

MONTHLY REPORT



IRAN CASE FILE

Your window on Iran from inside and abroad

April 2022



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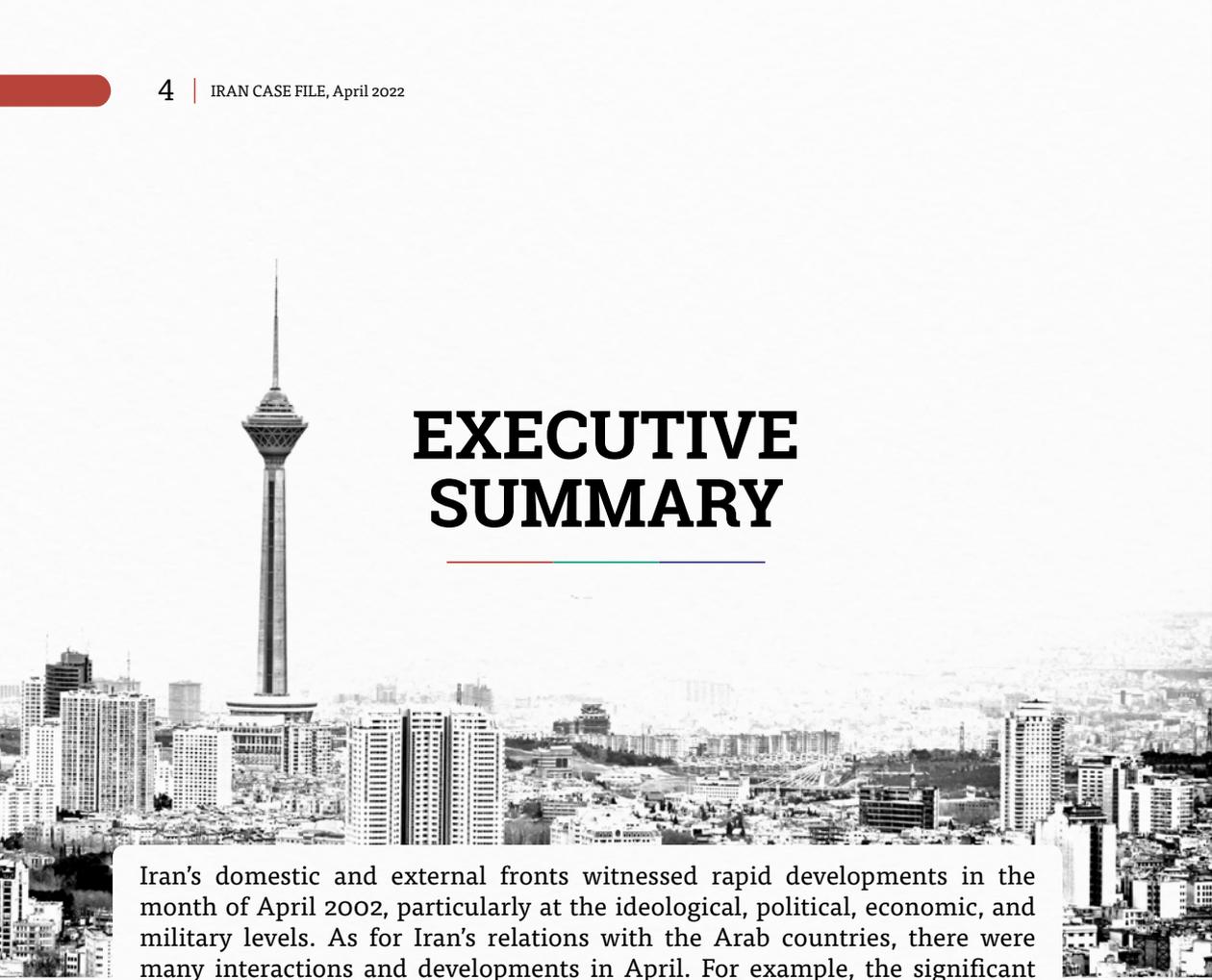
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Iran's domestic and external fronts witnessed rapid developments in the month of April 2002, particularly at the ideological, political, economic, and military levels. As for Iran's relations with the Arab countries, there were many interactions and developments in April. For example, the significant developments in Iran-Qatar relations, the new round of talks between Saudi Arabia and Iran, the truce in Yemen (which was adhered to by the legitimate government but violated by the Houthis), Iran's removal of its ambassador to Iraq, the political stalemate in Iraq, Sarkhi's call and its impact on the Shiite house, the tensions among the parties to the Astana tripartite process regarding Syria, and the growing tensions between the Syrian government and Hezbollah on the Damascus-Beirut border crossing. As for Iran's international interactions, the Iran Case File (ICF) discusses a host of prominent interactions: the impact of regional and international developments on the Vienna talks, the crisis of mutual mistrust between Tehran and Washington, the challenges hindering the expansion of the Vienna talks, and European endeavors to resume the nuclear talks.

Internal Affairs. The Ideological File sheds light on the desecration of Khomeini's statue by protesters in Qom. Some Iranian officials believed that this attack indicated that there are international plots targeting Iran and its revolutionary figures. The attack indicates that Khomeini's sanctity and prestige has declined among the grassroots. Iran's authorities fear that Khomeini's symbolic charisma may vanish or be undercut through repeated insults directed at him. The desecration of his statue confirmed this fear. The repetition of such attacks will reduce Khomeini's standing to one of a commoner in the eyes of

Iranians, thus removing the sense of reverence attached to him that the Iranian authorities have worked hard to instill in the minds of the Iranian people. Similarly, Iran witnessed a stabbing attack against hawza-affiliated clerics at the Razavi Shrine; takfiri elements were accused of being behind the attack according to Iranian officials. The two incidents are connected as they indicate a crisis facing Iran's religious elites.

The Political File examines the opposition of some "conservatives" to the government's understandings with the global powers in relation to reviving the 2015 nuclear deal. Members of the Resilience Front criticized the government and the negotiating team. In addition, up to 250 Iranian lawmakers in the "conservative" controlled Parliament sent a letter to Raisi in which they set five preconditions to reviving the nuclear deal. These preconditions hinder the Raisi government, which has been tirelessly attempting to revive the nuclear deal to ease the pressure it is facing from the Iranian street because of the deteriorating economic conditions.

In an unexpected move, the Iranian government approved the sacking of Mohsen Rezaee, Iran's vice president for economic affairs, and Solat Mortazavi, vice president for executive affairs, from its economic committee. The dismissal caused an uproar on the Iranian street. The Iranian government stated that the changes were made in response to Rezaee's and Mortazavi's requests, while some sources claim that there are big differences among the members of the economic committee — especially between Mokhber and Rezaee, the latter disagrees with how the government is running the Iranian economy.

The Economic File analyzes the internal and external developments that have worsened the daily living conditions in Iran. The three-year US sanctions imposed on the country have contributed to reducing production, increasing costs, a lack of foreign currencies that are needed for imports and a massive budget deficit. In addition, global inflation is impacting all countries in light of the Russia-Ukraine war. This war has massively impacted inflation in Iran and is a major source of worry for the Iranian people nowadays.

According to official statistics, the year 2022/2021 saw an inflation rate of more than 40 percent; it exceeded 50 percent for food items. This inflation rate led to a decline in purchasing power for the majority of Iranians despite an increase in wages. Furthermore, the rate caused a spike in unemployment and poverty levels. Though it issued new measures to respond to this economic crisis, the Iranian government continued with its proven failed policies to address the country's new and longstanding challenges.

The Military File sheds light on Iran's continuous efforts to flaunt its military capabilities and its diverse array of weapons at official military occasions. In April, Army Day and Quds Day witnessed military parades that involved combat units and the display of strategic weapons. Weapons displayed included those produced in the factories run by Iran's Defense Ministry such as ballistic missiles, drones and other military hardware. Through the aforementioned displays, Iran aimed to send a host of messages, deter its enemies and demonstrate its military capabilities in order to confront potential threats and show that its military industries have not been negatively impacted by US sanctions.

Arab Affairs. As for Iran-Gulf relations, the emir of Qatar called on Iran's President Ebrahim Raisi to discuss Tehran's preparedness to help Doha in organizing the football World Cup. It will be hosted by Qatar at the end of 2022. A Qatari delegation visited Kish Island where they signed a series of joint cooperation agreements with Iran in the presence of the transport ministers of the two countries. It is expected that Qatar will be a broker in the stalled nuclear negotiations. As for Iran-Saudi relations, the fifth round of talks between the two countries was held in April. The talks were reportedly attended by senior officials from the General Secretariat of the Supreme National Security Council of Iran and the head of the Saudi intelligence service in addition to Iraqi and Omani representatives. Despite the optimism expressed in Iran's statements about the talks, significant obstacles still remain, perhaps the most prominent of which is the chronic mistrust that exists between Tehran and Riyadh.

The Iran-Yemen File discusses the outcomes of the intra-Yemeni consultations held in Riyadh, which mainly aimed to reconstruct the Yemeni state at all levels and present a roadmap for Yemen's development and peace. The most significant outcomes were the establishment of a Presidential Leadership Council headed by Rashad Muhammad al-Alimi as well as an advisory board with the consensus of all Yemeni factions. The Houthis did not attend the consultations, highlighting the extent of their reliance on Iran — which hinders the political settlement in Yemen. In addition, the file reviews the course of the truce with the Houthi militia which came into force on April 2. The international community widely welcomed the truce, underpinning that all fighting parties must show compliance to the truce's provisions. The truce called for the de-escalation of inflammatory media rhetoric and hate speech. As for Iraq, prominent developments revealed the dilemma of continuous Iranian influence in the country, in addition to the conflict between militias and their blatant failure in the early parliamentary elections — in light of the growing public and official rejection of Iran's influence in Iraq as well as Baghdad's desire to establish a new independent Iraq. To address the political deadlock in Iraq, Iran announced the appointment of Mohammad Kazem al-Sadeq — who is well experienced in the Iraqi file — as its ambassador to Baghdad succeeding Ambassador Iraj Masjedi. This political stalemate has deepened as the Shiite alliances have failed to form a new government hindered by the disagreements between the two major Shiite alliances: the Sadr-led bloc, which insists on forming a national majority government and the Iran-backed Coordination Framework which insists on forming a consensual government which includes Shiite alliances. Iraq witnessed unprecedented intra-Shiite divisions following Sarkhi's call to demolish Shiite shrines.

The Iran-Syria File touches upon the fact that the relationship between the stakeholders of the Astana tripartite process is marked by tensions against the backdrop of the Ukrainian crisis. Particularly, the northern region of Syria witnessed an upsurge in confrontation between Syrian government forces, Iran, Russia, and Turkey. Russian military fighters resumed airstrikes against Idlib and the Hama countryside in northwestern Syria. These strikes coincided with shelling by Syrian forces and Iranian militias against the

opposition's military sites. A Turkish drone targeted the military posts of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). Following this escalation in tensions, Turkey announced the closure of its airspace to Russian aircraft heading to Syria. The Turkish escalation against Iran and Russia is closely linked to Ankara's position on the Russia-Ukraine war as well as Iran's rejection of Turkey's rapprochement toward the Arabian Gulf states. Turkey is also concerned about meeting its gas requirements as it imports a third of its gas from Iran and two thirds from Russia.

In spite of the alliance between the Lebanese Hezbollah and the Syrian government forged in recent years, disagreements between the Iranian factions in Syria and the forces affiliated with the Syrian government have been increasing. The most recent clash was between Hezbollah fighters and the militia of the National Defense Force affiliated with the Syrian government on the outskirts of the Damascus countryside. The reasons and implications can be summarized as follows: cross-border revenues, the Arab openness to the Syrian government and its impact on improving border security.

International Affairs. The nuclear talks in Vienna are still the bedrock of current Iran-US interactions. The delisting of the IRGC from the US terrorism list is a major point of disagreement between the two sides. According to Iran, the designation of the IRGC impacts the whole political system in the country because it is the most significant organization in the country. Countries in the region that had previously expressed their concerns over Iran's regional behavior after the conclusion of the nuclear deal are placing pressure to expand the scope of the nuclear talks with Iran to include their concerns. As part of its policy to convince the international powers of its willingness to agree to a nuclear deal, Iran handed over documents related to the outstanding issues to the IAEA to close its investigation about uranium particles found in three undeclared Iranian sites. This move enabled the IAEA to oversee Iran's nuclear sites once again. Iran hopes, by carrying out the aforementioned step, that tensions with the United States will de-escalate, and the path will be cleared for reviving the 2015 nuclear deal. It seems, however, such a step is not enough to convince the Americans who have called on the Iranians to take practical steps to defuse tensions as well as to take serious steps to incorporate the outstanding issues in the nuclear deal.

Iran and Europe. The Europeans have been tirelessly endeavoring to reduce the disagreements between Washington and Tehran regarding the nuclear talks which have been halted since early March. The delegations representing the concerned parties returned to their respective countries for further discussions. Though a draft agreement was crafted and was ready to be finalized to revive the 2015 nuclear deal, the talks were halted. It has become too complex for the Europeans to forge some sort of rapprochement between the two warring sides in the talks; Tehran demands for the IRGC to be removed from the US terror list and wants guarantees that Washington will not withdraw from the future nuclear deal. The Biden administration is facing scathing opposition at home

over its plan to conclude a nuclear deal with Iran; opposition voices call on the administration to keep in place US restrictions to deter Iran's nuclear and ballistic missile violations that have destabilized international security. It can be said that their relations are marked by ups and downs. The two sides have common economic interests and ambitions; the Europeans want to substitute Russian gas imports with Iranian gas. Yet, they oppose Iran's nuclear and ballistic missile ambitions. Every now and then, we find that the Europeans increase their pressure on Iran, accusing the latter of violating human rights and participating in terrorist acts. In response, the Iranians exploited the arrest of an Iranian refugee by Danish police and condemned the Europeans' treatment of Iranian citizens, accusing them of violating human rights.

