. There is talk about a deal between Turkey and Afghanistan that will have many political, strategic and military dimensions. There is also talk about material, political, and logistical support for Afghanistan so Ankara can play a greater role in the post-US and NATO withdrawal period.⁽¹⁹⁾ Turkey seeks to use its presence at Kabul Airport to support its influence in Central Asia and the Caucasus. Kabul Airport is a vital and pivotal area to secure diplomatic missions and official state organs and ensure the delivery of aid and relief operations. In addition, since Turkey logistically operates the airport, it can use this as a pressure card or bargaining chip in its favor in the future, whether against international or domestic actors. It provides an opportunity for Turkey to strengthen its presence in Central Asia, enabling it to take part in the game of recalibrating the balance of power in the region, especially at the level of relations with Russia that have been tense lately due to Moscow's dissatisfaction over Ankara's role in the recent conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan, and over a Turkish desire to establish a military base in Azerbaijan, which is considered a security threat to Russia.⁽²⁰⁾

3.4 The Gulf

The upcoming regional game in Afghanistan will clearly involve some Gulf states, especially Qatar. It has managed to build close relations with the

Taliban leaders in Doha, since allowing the movement to open an office in Doha in 2013. Relations were further enhanced when Qatar sponsored the negotiations between the movement and the United States, leading to the signing of the Afghanistan Peace Agreement in 2020. The Qatari role has emerged clearly following the US withdrawal from Afghanistan. Qatar and Turkey have also played a joint role; they coordinated their efforts at the political, security and military levels. This was reflected in their cooperation over operating Kabul Airport. There is also a great level of cooperation between the Taliban, Qatar and Turkey at the diplomatic level. Doha and Ankara play a mediating and coordinating role between the movement and the rest of the world. Therefore, we find that the Qatari political discourse on Afghanistan stresses the need to prevent the Taliban from being isolated, and encourages the international community to start dialogue with it. Qatar arranged several dialogues between the Taliban and some Western countries such as Germany and France. It is also significant that most European countries, along with the United States, will manage their diplomatic, consular and security affairs in Afghanistan through their offices in Doha. Reviewing Qatar's experience with the Taliban helps us to forecast clearly its future role in Afghanistan.

Moreover, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), which have extensive experience in dealing with the Taliban since the 1990s, have a great chance to play an important role in the future of Afghanistan, especially in the economic sector and in supporting the Afghan political transition if the Taliban complies with its human rights commitments, avoids collaborating with extremist organizations, and is inclusive of all Afghan political forces in the government setup.

Both Saudi Arabia and the UAE decided to close their diplomatic missions in Kabul in mid-August 2021, indicating concern over the developments in the country. The scenario, back then, was not clear; anything was possible. The safety of their diplomats was a top priority, according to the two countries. Therefore, they decided to withdraw their diplomatic missions.

Some analysis indicates that the UAE's hosting of former Afghan President Ashraf Ghani may limit the room available for its future movement in Afghanistan, although the Emirati government confirmed that its hosting of Ghani was purely for humanitarian reasons. The same analysis indicates that the chances of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to play an important role in the future of Afghanistan are great, given its religious position as the center of the Islamic world and due to its influence among most Afghan factions. This could prompt Saudi Arabia to play a bigger role in the brotherly Muslim country. This analysis confirms that Riyadh has the strongest card to influence the Taliban's trends and perhaps direct it towards more moderation. The Taliban derives a great part of its legitimacy from its religious identity, especially in rural

areas of Afghanistan. Without any direct or indirect diplomatic engagement with Saudi Arabia, it may be difficult for Afghans to travel to Saudi Arabia to perform Hajj or Umrah, thwarting the religious legitimacy of the Taliban.

The Afghan crisis, and Washington's withdrawal in particular, was an important test to see what help the Gulf states would provide to its allies, especially Washington, particularly regarding the evacuation and hosting of Afghan nationals and foreigners. However, the political power of the Gulf states is much more than just being mere transit centers for Afghan refugees. The UAE has already sent medical and food aid as part of its commitment to provide humanitarian assistance. Given the fact that foreign aid is a key element of Gulf development budgets, Gulf leaders can use their significant financial power to support development projects in Afghanistan, and help to improve the health sector. This will inevitably increase their political influence in Afghanistan.

4. The Interests of International Powers and Their Perspectives on the Future of Afghanistan

The convergence and divergence of interests of various international powers involved in Afghanistan during the current stage can be reviewed as follows:

4.1 American Interests

Washington did not leave Afghanistan until it signed a peace agreement with the Taliban last year. It provides for protecting the United States against any new danger emanating from Afghanistan. However, the United States will be in any case a major player in Afghanistan, although its forces withdrew, but normal relations with the Taliban government may be out of reach.

The United States' most likely concern is that Afghanistan will turn into a new sphere of regional and international conflict, where the interests of neighboring countries and great powers overlap. US Chargé d'Affaires to Afghanistan Ross Wilson warned by advising countries not to engage in "proxy wars," support Afghan stability, and disengage from any new cold war within the country.

The United States is unlikely to stir and escalate conflicts in Afghanistan, but rather will work to avert escalations and conflicts expanding into Central Asia. This is because many companies working to establish the Caspian Sea gas pipeline project are US companies.⁽²¹⁾

4.2 European Interests

Undoubtedly, some European powers have openly declared their dissatisfaction with the manner in which the US withdrawal from Afghanistan was carried out; it was done without sufficient coordination with Washington's European partners. Some European leaders, such as the former German Chancellor

Angela Merkel, regard this as an insult to Europe, and a move that was inconsistent with the spirit of the transatlantic partnership, and other European powers such as France viewed it as a continuation of America's unilateral approach to international relations which was apparent under the former US President Donald Trump.⁽²²⁾ The European position on the Afghan crisis can be explained as follows:

■ Europe's political position: It is based on interacting and holding talks with the Taliban at the present time, as it is the dominant party and the representative of Afghanistan currently. The European countries have set the following conditions for the Taliban: 1- Afghanistan will not be an incubator for terrorist groups, or a base for the export of terrorist activities or extremists to neighboring countries; 2- comply with human rights obligations, especially the rights of women, the rule of law, and press/media freedom; 3- to form an inclusive, consensual, transitional government representing all Afghan groups, including former politicians; 4- humanitarian access for the Afghan people in line with the EU's protocols, and a gradual increase in humanitarian aid over the coming phase; 5- the Taliban must honor its pledge to let foreigners and Afghans leave Afghanistan unhindered.

■ The recognition of the Taliban: The British prime minister asserted, and sent a direct message to some countries concerned with the Afghan file including Pakistan, that recognition of the Taliban government should happen on an international, not a unilateral basis.⁽²³⁾

■ The file of terrorist threats: Europe fears that the return of the Taliban, and the US withdrawal, which it described as "chaotic," will create a suitable environment for terrorist groups such as al-Qaeda and others, thus helping them to find a foothold in Afghanistan once again, which will threaten European security.

■ The migration file: Europe is concerned that the difficult political and economic situation in Afghanistan will lead to new waves of migration from the country towards Europe, like what happened during the Syrian crisis. This would place a huge economic and social burden on European countries. Therefore, the European Commissioner for Home Affairs in Afghanistan Eva Johansson stressed the need to prevent irregular migration towards the borders of the EU. As a result of this fear, former German Chancellor Angela Merkel declared that "the mistakes of the past must not be repeated." This refers to the 2015 refugee crisis in which nearly 1 million migrants fled to Europe within a year, leading to the growth of populist movements inside Europe, and causing a rift within the European bloc that has been unable to adopt or develop a fair control plan for migration. This explains the European move to cooperate with the countries neighboring Afghanistan that host refugees, so that the refugees remain there, including Iran.

■ Possible military intervention: With the idea to establish a European military force for rapid reaction gaining more traction, thus reducing Europe's dependence on Washington and safeguarding it against its sudden policy changes. During the last meeting in Slovenia on September 3, 2021, EU defense ministers presented a proposal to establish a rapid response force consisting of 5,000 soldiers from the 27 EU member countries to revise Europe's defense strategy and deal with international crises, after some criticized Europe's recent position on the unilateral American decision to stop securing Kabul Airport at the end of last August, forcing European countries to stop their evacuation process. This force, however, will not be an alternative to NATO, as emphasized by Germany and other European countries.

4.3.Chinese Interests and Concerns

Although China welcomed the US withdrawal from Afghanistan in principle, it criticized what it called a "sudden withdrawal," according to Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying. China is the closest ally of Pakistan, which has a strong relationship with the Taliban.

■ Potential risks to China's interests in Afghanistan: With the US withdrawal, Chinese companies are well positioned to exploit the mining potential in Afghanistan, including rare metals used to manufacture microchips and other cutting-edge technologies. The Chinese newspaper on international affairs Global Times reported on August 24, 2021, that Chinese companies are still scrutinizing the political and security risks in the country. In addition, China's ability to operate in Afghanistan will depend on whether the Taliban government faces Western sanctions or not, the newspaper said. Beijing is concerned about instability in Central Asia after the US withdrawal, and how this will impact its strategic project, the Belt and Road Initiative launched by President Xi Jinping in 2013, through which many countries, most notably the Central Asian countries where Afghanistan lies at the heart, pass through.

■ The direction for further engagement: From a strategic perspective, the Chinese government has strong reasons to be more involved in Afghanistan. The country is part of China's Belt and Road Initiative, which includes trade and infrastructure projects in both Iran and Pakistan. Beijing is also concerned about the possibility of Afghanistan being used as a terrorist safe haven in the region, particularly for terrorists operating from Xinjiang in western China.

■ China betting on the role of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO): According to China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi, China is betting on its partners in the SCO to maintain its interests in the region, and to strengthen the China-Pakistan strategic dialogue to promote peace in Afghanistan.

■ Opportunities and challenges: China is trying to exploit the US withdrawal from Afghanistan to boost its presence in the Afghan arena, strengthen its economic influence and develop its political dimensions, and perhaps build

a long-term strategic partnership with the Afghan government led by the Taliban. However, there are many conditions and challenges facing China's aims, namely the Taliban's position on the Muslim minority Uyghurs in China. Beijing wants to completely neutralize the Taliban on this issue. Thus it was noticed that only two weeks before the Taliban took control of Afghanistan, and in a "preemptive" step from Beijing, China received a Taliban delegation, and one day after the Taliban took control of Afghanistan, it declared its readiness to deepen the already friendly and cooperative relations with the movement. The Chinese embassy is still working in Afghanistan, although the United States and most European countries have shifted their diplomatic missions to Qatar, and the Chinese media was keen to positively address the possible opportunities for cooperation between China and the Taliban. It highlighted the projects that can be exploited in Afghanistan, such as the exploitation of minerals, oil and deposits of lithium, and the possibility of Kabul joining the Belt and Road Initiative. China is seeking to integrate Afghanistan into the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor under the Belt and Road Initiative. China has always wanted to make huge investments in Afghanistan given that it has the world's largest untapped reserves of copper, coal, iron, natural gas, cobalt, mercury, gold, lithium and thorium, with a total value of more than \$1 trillion.⁽²⁴⁾

4.4 Russian Interests

Russia is one of the most important international powers concerned with the developments in Afghanistan, due to its historical ties with the country and its past experience there, and the country's geostrategic importance for Moscow. Therefore, the US withdrawal from Afghanistan is a source of great concern and a big inconvenience to the Russians, who believe that part of the strategic dimension of this US step is to export the Afghan problem to Russia and Afghanistan's neighboring countries.⁽²⁵⁾ Russian interests can be summarized as follows:

- Expansion of the partnership framework with China, Pakistan, and the United States: The Russian strategy also includes international efforts, such as the "extended troika:" China, Pakistan, and the United States.⁽²⁶⁾
- Triangular cooperation with China and Iran: Russia is well aware that there are new actors in the Afghan arena that it can coordinate with to achieve stability in Afghanistan. From the recent Russian efforts, it is clear that it has moved towards cooperation with both China and Iran.
- Staying alert: Since the Taliban took control of Afghanistan, Moscow has increased the activity of its military base in Tajikistan and its forces in Kyrgyzstan. Russia's core interest within Afghanistan lies in preventing the destabilization of the region, but Moscow sees no problem in dealing with the Taliban government.

■ **Dual containment:** Moscow will continue its “dual policy” in Afghanistan. It seeks to communicate with the Taliban to ensure its political security. There is an increase in the number of Russian forces in Tajikistan, and intensive military cooperation with Tajikistan and Afghanistan to prevent extremists from coming to these countries via Afghan territory. On a wider scale, the US withdrawal from Central Asia reduces Washington’s influence in a region Russia considers as its sphere of influence.⁽²⁷⁾

5. Opportunities and Limits of Iran’s Movement in the Afghan Arena

5.1 Opportunities for Iran

As discussed in the previous sections of this paper, Iran faces a complex regional and international environment in Afghanistan, which poses a great challenge to it in preserving its interests in the country. However, Iran still has opportunities that it can exploit to protect and further its interests in Afghanistan. Accordingly, it is possible to draw a map of the possible intersections of Iranian interests:

■ **Cooperation with Pakistan:** Iran places relations with Pakistan at an important rank because it views Islamabad as part of its vision to achieve security in Afghanistan and the region. Tehran wants to keep its relations with Islamabad separate from the developments taking place in Afghanistan and it wants to change the policies of the powers present in Afghanistan, especially as the United States keeps on changing its policy towards the region, which varies according to different administrations. It seems that the Pakistani-Iranian-Afghan troika will have the upper hand in Afghanistan after the US withdrawal, due to geography and historical and ethnic ties.

■ **Iran’s concern about the growing Turkish role:** Tehran realizes that the new Turkish role in Afghanistan will lead to a struggle for control and influence with Ankara. Turkey’s role has also created great challenges for Iran in the context of its relationship with the Taliban and perhaps to some degree with Pakistan. Some media outlets in Iran, Pakistan and Russia have expressed concern about the Turkish role. They launched campaigns against Ankara and talked about the transfer of Syrian mercenaries from Libya and northern Syria to Afghanistan and stressed on the need to observe Turkey closely to gauge any changes in the regional balance of power equation. Although Iran has not commented on Turkey’s steps in Afghanistan so far, this does not mean that it welcomes them, because it views with concern the presence of Turkey on its eastern side.⁽²⁸⁾

■ **Refugee issues and the rise of extremism,:** Most of the regional and international powers concerned with the Afghan file share similar concerns with Iran about the developments in Afghanistan. Conflict and its escalation will impact the interests of all regional and international powers.

■ The problem of recognizing the new Afghan government: The recognition of the Taliban will be a point of contention between Iran and the countries concerned with this file. Russia, for example, links its acceptance of the Taliban to Afghanistan's neighboring countries such as Tajikistan and Uzbekistan recognizing the new government. While Uzbekistan has expressed some warmth towards the Taliban, neighboring Tajikistan previously announced that it would not recognize the Taliban government dominated by Pashtuns, unless it was inclusive of other Afghan ethnic groups, with Tajiks representing about a quarter of these groups. Europe confirmed that recognition of the Taliban should not be individual, but rather multilateral, to ensure the Taliban's commitment to its obligations before the international community.

■ Iran's role in manipulating the balance of regional players to allow it to build strong relations with the Taliban: It is expected that Iran will play an important role in tipping the balance of the alliances that Afghanistan is likely to see in the foreseeable future. Undoubtedly, Afghanistan joining the China-Pakistan axis will be a great opportunity to expand the size of Chinese influence in the country, and in the South Asian region generally. It will also ensure a good relationship between Afghanistan and Pakistan, away from the Indian sphere of influence. These fears may prompt India to establish a relationship with the new Afghan government, as Afghanistan is of vital importance in India's foreign policy strategy. India relies on a number of political, economic and security tools in its foreign policy towards Kabul.⁽²⁹⁾

■ Russian-Chinese-Pakistani-Iranian consensus: These four countries agreed on an outline to deal with the current situation in Afghanistan, especially regarding the reconstruction of Afghanistan by the United States and NATO, in order to prevent a humanitarian crisis and economic collapse. They are in agreement on the need to form an "inclusive political structure" that represents all ethnic groups, and to prevent the use of Afghan territories by extremist movements.⁽³⁰⁾

5.2 The Limits of Iran's Movements in Afghanistan

Amid heated regional competition for influence and taking into account all the aforementioned regional and international intersections, Tehran aspires to play a role in the future of Afghanistan motivated by security and economic reasons. The prospects for Iran's role can be summarized in the following points:

■ Limited coordination: Joint coordination with the Taliban will be the most prominent option in the near term to ensure border security and the resumption of commercial traffic between the two sides to go back to normal, which used to bring Iran \$5 million per day. This coordination will probably help Afghanistan achieve a level of security and economic stability – given Russia's support for the release of Afghanistan's cash reserves held in US

banks. This is supported by the resumption of fuel exports to Afghanistan at the request of the Taliban on August 23, 2021. There are a number of official Iranian statements, including one by the Foreign Ministry spokesman on June 28 regarding the Taliban. He said that the Taliban does not represent all Afghans, but rather is part of the solution. The Iranian president recently announced that he rejected any attempt to impose foreign guardianship on Afghanistan and called for the formation of an inclusive government for all ethnicities.

■ **Cautious engagement:** This involves playing a role in the unfolding Afghan political scene by communicating with various political forces and national minorities to balance the influence of the Taliban, and offering to provide security and logistical help. Iran also contacted the leaders of the Hazara community and offered support in the face of potential threats. It avoids igniting an escalation with the movement, which provided guarantees to the international community regarding minority rights, it allowed Ashura celebrations to proceed and pledged to protect Shiite Husseiniyas in Afghanistan.

■ **Contributing to reconstruction:** A significant contribution to regional economic cooperation is one of Tehran's most important long-term aims in light of Afghanistan's great potential and strategic location along the Silk Road and the North-South axis.

Conclusion

Iran had exerted considerable efforts during the past years to adapt to the changes in Afghanistan's reality under US occupation which led to the emergence of new dynamics and different patterns of regional and international interactions. However, the Afghan reality today, following the withdrawal of the United States and NATO forces, has become more complex and intertwined than before. This new reality post-US withdrawal poses many challenges to Iran, including civil war returning, the worst scenario for Iran. New competitors have also entered the Afghan arena, most notably Turkey which is trying to expand its influence in Central Asia, and the countries neighboring Iran, including Azerbaijan. Therefore, Iran is facing a complex strategic environment in the post-US withdrawal period. This requires Iran to balance some of regional parties such as India, Pakistan and China and evaluate how to benefit from the margin of competition between Russia and the United States on the one hand and with other European countries on the other.

The paper concludes that the strategic game in Afghanistan and Central Asia has already begun and is expected to continue in the foreseeable future, according to various scenarios. As a result, Iran will remain in the circle of regional and international pressure, waiting for chances to move and build regional and international understandings.

