

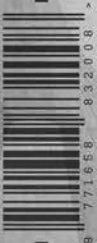
MONTHLY REPORT



IRAN CASE FILE

Your window on Iran from inside and abroad

March 2022



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Iran witnessed accelerating developments at various levels: ideological, political, economic, and military. Its interactions with Arab and Western countries were affected by a host of developments, most prominently: the Syrian president's visit to the UAE, the Iranian claims over the Saudi-Kuwait joint Dorra gas field, the Iranian ballistic missile attack on Erbil, the Houthi attacks on Saudi installations, the suspension of the Vienna talks, new US sanctions targeting Iran's non-nuclear activities, the release of two British-Iranian detainees, and the UK paying its debt to Iran — dating back to 40 years.

Internal Affairs

The Ideological File: Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei considers the United States as an example of "modern ignorance" saying that the United States promotes immorality and discrimination and feeds off the crises erupting across the world. It seems that the supreme leader aims to defame and demonize the West in the eyes of the Iranian people, and it is an attempt to isolate the people from what is happening around them in the world. Khamenei's use of the word "ignorance" is striking as this word has been employed in modern times by the Qutbists and extremist groups. This means that Khamenei is not only in line with such extremist groups, but also deems the confrontation with the West legitimate. As for Iran-Taliban relations, it can be said that due to their political and sectarian enmity, their relations have not been strategic at any stage but based on necessity and interests. Despite the truce between the two sides since the Taliban took over the Afghan capital and the attempt of each side to avoid confrontation, differences broke out between them, prompting clashes in the southwestern border region of Nimruz Governorate — where crossfire erupted between the IRGC and the Taliban. A new crisis flared up between the

two sides. This time the crisis was cultural and sectarian. The Taliban removed Balkh University's name in Dari, rewriting it in Pashto instead. The Iranians and their backers considered such a move to reflect an imposition of identity and tribalism nurtured under the banner of the Taliban.

The Political File: Edalat-e Ali, a hacktivist group known for hacking the databases of government institutions, published a document showing that the IRGC intelligence wing had issued a circular banning 37 former government officials from leaving the country. These individuals served under former President Hassan Rouhani. This move by the IRGC intelligence wing is against the backdrop of The Wall Street Journal report which revealed the details about the secret financial network used by Iran to circumvent US sanctions. According to the report, Iran has set up a secret banking and financial network to conduct trade dealings worth tens of billions of dollars banned under the US-led sanctions annually. The “hardliners” — who control the Iranian Parliament — have been working for a while to pass a bill restricting internet access, enabling the government to exert more control and oversight over the virtual world — under the pretext of sound management of this sphere despite the widescale criticism against the bill.

If the Parliament passes the bill, it is expected to ignite a new wave of protests against the government, given the fact that the internet has become the only outlet for the Iranian people to express their opinions on variant issues facing their country.

The Economic File: The rising possibility that Washington will conclude a nuclear deal with Iran has highlighted the matter of Iran's frozen assets abroad, once again resulting from the sanctions imposed on the country. The estimates regarding the value of Iranian assets frozen overseas vary — with valuations at a minimum of \$40 billion. But other estimates indicate that the value of Iran's frozen funds range between \$100 billion to \$120 billion according to different bodies. Reaching a nuclear deal will lead to the unfreezing of Iran's assets; however, not all of its frozen assets/accounts. There are three important factors that determine the extent to which Iran will be able to access these assets as follows: first, non-liquid assets make up the biggest portion of the frozen assets. Most of Iran's assets frozen overseas are not totally liquid assets. Second, the decrease in liquid assets — estimated at \$40 billion — as Iran has been withdrawing from them during the period of sanctions and for fighting the coronavirus pandemic in the form of humanitarian exemptions on agricultural and medical items as well as other exemptions. Third, sanctions related to terrorism and human rights abuses may continue; concluding a new nuclear deal does not mean lifting all the sanctions imposed on Iran.

The Military File: Iran launched a dozen ballistic missiles targeting Erbil, the capital of the Iraqi Kurdish region. Much confusion prevailed as the targets appeared to be in close proximity to a new US consulate building. The missiles were not intercepted by the air defense batteries in Erbil, which according to some experts reflect the accuracy of the Fateh 110 and the modifications made to Iranian ballistic missiles such as the depressed trajectory atmospheric

launch mode and vertical impact. In another military development, Iran announced that it launched Noor-2. According to official news outlets, the satellite is used for conducting surveillance missions for general and defense purposes. Though Iran declared the success of the latest satellite launch; however, there is no proof confirming the Iranian claim — taking into consideration that Iran is known to overexaggerate its military capabilities. The third military development was that the IRGC Aerospace Force (IRGCASF) announced that it had established underground drone and missile bases. This is the first time that the IRGC has announced the establishment of drone underground bases but the third time for missile bases.

Arab Affairs

Iran-Arab relations witnessed many developments. As for Gulf-Iran interactions, Assad's visit to the UAE was the first of its kind since the eruption of the Syrian crisis, where he met with a host of senior UAE officials. This visit is viewed as a UAE attempt to return Syria to its Arab sphere. But Iran has been penetrating deep into Syrian state apparatuses and is therefore concerned that this rapprochement may lead to its expulsion from the US equation. Iran objected to the Saudi-Kuwait joint Dorra gas field agreement. In response, the Kuwaiti foreign minister affirmed that Iran is not a party to the agreement as it is a Kuwait-Saudi gas field, and the two countries have the right to use it and invest in it based on their mutually concluded agreements. The Arab region also witnessed significant events: the Negev Summit in which regional and Gulf countries participated. The summit was held at a critical time as the world, including regional countries, are experiencing the impact of the Russia-Ukraine crisis and their growing concerns over Washington concluding a nuclear deal with Iran without addressing their fears i.e., without considering Iran's expansionist activities and ballistic missile program.

As for Iran's role in the Yemeni crisis, the Houthis launched attacks against oil, civil and economic facilities in several Saudi cities using cruise missiles and Iranian drones. The attacks coincided with efforts by the international community, especially the Gulf Cooperation Council, to achieve peace in Yemen through finding a common ground for negotiations between the Yemeni parties. This military escalation against Saudi installations is a Houthi attempt, backed by Iran, to undermine Gulf efforts to resolve the Yemeni crisis and pave the way for the Houthi initiative proposed by the president of the Houthis' so-called "Yemeni Supreme Political Council." The Yemeni people believe that this political initiative primarily serves the interests of the Houthis.

In Iraq, Erbil, the capital of Kurdistan Region, was hit by ballistic missiles — claimed by the IRGC. Iran justified the attack by claiming that it targeted an Israeli strategic spy center in retaliation for Israel's February attacks on an airbase (of drones) in the western Iranian city of Kermanshah and its killing of two IRGC officers in Syria. However, there are other motives for the Iranian attacks on Erbil, including Iran's desire to undermine the outcomes of the talks that took place between Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and the President of the Iraqi Kurdistan Region regarding the export of energy from northern Iraq to the European countries via Turkish territories.

The Iraqi government condemned the attacks and the Iraqi Foreign Ministry summoned the Iranian ambassador in Baghdad, Iraj Masjedi, and lodged a complaint about the violation of Iraq's sovereignty by the IRGC. There are implicit motives for the Iranian attacks, most prominently: to destabilize the Iraqi arena and complicate the political scene for Sadr; escalate militarily amid the faltering Vienna talks; deploy ballistic missiles to make clear that Iran's ballistic missile program is a red line, and that Iran will not include it in the nuclear talks.

As for Iran's role in Syria, March witnessed Arab-Iran moves in Syria coinciding with a host of developments across the region and the world. The visit of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad was significant as it is the first Syrian move outside the territories of its allies Iran and Russia since the eruption of the Syrian crisis. Following the visit of Assad to the UAE, Iran's foreign minister visited Damascus with an objective to impose a sort of Iranian supervision over Syria-UAE relations, which constitute a serious concern for Iran. The Arab-Iran moves toward Syria indicate that the Arab countries seek to enrich the Arab and regional role in resolving regional crises and create a balance of power equation as well as hedge the potential transformations stemming from Vienna and Kyiv. As for the Syrian government, Assad seeks to use the Arab efforts to achieve calm and the timing of a possible new nuclear deal to break the Syrian isolation and reap many economic and political gains. Militarily, Iran made massive changes to the deployment of its militias in Syria; withdrew hundreds of elements from Syria and deployed them to Iraq. In addition, it repositioned several militias between Deir Ezzor, Raqqa and Badia, and sent reinforcements to areas previously occupied by pro-Russian forces. Tehran also worked to expand the transfer of weapons, and reconnaissance/air defense systems to Syria. These developments prompted Israel to intensify its preparedness on the northern border and launch strikes against IRGC positions.

International Affairs

The Ukrainian crisis led many observers to expect that the nuclear talks would hasten to revive the nuclear deal, given the fact that the United States is preoccupied with the conflict with Russia and the growing talk about the need for Iran to return to the global energy markets amid the energy crisis. However, the nuclear talks were suspended, and the parties reaffirmed their redlines without showing any flexibility to make any essential concessions and resumed their pressure and threats. The United States stated that it will walk away from the efforts to revive the nuclear deal if Iran continues its "intransigence." The United States also imposed sanctions on Iran because of its ballistic missile activities, and to impede the export of Iranian nuclear material as well as Tehran's regional behavior. It also designated five Iranian individuals and entities. Despite the hindering of the Vienna talks, US complacency regarding the implementation of the sanctions has greatly contributed to reducing the impact of its sanctions on Iran's economy leading to an increase in Iranian exports and imports.

As for Iran-Europe interactions, the March file details the exchange of accusations between the two sides and the pressure placed through the media, hoping to push each other toward reaching a satisfactory settlement to revive the nuclear deal which the parties are reportedly closer than ever to finalizing. Some Iranian media outlets reported that the Iranian government accused France of hindering the nuclear talks through raising the issue of guarantees — which the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) has been demanding from Iran, particularly concerning its nuclear facilities.

The Iranians hope that the UN watchdog's restrictions will be eased, i.e., regarding the guarantees on its nuclear facilities. Yet the Europeans placed pressure on Iran to ensure its compliance with the provisions stipulated under the 2015 nuclear deal and prevent Iran from moving forward in enriching uranium at very high levels. Despite the exchange of finger pointing between the Europeans and Iran, their relations witnessed a considerable breakthrough in March after Tehran released two British-Iranian detainees: Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe and Anousheh Ashoori. The release coincided with the payment by the UK government of its £328.5 million debt to Iran over a failed arms deal dating back to 40 years ago. Iran detaining Zaghari-Ratcliffe was linked with its demand to the UK government to pay its 40-year-old debt despite the attempts of Iran's Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian to refute the link between the payment made by the UK and the release of the two detainees— claiming the release was due to humanitarian considerations.

Internal Affairs

Internal Affairs is divided into four files. The Ideological File discusses the Iranian supreme leader's denunciation of America as a manifestation of "modern ignorance," and the latest episode in Taliban-Iran tensions. The Political File reviews the IRGC's leaked document regarding the travel ban on 37 Rouhani government officials, and the insistence of the "hardliners" in the Iranian Parliament to restrict internet freedom. The Economic File sheds light on the estimates of Iran's frozen assets abroad and the extent to which Iran could benefit from these assets if a nuclear pact is concluded. The Military File discusses three significant developments: Iran's missile attack on Erbil, the IRGC's launch of the Noor2- military satellite, and the underground drone and missile bases.



The Ideological File

The Ideological File sheds light on the developments related to the Shiite religious elites in general and the Iranian ones in particular. It also spotlights the impact of these developments on the religious and political landscape in Iran and their repercussions on the Shiite community throughout the region. In February, the Ideological File cast light on the relationship between the religious and political aspects and the employment of religion to achieve political ends. It also touched on the invocation of Khamenei's fatwa by Iranian media and officials that rendered unlawful the possession of nuclear weapons.

This month, the Ideological File discusses two important issues. The first is related to the Iranian home front, when the supreme leader said that the Americans were ignorant, something that has been repeatedly raised by senior members of the Assembly of Experts. The second issue is the recent growing disagreement between the Taliban and Iran. The file offers an analysis of the disagreement from a philosophical and sectarian angle.