Internal Affairs

This part of the Iran Case File is divided into four files. The Ideological File discusses the factors which led to the desecration of Khomeini's statue as well as the public reaction to the attack against clerics in Iran. The Political File examines the criticisms launched by some "conservatives" against President Ebrahim Raisi's performance and their objection to reviving the nuclear deal. This in addition to discussing the dismissal of Mohsen Rezaee from President Raisi's economic team. The Economic File analyzes the reasons behind Iran's spiraling inflation, poverty and unemployment in addition to the government's response and future plans. The Military File discusses two prominent topics: Army Day and the rallies staged on Quds Day.



The Ideological File

The Ideological File sheds light on the developments in regard to the Shiite religious elites in general and the Iranian ones in particular. It also sheds light on the impact of these developments on the religious and political landscape in Iran and their implications for the Shiite community throughout the region. In March 2022, the Ideological File discussed the supreme leader's remarks when he referred to the United States as a manifestation of "modern ignorance." Such a reference to the United States has regularly been repeated by senior members of Iran's Assembly of Experts. It also touched on the disagreements between the Taliban and Iran that have been growing recently, analyzing them from philosophical and sectarian angles.

This month, the Ideological File highlights the desecration of a statue of Khomeini in Marjaya Square in Qom as well as the attack against Iranian clerics at the Razavi Shrine. The file breaks down the impacts, consequences and causes of these incidents, as well as their political and sectarian implications.

Desecrating Khomeini's Statue: Dimensions and Significations

Some angry protestors attacked the statue of the late Iranian Supreme Leader Ruhollah Khomeini in Marjaya Square. They set fire to the statue, causing a large portion of it to collapse. Because it is difficult to restore the burned statue, there is a plan to replace it with another statue in the same location. The incident occurred just days before a large celebration commemorating the Iranian people's vote to establish the Iranian republic on April 1, 1979. According to Iranian media outlets the purpose of the attack was to influence public opinion and highlight the animosity of the people against the government. It is worth noting that the Khomeini statue was built by municipal authorities and put up in Marjaya Square along with the statues of taqlid clerics Hossein Borujerdi and Haeri Yazdi.⁽¹⁾

The Iranian government accused affiliates of the People's Mojahedin Organization of Iran (PMOI/MEK) and rioters of setting fire to the Khomeini statue. Some pro-government protesters staged demonstrations to condemn the destruction of the statue. The government took advantage of this incident to solidify its popular support base. Some protesters held up pictures of Khomeini and Khamenei.⁽²⁾

The Society of Seminary Teachers in Qom rushed to condemn the desecration of Khomeini's statue, calling it an insulting act. "The cowardly act of desecrating Khomeini was a miserable and ignorant measure. It will not possibly

have even the slightest impact on the prestige of Khomeini's personality. The people cling to their bond with Khomeini since this relationship is divine and heavenly."⁽³⁾

But the Qom Friday prayer leader, Alireza Al-Arafi, drew a connection between the desecration of Khomeini's statue and the global machinations directed at Tehran and its revolution. He also highlighted the parallel between this incident and the schemes targeting what he called "the axis of resistance" in the region.⁽⁴⁾

Perhaps one of the most important significations of this incident is the erosion of the sanctity of Khomeini and his prestige among the grassroots. The authorities fear that his symbolic charisma may vanish or be undermined through repeated insults against him and the destruction and defiling of his statues. Such attacks will reduce Khomeini to the status of a commoner in the eyes of the Iranian people, removing the sense of reverence that the authorities have worked hard to instill in the minds of the public. As a result, Arafi was forthright when he mentioned that the incident was directed at the revolution itself. For the ruling religious elite, the revolution is only the clerical revolution which resulted in the ascendancy of the concept of Wilayat al-Faqih.

The Attack on Clerics and the Significations

In the same context, an Afghan national stabbed hawza-affiliated clerics at the Razavi Shrine, according to Iranian official investigations. He appeared to be a Sunni Muslim, which prompted Sunni scholars to disavow the act, describing it as a terrorist attack.

Hossein Bazmandeghan, a Sunni scholar in southern Iran, said, "The Sunnis show special respect toward Imam Reza (peace be upon him)."⁽⁵⁾ He then praised the Shiite clerics who came under attack and said they were "jihad-stricken and faithful clerics who work in the field of propagation, jihad affairs and resolve the problems of the poor in the city's urban areas." He then followed the official line of the Iranian government, accusing takfiri elements of being behind the incident, saying that "they are despised by the entire Sunni community."

Mariwan's Friday prayer leader echoed the same sentiment, "There is no doubt that such incidents will never cause a schism among the sects that have coexisted peacefully in light of the mutual unity and respect engendered by the Iranian revolution over the past 43 years." He continued, "We reiterate that the main inciters of such disagreements and divisions are the Zionist regime and the front composed of takfiri, assassination, and religious extremist elements."

The parliamentary bloc representing Sunnis condemned the attack on the clerics in an official statement. According to the statement, "Now, it is abundantly clear that violating the sanctity of the shrine of the Shiites' eighth imam and assassinating Shiite clerics in Mashhad is another episode of the British-Zio-American scenario that targets the core pillar of Iranian solidarity: Islamic unity." The statement underlined, "As a result, as we repel arrogant forces' attacks during the holy month of Ramadan, following in the footsteps of the Prophet of Islam, and condemn this violence rooted in ignorance and incomprehension, we disavow extremist movements that sow discord."

This Sunni narrative in line with the official state narrative, which solidifies the government's incubators, its legitimacy, and sends a message to the people that it is being attacked by foes. Fatimah Rahmani, a representative of Mashhad, said that the incident was a conspiracy plotted by foes to sow discord among Muslims.⁽⁶⁾ Parliament Speaker Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf said, "We all should remain vigilant about the country's foes and the opportunists who want to cause harm to the friendship and fraternity among peoples."⁽⁷⁾ He attempted to downplay the attack launched against Afghans following the attack on the clerics. He said, "Our Afghan brothers fought alongside us in this war without anything in return. They paid the price and suffered fatalities and injuries. They defended the front of resistance in many other areas as well. Our people have been and will always be more vigilant about such satanic plots so as not to cause the faintest harm to Islamic unity for the sake of the pride of Muslims and the greatness of Islam."⁽⁸⁾

In his remarks, he attempted to avoid implying that there is a major crisis involving Afghan refugees and the Afghan state, which is led by the Taliban. He classified the incident as an isolated attack which does not reflect the attitude of the Afghan people or refugees as a whole. As a result, he emphasized what he called friendship and fraternity among the peoples.

Such incidents cannot be completely prevented under the rule of a totalitarian government which rejects civil and constitutional law. It seeks to expand beyond its borders at the expense of nation states, and it employs violent groups as pressure tools against them.

The aforementioned expansion occurs while Shiite Iranians lack justice and other sects also experience injustice and oppression. These issues must be addressed by the government in a considered and serious way. It should not limit its actions to accusing the West, Zionism, the Gulf and regional countries of conspiring against it, while ignoring the country's pervasive structural problems, which have weakened the standing of clerics in Iran.⁽⁹⁾

Conclusion

The Iranian revolution is no longer viewed in the same way as it was in the 1980s. The founding father of the revolution, Ruhollah Khomeini, is no longer commanding the awe in the collective mind of Iranians as during the revolution. There is no question that there are several factors that have contributed to the rebellion against clerics and their image which the authorities have been working to entrench in the Iranian public mindset via the use of media, cultural and educational tools. A number of factors have contributed to people rebelling against clerics such as escalating economic pressures, deteriorating socioeconomic conditions, and the harsh interpretations of Islam espoused by clerics. Furthermore, the emergence of new post-revolution generations and the spread of secularism have contributed to people acting against the clerical elite in Iran.

Hence, it can be said that there has been a decline in the standing of clerics in Iran in general and the founding father of the state in particular. This has been caused by the government's policies at home and overseas. Moreover, it

failed to set up a national and unity-centered program and instead employed religion and sect and inflamed sectarian tensions throughout the region.

The government is unlikely to back down from its policies as long as it continues to associate all domestic problems to outside parties. The government considers these parties to be Iran's foes and amplifies its disagreement with them to cover up its consecutive failures at the economic and political levels.

The Political File

The March 2022 Political File shed light on the leak by the hacktivist group Edalat-e Ali (Ali's Justice) of an IRGC intelligence document about barring 37 former Rouhani government officials from traveling outside the country. In addition, the file discussed the intent of parliamentary “hardliners” on passing a piece of legislation restricting free access to the internet. The April 2022 file will touch on two critical axes. The first axis includes the rejection by some “conservatives” of the understandings reached by the Iranian government with the major world powers on returning to the nuclear deal, the criticisms leveled against President Ebrahim Raisi due to his government's poor performance over the past months, the formation of a new “conservative” front that opposes Tehran's return to the nuclear deal, and the restrictions imposed by the “conservative” controlled Parliament on the path to return to the nuclear deal. The second axis discusses the implications and motives behind the sacking of Raisi's deputies for economic and executive affairs from the government's economic committee.

“Conservatives” Veto Iran's Return to the Nuclear Deal and Criticize President Raisi's Performance

After the “conservatives” were successful in elevating Raisi to the presidency, forecasts suggested that there would be a great deal of harmony among the “conservative” factions, particularly on contentious issues such as the nuclear deal. Given its role in bringing about a breakthrough in Iran's dire economic situation, the Iranian street has been impatiently awaiting a resolution to this issue. But in recent times, some “conservative” voices criticizing the understandings reached by the government with the major world powers on returning to the nuclear deal have emerged. Members of Iran's Parliament have imposed new conditions on the government in order for the nuclear deal to be revived. Furthermore, Raisi is still facing harsh criticism from his supporters, who backed him in the recent presidential election.

While Iran waits for an agreement with the major world powers to resurrect the nuclear deal, an anti-nuclear-deal committee has been formed within the Iranian Parliament. It is composed of five members affiliated with the Resilience Front; a “hardline” bloc close to the former Supreme National Security Council's Secretary Saeed Jalili. Members of this front have expressed their rejection of the content of the understandings reached by Iran so far with the major world powers to revive the 2015 nuclear deal.

Resilience Front member Mahmoud Nabavian harshly criticized Iran's chief nuclear negotiator Ali Bagheri Kani. He accused the negotiating team of failing to adhere to the Iranian government's red lines. He also chastised the negotiating team for failing to follow the approved bill entitled “Strategic Action Plan

to Lift Sanctions and Protect the Iranian Nation's Interests," particularly the provision requiring the government to inform the Parliament of the details of the nuclear negotiations and obtain the Parliament's opinion on these details. Furthermore, Nabavian has advocated changing the negotiating team and replacing it with a revolutionary team dedicated to upholding Iran's red lines and national interests.⁽¹⁰⁾

Saeed Jalili, who contested the past presidential election and dropped out of the race in favor of Raisi, previously sent a letter to the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei in which he protested the policies of the Raisi government in relation to the nuclear negotiations. He called on Khamenei to exert pressure on the government to withdraw from the negotiations and to raise uranium enrichment up to 90 percent before entering into negotiations with the United States. He also called for depending on the Russian and Chinese veto in case the United States moves to pass a UN Security Council resolution against Iran's nuclear program. Jalili, who was the chief nuclear negotiator under former Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, justified his demands by saying that experience has proven that the United States cannot be trusted.⁽¹¹⁾

Jalili now serves as the representative of the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei in the Supreme National Security Council. However, it is unlikely that the supreme leader or the president will respond to his tough stance or to the demands of the Resilience Front when it comes to the Vienna talks to revive the nuclear deal. There is harmony between Khamenei and Raisi and the latter desires Iran to return to the nuclear deal in order to ease the domestic pressures exerted on the government by the Iranian street.

The hindrances facing Raisi to reach an agreement with the major world powers are not limited to the members of the Resilience Front. Up to 250 Iranian lawmakers in the "conservative" controlled Parliament sent a letter on April 10, 2022, to Raisi in which they set five conditions for agreeing to revive the nuclear deal. They conditioned that:

- Washington should provide strong guarantees that it will not pull out of the nuclear deal in the future.
- The US Congress should approve these guarantees.
- The agreement should state that Washington will not reactivate the mechanism through which sanctions can be imposed on Iran.
- There should be no new embargoes, and those individuals who have been removed from the sanctions list should not be sanctioned again.
- Washington should recognize Iran's right to export its oil to any country in the world as part of the OPEC quota established prior to the imposition of US sanctions. Iran has the right to sell its oil and receive its revenues without any restrictions. All impediments to the banking sector and exports should be removed.⁽¹²⁾

In addition to the "conservatives'" position on the nuclear agreement, Raisi came under severe criticism from a number of "conservatives" who until recently had defended him. Jalil Mohei, a former secretary of the Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice and a member of Raisi's media team, is the most recent critic of Raisi. He criticized Raisi and his me-

dia team's performance. Though Mohei came under severe criticism by those close to the president, he did not tone down his criticism. Addressing his critics, he said, "I am aware that you expect Raisi to do great things for Iran. But I don't think he's capable of it, and I don't think he can fulfill your dreams and aspirations."⁽¹³⁾ In other remarks, he stated that Raisi is incapable of running a five-story building⁽¹⁴⁾, referring to his inefficiency as Iran's president.