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- (5) Thomas Parke, "The Regional Implications of the US Pullout from Afghanistan," *The Washington Institute*, June 15, 2020, <https://bit.ly/3qnAVBc>.
- (6) * Since 2001, Iran has become Afghanistan's largest trading partner, with a trade balance strongly tilted in its favor. The volume of trade exchange between the two countries in March 2017 to February 2018 amounted to nearly \$2 billion and increased in 2020-2021 by 25 percent. Iranian exports constituted 90 percent of total bilateral trade. This did not include illicit trade, which was estimated at \$1 billion for 2016-2017 alone. See Raza Nader et al., "Iranian Influence in Afghanistan."
- (7) * Afghanistan is located to the east of Iran, and the shared border extends to 978 kilometers. Iran is one of the important seaports for Afghanistan, and the latter is a direct passage for Iran to Central Asia and China. The number of Afghans is 23 million people, distributed over more than 300 tribes. They make up four main ethnicities: the Pashtuns with 40 percent, the Tajiks with 30 percent, the Uzbeks with 10 percent, the Hazaras with less than 8 percent. The majority are Sunnis, and Hanafi. The Shiites account for about 5 percent with a smaller percentage of Ismaili Shiites, and the Persian language is spoken by 60 percent of the population used by the Tajiks. See Nader, Iranian influence in Afghanistan."
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THE CONFLICT AMONG MILITIAS AND IRAN'S CLOUT IN IRAQ

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Abstract

This study sheds light on the outbreak of divisions among the militias pledging allegiance to the Qom Marjaya at a time when the popularity of the militias is declining while Iran is facing Iraqi popular discontent in Iraq's Shiite-majority provinces. The study reviews the credibility of the claims Iran has been promoting for years about cohesion and unity among the militias pledging allegiance to Wilayat al-Faqih as one entity. This is in addition to the consequences of the militias' divisions on Iran's influence in Iraq and the entire region — given that Iraq is the most important node for establishing the corridor connecting Tehran to the Mediterranean Sea. The study discusses the motives and dimensions of the dispute among the pro-Iran militias in the spheres of influence, Iran's strategy to address the dispute, and the consequences of this dispute for Iran's influence.

Keywords: *Wilayat al-Faqih, militias, Qom Marjaya, and Iran's influence*

Introduction

Militarization is considered an advanced stage within the critical stages of Iran's transboundary project. It has been one of the main characteristics of Iran's foreign policy since the revolutionary government managed to cement its pillars in the early 1980s. Armed militias sprung up and turned into one of the most important Iranian tools to implement Tehran's sectarian project in its various vital spheres. Iranian decision-makers heavily depend on militias to implement Iran's expansionist sectarian schemes in its vital spheres of influence — especially in Iraq. Iran has established, strengthened, and supported militias with money, weapons and fighters — making them a backbone and effective military wings that execute the Iranian project, not only in Iraq but also across the region. Militias have become a powerful tool in Iran's hands and have been used against consecutive Iraqi governments, securing its gains and executing its expansionist schemes.

The divisions apparent among Iraqi militias and among others in different Iranian spheres of influence reveal the dilemma Tehran is now facing in Iraq and across the region. This Iranian dilemma has heightened not only because of divisions among militias loyal to the Qom Marjaya and those loyal to Najaf — a matter that has been reviewed by other studies previously — but also because of divisions among militias that are loyal to Qom — the subject of our study. This comes at a time when popular support for Iranian militias is eroding and Tehran is facing Iraqi popular discontent in the heart of the Shi'ite-majority provinces. This new development has pushed Iran to try to heal the rifts existing between its militias to safeguard its gains and limit the losses in the period following the killing of former Quds Force Commander General Qassem Soleimani and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, the former deputy head of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF).

The study analyzes the credibility of Iran, particularly in light of its endless claims over the years regarding the unity and cohesion of its militias, and also analyzes the impact of current divisions on Iranian influence in Iraq and the entire region — given the fact that Iraq is a critical country in Tehran's corridor to the Mediterranean. Divisions among Iranian militias have reached their peak, with heated competition over securing the top posts in the Iran-backed PMF as well as competition over controlling areas of influence, and securing the largest share of the spoils of war. The people residing in the Iranian spheres of influence want Tehran-backed militias driven out. Yet, there is a regional and international demand to settle the outstanding issues with Iran, particularly the issue of militias that enable Tehran to establish a firm grip over its spheres of influence and represent a tool which Tehran uses against its foes when a dispute arises — at the expense of Arab security and stability. We should not be heedless of the dangerous role of militias in toppling sitting governments and contributing to the creation of failed nations in the region.

1. The Significance of Iraqi Militias in Iran's Strategy

Iran's armed militias represent the most important Iranian lever in Iraq and are a powerful arm for implementing Tehran's expansionist schemes across the Arab world. Through these militias, Iran has managed to control the Iraqi landscape and prevent the country from returning to its natural Arab sphere. In addition, these militias have kept Iraq within Iran's sphere of influence, with militias loyal to the Qom Marjaya having extensive clout and influence within the Iraqi equation. A host of factors have contributed to this situation:

1.1 The Militias' Relative Weight

The militias that are loyal to the Qom Marjaya constitute the majority of militias in the PMF. They make up nearly 65 percent (44 militias) out of 67 Shiite militias in the PMF. The PMF consists of 119 militias, including 43 Sunni militias, and nine militias representing minorities in southern Kurdistan, according to a study prepared by the late Iraqi expert Hisham al-Hashemi, published in July 2020.⁽¹⁾ In addition, nearly 10 new Shiite militias emerged following the killing of Qassem Soleimani, and most of them pledged their allegiance to the Qom Marjaya. They included the following militias: Rab'allah (God's Fellows), Saraya al-Muntaqim (the Avenger Regiments), Osbat al-Thaeryn (Rebel League), Liwa Thar Muhandis (LTM/ Revenge of Muhandis Brigade), Ashab al-Kahf (Companions of the Cave), Qabdat al-Mahdi (al-Mahdi's Fist), al-Ghashya, Zulfaqr and Ahdullah. The aim is to create militias more loyal to Iran and its autocratic ruling system. They are directly linked to Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps' (IRGC) Quds Force and implement its orders.⁽²⁾ Iran created these 10 militias to curb the divisions that surfaced amongst its militias following the death of Soleimani and Muhandis and the subsequent ramifications.

1.2 The Geostrategic Deployment of Militias

Iranian militias are deployed across Iraq's oil-rich provinces and within Shiite-majority provinces in the south. They are also deployed across the main highways and crossings linking Iraq with neighboring countries such as those with Iran, Syria, Jordan, Kuwait, Turkey and Saudi Arabia.⁽³⁾ This provides Iran levers against the Iraqi government on the one hand, and gives it a bargaining chip against disputing regional and international powers in Iraq on the other. This deployment also enables Iran to carry out its broader schemes, including, for example, connecting Tehran to the Mediterranean.

1.3 Loyalty and the Scope of Relations With Iran

Militia commanders and fighters believe in Wilayat al-Faqih and also believe that they have an ideological role to pave the way for the reappearance of Imam Mahdi who will establish a global government that will spread justice to all corners of the world. At the political level, they believe in the Iranian

transboundary revolutionary principles. Hence, they are involved in Iran's expansionist schemes and play a critical role in exporting the 1979 revolution, expanding it, and spreading it. In this transnational project Iran is the center and Iraq is just one part of it. Iran seeks to weaken the Najaf Marjaya in favor of Qom. The emergence of militias such as Kata'ib Hezbollah is helping in the propagation of Twelver Shiite thought, especially the theory of Wilayat al-Faqih.^[4]

The aforesaid indicates that Iranian militias in Iraq, loyal to the guardian jurist, are proxies working to secure Iranian objectives — whether tactical represented in controlling each vital sphere of influence, or strategic represented in the total control over Tehran's spheres of influence and linking them together. The ultimate objective of the theory of Wilayat al-Faqih is to establish an international Iranian order led by the guardian jurist in Iran. This ultimate objective explains Tehran's exertions to tackle the divisions amongst Iranian militias in its spheres of influence, given the dangerous ramifications these divisions have for Iran's supreme objectives if they are allowed to linger on and deepen.

2. The Factors Contributing to Divisions Within Militia Ranks

The divisions among Iranian militias that are loyal to the guardian jurist are because of several factors:

2.1 Soleimani's Absence and Qaani's Lack of Experience

The absence of Qassem Soleimani from the scene in Iraq, Syria, Yemen and Lebanon — following his assassination via a US drone strike near Baghdad International Airport in January 2020 — is the most significant factor that has fueled divisions amongst Iranian militias. This is because of:

2.1.1 Soleimani's Position Within Iran's Power Structure and His Influence Over Its Foreign Policies

Soleimani was the second most powerful man behind Khamenei — not in terms of position in the ruling system's top-down set-up but in terms of overall clout and influence. This helped him secure the much-needed political and financial support to manage Iran's battles in its spheres of influence after Khamenei's nod of approval. His successor does not have such a privilege as he does not carry Soleimani's clout and influence in the Iranian ruling system.

The extent of Soleimani's influence inside the ruling system was revealed in a leaked video tape in March 2021. In this tape, former Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif said, "Each time I intended to start negotiations; Soleimani presented his demands for me to raise during the negotiations."

Zarif added, "I always headed to the negotiations to accomplish 'field missions.' But when I for example asked him not to use Iran Air aircraft operating

between Iran and Syria, he did not agree. So, we have sacrificed diplomacy for the battlefield.”⁽⁵⁾

2.1.2 A Charismatic and Popular Figure

Soleimani was popular among the commanders and rank-and-file members of Iranian militias operating in Tehran's spheres of influence. The assassinated commander established a wide network from a range of militias and fighters. He also wielded direct control over a number of militias as he not only symbolized but was also a key architect of the transboundary Iranian project. Soleimani was also able to ideologically mobilize fighters on the battlefield. His humble demeanor and fluency in Arabic allowed him to establish a good bond with the fighters and communicate with them easily. Due to the aforementioned factors, he earned the trust of local commanders and militias, allowing him to expand his network and support base for Iran.

2.1.3 His Geopolitical Vision and Battlefield Experience

Soleimani was extremely skillful when it came to military planning and managing live battles, skills which local commanders lacked. This was due to his expertise and extensive experience which he gathered while climbing the IRGC ladder and commanding an array of battles in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon and elsewhere in the region.

2.1.4 The Insignificant Influence of Qaani Compared to Soleimani

The killing of Soleimani undoubtedly led to a leadership vacuum, prompting militia commanders to vie for top leadership positions or at least to have a say in decisions. This vacuum led to disharmony and disunity among militias, particularly when it came to critical issues such as the formation of the government and directing domestic and foreign policies. This is in addition to the onset of confusion during the battles in Iran's spheres of influence. Qaani lacks the expertise, experience, and the wide network of militias that Soleimani was able to build. In addition, he lacks fluency in Arabic and is uncharismatic. One source described Qaani as “an official who is only concerned with conveying messages and instructions.” His efforts are limited to breaking the ice with militia commanders only. His trips to Iraq are usually brief and focus on practical matters. Some militias such as Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq (AAH), for example, are no longer submitting to his dictates.⁽⁶⁾

2.2 The Decline in Iranian Financial Support

Iran was compelled to reduce its financial support for its militias in Iraq and the countries where it wields influence due to the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic which overwhelmed the Iranian economy. This is in addition to the economic sanctions imposed by the United States on Iran. Exports of Iranian oil declined to below 150,000 barrels per day in 2019, down from a daily

average of 2.5 million barrels before the US withdrawal from the nuclear deal and the reimposition of sanctions on the country in August 2018. The Iranian government was also forced to embrace financial austerity and borrow from local banks to address the country's budget deficit. The Iranian economy also posted a significant recession in 2020 which was considered among the highest rates of recession globally according to various estimates. Amid living conditions deteriorating at home, financially supporting militias has caused the ruling system's legitimacy to erode.⁽⁷⁾

Parviz Fattah, the head of Iran's Mostazafan Foundation and former director of the IRGC Cooperative Foundation (Bonyad Taavon Sepah), explained the depth of the crisis. He said, "Soleimani was facing a shortage in the financial funds designated to militias, and he once asked for help to pay the stipends of militias...He said that the IRGC was no longer able to pay the wages of militias." In an interview he gave in April 2020, Fattah also spoke to media agencies about Qaani presenting silver rings to militia fighters during his visit to Iraq instead of cash.⁽⁸⁾ In light of this financial predicament, Iran informed its militias that they should look for alternative means to finance their activities "to ensure the continuation of Iranian escalation in the face of US pressure."⁽⁹⁾

The decline in Iranian support contributed to its militias facing a tight financial squeeze. The militias now need to secure alternative sources of finance to cover expenditures for their day-to-day activities, combat operations, and to provide compensation and financial assistance to the families of those killed in battle. In addition, they need finances to cover the expenses of commanders and to ensure their protection. To address this dilemma, Iranian militias have only two paths: reduce the level of expansionist operations and cut the number of fighters or switch to commercial activities as well and employ their clout on the ground to generate financial profits from trade.

As part of entering the commercial sphere, Iranian militias have established tourism companies in the overland and air transportation sectors, hotels as well as companies working in the agriculture and real estate sectors in Baghdad, Mosul and the southern Iraqi provinces. They have also established companies to ship petroleum items to neighboring countries in order to re-export them to the world. The militias have also used their wide-ranging political and military influence to secure preferential loans and permits to carry out their commercial projects. Moreover, Iranian militias seized control of vast tracts of agricultural lands during the fight against ISIS. These lands were not given back to their owners under the pretext of their alleged collaboration with ISIS.

The conflict of interests between militias was apparent during their rush to secure finances and their competition to control resources in Iran's spheres of influence. In this context, we should point to the fighters whose contracts were terminated by the PMF. According to the Iraqi researcher Mahdi al-Jana-

bi, this led to 35,000 job vacancies in the Iraqi state with the Iraqi budget covering their salaries. This encouraged other militias and parties to compete for the available vacancies. The existing differences continue to mount among militias as the gains made by these groups have not been equally distributed.⁽¹⁰⁾ This lack of balance is an additional factor contributing to differences between the militias embracing the theory of Wilayat al-Faqih.

This crisis in Iran's financial relations with its militias spilled over into its other spheres of influence. In Syria, reports mentioned that hundreds of fighters left Syria for Iraq due to low wages. Military and strategic expert Colonel Adib Eliwi mentioned that Iran-aligned fighters exiting from Syria due to a lack of Iranian finances is not unprecedented. He said that there were two main reasons which led to sectarian militias to initially enter Syria. The first was the high salaries over the past period that surpassed \$1,500. The second was the sectarian mobilization and the Iranian propaganda that spoke of protecting Shiite shrines in Syria. He added that the wages Iran designated to foreign fighters have significantly dwindled over the past two years. For his part, Syrian media activist Mahran al-Furati mentioned that the wages of foreign fighters amount to \$700, which validates the reports that suggest Iran has cut the wages of fighters by more than half.⁽¹¹⁾

3. The Differences and Contentious Issues Among Iranian Militias

The Iranian Ambassador to Baghdad, Iraj Masjedi, in December 2020 admitted that there were differences among Iranian militias.⁽¹²⁾ One militia commander emphasized that Iranian policymakers had noticed the divisions among militia commanders due to personal interests and competition over influence. Another commander mentioned that meetings and contact with Iranian officials had decreased and they no longer held regular meetings neither were they invited to Iran.⁽¹³⁾ The contentious issues among Iranian militias include the following:

3.1 Disagreements Over Senior Positions in the PMF

Major rifts developed among militia commanders and within the ranks of Iranian militias following the end of Soleimani's presence on the regional landscape. Iraq witnessed bitter divisions between the two most powerful militias that are Iran-affiliated and loyal to Wilayat al-Faqih: Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq (AAH) led by Qais al-Khazali and Kata'ib Hezbollah. These divisions are in light of the two militias vying to secure positions to manage the affairs of militias and overtake key positions in the PMF after the killing of Soleimani and Muhandis. The divisions between the two militias deepened, with the two embracing a policy of attempting to attract the other militias to maximize their respective capabilities and move towards exercising further influence in strategic Iraqi cities and provinces — as they are a tremendous source of securing wealth.

The gap between the two militias wielding huge influence in the Iraqi equation widened due to the geopolitical and economic significance of the spheres of influence and deployment. The gap widened further after the appointment of the former Secretary General of Kata'ib Hezbollah Abdul-Aziz al-Mahmadawi,* known as Abu Fadak, in May 2020 as chief of staff of the PMF to replace the IRGC's number one loyalist in Iraq, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis who was killed along with Soleimani in a US drone strike in 2020. The appointment of Abu Fadak sparked the concerns of AAH, given his heavy influence in changing the rules of engagement by creating missile attack units.⁽¹⁴⁾ His appointment intended to entrench the clout of Kata'ib Hezbollah within the PMF and expand its leadership role — in light of its strength, vast network of spies, death squads, influential media outlets and economic dominance over the PMF.

The rift between the two heavyweight militias deepened due to Khazali's anger at Mahmadaawi for turning down his request not to reduce the finances designated to AAH,⁽¹⁵⁾ a move intended to thwart its ambitions and curtail its growing clout within the PMF. Furthermore, Mahmadaawi appointed Abdul-Rahman Goma'a Enad Saadoun, the Iraqi defense minister's son, as commander of the Fourth Regiment of the PMF's 51st Brigade. Jawad al-Taibawi, an AAH leader, considered the appointment a reward for those who oppose the PMF⁽¹⁶⁾ in reference to the Iraqi defense minister, who had previously stated that the PMF's role in liberating Iraq from ISIS was secondary.

Yet, there is an ongoing spat between AAH and Harakat al-Nujaba. The Shiite leaders say that Khazali is the one who should be commanding the armed resistance given that he is more effective and influential than Akram al-Kaabi, the leader of Harakat al-Nujaba. But the Iranians do not prefer to hand the leadership over to Khazali since they are convinced that he is more of a politician than a military commander.⁽¹⁷⁾ This explains the reason behind the deep rift between AAH and Iran, compared to relations between Tehran and other militias.

3.2 The Dispute Over Resources and the Spoils of War

The rift between the two most powerful Iranian militias in Iraq and Syria— AAH and Kata'ib Hezbollah — was not only over who should take the leading positions within the PMF after Soleimani's killing. But the divisions widened to include the spoils of war and the collection of revenues — rifts that amounted to armed clashes between the two militias in Syria after AAH blocked the road leading to the Qa'im-Bukamal crossing by setting up checkpoints and barricades at al-Hari village in the city of Qaim in Syria, hence preventing trucks affiliated with Kata'ib Hezbollah from crossing. This happened on two occasions in 2020, in June and September.⁽¹⁸⁾ The two militias seized control over the drug smuggling operations and the cross-border trade between Iraq and Syria by tightening control over Syria's Bukamal and Iraq's Qaim, both located on the Iraq-Syria border.

However, four armed clashes took place between Iraq's Kata'ib Hezbollah and the National Defense Forces (NDF) * in a number of towns in Syria's Qalamun region near the Syria-Lebanon border in 2019, which left several fighters dead and wounded. The clashes broke out over a dispute over the distribution of revenues secured from drug smuggling operations via the border between Syria and Lebanon and the money Hezbollah generated from smuggling dissidents wanted by the Syrian regime in return for \$3,000 to \$4,500 for each person to illegally bring them to Lebanon.⁽¹⁹⁾

The NDF militia discovered that Kata'ib Hezbollah had transformed Qalamun, where they both shared dominance and clout, into a corridor for drug shipments coming from Lebanon and was using vast swathes of land for cultivating drugs to sell in Syria,⁽²⁰⁾ a direct threat to the areas where the NDF exercises control and clout.

Several disagreements broke out, which could have led to armed clashes between AAH and Saraya al-Khurasani which remained close to the IRGC throughout 2020 in its spheres of influence scattered across several Iraqi provinces. The clashes broke out when AAH fighters tried to levy tariffs on the trucks belonging to Saraya al-Khurasani coming from Syria to secure finances to cover fighter costs in light of the harsh economic conditions which Iranian militias have been facing following the decline in Iranian financial support. According to an Iraqi Shiite politician close to Iranian militias in Iraq, the differences between the two most powerful factions within the Iran-backed PMF are over finances and weapons. Each side accuses the other of seizing PMF resources and depriving the other of their rights.