The Iranian Supreme Leader and American Ignorance

The Iranian supreme leader considers that America is an example of modern ignorance. According to him, the characteristics of this ignorance are as follows:

- The United States follows a system which encourages immorality; discrimination increases on a daily basis and wealth flows toward the wealthy day after day.
- In the United States, people die on the streets during times of extreme heat and cold.
- Basically, the system in the United States generates crises and benefits from these crises.
- The mafia networks inside the United States feed on the crises occurring across the world.⁽¹⁾

When looking at the aforementioned characteristics, we find that they are nothing but attempts to defame and demonize the West before the Iranian people. It is an attempt to isolate the Iranian people from what is happening around the world, hence forcing them to accept the domestic circumstances at all levels. However, the supreme leader legitimized his anti-West position, telling the people that Prophet Mohammad (PBUH) stood up to ignorance. He did not stop at forming a government but confronted enemies forcefully and rejected the separation of religion from politics.⁽²⁾ Hence, Iran's confrontation with the West is legitimate, whatever the political and economic outcomes may be.



But what is striking is Khamenei's use of the word "ignorance." This word — though recurrently found in Islamic religious heritage and denotes several meanings — is often used in modern times by the Qutbists and extremist groups that believe that the world is suffering from some sort of ignorance which should be addressed.

Like the supreme leader, this anti-West position was echoed by Ahmed Khatami, representative of Kerman in the Assembly of Experts. He reiterated the remarks of the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, calling for the "jihad of clarification" against those who demand religion to be separated from politics or allege that the hawzas were apolitical during the reign of Haeri Yazdi.⁽³⁾ The irony/paradox here is that in the same context Khamenei called on the Assembly of Experts to implement strict rules – from now on — in regard to the next supreme leader who will be selected on the basis of voting by the members of the Assembly of Experts.⁽⁴⁾

Therefore, while the supreme leader himself attacks the West and seeks to demonize the West among the Iranian people, he intends to enhance his internal policies and create a general consensus in Iran that he represents the truth. He wants people to feel that they are mandated to reverse the ignorance as did Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), who, according to Khamenei, did not suffice with forming a government. At the same time, Khamenei calls on the Assembly of Experts to play a role in controlling future supreme leader which illustrates his interference in the work of this organization. His request conflicts with the simplest principles of institutionalization. The Assembly of Experts chooses and dismisses the supreme leader and oversees his work. It is not in need of advice from the supreme leader. It rather needs to be totally independent from the supreme leader for it to perform its duties according to the constitutional

rules. The important point here is that Iran's position regarding the outside world, especially America and the West, is inextricably linked to the supreme leader's pursuit to enhance the system's internal legitimacy through defaming and demonizing regional and international foes.

A New Episode in the Taliban-Iran Row

Relations between the Taliban and the Iranians have never been strategic at any point. Bilateral relations are instead pragmatic and driven by realpolitik and disrupted by many hindrances, including the political-sectarian animosity between the two sides.

Despite the truce between the two sides since the Taliban takeover of Kabul, and the attempts by each side to avoid confrontation, differences have sparked between them, leading to clashes in the border region of Nimruz Governorate. These clashes followed similar ones that broke out last December. Over four IRGC officers were killed in these clashes.⁽⁵⁾ The crisis was quickly contained and attributed to "misunderstandings" according to a Taliban official.⁽⁶⁾ However, only two days later, a new crisis flared up between the two sides. This time the crisis was cultural and sectarian. The Taliban removed Balkh University's name in Dari, rewriting it in Pashto instead.⁽⁷⁾ The Iranians and their backers considered this move to reflect an imposition of identity and tribalism nurtured under the banner of the Taliban.⁽⁸⁾

Some Iranian officials quickly expressed Tehran's concern about the terrorist activities in Afghanistan, attributing such activities to the weak Taliban government, considering it to be an unstable government. They said, "Afghanistan is in turmoil. And this turmoil and not enforcing the will of the people to decide its own fate paved the way for the emergence of terrorist extremist movements."⁽⁹⁾ Iranian officials also indicated that the surge in terrorist acts had caused panic among the Afghan people in neighboring and even in regional countries. "Therefore, the Taliban should take care of this land, so that the terrorist groups affiliated with al-Qaeda and ISIS do not take advantage of the political and security instability in Afghanistan."⁽¹⁰⁾ They added that the Taliban is to blame for the terrorist acts in the country, as it is responsible for the country's security.

Based on the foregoing, we conclude that the relationship between the Taliban and Iran is pragmatic in the first place. The possibility of such a relationship becoming strategic is out of the question because of the deep sectarian and intellectual differences between the two sides. Hence, both sides are keen to take advantage of the status quo (the current situation), build economic ties and open up diplomatic channels while keeping their sectarian differences hidden as much as possible to avert an open confrontation which would not benefit either side. Additionally, both sides realize that they need each other. The Iranians need the Taliban to prevent the expansion of ISIS and al-Qaeda into Tehran. Both of them share animosity toward the United States. But this mutual need does not negate the deep differences between them, which could spark a major confrontation in case one side senses danger from the other.

Conclusion

The Iranian supreme leader used the word “ignorance” which is used by the Qutbists and extremist groups to describe the United States and other countries that are hostile to Iran in the region. In doing so, he not only sees eye to eye with extremist groups, but he also seeks to legitimize the confrontation with the West and give it an ideological cover, hence asking the Iranian people to endure the confrontation’s devastating consequences economically and socially. Therefore, it is ruled out that the supreme leader and the ruling religious elite will reverse their approach of seeking confrontation with the West. They realize that they need an external foe in order to enhance the political system’s legitimacy at home. Second, if they are not different (distinctive) from the West, the tenets, missions and doctrine of the revolution will erode.

At the level of relations between Iran and the Taliban, there were tensions and light clashes at the border, which were quickly contained and attributed to misunderstandings. However, it is expected that the language of mutual interests will continue, with a policy of mutual benefits preferred over a policy of confrontation. The latter would lead to losses for both sides if they opt to embrace it. As a result, it is likely that the language of mutual interests will continue — at least in the foreseeable future — in case there are no international and regional interactions that change the entire landscape.

The Political File

In February 2022, the Political File shed light on the severe criticisms leveled against the Iranian government and Parliament. The criticisms labeled them the weakest and least efficient in the history of Iran since the 1979 revolution. The file also discussed the lawsuits against Khamenei and former President Hassan Rouhani due to COVID-19 related deaths. Finally, the file spotlighted the remarks of the Iranian minister of labor in regard to the sacking of hundreds of officials and the filing of corruption lawsuits against 120 officials in his ministry. The file of March 2022 focuses on the leak of an IRGC intelligence document regarding the banning of 37 officials in the government of former President Hassan Rouhani from traveling abroad. This document was leaked by Edalat-e Ali (Ali's Justice). Furthermore, the file touches on the "hardliners'" intent to pass legislation in Parliament to restrict internet freedom.

The IRGC Prevents Former Officials From Leaving the Country

Edalat-e Ali, a hacktivist group known for hacking the databases of some government institutions, leaked a document showing that the IRGC intelligence wing had issued a circular banning 37 officials in the government of former President Hassan Rouhani from leaving the country. The intelligence wing feared that the mechanisms used by Iran to circumvent sanctions, especially those on oil exports would be leaked. The leaked document included the personal details and national ID numbers of the 37 officials, in addition to the potential travel plans of the 37 officials. The 37 former officials are now working as administrators in government institutions and agencies such as in the Ministry of Oil, National Bank, National Iranian Oil Company, National Iranian Gas Company (NIGC), National Petrochemical Company (NPC), Civil Aviation Organization, and National Iranian Tanker Company (NITC). Some of them also work in the company in charge of the front companies to counter US sanctions as well as in the national energy and electricity body. The list included Hassan Rouhani's niece Qodsia Najar and her husband who faces accusations of selling lands in the Kish Free Zone and exploiting government-owned holdings.⁽¹¹⁾

The lawmakers close to the IRGC in the Iranian Parliament reiterated that the IRGC's intelligence wing and the Ministry of Intelligence called on the assembly to issue a law banning senior administrators from leaving the country for up to 15 years after they left government positions. When the Parliament failed to issue the law, the IRGC intelligence wing was prompted to directly intervene and ban the 37 former officials from travelling abroad.⁽¹²⁾

According to the leaked document signed by the IRGC deputy for legal affairs Ali Alqasi-Mehr, the IRGC intelligence wing justified the decision based on the

fact that the former officials working in the Iranian oil and gas sectors possessed a huge amount of confidential information regarding Iran's oil transactions, citing the possibility of this information being revealed. The intelligence wing also said a number of former officials possess information about the tankers carrying Iranian oil. The leaked document accused a number of the 37 former officials banned from travelling abroad of receiving commissions and bribes and leaking details about Iranian negotiations concerning gas.⁽¹³⁾

Figure 1: The Leaked Document (Travel Ban on 37 Ex-Iranian Officials)

جناب آقای دکتر القاسمی مهر			
دادستان محترم عمومی و انقلاب تهران			
موضوع: احتمال خروج از کشور برخی مدیران سازمان ها و دستگاه های دولتی در دولت دوازدهم			
سلام علیکم؛ اللهم صل علی محمد و آل محمد و عجل فرجهم؛ با احترام، بازگشت به مکاتبه شماره ۲۳۲۰/۲۰۰ مورخ ۱۴۰۰/۰۴/۲۶ در خصوص احتمال خروج از کشور برخی مدیران سازمان ها و دستگاه های دولتی در دولت دوازدهم، مراتب به شرح جدول ذیل به حضورتان اعلام می گردد:			
ردیف	نام و نام خانوادگی و کد ملی	مسئولیت	توضیحات
۱	تورج دهقانی زنگنه ۳۳۶-۱۷۷۹۵۲	مدیرعامل سازمان هواپیمایی کشوری	عزل ایشان در تیر ماه سال جاری و مرتبط با پرونده مفاسد اقتصادی مفتوح گردیده توسط واجا و همچنین مفتوح نمودن پرونده مفاسد اقتصادی علیه ایشان در شعبه ۳ بازپرسی دادسرای کارکنان دولت از جانب سازمان اطلاعات سپاه - هسرو و فرزندان اقامت ترکیه دارند.
۲	جعفر ربیعی ۰۷۸۳۳۷۶۶۱۰	مدیرعامل هلدینگ پتروشیمی خلیج فارس	مدیرعامل و اعضای هیأت مدیره هلدینگ خلیج فارس توسط وزیر نفت تعیین می شود. به دلیل اینکه اکثریت سهام این شرکت تحت کنترل وزیر نفت می باشد (سهامداران این شرکت ۲۰٪ دولت، ۴۰٪ سهام عدالت و ۲۵٪ صندوق نفت و صندوق بازتوسعه کشوری ۱۵٪)، وجود اتهامات مالی در عملیات مالی هلدینگ خلیج فارس و شرکت تجارت صنعت (شرکت)

Source: Iran International, March 14, 2022, <https://issuu.com/iranintl/docs/>

This move by the IRGC intelligence wing comes as *The Wall Street Journal* revealed in a report on March 18, 2022, the details about the secret financial network used by Iran to circumvent US sanctions. According to the report, Iran set up a secret banking and financial network to conduct trade dealings worth tens of billions of dollars banned under US sanctions annually. The documents related to the financial dealings disclosed several proxy Iranian companies holding 61 accounts in 28 foreign banks in China, Hong Kong, Singapore, Turkey, and the UAE worth hundreds of millions of dollars. Yet the report indicated that there were tens of billions of dollars in similar deals.⁽¹⁴⁾ Two weeks after *The Wall Street Journal* report, Double Cheque website revealed the details of this clandestine network, including the names of some banks and institutions used in five countries. According to the report, Iranian companies sanctioned by the United States established companies overseas under different names. These companies sell oil and other commodities and transfer funds to

accounts overseas. Moreover, the correspondence by some Iranian banks such as Shahr Bank and Eghtesad Novin Bank with petrochemical companies was also revealed.⁽¹⁵⁾

The decision to ban the former Rouhani officials — in addition to the keenness of the Iranian government to keep the information related to the mechanisms used to circumvent US sanctions confidential — reveals that it plans to preserve the aforementioned backchannels in anticipation of facing further sanctions in the future, especially if no settlement is reached with the United States over its nuclear program. This is added to Iran's plan to continue its illegal activities, including the smuggling of weapons, the financing of proxy groups, and money laundering.