Sacking Mohsen Rezaee from the Government's Economic Committee: Implications and Motives

In an unexpected move, the Iranian cabinet, in its meeting held on April 23, 2022, headed by the First Vice President Mohammad Mokhber, approved the sacking of Mohsen Rezaee, Iran's vice president for economic affairs, and Solat Mortazavi, vice president for executive affairs, from the Iranian government's economic committee.

The dismissal caused uproar on the Iranian street. The Iranian people wondered about the causes of the dismissals, especially as some reports suggested differences within the economic committee, especially raised by the first Vice President Mohammad Mokhber and the Minister of Finance and Economic Affairs Ehsan Khandouzi. These two were opposed to some economic policies of Mohsen Rezaee. Iranian government spokesperson Ali Bahadori Jahromi attempted to deny any differences among the members of the government's economic committee. He said that the changes brought about by Mokhber in the committee came in response to the requests of Rezaee and Mortazavi due to the many responsibilities assigned to them and their inability to attend the committee's meetings.⁽¹⁵⁾

Since its inception, the Iranian government's economic committee has faced harsh criticism for its muddled performance, its members' contradictory remarks, the lack of a unified vision for addressing the country's economic crisis, and the ambiguity of the responsibilities assigned to each of its members. It was unclear to the Iranian public who bore responsibility for economic decisions and the roles of Ehsan Khandouzi as minister of economic affairs. The role of Mohsen Rezaee as vice president for economic affairs was also unclear.

Predictions of a crisis within the Iranian government and the economic committee date back to the beginning of the government's tenure when the names of the economic team members were announced. Several economic experts stated at the time that this team would not be homogeneous and harmonious in its vision and plans to manage the country's economic situation.

According to some recent leaks, Mokhber and Rezaee disagreed on how to manage the Iranian economy. Former Iranian parliamentarian Mehdi Ayati blamed the dismissals on Mokhber's and Rezaee's positions within the government and the powers they each held. In his capacity as Raisi's vice president for economic affairs, Rezaee believed that he should have the final word on all economic decisions. However, as first vice president, Mokhber has greater powers and purviews that Rezaee did not.⁽¹⁶⁾ In terms of Rezaee's relationship with the minister of economic affairs, Aftab Yazd newspaper previously indicated that the approach of the Minister of Economic Affairs Ehsan Khandouzi in handling

economic matters is different from that of Mohsen Rezaee. When it comes to economic management, each of them considers himself to be a theorist. As a result, it was expected that they would disagree in the future.⁽¹⁷⁾ One aspect of these disagreements became apparent last December when Rezaee announced that, starting from the new Iranian year on March 21, 2022, the government would double subsidies to Iranian households. However, the Iranian minister of economic affairs stated that Rezaee's statement was false and that the government had not set any deadlines for increasing the subsidies allocated to the Iranian people.⁽¹⁸⁾

Some Iranian newspapers criticized the decision to sack Rezaee and Mortazavi from the economic committee such as Sobh-e-No newspaper which considered Mohsen Rezaee to be one of the most prominent economic figures in Iran. The newspaper cited his extensive administrative experience. The newspaper contended that as long as he serves as the vice president for economic affairs, he is capable of contributing to elevating the performance of the government, especially when it comes to improving the living conditions of the Iranian people. Therefore, the newspaper believes sacking him from the government's economic committee is unjustified. The newspaper also believes the same with regard to the Vice President for Executive Affairs Solat Mortazavi since the outcomes of the economic decisions taken by the committee needs authorization from the vice president for executive affairs before being implemented on the ground.⁽¹⁹⁾

Conclusion

The criticisms leveled against Raisi, whether in regard to the understandings his government has reached to return to the nuclear deal or those related to his performance, indicate that the era of praise and acclaim that he previously enjoyed has come to an end, and that he may fall out with those who backed him until very recently and enabled him to enter the presidential palace. The removal of Rezaee and Mortazavi from the government's economic committee indicates that there are divisions within the government. It also reveals Raisi's failure to form a unified revolutionary government which allows the "conservatives" to seize control of the state apparatuses and heal the divisions that haunted the previous government.

The Economic File

The March 2022 file shed light on the issue of Iranian assets frozen overseas. Meanwhile, the April 2022 file highlights the major challenges that Iranian citizens have faced recently, as well as the Iranian government's response to them in light of internal and external variables. This file focuses on three topics. The first topic addresses the most pressing everyday challenges, while the second topic addresses poverty and unemployment indicators. Finally, the third topic concerns the Iranian government's reaction to contemporary living challenges in light of current internal and external variables.

Last January, Fitch Ratings, a credit rating agency, predicted that a nuclear deal would be concluded by mid-2022. It also forecast that inflation would fall to 8 percent and the Iranian economy would grow by 4.4 percent in the same year.⁽²⁰⁾ Despite the fact that the middle of the year is approaching, neither prediction has come true. Because of the West's complete focus on the Russian-Ukrainian war, the nuclear deal has yet to be signed. Inflation did not decrease. On the contrary, it recently reached 40 percent, a record-breaking level. In addition to the living challenges that existed previously, new challenges have emerged as a result of internal and external variables. The latter has impacted all aspects of the economy.

Continued Price Hikes And Low Incomes

According to the Iranian Chamber of Commerce's research center, more than half of the Iranian population have been suffering from a calorie deficit since 2017.⁽²¹⁾ As a result of soaring prices, and shrinking purchasing power, at least half of the Iranian population cannot meet the minimum calorie requirement of 2,100 calories per day. This has had a negative impact on efficiency and productivity.

Iran is currently facing a food security crisis due to drought and lack of rainfall. Furthermore, sanctions and prices hikes currently gripping the entire world as a result of the Russian-Ukrainian war have added to the country's food insecurity. The upsurge in food and beverage prices was the primary source of Iran's overall inflation in recent times. For example, the price of some kinds of Iranian rice reached record levels of more than 100,000 tomans per kilogram (\$3.7). Between April 2021 and April 2022, the price of a kilogram of mutton rose by 36 percent on average. Meanwhile, the price of a kilogram of beef increased by 56 percent during the same period.⁽²²⁾ In comparison to the same period last year, the following are the most important items/areas impacted by inflation during the 12-month period until April 2022:

Table 1: Average Inflation Rate for 12 Months Until April 2022

Food and drink	51%
Housing and facilities	26.7%
Clothes and shoes	50%
Home furniture and maintenance	43%
Medication and healthcare	37.4%
Transportation	37.7%
Education	25.5%
Hotels and restaurants	62%
Other goods and services	39%

Source: Statistical Center of Iran

The Iranian public's primary concern in recent months has been the rise in prices. According to official Iranian figures released by the Statistical Center of Iran, the inflation rate in the 12 months ending April 2022 reached 39.2 percent. This high inflation rate is among the highest published by an official Iranian body in a decade. Unofficial statistics always suggest higher inflation rates.

According to official Iranian statements, the year 2021/2022 saw an inflation rate of 40.2 percent, the second-highest since the revolution. The year 1995/1996, meanwhile, saw the all-time high inflation rate of 49.4 percent, according to the economic studies department at Tehran's Chamber of Commerce, Industries, Mines and Agriculture. The biggest factor driving inflation increases in 2021/2022 was an increase in food and beverage prices, followed by housing and facilities (water, electricity, natural gas and other kinds of fuel). Bread, cereals, red meat, poultry, and vegetables were on top of the items driving inflation in the food and beverage group.

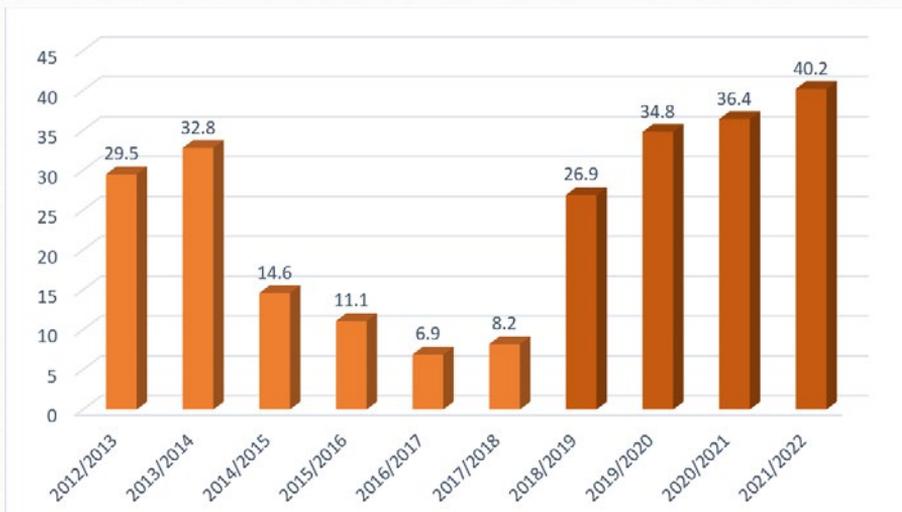
The chronic rise in inflation in Iran is attributed to a variety of internal and external variables. Internal reasons include an increase in the budget deficit, flawed government policies to address inflation, such as injecting liquidity into the economy, particularly by the Rouhani government, local supply-demand imbalances, production shortages, and some decisions with direct price implications, such as the elimination of the preferential (subsidized) exchange rate for medicine imports. There are also external variables that have come about because of the nature of Iranian policies. These include US sanctions and their impact on trade, increases in shipping and domestic production costs, the

continued depreciation of the national currency against foreign currencies, particularly the dollar, rising import prices, and finally the impact of the Russia-Ukraine war on global inflation.

The Supreme Labor Council of Iran determined that a family of three requires approximately 11 million tomans to live a decent life. This comes at a time when the average working-family's income is 4.2 million tomans.⁽²³⁾ Hence, this represents an income gap of 7 million tomans per month for millions of households that receive monthly fixed salaries, while prices continue to rise, forcing them to look for alternative sources to meet their basic needs.

The sanctions increased the cost of imports and caused a foreign currency shortage. Almost everything in the country has risen in price, including food, housing, transportation, education, health, and medication. In order to reduce the budget deficit, the price of gasoline in the oil-rich country tripled in 2019. Prices have continued to rise unabated since then. Figure 1 depicts this.

Figure 1: Consumer Price Inflation Over 10 Years (2012-2022)



Source: Tehran Chamber of Commerce

Poverty and Unemployment

US sanctions targeted the essential locomotives of the Iranian economy such as the oil sector and labor-intensive sectors such as the automotive industry. Moreover, the drugs and retail sectors were targeted as well as foreign trade. Even the agricultural sector suffered from a shortage in inputs and production components. As a result, many Iranians lost their basic source of income. Due to the decrease in production and soaring prices, the scale of poverty and the number of poor people have significantly increased over the past two years in Iran.



Though some official statistics on issues deemed sensitive for the Iranian government such as poverty and unemployment statistics lack accuracy, however, they do give an indication of the future direction of the country. According to the Statistical Center of Iran, the number of unemployed people over the age of 15 reached 2.4 million in the fourth quarter of 1400 H.S (March 2021-March 2022), accounting for 9.4 percent of the country's workforce. Youth unemployment reached 23.1 percent in the 15-24 age group and 16.6 percent in the 18-35 age group.⁽²⁴⁾

Meanwhile, the International Monetary Fund's forecast for unemployment in Iran put the rate slightly higher at 10.2 percent. It is forecasted to reach 10.5 percent next year.⁽²⁵⁾ It is worth noting that every 1 percent increase in the unemployment rate results in thousands more unemployed youth.

As for poverty, it is undeniably on the rise. According to the Iranian Parliament, at least one-third of Iranians live below the poverty line. Meanwhile, Iranian experts believe that the current wave of soaring prices has resulted in more dangerous poverty levels, which includes 60 million Iranians (70 percent of the population)⁽²⁶⁾. The poverty line represents the bare minimum income required to survive. As poverty rates rise, so do other problems across various fronts such as health, society, and security.

The Government's Interaction and Future Orientations

Several Iranian lawmakers, think tanks and economic activists have warned of the negative effects of rising prices on ordinary people, as well as the danger of prices spiraling out of control. At a time when price reductions are desperately required through effective government intervention, President Ebrahim Raisi's government reduced subsidies for some essential items such as medicines.

This comes amid local warnings that the move would cause imported drug prices to increase by three-to fivefold. Other price increases impacting non-drug items may follow. It should be noted that tackling inflation and poverty was one of Raisi's electoral priorities.

The government believes that raising wages and providing direct subsidies to those in need is the most effective way to tackle rising prices. Despite its importance in assisting some families to improve their living conditions, relying solely on these measures exacerbates the problems. This is because these measures will only increase demand without increasing supply, which means that there will not be enough goods/services nor sufficient imports to meet the increased demand caused by the additional money in people's hands. These measures will set off a chain reaction of price increases, necessitating further wage increases and additional subsidies. Given the growing financial deficit in the tens of billions of dollars, the government's budget cannot currently provide significant subsidies to families.

Some local economic activists have outlined the necessary solutions to combat price increases and poverty, such as tightening market control, supporting the stability of the dollar exchange rate, or increasing subsidies. In fact, all of these solutions are required. However, they are temporary and makeshift solutions, the impact of which will wear off after a while, resulting in a living crisis. Ironically, even though the Iranian economy is heavily reliant on the outside world, government officials claim that Iran can achieve self-sufficiency overnight, through chanting the slogan of a "resistance economy" and depending solely on "domestic production." As a result, the suffering of the Iranians caused by price increases, poverty and unemployment will continue. Decision-makers in Iran may be unaware that the most important way to address the crisis is to outline long-term plans for macroeconomic stability. Such plans must be in line with a stable Iranian foreign policy toward the rest of the world and Tehran's neighbors. However, the absence of political stability means that Iran's fluctuating economic cycles will continue, especially given the world's volatile economic situation.