He added, "Khazali wants to play a leading role inside the PMF and doesn't want Kata'ib Hezbollah to seize all the spoils,"⁽²¹⁾ in reference to AAH's desire to seize the spheres of influence where it has control, clout and dominance over resources.

Deep rifts had surfaced in 2018 and 2019 between AAH and the Brigade of Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas led by Aws al-Khafaji over finances and with Harakat al-Nujaba, led by Akram al-Kaabi, over the smuggling of oil and the collection of revenues in central and southern Iraq.⁽²²⁾ Iraqi security sources in February 2020 revealed that unidentified gunmen had shot and killed Mohammad Rahim al-Shammari, an AAH commander, in al-Shuala district using guns with silencers following disputes over wresting control, exercising influence and seizing resources. AAH has accused rival militias — which it stopped short of naming — of killing Shammari. According to Muhannad al-Janabi, targeted killings are always carried out against opponents of Iranian influence, emphasizing that multiple similar incidents had taken place previously.⁽²³⁾

Iraqi researcher Raad Hashem argues that the killing of an AAH commander in Baghdad or using an IED to take out elements from Kata'ib Hezbollah in

Jurf Sakhar are part of the physical liquidation policy targeting militia fighters. He added that deep rifts have emerged in the militias' areas of influence, where they compete for levying fees, collecting revenues and smuggling and dealing in drugs.⁽²⁴⁾

3.3 The Disagreement Over the Attacks on Foreign Troops

The Iranian militias differed about the priority and the timing of launching attacks against US targets (the embassy, consulate, military bases, military convoys) in Iraq in 2020. This operation of launching attacks is led by Iran with the aim of prompting the United States to withdraw its forces from Iraq and to keep Baghdad within its sphere of influence — due to considerations related to the centrality of Iraq in the Iranian strategy and its geopolitical, economic and security importance for Iran. Iraq represents one of the key Iranian lines of defense against the United States and its regional allies.

On many occasions, Kata'ib Hezbollah rejected AAH's use of force against US targets to submit to Iranian orders during Rouhani's government. Kata'ib Hezbollah sought to be in line with the Iranian calculation back then that there should be no military escalation — which would have increased Trump's chances in the 2020 presidential elections. Further, it aimed to support Iran's position on the nuclear talks in Vienna in order for the US sanctions to be lifted on Tehran. In this context, Kata'ib Hezbollah has strongly opposed AAH's violation of the tacit truce between the Iran-backed proxy militias in Iraq and the United States — stating that it will not be hitting US targets — by launching attacks on US targets on two occasions in November and December 2020 without any coordination with the commanders of other militias or Iranian officials. A Kata'ib Hezbollah official revealed, "We have been surprised by Khazali's breach of the truce, especially after the visit of General Esmail Qaani, chief of the Quds Force, and his meeting with a number of the commanders on November 24, 2020, to reiterate the importance of not provoking Trump during this sensitive period. This was construed as a sign of AAH breaking ranks with the PMF." The same official indicated that "the new groups claiming responsibility for the attacks against US forces such as Ahl al-Kahf, an AAH-affiliate, work under its supervision, without referring to us or even discussing the matter with us."⁽²⁵⁾

This prompted the Iraqi security forces on December 23, 2020 to arrest Hosam al-Azarjawi, an AAH commander and a rocket engineer, after finding conclusive proof that he was involved in attacks against US targets. Videos on social media platforms showed AAH militants threatening to strike Iraqi forces on orders from Khazali, which was strongly rejected by Kata'ib Hezbollah.

AAH's response was proof of the divisions among the pro-Iran militias that are loyal to Wilayat al-Faqih and the strongest indication of the militia abandoning Iran's ideology. This is consistent with a report published by the British

website Middle East Eye⁽²⁶⁾ which stated that during Qaani's visit to Baghdad on November 24, 2020, to urge Iranian militias to abide by the ceasefire, Khazali publicly denounced his visit, and argued that resisting the US presence was an Iraqi national project and there was no need for Iranian involvement.⁽²⁷⁾ Moreover, a senior AAH commander said, "AAH rejects Iran's custodianship since expelling US forces from Iraq is an internal issue that only concerns Iraqis. Neither Tehran nor the Iranians have a right to interfere in this issue." He added, "The Iranians want to extend the truce with the United States in order not to provoke it, hoping Biden will agree to rejoin the nuclear deal. We want to drive the occupiers out of our country. We are free, Iraqis and patriots. We do what we deem suitable for us and for our country."⁽²⁸⁾ This indicates that AAH is embracing a new approximation to reset its political discourse to increase its chances of winning in the parliamentary elections. AAH realized that distancing itself from Iranian influence amid the parliamentary elections would serve its objective.

In February 2019, the PMF arrested the commander of the Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas Brigade, Aws al-Khafaji, and shut down the militia's headquarters. He, according to the PMF, had splintered from the group. The PMF arrested him over his criticism of Iran, its influence and Iranian military operations against US targets in Iraq.⁽²⁹⁾ Hence, the Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas Brigade defected from the PMF after revealing information about the attacks carried out by Iran and its allied militias in Iraq. This was unprecedented and confirmed the reports indicating severe differences between Iran and its militias in Iraq. Some militias have been working to defect from Iran's orbit after regional and international pressures have dramatically increased on the ruling system of Wilayat al-Faqih.

By the end of July 2021, a new disagreement emerged between the Sayyed al-Shuhada Brigades, Harakat al-Nujaba, AAH and the Iran-backed Fatah Alliance, which is considered to be the political representative of all the factions loyal to the Qom Marjaya over the US-Iraq joint statement on the withdrawal of US troops by the end of December 2021. While the Sayyed al-Shuhada Brigades and Harakat al-Nujaba rejected the statement, citing a lack of confidence in Washington abiding by the terms of the statement and keeping US forces in Iraq for merely an advisory role, the AAH questioned the move. The Fatah Alliance welcomed the statement, considering it a positive step towards achieving Iraq's full sovereignty.⁽³⁰⁾

The assassination of Abu Sadiq al-Khashkhashi, the 9th Brigade's commander in the PMF, in August 2021 in Babel Governorate sparked the debate about whether Iraq has turned into an arena for settling accounts among militias. The aforementioned assassination was followed by further assassinations across all spheres of influence.⁽³¹⁾

3.4 The Differences Over Naming Prime Ministers

Under Soleimani, militia commanders in Iran's spheres of influence in Iraq were following his instructions — backed by the decision-makers in Iran. His instructions ensured that Iran had great influence in the domestic equations, particularly in regard to naming the prime minister. But after his killing, differences between militias surfaced over the naming of prime ministers in Iran's spheres of influence. For example, differences emerged in Iraq between AAH and the Badr Organization on the one hand and the Hezbollah Brigades and Harakat al-Nujaba on the other over the naming of Kadhimi as prime minister of Iraq in April 2020. The AAH and the Badr Organization declared support for naming Kadhimi as Iraq's prime minister while Kata'ib Hezbollah, whose influence has been dwindling since the killing of its head Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis according to *Foreign Policy* magazine,⁽³²⁾ and Harakat al-Nujaba opposed his nomination. They accused him of being involved in the assassination of Soleimani and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, an accusation that AAH has denied.⁽³³⁾ It seems that there were other factors behind Kata'ib Hezbollah's — which has close ties to the IRGC — and Harakat al-Nujaba's opposition to Kadhimi, related to the latter's desire to curb Iranian clout in Iraq through ensuring Iraq's transition to full statehood based on independence and sovereignty and reestablishing Iraq's regional role and balancing its foreign relations.

The contentious issues between Iranian militias on the Iraqi arena — loyal to the Qom Marjaya — indicate that they are extensive and of an escalating nature. They are critical issues related to disputes over spheres of influence, and the collection of revenues to cover costs in light of Iran reducing its financial support. It is unlikely that the United States will lift the sanctions imposed on Iran in the foreseeable future given Tehran's inflexibility when it comes to returning to the nuclear negotiations and addressing the outstanding issues. This inflexibility will prolong the negotiations, delay the lifting of sanctions and hinder Tehran's financial support for its militias. Furthermore, Iranian militias differ over leadership positions and the financial resources provided to the major Iran-affiliated militias — given their armament strength, organization and extensive influence in several Iraqi and Syrian provinces, especially in strategic provinces and at several border points and crossings. Such contentious issues are very evident and critical in Iraq, given its geopolitical, economic and security significance for Iran— as well as its military, political and economic importance for its proxies.

4. Iranian Efforts to Tackle the Divisions Among Its Militias

Due to the bitter divisions amongst major pro-Iran militias in Iraq and Iran's concern about the disunity among them, Tehran has laid out policies to

limit the negative impact (of such divisions) on its influence in Iraq, and to safeguard its gains. These policies will also allow Iran to and move forward in implementing the rest of its expansionist schemes, via the following:

4.1 Forming New Militias More Loyal to Iran

Iran resorted to forming new smaller and more loyal armed militias in Iraq to camouflage its involvement in attacks against US interests in Iraq and to heal the divisions between its militias. Iran has adopted a new approach which will reduce its dependence on its old militias, recruiting dozens of fighters who are unwaveringly loyal and devoutly believe in Wilayat al-Faqih. Through these fighters, Iran has formed smaller militias which are more loyal and submissive to the IRGC. Throughout 2020, IRGC military advisors as well as some from Hezbollah in Lebanon trained these fighters to use drones and plant bombs to hit rivals in Iraq in order to change the rules of engagement in Iran's favor. Iran believes that these new smaller militias have a strategic advantage as they are less likely to be infiltrated.⁽³⁴⁾ The most important newer militias in Iraq are: Rab'allah (God's Fellows), Saraya al-Muntaqim (the Avenger Regiments), Osbat al-Thaeryn (Rebel League), Liwa Thar Muhandis (LTM) (Revenge of Muhandis Brigade), Ashab al-Kahf, Qabdat Al Mahdi, al-Ghashya, Zulfaqar and Ahdullah.

4.2 Dismantling Small Militias

Citing Iraqi political and military sources, Middle East Eye reported on January 2, 2021, that Iran set a new vision based on maintaining its large militias loyal to Wilayat al-Faqih while dissolving smaller (older) militias — a policy known as “removing outcrops” such as Saraya al-Khorasani in return for supporting any Iraqi government that accepts a two-headed armed militia —with the PMF being one head, and the other being an armed resistance force consisting of two or three large factions.⁽³⁵⁾ It seems that the PMF's security apparatus arrested nearly 30 elements of Saraya al-Khorasani, including senior commanders. It also raided its headquarters and seized some of its property by the end of December 2020. This is indicative of the start of the implementation of Iran's scheme on the Iraqi arena in particular. Apparently, Iran fully realizes the critical situation its militias are facing in Iraq following the demise of Soleimani and the poor performance of Qaani, who could not unite militias and their leaders as Soleimani did.

4.3 Distributing Responsibility for Iraq's File to Several Iranian Officials

Iran has designated several officials to be in charge of the Iraqi file. They include: Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council Ali Shamkhani, who has made multiple visits to Iraq to tackle the divisions; Iran's Ambassador to Baghdad Iraj Masjedi who has been under US sanctions since November

2020 and former Iranian Ambassador to Iraq Hassan Danai-Far. Qaani will be in charge of the military proxies only.⁽³⁶⁾ Qaani has made multiple surprise visits to Iraq since he took over as chief of the Quds Force to meet with militia commanders to unify their visions for the new phase following the killing of Soleimani and Muhandis.⁽³⁷⁾ These appointments indicate Iran's awareness regarding Qaani's inability to run the Iraqi file unlike Soleimani. Hence, Qaani is solely responsible for the military file in Iraq, whereas the other files have been designated to the aforementioned officials.

4.4 An Iranian Green Light for the Lebanese Hezbollah to Intervene

The divisions between pro-Iran militias in Iraq prompted Tehran to ask the Lebanese Hezbollah to intervene in order to curb the negative impact of these divisions on Iran's influence in Iraq. Hezbollah's representative to Iraq, Mohammad Hussein Kawtharan, held meetings with militia commanders to converge their points of view and heal the rifts between them.

Overall, Iranian exertions did not bear fruit and it was impossible to unite all militias under one cohesive umbrella. Multiple fronts have emerged as well as with new divergent orientations making it difficult to address critical issues related to the PMF's restructuring following the killing of Soleimani and Muhandis. The conflicts over the collection of revenues, management of border crossings and smuggling operations continue. They are expected to drag on to reach a crucial cutthroat phase, with the possibility of Iran's influence being curbed in Iraq, especially after the emergence of new power vacuums which militias could compete over to dominate following the US withdrawal from Iraq by the end of December 2021.

5. The Consequences of the Disputes Between Militias on Iran's Clout in Iraq

The aforesaid factors reveal sharp divisions among militias loyal to the Qom Marjaya. These divisions among militias pose an additional challenge to Iranian clout in Iraq as they involve the most powerful pro-Iran militias such as AAH and Kata'ib Hezbollah and they have emerged in the most important sphere of influence in Iran's strategy: the Iraqi arena. These divisions raise Iran's concerns because pro-Tehran militias play a big role in tightening Iran's grip over Iraq. Iran depends on these militias to advance its regional project.

These divisions negatively impact the Iranian project throughout the region. The major conclusions of the study regarding the divisions among Iranian militias can be summarized as follows:

5.1 Calling Into Question Iranian Claims About the Cohesion of Its Militias

Soleimani exercised tremendous power and influence that helped him achieve harmony among Iranian militias in Tehran's spheres of influence.

However, following Soleimani's killing and with Qaani taking over as chief of the Quds Force, the cohesion of the pro-Wilayat al-Faqih militias decreased. This development calls into question the claims of Iranian media outlets over the past years regarding the solidarity of Iranian militias. At face value, Iranian militias seem united and harmonious. But on the ground, they are no longer one bloc. Tensions have been rising among Iranian militias particularly between those exerting huge influence in Iran's spheres of influence since the killing of Soleimani and Muhandis. Tensions and divergences have surfaced between militias loyal to the Qom Marjaya and militias loyal to the Najaf Marjaya, particularly over Iraqi internal affairs, ways to address internal crises, and achieving security and stability. Thus, militias are operating under a new equation in Iraq and therefore Iran's claims that they are operating as one cohesive bloc is no longer accurate. Thus, Iran seems deeply concerned about the divisions among its most important proxies as they will impede its expansionist strategy in its spheres of influence.

5.2 The Declining Influence of Militias: Iran's Most Powerful Tool

A series of divisions have emerged among Iranian militias that exert tremendous influence within the PMF such as AAH, Kata'ib Hezbollah and Harakat al-Nujaba, Tehran's most powerful allies. These divisions are due to their control over sensitive positions in Iraq, their number of fighters, their control over strategic areas of influence — as well as their control over border crossings, strategic areas and international highways that connect their spheres of influence. On the other hand, the divisions seems to be over strategic issues open to escalation at any time; such as the divergence over who dominates the critical positions within the PMF — command and control over the PMF is entrenched in the minds of militia commanders. This is in addition to the divisions over controlling resources and the collection of revenues in light of Iran's inability to provide financial support to its militias. These divisions pose a principal challenge to Iran's influence, weaken its clout and reflect a decline in its influence in its most important sphere of influence overseas. It is expected that these challenges will persist in light of Qaani's scant experience compared to Soleimani when it comes to advancing Iran's influence in Iraq and Iran's inability to provide financial support because US sanctions have not been lifted yet as the nuclear talks in Vienna have stalled.

5.3 Militias Rebelling Against the Guardian Jurist

The study revealed the phenomenon of militias rebelling against their Iranian sponsor, especially the most powerful militias who had pledged allegiance to Iran and Wilayat al-Faqih such as AAH. Khazali announced plainly his rejection of Iran's custodianship and his decision to stop striking US targets before the end of Trump's tenure. He asserted that resisting the US presence

was an Iraqi national project in which Iran does not need to play a role. This indicates that the AAH became aware of the challenges facing Iran's expansionist project. The AAH, therefore, outlined a new approach to present itself to the Iraqi people as a nationalist movement that works for Iraq to win over voters in the October 2021 elections. Accordingly, some militias rebelled against Iran and pursued their own personal interests, which in turn indicated the fragile ideological relationship between these militias and Wilayat al-Faqih. The reality, therefore, seems contrary to Iran's claims that its militias are overwhelmingly driven by ideological loyalty to the guardian jurist.

5.4 Inciting Chaos in Iraq and Iran's Diminishing Image

The disputes among pro-Iran militias embracing Wilayat al-Faqih have become very tense in Iraq, affecting Iraq's stability and security. The militias are deployed across southern oil-rich regions, maintaining a grip over networks for smuggling Iran's crude oil and its derivatives by tankers into Syria and Lebanon via the Syria-Iraq borders. These militias also carry out illegal trade dealings by smuggling oil via Iraqi territory to generate money, secure royalties from foreign oil companies in return for releasing oil machinery and equipment — given their control over the cargo-handling at Iraqi ports. Former Iraqi Petroleum Minister Ihsan Abdul-Jabbar at the parliamentary session on July 4, 2021, admitted that investments and security had declined in the country. This forced global petroleum companies to reassess their positions. In a report by Al-Monitor, Salam Zidane, an Iraqi journalist, said that Western petroleum companies began to withdraw after their sites suffered attacks and they faced blackmailing by militias. The role of militias and their disputes played a part in the Iraqi street rejecting Iran and its proxy groups. Undoubtedly, the wave of popular protests contributed to the Iraqi government resolutely focusing on transitioning Iraq to full statehood and limiting weapons to the state. The protest wave also coincided with regional and international efforts to curb Iran's clout in the Iraqi arena.

Conclusion

Iran is facing an additional complexity in Iraq as disputes are breaking out not only between Iranian militias loyal to the Qom Marjaya and those loyal to the Najaf Marjaya, but also among the pro-Qom militias themselves. These divisions pose great danger to Iran's influence in Iraq as its militias are the most important tool and the most powerful and credible allies to implement its expansionist project; given their Wilayat al-Faqih orientations. Thus, these divisions among Iranian militias means paralyzing Iran's most powerful overseas arms for advancing its expansionist schemes, which explains Tehran's employment of new approaches in Iraq such as forming new militias under new commanders who are more loyal, ideologically motivated and more willing to advance Iranian schemes.

The divisions between militias widen with every step they take to maximize their stature, strength and clout in Iraq. These disagreements are not over marginal issues that can be overlooked or bypassed but are related to their core work in the country. They have disputes over critical leadership positions in the Iran-backed PMF, and over who controls strategic locations such as the oil-rich areas in the south, and crossings and international roads that are crucial to the collection of revenues. This is in addition to the fact that Qaani lacks Soleimani's qualities, including a charismatic personality, an ability to build relationships with militia commanders and win their confidence. If he had such qualities, he would have been able to settle the divisions swiftly to uphold their unity and cohesion. Further, the disputes have deepened with the militias loyal to the Najaf Marjaya and the latter stopped supporting Iranian militias loyal to the Qom Marjaya, and several major militias announced their withdrawal from the PMF. The Najaf Marjaya, the highest religious authority in Iraq, withdrew the religious legitimacy it granted to militias pledging allegiance to Wilayat al-Faqih since Ali al-Sistani's Fatwa of Sufficient Jihad justifying militias to fight ISIS in Iraq. It is expected that the divisions among militias loyal to Wilayat al-Faqih will become sharper after the US withdrawal from Iraq and the ending of the combat mission of the remaining US forces in Iraq by the end of December 2021. One of the scenarios at play following the withdrawal of US forces is deeper divisions among militias if tensions over who controls the US areas of influence — after the withdrawal of US troops — escalate and Iran's inability to fund its militias in the short run diminishes further. The aforementioned scenario may develop against the backdrop of the uncertain position of Iran on the nuclear talks in Vienna and the stance taken by Ebrahim Raisi; Iran's new "hardline" president who has already called for escalation to counter the US pressure to push the nuclear deal back to its status before 2018 (when the United States withdrew from it) without any amendments to it. Iran is aware that US deterrence has declined and Washington has shifted its foreign policy priorities.