“Hardliners” Within the Iranian Parliament Intend to Restrict Internet Access

The “hardliners” — who control the Iranian Parliament — have been working for a while to pass a law to restrict the internet, hence enabling the government to exert more control and oversight over the virtual world — under the pretext of sound management of this sphere. The “hardliner” lawmakers in the Iranian Parliament in this respect called the bill: the Cyberspace Users Rights Protection Bill, also known as the “Protection Bill.” The Iranian Parliament's presidential body last February defined the contours of the bill to restrict internet freedom which was approved by the Joint Parliamentary Commission. At that time, it was announced that a new decision on the matter would be made. It seems that the severe criticisms leveled against the Parliament and the widespread threats to stage protests against the bill like those staged in 2019 over the hike in gas prices forced the presidential body of the Iranian Parliament to delay the debate on the bill. This in no way means that the “hardliners” will back down from passing the bill. They reiterated in March 2022 their intent to approve this controversial bill. It seems that the IRGC strongly backs this bill and supports the “hardliners” to push for its parliamentary ratification.

In this respect, Fars News Agency, affiliated with the IRGC, held interviews with several lawmakers. It also published previous remarks by the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei in which he described the cybersphere in Iran as being “uncontrolled” and called for imposing restrictions on it. In addition, Fars News Agency published a report on the matter saying that it was necessary to effectively manage the virtual world for the safety of individuals.⁽¹⁶⁾

In this context, Ahmad Hossein Falahi, a member of the committee in charge of preparing the bill to restrict internet access, announced that the Parliament was intent on moving ahead with the bill. He indicated that the Supreme Council of Virtual Space asked the Parliament to take the necessary steps related to approving the bill to restrict internet access.⁽¹⁷⁾

It is likely that approving the bill will prevent the free exchange of information and hamper the development of knowledge and business activities. It will have a devastating impact on various sectors that depend on the internet for progress, especially education and medicine.

UN human rights experts called on the Iranian government to suspend the moves to restrict internet access, which would isolate Iran from the international internet network. These experts warned of the Parliament's abuse of its constitutional

powers to approve the bill in the weeks to come. They reiterated that the move is worrying and comes in the context of strengthening the digital wall in Iran and making the circulation of information much more difficult, particularly in a country that already has tough restrictions on freedom of expression and political rights. This move is also considered a flagrant violation of the rights of the Iranian people since it will deprive them of accessing cultural information.⁽¹⁸⁾

Iranian media outlets have widely condemned the bill. Some “reformist” newspapers such as *Arman Melli* attacked the Iranian government, especially Ebrahim Raisi who promised during his electoral campaign that he would increase the speed of the internet in Iran. He has not expressed any position indicating his rejection of the bill and has just said, “The government will support the rights of the Iranian people in the cybersphere, and it should not be something to worry over.”⁽¹⁹⁾ The “reformist” figure Abbas Abdi published a post on Twitter last February in which he said that the Iranian government does not even have the courage to express its position on the Parliament’s plan against internet freedom.

Figure 2: Abbas Abdi’s Post on Twitter (Persian)



The stinging criticisms prompted Abul-Hassan Firouzabadi, secretary of the Supreme Council of Virtual Space, on March 14, 2022, to announce that the Parliament’s bill on the virtual space was not sufficiently studied. He said that it is better to give up on the bill given the extensive popular opposition and the problem-

atic issues involving it. Nonetheless, one day after the comments of Firouzabadi, members of the Supreme Council to Regulate Virtual Space, chaired by Ebrahim Raisi, reiterated that the Parliament, in its capacity as the body responsible for issuing legislation, would ensure that the bill would reach its logical end.⁽²⁰⁾ This means that the government will not oppose the bill if the “hardliners” insist on passing it in Parliament.

Conclusion

The leaked confidential document on the IRGC intelligence wing’s plan to ban 37 former Rouhani officials from leaving the country revealed that Tehran plans to keep in place the clandestine networks that have enabled it to circumvent the US sanctions imposed on it. Iran is concerned about the possibility of a new US president in the future who could scrap the imminent new nuclear deal as did the former US President Donald Trump. The “hardliners” insistence on approving a bill that restricts internet access may lead to popular protests against the Iranian government. The internet is the only outlet for the Iranian people to express their opinions on different Iranian political, economic and social issues.

The Economic File

The past month's file discussed the nature of economic relations between Iran and Russia and Ukraine and the consequences of the Russian invasion of Ukraine on the Iranian economy. Meanwhile, the March 2022 file focuses on the issue of Iran's frozen assets overseas estimated to be worth billions of dollars: what is the exact amount? Where are these assets? And to what extent will the country benefit from these funds in case a new nuclear pact with the West is reached?

The Estimates of Iran's Frozen Assets Abroad

The decision to freeze Iran's financial reserves following the US withdrawal from the nuclear pact in 2018 and the US embargo on the sale of Iranian oil to the outside world caused Iran's dollar reserves to dry up all at once. Iranian oil exports went down to less than 300,000 barrels per day compared to 2.4 million barrels before the imposition of the sanctions. This shattered the Iranian economy leading to a sharp decline in living standards. The coronavirus crisis added insult to injury, which prompted Tehran to seek a \$3.6 billion loan from the International Monetary Fund (IMF)⁽²¹⁾ during the tenure of former President Hassan Rouhani to address the financial and health crisis facing the country.

Hence, the issue of unfreezing Iran's sizeable assets overseas has become a top priority for Ebrahim Raisi since his rise to the presidency in 2021. Tehran has placed continuous pressure on many countries that have frozen its assets due to US sanctions, starting from ceasing trade to seizing oil tankers owned by countries such as South Korea.

Estimates regarding the value of Iranian assets frozen overseas have varied — with valuations at a minimum of \$40 billion. But other estimates indicate that the value of Iran's frozen funds range between \$100 billion to \$120 billion according to different bodies. There are no official reports which enumerate Iran's various assets abroad. The latest report by the IMF suggested that the value of Iran's frozen assets could reach roughly \$115 billion. Iran can only use \$12.2 billion of these assets.⁽²²⁾ The frozen assets are located in several countries. Most of these countries are either buyers of Iranian oil or undertake bilateral trade with Tehran such as China, South Korea, India, Japan, Bahrain, Iraq and some European countries.

Tehran called on these countries freezing its assets to release them totally or partially. But there was no clear response for fear of facing US financial sanctions. Most of these countries have deep trade and security ties with the United States such as Japan, South Korea and India.

The frozen Iranian assets (\$40 billion at the minimum) are distributed

among a number of countries. These countries include South Korea (between \$7 billion to \$10 billion), Japan (\$3 billion), Iraq (\$5 billion), China (\$20 billion), Luxemburg (\$1.6 billion) and Bahrain (\$2 billion). The IMF indicated that nearly 90 percent of Iranian assets overseas have been frozen.⁽²³⁾

Iran has on several occasions threatened South Korea – which holds frozen assets ranging between \$7 billion to \$10 billion — that it will take exceptional measures against Seoul in case it does not release Iranian assets. On January 4, 2021, Iran seized a South Korean tanker.⁽²⁴⁾ Later, Ebrahim Raisi ordered the suspension of all imports from South Korea in response to a request from the supreme leader in this regard. This prompted South Korea to announce the release of a small portion of Iran's assets — reported to be a paltry \$1 billion in addition to several millions of dollars to the UN to settle outstanding payments owed to the organization by Iran. In 2022, there was talk of releasing more assets frozen by South Korea, but with no meaningful follow up.

To What Extent Will Iran Benefit From These Assets If a Nuclear Pact Is Concluded?

After the lifting of the sanctions in 2016, it was apparent that Iran had tens of billions of dollars frozen overseas and had accumulated revenues from oil sales throughout the years of sanctions. But it had difficulty transferring them since its assets were valued in the local currencies of the purchasing countries while major international transfers are based on transferring assets in one of the main currencies such as the US dollar. Hence, the assets remained in the bank accounts of the major purchasers of Iranian oil such as China and India. They were used to finance bilateral trade with Iran. But they have accumulated over time as Iranian oil exports outpaced imports from these countries. Iran rarely succeeded in transferring the surplus in small transfers in US dollars. Even China — after lifting the sanctions imposed on Iran in 2015 — defaulted on nearly \$11 billion.

The Iranian economy and people are in desperate need of every dollar — whether presently or in the future — as the country's resources have dried up. This caused the local currency, the toman, to lose 80 percent of its value. Imports were also restricted and inflation rose to over 50 percent in some months. Therefore, reaching a nuclear deal will lead to the unfreezing of Iran's assets, which will result in a desperately needed infusion of dollars into the Iranian economy, an increase in the value of the local currency and a decline in speculation on the dollar, curtailing an increase in its price. However, such increases will of course be limited. It is not expected that the value of the local currency will significantly increase or that market prices will go down to the levels preceding the imposition of sanctions in 2018. However, Iran will not be compelled to accumulate the revenues of its oil exports in buyers' accounts overseas but will transfer them to the Iranian Central Bank and boost the Iranian economy with imported commodities, spare parts and production inputs. This is in addition to addressing inflation more effectively.

On the other side, unfreezing the assets overseas does not necessarily mean that they will be transferred to Tehran or be completely accessible —contrary

to what is being reported inside Iran. There are three important factors that determine the extent to which Iran will be able to access and benefit from these assets:

First: Non-liquid assets make up the biggest portion of the frozen assets. Most of Iran's assets frozen overseas are not totally liquid assets. There are investments by the Iranian Central Bank in European oil companies involving huge amounts of investments such as in the Swiss company Naftiran Intertrade, a subsidiary of the National Iranian Oil Company in Europe with investments of up to \$25 billion.

There are billions of dollars deposited in banks of Iran's trading partners as guarantees for financing joint trade or investment and development projects such as those carried out by China (Iran's number one trading partner) in the country. The frozen guarantees with China alone are estimated at \$22 billion.⁽²⁵⁾

Second: The decrease in liquid assets — estimated at \$40 billion — as Iran has been withdrawing from them during the period of the sanctions and for fighting the coronavirus pandemic in the form of humanitarian exemptions on agricultural and medical items as well as on other exemptions. For example, Iran had withdrawn from its frozen assets in India in return for rice, sugar and tea imports.

Iran's frozen assets in India are estimated at \$7 billion. Yet the country has \$20 billion in China, \$7 billion in South Korea, \$6 billion in Iraq, \$3 billion in Japan and \$3 billion to \$5 billion in Europe. Some countries often use their debts owed to Iran by obliging the latter to purchase locally-manufactured goods in return for their debts — as was the case with Britain, which conditioned that Iran should purchase humanitarian goods from it if it wants to have an old debt from the Shah era paid off. The debt's value now — plus the interest rate — reaches half a billion dollars.

Third: The continuation of the sanctions related to terrorism and human rights abuses. Concluding a new nuclear pact does not mean lifting all the sanctions imposed on Iran. There were sanctions which remained in place even after the conclusion of the 2015 nuclear deal such as those related to terrorism, and the use of ballistic missiles and on individuals linked to terrorism-related cases. Even if the IRGC is removed from the terror list, it is expected that such sanctions will remain in place. Since the IRGC is a powerful contributor to the Iranian economy, the possibilities of freezing assets linked to it or to individuals affiliated with it remain likely in the future. This could obstruct Iran's pursuit to obtain all of its frozen assets.

Conclusion

The unfreezing of Iranian assets estimated to be worth tens of billions of dollars in several countries worldwide does not mean the automatic transfer of these billions to Iran directly. This is because a significant portion of such assets is non-liquid by definition or related to commercial guarantees with trading partners. This is in addition to the depletion of these assets and the lack of accuracy regarding their size and the remaining amount after bartering these assets for goods with countries where the assets are held. On the other side, however, the

unfreezing of assets will enable Iran to get access to dollar reserves which will boost the value of the local currency, the toman, which lost 80 percent of its value. It will also reduce inflation and speculation on the dollar. The value of the toman will rise slightly —falling short of reaching pre-sanctions levels. Yet, Iran will no longer be forced to accumulate its oil sales revenues in accounts overseas. But it will directly transfer them to the Central Bank of Iran, leading to a financial breakthrough more than three years after suffering a financial, economic and living crisis.