All countries worldwide are experiencing waves of high inflation not seen in at least four decades. The major central banks in the world intend to increase interest rates on the dollar and other essential currencies. This will mean increasing production costs globally, a slowdown in trade, the possibility of inflation continuing for a while and many economies being plunged into a phase of production stagnation amid soaring prices or stagflation. These global circumstances will increase import costs, which will greatly affect import-intensive countries such as Iran. This means that the Iranian people will face a second wave of price hikes and harsh living conditions that have not reached their peak yet.

Conclusion

The three-year US sanctions and tight embargo on Iran have contributed to the harsh living standards faced by the Iranian people, impacting their everyday lives. The hikes in the price of food and medicine and the spread of poverty have reached dangerous and unprecedented levels not seen during any previous sanctions period. Immigration rates have doubled as unemployment among the youth has increased. There is no doubt that poverty and the widening disparity between the classes will impact Iran's security and stability presently and in the future. The current challenges faced by the global economy will undoubtedly continue to impact the living conditions of the Iranian people.

The Military File

The Military File of March 2022 cast light on Iran's military establishment advancing its strategic weapons, including ballistic missiles and drones. In the same vein, April's file discusses Army Day and the rallies staged on Quds Day as well as the military parades involving combat units and strategic weapons on the aforementioned two occasions. The file also spotlights the recent weapons produced in the factories run by Iran's Defense Ministry such as ballistic missiles, drones and the other military hardware.

Army Day and Displaying Military Capabilities

Every year on April 18, Iran's armed forces observe Army Day. The occasion includes military parades and the display of major weapons by Iran's military establishment. After a two-year hiatus due to the coronavirus pandemic, Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi and senior Iranian military commanders attended the military parade on April 18, 2022. Key attendees included the Chief of Staff of the Iranian Armed Forces Mohammad Bagheri, Commander-in-Chief Amir Mousavi, Quds Force Chief Hossein Salami, and the commanders of the various branches of Iran's armed forces.⁽²⁷⁾ The parade's itinerary included showcasing the combat and armored units of the army. Aircraft and fighter jets — along with Iran's air defense units — were included in the parade.

The military parade brought to the fore the drone Kaman-22 which was unveiled last year. However, its showcasing on Army Day marks the first official display since it was commissioned. The Kaman-22 is an improved version of the US Predator MQ1 drone. It has a 3,000-kilometer operational range and is dedicated to surveillance and reconnaissance. The drone is also 6.5 meters long and 8,000 meters in altitude (see Table No.1). With regard to its capabilities in offensive operations, Iranian sources indicated that the drone can carry 300 kilograms of explosives, which includes four Qaem bombs, two smart missiles and the X-Band jamming system.⁽²⁸⁾

Table 1: Kaman-22 Specifications

Length	Height	Wing length	Operational range	Altitude	Weight
6.5 meters	4.5 meters	17 meters	3,000 kilometers	8,000 meters	Ton



Kaman-22 combat drone.
Photo: Rooziato

Other homegrown short-range defense systems on display included Majid, Dezful, Fateh-360, and Labeik. The IRGC previously unveiled the Majid and Dezful defense systems for the first time in 2021 during the military drills dubbed the “Defenders of Velayat Sky.” The Dezful system is the product of the upgrades of Russia’s defense system Tor-M which Iran obtained from Moscow in the 1990s. The modifications included mounting the system on a wheeled vehicle, unlike the tracked vehicle which the Tor-M system is mounted on. Iran also carried out modifications to the system’s antenna.⁽²⁹⁾

As for the Majid defense system, also unveiled during the “Defenders of Velayat Sky” military drills, it is a low-altitude system and consists of missiles which use a thermal seeker and electro-optical system. This added to the homegrown Kashif-99 radar whose range reaches 30 kilometers. Meanwhile, the range of the system’s missiles is reportedly 8 kilometers. The length of the missile ranges from 2.7 meters to 2.9 meters, and the diameter ranges from 15 centimeters to 17 centimeters.⁽³⁰⁾ The system is mounted on an Iranian-made Aras-2 four-wheel drive tactical vehicle.⁽³¹⁾



Dezful short-range missile system.
Photo: Tasnim News Agency.



Majid low-altitude missile system.
Photo: Reuters.

During the parade, Iran also displayed the latest modified versions of the Fateh-360 short-range air defense system, developed by the country’s defense

industry. Iran built two different versions of this system. It is equipped with six launcher configurations and was handed over to the Iranian naval forces to fill in the gaps of its poor defense systems.⁽³²⁾ The other version is equipped with three launcher configurations. It was produced for the Iranian army. The system is mounted on mobile vehicles and has cylindrical launchers. As to its dimensions, these are close to those of the Fateh-110.⁽³³⁾



Fateh-360 Short-range System
Photo: Abouzar Cheraghi/YJC.

Quds Day Rally and Flaunting Missile Capabilities

The Iranian government accords great priority to this symbolic occasion. Its commemoration was based on Imam Khomeini's directive after the revolution. He claimed that this day was held to protest against Israel's occupation of Jerusalem. Years after the Iranian revolution, this day has become one of the most important official celebrations in Iran, receiving extensive coverage from Iranian media outlets.

Quds Day is held on the last Friday of Ramadan every year, and this year it fell on April 29. The occasion usually witnesses massive demonstrations and rallies denouncing the Israeli occupation. It also involves religious sermons and anti-Israel chants and slogans. Every year, Iran has always used the day to showcase its ballistic missile capabilities.

This year's Quds Day rally in Tehran saw Iran display a number of its ballistic missiles on Valiasr Street. The parade included missiles of strategic importance from Iran's arsenal, such as the Zelzal, Khyber Shikan, and Emad-3 missiles.⁽³⁴⁾

In terms of solid-fuel missiles, Iran displayed the most famous and oldest missile in its arsenal, the Zelzal missile. This is in addition to the liquid-fuel Qader F missile and an extension developed from its other known versions, Qadr H and Qadr F, which have a range of 1,500 kilometers, according to Iranian sources.⁽³⁵⁾

Additionally, the Quds Day celebrations saw Iran showcase solid-propelled

missiles, especially the Khyber Shikan, and Emad-3 missiles. The Khyber Shikan is one of the latest Iranian ballistic missiles added to the country's missile arsenal. Tasnim News Agency, a semiofficial news agency close to the IRGC, reported last February, in conjunction with the 43rd anniversary of the Iranian revolution, about the Khyber Shikan at one of the IRGC's missile bases.

This missile, which was unveiled last year, is solid-propelled with a range of 1,450 kilometers. With regard to the Emad missile, which is a solid-fuel missile, it was unveiled by Iran in 2015. Its range reaches 1,700 kilometers.⁽³⁶⁾



The Ballistic missiles displayed during the Quds Day celebrations.
Photo: Radio Farda.

Conclusion

The Iranian military establishment works to perpetuate the momentum of Iranian influence. This is done through using occasions of symbolic significance to send messages to the home front and the outside world about its defense capabilities. It uses celebrations with religious significance, such as Quds Day, to keep the Iranian street and its aligned proxy militias busy resisting alleged hostile conspiracies. The government seeks to cover up internal and development-related failures through symbolic celebrations and the promotion of conspiracies. It also attempts to send messages of deterrence and threat to its foes by displaying its military prowess.

There is no doubt that Iran's military industrial capabilities have expanded significantly, with the country now producing many long-range missile systems — with the goal of acquiring homegrown deterrence capabilities. Nonetheless, as a result of the embargo imposed on the country, Iran's military industry is still in its early stages. This raises the prospect for the misuse of weapons, hence deepening regional security concerns.

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ARTICLE

The IRGC's FTO Delisting Is Iran's and America's Shared Imbrolio

With its oil production already reaching pre-Trump era levels, Tehran is linking full compliance with the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) to the delisting of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) by the US State Department. As part of his “maximum pressure” policy against Iran, the Trump administration for the first time named another country's military entity – the IRGC – as a terrorist group on April 8, 2019. Iran responded by inconsequentially designating all US military forces as a “terrorist organization.”

Since both the United States and Iran are walking back to the pre-Trump period, it would seem that the IRGC branding as a FTO must go as well. The situation on this matter is much more complicated than it appears. The IRGC, which does not report to the president but only to the supreme leader, is not known to be a transparent player...

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Arab Affairs

Arab Affairs is divided into four major files. The first file discusses Iran's relations with the Gulf states, shedding light on the increased momentum in Iran-Qatar relations and the new round of Saudi-Iran talks. The second file reviews Iran's interactions in Yemen, discussing the intra-Yemeni consultations hosted by Riyadh and how such consultations will pave the way for Yemen's peace and development— this is in addition to analyzing the truce in Yemen which the legitimate government showed adherence to while the Houthis violated it. The third file examines the motivations behind Iran's removal of its ambassador to Iraq, the political stalemate in Iraq, the impact of Sarkhi's calls on the divisions among Shiites, and Iran's role in Turkey's military operations in Iraq. The fourth file investigates Iran-Syria interactions, highlighting three major developments: the abounding tensions in the Astana tripartite process in Syria, the growing tensions between the Syrian government and Hezbollah on the Damascus-Beirut border crossing, and the resumption of Iranian pressure on US interests in Syria and Iraq.



Iran and the Gulf States

The Gulf-Iran file in March 2022 addressed the ongoing Gulf-Iran tensions in the context of regional developments, most notably the repercussions of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's visit to the UAE, the attempts to bring Syria back to the Arab fold, and the dispute raised by Iran over the Saudi-Kuwaiti agreement for joint investment in the al-Durra gas field. In addition, the file discussed the potential impact of the Gulf countries' participation in the Negev Summit, which was held between a number of countries in the region, the United States participated as well. In April, Iran-Qatar relations steadily developed because of reciprocal visits and messages, which revealed their intentions to advance bilateral relations. The April Gulf file also sheds light on the talks held between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and Iran.

The Increased Momentum in Iran-Qatar Relations

In a telephone conversation with the Qatari Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, the Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi offered to increase cooperation with Qatar during the 2022 World Cup, which is scheduled to be hosted by Doha at the end of this year. The Iranian presidency published a statement declaring that the Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi assured Sheikh Tamim that Iran is ready to assist Qatar in every way possible in organizing the activities of the World Cup through its islands located in the Arabian Gulf. Both countries reviewed ways of developing bilateral relations in all fields. Raisi stressed that "Iran and Qatar can take effective steps in the interests of the two peoples and foster security and stability in the region by taking advantage of all opportunities of cooperation and establishing close coordination." He confirmed that "the forthcoming visit of the Emir of Qatar to Tehran will be beneficial for both sides" and that "major decisions will be made to develop relations and cooperation between the two countries in various fields." For his part, the Emir of Qatar confirmed his country's intention to develop relations with Iran by saying that the ministers of transport of the two countries will soon meet to discuss ways to cooperate for the sake of organizing the 2022 World Cup.⁽¹⁾ Understandings were also reached regarding visa protocols for diplomats and special passport holders. While hosting the Qatari delegation on Kish Island, six documents of joint cooperation were signed between the two sides in the presence of the transport ministers of both countries.⁽²⁾ Iran may seek to exploit this visit to serve its economic interests and reintegrate with the international community, even though Tehran lacks the financial resources and the technical know-how to benefit Qatar in its ambition to organize the World Cup

in accordance with international standards.

Upward Trajectory in Bilateral Relations

The invitation of the emir of Qatar to the Iranian president to attend the launch of the OPEC Gas Summit laid the foundation for growing bilateral relations between Qatar and Iran as we are witnessing currently. Ebrahim Raisi took advantage of the summit held in the Qatari capital to head a high-level delegation on February 21 representing the first visit of an Iranian president to Qatar after more than a decade. Many agreements were signed, indicating the mutual desire of both sides to develop bilateral relations. This also marked President Raisi's first visit to an Arab country and points to the growing bilateral relationship over the past years. A number of prominent issues were discussed such as bilateral cooperation in the gas sector, respective positions on global markets, and the formation of a working and joint study group for the Pars gas field between Iran and Qatar.⁽³⁾

Undoubtedly, the Ukrainian crisis has strengthened Iran's desire to benefit from Qatar, particularly in the field of gas production. This will also provide a new opening for the Iranian economy as the Iranian president promised during his election campaign to prioritize the development of external relationships, particularly with neighboring countries. Iran's ultimate goal is to sow divisions among the Gulf states and weaken the unity of their decision-making by establishing bilateral relations to neutralize the possibility of any consensual Gulf decision-making.

For its part, Qatar seeks to benefit from its distinguished relationship with the United States, which recently designated Doha as a strategic non-NATO ally, to play a mediating role. This role will advance Qatar's political effectiveness, and it will benefit from any breakthrough with Iran given the mutual interests, particularly in the field of joint gas investments. This commonality will prevent the outbreak of any bilateral disputes over the jointly held gas field.

The Meeting of Rivals in Qatar and Testing Iran's Credibility Regarding Its Hostility to the United States

Despite the presence of US bases in Qatar, this did not prevent Iran from developing its political and economic relations with Qatar. Iran's paradox will be publicly tested at the beginning of the World Cup as the Iranian team will face the American team.⁽⁴⁾ It is noteworthy that Iran refused to hold direct negotiations with the American side during the Vienna talks. This confrontation (the 2022 World Cup) between Iran and the United States will be of a political nature if it occurs. Qatar by hosting the World Cup will help in exposing Iran's true face and the inconsistencies in its declared animosity toward the United States.