Apparently, Iran has been facing unprecedented complexities in Iraq that have reduced its chances of sustaining its expansionist project in the way it desires. These complexities concern the outbreak of squabbles and feuds between Iranian militias that might turn into armed clashes. The militias are the most important and most powerful arm which Iran relies on to advance its expansionist project. The second biggest challenge and the most dangerous complexity Iran is facing in Iraq: The growing awareness of young Iraqis who reject Iran, its proxies, and expansionist schemes. The Iraqi people have made clear their rejection of Iran's interventions; this was clearly seen in the unprecedented loss of its proxies in the 2021 parliamentary elections. Iraqi voters refused to support the major Iran-backed alliances. This indicates the

tremendous challenges facing Iran's project in Iraq, reflecting the failure of Tehran's soft power project in creating a popular support base and popular incubators to advance its project. This is in addition to the divisions among militias, which slow down the pace of implementing Iran's project, amidst several indications forecasting that Iraq is heading towards state sovereignty on a civilian basis rather than a sectarian one.

All the aforementioned factors and developments in Iraq will curb Iran's strength in its spheres of influence. It will reduce Iran's chances and weaken its project and its viability — giving an opportunity for Iraq and other countries to recover and strengthen their institutions in a way that prioritizes the independence of internal and external decision-making and the transition from the phase of non-state control to total state control over all spheres.

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IRANIAN MARITIME ORIENTATIONS: OBJECTIVES, CHALLENGES, AND SCOPE OF INFLUENCE

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Abstract

Several indications point to Iran's intensification of its maritime activities beyond the boundaries of traditional movement. This comes in the context of heightened tensions between Iran and regional and international powers, coupled with extensive US pressure to curb Iran's oil exports and foreign trade. The study addresses several questions, most prominently about the extent of change in the Iranian naval strategy, the impact of this on Iran's ability to achieve its objectives and handle rising challenges. The study discusses the status and strategic objectives of the Iranian navy, Iran's maritime capabilities and potential, the activities and movements of the Iranian navy, and challenges and the extent of the Iranian navy's effectiveness.

Keywords: *Iranian navy, maritime capabilities, and strategic objectives*

Introduction

Iran has intensified its maritime activities over the past years. There have been some remarkable changes to the rules of engagement and deployment beyond the decades-long traditional areas of operations. Of course, these changes are attributed to important shifts in Iran's military doctrine in general and its maritime doctrine in particular — to address regional and international developments.

A primary change was the openness provided to Tehran after it signed the nuclear deal in 2015. Iran grasped this new opportunity to extend its clout, which contributed to the resumption of pressure and sanctions after the United States withdrew from the deal in 2018 and implemented its maximum pressure campaign to change Tehran's behavior. The aforementioned developments — in their radical and most open aspect— reflect the importance of Iran's naval force, either as a potent force to support Tehran's regional project or as a necessary force to confront the pressures and challenges it faces.

The study argues that Iran's maritime operations significantly increased when pressures and sanctions mounted against it. However, despite the intense nature of its maritime operations, wide deployments and movements, their impact has been limited. It is in Iran's interest to ensure that there is an adequate balance of power in the region in light of the challenges it faces and the levers it possesses. Tehran lacks the ability and capacity to turn the existing conflict with regional and international actors in its favor or mitigate the ramifications of sanctions and isolation that it is experiencing.

In light of the aforementioned, this study discusses the scope of Iran's maritime operations and their effectiveness through four principal axes: the Iranian navy: status and strategic objectives, naval capabilities, Iranian maritime orientations and operations, finally challenges and scope of the effectiveness.

1. The Iranian Navy: Status and Strategic Objectives

The Iranian navy has held considerable significance in Tehran's defense strategy. It has been assigned with protecting the country's strategic, economic, and military assets along the coastline extending throughout the Arabian Gulf, the Sea of Oman and the northern parts overlooking the Caspian Sea. The aforementioned is based on the following:

1.1 The Position of the Iranian Navy in Tehran's Defense Strategy

The rapid developments during the first eight years after the 1979 revolution played an integral role in shaping the features of the Iranian navy; determining its reality and approaches. A key change was the end of the military doctrine espoused under the Pahlavi government and a new military doctrine was defined for the military establishment — especially the Iranian navy. In

the aftermath of the revolution, all Iranian military establishments were restructured — including the navy — with the Pahlavi designated military commanders sacked and replaced with revolutionary commanders who lacked military and leadership capabilities to perform their jobs well. These revolutionary commanders served during the first years of the eight-year Iran-Iraq War. This war had the biggest impact on the reality of the Iranian navy along with the blunders of the political leadership which contributed to its restructuring. The Iranian navy's limitations were exposed in the face of Iraq's military superiority during the Iran-Iraq War. The Iranian navy, back then, failed to implement Western naval strategies which had been previously adopted during Iran's monarchical era. To counter Iraq's mounting firepower on multiple fronts, the Iranian navy resorted to enhance its capacity in crafting alternative strategies and tactics — given the fact that Iran was unable to strengthen its navy and other military departments with weapons. Therefore, Iran's military operational capacity declined and the country was further handicapped by Western sanctions that prevented the supply of much-needed spare parts.

The Iranian leadership realized that it must act to plug the gap and the glaring decline in the navy's performance. Hence, it established the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) with its different branches including a navy, whose operational capacity was equivalent to the country's regular naval forces, following a decision by Khomeini in the mid-1980s. Khomeini granted unrestricted powers to the IRGC to manage the situation on the battlefield and permitted it to use the various available national resources to tip the war scale in Iran's favor. This contributed to changing to an extent the balance of power between Iran and Iraq. It was entrusted with carrying out several operations against vessels in what became known as the Tanker War. Iran laid mines in the waters of the Gulf and targeted civilian and military ships sailing through the Arabian Gulf or heading southwards towards the Strait of Hormuz. But this strategy caused Iran to incur a host of naval and logistical losses contributing to a dent in the country's naval hardware system.

Following the end of the Iraq-Iran War, and in response to Tehran's growing hostility towards the West, it faced tough sanctions and international isolation, and the intensive presence of foreign forces on its border. To shore up its regional and international projects, Iran worked to rearrange and strengthen its naval units at different levels via distributing zones and operational missions to both the IRGC and the regular navy in green and blue waters. In addition, Iran worked to develop its missile program and adapt some naval weapons using conventional methods at a low cost such as armed speedboats. Iran's naval forces were given huge significance by the Iranian leadership due to the navy's contribution in supporting the country's defense system. Due to

the limited ability to secure sophisticated technology from abroad because of the sanctions on Tehran, the Iranian navy sought to secure warships and boats by manufacturing them domestically. The military commanders restructured and redistributed naval operations between the IRGC and the regular navy to create some sort of balance between them. This included creating a unified operational missions headquarters in Bandar Abbas overlooking the Arabian Gulf.⁽¹⁾ Recently, Iran has renovated several warships and frigates and carried out drills with its allies; a drill was held by Iran, China and Russia in 2019.

1.2 Iran's Naval Forces and the Benefits of Its Geographical Location

Iran's strategic location is of significant importance, as it overlooks the most vital waterways in the world. This impacted the Iranian leadership's decision-making with them wanting to enhance the country's maritime capabilities and the latter quickly turned into one of the most important pillars of Tehran's deterrence strategy in the face of the growing threats and challenges and the first line of defending its vital spheres of influence.

Iran's naval forces provide security for the country's strategic points in the Caspian Sea, the Arabian Gulf, and the Gulf of Oman. The naval forces are designated to protect 2,800 square kilometers of Iranian coastline.⁽²⁾ Iran overlooks the oil-rich Arabian Gulf, and has nearly 1,000 square kilometers of coastline overlooking it and it extends to the north — passing through the Strait of Hormuz to the Sea of Oman. Iran also has maritime islands scattered across the Arabian Gulf and near the strategic waterways where ships and tankers pass. The aforementioned increased the importance of Iran's naval forces in light of critical geostrategic and geopolitical considerations. Therefore, overlooking the Arabian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz is considered the most salient strategic advantage afforded by Iran's unique geographical location — given the fact that the Arabian Gulf is at the center of global attention. This is because the world depends on oil and gas supplies, and their importance is mounting amid the discovery of new oil reserves and the Gulf is seeing heightened traffic with more oil tankers entering than ever before.

1.3 Strategic Objectives

The most important Iranian strategic objectives include the following:

- Coping with regional domination schemes: Iran has great ambitions and old Persian inclinations for dominance and expansionism, reflected in the occupation of the three Emirati islands in the Arabian Gulf, in addition to its regional projects in Syria, Yemen and Lebanon, which require a navy that is supportive of implementing the aforementioned aspirations. Hence, the navy serves Iran's strategy in the region.

The Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei referred to Iran's naval forces as a "strategic force," which helps one understand their importance in the country's

deterrence doctrine. This term is a clear expression of Iran's ambitions to dominate and expand in the high seas. Furthermore, the supreme leader suggested that Iran's naval forces intimidated other countries — in reference to the United States and Israel.⁽³⁾ The Iranian military top brass also echoed the same message as Khamenei. Iranian navy Commander Habibollah Sayyari asserted that Iran's operations in international waters was to safeguard the interests of his country. He also highlighted Iran's efforts to intensify its maritime operations and protect its national interests in the northern part of the Indian Ocean and the Gulf of Aden.⁽⁴⁾ Iran claims that the Iranian navy had been present on the high seas long before the existence of countries like the United States — which projects itself as a major world power⁽⁵⁾— and that Iranians had been sailing on the high seas 100 years before the birth of Christ.⁽⁶⁾

In addition to protecting Iranian interests — through the maritime defense of its coasts — Iran's naval forces provide logistical and intelligence support to Tehran's militias in the region. The IRGC uses both civilian and military vessels in the Red Sea to transfer shipments of weapons and missiles to its proxies fighting in Syria. In addition, Iran's naval presence in the region supports reconnaissance and espionage missions. This was confirmed by the incident involving the Iranian ship *Safer*, which maintained a presence in the Red Sea and was targeted by Israel. The Iranian navy seeks to secure a geographical leverage in addition to expanding its maritime outreach and ability to forecast potential scenarios in case disputes flare up with Tehran's foes. Moreover, it aims to develop the capacity to assess situations and measure reactions to its moves from the countries overlooking the Red Sea or the countries deemed very important to it such as Israel or the Mediterranean countries. The Iranian naval forces have enhanced their presence in the Atlantic Ocean, the Red Sea and the Mediterranean in light of the need to protect Iran's oil and commercial tankers heading to Latin America, Syria and Lebanon — two countries overlooking the Mediterranean coast.

■ **Balancing pressures and securing some sort of naval deterrence:** The Iranian naval forces seek to protect Iran's interests and national security via expanding their maritime presence in a wide range of waters to help overcome the country's isolation and economic blockade. Tehran also seeks to achieve some sort of political and military balance and send a message to its foes that it is capable of resorting to harsher options and acting in multiple arenas in regions of high strategic importance. Iran also seeks to maintain levers and engage in trade-offs with all international actors in case the latter's threats escalate or there is a move towards military confrontation. Iran also needs this naval might to exert pressure on regional countries seeking to bring its expansionist schemes and subversive roles such as the support provided to its militias in Yemen, Syria and Lebanon to a halt.

Iranian navy Commander Admiral Habibollah Sayyari has reiterated the importance of providing security, not only in the Arabian Gulf, but also in the Gulf of Aden, the Indian Ocean, and the Red Sea. He views this as a priority for Iran and having a presence on the eastern coast of Africa enhances its maritime role. Iran is attempting to build a network of relationships and alliances in the Middle East as a whole to serve its regional project and to maintain and protect its interests. Thus, it has developed maritime supply corridors on the eastern coast of Africa — acting as regional logistical hubs.⁽⁷⁾

■ Countering the isolation and circumventing sanctions: The Iranian navy plays an extremely important role in circumventing US sanctions. It helps in smuggling oil by evading international protocols. This is done through a host of tactics such as stopping signals of tracking tankers, replacing shipments halfway, camouflaging the identity of Iranian oil tankers through changing the names of ships, raising flags of other countries and turning off tracking systems to avoid satellite detection.⁽⁸⁾ In addition, the naval forces assist in stockpiling Iranian oil at sea to circumvent sanctions and indirectly help in selling it.⁽⁹⁾ It was announced by TankerTrackers.com — a website focusing on tracking oil tankers — in 2020 that an Iranian tanker carrying 20 million barrels of gas condensates unloaded at Puerto José in Venezuela. The online service on Twitter posted that the Iranian tanker had likely shut down the automatic identification system (AIS) along the voyage to Venezuela after it sailed near the coast of South Africa. Reports also indicated that the Iranian tanker had its basic specifications removed and renamed.⁽¹⁰⁾

■ Securing some sort of military balance of power with the United States and other Western powers: Iran's principal focus is on maritime cooperation with Russia and China to achieve its security aspirations in the region. Tehran uses the cooperation to support its position amid external threats as well as the hostile alliances in the Gulf waters such as the US-led coalition to protect navigation in the Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz and the European initiative which was also launched for this purpose. The aforementioned moves were taken following Iranian threats to the freedom of navigation in the Arabian Gulf after the United States refused to extend waivers for certain countries to import Iranian oil in early May 2019.⁽¹¹⁾ Iran may find amid shifts in international relations and US pressures on China and Russia an opportunity to boost its partnership with these two countries — especially China which is considered the biggest international actor in the region and is ready to move the standoff with the United States outside its borders in what is known as “offshore balancing.”⁽¹²⁾ Here, we should point to Iran's strategic partnership agreement with China, the naval drills the two countries conducted with the participation of Russia in recent years, the last of which was in February 2021. Hence, the interests of the two countries converge and the agreement is the

main pillar in the two countries' maritime strategy and an indispensable expression of China's giant project to connect the world's continents via its Belt and Road Initiative, which passes through areas vital to Tehran's clout. Russia may join them at some point in the future.

In general, the Iranian naval forces are considered critical to safeguard Iranian interests. They are also an important option to shore up Iran's policies in the face of challenges and threats from countries like the United States and its allies.

2. Capabilities of the Iranian Navy

The Iranian naval forces consist of nearly 48,000 sailors.⁽¹³⁾ Several specialized military colleges — as well as institutes and training centers — carry out the mission of military education. For the naval forces of the regular army, Imam Khomeini Naval University of Nowshahr is considered to be the place designated for graduating naval officers. Several other naval centers are also responsible for graduating naval officers as well. As for the IRGC's naval forces, Imam Hossein University is the academy responsible for graduating its officers. The Iranian naval headquarters and affiliated training centers are also tasked with graduating servicemen among their cadets.

The naval forces consist of mostly outdated vessels acquired in the pre-revolutionary era. But the naval forces have exerted huge efforts to upgrade them and secure their spare parts through their military factories. They also managed to manufacture several military boats. Table 1 lists the Iranian navy's equipment, while Table 2 lists Iran's naval bases.

Table 1: The Iranian Navy's Equipment

Category	Number
Frigates	5
Mine flails	10
Patrol boats	230
Submarines	33
Destroyers	3

Category	Number
Boats	398
Total	679

Source: “Capabilities of the Iranian Navy,” *Sputnik*, December 27, 2019, accessed September 11, 2021, <https://cutt.us/wtOhI>. [Persian].

Table 2: Iranian Naval Bases

Bases in the Arabian Gulf and the Sea of Oman	Bases in the Caspian Sea
Bandar Abbas Base	Anzali Base
Bushehr Base	Nowshahr Base
Khorramshahr Base	
Bases established on islands	
Farsi Island Base	
Larak Island Base	
Abu Musa Base	
Siri Island Base	

Source: “Capabilities of the Iranian Navy,” *Sputnik*, September 10, 2016, , <https://cutt.us/wtOhI>. [Persian].

The Iranian navy depends on a host of weapons considered to be the bedrock of the country’s naval doctrine and the principles of engagement in conflict. They include combat ships, supply ships, speedboats, drones, naval missiles, and naval mines. This is in addition to creating a suitable environment to boost naval defenses, such as creating zones to prevent giant ships from entering as well as using covers for camouflage and preparing operationally for military confrontations. To create a balance between the relatively poor capabilities of the navy and the various threats facing the country, the Iranian naval forces embarked on pursuing the following:

2.1 Depending on Speedboats to Tackle the Weapons Gap

Iranian speedboats are considered one of the most effective weapons and strategic pillars of the IRGC naval forces. They are part of the IRGC’s naval doctrine as they are an effective operational tool in the Arabian Gulf and

the Strait of Hormuz. Iran has paid attention to speedboats due to a host of considerations, including securing a “balance of weaponry,” and stepping up naval combat capabilities. They are also preferred because of their high speed and maneuverability and the various military and combat equipment which can be supplied to these boats. Finally, there is a low cost in manufacturing speedboats. Setting in motion the aforementioned speedboats created an operational edge for Iran in the Arabian Gulf — especially given that the geographical layout of the Gulf enabled them to carry out their operations and missions swiftly and with ease.

Iran developed and armed the old speedboats it purchased from China and North Korea, especially the Peykaap-class (IPS-16 and IPS-18) known as the Zolfaghar speedboats,⁽¹⁴⁾ and the Chinese (C-14)-class speedboats known as Azarakhsh. In addition, Iran has modified civilian vessels into military boats, arming them with artillery and missile launchers such as Seraj-1; a military racingboat.⁽¹⁵⁾

When it comes to the weapons with which ships and boats are equipped, Iran has depended on indigenously developed Chinese anti-ship missiles.⁽¹⁶⁾ The Zolfaghar boats were equipped with Kowsar anti-ship missiles and a radar system with a range extending to 25 kilometers⁽¹⁷⁾ in addition to two 12.7 millimeter guns. The boats Ashoura, Azarakhsh and Seraj were equipped with DShK machine guns and Chinese 107 millimeter rocket launchers.

Iranian speedboats have undergone important developments, including their modification to turn them into remote-controlled suicide speedboats, some that can be filled with explosives. The country tested for the first time the Ya Mahdi suicide boat during the Great Prophet Maneuvers 5 in 2010.⁽¹⁸⁾ Furthermore, Iran has added the mission of launching torpedoes from its speedboats. The IRGC naval forces announced in 2015 the commissioning of the Zulfaqr semi-submersible torpedo boat — capable of launching missiles and torpedoes. It indicated that the boat is capable of carrying a 324 millimeter, 4-meter-long torpedo, missiles with a 20-kilometer range, and two Kowsar anti-shipmissiles.⁽¹⁹⁾

Iran's speedboats have a record of carrying out provocative activities and harassing naval vessels in the Arabian Gulf waters — primarily vessels belonging to the US Fifth Fleet or military and civilian vessels sailing in Gulf waters. Such provocations have sparked tensions and have prompted fiery remarks between the United States and Iran. Former US President Donald Trump decided to destroy any Iranian boats that approached US vessels in the Gulf in 2020 — a response that came after Iranian boats on multiple occasions approached six US vessels that were on a monitoring mission in the northern part of the Gulf.⁽²⁰⁾

2.2 Naval Mines as an Option to Threaten the Gulf's Maritime Security

Iran is betting on the use of naval mines and introducing them in navy-on-

navy confrontations in the Arabian Gulf region in case the course of events lead to military confrontations or the blockage of the Strait of Hormuz.