The Military File

In February 2022, the Military File discussed the attack mounted by pro-Iran militia groups on Pakistani forces at the border and the impact of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in dimming Iran's hopes of easing the sanctions imposed on it. The file also discussed Iranian security concerns regarding the proliferation of firearms among the Iranian people. In March 2022, the Military File sheds light on significant Iranian military activities including the firing of ballistic missiles toward the capital of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. It marked the second ballistic missile attack after the one carried out in 2020. The file also looks at Iran's continuous attempts to pursue its space ambitions by launching its second military satellite, Noor. As part of enhancing the development of its strategic weapons, on April 5, 2022, Iran announced the establishment of underground bases for drones for the first time and for missiles for the third time.

Iran's Ballistic Missile Attacks on Erbil

Instead of directing its proxy militias, on March 13, Iran chose to fire a dozen ballistic missiles targeting Erbil, the capital of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. Much confusion prevailed as the targets appeared to be in close proximity to a new US consulate building.⁽²⁶⁾ While the general perception was that the attack targeted the US consulate building, Iranian state media outlets claimed that the target was an Israeli strategic center, referred to by some as a nest of Mossad spies.⁽²⁷⁾ The purported reason provided was to avenge Israeli attacks on Iranian troops in Syria.

By March 28, the dust of the attack had settled and it emerged that Iran targeted a nascent plan for the KRG to supply gas to Europe via Turkey with Israeli help to ease the continent's dependence on Russian hydrocarbons.⁽²⁸⁾

As for the attack itself, once again the accuracy of the Fateh-110 was reaffirmed. Though Tehran went for an overkill by lodging 12 sophisticated projectiles, circular error probable (CEP) was very low. The missiles were not intercepted by the air defense batteries in Erbil, which led Iranian military experts to claim an additional tactical success, thanks to missile modifications such as depressed trajectory atmospheric launch mode and vertical impact. Given the volatile nature of attacks in Iraq, the US consulate's early warning systems did not assess the trajectory of projectiles directed toward the building, hence no automatic self-defense was initiated. Furthermore, the US diplomatic mission is not responsible for the defense of its entire neighborhood in Erbil. While the cat-and-mouse game between Israel and Iran continues in Syria, such attacks against suspected Israeli sites or interest in Iraq or in the Gulf will not likely be the new normal. Iran has been using its striking capability

sparingly to take revenge or for preemption purposes in Iraq since Soleimani's assassination.

The IRGC Launches Noor-2 Military Satellite

Two years after the IRGC launched the military satellite Noor-1 into space on April 23, 2020, its Aerospace Force announced the launch of the Noor-2 military satellite on March 8, 2022. The IRGC said the satellite was successfully put into low Earth orbit (LEO). The official news agency IRNA announced that the military satellite Noor-2 was launched from the IRGC aerospace base in the Shahroud Desert, 300 kilometers to the east of Tehran. It was successfully put into orbit at an altitude of 500 kilometers above the Earth. The satellite carrier Qassed was used in the launch of the satellite. It was also used for putting the previous military satellite Noor-1 into orbit. Qassed is the first homegrown three-stage missile running on hybrid fuel, a mix of hard and liquid fuel.⁽²⁹⁾

As to the objectives of launching the military satellite Noor-2, official Iranian sources said that the satellite was launched for general and defensive purposes. It will carry out reconnaissance and measurement missions at the speed of 7.6 kilometers per second, 480 seconds after the launch.⁽³⁰⁾



Iran's first launch of a military satellite was on 22 April 2020

Photo: IRNA, <https://bit.ly/3sPyæn>.

Iran's space program efforts began at the end of the 1990s through launching the Shahab-3 missile into space. This was followed by developing the facilities concerned with its space program. Since then—and over sporadic periods of time—Iran has conducted more test launches of satellites into space. But such attempts came to naught, the last of which was carried out earlier this year,

where the country failed to put a satellite into orbit. It attributed the failure to technical problems which it said it was seeking to resolve. Despite the Iranian announcement that the recent launch had succeeded, there is no proof verifying the claims of Iranian officials. This could be an overstatement as Iran routinely amplifies its military capabilities and potential.

Underground Bases for Missiles and Drones

The IRGC's Aerospace Force announced on April 5, 2022, the establishment of underground bases for drones and missiles in the presence of General Hossein Salami, commander in chief of the IRGC. This announcement coincided with a remark made by Salami. He said that the underground bases of missiles and drones had entered into service. He added that these bases were built in the shape of tunnels in the heart of high mountains. They include ground-to-ground missiles with state-of-the-art equipment—in addition to attack drones that infiltrate the enemy's radar networks and defenses.⁽³¹⁾

This is the first time that the IRGC Aerospace Force has revealed the establishment of an underground drone base. In 2015, the Aerospace Force unveiled its first underground missile base in a ceremony broadcasted by Iranian state television. It aired pictures of the base that contained different categories of missiles. The base's depth reached 500 meters underground, according to the announcement at the ceremony.⁽³²⁾

Tehran repeated the step by unveiling its second base in 2016 which was inaugurated by the then-Speaker of the Iranian Parliament Ali Larijani. The inauguration ceremony included the display of the ballistic missile Emad which was previously unveiled during the inauguration of the first IRGC underground missile base three days earlier.⁽³³⁾



A number of Iranian drones at the IRGC's underground base

Photo: Mehr News Agency, <https://bit.ly/3vChCsl>

Iran's interest in building bases for missiles and drones comes in the context of developing its various weapons. The top priority of its military is the building of bases and manufacturing drones. It uses such missiles and drones to help

its terrorist militias in Yemen, Lebanon, Iraq and Syria, which have become a threat to the region's stability and security. These steps to build fortified zones are prompted by Iranian concerns about attacks targeting its most important military programs. They aim to provide protection against hostile attacks. Iran shrouds its sensitive military bases with secrecy and ambiguity. Despite the secrecy Iran is conferring on its armament programs, last February its drone bases in the province of Kermanshah came under Israeli attack. Israel's Haaretz newspaper said that the aerial attack carried out by Israel in Iran caused devastating damage to the country's drone network. The newspaper also added that six Israeli drones bombarded the IRGC base in the province of Kermanshah, west of Iran.⁽³⁴⁾

Conclusion

The ballistic missile attacks on Erbil, the capital of Iraq's Kurdistan Region will likely provoke Tel Aviv to launch revenge attacks against similar centers affiliated with the IRGC on Iraqi soil. And maybe Israel has already responded to this attack in Syria. Yet it is possible that among the motives behind the attack is Iran's desire to test its missile capabilities and how accurate is the Fateh-110 class of ballistic missiles. The insistence of the Iranian government on launching missiles into space represents a flagrant defiance of UN Security Council resolutions. The launch coincided with the impasse reached at the nuclear talks in Vienna. Yet we cannot turn a blind eye to growing Iranian attention toward its space program. It could be a pretext Iran is using to develop longer range missiles in the future, particularly as such missiles are considered among the red lines that cannot be incorporated into any future nuclear deal. As to Iran's interest in building bases for its ballistic missiles and drones, this is part of the Iranian project to develop its different weapons and to become an indestructible and unassailable force.

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Iran and the Gulf States

The February Gulf-Iran file discussed the rising escalation between the two sides because of the increased international activity surrounding the Iranian nuclear file, in addition to the impact of the Russian-Ukrainian crisis on their relations. This crisis has led to the emergence of new international considerations in relation to energy markets because of the Western alliance against Russia. The aforementioned was discussed through the resurgence of international interest in the Gulf states because of growing Western demand for energy supplies. Therefore, this Western interest strengthened the negotiating position of the Gulf states. The file also highlighted Iran's activities on the Emirati islands, with its intent to impose a fait accompli policy in relation to its occupation of these islands. Gulf-Iran tensions persisted in March in light of new regional developments that are expected to impact Gulf-Iran interactions. These developments included the following: the implications of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's visit to the UAE, the attempts to draw Syria back into the Arab sphere, the dispute raised by Iran over the Saudi-Kuwaiti agreement on joint investment in the Dorra gas field, and finally the potential impact of the participation of the Gulf states in the Negev Summit, in which a number of regional states participated along with the United States.

The Repercussions of the Syrian President's Visit to the UAE on Gulf Relations With Iran

In light of the UAE's policy to restore peace in Syria, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad visited the country on March 18, 2022, during which he held separate consultations with the Vice President of the UAE Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, and the Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Zayed Al Nahyan as well as with a number of Emirati officials. Some observers believe that this visit not only serves the joint interests of both parties but also the wider region. Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed described this visit as the "beginning of goodness, peace and stability for Syria and the entire region."⁽¹⁾ Some believe that the UAE's efforts to bring back Syria to its Arab sphere is supported by Syria's desire to return.

Iranian Fears

The Iranian Mehr News Agency described the visit as historic, stating that the two sides discussed bilateral relations and joint cooperation plans. During this visit, both parties emphasized the defense of Syria's independence and the withdrawal of foreign forces from the country.⁽²⁾ Undoubtedly, Iran believes that Assad's rapprochement with his Arab neighbors will reduce his dependence on



Iran. Therefore, from Iran's perspective, this move poses a threat to its position in Syria and will limit its ability to put pressure on Israel. Furthermore, this move will diminish the effectiveness of the so-called "axis of resistance."⁽³⁾ However, some observers believe that this rapprochement includes an implicit message of UAE reassurance of its neutrality toward Iran, which connotes that its relations with Israel will not be at Iran's expense, and that its good relations with the Syrian regime reflect a rapprochement with Iranian policy.

The Position of the United States and the Nuclear File

The United States, which is seeking to revive the nuclear deal with Iran in order to focus on the Ukrainian file, considers this visit to the UAE as a new burden, the consequences of which it will have to bear. The US State Department expressed its profound disappointment and dismay about the visit.⁽⁴⁾ It considers interactions with the Assad regime as violating the United States' red lines as stipulated in the Caesar Act. Commenting on the visit, US State Department Spokesperson Ned Price said, "We are profoundly disappointed and troubled by this apparent attempt to legitimize Bashar al-Assad, who remains responsible for the death and suffering of countless Syrians." He added, "We urge states considering engagement with the Assad regime to weigh carefully the horrific atrocities visited by the regime."⁽⁵⁾

The reality of the ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine, and the subsequent crisis in the energy markets, has compelled Western countries to search for alternatives to Russian oil and gas. The UAE can be a possible part of the

solution to the ongoing energy crisis.⁽⁶⁾ In light of the aforementioned, the United States may have to modify its response to the visit, and work to avoid raising the concerns of the Gulf countries, especially given the speculation that the IRGC might be delisted from its terror list. Avoiding tensions with the Gulf states is important to prevent complicating relations with important oil producing countries.

The Impact of Assad's Visit to the UAE on Gulf-Iran Relations:

The UAE rapprochement with Syria, which Tehran considers a threat to its influence in the country, is expected to lead to new tensions which will impede Gulf-Iran relations. The Iranians may construe this step as a means for the Gulf to draw closer to Syria in order to pressure the United States to modify its position toward Iran. Moreover, the Iranians may view this step as an attempt to counter its strategic presence in Syria, especially in light of the new and growing relationship between Abu Dhabi and Tel Aviv.