A New Round of Saudi-Iran Talks

After a halt of more than six months, news circulated in the media regarding the resumption of an unofficial fifth round of Saudi-Iran talks. Reports indicate that the round of talks was held between representatives of Iran and Saudi Arabia in the Iraqi capital, Baghdad, amid increasing hopes for the resumption of relations between the two countries. The Iranian news website Noor News

said that “the meetings were attended by senior officials from the General Secretariat of the Supreme National Security Council of Iran and the head of the Saudi intelligence service, in their capacity as representatives of the two countries.” It was also reported that high-ranking Iraqi and Omani officials played an important role in organizing joint meetings between the representatives of Tehran and Riyadh.

Changing the Rules of the Game

The Ukrainian crisis caused a sudden shift in the conduct of international politics. We are referring here specifically to international policies impacting the Gulf and the wider Middle Eastern region. After the international community was focused on finding a solution to the Iranian nuclear issue, the spillover caused by the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the subsequent Western position which created a global energy crisis deflected attention away from the nuclear talks. Iran had pinned its hopes on the talks easing the sanctions that have destroyed its economy. The fear of the Gulf states has grown because of the ongoing aggressive and destructive behavior of Iran-affiliated militias which seek to put pressure on the international community to accept Iran's demands and speedily conclude the nuclear talks.

Global attention has reverted back to the Middle East following the energy crisis that has stemmed from the Western embargo imposed on Russia. The Middle Eastern countries represent an alternative energy source to compensate for the shortfall in the energy markets. However, the commitment of the OPEC+ countries to their existing agreements has disrupted the oil markets. Russia's intransigence on Iran's nuclear file dimmed Tehran's hopes of a potential breakthrough while strengthening Saudi Arabia's relations with Russia. As a result, Moscow and Tehran find it necessary to reassess the prospects and limits of their mutual relations.

Is the Ground Ready for a Serious Dialogue?

External events may prompt the two parties to converge on the basis of necessity, but the gap between Iran and Saudi Arabia is still wide. Despite the exchange of messages through the media, Iran still believes in its regional presence and in its right to possess weapons that go beyond its defense needs to deter an illusory enemy, while Saudi Arabia believes that Iranian interference has greatly harmed it, and it is necessary to put an end to Iranian adventurism if Tehran wants to build positive and beneficial relations with Riyadh.

It is difficult for Iran to drink poison again and give up what it has sowed over the past decades. The policies of the Iranian government have not improved the lives of its citizens in any way. Its slogans for championing the rights of the downtrodden and supporting the weak ring hollow and soon the Iranian people will no longer be able to tolerate more disappointment.

On the other hand, Saudi Arabia will no longer accept further compromises to its national security because of Iranian actions. It is expected that Saudi Arabia will put before Iran difficult choices if it wishes to restore good relations to a minimum with Riyadh.

All of the above indicates that the new round of talks is still within the ex-

ploratory phase. The latest update in this round is the entry of Oman and Qatar as mediators, which may raise the talks to higher levels.

Iraq, Lebanon, Yemen and Saudi Arabia support the nation state model while Iran seeks to keep these countries mired in the non- state phase. This Iranian position will make points of convergence and agreement difficult. It seems that the nation state model supported by Saudi Arabia will soon materialize in accordance with the aspirations of the people and the international community. Therefore, Tehran's options and strategies will become less effective, and it will come under pressure. Tehran will be obligated to reconsider its intransigent approach. Undoubtedly, the return to diplomatic understandings is in the interests of all the peoples of the region, and the Iranian people themselves are in desperate need of this.

Conclusion

Gulf-Iran relations are currently going through challenges in light of international developments, most notably the Russian-Ukrainian war. Iran and the Gulf states are trying to pursue approaches to calm the situation in the region and search for a way out of the decades-old crisis. During this month, efforts by Qatar and Iran to build bilateral relations were noted. By doing so, Iran seeks to isolate the Gulf states from each other and neutralize their unified decision-making on all outstanding issues. There is also talk about Omani, Qatari and Iraqi efforts to facilitate the Saudi-Iran talks. Significant obstacles still remain, perhaps the most prominent of which is the chronic mistrust that exists between Tehran and Riyadh.

Iran and Yemen

The March 2022 file discussed the implications of the timing of the Houthi terrorist attacks on Saudi Arabia's oil facilities and the political dimensions of the initiatives proposed by the Houthis. The April report discusses two important turning points in the course of the Yemeni crisis: firstly, the outcomes of the Yemeni consultations in Riyadh, which primarily aimed to strengthen the institutions of the Yemeni state and serve as a roadmap for the course of peace and Yemeni development; and secondly, the implications of the Houthi-Iran position on the outcomes of the Yemeni consultations. The Yemeni Presidential Leadership Council was created as a result of the aforementioned consultations and was agreed upon by all Yemeni elements as represents all Yemeni political parties and components. The outcomes were welcomed by many international and regional organizations and parties. In addition, the report reviews the course of the truce with the Houthi militia that came into force on April 2 and will last for two months under the supervision of the United Nations and international actors.

The Intra-Yemeni Consultations: A Roadmap Toward Peace and Development

Under the Gulf Cooperation Council's (GCC) umbrella, April 7 witnessed the outcomes of the intra-Yemeni consultations in Riyadh, which began in late March. Nearly 800 Yemeni personalities from various Yemeni political components across the spectrum of Yemeni society, including politicians, writers and military leaders, participated. The consultations concluded with a final statement read out by Yemeni Prime Minister Maeen Abdul Malik which included several outcomes and referred to 11 items, most notably the formation of the Presidential Leadership Council and a broad-based advisory body. The final statement also included detailed outcomes and recommendations covering six aspects, namely issues regarding politics, economics, social development, security, media, and humanitarian relief. All of these aforementioned issues aim to restructure the legitimate government and advance the work, efficiency and unity of all Yemeni state institutions. This represents an important step in advancing the political resolution of the Yemeni crisis. The decision of the former Yemeni President Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi — in his capacity as the President of the Yemeni Republic— to endow the Presidential Leadership Council intends to strengthen the work of the council's institutions. The Presidential Leadership Council includes eight members from various Yemeni components chaired by President Dr. Rashad Muhammad al-Alimi.⁽⁵⁾

The Yemeni people and all the international parties working to achieve peace in Yemen are counting on the council to manage the affairs of the Yemeni state

to identify new prospects for the development of the Yemeni peace process and to alleviate the suffering and pressure on the Yemeni people during the coming period. The presence of European Union ambassadors, the UN Special Envoy for Yemen Hans Grundberg, the US Special Envoy to Yemen Tim Lenderking, GCC ambassadors, and representatives from other Arab countries at the inauguration ceremony of the Presidential Leadership Council in the Yemeni Parliament reflected the support of the international community and the global endorsement of the outcomes of the intra-Yemeni consultations.⁽⁶⁾

Many observers believe that the support of all Yemeni circles for the Presidential Leadership Council, which includes people representing all of Yemen's political and social segments as well as the broad international support, will leave the Houthi militia with no option but to participate in the future peace process. To date, the Houthi militia has been apparently content to remain on the sidelines by refusing to participate in the consultations in order to serve the Iranian project in Yemen. Therefore, this will put an end to the Yemeni crisis and the suffering of the Yemeni people, as well as preventing the Houthi militia from clashing with global public opinion and the will of the Yemeni people. In any case, the Houthi-Iran position will not prevent the Yemeni people from determining the future shape of Yemen and rehabilitating the Yemeni state. The Houthi militia faces grave challenges because it has continued to distance itself from the approaches and will of the Yemeni people and has defied Yemeni unity. This has invoked the ire of the international community, including the UNSC.

The Military Truce, the Commitment of the Legitimate Government and Houthi Violations

Under the supervision of the United Nations, the truce in Yemen came into force on April 2, 2022, which is expected to last for two months. The UN envoy to Yemen, Hans Grundberg, welcomed the positive reactions before the truce, emphasizing that “the success of this initiative depends on the warring parties’ continued commitment to implementing the truce agreement, with its accompanying humanitarian measures, and that the goodwill that we saw from all sides in public will translate into de-escalation of inflammatory media rhetoric and hate speech.” The UNSC and many international parties seeking peace in Yemen welcomed the truce on the basis that it could lead to a reduction in military escalation in the coming period and facilitate the identification of a political solution to put an end to the Yemeni crisis.⁽⁷⁾

However, the Houthi militia responded to the truce from day one with underhand maneuvers and policies, clearly indicating its rejection of any process to end the crisis through reaching a political settlement. It carried out military violations on more than one front. The Yemeni National Army recorded more than 1,700 Houthi violations of the truce. In addition, the Houthi militia exploited the truce by carrying out robberies and lootings that worsened the living conditions of the Yemeni people. These illegal activities served the militia's interests, such as storing large quantities of fuel, monopolizing black market operations, and exploiting oil shipments to secure oil stocks in preparation

for a new phase of escalation. Furthermore, the militia set up further storage facilities, including those inside the city of Hodeidah.⁽⁸⁾

In this regard, the head of the Consultation and Reconciliation Commission of Yemen Mohammed al-Ghaithi said that the Houthi militia does not want peace and seeks to prolong the war. He also added that the legitimate government wants the truce to continue and to be a prelude to a comprehensive peace that brings together all Yemenis. The Houthi militia's violations are evidence of the fact that it does not want peace and the international community is aware of this. Therefore, US President Joe Biden called for reconsidering and discussing the Houthi militia's re-designation as a terrorist group. The US envoy to Yemen Tim Lenderking confirmed that the armistice in Yemen is a very important step toward peace, but the Iranian government continually attempts to undermine security and stability in Yemen by commanding the leaders of the Houthi militia to escalate. He explained that there is no positive Iranian action in Yemen, stressing that one wants to see Tehran's positive position on the war in Yemen. Many observers believe that US actions against the Houthi- Iran role in Yemen have escalated.⁽⁹⁾

The guided-missile destroyer USS Gonzalez transiting the Gulf of Aden to Djibouti was considered an explicit US warning to the Houthi militia regarding its continued threat to international navigation and its attempts to undermine a political solution in Yemen. The US Navy announced the deployment of the missile destroyer to ensure maritime security and stability. The US Ministry of Defense established a joint force to secure maritime navigation after the Houthi militia's crimes and piracy escalated in international waters.⁽¹⁰⁾

In the context of Iran's destabilizing role in Yemen, the Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei spoke about the Yemeni crisis during the truce period. He said that the leaders of the Houthi militia are brave and that no one will be able to defeat them. Some said his remarks reflected the Iranian government's desire to prolong the conflict and the Yemeni crisis. Moreover, it is believed that the remarks represented an Iranian directive to the Houthi leaders to reject the military truce and refrain from participating in a political solution. Yemeni elements perceived Khamenei's remarks to reflect blatant interference in the



affairs of the Yemeni people, especially since he did not mention Iran's role in achieving a political solution to end the Yemeni crisis.⁽¹¹⁾

Conclusion

The recommendations and outcomes from the Yemeni consultations in Riyadh provide a roadmap to improve the standard of living of the Yemeni people and shift Yemen from a state of disintegration to unity to face its challenges, fight corruption, achieve peace, and start the process of development to benefit the Yemeni people. At the same time, they reflect the depth of the partnership between Yemen and the GCC countries. In addition, the international appreciation for the outcomes of the Riyadh consultations was reflected in the support of the international community for the new Yemeni Presidential Leadership Council. The absence of the Houthi militia and its opposition to the Yemeni consultations and its outcomes is considered as reflective of its dependence on Iran's will and directions, and reflects the Houthi-Iran desire to continue the Yemeni crisis and reject any political solution. Although the Presidential Leadership Council will give priority to achieving a political solution in Yemen, a military option may be considered if the Houthi militia remains belligerent and continues to obstruct the political process and reject the path of peace that has been chosen by all Yemeni elements.

Iran and Iraq

The March 2022 file reviewed Iran's narrative for targeting Erbil, the official and unofficial Iraqi positions on the attack, the objectives behind Iran's attack and its implications. The April 2022 file will discuss the justifications for Iran's removal of its ambassador in Iraq, the developments in relation to the Iraqi political stalemate, the impact of Sarkhi's call on the divisions within the Shiite house, and Iran's connection to Turkey's military operations in Iraq.

Reasons for Iran's Removal of Masjedi in Iraq

On April 11, 2022, Iran announced the appointment of Mohammad Kazem al-Sadeq as its ambassador to Baghdad succeeding Ambassador Iraj Masjedi.⁽¹²⁾ The following questions arise: why was Masjedi removed? What are the implications of his removal? The answers lie in the standing of the Sadeq family. Even though the two ambassadors are officers of the IRGC, Sadeq is an influential person in the organization and belongs to SPAS which is linked to the organization's intelligence wing.⁽¹³⁾ He was also one of the most prominent advisors to the late Quds Force Commander Qassem Soleimani, and he has extensive experience in Iraq. He was born in Najaf, which is of religious significance for Iraqi Shiites, and is fluent in Arabic and the Iraqi dialect. Sadeq has strong and even influential relations with leaders of Shiite alliances and Iraqi political components. Therefore, this will enable him to play a role in the current Iraqi political stalemate.

The removal of Masjedi in Iraq indicates that he failed in the tasks entrusted to him, particularly to enhance Iran's influence and to preserve its control over Iraqi decision-making. For example, over the past years, popular discontent against Iran's influence has increased, opposing voices to its influence have grown, particularly during the tenure of Kadhimi's government, and Tehran-affiliated militias which pledge allegiance to Wilayat al-Faqih have clashed with Iraqi elements over control of Iraqi resources and influence. The Shiite alliances in the early legislative elections held in October 2021 lost, and Iraq is witnessing a political impasse because the Sadrist bloc leader Muqtada al-Sadr is insisting on forming a national majority government rather than a consensual government as demanded by Iran's allies, and the Iranians themselves. Before leaving his post, Masjedi believed that the time had not come to form a majority government and that a consensus government was the solution to the political stalemate.⁽¹⁴⁾ Iran wants to secure a satisfactory role in the new government.