Iran possesses several Russian and Chinese mines and it uses speedboats and surface ships to plant them. It is believed that Iran planted between 2,000 to 5,000 mines — weighing 300 kilograms each.⁽²¹⁾ The Iranian navy has MDM-4 and EM-52⁽²²⁾ wired and bottom mines as well as homegrown mines known as Sadaf developed by the country's naval research authority or Limpet mines

Historical incidents have proven that Iran resorted to using naval mines in confrontations — including the operation carried out by the IRGC — which laid some mines near Farsi Island in the Arabian Gulf — which resulted in an explosion that hit the US oil tanker SS Bridgeton in 1987 or the explosion that hit the US frigate Samuel Roberts in 1988, which collided into an Iranian mine.⁽²³⁾

Iran's naval mines remain a source of danger and a growing threat that undermines maritime security in the Arabian Gulf, the Sea of Oman, and the Red Sea. The US Central Command in 2019 revealed the details of the targeting of the Japanese oil tanker, Kokuka Courageous, by an Iranian Limpet mine.⁽²⁴⁾

The Arab Coalition to Support Legitimacy in Yemen has made efforts to remove the mines laid by the Houthi militia backed by Iran in the Red Sea.

2.3 Ballistic and Mobile Missiles as a Deterrent Force

Iran's naval missile arsenal consists of coastal defense missiles and anti-ship naval ballistic missiles. The aforementioned are considered to be among Iran's major military and naval capabilities. They are introduced as major elements of the Iranian navy, missiles for offensive and defensive deterrence and primary options in the face of naval confrontation. They are of importance given that their ranges are between 25 kilometers and 300 kilometers. The weight of their warheads ranges between 29 kilograms and 315 kilograms — with the possibility of arming speedboats with these different missiles. Iran's naval missile arsenal strengthened after the country inked multiple missile deals with China during different periods. It also secured franchises to manufacture some missiles domestically, especially the C-801 and C-701 missiles and developed them into different classes, known as Noor 1 and Noor 2, Ghader, Ghadir, Zafar and Kowsar 1 and Kowsar 2.

A leading domestically reengineered missile is the Noor missile — an upgraded version of the Chinese missile C-802, which can be launched from fixed coastal launchers or from Iranian boats. Also, There is the Ghader missile, which is an upgraded version of Noor missile and the Raad (Thunder) missile, developed from the Russian missile Silkworm.

Iran's navy witnessed a pronounced development in its capabilities after including naval ballistic missiles on the list of anti-ship missiles. Iran commissioned the Khalij Fars missile, one of the most important missiles

which the Iranian naval forces depend on when facing hostile warships. The missile's range is nearly 300 kilometers.⁽²⁵⁾

2.4 Submarines to Assert Naval Superiority

The Iranian navy depends on a number of submarines. —with various armament systems and sizes. They are of Russian and North Korean origin which Iran acquired during the era of the former royal navy. They included the North Korean Gadir-class submarines — or during the post-revolutionary period, especially from Russia during the period from 1992 to 1997.⁽²⁶⁾ The submarines are known as Tariq, Yunus and Noah — developed originally from the Russian-made Kilo-class submarines.⁽²⁷⁾ The three Russian variant submarines are the first line of defending the Sea of Oman. They run on diesel and electricity — with a displacement that reaches 3,950 tons during submerging.⁽²⁸⁾ They are distinguished by their capability to lay mines and the possibility to be equipped with torpedoes.

They are also equipped with the air-independent propulsion (AIP) system installed for submarines.⁽²⁹⁾

As to the indigenously developed Fateh submarine — compared with the other Iranian submarines — it is equipped with 533 millimeter torpedoes, cruise missiles and the capacity to operate in waters distant from the Iranian coasts. The Iranian navy also possesses 10 Gadir-class light submarines capable of operating in the shallow waters of the Arabian Gulf.⁽³⁰⁾

2.5 Drones as a Force of Aerial Threat

The project to develop drones is considered to be a key manufacturing priority in Iran. Inserting drones to be part of the Iranian navy's arsenal has provided it with a relative edge — especially in regard to aerial reconnaissance missions and repelling hostile naval moves in the Arabian Gulf. Drones are supplied with some domestically developed missiles and bombs.

Given the fact that drones have been inserted into the Iranian navy's arsenal — along with other naval weaponry — units dedicated to drones have been created on the shores of the regions overlooking the Arabian Gulf — making them hotbeds and launching pads for drones.

The program of manufacturing Iranian drones has seen a qualitative transformation after the shooting down of the US drone "RQ-170 Sentinel" in 2011. Iran embarked on developing it and taking advantage of its technology. Iran produced multiple variants from it known as Saegheh and Thunderbolt.

A primary Iranian drone is the Ababil-3 designed for reconnaissance missions, gathering information by capturing images and monitoring maritime movements.

In April 2019, the IRGC published images showing the US jet carrier USS Dwight D. Eisenhower (CVN-69) in the Arabian Gulf waters — an image taken by the Ababil-3.⁽³¹⁾ There are also other Iranian drones such as Saegheh, which

is modeled on the US drone RQ-170, a drone that carries out reconnaissance and aerial monitoring missions. It was commissioned in 2014. Saegheh underwent further upgrade, and the upgraded version of the drone was commissioned in 2016 under the name Thunderbolt. It was equipped with four launchers for the indigenously developed Sadid glide bombs.⁽³²⁾

However, despite the intensive production of drones in Iran, their involvement in naval drills and engaging various industrial sectors in this endeavor — primarily the Quds Aviation Industry Company — Iran's drone program faces some strategic weaknesses. The Defense and Strategic Studies Magazine published in the summer of 2018 an article in which it indicated that the distribution of designing, manufacturing and production between different Iranian bodies negatively impacted the scale of drone production in the country. In addition, Iranian drones have performed poorly, particularly when carrying out missions in distant regions.⁽³³⁾

3. Activities and Movements of the Iranian Navy

Iran has chosen the path of resistance, confrontation, deterrence and empowering its domestic economy. Hence, the Iranian navy was required to mitigate the impact of sanctions, break isolation, import strategic materials, and facilitate the flow of the country's exports. This is in addition to creating a balance of power in the region, and supporting the strategy of forward defense through assisting proxy militias backed by Iran. In this context, several naval activities and movements surfaced, notably including the following:

3.1 Intensive Naval Deployment in the Arabian Gulf and Attempting to Control the Strait of Hormuz

The stature of the Iranian navy and its strategic position increased after expanding the scope of its military presence on the coasts overlooking the Arabian Gulf and the islands scattered there—that are of much significant strategic importance, especially the occupied Emirati islands. Iran embarked on establishing military bases, intensifying its possession of missile and defense systems, and assigning more operational, logistical and support missions to its frigates and speedboats.

Iran is attempting to impose its control over the most important strait on the planet: the Strait of Hormuz. It is seeking to exercise absolute sovereignty over this critical choke point, given its strategic location as the most significant passage for global energy. Iran has long threatened to close down the strait as an option in case a war is waged against it — making the strait a strategic lever that could be used as a bargaining chip and a deterrent card to avert global powers from carrying out any military strikes against Iran. Iran has pursued calculated escalation to influence the position of the United States which has put excessive pressure on it. By this, Iran aims to develop an environment for

counter-pressure, to force the United States to change its policies or transmit the message that by targeting Tehran, this will lead to heightened tensions and regional and international instability.

In this context, Iran hinted at its ability to threaten regional security and stability on several occasions — in response to US economic sanctions or military threats — using the pressure lever of regional security⁽³⁴⁾ through clandestine attacks, without plainly accepting responsibility for any of them.⁽³⁵⁾

Table 3 indicates some of the escalations and attacks that Iran has been accused of instigating. These were on the rise in 2019.

Table 3: Iranian Maritime Attacks in the Region

Date	Incident
May 12, 2019	Washington and regional countries accused Iran of targeting four commercial ships at Fujairah port in the UAE.
May 14, 2019	Houthi drones bombed two oil pumping stations in Saudi Arabia, sparking a fire that was controlled after causing minimal damage to one of the pumping stations. However, the attack never disrupted oil production or exports.
June 13, 2019	Iran accused of being behind an attack on two oil tankers in the Sea of Oman.
June 20, 2019	Iran shot down a US reconnaissance drone.
July 10, 2019	Three Iranian vessels attempted to block the passage of the British Heritage, a British commercial ship in the Strait of Hormuz.

Date	Incident
July 15, 2019	The CIA announced that the IRGC seized M/I RIAH, a Panama-flagged tanker, which is believed to be owned by the UAE. But the latter denied ownership of the tanker.
July 18, 2019	Washington declared that the US destroyer Boxer destroyed an Iranian drone in the Strait of Hormuz after it threatened the US vessel. But Iran denied losing any of its drones.
July 19, 2019	The IRGC seized the British tanker Stena Impero and Mesdar — both run by the UK. The Mesdar was allowed to leave after receiving a warning from the Iranian authorities.
July 20, 2019	The IRGC forces Masdar oil tanker — operated by an Algerian firm — to change its course towards Iranian territorial waters after it was en route to pass through the Strait of Hormuz.
September 14, 2019	Houthis claimed responsibility for a drone attack against two Saudi oil facilities in Abqaiq-Khuras.

Source: *Annual Strategic Report 2019* (Riyadh: The International Institute for Iranian Studies (Rasanah), 2019), 119-120.

3.2 Intensifying Its Military Naval Presence in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden

Iran's maritime objectives extend to having a naval presence beyond its maritime boundaries — with the aim of establishing a presence and influence in the sphere of the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, which is second to the Strait of Hormuz in terms of providing strategic depth for Tehran. The Red Sea is the most important strategic control point because it is a passage for oil, a conduit for the passage of essential trade and the flow of military might between the Mediterranean, the Black Sea and the Atlantic Ocean and between the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean.⁽³⁶⁾

It is also one of the shipping routes that Iran uses to support its militias in Syria and Yemen. Iran also has boosted its naval and military presence at important sea corridors and strategic straits — as well as on the main trade routes. Iran uses the card of regional stability and global oil supplies in case it is blocked from exporting its oil due to US sanctions.⁽³⁷⁾ Former Quds Force Commander Qassem Soleimani hinted at threatening the security of the Red Sea — a threat that came one day after the Houthi militia targeted Saudi oil tankers in the Strait of Bab al-Mandab near the Yemeni coast.⁽³⁸⁾

3.3 Creating a Naval Fleet to Operate Beyond Domestic Maritime Borders and Sailing in High Seas

Under its maritime strategy, Iran saw that it was important to create a fleet that operates outside its traditional maritime scope, and to reflect the power of the country. In addition, it aimed for a fleet that operates on the open oceans, turns into a forward line for defending the country, establishes connections with its operation bases outside the Strait of Hormuz as well as at various maritime points — making it a force for influence and flexibility. In line with this approach was the opening of Chabahar port on the southern coast overlooking the Gulf of Oman. It is an alternative port for Iranian trade, away from the Arabian Gulf. This opening was to prepare Iran for any escalation that might impact its trade exchange. Iran believes that this port will be a point of contact with its networks and alliances that extend along the African coasts. Former Iranian President Hassan Rouhani, at the inauguration ceremony of the port, said that it enjoys a strategic location that “allows the connection of the African and Asian coasts to Central Asia via an overland road and railroad between the north and south — which is being developed by Iran along its eastern borders with Pakistan and Afghanistan.”⁽³⁹⁾

The multiple challenges faced by Iran’s naval forces made it imperative to adapt their development and operational plans to respond to the growing challenges they face through: restructuring the whole navy (the naval forces of the regular army and that of the IRGC) and announcing their intent to send vessels on the high seas. Tehran ushered in a phase of restructuring its naval forces and adopting the strategy of deployment beyond its maritime boundaries dubbed “Return to the Sea,” according to Sayyari in November 2016. “We are building two naval zones and three naval bases on the Makran coast,” he said. “This is in line with our policy of making a return to the sea,” he added. Sayyari also shed light on Iranian plans to equip Iranian naval forces with locally manufactured ground-to ground missiles, drones with a capacity to be launched from the sea, interception radars — as well as with submarines. It is not the first time that Sayyari has pointed to Iran’s maritime objectives beyond its immediate “regional waters.” He had said, “Our naval fleets will, in the near future, circle Africa and cross the Atlantic.” He also

pointed to East Asian waters as well. For Iran to achieve this end, it is making visits and carrying out joint naval drills with Asian and African countries.⁽⁴⁰⁾

3.4 Placing Pressure on US Military Presence in the Region

Iranian boats harassing US military vessels passing through the Arabian Gulf has increased recently. Nearly 30 harassment operations were recorded against vessels passing through the Strait of Hormuz by Iranian missile boats in 2016. The harassments continued through 2017⁽⁴¹⁾ as well as in 2018, 2019 and 2020. Definitely, the United States closely follows the growth of Iran's naval capabilities. The US Office of Naval Intelligence (ONI) issued a report, forecasting that by the time the arms embargo is lifted in 2020, Iran's naval forces will significantly boost their fleet after Tehran is allowed to purchase new naval vessels.⁽⁴²⁾

Iranian military leaders have continued to threaten US bases and interests in the Arabian Gulf region.⁽⁴³⁾ US reports indicated that Iran has deployed a range of anti-ship missiles in the region overlooking the Strait of Hormuz.⁽⁴⁴⁾ Iranian boats also harassed US warships in the Arabian Gulf. Iran threatened to target US commercial ships in the Arabian Gulf and the Sea of Oman, in case any Iranian oil tankers faced US attacks in the Caribbean.

In the same context, the IRGC established a new mockup jet carrier off Iran's southern coast to carry out potential drills using live ammunition. This decoy plane carrier was previously used in February 2015 during a military drill dubbed "The Great Prophet IX." This operation indicates that the IRGC was preparing to sink a mockup carrier — similar to the one it carried out in 2015.

The maritime dispute between Iran and its foes, especially the United States, escalated after the latter seized Iranian oil tankers that were bound for Venezuela, and confiscated what was aboard the vessels. The UK also seized the Iranian oil tanker *Grace 1* in July 2019 at the Strait of Gibraltar. Moreover, Israel targeted a number of Iranian oil tankers in 2021 in the Mediterranean on their way to Syria. US national security agencies followed in June 2021 the movements of two Iranian vessels — the Iranian modern frigate *Sahand* and the former oil tanker *Makran* which has been turned into a floating base. Iranian authorities said that the latter will reassert Iran's presence in the Atlantic Ocean and at the international level.⁽⁴⁵⁾

3.5 Intensifying Military Drills With Russia and China in the Indian Ocean and the Arabian Gulf

Iran-China maritime cooperation has taken a new turn since 2012 when Tehran sent its first naval group to Beijing⁽⁴⁶⁾ for training. Cooperation between the two sides has grown to include carrying out a host of joint drills, some of which involved Russia. Aspects of this cooperation have increased in recent

years. Iran participated in four-day joint naval drills on December 27, 2019 in the Gulf of Oman near the Iranian coast and the Arabian Gulf — with the participation of China and Russia. This was the first time in which Moscow and Beijing sent warships to carry out naval drills with Iranian forces in the Indian Ocean. The countries involved agreed to hold more drills early in 2022.⁽⁴⁷⁾

4. Challenges and Scope of Effectiveness

The Iranian navy is facing a host of challenges at the organizational and defense levels. The most important are as follows:

4.1 Dualism and the Dispute Between the Regular Army and the IRGC

Due to a host of reasons related to the persuasions and principles of the revolution, Iran granted preferences to the IRGC and its nascent navy to play a critical role and lead the military strategy. This was evident when the IRGC overtook most of Iran's critical military zones in the Arabian Gulf — along with supervising the naval missile arsenal and establishing the country's coastal naval headquarters. Furthermore, Iran allocated special military budgets to the IRGC that are far higher than those allocated to the regular army's navy, which retained a role in the blue seas — a role that was considered to be temporary until the IRGC's navy was capable of performing it. The most remarkable sign was the restructuring of the two naval forces — the regular army and the IRGC — as an initial step to achieve a state of tactical and strategic balance in 2010. In that year, the central command of the IRGC's navy was moved to Bandar Abbas besides the army's command headquarters as well as the announcement by the then-chief of the IRGC Ali Fadavi that the naval industries would also be moved to the same place.⁽⁴⁸⁾

Following the aforementioned moves, the IRGC was qualified to play more strategic roles, redefining the initial defense lines and deploying alongside the regular army's navy. This comes after the IRGC announced commissioning the vessel *Shahid Roudaki* deep in the blue seas in 2020.

It is a roll-on/roll-off commercial ship which was transformed into a warship armed with a host of speedboats and surface-to-surface cruise missiles. It was equipped with the *Sevom Khordad* (3rd Khordad) air defense system to ensure protection.⁽⁴⁹⁾

Based on the foregoing, it is clear that the distribution of the scope of work of the IRGC's naval forces, partnering with the regular army's navy — which took over the role of operating in the blue waters following the years of war, allocating generous budgets to the IRGC's navy and the dualism of missions between the two branches aim to establish some sort of integration between them to enable the IRGC to acquire comprehensive maritime capabilities in the near and distant maritime zones.

4.2 Operational Efficiency and Indigenous Development

The outmoded weapons of the Iranian navy and the flaws within the balance of power equation in the region led Iran to resort to depending on alternative domestic options. They included activating the role of domestic manufacturing industries that took over the modernization and development of the country's outdated naval vessels by depending on reengineering weapons or turning civilian vessels into military ones. In spite of these attempts, the vessels were unable to meet the requirements that warships should have such as capabilities to engage in military confrontations. They were not on par with new scientific or technological advancements.

Another glaring weakness was the lack of trained staff with relevant experience. This was apparent at the industrialization centers or in the military teams working aboard different naval vessels. Their handling of the command-and-control systems was poor. The aforementioned impacted the performance of Iran's naval forces and contributed to recurrent accidents during drills. This was the result of installing ill-matched spare parts/weapons in the combat and technical systems which weakened operational efficiency.

There are a host of additional factors that have contributed to lowering the efficiency of naval weapons, such as the following:

■ **Maritime geographical challenges:** As much as Iran's geography has granted its naval forces opportunities, its strategic location has also generated a host of challenges. They include the intensive presence of major world powers near Iran's maritime boundaries, heavy military deployments, specifically in the Arabian Gulf and in the northern part of the Indian Ocean, reaching up to the Red Sea, Bab al-Mandab, the Gulf of Aden and the Arabian Sea.

■ **Poor combat preparations:** The production of locally manufactured weapons and spare parts for Iranian frigates and some modifications to some Western-made frigates — which Iran secured in the pre-revolutionary period and some defense and missile systems purchased from its allies, especially China — has caused a mismatch in weapons systems, curbing their effectiveness. Iranian frigates are still suffering from poor air defense systems and are incapable of countering aerial attacks. For example, Iran has suspended the use of the air defense system Seacat fitted onto its Alvand-class frigate due to its poor performance.⁽⁵⁰⁾ Iran has focused on boosting its offensive capabilities through replacing Sea Killer Mk2 — a five-round missile installed on the Alvand-class frigate — with the four-round Chinese missiles (C-802).⁽⁵¹⁾ The past few years have seen several maritime incidents at the maritime zones in the Arabian Gulf, the Sea of Oman, and the Caspian Sea.