Iranian Claims About the Saudi-Kuwaiti Joint Dorra Gas Field Agreement

Following the Saudi-Kuwaiti announcement of the historic agreement that they signed concerning joint investment in the Dorra gas field, Tehran, through its Foreign Ministry spokesman, quickly declared its objection to the agreement without its consultation. Tehran also raised the longstanding dispute regarding the border of the continental shelf between Iran and Kuwait. Iranian Foreign Ministry Spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh said, "The Dorra field, which Iran calls the Arash, is a field shared between Iran, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, parts of which are located in areas between Iran and Kuwait whose water boundaries have not been defined." He further stated that based on international protocols, any attempt to invest in and develop this field must be subject to coordination and cooperation between the three countries. Therefore, according to the Iranians, the recent move by Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, which was within the framework of cooperation between the two sides, is an illegal move and contradicts current international protocols, as well as previous negotiations regarding investment in this joint field. At the same time, Iran is ready to continue bilateral negotiations with Kuwait within the framework of previous negotiations over the demarcation of the continental shelf as well as start tripartite discussions, stressing that it also reserves the right to invest in the joint field.⁽⁷⁾

The Significance of Dorra Gas Field

The Dorra gas field is of great significance economically and politically, especially in light of the current energy crisis resulting from tensions between Russia and the West. The field's economic importance lies in the fact that it is a large reservoir for producing gas. It is expected to produce 1 billion standard cubic feet of gas per day and 84,000 barrels per day of condensate gas. The political significance is that it reflects the economic value of the Gulf states globally, which they can leverage when it comes to matters of concern for them.⁽⁸⁾



The border dispute between Saudi Arabia and Kuwait has disrupted the field's production since it was discovered in 1960. Dr. Muhammad al-Sabban, an international economic and oil advisor, indicated that Dorra is a joint off-shore gas field between Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. Iran was attempting to obtain part of it because of its border location. He also stated that work on this field was supposed to start a long time ago. However, its border location led to a dispute which delayed its development. The field is owned equally by Saudi Arabia and Kuwait.⁽⁹⁾

The Reasons Behind Iran's Denouncement and Fears

Iran is still seeking to add complexity to its relations with its neighboring Gulf states. Any Gulf success raises Iran's concerns. Therefore, Iran aims to perpetuate existing tensions in order to capitalize on the challenges facing the region. Since the Dorra field represents a major source of gas production, it is considered a threat to Iranian gas exports. Iran's denouncement also aimed to send a message to the world about the significance of the Gulf region in light of the energy crisis facing it.

Kuwaiti Foreign Minister Sheikh Ahmed Nasser Al Mohammed Al Sabah resolved the controversy generated by the provocative Iranian denouncement by saying that "Iran is not a party to the Dorra field as it is a purely Kuwaiti-Saudi field. They only enjoy the investment rights according to the agreements concluded between the two countries." This referred to the negotiations over the continental shelf.⁽¹⁰⁾ Negotiations remain stalled between Kuwait and Iran to define the maritime border of the continental shelf. This has nothing to do with the area in which the Dorra field is located. Therefore, Iran's ownership claims are completely groundless.

The Negev Summit and the Gulf's Presence

The world is going through a critical time, and the consequences are being felt across the region. The Negev Summit brought together Gulf and Arab countries

to coordinate with Israel for the first time in the presence of the United States. Some described the summit as “historic and unprecedented,” with questions raised about the nature of the understandings that could bring these parties closer in the context of the current conditions.

The United States’ relations with regional countries are complex. The moves taking place in the region can be described as reflecting the desire of regional countries to safeguard themselves against the implications of the ongoing US attempts to arrange its cards with Iran.

Messages and Implications of the Negev Summit

This summit followed a tripartite summit that brought together the foreign ministers of Egypt, the UAE and Israel, and coincided with the US secretary of state’s tour to the region. It also happened amid increased Western alignment against Russia, which is waging a war against its neighbor Ukraine. Therefore, it can be said that the summit was held to recalibrate relations between regional countries in light of the aforementioned developments and to put pressure on the United States to give up its moves to appease the Iranian side, which is still carrying out acts of sabotage and supporting terrorist activities in the region.

The Iranian Position

The Ukrainian crisis has cast a shadow over the Iranian nuclear talks which Russia uses as a bargaining chip against the United States. Moscow is using this chip to ease the sanctions imposed by the West on it. Furthermore, the Negev Summit is expected to put pressure on the United States to prevent the IRGC’s delisting, which is an Iranian condition to return to the nuclear deal. The United States was considering this step to achieve some consensus in order to revive the nuclear deal.

Iran believes that the recent regional developments could result in a major shift, leading to the integration of Israeli and Arab security operations, meaning that the security of the Arab countries would be safeguarded by Israel and vice versa. This raises Iran’s concerns and sensitivities. Some Iranians believe that the political/popular resistance and Arab diplomatic sensitivities about establishing relations with Israel no longer exist in the same way as before and that conditions in the near future will promote the rapid establishment of relations between the rest of the Arab countries and Israel. Under these circumstances, Iran will not be able to play an effective role. In other words, the Arab bloc’s front with Israel will cast a heavy shadow over the axis of resistance alliance in the near future.⁽¹¹⁾

Conclusion

It seems that the complexities of the Ukrainian crisis have cast a dark shadow over the regional countries both politically and economically. Therefore, tensions between Iran and the Gulf states will continue. Iran, which is trying to fill the vacuum that Russia might create in Syria because of its involvement in the Ukraine war, fears any rapprochement between the Syrian president and the Gulf states. Countries in the region, especially the Gulf states, are working to address the repercussions imposed by the Russia-Ukraine war and

to curb Iran's ambitions, which may increase if Tehran reaches an agreement with Washington on reviving the nuclear deal. The negotiations on returning to the nuclear deal are getting complicated given the increasingly complex international developments and regional interactions such as the dispute over the Dorra field, UAE-Syria rapprochement, and the Negev Summit's understandings. The aforementioned reflects the regional response to the repercussions of the Russian crisis and the nuclear talks. It also indicates the desire of the Gulf countries to take extraordinary steps to protect their security in light of the current international conditions.

Iran and Yemen

Rasanah's February 2022 file discussed the implications of designating the Houthi militia as a terrorist organization by the UNSC and the Iranian position on this designation, and the possible repercussions of the UNSC resolution on the Yemeni scene. In the March 2022 file, we address the implications and timing of the Houthi attacks on oil facilities in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and the implications of the Houthi initiatives and their political dimensions.

The Timing and Implications of the Houthi Attacks on Saudi Installations

March witnessed a series of Houthi attacks targeting oil, civilian and economic facilities in Saudi Arabia. On March 25, 2022, the Houthi militia issued a statement claiming responsibility for the terrorist attacks targeting vital targets in Jizan, Dhahran al-Janoub, Abha and Khamis Mushait, and most notably the targeting of the Aramco oil installation in Jeddah.⁽¹²⁾

For these terrorist attacks, the Houthi militia used Iranian cruise missiles and drones, clearly demonstrating that the Iranian government continues to supply the militia with weapons to target neighboring countries and the Yemeni people. The head of the Yemen Tribes Alliance Brigadier Faisal al-Shaari confirmed that Iranian weapons, including missiles and drones, "were not available in the arsenal of the former Yemeni army before the coup took place, but they were provided following the operation to end the coup to restore the Yemeni state." He added that despite the embargo imposed on the Houthi militia, the Iranian government has proven that it has many ways and means to smuggle military equipment to the Houthis, citing the weapons shipment that was recently seized at one of the shipping ports in Yemen.⁽¹³⁾

In this regard, the military spokesman for the joint forces on Yemen's western coast said that "Iran is permanently and largely determined to smuggle various types of high-quality and very dangerous weapons which the Houthi militia has launched towards Saudi Arabia and the UAE or used in internal attacks."⁽¹⁴⁾

On Tuesday, March 22, 2022, the Saudi Cabinet urged the international community to be aware of the danger posed by the Iranian government supplying the Houthi militia with ballistic missiles and drones and to fulfil its responsibilities to ensure the flow of energy supplies. The council reaffirmed that the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia will not bear responsibility for any global energy supply shortages as a result of the ongoing Iran-backed Houthi attacks on petroleum supplies and gas production installations in the country.⁽¹⁵⁾

Many observers believe that the Houthi's offensive operations against oil facilities in Saudi Arabia have come at a sensitive phase for the global energy market. These offensive operations are directly connected with the interests of the Iranian government, both in regard to Iran's oil export policy and the government's negotiating leverage at the Vienna talks. The escalation also represents a Houthi attempt to send a message to its supporters and opponents that it is not in a vulnerable position. The Houthi militia also seeks to establish an external enemy in order to unify its internal front. Moreover, it wants to make clear to the regional countries and the Yemeni political forces that Iran plays a pivotal role in Yemen's future political process. It is noteworthy that the escalation came days before the beginning of the Yemeni consultations held in Riyadh under the supervision of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). These talks intended to unify peace efforts and strengthen Yemeni institutions to meet the aspirations of the Yemeni people.

Houthi Initiatives and Their Political Dimensions

March witnessed Houthi interactions with the UN. The militia signed an agreement with the UN on March 6, 2022 to unload the cargo of the oil tanker Safer and it reached a prisoner exchange agreement with the coalition and the legitimate government under the auspices of the UN. The agreement stipulates the release of 1,400 Houthi prisoners in exchange for 823 prisoners belonging to the coalition and the legitimate Yemeni government, including the brother of Yemeni President Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi.⁽¹⁶⁾

The UN also announced a truce in Yemen for two months. This coincided with the beginning of the Yemeni consultations in Riyadh, but the Houthis violated this truce on many fronts, especially in Marib, Taiz and Hodeidah.



Despite these violations, the Yemeni army spokesman, Brigadier General Abdo Majali, reaffirmed that the coalition's air force still abides by the UN truce and that the legitimate Yemeni forces did not carry out any offensive operations and only undertook defensive actions against Houthi attacks.⁽¹⁷⁾

Instead of abiding by the UN truce, which may pave the way for ending the Yemeni crisis, the Houthi militia announced what it called the "Yemeni Peace Initiative" by so-called President of the Supreme Political Council, Mahdi al-Mashat. The Houthi militia claimed that it would suspend its terrorist attacks for three days. The Yemeni Foreign Minister Ahmed Awad bin Mubarak described the Houthi militia's initiative as absurd and an attempt by it to avoid taking steps to end the war and achieve peace in Yemen. He added that the Yemeni government welcomed all responsible and honest efforts to achieve peace. After his meeting with the UN envoy Hans Grundberg, he said, "This is the government's consistent position on all UN and regional calls, the latest of which was the Saudi initiative, which clearly called for a comprehensive ceasefire since his appointment to arrive at an approach that guarantees a comprehensive ceasefire and truly addresses all the humanitarian issues that impact the lives of Yemenis across the country without the discrimination which the coupists [the Houthis] created, leading to the suffering of the people in each governorate of the republic."⁽¹⁸⁾ The Yemeni foreign minister stressed that the Yemeni government is fully participating in all the consultations called for by the GCC and similar international calls intending to alleviate the suffering of the Yemeni people, while the Houthi militia evades its commitments by launching irresponsible initiatives that fail to address the root cause of the problem seriously, resulting in the deterioration of humanitarian and economic conditions.⁽¹⁹⁾

Many observers believe that the Houthi militia pursues escalation as an approach for the sake of its political maneuvers and its hollow initiatives for peace. This approach is an old tactic embraced by guerrilla warfare outfits. The conditions of the new Houthi initiative were originally proposed by the Iranian government years ago, and the latter is still dictating these conditions until today. This new initiative brings to mind the attacks targeting the Aramco installations in Abqaiq and Khurais in 2019 and the subsequent announcement of an initiative by the Houthi militia which was largely political in nature rather than proposing meaningful solutions for peace.

Conclusion

While the international community, especially the GCC, is seeking to achieve peace in Yemen by finding common ground for Yemeni dialogue to achieve the aspirations and interests of the Yemeni people, the Houthi militia is seeking to impose further escalation and reshuffle the cards to prolong the Yemeni crisis in order to serve the Iranian government's interests and orientations at the expense of Yemen's security and stability.

The military escalation that targeted vital oil facilities in Saudi Arabia through the use of Iranian weapons demonstrates the Houthis' choice of violence and terrorism to undermine all international and regional efforts to achieve peace in Yemen. As for the political initiatives presented by the Houthis, these are merely tactical maneuvers intending to impose the Iranian agenda on any future Yemeni settlement to resolve the ongoing crisis.



Iran and Iraq

While the February 2022 file discussed the impact of Iraq's political impasse on the extent of Iran's influence in the country, the failure of Iranian efforts to bridge the division in the Shiite house, and Iranian pressure on the Sadrists to form a government that includes all its pro-Shiite alliances, the March 2022 file discusses Iran's narrative about targeting Erbil, the capital of the Kurdistan region of Iraq, the official and unofficial Iraqi positions on the attacks, and Iran's objective behind launching the attacks and their implications.