The task of the new ambassador will be to work on restoring Iran's control over Iraqi decision-making by achieving harmony between the Shiite alliances

to force Sadr to accept a consensual government which includes all pro-Iran alliances, and to achieve harmony between the armed militias due to his experience and strong connections with Iraqi forces. Therefore, this change by Iranian decision-makers of Iran's ambassador to Iraq is intentional because they follow a strict criteria when it comes to appointing an ambassador to Iraq, and it also reflects the directions of Iranian policy in Iraq due to Baghdad's significance in Tehran's strategy and the implementation of its schemes, since it is the most important link in the Iranian corridor which connects Tehran to the Mediterranean. The appointment of Sadeq also demonstrates the continuation of IRGC role in devising and implementing Iran's policies toward Iraq.

Iran's Allies in Iraq and the Political Stalemate

Iraq is suffering from a political stalemate because the constitutional deadlines ended on April 6 2022. The two presidencies: the Presidency of the State and the Presidency of the Government have not been nominated due to the differences between the two major Kurdish parties: the Kurdistan Union Party (KUP) and the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) over the President of the Republic, and the failure of the Shiite alliances to form a new government owing to ongoing divisions between the two major Shiite alliances:

- The first alliance is the Sadrist bloc, which ranked first in the new Parliament, led by Muqtada al-Sadr, who sided with the Sunnis (the Progress Alliance led by Muhammad al-Halbousi and Al-Azim led by Khamis al-Khanjar) and the Kurds (the KDP led by Masoud Barzani) under the name of the "Save the Nation" bloc also known as the "National Rescue" bloc. This alliance insists that it is the largest bloc and has the right to nominate a prime minister and to form a national majority government which will pursue the path toward full statehood and sovereignty.
- The second alliance is the Coordination Framework which includes many alliances, including pro-Iran alliances such as Al-Fatah Alliance led by Hadi al-Amiri and the State of Law Coalition led by Nouri al-Maliki. It insists that it is the largest bloc and seeks to form a consensus government in accordance with the 2003 Iraqi law. The Coordination Framework will allow all alliances, especially pro-Iran ones, to participate in the new government, thereby maintaining the non-state scenario. Therefore, the uncontrolled proliferation of weapons will play a pivotal role, hence enhancing Iranian influence in Iraq.

The differences between the Iraqi alliances have increased and the efforts to reach a settlement to form the new government have all failed so far. In addition, it seems unlikely that the Iran-backed Coordination Framework will be able to form the government within the critical period of 40 days starting from April 1, 2022 because it rejects Sadr's project: the formation of a national majority government and the nomination of Sadr's cousin Jaafar al-Sadr to head the new government. However, Sadr has used this period as a political gambit. Therefore, the available option on the table now is to keep the Kadhimi government in place as a caretaker government and to undertake a major cabinet reshuffle.

As the political impasse continues, even if the elections are repeated, their

validity will be questioned again if the outcome is not in the interest of the pro-Iranian alliances. Consequently, the crisis will continue as long as there are alliances which work for the interests of Iran and support sectarianism. Ultimately, the only loser is Iraq, the government and the people.

The Impact of Sarkhi's Calls on the Divisions Within the Shiite House

In a new indicator of the deepening Shiite-Shiite divisions across the Iraqi landscape, the imam of the Al-Fateh Mosque in Babylon Province, and one of the followers of the Shiite Sarkhi movement Ali Musa Kazem al-Masoudi during his sermon on April 11, 2022, explicitly called for the demolition of Shiite shrines which he said should be razed to the ground. As a result, the Iraqi National Security Service arrested him on charges of threatening public peace. In addition, the Iraqi judiciary also issued an arrest warrant for the leader of the Sarkhi movement, the Shiite religious marja, Mahmoud al-Sarkhi.^{(15)*} On April 12, 2022, the National Security Agency arrested approximately 29 supporters and preachers of the movement. The statement of the agency described the movement to be extremist as it insulted religious beliefs⁽¹⁶⁾ in several provinces, including Babil, Dhi Qar, Muthanna, Najaf, Basra, Karbala and Maysan. Its calls is similar to Musa Kazim's call for demolishing Shiite shrines in Iraq.

The calls of the Sarkhi movement's preachers caused a wave of condemnation and anger in the Shiite community and among its already divided religious and political forces and communities concerning the formation of the new Iraqi government. There were also Shiite counter calls against the proclamations of the movement's preachers to avoid the outbreak of widespread Shiite-Shiite conflicts in the southern governorates which are predominantly Shiite, especially as Shiite shrines are of great importance for millions of Shiites. Muqtada al-Sadr criticized the calls strongly in his statement on April 12, 2022. He called on the leader of the movement to hold its preachers accountable and gave it three days to disavow them. Otherwise, he would be compelled to impose an appropriate punishment on them and to pursue legal channels to hold them accountable. Sadr described their beliefs as corrupt, and he said that "The spread of corrupt beliefs should not be overlooked in Iraqi society."⁽¹⁷⁾

In addition to Sadr's condemnation, who has become the strongest and most important Shiite figure on the Iraqi arena after his bloc ranked first in the early parliamentary elections, the leader of the Al-Hikma Movement Ammar Al-Hakim also weighed in on the crisis. He called on Kadhimi to hold Sarkhi's preachers accountable. Dozens of Sadr's followers besieged Al Fateh Al Mubin Mosque. Sadr's angry protesters also set fire to the hussainiyas of the Sarkhis in a number of Iraqi provinces, including Babil and Dhi Qar, and a sound bomb exploded near the Al-Mujtaba hussainiya of Sarkhi in Babylon. An unofficial statistic indicates that more than 40 hussainiyas were burnt and destroyed due to the incitement of Sarkhi preachers against Shiite shrines.⁽¹⁸⁾ In response, Sadr called for Sarkhi mosques not to be burnt or demolished, but to be closed only.

There is a view that the crisis has been fabricated by the Coordination

Framework, whose alliances are supported by Iran, to pressure Sadr to accept the formation of a consensus government, since Sarkhi was one of the students of the prominent Shiite marja Muhammad Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr, the father of Muqtada al-Sadr. The issue raised by Musa Kazim's sermon reflects an old jurisprudential dispute between Shiite jurists.⁽¹⁹⁾ Sadr, because of his position, has blocked the Coordination Framework's path and has invalidated its narratives, repeatedly expressed, to harm the Shiite doctrine and weaken the Shiite component. His severe criticism of the Sarkhis was in light of the aforementioned view of the Coordination Framework fabricating the crisis to undermine him and depriving him of the right to determine the structure of the next government.

Some other observers believe that there is an Iranian involvement in this crisis to reshuffle the cards and complicate the Iraqi scene for Sadr and to exact revenge against the Sarkhis for their anti-Iranian stances in Iraq. Iran has accused the Sarkhis of being involved in the storming of the Iranian consulate in Karbala and the burning of the Iranian flag during the mass protests that erupted in the southern governorate during the past years. They also reject Iranian interference and believe that the Iran-backed PMF is a tool to increase Tehran's grip over Iraqi decision-making. The Sarkhis are well-known for their criticisms of the Shiite alliances that have ruled Iraq since 2003.

This is not the first time that the Sarkhis' positions have caused a crisis in the Iraqi arena. The former prime minister and the Leader of the State of Law Coalition Nouri al-Maliki called for the arrest of Mahmoud al-Sarkhi and Iraq's security forces raided his office in 2014 and arrested many of his followers. However, this crisis is different because it deepened the divisions among the leaders of the already divided Shiite house as the pro-Iran alliances lost heavily in the early parliamentary election in October 2021. The current crisis is not between the government and Sarkhi as was the case in the past, but it is one between two Shiite components over the reverence Iraqi Shiites hold for Shiite shrines.

Iran's Role in Turkey's Military Operation in Iraq

Turkish forces carried out new military operations in northern Iraq on April 17, 2022. They targeted the sites of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in Basian, Afshin, Al Zab and Matin in the Kurdistan Region because the group controls the northern mountains in Iraq, using them as a starting point for their hostilities against Turkey, according to the Turkish narrative. However, observers believe that these operations complement those that started in 2019 to sever any geographical continuity of the PKK between Iraq and Turkey, as well as to remove the party's fighters from the border strip and to establish a safe zone on the border.

Some observers stated that the Turkish attacks against the PKK are related to Iran's attacks on Erbil in March 2022 which were carried out to undermine the outcomes of the talks held between Kurdistan Region President Nechirvan Barzani and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan in Ankara. These were held to discuss energy exports (oil and gas) from the north of Iraq to the European

countries via Turkey and the extension of power and gas supply networks to facilitate exports.^[20] However, Iran has sought to undermine this move while it is attempting to exploit global energy conditions to develop its relations with the West through supplying gas. Therefore, according to observers, Turkey's objective behind its latest operations in Iraq is to send Iran messages that it is able to secure the geographical corridor through which the gas pipeline from the Kurdistan Region will pass through Turkey instead of Iran. It also targeted the PKK's sites in Sinjar.

Conclusion

Iraq is witnessing the most complicated political impasse since the US invasion of Iraq because the constitutional deadlines ended without the formation of a new government. Iran's realization of its crisis of influence pushed it to replace its ambassador to Iraq with someone who is more experienced and familiar with the Iraqi file in order to regain control over Iraqi decision-making, especially in light of Shiite-Shiite clashes among its armed proxies in Iraq. On the other hand, Iraq still falls within the sphere of conflict for achieving more influence, settling scores and exchanging messages between Iran and Turkey.

REPORT



The Sarkhi Movement: The Intra-Shiite Rift and Its Political Implications for Iraq

The Iraqi Arena Is Abundant With Different Confessional Factions, Movements, Creeds And Sects. There Exists Some Political Disputes Within The Iraqi Shiite Group, But There Is Also A Deeper Rift Within It Over The Particular Religious Doctrine Favored By The Shiite Sect, With Conflicting Schools Of Thought, Each Wishing To See Their Own Favored Religious Doctrine Become The Dominant One. This Internal Conflict Means That This Dispute Manifests Itself In Iraq's Already Turbulent Political And Religious Landscape, Impacting All Areas, Including Employment...

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Iran and Syria

The March 2022 file reviewed the motives and implications of Arab-Iranian interactions in the Syrian file, and the repercussions of Russian-Ukrainian tensions and their ramifications on the Iranian-Israeli axis in Syria. The April 2022 file analyzes the latest developments in Iran-Syria relations in light of the progress made in the Iran nuclear deal and the ongoing Russian-Ukrainian crisis. The following points are discussed in the context of the aforementioned developments: the escalation in tensions in relation to the Astana tripartite process regarding Syria, the growing tensions between the Syrian government and Hezbollah on the Damascus-Beirut border crossing, and the resumption of Tehran targeting US interests in Syria.

Abounding Tensions in the Astana Tripartite Process Regarding Syria

The relationship between the stakeholders of the Astana tripartite process is marked by tensions: Russia, Iran and Syria are facing pressure because of the current international crisis. In particular, the northern region of Syria witnessed an upsurge in confrontation between Syrian government forces, Iran, Russia and Turkey. Russian military fighters resumed airstrikes against Idlib and the Hama countryside in northwestern Syria. These strikes coincided with shelling by Syrian forces and Iranian militias against the opposition's military sites. Turkish drones targeted the military posts of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). Following this escalation in tensions, Turkey announced the closure of its airspace to Russian aircraft heading to Syria.

The intent to convey political messages to several parties is the main reason behind the ground escalation. Foremost among these messages is Ankara signaling its intent to maximize its gains in Syria in light of the international community's preoccupation with the Ukraine crisis. In particular, Ankara seeks to expedite its project in the Syrian-Iraqi border regions, facilitate the return of Syrian refugees, establish a security zone, and displace the Kurdish population to create a loyalist atmosphere for Ankara along the Turkey-Syrian border. In addition, Turkey is seeking to benefit from the repercussions of the Ukrainian crisis, and growing European demand for alternatives to Russian gas. It signed a cooperation agreement for constructing a gas pipeline inside the Kurdistan Region to connect it with Turkish lands. However, this project will harm Iranian ambitions for supplying its gas to Europe and will also reduce Turkish demand for Iranian gas. Tehran's dissatisfaction regarding cooperation between

Turkey and the Kurdistan Region was expressed through the IRGC shelling Erbil from its bases in Iran.

The second Turkish message was intended for Iran because of its recent attempts to recruit combatants from tribes and to establish an Iranian military council in the city of Hasakah and other Turkish areas of influence. These moves aim to protect Iranian interests and increase its presence in the aforementioned areas.

Turkey's military operations on the Iraqi and Syrian border have raised Iranian concerns. This is evident from the remarks of the Iranian Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Saeed Khatibzadeh who underlined that there are many core differences between Tehran and Ankara, especially when it comes to the Syrian file. However, Khatibzadeh did not mention anything about the nature of the differences between Ankara and Tehran, although he confirmed that the differences between both countries concerned Syria. He hinted that Turkey's military operations inside Syrian-Iraqi territories had raised Iran's anger.⁽²¹⁾

These Iranian remarks express the Iranian government's visible anxiety over Turkish policy in the region generally and the gas file in particular. Iran has certainly started to sense the danger of the formation of new alliances between several countries to confront its clout and expansion in Syria. Consequently, its relations with many countries which used to describe their relations with Iran as strategic will be impacted.⁽²²⁾ Tehran, therefore, deliberately sent warning messages to Ankara. In addition, Russia raided areas inside Idlib, and besieged and restricted the United States by exhausting its ally the SDF through continuous clashes.