In the span of five years, Iran has lost its most prominent vessels on which it depended to implement its maritime strategy, and which also provided logistical support to its frigates that remain operational or need upgrading. Among

these incidents was the Damavand destroyer crashing into the breakwater in the Caspian Sea — leading it to completely sink in 2018. The reasons behind the incident, according to analysts, included the lack of technical know-how and preparation, as well as the vessel's inability to withstand different weather conditions in a narrow marine zone.⁽⁵²⁾ In addition, there was the friendly fire incident that destroyed the support vessel Konarak when an anti-ship missile was launched from the frigate Jamaran during a military drill in the region of Bandar-e-Jask and Chabahar in 2020. The aforementioned incidents reveal the extent of the haphazardness in Iran's rules of engagement and the evident weaknesses of the command and control systems.

■ **Technical problems:** On the technical front, the biggest challenge to the Iranian naval forces was their engines. The Iranian navy has been unable to purchase them. Countries have abstained from providing Iran with the necessary engines to install them on its ships or to carry out maintenance to them. Iran has sought to secure engines from some countries, but Germany turned down an Iranian request to provide it with two engines for the Jamaran destroyer — a move that prompted Tehran to turn to other countries. However, its requests were met with delays and procrastination, especially from France. Iranian sources have yet to confirm the delivery of a shipment that Tehran requested from Paris.⁽⁵³⁾ As a result, Iran has responded to Western refusals to its requests by arguing that the required engines will be used for civilian purposes exclusively.

Iran has carried out some local maintenance to its vessels' engines, especially at ISOIPCO complex specializing in manufacturing and developing Iranian ships. But the incidents from which Iranian vessels have suffered and the mounting problems related to them have exposed their real standing. Furthermore, among these instances was the burning and sinking of the supply ship Kharg near Bandar-e-Jask port overlooking the Gulf of Oman after suffering a blaze that the firefighters failed to control. It is believed that the fire was caused by an explosion in the ship's boilers.⁽⁵⁴⁾ This was mostly likely due to a glitch in the maintenance work that was carried out by the ISOICO complex to the already aging boilers. The Iranian navy is also facing growing obstacles related to securing maintenance parts for its most important vessels and the evident prolonging of development operations and the naval projects that Tehran launches continuously. The number of submarines and warships that need modernization and maintenance to bring them back into service is increasing. A report issued by Intel. Lap research institute — which sheds light on Iran's actual naval capabilities — indicates that the essential vessels have been taken out of operational service, especially the submarines⁽⁵⁵⁾

3.3 Deterrence and Regional and International Confrontation of Iran's Naval Deployments

The international and regional hunting down of Iran's maritime activities contributes to curbing its clout and ability to move freely. In addition, an international coalition could be formed to counter Iran's regional behavior and stand up to Tehran's role in the region. There is no doubt that this will impact Iran's capabilities in remoter spheres as well as its ability to secure the necessary resources to maintain its maritime presence on the scale needed. The United States has retaken the initiative to counter Iran's maritime activities through standing up to the increasing provocations by Tehran's naval forces. This is evidenced by the role of the US Marine Forces in countering Iranian maritime movements — especially off the Yemeni coast, in the Gulf of Aden and in the Arabian Gulf.

3.4 Limited Effectiveness in Achieving Set Strategic Objectives

As a whole, the attempts to develop the Iranian naval forces were not effective in terms of weaponry strength or military strategy given the various political and economic variables. At the level of the Arabian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz, Iran's naval forces' effectiveness is confined — in the narrow scope of the region — to the use of speedboats and naval missile launchers. It has little to no naval operational effectiveness in the regional and international seas.

A key impediment is the scant number of naval vessels. The Iranian navy has no more than five main vessels. The aforementioned hinder Iran's naval combat preparedness or its ability to navigate in the free waters, given that strategic naval strength depends on the swiftness of all units to respond to crises and threats.⁽⁵⁶⁾

In addition, Iranian strategic considerations require naval bases on the coasts of friendly and allied countries. to secure the logistical needs of naval vessels and boost the range of outreach.⁽⁵⁷⁾

Conclusion

In light of Iran's maritime orientations and the objectives and challenges the navy faces in fulfilling the tasks assigned to it by the Iranian leadership to protect the country's strategic interests and advance its standing, there are several difficulties and technical problems which impede it from executing its tasks. In general, we can conclude the following: First, the speedboats, naval missiles, naval mines, drones, and shallow water submarines represent the most salient pillars of Iran's naval forces. Second, the heavy deployment of the Iranian navy in the Arabian Gulf and the Red Sea and the naval displays of strength on the high seas in light of modest military capabilities is a lever with scant deterrent effect. Third, despite the efforts made by Iran to modernize its naval fleet including its frigates, warships and submarines, it has failed to plug

the gap in its essential naval vessels. Fourth, in light of developing military information and technology and the surge in the level of threats, it is hard for the Iranian navy to achieve its ambitions on the high seas and dominate regionally. This is because of its outdated weapons, the harsh economic situation at home, the decline in oil prices globally, and the international sanctions. These factors will further slowdown the manufacturing of weapons and hold back the efficiency of Iran's naval forces.

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THE KURDISH ARENAS: A POLITICAL CARD BETWEEN TURKEY AND IRAN

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Abstract

The interests of Turkey and Iran converge and intersect across several regional issues. Due to its security, political, economic and ethnic dimensions, the interests of both the Turks and Iranians deeply overlap and intertwine when it comes to the Kurdish question. The two countries share the same view regarding the Kurdish question as a security concern that threatens their sovereignty in light of the Kurdish ambition to create an independent Kurdish state that encompasses land from Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria. However, the two countries use the Kurds as a political lever in their dispute over regional influence. The study, therefore, discusses in detail the Kurdish groups affiliated with Turkey and Iran, the factors influencing the position of Turkey and Iran towards the Kurds, and the attitudes of the Turks and Iranians in their handling of the Kurds. The study also sheds light on whether the Kurdish card between Turkey and Iran represents a point of intersection or a conflict of interests.

Keywords: *Kurdish question, Iran, Turkey,*

The Kurdish arenas abound with political tensions, either between the Kurdish groups themselves, or through the groups' interactions with the outside world in light of regional and international developments. Turkey and Iran attach a great deal of significance to all Kurdish developments, whether those occurring within their own territories or in Iraq and Syria given the fact that Kurdish communities live within their national boundaries and the Iraqi and Syrian central governments are as yet unable to extend their sovereignty over the entire Kurdish geographical spheres due to several impediments.

The historical background is of great importance when trying to understand how Turkey's and Iran's relationship was formed with the Kurdish parties. The past few years have brought to light several developments in the Kurdish arenas. In these arenas the interests of both Ankara and Tehran are intertwined, however, at certain moments their interests conflict, compromising their national interests.

Regionally, the Iraqi Kurdish referendum for independence in 2017 had many ramifications for the status of the Kurds and their relations in the region. Kurdish forces played an important role in supporting the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS which was formed in 2014. Subsequently, Kurdish forces played a critical role in the Syrian crisis, resulting in them fully controlling the north-east of Syria. Turkey responded by launching military operations against Kurdish strongholds inside Iraq and Syria. Iran continues to support Bashar al-Assad's regime, however, to take control of the Syrian border areas, it has entrusted Shiite militias to carry out military operations in Iraq, thus undermining the Kurdistan Regional Government's influence in its territories.

Internationally, there is a new variable as the Biden administration took over the US presidency at the beginning of this year. It has a different approach towards the Kurds compared to the Trump administration, which withdrew from the Kurdish areas in northern Syria in 2019. This left Washington's Kurdish allies vulnerable to Turkish attacks. Washington later reconsidered its decision and redeployed troops to the surrounding oil-rich areas. On the other hand, Russia has taken the lead in Syria and sometimes coordinates with Turkey to support its operations against the Kurds, and sometimes it mediates to conclude agreements between Turkey and the Kurds. At the same time, it provides an official cover for Assad's forces and his allies on the ground, primarily Iran's Shiite militias.

All the aforementioned developments result in significant questions arising: Do the Kurdish territories constitute arenas of cooperation or conflict between the two neighbors, Iran and Turkey? Do the Kurds have a united front? What are the internal differences amongst the Kurds? When will the Kurdish card be a means of convergence between Turkey and Iran, and when will it be cause for dispute? How does each country exploit the Kurdish file to

shun the other and advance its political objectives?

In this paper, we assume that there are conflicting interests between Turkey and Iran in the Kurdish arenas across Syria and Iraq, although the Kurdish card was initially a means of cooperation and coordination between the two parties. The Kurdish arenas have been overwhelmed with Turkish-Iranian rivalry and exploitation because each party wishes to defend its own core national interests, or to extend political and regional influence through ideological, military, and economic means. To investigate the validity of this assumption, we review in-depth four major topics: The characteristics and variables of Kurdish groups connected to Iran and Turkey; the factors impacting Turkey's and Iran's positions; the most critical junctures in Turkish-Iranian interactions with regard to the Kurds; the Kurdish card between Turkey and Iran: intersection or conflicting interests?

The following table lists the acronyms of Kurdish parties used throughout the study.

KDP	Kurdistan Democratic Party
PUK	Patriotic Union of Kurdistan
KNC	Kurdish National Council
PYD	Democratic Union Party
YPG	People's Protection Units
PKK	Kurdistan Workers' Party
PJAK	Kurdistan Free Life Party
KDPI	Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan
Komala	Komala Party of Iranian Kurdistan
YBS	Sinjar Resistance Units
EPF	Ezidkhan Protection Force

1. Kurdish Groups Connected to Iran and Turkey: Characteristics and Variables

The Kurds could not manage to forge a united front due to several internal variables and differences amongst the Kurdish groups. These internal variables and differences can be classified as follows:

1.1 Kurdish-Kurdish Differences/Distinctions

The ruling party of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and its democratic partner in Iraqi Kurdistan, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), stand out prominently from other Kurdish groups in Iraq. The Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) is active in the mountains of Kurdistan and opposes the Turkish government, and the Kurdistan Free Life Party (PJAK) opposes the Iranian government. In Syria, the Democratic Union Party (PYD), whose military arm is the People's Protection Units (YPG), is the dominant party in the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), and the Kurdish National Council (KNC).

The Kurdish groups have various political ideologies. The PKK is radical and revolutionary; the KDP is democratic although with some aspects of conservative feudalism; and the PUK is a leftist nationalist movement, with a tilt towards progressive socialism. There are also radical differences between Kurdish groups regarding Kurdish nationalism, however, this might not be significant to delve into when discussing Kurdish aspirations for unity. At the cultural and social levels, linguistic distinctions stand out the most. Kurds in Turkey, Syria and northwestern Iraqi Kurdistan mainly speak Kurmanji (written in the Latin alphabet), while the Kurds of Iran and southeastern Iraqi Kurdistan speak Sorani (written in the Arabic alphabet). In the context of religion, there are Shiite Kurds in Iran who have sectarian disagreements with the Sunni Kurds and are the majority in Iran, Turkey, Syria, and Iraq. We cannot lose sight of the Yazidis who hide their beliefs because of religious persecution. Their beliefs are linked to ancient religions like Zoroastrianism and are also derived from Islamic and Christian teachings.⁽¹⁾

The distinctions in the Kurdish sphere are not limited to language and religion, but extend to collective memories of historical military conflicts, especially the civil war between the Iraqi Kurdistan parties (the KDP and the PUK) which broke out in 1994 and lasted until 1998, or the renewed military disputes between the KDP and the PKK. Particularly, the ruling party in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KDP) does not oppose the decades-old successive Turkish strikes against the PKK's positions in the Qandil Mountains inside its territories.

Economic fortunes play an important role in deepening the disparity between the Kurdish parties. Economic relations with Turkey have enabled

Barzani's ruling party in the Kurdistan Region to build infrastructure projects and reap financial revenues, and consolidate its national and regional position unlike its counterparts from other Kurdish groups such as the PKK and those following revolutionary ideologies in northern Syria.

Regional and international developments have had a clear impact on raising certain parties at the expense of others. Turkey, the United States, NATO, the EU and European countries designating the PKK as a terror outfit⁽²⁾ eroded its influence at the international level, unlike the international recognition that other Iraqi Kurdish parties enjoy because of their involvement in the international military campaigns to oust the former Saddam regime.

1.2 Developments in the Kurdish Arena in Iraq

After the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq War, Saddam Hussein drew attention to the problem of the Kurdish rebellion. Foremost among Saddam's concerns was that the Kurds or Iran would destroy the oil pipeline that passes through Iraqi Kurdistan, Turkey and Europe. As soon as the war with Iran ended, Saddam launched the Anfal campaign against the Kurds and committed massacres against them. Chemical weapons were used, resulting in the death of 182,000 civilians.⁽³⁾ This massacre brought the Kurds together, leading to the creation of the Kurdistan Front under the leadership of Barzani and Talabani. The former later took over the leadership of the Peshmerga's military operations, while the latter assumed responsibility for foreign relations.⁽⁴⁾

During the 1990s, the two most important internal developments in Iraqi Kurdistan were the bloody conflict that erupted in 1992 between the PKK and the Kurdish alliance in Iraq, which included the KDP and the PUK backed by Turkey; and the civil war between the two allies and the two prominent parties in Iraqi Kurdistan: the KDP and the PUK. The PKK engaged in the war, exacerbating the conflict, in favor of the PUK against the KDP.⁽⁵⁾

The constitution of the central government of Iraq recognized in 2005⁽⁶⁾ Kurdish autonomy over Iraqi Kurdistan. Then their experiences developed into democratic elections, after which Jalal Talabani became the president of Iraq, and Mustafa Barzani the governor of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

ISIS incursions into Syria and Iraq had ramifications on the Kurds. The battle to regain Sinjar from ISIS control played an important role in changing Kurdish dynamics in the region. ISIS attacked the Yazidi religious minority, punished their men and committed heinous crimes against their families. PKK forces, supported by the international coalition and the Iraqi Peshmerga aligned with the KDP, and also supported by the Syrian Peshmerga and the Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), managed to liberate Sinjar and expel ISIS elements.⁽⁷⁾

This change in dynamics revealed prominent political paradoxes due to the fact that the forces linked to the PKK, which are included on international

terrorist lists, received international support. Furthermore, the new dynamics led to temporary Kurdish cooperation between the warring factions, an increasing Kurdish role in important regional issues, the expansion of PKK influence, and the training of pro-Yazidi militias.⁽⁸⁾

The Kurdistan Regional Government's hope to hold a referendum for independence in 2017 was crushed when it faced international opposition, especially from the United States, and regional opposition which was evident in the Turkish and Iranian reactions. At the internal level, the Kurdish referendum's declared goals were met with skepticism and caution by the PUK, the rival of the ruling KDP in the region. The PUK, therefore, sought to converge with the Syrian Kurds, who have close ties with the PKK.

1.3 Variables in the Syrian Kurdish Arena

The PYD was established in 2003 to defend the rights of the Kurds in Syria, and it does not keep secret its clear subordination to PKK policy. Since the beginning of the civil uprising in Syria against Bashar al-Assad in 2011, the Syrian Kurdish groups led by the PYD used their human and military capabilities to defend their lands. This was achieved through the efforts of its military arm, the People's Protection Units (YPG) and the unprecedented support from the PKK, which has supported the Syrian Kurds for a long time with a number of Syrian Kurds holding leadership positions in the PKK's military hierarchy.⁽⁹⁾

In October 2011 in Erbil, the capital of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, an umbrella of Kurdish parties in Syria opposing the PYD approach was established and dubbed as the Kurdish National Council (KNC). It included up to 13 Kurdish parties, most of which were formed after the outbreak of the Syrian uprising. The KNC is ideologically aligned with the Barzani-led KDP in Iraq, although it includes emerging left and revolutionary parties.

The KNC umbrella contributed to the creation of the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces in 2012. Its military arm, the Rojava Peshmerga, was formed in Iraqi Kurdistan, consisting of Syrian Kurdish fighters numbering between 300,000 and 500,000 fighters, most of whom are Kurdish soldiers who defected from the Syrian army following the outbreak of the civil uprising. However, the Rojava Peshmerga has not participated in any military operations inside Syria. The KNC and the PYD are still debating over relocating the Rojava Peshmerga back to its Syrian home.⁽¹⁰⁾

It is important to shed light on the map of the Kurdish divisions in Syria. The KNC led by the KDP is internationally recognized and has been integrated into all matters relating to the Syrian opposition. It is also involved in the Astana peace talks in Syria, guaranteed by the three countries involved in the conflict: Russia, Turkey and Iran. On the other hand, the apparent brotherhood between the PYD and the PKK put the former under the spotlight of international

suspicion and prompted Turkey to oppose any attempt to involve the PYD in the diplomatic settlement in Syria to prevent it from gaining international legitimacy.

The PYD, however, managed to establish a partnership with the United States during the Kobane battle in September 2014. In October of the same year, the PYD received its first shipment of arms supplies from the US-led coalition. This partnership resulted in the PYD controlling three important areas in northern Syria: Afrin, Hasaka and Kobane. In addition, it led to the formation of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) as the PYD allied with the scattered diaspora of Arabs, Turkmen, Muslims and Christians.⁽¹¹⁾ The external threat meant that Kurdish groups had to unite against a common enemy. The battle to liberate Kobane from ISIS was one of the threats that led to a Kurdish consensus and this was aided by the channels of communication that Washington established between the KNC and the PYD in Dohuk.⁽¹²⁾

The PYD's pivotal role resulted in it turning into an active political player in the Syrian crisis, and helped it to develop influence, whether in regards to current Syrian events or in relation to future proposals to resolve the Syrian crisis. Although Turkey carried out successive attacks targeting PYD controlled territories – this point will be discussed in detail under subheading 2- and the US withdrew from northern Syria while keeping its forces around the oilfields in Hasaka in 2019, the PYD still controls vast territories east of the Euphrates in northern Syria — even after Turkish forces and the Syrian opposition took Afrin in March 2018.⁽¹³⁾

Kurdish nationalism as a whole has never been represented by a united political party nor a single representative front. However, on more than one occasion, we have seen temporary cooperation between the warring Kurdish factions to counter an external existential threat; their joint defense when ISIS took over Sinjar and killed the Yazidi religious minority, and their joint response when ISIS invaded Kobane in Syria. Yet, fragmentation and partisanship still prominently exist amongst the Kurdish groups. The PKK adopts a revolutionary Marxist ideology as do the Kurdish parties in Syria, in particular the PYD and the PJAK in Iran that are hostile to the KDP's policies, the ruling party in the Kurdistan Region. The PUK seems hesitant to defend its political interests; sometimes it aligns with the KDP by engaging with it in the democratic experience in Iraqi Kurdistan and at other times it enters into disputes with it, moving closer towards the PKK and its loyalists.