Iran's Narrative About Targeting Erbil With Ballistic Missiles

As the world focused on the Russia-Ukraine war, its ramifications for international peace/security and its adverse impact on trade and the global economy, the Iraqi city of Erbil, the capital of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, faced ballistic missile attacks on March 13, 2022. The IRC claimed responsibility for the ballistic missiles attacks. In a statement, it confirmed that the attacks damaged the Israeli "strategic center for conspiracy" because of the recent crimes committed by the Israeli army inside Iran.⁽²⁰⁾ Iraqi security services stated that some Iranian missiles landed near the US consulate's compound which is under construction in the north of Erbil, and the US military base in the vicinity of Erbil International Airport. However, no damage was reported.

In addition, the IRGC's statement indicated that the motive for launching the missile attacks on Erbil was to respond to Tel Aviv's attack on an Iranian drone base located in Kermanshah, western Iran in February 2022. The New York Times revealed that a senior intelligence official (who was unidentified) stated that six drones exploded in an Iranian facility that stored drones near Kermanshah in February 2022. Moreover, the attack destroyed dozens of drones, and the Israeli intelligence agents who oversaw the attack were stationed in Iraq.⁽²¹⁾ Hence, Iran responded to this Israeli attack in its territory.

Although the IRGC statement clarified the motive for the attacks targeting Erbil, Iranian media outlets indicated that there was another motive. Iran carried out its threat to retaliate against Israeli air raids targeting Iranian positions in Syria in February 2022. The air raids killed four Iranian fighters and two IRGC officers. Their obituary stated that "Israel will pay for its crime and the operations of the Israeli killing machine will not remain unpunished."⁽²²⁾ However, the retaliation took place on Iraqi soil as some recent Israeli attacks targeting Iran were launched from Iraq,⁽²³⁾ according to the Iranian narrative.

Some observers believe that the Iranian attacks on Erbil were launched to undermine the outcomes of the talks that took place on February 2, 2022 between Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and the President of the Iraqi

Kurdistan Region Nechirvan Idris Barzani in Ankara; and to derail the outcomes of the discussions between the two sides held on the sidelines of the Antalya Diplomatic Forum on March 12, 2022 regarding the export of energy from northern Iraq to the European countries via Turkish territories. These attacks came hours after the second meeting between Erdogan and Barzani, particularly given the fact that the Regional Government of Iraqi Kurdistan had agreed with the Kurdish “Kar Group” to expand the network of energy and gas supply lines toward the Turkish borders in preparation for exports. ⁽²⁴⁾ The Ukrainian war prompted the European countries to search for alternatives to Russian gas and Tehran seeks to take advantage of this predicament to develop its relations with Europe by exporting Iranian gas to the continent. Therefore, Ankara’s and Erbil’s efforts to transfer gas from Iraqi Kurdistan to Europe concerned Iran since they offered an alternative to Russian gas other than Iranian gas.

Iraqi Positions on the Iranian Attacks Targeting Erbil

The first thing that must be noted about the Iraqi position is that Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kazemi was decisive in condemning the Iranian attacks, immediately convened a meeting of the National Security Council, and made an urgent visit to Erbil. He also demanded the Iraqi Foreign Ministry to summon the Iranian ambassador in Baghdad, Iraj Masjedi, and lodge a complaint about the violation of Iraq’s sovereignty, regardless of the accuracy of Iranian allegations about whether or not Israeli targets existed in Erbil. Kazemi’s stance is in line with his position to transfer Iraq to the phase of full statehood and national sovereignty.

The second thing that must be noted is that the Kurdistan Regional Government rejected the Iranian narrative. It argued that Tehran’s allegations were baseless since the targeted civilian sites were located about 2 kilometers away from the new compound of the US consulate. ⁽²⁵⁾ It also called on the Iranian government to provide evidence in support of its narrative. However, the Iranian government has not provided any evidence despite the fact that it has been more than three weeks since the attacks were launched, which attests to the accuracy of the Kurdish narrative to date. The Iranian retaliatory attacks are far from Israel, which has been targeting Iranian positions in Syria for more than five years. Israel has launched hundreds of air strikes without any Iranian response. In response, Iran would simply remain silent or repeat “We will respond at the time and place of our choosing.” However, the targeting of the two IRGC officers was in Damascus not in Erbil, and Iran’s militias should have responded in Syria. This means that the attacks have nothing to do with Israel, but rather are related to the Iraqi scene and the developments taking place in the Vienna talks. Therefore, the Iraqi arena was chosen to send the Iranian message of anger at the complexities of the Iraqi scene and its frustration with the stalled talks in Vienna. Iran’s targeting of the Iraqi arena will also give it an opportunity to save itself from facing similar retaliatory attacks, especially as the attacks had limited outcomes and caused minimal damage.

The two major Iraqi alliances were divided over the attacks: the Sadrist bloc, its Kurdish allies and the Sunni forces that support full statehood and shifting Iraq to its Arab sphere held a position different to the Coordination Framework

that includes pro-Iran alliances such as the Fatah Alliance and the State of Law Alliance as well as other currents supporting the non-state path.

The Position of the Sadrist Bloc and Its Allies

They denounced the Iranian attacks. Sadr called on the competent authorities to deliver a protest note to the UN and the Iranian ambassador in Baghdad in response to Tehran targeting Erbil via ballistic missiles. He stressed that “Iraqi lands should not be used from the north to the south and from the east to the west as an arena for political, security, and military conflicts. The alleged Israel site must be investigated as soon as possible. They should not be used as an excuse to destabilize the security and people of Iraq.”⁽²⁶⁾ The Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) also considered these attacks to be unacceptable Iranian political messages, which will not prevent the Kurds and their allies from supporting the path to full statehood.

The Position of the Coordination Framework

It did not condemn Iran. However, the position of one of its strongest military arms, the Iraqi Hezbollah, was in line with the Iranian narrative that the attacks were a response to Israel targeting Iranian territories from Iraq, and the bombing of Iranian positions in Syria.

This division between the two alliances indicated that the inter-discussions to form a new Iraqi government are not proceeding well in light of Sadr’s growing popularity at the expense of the Coordination Framework, and his chances to influence the upcoming Iraqi equation in general, and limit the role of the Coordination Framework in attempting to thwart his efforts to form a majority government.

Iranian Objectives Behind Launching the Attacks on Erbil

Confusing the Iraqi Arena and Complicating the Political Scene for Sadr



The Iranian attacks aimed to shuffle the cards and destabilize the Iraqi arena, especially as the leader of the Sadrist bloc, which ranks first in the new Parliament, Muqtada al-Sadr and his allies from the Kurdish community, most notably the KDP, want to form a majority government that supports the path toward full statehood and returning Iraq to its Arab sphere. Iran does not want this as it will limit the influence of its militias over Iraqi decision-making. Therefore, Tehran seeks to complicate the scene for Sadr by hindering the KDP from joining his bloc to deter him from his rejectionist position toward forming a government based on Iranian whims, in which Iran and its militias will have the largest share of influence over Iraqi decision-making.

Iran's Emphasis on Separating the Ballistic Missile and Nuclear Files

In its attacks on Erbil, Iran used ballistic missiles from within its territory, while it could have targeted Erbil from Iraq by using short-range missiles to send a message to the regional and international community that its ballistic missile

file is a redline and that it refuses to link the ballistic and nuclear files together in Vienna. This is in light of some regional and international powers intensifying their efforts in Vienna to integrate the ballistic missile file into the nuclear file in order to weaken Iran's ballistic missile program and its missile capabilities.

Armed Escalation Amid the Faltering Vienna Talks

Iran realizes that the faltering Vienna talks signify the continuation of its economic deterioration, with billions of Iranian oil dollars remaining frozen abroad. This also means that the tragic living conditions inside Iran will worsen, and there will be a possibility of protests restarting again against the government. The Vienna talks for the international powers declined in significance since the outbreak of the Russian-Ukrainian war. Therefore, Iran is seeking to bring



back international attention to its nuclear file so that sanctions can be eventually lifted after it has, to some degree, lost the card of reducing its nuclear commitments. The escalation of armed conflict may be an alternative Iranian card to stir the stagnant waters in relation to the nuclear file.

The Implications of the Iranian Attacks on Erbil

The Iranian ballistic missile attacks on Erbil were considered unprecedented because they were launched from within Iranian territory, specifically from the northwestern region of the country, from an Iranian base in the Tabriz region, 332 kilometers from Erbil. Drone attacks were launched previously by its militias from within Iraqi territory against US targets. The attacks on Erbil involved about 10 Fateh ballistic missiles, including the Fateh 11 ⁽²⁷⁾ while in the past short-range missiles were deployed.

These attacks fall within Iran's attempts to exploit the turbulent international scene because of the Ukraine war to advance its expansionist agenda in Iraq in particular and in its spheres of influence in general, and to confirm the persistence of its escalatory behavior against US targets in Iraq even if a nuclear deal is reached. However, these attacks enhanced the opportunities of the proponents of establishing Iraq's national sovereignty because such attacks disregarded Iraqi sovereignty and violated the principle of good neighborliness by unjustifiably bombing the territory of a neighboring country. Iran has not provided any evidence for its allegations that it was targeting Israeli interests in Iraqi Kurdistan.

Although some observers believe that Israel was not the intended target of the Iranian attacks, they did carry a threatening message to Israel, exacerbated Iranian-Israeli tensions in the Iraqi theater of conflict, and will lead to intensified Israeli escalations against Iranian positions in Iraq and Syria in the foreseeable future, and increased air and cyberattacks against Iran's sites within its territories. It is expected that the Iranian ballistic missile attacks on Erbil will reinforce regional and international demands for the integration of the Iranian ballistic missile and regional behavior files in Vienna, and they will impose further pressure on the US administration to discuss their integration during the upcoming rounds. If it does, Iran will be the losing party, either by refusing to link these two files in Vienna, which will impede the reaching of a new deal, or prolong the talks to reach a satisfactory outcome, especially as the talks have reached a semi-final phase. Both cases will prolong the talks and maintain the sanctions against Iran.

Conclusion

There are Iranian attempts to take the advantage of the international community's preoccupation in general and the United States in particular with the war in Ukraine and its repercussions on international politics and the global economy by opening a new front of tensions in Iraq to destabilize the Iraqi arena and prevent the formation of a new government which will move toward full statehood and shift the country to its natural Arab sphere. This will limit the influence of Iranian militias over Iraqi decision-making, hence reducing

Iran's influence in the country. There is also an Iranian attempt to bring back international attention to the nuclear talks, which may lead to the sanctions being lifted. However, Iraq, its people and national sovereignty suffer the most from these Iranian attacks, creating difficulties for the transition toward full statehood for the next government.



Iran and Syria

In February, the Iran-Syria relations file discussed the repercussions of the Ukrainian crisis on Syria and the profit and loss accounts for Tehran and Damascus. This month's file discusses the regional moves to extend political and diplomatic relations with the Syrian government and Iranian military and political opposition against these moves. The aforementioned are discussed as follows: first, Arab-Iran moves in the Syrian file, and second Syria amid Iranian moves and Israeli preparedness.

Arab-Iran Moves in the Syrian File

Recent Arab and Iranian moves hold great significance. These coincided with a number of developments in the world and the region, and the West nearing a deal with Iran over its nuclear program. Moreover, all the international and regional parties sought to strengthen their cards against the other. Hence, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's visit to the UAE, which was his first visit to an Arab country since the outbreak of the Syrian crisis in 2011, is important. It also reflected the first international move outside the scope of Damascus's traditional allies: Iran and Russia. Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian visited Damascus and Beirut after visiting Moscow.⁽²⁸⁾ Between these two visits, there were meetings between many regional and international parties, where the Syrian crisis was always present, starting from the tripartite summit in Sharm el-Sheikh in Egypt, the Aqaba meeting in Jordan, to the Negev Summit. These multiple moves are of considerable significance and have several implications. They coincided with a number of developments in the regional and international arenas, which gave them additional importance; they occurred amid the escalation of the Ukrainian-Russian war, and the build-up of the Western-Russian divisions. In addition, the latter led to severe regional and international ramifications. It is expected that the sanctions on Iran will be lifted and attacks by Tehran's proxies across the region will increase.