The Growing Tensions Between the Syrian Government and Hezbollah on the Damascus-Beirut Border Crossing

In spite of the alliance between the Lebanese Hezbollah and the Syrian government forged in recent years, disagreements between the Iranian factions in Syria and the forces affiliated to the Syrian government have been increasing. The illegal border crossing between Syria and Lebanon plays an important role in the differences between the two sides and has been the subject of increasing tensions over various periods. The most recent clash was between Hezbollah fighters and the militia of the National Defense Force affiliated with the Syrian government on the outskirts of the Damascus countryside.⁽²³⁾ The reasons and implications can be summarized as follows:

- The resumption of cross-border smuggling is one of the major reasons for the disagreements between the Syrian government and the Iranian militias, especially Hezbollah, in the border areas. Hezbollah seeks to obtain the biggest share of the revenues to enhance and fund its military capabilities. It also uses this money in investment activities to ensure renewable income sources.
- Tensions between both parties erupted when Hezbollah established several military posts near the Syrian crossings with Lebanon at the beginning of April 2022. The militia sought to secure these posts by digging tunnels and trenches in the vicinity and close to its military headquarters. It deliberately raised the Syrian flag above their sites to avoid any possible Israeli shelling.

- The recent tensions between Hezbollah and the Syrian forces are inseparable from Tehran's attempts to exploit the Ukrainian crisis to strengthen its military clout inside Syria. Iran relies on Russia's preoccupation with the Ukrainian war. Signs of this Iranian endeavor appeared in Tehran's reported transfer of arms to different areas west of the Euphrates and Palmyra in the Homs countryside, and the establishment of military training camps and centers. Iranian militias endeavored to redeploy and consolidate their newly established presence on the Iraqi border area within the al-Tanf-al-Bukamal axis, the countryside of Deir Ezzor, and in the areas adjacent to the SDF's spheres of influence.
- The Iranians are concerned about Syria's desire to shift toward the Arab sphere which will have significant implications for the turbulent Syrian border and a number of neighboring countries. Therefore, this issue remains a top priority for Iran. The smuggling of various narcotics and arms across the Syrian border represents a grave threat to the neighboring countries, especially Lebanon and Jordan. Both Tehran and its proxy Hezbollah are concerned about the implications of Syria's intent to move closer to the Arab sphere and the impact of this on their clout inside Syria. This raises the prospects for further escalation by Iran and Hezbollah against the Syrian government in order to convince it that it is in its interests to preserve the current cooperation between both parties.

The Resumption of Iran's Pressure on US Interests in Syria and Iraq

Although Iran remains focused on the nuclear talks, it has renewed its military presence in the region since the concerned parties have not been able to resolve their points of divergence in relation to the nuclear deal. In parallel with the resurgence of attacks targeting the Iraqi base of Ain Al Asad, Iranian militias resumed attacks against US forces located in al-Omar oil field, western Syria.⁽²⁴⁾ These bases in Iraq and Syria are constant targets for Iranian militias. Al Omar oil field was previously targeted at the beginning of this year. The motives behind Iran's repeated attacks against the US military presence in the region can be understood in light of the following considerations:

- Iran seeks to repeat the scenario of the US withdrawal from Afghanistan and apply it to the Syrian case. A complete withdrawal from Syria will set the stage for the pro-Iran armed militias to fill the void. Although the Syrian and Iraqi cases are very different to Afghanistan, Iranian militias, according to Tehran's perspective, have the capabilities to repeat the Afghan scenario, hence advancing Iran's presence in Syria and Iraq that currently face seemingly intractable challenges.
- The attack against al-Omar oil field by Iran-backed militias reflects their attempts to pressure and provoke the United States amid the tense international and regional geopolitical environment and the critical juncture in the Iran nuclear file. Therefore, Iran seeks to inflame the regional files and pressure all regional forces through its extensive network of arms across Syria and Iraq.

Conclusion

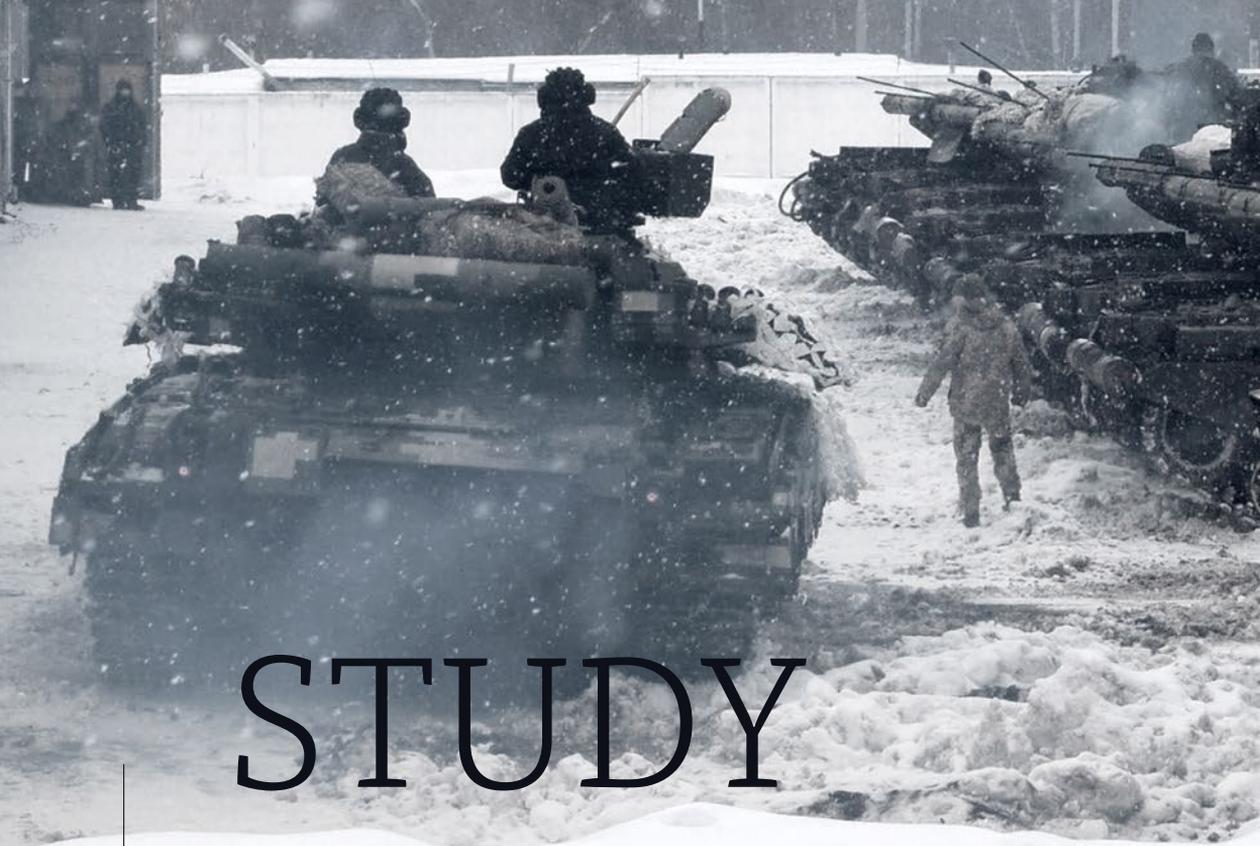
There appears to have been an escalation in tensions not only between Iran and Syria, but between all parties to the Syrian equation. The dispute between Iran and Russia, and Iran and Turkey in the Syrian arena is expanding. The disagreements between Hezbollah and the Syrian government over the border file and smuggling have further complicated the Iranian position and its role in the Syrian conflict. However, Tehran is expected in the coming months to contain these disagreements and ease tensions with its partners in the Syrian file. Iran is keenly aware that any escalation in the aforementioned disputes will be at the expense of its geopolitical clout in Syria and it will potentially have to suffer heavy losses in the future.

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STUDY



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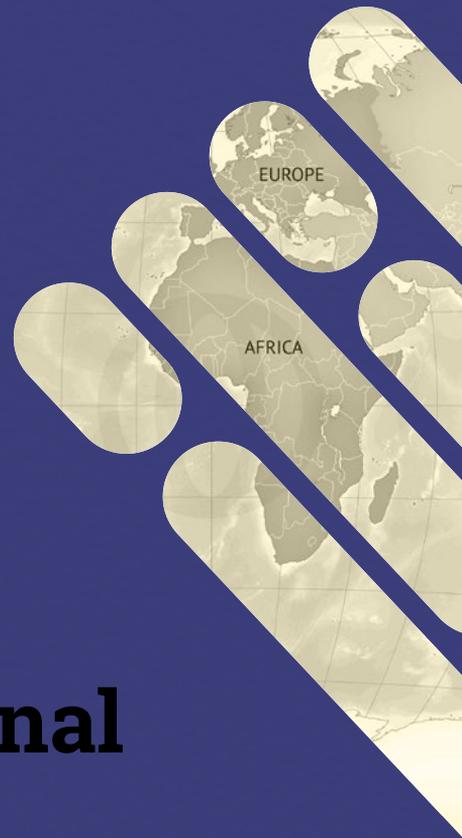
The Economic and Demographic Dimensions of Ukraine in the Russian Strategic Perspective

After the new Ukrainian government was installed in 2014, relations between Russia and Ukraine soared. The latter overlooks the Black Sea, which enables it to access the Mediterranean, which is of utmost importance for Russian trade and the passage of energy supplies to the entire region. This prompted Russia to annex the Crimean Peninsula in the same year to enhance its standing within the context of the ongoing global competition. Now it is invading the rest of Ukraine to extract more geopolitical, security and economic advantages.

In addition to its unique location militarily, geographically, and economically, Ukraine — a former Soviet republic—is an important maritime hub for Russia. It spreads over an area of 603 square kilometers — the second biggest country in Europe — with 44 million people...

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International Affairs

This part of the Iran Case File discusses Iran's interactions with the United States and Europe. As for Iran-US relations, it reviews four prominent developments as follows: the dispute over delisting the IRGC from the US terrorism list; the impact of regional and international developments on the Vienna talks; Iran's nuclear agreement and its hedging strategy, the mutual crisis of confidence and the challenges to broadening the Vienna talks. As for Iran-Europe relations, the file sheds light on the nuclear issue and endeavors to resume the Vienna talks, and the points of convergence and disagreement between Europe and Iran.



Iran and the United States

The Vienna talks are at a critical juncture due to the divergent positions on the revival of the nuclear deal. Although a number of files were resolved during the last round of talks, including the technical aspects of the United States and Iran returning to their obligations, speculation is mounting about the aspects and dimensions of the aforementioned divergences. We discussed in our previous file the impact of the weakening of the sanctions on Iran, and the continuous attempts to reach a point of convergence and a breakthrough in the negotiations regarding the Syrian file. The April 2022 file sheds light on the developments in US-Iran relations through analyzing the most notable developments as follows: the disagreement over the removal of the IRGC from the terrorist list; the impact of regional and international developments on the Vienna talks; the autonomous guarantees under the nuclear deal; and the lack of mutual confidence and the challenges to broadening the Vienna talks.

The Dispute Over the Removal of the IRGC From the US Terrorist List

The nuclear deal is still the bedrock issue for Iran and the United States. The United States is concerned about Iran's unchecked nuclear capabilities. US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said before the Congress that Iran's capacity to produce a nuclear weapon is down from about one year to a few weeks or less. The negotiations, however, have been on hold since March 11, 2022. Each party blames the other for thwarting the agreement. There are still substantive disagreements that continue to impede the negotiations and reaching a final deal.⁽¹⁾

One of the most important issues impeding the Vienna negotiations is the dispute over the removal of the IRGC from the US terrorist list. Iran views this issue as a matter which impacts the Iranian leadership apparatus as a whole since the IRGC is one of the most important organizations. It has been said that Iran rejects the idea of lifting the designation of the IRGC from the sanctions list while keeping the Quds Force on it. There have been some indications of the Iranians rejecting Washington's offer to remove the IRGC from its blacklist in return for Tehran's public commitment to de-escalate in the Middle East. If this is true, it clearly reflects Iran's unwillingness to change its behavior in the region, and it still insists on separating the nuclear deal as a whole from its behavior which threatens regional security and stability.

In fact, lifting the sanctions on the IRGC is not the only contentious issue, but there are also divergent views on the sanctions that must be lifted. In this regard, Iran's Foreign Ministry Spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh said that "More



than one issue is still pending between us and the United States, and these are centered on lifting maximum pressure.” It is expected that the Americans will want to keep some of the sanctions in place as waiving all the sanctions will embarrass the Biden administration.

Regarding a connected matter, while Iran believes that it has exerted efforts to build confidence such as offering to collaborate/coordinate with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) on technical matters, the United States has not kept its promise to lift the sanctions. For example, the United States has not lifted the financial sanctions nor those imposed on maritime navigation and others. It seems that the United States is attempting to secure further gains at this critical stage. This was reflected in Iranian official statements that the United States and the West are looking to expand the negotiations beyond the nuclear issue.⁽²⁾

The Impact of Regional and International Developments on the Vienna Negotiations

Recent regional and international developments have cast a shadow on the negotiations. Regionally, the possibility of removing the IRGC from the US terrorist list has raised concerns among regional states which have urged the United States not to pursue this path. Meetings held between a number of regional

governments with the United States aimed to coordinate positions on Iran and to develop a common vision so as not to impede future negotiations.