2. Factors Impacting Turkish and Iranian Positions on the Kurds

There are four main factors which influence Turkish and Iranian positions towards the Kurds:

2.1 The Persisting Kurdish Ambition for an Independent State

The Kurdish ambition for an independent state dates back to the 20th century in the aftermath of the Ottoman Empire collapsing. However, the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923, which was subsequently signed after the fall of the Ottoman Empire, determined Turkey's current borders and prevented the establishment of a single Kurdish state as was envisioned by the Kurdish leadership at the time. The Kurdish struggle continued at all levels during the last century, from the establishment of the Republic of Mahabad in northwest Iran with Soviet support, which was suppressed in 1947 by the Pahlavi shah and his Western allies; the unsuccessful revolt against the British Mandate in Iraq; the armed struggle led by Mustafa Barzani during the 1960s in Iraq; to the 1970s when the Pahlavi government and the United States abandoned the Kurds after Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi signed the Algiers Agreement with Saddam Hussein to demarcate the borders between Iran and Iraq in 1975.⁽¹⁴⁾

Thus, the concern about the Kurdish ambition to establish a single state is the fundamental reason for Turkey and Iran engaging with the Kurdish minority at home and abroad. The PKK began its revolutionary operations to separate Kurdish territories from Turkey in the 1980s. The Iranian Kurdish parties were brutally suppressed after the 1979 revolution for fear that the Kurds would demand political autonomy or separation. Turkey's and Iran's opposition to the Kurdish ambition was evident from their decisive opposition to the Kurdish independence referendum in Iraq in 2017.

2.2 The Problems of National Security and Terrorism

In the four countries that have large Kurdish minorities, several security problems stem from Kurdish separatist movements. Separatist movements seem inevitable in light of the policies towards Kurdish culture, rights, language, and recognition. Prior to the 1990s, the Kurdish card was the basis of relations between the concerned countries, resulting in unique security relations between them, either to quell Kurdish protests or to antagonize neighboring countries, like when Iran and Syria used the Kurdish card against Turkey.

The first security agreement signed between Turkey and Iran in light of the Kurdish equation was in September to uphold border security. Iraq, Iran and Turkey, with the participation of Syria, previously held a series of conferences starting in 1992 to prevent the Kurds from establishing an independent state in northern Iraq. These conferences continued until 1995 when the Kurdish civil war escalated and then Turkey intervened to support the KDP, and Iran supported the PUK.⁽¹⁵⁾ The security problems stemming from the Kurdish card still motivate Iran and Turkey to strengthen areas of cooperation such as by signing agreements to strengthen border security and combat terrorism

to prevent continued oil and gas pipeline attacks such as the March 2020 bombing incident, which disrupted the export of Iranian gas to Turkey.⁽¹⁶⁾

2.3 Ramifications of Weak Central Governments in Syria and Iraq

The weakness of the Syrian and Iraqi central governments has affected the status quo in the Kurdish arenas. During the 1990s, the Iraqi government lost control of northern Kurdistan as a result of the air embargo imposed by Western countries and the UN Security Council in 1992. The Iraqi central government grew weaker after 2003 due to sectarian divisions and the conflict of internal interests instigated by regional parties intervening in the country. The status of Iraq as a declining regional power meant that it was imperative for the other two powers, Turkey and Iran, to compete in order to expand their influence within Iraqi territories.⁽¹⁷⁾

Iran and Turkey support both sides in the Syrian crisis. Iran has fought alongside the Shiite militias linked to Assad's forces, while Turkey has supported the Syrian opposition stationed in its last stronghold, Idlib. The two sides are aware of the opportunity presented to Kurdish parties to establish their control over northeastern Syria in their quest for autonomy. This would not have been possible if the Syrian government had not lost its control over its territories.

2.4 International and Regional Use of the Kurdish Card

Iran and Turkey have a number of concerns about the regional and international exploitation of the Kurdish card that contradicts their strategic interests. International players exploit the Kurdish card to promote their interests in the Middle East and to place pressure on Turkey or Iran, most notably the United States and Russia. Regionally, Israel is a pivotal partner for Washington.

Washington has always presented itself as supportive of Kurdish demands for self-determination. Although it has repeatedly disappointed the Kurds, America has undoubtedly exploited the Kurdish card politically to leverage against certain countries in the region. Iran's Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi used the Kurds in the 1970s against Iraq and then betrayed them by signing the Algiers Agreement of 1975. The Kurds were used in the 1991 Gulf War, but they were supported when they rose up against Saddam Hussein, but this uprising was violently suppressed by the Iraqi regime. The Americans used the Kurds again in the war to overthrow Saddam in 2003.

According to Iran, the situation is more dangerous because it opposes the US military presence close to its western borders. In addition, it resents the convergence of Israeli-US interests in regard to their focus on the Kurdish card. Turkey guards against full US support for the Kurds, especially during the air embargo in the 1990s in northern Iraq, although it essentially participated in enforcing it. The US alliance with the Kurds in Syria, under the pretext of

eliminating ISIS, has raised Turkish ire. It should be noted that there are news reports about a US offer to win over Komala, an Iranian Kurdish party, on the condition that it ends its subordination to the PKK'S revolutionary ideology. The Komala party reportedly rejected the US offer.⁽¹⁸⁾ The US support for the PYD, linked to the PKK, raises doubts about the reports regarding the US making a conditional offer.

The Soviet Union supported the establishment of the Republic of Mahabad in northwestern Iran, but the Shah of Iran used his Western allies to overthrow it quickly after 11 months of its establishment. Russia continues to use the Kurdish card in its bilateral relationship with Turkey whenever needed. For example, in response to the negative Turkish reaction against Russia's intervention in Chechnya during the 1990s, Moscow raised Turkish ire after it opened the so-called "Kurdish House" in Moscow in December 1994, and allowed PKK members to attend military training operations in January 1995. However, the crisis was defused when Russian Prime Minister Primakov, back then, refused to grant the PKK leader asylum in Russia in 1998.⁽¹⁹⁾ Currently, Russia is a major and dominant actor in the Syrian crisis and has the upper hand in establishing security in the Kurdish engagement areas and contact with Turkish troops or Syrian forces and their allies; Iran's militias.

Therefore, both Ankara and Tehran are aware of the security problems raised by the Kurds and the potential ramifications of regional and international parties interacting with the Kurds as their national interests might be undermined or contradicted. There are other factors influencing Turkey's and Iran's position towards the Kurds such as the weakness of the two central governments in Syria and Iraq, and the growing ambitions of the Kurds for establishing an independent state.

3. Turkish and Iranian Attitudes Towards the Kurds

After reviewing the Kurdish arenas, the variables in Syria and Iraq and the factors impacting Turkish and Iranian positions, we now attempt to shed light on the most significant junctures in Turkish and Iranian interactions with the Kurds, in light of domestic, regional and international developments.

3.1 Turkey's Reaction to the Kurdish Question

Turkey confronting the PKK's threats to its national security has been a fundamental aspect of Ankara's foreign policy. Following the collapse of the peace talks between the Turkish government and the PKK, that started in 2013 and lasted for less than two years, the two sides have waged war against each other. The PKK was founded on a nationalist revolutionary Marxist ideology that seeks to separate Kurdish territories from Turkey. However, over the past decades, the PKK's ambitions were restricted since the Kurds gained some autonomy and rights inside Turkish territories. It should be noted that

the Kurdish population in Turkey amounts to about 20 percent of the total population.

The conflict between Turkey and the PKK impacts the Turkish interior, especially Kurdish populated areas, as illustrated by the Turkish government's enactment of emergency laws to stifle the Kurds. Following the military confrontations with the PKK, the Turkish government imprisoned thousands of members of the Turkish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), supportive of the Kurds, and expelled 93 governors from their posts in Kurdish metropolises, and replaced them with government commissioners.⁽²⁰⁾ The HDP returned to the political arena after the 2018 parliamentary election and it has actively participated with other opposition parties against the Turkish government, the Freedom and Justice Party, led by President Erdogan and its ally the Nationalist Movement Party MHP. The Turkish government has attempted to keep the HDP away from the political scene completely and pass legislation that would give it the right to prosecute HDP members and lawmakers.⁽²¹⁾

Turkey had previously extended a helping hand to both prominent Kurdish parties in the region, the KDP and the PUK, in their struggle against the Iraqi Baathist government during the 1990s, through enforcing the no-fly zone imposed by Western powers on the Kurdish areas known as Operation Provide Comfort (OPC). We cannot ignore the various pressure tools Turkey has at its disposal, most notably the Kurdish region's economic dependence on trade with Ankara, as well as the region generating revenues from exporting oil and its derivatives to Turkish markets.

Turkey's foreign policy goal is to prevent an independent Kurdish state in Iraq's Kurdistan Region and launch military operations against PKK strongholds in northern Iraq. Over the past two years, Turkey has launched several military operations in northern Iraq to attack PKK fighters and eliminate them. In the middle of 2020, it launched Operation Claw-Eagle, and then in February 2021 launched Operation Claw-Eagle 2 in Jabal Karah, Amadiya district in Dohuk Governorate in the Kurdistan Region. The second operation aimed to free 13 Turkish prisoners who were being held by the PKK, but it was unsuccessful. Ankara accused the PKK of killing the Turkish prisoners during the operation. The PKK responded that the Turkish bombing of a cave in Jabal Karah killed all the Turkish prisoners.⁽²²⁾ In addition to the two mentioned Turkish operations, Ankara launched its third, Operation Claw-Lightning and Claw-Thunderbolt, in April of this year.⁽²³⁾

On the Syrian side, the PYD's control of vast lands in Syria worries the Turkish government, as it considers this to be an existential threat to its national unity and its worries would grow if Kurdish nationalists demand an independent state. Turkey considers the PYD in Syria and its military wing, the YPG, solely a Syrian branch of the PKK. Therefore, it deals with this party as a terrorist

outfit, so it opposed with all its political weight the PYD's involvement in the peace talks in regard to resolving the Syrian crisis.

The successive Kurdish triumphs to expel ISIS and the siege of Raqqa from October 2017 until victory was announced in March 2019⁽²⁴⁾ coincided with Turkish military operations to prevent the formation of an autonomous region run by the Kurds. It carried out two military operations against Kurdish-controlled territory; the first, Operation Euphrates Shield, which lasted until March 2017, and then Operation Olive Branch, through which it regained Afrin in March 2018. Undoubtedly, the two operations were coordinated with Russian forces. Strategically, Turkey aims to advance its troops into Syrian territory by 32 kilometers and along the border strip with Syria, estimated at 460 kilometers, to establish a safe zone to abort any attempted Kurdish autonomy project.⁽²⁵⁾

3.2 Iran's Reaction to the Kurdish Question

The estimates of the Kurdish population inside Iran vary, and it is more likely close to 10 percent of the total Iranian population — though the Kurdish sources go beyond this percentage. As in the case with all ethnic minorities in Iran, the Kurdish people suffer from serious marginalization, persecution and their civil and cultural rights are denied.⁽²⁶⁾

Historically, the Kurds participated in the revolution against the Pahlavi government, but Khomeini, months after taking power, believed that Kurdish ambitions were akin to “disbelief in Islam” and directed the Iranian army and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) to end the Kurdish movement. As a result, 10,000 Kurds were killed.⁽²⁷⁾ At that time, the two prominent Kurdish parties were the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran (KDPI), which was headed by Abd al-Rahman Ghassemlou who was assassinated by the Iranian government in 1989, and the Komala Party, which aligned itself to a Marxist-Leninist ideology. The former only called for autonomy without having separatist ambitions.⁽²⁸⁾ During the Iran-Iraq War, just as Iran exploited the hostility of Iraqi Kurds towards Saddam, the Iraqi forces exploited the armed struggle of the Kurds against the Iranian political system led by Khomeini.

The year 2004 witnessed the rise of the Kurdish Free Life Party (PJAK), which is ideologically and organizationally connected to the PKK. Sporadic disputes have erupted between the PJAK and the Iranian government. Although the PJAK announced that it had halted its military operations in 2011, these operations continued until the current moment in time. Iran has launched military strikes targeting sites in northern Iraqi Kurdistan, which it says are PJAK strongholds. Iran stirs political divisions among the two prominent parties in the Iraqi Kurdistan Region because it fears Kurdish national unity and wants to thwart Kurdish separatist attempts. Therefore, even if Iran recognizes the Kurdistan Regional Government of Iraq, it certainly does not

want a unified Kurdish entity inside Iraq nor an autonomous Kurdish entity in northern Syria. Iran, however, has different considerations when it comes to the Kurds in Syria because they are quite close to Turkey's border, and Tehran therefore has a heavy bargaining chip against the Turkish government.

During the Iran-Iraq War, Iran used every means available to agitate the Kurds and support their struggle against Saddam. During the four years of civil war between the two parties, the KDP and the PUK from 1994 to 1998, Turkish-Iranian rivalry surfaced. Turkey aligned with the KDP while Iran aligned with the PUK. This civil war ended after US mediation and a peace treaty signed between the two parties called the Washington Agreement in 1998.⁽²⁹⁾

The common denominator between Iran and the PUK was their hostility to the KDP. According to some reports, there were talks between Iran and the PUK in 2017 to establish a pipeline to export oil from Sulaymaniyah through Iran.⁽³⁰⁾ Iran's growing influence over Iraq's central government after the collapse of the Saddam state allowed it to activate its Shiite militias inside Iraq against the Kurdistan Regional Government to exhaust the KDP's forces, the ruling Turkish-backed party. In Syria, the IRGC-backed militias are active, and they operate under the cover of Assad's regular army.

3.3 The Worsening of Disagreements in Sinjar

Turkey has had military posts established inside Iraq for decades to eliminate PKK forces, which currently depend on the rugged terrain of the Sinjar Mountains and the Qandil Mountains, to hide or stir unrest against the Turkish government.

Recently, Tehran's ambassador to Iraq, Iraj Masjedi, condemned Turkey's military operations. In response, Turkey summoned Tehran's ambassador to Ankara, Muhammad Farazmand, in protest against the statement of the Iranian ambassador to Iraq. According to media reports, the two regional powers are potentially heading towards a cold war, given the fact that tensions between the two countries have dramatically increased to such an extent that forced Iran to summon Turkey's ambassador to Tehran, Derya Urs.⁽³¹⁾

The Sinjar district is located in the triangle of northwest Iraq along both the Turkish and Syrian borders, specifically west of the city of Mosul within the Nineveh Governorate of the Kurdistan Region. This gives it great strategic importance. Before 2014, it was an area disputed between the Iraqi central government and the Kurdistan Regional Government, and then fell into the grip of ISIS, leaving the Yazidis, there vulnerable to rape, killing and displacement. About 75 percent of its inhabitants are Yazidi Kurds. However, some prefer to reveal their Kurdish identity only, whereas others are proud of the Yazidi community's unique heritage.⁽³²⁾

Thanks to Kurdish fighters from Syria and Iraqi Kurdistan, and with the support of the international coalition, Sinjar was liberated in November 2015, and since then Kurdish groups have taken control over the region's mountains, including the PKK. The latter developed much popularity amongst the Yazidis because of the support it offered to them after they suffered much brutality under ISIS control, marking this period as the darkest in Sinjar's history. The PKK established a safe corridor to help Yazidis escape from Sinjar.

The Sinjar Mountains is highly significant in Iran's regional strategy, given the fact that it can possibly use these mountains as a crossing point for its Shiite fighters, and a conduit for military supplies across the border. By engaging in the battles to liberate Iraq from ISIS control, Iran managed to deploy its Shiite militias in territories surrounding the Sinjar region.⁽³³⁾

PKK forces have infiltrated areas in the Kurdistan Region, especially where popular anger against the KDP is growing, as is the case in Sulaymaniyah, or in the Sinjar region, home to the Yazidi community, with the Yazidis accuse the KDP's Peshmerga of abandoning them when ISIS attacked their homes. Since the beginning of the battle against ISIS, the PKK used the conflict as an opportunity to establish its influence in Sinjar by establishing militias that are loyal to it, most notably the Sinjar Resistance Units (YBS) and the Yezidkhan Protection Forces (EPF).

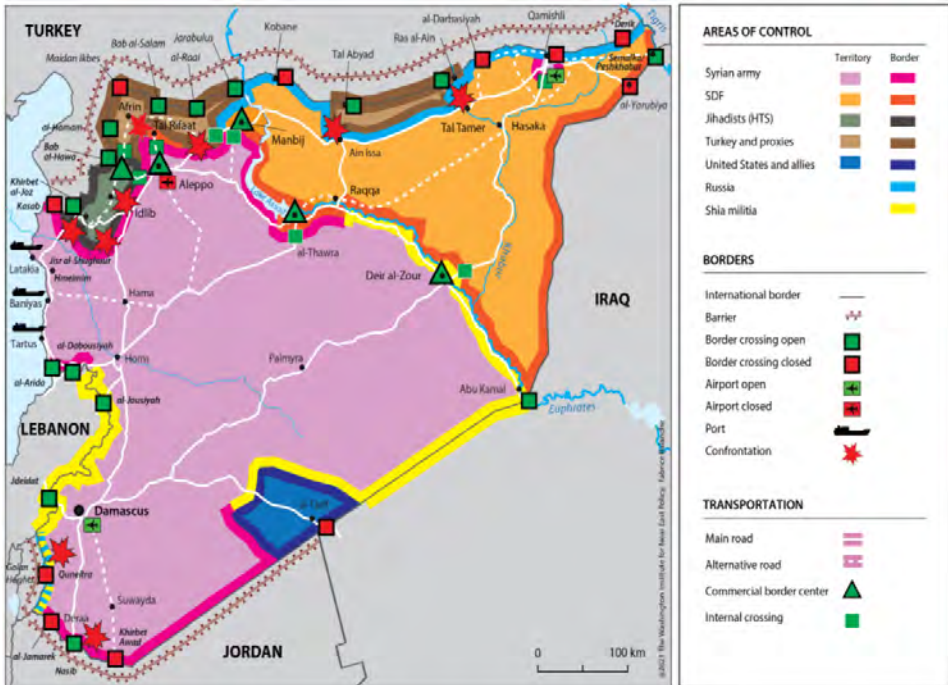
The Shiite PMF has developed links with the PKK because they share the same outlook and face common enemies, motivating the former deputy PMF commander Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis in 2019 to conclude an agreement with the PKK. This paved the way for the YBS and other Yazidi militias connected to the PKK to benefit from the PMF's financial allocations that had been provided to it by the Iraqi federal government.⁽³⁴⁾

3.4 The US Position on the Kurdish Question

After the former US President Trump took the decision to withdraw US forces, amounting to nearly 2,000 soldiers, from Syria in October 2019, Turkey intervened militarily for the third time through operation Spring of Peace which forced hundreds of thousands of civilians to flee from the area that Ankara sought to secure. The operation forced the SDF to plead to Russia and Syria for their forces to confront the Turkish threat. The situation ended with the withdrawal of Kurdish forces from the border with Turkey, and the involvement of Russian and Turkish patrols to comb the border area, except for 120 kilometers of the border located between Tal Abyad and Ras al-Ain, since it is under the exclusive control of Turkish forces.⁽³⁵⁾ Despite the Turkish advances and the results of its agreement with Russia, the SDF forces still managed to extend their

influence over vast areas in the northeastern Syria and east of the Euphrates, as shown in Map 1 below.

Map 1: Spheres of Influence of Disputing Forces in Syria



Source: Fabrice Balanch, "The Assad Regime Has Failed to Restore Full Sovereignty Over Syria," *The Washington Institute*, February 10, 2021, <https://bit.ly/2U6YRwN>.

Iran opposes the US presence on Iraqi soil, particularly the US military bases established in Kurdish cities. These served as a platform for many operations launched by the United States against the Iraqi central government, whether during the 1991 Gulf War or the operations it carried out to overthrow Saddam Hussein in 2003. Iran's opposition reflects the Iranian government's concern that it might face the same fate as the Baathist regime in Iraq.