Reviewing the indications of the aforementioned developments, it becomes apparent that their objectives were as follows: firstly, to strengthen the Arab and regional role in resolving regional crises. The current stage and the complex regional conditions require the need to adopt an approach to reduce tensions and identify regional solutions to crises rather than relying on international initiatives. This can be done by strengthening the Arab role, creating a balance of power and anticipating the expected outcomes in both Vienna and Kyiv. There was also widespread news about the possible delisting of the IRGC as a foreign terrorist organization. If this happens, this will give the IRGC free rein to cement its influence and deploy further its militias in the region. In this

context, the discussion about Iranian influence in the region in general, and in Syria in particular, seems to be a matter of urgency for many international powers and Arab countries, especially the Gulf states in light of the increasing attacks by the Iran-backed Houthi militia against Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

Secondly, for the Syrian government, the visit of the Syrian president to the UAE which coincided with the visit of the Iranian foreign minister to Damascus reflects Bashar al-Assad's dual policy: he intends to use the Arab quest for seeking calm and to rearrange the regional security equation and at the same time to seize the opportunity of the world powers being quite close to concluding the Iranian nuclear deal, so he can break Syria's isolation and secure economic and political gains.

Thirdly, for Iran, the evolution of the relationship between Damascus and Abu Dhabi has become one of the most important concerns, prompting an acceleration in Iranian diplomatic efforts to thwart the development of relations between the two sides. The Iranian foreign minister's recent visit to Damascus occurred one week after the visit of the UAE foreign minister to Damascus in November 2021. This evolution of the Damascus-Abu Dhabi relationship and the timing of Abdollahian's visit to Damascus leaves no doubt about the level of Iranian apprehension. Although Iran seeks to end Damascus's isolation, this developing relationship between Syria and the UAE should not be at the expense of its influence and interests in Syria. In light of the rapid developments in the regional and international arenas, and Tehran's apprehension about the outcomes of the meetings held between a number of regional countries in which its malign interventions and how to counter them were discussed, Iran was prompted to coordinate with its allies and arms and keep a close eye on its spheres of influence in the region.

The timing of the Iranian foreign minister's visit to Damascus was important as it reflected Tehran's desire to expand its role in Syria at the expense of the Russian role. Russia will be unable to provide continuous support to the Syrian government if its war against Ukraine continues. This means there is an opportunity for Iran to present the Syrian government with alternatives and options. This reading is supported by the fact that Abdollahian's visit coincided with the convening of the seventh round of meetings of the Syrian Constitutional Committee in Geneva. The Russian president's envoy to Syria Alexander Lavrentiev was a prominent absentee as over the past two years he had routinely held multiple discussions and consultations before any meetings regarding Syria. Therefore, the absence of Russian diplomatic activity was starkly felt.

Syria Between Iranian Activity and Israeli Preparedness

During March, Tehran worked to increase the pace of its activities and intensify its political, diplomatic and military movements in Syria, thereby taking advantage of the opportunity created by the international preoccupation with the Russian-Ukrainian crisis. These moves were made amid reports of progress in the Vienna talks between Iran and the Western powers to revive the Iranian nuclear deal. Politically, the visit of Iran's foreign minister as well as other Iranian visits to Damascus in early March — including the visit of the senior

advisor to the Iranian foreign minister and the head of the Popular Mobilization Forces in Iraq Faleh al-Fayyad and their meeting with the Syrian president — sought primarily to serve Tehran's goal of strengthening its presence in Syria, and highlighting the role of its proxies in the region — this is in addition to preventing Syria from getting involved in the Ukraine crisis. Iran also aims to present itself as the most important player wielding power through its proxies in the region.⁽²⁹⁾

Militarily, the Syrian arena witnessed increased activity by Iranian militias in the eastern Euphrates. The security threat posed by these militias against the bases of the international coalition forces, and US forces in particular, also increased. Other Iranian moves included extensive changes to the deployment map of Tehran's militias in Syria, the withdrawal of hundreds of elements from Syria to Iraq, the repositioning of several militias between Deir Ezzor, Raqqa and Badia, and the sending of reinforcements to areas previously occupied by pro-Russian forces. Tehran also worked to expand the transfer of weapons, and reconnaissance/air defense systems to Syria. Notably, Iran transferred expertise for the assembly and launch of drones from the Quds Force's training center in the Imam Ali military base located on the Tehran-Karaj Freeway to Deir Ezzor under the oversight of the IRGC.⁽³⁰⁾

These developments and Iranian moves prompted Israeli forces to intensify their preparedness on their northern borders. They also shelled IRGC sites located in the Damascus International Airport area in Syria. Estimates suggest that Israel targeted the Lebanese Hezbollah Precision Missile Development Center in Syria. Two senior IRGC officers were reportedly killed in this Israeli attack.

Tel Aviv had previously launched a qualitative operation which destroyed hundreds of drones on Iranian soil. Both operations indicate Israeli concerns over Western-Iranian consensus regarding the nuclear talks. In light of this concern, Israel aimed to thwart Iranian uranium enrichment activities and other programs which endanger its security such as Tehran's missile and drone systems. Israel also sought to counter the activities of the Quds Force on its borders with Syria and Lebanon. Israel's operations also highlight its concern if the situation gets complicated in Kyiv, and if Russia is forced in the coming period to transfer some of its military forces from Syria to Ukraine. Consequently, its power will be weakened in Syria while Iranian military power and influence will be strengthened.

The IRGC bombed an Israeli training center in the Iraqi city of Erbil by firing 12 ballistic missiles launched from Iran. The IRGC claimed responsibility for the missile strikes. Israel promised to respond to any future attacks.⁽³¹⁾ The Iranian targeting of Israel on Iraqi territory, instead of on Syrian territory, indicates that Tehran has taken its confrontation with Israel to a different level. The IRGC had previously refrained from retaliating against hundreds of Israeli attacks that targeted it inside Syria and Iran as well. In addition, the IRGC publicly claiming responsibility for the operation and launching missile strikes directly from Iran to Iraq, although the targeting of Iranian officers took place on Syrian territory, indicates that the response outside the Syrian arena is the least costly option

for Tehran. This option saved Iran from complicating the Syrian file, disturbing the political balances inside Syria and adjusting its calculations with the rest of the actors involved in the Syrian file and averting the potential repercussions of this attack on the course of its nuclear talks that have experienced several complications. In line with Iranian calculations, the retaliation against the Israeli strikes inside Syria will make it necessary for Tehran to target US forces which are mainly located in eastern Syria, however, Tehran will avoid any military or political escalation that may complicate the nuclear talks at this stage.

Conclusion

The diplomatic and political movements and the serious efforts made in the Syrian file in March, starting from the UAE's reception of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, and the visit of the Iranian foreign minister to Damascus, will define the shape of the next stage in Syria. Furthermore, this file will be impacted by the ongoing Russia-Ukraine conflict and its multiple contexts, and the near consensus between Washington and Tehran over the Iranian nuclear program. The escalation of the Ukraine-Russia crisis and the semi-final stage of the nuclear deal with Iran will help define the boundaries of the roles of the active actors involved in the Syrian file. Therefore, it is expected that these developments (the nuclear deal and the Russia-Ukraine crisis) will lead to further escalation between the actors in the Syrian crisis, especially Iran and Israel. Each party, along with the rest of the actors involved in the Syrian file, will seek to strengthen their roles and secure pressure cards against the other party.

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International Affairs

International Affairs discusses the Iranian interactions with the United States and Europe. As for Iran-US relations, four topics are discussed: the reasons for the suspension of the Vienna talks, the US sanctions on Iran's non-nuclear activities, and the declining impact of US economic sanctions, and finally, the implications and outcomes of these developments. As for Iran-Europe relations, the file reviews the most significant interactions between the two sides: the problems in the nuclear talks in Vienna, and the release of the British-Iranian detainee Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe and the UK paying its debt to Iran.



Iran and the United States

The participants of the Iranian nuclear deal have almost crafted a semi-final draft to revive it after the great progress made in the Vienna talks. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and Iran made noticeable progress in their discussions to outline a joint blueprint to resolve their disagreements, meanwhile the United States reduced its tough policy of sanctions and pressure against Iran. The nuclear talks, however, stopped due to some unresolved issues that require decisive political action from Tehran and Washington. The Europeans are still mediating to forge a rapprochement between the two sides and avoid the collapse of the Vienna talks. Yet, the talks have been confined to discussing the revival of the nuclear deal, so the semi-settlement draft does not address all outstanding issues; Iran's ballistic missile program and goes against the interests of regional countries.

In this month's file, we shed light on the developments in Iran-US relations, and discuss three major interactions: the Vienna talks, US sanctions on Iran's non-nuclear activities, the declining impact of US economic sanctions on Iran, and finally, the implications and outcomes of these developments.

The Reasons for Suspending the Nuclear Talks

The Ukrainian crisis led many observers to expect that the nuclear talks would hasten in order to revive the nuclear deal, given the need to return Iran to the global energy markets amid the energy crisis. However, the talks were suspended, and the parties reaffirmed their redlines without showing any flexibility toward making any essential concessions and resumed their pressure and threats. The United States stated that it would walk away from the efforts to revive the deal if Iran continues its "intransigence."⁽¹⁾ This is perhaps aligned with the position of the Republicans who launched scathing criticism against the Biden administration, over what they view as a "bad deal" with Tehran. The latest US position has raised the concerns of regional countries because they believe Washington has not taken into account their security interests in the nuclear talks.⁽²⁾

Tehran is concerned that the aforementioned developments will lead to an outcome similar to that of the 2015 nuclear deal; all parties had agreed to curb Iran's nuclear program. Tehran's growing concerns stem from the possibility that the Republicans may gain power or hinder the conclusion of a deal if they gain control of the US Senate after the US midterm congressional elections to be held in November 2022. Iran, therefore, is still demanding guarantees; to ensure that the United States will not withdraw from the deal in the future

as the snapback mechanism will be an effective tool for Washington in case it returned to the deal.

Iran also demands guarantees regarding not depriving it from the economic benefits of the future deal through imposing non-nuclear sanctions. Iran's demands were enhanced by the demands of Russia and China for guarantees to protect their future trade with Iran. The United States refused to provide any guarantees except for granting Russia with guarantees that it can work with Iran only for developing Iranian nuclear reactors and trading uranium; this is Russia's responsibility as stipulated in the nuclear deal.

Another essential disagreement is regarding the lifting of the sanctions imposed on Iran. Tehran insists all sanctions are lifted while the United States is hesitant to lift some of them, including delisting the IRGC from the terror list. The United States, however, showed some flexibility by considering the delisting of the IRGC, inciting scathing international and regional criticism as the IRGC is charged with implementing Iran's expansionist agenda and has played a role in destabilizing the region.

Iran has reaped gains from the United States far behind its expectations, according to Russian officials' remarks. Iran, however, adopted a tougher position instead of enhancing trust and pushing forward the nuclear talks. This is probably due to the deliberate complacency of the Biden administration over the implementation of the sanctions; the Ukraine crisis; and the volatility in the energy markets.

The suspension of the nuclear talks and the delegations returning to their countries on March 11, 2022 revealed the difficulty in reaching an agreement which cannot be achieved without political compromises from both sides — though many disagreements have already been resolved. Amid this critical time, the parties need to make concessions or probably return to square one; escalation and confrontation.⁽³⁾ None of the parties would like to face such a scenario. Therefore, the EU coordinator for the Iran nuclear talks Enrique Mora commenced talks with Tehran and Washington to close the gaps in the nuclear talks.

US Sanctions Against Iran's Non-Nuclear Activities

The Vienna talks exclusively address Iran's nuclear activities, given Tehran's insistent refusal to include any other issues in the talks; therefore, the United States continued to impose sanctions related to Iran's missile activities, export of nuclear materials, and behavior in the region. As for Iran's proxy activities in the region, the United States designated two Hezbollah financiers operating the group's business network in West Africa: Ali Saade and Ibrahim Taher.

As for curbing Iran's nuclear activities, the United States designated five entities and individuals in Russia, South Korea and one entity in China for proliferation activities under the Iran, North Korea, and Syria Nonproliferation Act (INKSNA).

As for addressing Iran's ballistic missile activities, the United States sanctioned five Iranian individuals and entities pursuant to Executive Order (E.O.) 13382, which targets proliferators of weapons of mass destruction and

their means of delivery. This was following Iran's recent missile attack on Erbil, Iraq, as well as missile attacks by Iranian proxies against Saudi Arabia and the UAE. General Kenneth F. McKenzie, Jr., the commander of United States Central Command warned on March 15, 2022, that Iran's ballistic missile program is a "direct threat" to the security of the Middle East.