The regional powers are concerned about Iran's behavior post the revival of the nuclear deal. They believe that it would be even harder to contain Iran's hostile behavior if the IRGC's terrorist designation is removed. Furthermore, according to the regional view, the present moment presents a valuable opportunity to broaden discussions with Iran to cover regional concerns, especially since the Iranian government did not previously honor the spirit of the nuclear deal.

Internationally, Russia and China have been impacted by current developments, particularly the Ukraine crisis, and have lost their enthusiasm about reviving the nuclear deal at the current stage in light of the resurgence of international conflict.⁽³⁾ The Russians have made the Vienna negotiations part of their conflict with the United States. They use the nuclear talks as a tool to secure their interests in their confrontation with the West on one hand, as well as to prevent the revival of the nuclear deal and the lifting of sanctions on Iran, so that Tehran is unable to compensate for the loss of Russian supplies in the global energy market. If Iran's problem is resolved and its relations with the West improve, both Russia and some circles within Iran will be concerned about an Iranian shift toward the West as witnessed following the conclusion of the 2015 deal.

Iran's Nuclear Documents and Hedging Strategy

The return of the IAEA to monitor Iran's nuclear sites has calmed the growing tensions between Iran and the United States. Iran handed over documents related to the outstanding issues to the IAEA to close its investigation about uranium particles found in three undeclared Iranian sites. Resolving this issue will remove a significant impediment to reviving the 2015 nuclear deal between Tehran and the world powers. Under IAEA oversight, Iran will set up new workshops in Natanz to assemble centrifuge parts used for uranium enrichment. Iran has endeavored to assert its nuclear right to produce energy for peaceful purposes. The Atomic Energy Organization of Iran (AEOI) unveiled nine achievements associated with the nuclear industry. These included the comprehensive document which outlined the vision of the nuclear industry in Iran for the next 20 years. Iran is keen on realizing this vision in coordination with the IAEA. A nuclear power plant will be constructed in Darkhovin in the southeast of the country, which according to Iranian experts will generate power this year.

It seems that Iran seeks to legitimize its peaceful nuclear program and to achieve technical advancements in cooperation with the IAEA to ensure it meets with all the regulatory requirements. In this context, the chief of Iran's Atomic Energy Organization Mohammed Eslami said that his country will work to have professional relations with the IAEA by thwarting what he described as "the enemy."

Additionally, the lack of guarantees that the United States will not exit from the future nuclear deal indicates that Iran, through its previously announced nuclear plan, is trying to create a deterrence tool to prevent Washington's potential withdrawal from the deal, or to establish autonomous guarantees to maintain the deal. This means that Iran through its nuclear program will raise the cost of any future withdrawal from the nuclear deal. Nevertheless, Iran made nuclear advances, especially at the technical level during the period following the Trump withdrawal from the deal. These advances can be built upon to minimize Tehran's breakout time and reach the nuclear threshold. In this regard, Iran wants to preserve its accumulated uranium and its advanced centrifuges which it further developed following its reduction in its nuclear commitments.⁽⁴⁾ This will be a sufficient deterrent to prevent any US manipulation of the nuclear deal in the future, and will reduce the international community's ability to control Iran's nuclear program.

The Mutual Crisis of Confidence and the Challenges to Broadening the Vienna Understandings

Iran and the United States need to conclude the nuclear deal at this critical stage. Biden needs trump cards in the foreign policy sphere since the congressional elections will be held in November. The conclusion of the nuclear deal will be the Democrats' most powerful card to win against the Republicans. Given the economic situation Iran faces, it needs to recover some of its economic status by implementing the nuclear deal and obtaining sanctions relief. However, both parties are pursuing a cautious policy; Iran says that it will return to the negotiations only for concluding the final deal, while the United States considers this Iranian position as putting the onus and burden on her as well as ungallant behavior, according to US State Department Spokesperson Ned Price.⁽⁵⁾

From the beginning, the United States intended to include other issues in the Vienna talks. This matter puts pressure on Biden. The negotiating team led by Robert Malley, the US special envoy for Iran, tried to exploit the last minute negotiations to secure additional gains. This is reflected in the statement of the State Department spokesperson, "If Iran wants sanctions lifting, it needs to address the concerns that go beyond the nuclear deal."⁽⁶⁾ For Iran, the discussion of any other issue rather than the nuclear file is a redline that cannot be crossed. The IRGC's statement on April 1, 2022 confirmed this position on the occasion of Republic Day, "The missile power and the popularity and regional influence of Iran ... (both of) which have been associated with the name of the Islamic Revolution Guard Corps, are red lines for the Iranian nation."⁽⁷⁾

The negotiations over the nuclear deal reveal the crisis of confidence between the United States and Iran. In April 2022, the US State Department described Tehran as the "the largest supporter of terrorism" and stated that Washington will confront its destabilizing behavior in the region. The US State Department also listed several US individuals on the sanctions list for their links to Iran,



their non-compliance with the sanctions and the provision of financial support to the Iranian government.⁽⁸⁾

In response, Iran imposed sanctions on a retired US general and 23 American citizens involved in what it described as “terrorism and human rights violations.” Iran’s Foreign Ministry spokesperson said that the newly-imposed US sanctions are another sign of Washington’s malign intentions against the Iranian nation, adding that the US administration is pursuing what he described as “the failed maximum pressure policy” against Tehran.

The supreme leader stressed that the country’s future should not be tied to the nuclear deal and its outcomes. In the presence of Ebrahim Raisi, the supreme leader directed the government to continue its work regardless of the results of the negotiations. He also reiterated the hardline positions toward the United States by saying, “The United States broke its promises by withdrawing from the deal, and they have reached a dead end while Iran is not in such a situation.” He called on Iran’s nuclear negotiators to resist America’s excessive demands.

Conclusion

The IAEA’s cooperation with Iran and American complacency have played a role in this current state of calm between Iran and the United States. Each party has secured its interests at this stage without paying any political cost. Biden might want to avoid any incident that can be used by the Republicans before the midterm elections to strengthen their position, especially as the president is under pressure not to provide concessions to Iran. This is convenient for Iran which still maintains its core hostile ideology toward the United States. However, Iran is severely impacted by the resumption of IAEA supervision over

its nuclear program and therefore will likely make concessions.

In view of current developments and the lack of mutual trust, it can be said that if Iran and the United States successfully revive the nuclear deal, it will be based on a fragile consensus which can quickly fall apart. This is due to the uncertainty about Iran's nuclear program, the profound differences between both countries, their divergent views, Iran's enduring ideological hostility toward the United States and the seemingly intractable contentious issues, namely Iran's ballistic missile program and regional schemes. As a result, the enmity and confrontation will remain in place, especially at the regional level, thus bringing relations back to square one. This scenario could actually materialize if the Republicans dominate the Congress in the midterm elections, leading to a shift in American foreign policy.

Iran and Europe

The Iran-Europe file in March discussed the disagreements behind the halt of the Vienna talks and shed light on the unresolved issues between Iran and the global powers partaking in the talks. In addition, the file reviewed the UK paying its debts to Iran in return for the release of two British-Iranian detainees. The April file discusses the developments in Iran-Europe relations, especially in the context of the nuclear file, Iran's energy policies, and human rights record.

European endeavors in April were fruitless, no breakthrough was attained in the Vienna talks — which have been halted since early March. Some observers believed that the revival of the nuclear deal would be unrewarding in light of Iran's intransigence and its far-fetched demands to approve the draft agreement such as the removal of the IRGC from the US terrorism list. The Biden administration has faced serious opposition at home over what some assume to be consecutive concessions to Tehran despite Washington's powerful position at the negotiating table.

This file discusses two prominent developments in Iran-Europe relations in the month of April: the nuclear issue and endeavors to resume the Vienna talks, and the point of convergence and disagreement between Europe and Iran.

The Nuclear Issue and Efforts to Resume the Vienna Talks

The Europeans have continued their mediation efforts between the United States and Iran, hoping to make the two opposing parties find common ground to revive the nuclear deal. Since the halt of the Vienna talks, the European Union's Iranian nuclear talks coordinator Enrique Mora has tirelessly endeavored to find points of convergence and encourage both parties, Washington and Tehran, to make concessions to accept the reportedly semi-final draft agreement, which will lead to a satisfactory settlement for all the parties concerned in the nuclear deal. The delisting of the IRGC from the US terror list has become the main obstacle hindering the approval of the draft agreement.

Over the past few months, Iran started to give up on its demands and conditions in a gradual manner. First, the Iranians were very stubborn regarding the need for all the sanctions to be lifted on Iran, but gradually they softened their demands while continuing to place pressure for the IRGC to be removed from the US terror list given the organization's significance in Iran's political system. It is worth mentioning here that the IRGC has effectively extended its grip over the country's economic sectors, so it is difficult to operate the Iranian economy if this military organization continues to be sanctioned. Further, foreign inves-

tors will be concerned about violating US sanctions by doing business in Iran; accordingly, the Iranian government is likely to fail in achieving the desired economic breakthrough that it has promised.

Without a shadow of a doubt, Iran's demand to delist the IRGC from the US terror list is a bargaining chip to leverage the US administration to quickly revive the nuclear deal without any delay. By emphasizing the point that the IRGC is an essential part of the Iranian military establishment, the Iranian negotiating team can make its removal from the terror list an essential condition for any nuclear deal to be concluded. Iran's Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian expressed his appreciation of the European, Chinese, and Russian roles to achieve a desired settlement,⁽⁹⁾ at the same time he blamed the US administration for its inability to amend its previous policies toward Iran.

In an open letter, former European diplomats called on Washington and Tehran to find a satisfactory nuclear settlement that ensures regional stability and security.⁽¹⁰⁾ The United States has sent mixed signals regarding its willingness to remove the IRGC from its terror list and the US administration is facing extensive pressure from both Republican and Democratic circles who are concerned that Washington will revive a bad nuclear deal. They demand that restrictions on Iran are tightened due to its ongoing nuclear violations, and that its missile activities and destabilizing behavior in the region are addressed. Even if the Biden administration removes the IRGC from its list of foreign terrorist organizations, its various factions, leaders, and affiliated organizations will still be sanctioned as they are designated under different categories by the US Department of Treasury.⁽¹¹⁾

The Europeans are still endeavoring to resolve disagreements between the Americans and the Iranians and convince them to accept the draft agreement to revive the nuclear deal as well as to delay their debate on thorny issues such as delisting the IRGC from the US list of terrorist organizations after concluding the nuclear deal.⁽¹²⁾ The Europeans in April 2022 were keen to enhance their diplomacy and make the IAEA join its efforts of de-escalation and bridge the gap of mistrust with Iran.

Disagreements and Convergence

Despite their common economic interests, the Europeans and Iranians still have many disagreements, primarily concerning Tehran's human rights record and terrorist operations. The Europeans have adopted a carrot and stick policy toward Iran; they intensify their pressure when it comes to issues related to human rights violations and Iran's terrorist operations abroad. The Iranians have tirelessly refuted European accusations related to human rights violations and have used media outlets to attack them.

According to observers, politically speaking, despite their growing disagreements, the interests of both sides converge on energy, given the challenges arising in light of the Russia-Ukraine crisis.

Amid concerns over European energy security, some analysts argue that

Iran can make up for the gas shortage in light of strained Russia-Europe relations. Supplying gas is definitely a point of convergence for both the Iranians and the Europeans through which they can build joint economic partnerships and interdependencies. The reality on the ground is not that simple; it includes many complexities and obstacles.

The Financial Times reported that there is no substitute for Russian gas, even if sanctions on Iran are lifted since global gas production is already running at maximum levels. Unlike in the oil industry, where producers can increase or hold back production at their discretion, gas supplies require pipelines or sophisticated liquefaction facilities, which Iran lacks. Even if Iran is eager to export gas, it needs a long time to establish this gas infrastructure as well as massive investments. Finally, most of Iran's natural production is for domestic consumption and Tehran has not enhanced its production capacity as Russia has done.⁽¹³⁾

As for their disagreements on human rights, the trial of Hamid Nouri is still ongoing in Switzerland. Nouri is accused of murder in connection with Iran's 1988 political prison massacre — undertaken by the Iranian government against political detainees. President Ebrahim Raisi is reportedly accused of being part of the massacre as he was a government official and a member of the "Death Committee" which passed the death sentences. In April, Iran exploited the arrest of an Iranian female asylum seeker by Danish police, protesting what it described the "inhumane" treatment of an Iranian female citizen. In a letter to the Danish Minister for Immigration and Integration Mattias Tesfaye, Kazem Gharibabadi, the deputy chief of Iran's judiciary and the secretary of the High Council for Human Rights, condemned the deportation of a woman with two of her children and her third child — who was only one-year-old — was separated from her and remained with his father and the inhuman mistreatment against her. He deemed such acts as violations of Denmark's "obligations under the Rights of the Child, the prohibition of violence against women, and the violation of Article 5 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and Article 7 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights."⁽¹⁴⁾

The Europeans and Iranians exchange accusations on human rights violations and terrorism. Such thorny issues are likely to remain bargaining chips for the two sides to be used to secure gains in other economic, political and security matters.

Conclusion

Europe and Iran in April 2022 focused on resuming the Vienna nuclear talks that have been halted since early March 2022. The Europeans enhanced their political and diplomatic efforts to reduce disagreements between Washington and Tehran, urging them to accept a draft agreement — that had been crafted previously. Iran, however, will not accept the draft agreement unless the US removes the IRGC from its terrorism list. The US administration cannot respond to Iran's demand, fearing criticism at home. The two sides also have points of

divergence and convergence mainly Iran's human rights record and Europe's need for Iranian natural gas. To compensate for European gas shortages, Iran faces several challenges, most prominently inadequate infrastructure to export natural gas and the country's failure to achieve self-sufficiency in natural gas production.

Endnotes

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