In Syria, US support for the Kurdish parties complicates Iran's strategy that supports Bashar al-Assad and hinders the efforts of Iran's Axis of Resistance, which extends from Tehran through Baghdad to Damascus and Beirut. Turkey rejects US support for the Kurdish parties in Syria and considers changing their names to be a political ploy that is part of Washington's strategy. Washington perceives the Kurdish forces as a trustworthy ally, especially in defeating ISIS. At the same time, the United States seeks to avoid provoking its Turkish ally.

4. The Kurdish Card Between Turkey and Iran: Intersection or Conflict of Interests?

At first glance, the Kurdish card may appear to be the focus of strategic cooperation between Turkey and Iran to quell Kurdish ambitions for separation, but the Kurdish card has many entanglements and the polarizing disputes stemming from these entanglements are well known.

Before we address the areas of disagreement between the two sides in light of the Kurdish question, it is worth mentioning the cooperation between the two sides in certain areas:

4.1 Nominal Cooperation Against Terrorism

In 2019, when Iran and Turkey signed a memorandum of understanding to boost security cooperation on their shared border strip, and although Turkey stated that it carried out joint operations with Iran against PKK sites after concluding the security agreement, Tehran quickly denied this, raising doubts about military cooperation between the two sides against the Kurds in Iraq.⁽³⁶⁾ Kurdish media platforms confirmed on September 9, 2020 that Turkish attacks against PKK militants in northern Iraq coincided with military attacks launched by the IRGC on sites near PJAK strongholds in Iraqi Kurdistan.⁽³⁷⁾ It should be noted that the Iranian strikes did not cause any casualties, but rather material damage to farms belonging to Kurdish villagers. This indicates that the details of the agreement between Turkey and Iran were merely nominal and not substantial.

4.2 Close Cooperation to Thwart the Establishment of an Independent Kurdish State

This is evident from both sides rejecting the Iraqi Kurdish independence referendum in 2017 and it is currently evident in their agreement to curb Kurdish ambitions in Syria, fearing that Kurdish control of northeastern Syria will lead to autonomy and heighten calls for Kurdish autonomy in northern Iraq.

4.3 The Individual Responses to Internal Threats

It is also evident in the suppression of separatist movements and the tightening of restrictions on groups sympathetic to the Kurds so that they do not impact the course of political decision-making in the two countries. On the other hand, conflicting Turkish-Iranian interests in regard to the Kurdish file are also evident:

■ The possibility of increasing the frequency of clashes in the Sinjar region: The developments in the Sinjar region caused concern for several reasons, most notably that they foreshadowed an unbridled Turkish-Iranian conflict in the future. The Turkish military operations against PKK sites are also a

bold challenge to Iranian goals, and it is likely that this challenge will lead to a direct clash between Iraqi Shiite militias under the command of Iran and the Turkish side.

The developments of the clashes in the Sinjar region will reveal crucial complications between the Turkish and Iranian parties in the coming days, especially as the Turkish side is prioritizing the security problem created by the PKK in Sinjar and northern Iraq, while the Iranian side cares more about arms supplies and the movement of its Shiite militias across the Iraqi-Syrian border.

■ **Shiite militias and the PKK converging, thus threatening Turkey's interests:** The real threat to Turkey is the Iranian convergence, represented by the PMF, with the PKK in Iraqi Kurdistan. The Shiite factions and elites find pragmatic commonalities with the PKK; therefore, the two sides rejected the Iraq central government's agreement with the Kurdistan Regional Government signed in October 2020 regarding Sinjar. According to this agreement, all armed forces must vacate the area, including the PMF and the PKK. At the end of February 2021, the leaders of the PMF, Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq and Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba met with IRGC leaders to discuss what they described as Turkey's intention to storm Sinjar. According to local Turkish media reports, the PMF deployed almost 15,000 fighters to Sinjar to counter Turkish interventions.⁽³⁸⁾

■ **Kurdish internal rifts and granting Iran and Turkey tools to compete:** After the 2017 referendum, the PMF was the biggest winner in the internal rift between the KDP and the PUK during the Kirkuk crisis, which resulted in the withdrawal of the Peshmerga forces to the Kurdistan Region and the capture of Kirkuk by Iraqi forces supported by the PMF. The Iraqi forces settled in Kirkuk, Mosul, and Sinjar district. Iran relies heavily on the internal rifts and takes advantage of the tensions between the PKK and the KDP, and between the PUK and the KDP, to put pressure on Turkey and its ally, the KDP, the Kurdistan Region's ruling party.

Many regions and parties inside Kurdistan are tilting towards the PKK, especially after popular and political anger grew against the growing administrative corruption stemming from the decisions taken by the ruling KDP. For example, the Kurdistan opposition movement, the Gorran Movement, stayed in Sulaymaniyah and strengthened its relationship and support for the PKK after its representatives were expelled from the Kurdistan Parliament by Massoud Barzani, the leader of the KDP.⁽³⁹⁾

Turkey has a strong relationship with Barzani's party (KDP), and it accepted – though tacitly – the successive Turkish attacks against PKK strongholds, deepening the gap between the Kurdish parties internally and instigating them to fight each other again. This may lead to a new civil war engaging both Turkey and Iran undoubtedly. The Kurdish internal rifts provide an opening

for regional powers to exploit the Kurdish parties, especially Iranian and Turkish forces, which have been competing to extend their influence in Iraq and Syria.

■ Turkey's rising influence in Syria and Iran's dependence on militias in Iraq and Syria: Iran depends on its armed militias to extend its military influence and execute its desired policies. The most compelling illustration of the PMF's growing pressure against the Kurdistan Regional Government and the capital Erbil is its escalation in the targeting of international diplomatic and military interests and headquarters in the region. Iranian-backed Shiite militias were reportedly accused of carrying out attacks against these targets. Trump's withdrawal from Syria increased Turkey's influence and opportunities for securing its goals. Accordingly, Turkish and Iranian goals and interests collide depending on the extent of the weakness of the Iraqi and Syrian central governments.

■ The Biden approach favoring the Kurds: Internationally, the Biden administration's approach will not be the same as that of the Trump administration's towards gradual withdrawal from Syria. The Biden administration wants to be a key player in determining the outcome of the Syrian crisis. Although the Iraqi and American governments announced that US forces will merely play an advisory role, the US military presence in Syria will not change, and supporting the SDF is among Washington's most significant goals — in coordination with its regional ally, Israel.

Conclusion

Although the Turkish-Iranian relationship is deeply divergent in light of their different regional strategic visions and ideological approaches, the two sides were driven by several motives that led to them forging cooperation agreements in regard to various developments, hence neutralizing disagreements over the past four years. For example, their mutual cooperation was clearly evident in response to the 2017 Iraqi Kurdish independence referendum. The study concludes that the Kurdish question has not been an area of cooperation between the two countries given their mutual disagreements on the issue itself as well as the internal differences among the Kurds themselves. This is in addition to the repercussions resulting from the weakness of the central government in Syria and Iraq. Further, various regional and international developments led the two countries to adopt divergent regional policies when dealing with the Kurdish parties.

There are various disagreements between the two countries, most notably the competition in Sinjar between Turkey and the KDP on the one hand and the PKK and the Iraqi Shiite militias linked to Iran on the other. This is in addition to the convergence of Iran's Shiite militias and the PKK despite the

differences in their intellectual and ideological foundations indicating that a direct clash between Turkey and Iran in the coming days could possibly erupt. The two countries are determined to support rival Kurdish parties in the hope of securing their competing interests. The absence of state sovereignty in Iraq and Syria undoubtedly is fertile soil for a frantic competition between Iran and Turkey. The two countries are on full alert for any potential, urgent regional and international developments such as the new US policy towards the Kurds adopted by the Biden administration.

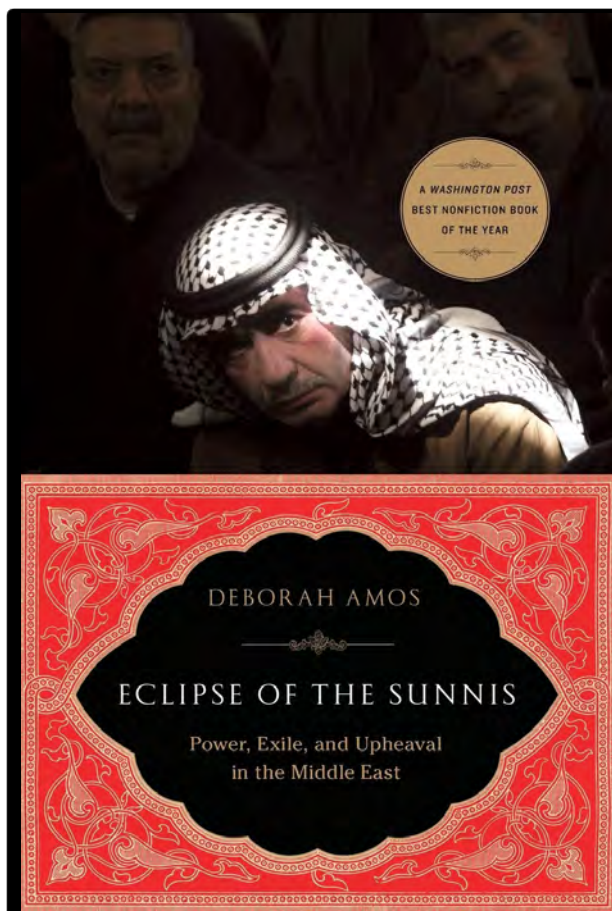
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BOOK REVIEW
ECLIPSE OF THE SUNNIS:
POWER, EXILE AND UPHEAVAL IN
THE MIDDLE EAST

Book by: Deborah Amos
Review by Dr. Mohammed al-Sayyad,
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The 2003 US invasion of Iraq profoundly and fundamentally transformed the country. As a result of this major shift, the structure of Iraqi society was transformed at various levels: political, sectarian and economic. The fall of Saddam Hussein's government contributed to the creation of a security and political vacuum, marking the end of Sunni dominance. On the other hand, anti-Baathist forces and Iran-backed Shiite groups took the limelight. However, the downfall of the Sunnis was not limited solely to politics, they had been targeted by Shiite militias since the 1980s, with them having expertise in guerilla warfare and trained in the use of weapons. This hostility against the Sunnis increased after the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime. This was coupled with the emergence of new Shiite militias with new names and leaders. They were all extremely loyal to the Iranian Guardian Jurist.

Deborah Amos documents in her book *Eclipse of the Sunnis: Power, Exile and Upheaval in the Middle East* the demographic and political marginalization of the Sunni community between 2003 and 2010. Her book is of great significance not only due to its pioneering contribution to the academic field but also because it chronicles her journey across the region, documenting the investigative research that she carried out. Her accounts are based on extensive fieldwork carried out in Iraq, Syria and others regional countries.

1. Mass Population Displacement

More than 2 million Sunnis were displaced from Iraq between 2003 to 2006. In Diyala Province, for example, Shiite militias worked to systematically transform the demographic map of the province. They carried out arrest campaigns, destroyed mosques/land, and assassinated people based on sect affiliation. This sectarian oppression turned systematic, with bomb attacks targeting two Sunni shrines in 2006, leading to widespread sectarian strife and internal fighting. Sectarian violence and forced displacement increased after the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) was expelled from Diyala in 2014. The Shiite militias comprehensively changed the demographics of the province. Similar devastation took place in all Sunni-majority cities under the pretext of fighting terrorism. This happened in Mosul, Salah al-Din and Ramadi. The cities adjacent to the Iranian border and the Baghdad Belts (the residential, agricultural and industrial areas that encircle the Iraq capital Baghdad) witnessed the greatest level of forced displacement.

Neighboring Iran took full advantage of the situation in Iraq. The Iranian government introduced a policy of indirect displacement against the Iraqi population. This included first, the deprivation of water resources as Tehran built dams on the headwaters of the Diyala River which decreased the water level and contributed to polluting the river, forcing many residents to leave their farms and homes.

Second, several Iranian cultural offices were established in Iraq. During former Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's tenure, Iran opened three cultural offices in Diyala Province alone, more than the number of its offices in Najaf, Basra and Karbala. In these cities, there is just one Iranian cultural office. Third, Nouri al-Maliki distributed lands from Sunni provinces, particularly from Diyala Province, to Shiites belonging to southern Iraq who are known to have a doctrinal loyalty to the Iranian political system.

The strange issue observed by the author is that the number of Iraqis who were forced to leave Iraq during the three decades of Saddam Hussein's rule amounted to 5 million, but the same number was displaced in less than five years after the fall of Saddam's government. Those forced to leave were from Iraq's elite including doctors, scientists, poets, managers, and professionals. These people were the best hope for realizing America's ambition of turning Iraq into a bastion of democracy and prosperity.

Amos states that one-sixth of Iraqis have become refugees or displaced persons. Therefore, this huge number has dramatically altered the Iraqi landscape and has changed the politics of the regions to which they have shifted.

In regard to those Iraqis who tried to return, it was too dangerous for them to reclaim their homes which were seized by sectarian groups. In addition, former Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, despite his symbolic call for Iraqi refugees to return to their homeland, continued to practically support a political system based on an ethnic and sectarian quota system. Ministerial vacancies and the allocation of important government posts were determined on the basis of sect. This meant that competence and academic credentials were not considered when applying for a post. This policy of sectarian discrimination determined the government's orientations. Iraq has become unlivable for many Iraqis in the diaspora. Amos said, "Their [the Iraqis'] dreams of permanent return to Iraq were on hold." (154)

2. The Policy of Targeted Killing

Amos analyzes the policy of identity-based killing carried out by militias and elements of Iranian intelligence to eliminate Iraq's social, cultural and economic elite. These targeted killings became the norm after 2005 to force the Sunni community to leave, hence forcing demographic change based on sectarian lines.

This sectarian violence did not contradict the aims of the Americans and the British. According to Radwan al-Sayed, the project to end the Iraqi state was principally a US project, reflected in Paul Bremer disbanding the Iraqi army, police and security services and other state organs immediately after the invasion. The civil war (the Sunni-Shiite conflict) erupted between 2005 to 2008 during the US occupation, and with Washington's greenlight.

In May 2019, Bremer, who led the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) in Iraq, said in an interview, "Removing Saddam Hussein upended thousand years of Sunni domination in the lands of Mesopotamia, beginning with the Abbasid Caliphate, the Turks, the British, the Hashemites and then the Hashemite Kingdom. Therefore, the Sunni minority held sway over the country for a thousand years, and I think this situation was not good." It is apparent from the aforementioned quote, that the United States supported the transfer of power from the Sunnis to the Shiites in Iraq. It seems that transferring power to the Shiites was a strategic goal for the United States — distinct from the historical incidents mentioned in Bremer's quote. This US plan created a profound shift in the priorities of Arab and Iranian decision makers, making the issue of sectarianism central to their planning. Accordingly, Arab countries, consequently, considered Iran to be their number one enemy.

Amos states that during Saddam Hussein's era, marriages between Sunnis and Shiites were common. In fact, the term "mixed marriage" was only used after 2003 when "Iraqis adopted more sectarian identities — a process that often tore families apart." She argues that the Shiites made good use of the opportunity of US support for them. Amos says, "Ever since the failure of the George H.W Bush administration to support the Shiite uprising against Saddam in 1991, Americans had recognized the potential of forming an alliance with the Shiite majority against Saddam."

Indeed, Shiite militiamen were seen guarding hospitals, vital state organs, and neighborhoods, while in the presence of US and Iraqi national army forces. These militiamen carried out identity-based killings without the United States or the Iraqi government intervening to prevent these killings. The ramifications of this bloodshed are still felt today.

3. The Establishment of Sectarian Security Services

Amos reviews the centrality of armed militias and the integral roles they were entrusted with to exclude or marginalize Sunnis politically, contributing to the mass exodus of Sunnis from their homeland.

Amos says that the Mahdi Army largely took over sectarian tasks, it was the largest Shiite militia at the time. It continued with its sectarian cleansing in the remaining mixed areas (Sunnis and Shiites) of Baghdad, to complete its mission before the full deployment of US forces. Amos states that this decisively

changed the sectarian landscape in the Iraqi capital and consequently “for the first time in history, Iraq’s future was in Arab Shiite hands.”

Sectarian militias continued to threaten Sunnis, even after the massive US military deployment. There were a lot of tragic Sunni stories such as a husband who was shot dead, a child kidnapped and then murdered, the mass rape of sons and daughters, and messages left at the doors of homes like “Leave or die.”

4. The Question of Iraqi Identity

Amos carefully analyzes an important issue: the struggle over Iraqi identity. Shiite militias have resorted to sectarian cleansing “to assert a new Iraqi identity — an identity based on sectarian allegiances that Saddam’s regime had submerged.” However, it seems that the new identity was not a purely Iraqi identity because “Former Baathists were targeted from the beginning, along with high-ranking army officers and air force pilots who had fought in the Iran-Iraq war.” This indicates that elements from outside Iraq were involved serving external agendas via assassinations and taking revenge for historical grievances.

Despite the internal differences in the Shiite house, all Shiite parties agreed on the sectarian cleansing policy, keeping the landscape for Shiites exclusively, to strengthen the new Iraqi identity. Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki pledged to work towards “political reconciliation” but “He was unable or unwilling to reign in the Shiite militias in the capital — in particular, Sadr’s militia, the Jaysh al-Mahdi (Mahdi Army).”

The Mahdi Army led cleansing campaigns against the Sunnis in some Baghdad neighborhoods in full view of the Iraqi government and US forces, erasing the identity of non-Shiite communities. Amos gives us an example of this in her book, “Hurriya, which means ‘freedom,’ had been a mixed neighborhood where Sunnis and Shiites lived together and married across sectarian lines during Saddam’s time, but by 2007 many of Hurriya’s Sunni residents had been driven out by the Mahdi militiamen and the neighborhood had become almost entirely a Shiite enclave.” So the question of identity: “what is Iraq?” was not determined by Iraq’s authority, nor by the Iraqi public, but by sectarian militias. The 2005 Constitution contributed to strengthening Iraqi sectarianism through quotas and allowing groups and parties to use sectarian, political and religious loyalties as their defense shield. For example, in northern Iraq, many Kurds considered Baghdad a foreign capital.

Therefore, according to Amos, Iraq is a state which has never had a clearly defined identity. The Iraqi people have never agreed on who they are, and what are their basic values, for example, is Iraq based on Islam or Arab nationalism? Amos highlights a pressing question for Iraqis: “How will Iraqi citizens live together within the same borders?”

The question of Iraqi national identity depends on strengthening the Iraqi constitutional state, with a need for Iraqis to form a social contract involving respect for all religious and sectarian groupings and ensuring the protection of minorities. By achieving the aforementioned, sectarianism in Iraq can be overcome, and the writ of the state can transcend sectarian loyalties.

Conclusion

In the twelfth chapter, Amos provides a lucid summary of the situation in Iraq, arguing that Iraq has become a different country now, and it has changed due to the sectarian civil war, in which Shiites won and Sunnis lost. There is no way to avoid this fact.

As long as militias are present and active, there is no hope that Baghdad, once a city where diverse communities lived in harmony with one another, will reclaim its historical legacy of religious tolerance. Nowadays, Baghdad has a distinctly Shiite outlook. On display during Shiite religious holidays are Shiite religious banners which are hoisted over most of the city. Many Sunni mosques in the city have been closed or destroyed.

The militias are not solely responsible for this transformation, Maliki's government is also to blame, it also wanted to make sure that Baghdad remained the capital of Shiites. There is internal and external Shiite consensus to create a new Iraqi identity, but it is a narrow and sectarian one that does not include all Iraqi communities and culture, nor does it reflect Iraq's rich civilization.

JOURNAL FOR IRANIAN STUDIES

Specialized Studies