The aforementioned developments reflect the US dual policy toward Iran, which includes both deterrence and diplomacy; Washington uses diplomacy to tackle top priority files: nuclear issues while maintaining its sanctions and coordination with its allies in the region. For example, to achieve its deterrence objective, the United States joined the Negev Summit. The Biden policy in this regard is similar to that of former US President Barack Obama before concluding the 2015 nuclear deal. Definitely, the collapse of the Vienna talks will make the United States reimpose the comprehensive sanctions on Iran.

The United States is contemplating Russia's demands for written guarantees to ensure its trade with Iran remains unhindered in the future, including arms deals— given the fact that the UN arms embargo on Iran expired in October 2021 in line with the timetable set out in the 2015 nuclear deal.

The Declining Impact of US Economic Sanctions on Iran

Following the supreme leader's directives, the Raisi government adopted a program that does not depend on the nuclear deal to tackle the domestic crisis. The Iranian government, without a doubt, benefited from US complacency in following up on the implementation of sanctions, especially economic sanctions. Iran's oil exports to neighboring countries increased in the last four solar years (Iranian years) by 70 percent to 120 percent.⁽⁴⁾ Iran's trade with the countries that border the Caspian Sea increased by 39 percent.⁽⁵⁾ The Iranian government views these figures as an indication of its success in addressing the ramifications of US sanctions, adopting the policy "Heading to the East" and reaching out to its neighbors.

In the same program to address the US sanctions imposed on Iran's oil exports, Iran's Oil Minister Javad Owji tweeted on March 23, 2022 that Iran registered the highest record of oil revenues and exports during the sanctions period.⁽⁶⁾ The CEO of Iran's National Petrochemical Company Morteza Shahmirzaei announced on March 26 that the country's petrochemical industry has been able to depend on its domestic capacity to overcome the sanctions in variant petrochemical fields.⁽⁷⁾

According to official figures, Iran's non-oil trade with foreign countries in the Persian year 1400 hit a record breaking 162 million tons (\$100 billion) with a 38 percent increase compared to the year 1399.⁽⁸⁾

It is worth mentioning that Iran managed to evade the ramifications of US sanctions through illicit methods. The Wall Street Journal disclosed the Iranian government's involvement in a secret financial network abroad to resist US sanctions, revealing that Iran's foreign trade revenues are at the same level as the period before the Trump administration's imposition of severe sanctions. Through this network, the Iranian government has managed to ease some political pressure at home and enhance its position in the Vienna talks to revive



the nuclear deal. It is likely that the Iranian government will use this network as a permanent part of its economic structure to evade future sanctions or to prevent any foreign supervision,⁽⁹⁾ in light of the “hardliners” dominance and their unwillingness to naturalize relations with the United States.

Amid the harsh sanctions on Iran and Russia, the two countries are discussing ways to officially recognize the usage of MIR bank cards, a local payment system established and supervised by of the Central Bank of Russia used in 2014 against the backdrop of the Western sanctions imposed on Russian institutions.⁽¹⁰⁾ The talks indicates that the two countries are taking serious steps to evade US sanctions.

Upon the aforementioned, it is significant to highlight two points. First, Iran would not be able to achieve this economic progress without US negligence in following up on its “campaign of maximum pressure” adopted by the former administration, especially at the economic level, hoping to give diplomacy room to flourish given the fact that the Vienna talks to revive the nuclear deal have made noticeable progress and that US priorities in the international arena have changed. Second, all of the aforementioned figures and remarks do not necessarily reflect the reality on the ground as Iran actually suffers challenges at home. The Iranian government probably wants to send a message at this critical period that US sanctions are useless, i.e., it is not a card that will

pressure Iran to make concession at the negotiating table and that the Iranian government is in a better position to be adherent to its redlines.

Implications and Outcomes

The United States and Iran have confirmed a draft to revive the nuclear deal. The draft decisively addresses outstanding questions regarding Iran's nuclear compliance with the deal; this is reflected in the progress achieved by talks between Iran and the IAEA, yet other outstanding issues remained unresolved; US compliance to lift all the sanctions imposed on Iran, including the delisting of the IRGC from the US terror list and guarantees that Washington will not withdraw from the deal again. As the two sides are not willing to make further concessions, the diplomatic approach is at risk; Tehran views its demands as redlines that cannot be compromised and does not trust the United States' intentions while Washington refuses to address Iran's demands because it views them as unrealistic and illogical and exceeding the limits of the deal.

Because the United States gave up on its "maximum pressure campaign" which aimed to paralyze Iran's economy and place pressure on Iran, the latter benefited from this US inaction. The Iranian success in tackling its economic crisis without the nuclear deal has granted it time and space to maneuver, and has consolidated its negotiation position — which has been strengthened further against the backdrop of the Russian-Ukraine crisis and its ramifications as well as the obstacles hindering US diplomacy. This is in addition to the support of Russia and China.

The United States has been keen to maintain sanctions targeting Iran's missile program and destabilizing activities in the region. Probably, Washington, by maintaining such sanctions, aims to pave the way for further talks to address the remaining thorny issues with Iran in the future. Iran's Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian said that the United States in the last few weeks repeatedly attempted to negotiate directly about the remaining outstanding issues and open new issues.

Conclusion

Iran-US relations are at a critical stage amid their adherence to their redlines. Washington had a strong card to leverage Iran at the negotiation table; the "maximum pressure campaign", but the Biden administration gave up on this card by prioritizing diplomacy in addressing its disagreements with Tehran. The Raisi government, which adopts ideological perspectives and much harsher enmity against the United States, has become much more powerful at the negotiating table due to economic improvement resulting from the declining impact of US sanctions. Iran's position was strengthened further by the support of Russia and China. The United States believes that Iran's demands cannot be met. The US administration faces widespread criticism over what some believe to be massive concessions for Iran. The United States is really keen to revive the nuclear deal; Washington places last-minute pressure on Iran to revive the nuclear deal and secure its conditions without making essential concessions. The United States is also eager to maintain some cards to ensure

Iran will negotiate over the remaining thorny issues in the future. It seems that most of the members of the current US administration were part of the team that orchestrated the nuclear deal in 2015 and therefore are informed by their previous experience – solely betting on the nuclear deal to change Iran's behavior in the region.



Iran and Europe

The February 2022 file on Iran-Europe relations discussed the nuclear talks and political conflicts in regard to Iran's human rights record, and it reviewed three main topics: the nuclear talks in Vienna, the Iranian government's condemnation of the Iran Atrocities Tribunal (Aban Tribunal); and the European Parliament's demand to abolish the death penalty in Iran.

The March file details the exchange of accusations between the two sides and the pressure placed through the media, hoping to push each other toward reaching a satisfactory settlement to revive the nuclear deal which the parties are reportedly closer than ever to finalizing. The file also discusses the implications of the Iranian government's release of the UK detainee Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe as well as the UK paying its debt after 40 years over a failed arms deal which was concluded between Mohammed Reza Pahlavi and the UK government before the 1979 revolution.

Problems in the Vienna Nuclear Talks

The nuclear deal between Iran and the world powers in Vienna came to a temporary halt on March 11 due to many thorny issues including Russia's new demands as a result of the growing tensions with the West against the backdrop of the Russia-Ukraine war. As for Iran-Europe relations, the file reviews the interactions in relation to the nuclear negotiations based on four aspects. First, the mutual pressure by media outlets; each side blames the other for halting the desired settlement in order to push one another to make compromises to revive the nuclear deal to serve one another's interests. Some Iranian media outlets reported that the Iranian government accused France of hindering the nuclear talks through raising the issue of guarantees — which the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) has been demanding from Iran concerning its nuclear facilities.⁽¹¹⁾ The European Union's (EU) foreign policy chief said the pause was probably due to "external factors," and it could have some advantages that will help resolve the current thorny issues between all parties.⁽¹²⁾

Second, the thorny issues between the negotiating parties; according to Iran's negotiating team adviser, the thorny issues include "the confiscation of two ships with Iranian oil cargo, the 'terrorist' designation, new US demands as well as its failure to remove more companies, businesses and individuals from the 'maximum pressure' sanctions regime which are key problems that must be resolved."⁽¹³⁾ Iran's demands are as follows: the lifting of the economic sanctions on Iran, providing guarantees that the sanctions will not be reimposed, and delisting the IRGC from the US terror blacklist. In return, the Europeans intensified their diplomatic efforts, hoping to close the gaps

of disagreement between Iran and the West; the EU coordinator for the Iran nuclear talks Enrique Mora visited Tehran in late March.^[14]

Third, amid the nuclear talks, Russia demanded the provision of guarantees from the West that the sanctions imposed on it will not affect its trade and economic relations with Iran once the nuclear deal comes into force. The Russian demands created a crisis that Iran never expected to face. Definitely, Iran was caught by surprise given its alliance of necessity with Russia against the West. Iran, therefore, did not issue any condemnation over Russia's invasion of Ukraine and took a balanced position toward the crisis. In a joint statement, France, Britain, and Germany – the so-called E3 European parties – expressed their discontent over Russia's demands, holding it responsible for the future ramifications. "This [Russia's new demands] risks the collapse of the deal, depriving the Iranian people of sanctions lifting, and the international community of the assurance needed on Iran's nuclear program," the statement said.^[15]

Finally, Iran's relations with the IAEA remain a focal point of concern for both Iran and the Europeans. Iran hopes to shorten the period of restrictions needed to implement the guarantees in regard to its nuclear facilities. On the other side, the Europeans, through their meetings with the IAEA Board of Governors, placed pressure on Iran to show compliance with the 2015 provisions and prevent it from moving forward in enriching uranium at very high levels. However, considering the general perspectives of both sides in March 2022, one comes to know that the Europeans aspire to achieve the desired breakthrough very soon to reach a settlement in order to halt Iran's nuclear ambitions and serve their interests. However, the Europeans' goal is still conditioned/linked to other factors irrelevant to Iran-Europe relations.

The Release of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe and the UK Paying Its Debt to Iran

The Iranian authorities released Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe and Anousheh Ashoori, British-Iranian detainees which coincided with the payment by the UK government of its £328.5 million debt to Iran over a failed arms deal dating back to 40 years ago.^[16] Detaining Zaghari-Ratcliffe had been linked for years with Iran's demand to the UK government to pay its 40-year-old debt. The UK government rejected the Iranian demand on the basis that the debt issue was complicated and should not be linked to dual national detainees, given the fact that they were detained with no official charges made and were deprived of fair trials, adding that it would not pay the debt as "blood money" for its nationals detained in Iran.

A few days after receiving the money, Iran's Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian attempted to convince the press that the payment of the UK debt did not have any link to the release of the aforementioned detainees. He said that there is a link considering "probably, the timing; the time of their release and depositing money [paying the debts] were close, but there is no link between the two issues. The release of the two persons was eventually made by Iran out of humanitarian consideration/feeling."^[17] It is worth mentioning here that Iranian newspapers and officials worked to convince the public that

the detainee Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe was working for US and UK intelligence agencies and had links to Mossad, the Israeli intelligence agency.

It is very easy to refute the Iranian claims. Many dual nationals have suffered the pain and agony of indefinite detention and many of them are still in Iranian prisons. It is impossible that all of them are intelligence agents for Western governments, if they were, Iran would not rapidly release them in exchange for financial and political benefits from the West. The Europeans, including the UK, always seek to place further pressure on Iran regarding its detention of dual nationals. They, however, accede to Iran's demands to secure the release of their nationals — despite Tehran's claims that these detainees were released due to humanitarian considerations. This oppressive tactic employed by Iran against dual nationals enables it to twist the arm of the West.

Conclusion

The Europeans continue their efforts to forge a rapprochement between Washington and Tehran, hoping to reach a satisfactory settlement for all participants in the nuclear talks. The talks were halted temporarily in early March 2022. Each side, whether the Europeans or the Iranians, has its own perspective toward the desired outcome of the talks. Therefore, each side resorted to use the media as a tool to place pressure on the other side, with an objective to achieve more compromises. The current phase is riddled with many disagreements over resolving outstanding issues. However, their cooperation has increased regarding Russia's demands as they both aim to keep the nuclear talks going. As for Iran's human rights record, the release of the British-Iranian dual nationals received tremendous media coverage due to how and why it happened as well as its political implications. The release coincided with the UK payment of its debt to Iran which dated back to four decades.

Endnotes

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