

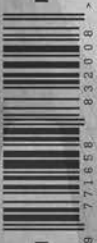
MONTHLY REPORT



IRAN CASE FILE

Your window on Iran from inside and abroad

September 2022



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Abbreviations

BIS	----- Bureau of Industry and Security
CISA	----- Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency
DAMA	--- Design and Manufacturing of Aircraft Engines
E3	----- European Troika (France, United Kingdom, and Germany)
FBI	----- Federal Bureau of Investigation
GCC	----- Gulf Cooperation Council
GDP	----- Gross Domestic Product
IAEA	----- International Atomic Energy Agency
IRGC	----- Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps
JCPOA	--- Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action
KDPI	----- Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran
KSC	----- Kuwait Telecommunications Company
MEK	----- Mujahideen-e Khalq
MOIS	----- Iranian Ministry of Intelligence and Security
NATO	---- North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NPT	----- Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons
OFAC	----- Office of Foreign Assets Control
PCC	----- Presidential Command Council
PMF	----- Popular Mobilization Forces
RFJ	----- US State Department's Rewards for Justice
SCO	----- Shanghai Cooperation Organization
STC	----- Saudi Telecommunications Company
SWIFT	--- Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication
UAV	----- Unmanned Aerial Vehicles
UN	----- United Nations
UNGA	--- United Nations General Assembly

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Executive Summary

September 2022 witnessed a flurry of ideological, political, economic, and military developments. In addition, following the death of Kurdish woman Mahsa Amini, mass protests erupted in Iranian cities. Tehran launched missile and drone attacks against Iraqi Kurds, thereby opening a new front on its western border. It also began the process to gain full membership in the SCO. Several events influenced Iran's interactions with its Arab neighbors, the most notable of which was Iran's issuance of definitive ownership documents for the three occupied Emirati islands, a move likely intended to impose a new fait accompli. Among the interactions was also Iran's role in the Houthi militia's refusal to extend the ceasefire. This is in addition to the ongoing disagreements between the Sadrist Movement and the Iran-backed Coordination Framework as well as Iraqi alliances' concerns about the return of demonstrations and the stifling of the political process, and discussions regarding the new Jordanian initiative to end the Syrian crisis. Iran's relations with the West have been influenced by mutual pressures imposed by the two sides to strengthen their relative negotiating positions prior to reaching an agreement on Iran's nuclear program. Furthermore, the United States weighing in on the Iranian protests by expressing support for the protesters; the E3 group emphasizing the importance of Iran's compliance with its nuclear commitments; the IAEA report warning of Iran's ongoing uranium enrichment and developments at its nuclear sites; and finally, the Albanian government expelling the Iranian ambassador and severing diplomatic ties with Tehran all have had an impact on Iran's relations with the West.

Internally, at the ideological level, Iranian women attempted to reclaim their long withheld rights and opposed the religious elite's jurisprudential rulings and rhetoric regarding women in the aftermath of the murder of Amini at the hands of Iran's morality police. At the protests, women removed their headscarves, with some chanting slogans against Khomeini, Khamenei, and the draconian political system based on Velayat-e Faqih. The government, for its part, considers the protests as a violation of the law, reflecting collaboration with outside actors, and submission and subordination to Western and Zionist imperialism. As a result, the government has ignored the core essence of the problem, in effect, denying its existence. As a result, no solution to this problem is on the horizon. There is a new Iranian generation aspiring to achieve freedom and dignity in the face of a violent government that has no qualms about using excessive violence against those who oppose it.

At the political level, the arrest of Amini under the pretext of not wearing the hijab properly, and her subsequent death, sparked widespread outrage and prompted various segments of Iranian society to take to the streets to protest the government's policies. The government's falsification of evidence regarding the death of Amini, Iranian officials threatening protesters and describing them as either rioters or stooges and ignoring their genuine demands, increased Iranian popular anger and discontent. This is in addition to the government's insistence on embracing the security option to subdue the protests, with excessive violence unleashed that claimed the lives of many and left dozens injured. To shift the direction of the protests that broke out in most Iranian cities, the government inflicted further oppression on the Balochi community under a false pretext that was dismissed by all Balochi leaders. The government alleged that Jaish al-Adl, an anti-government outfit, had mounted an attack on a police station in the city of Zahedan with the aim of seizing it. However, it was revealed after the incident that those killed by the IRGC and police were citizens who had gathered near the police station to denounce the rape of a 15-year-old Balochi girl by a senior police officer.

On the economic front, following the official approval of its accession, Iran began the process to achieve full membership in the SCO. Iran hopes to achieve several goals through its SCO membership. This includes economic goals reflecting the practical implementation of its policy to turn eastwards and toward its neighbors. Iran hopes this policy will help in mitigating the sanctions, alleviate economic pressure and leverage its geographic location to ensure maximum benefits. However, there are obstacles and consequences for Iran; Tehran aims to capitalize on the ongoing schisms between the East and West to achieve the most gains while aligning itself with major world powers such as Russia and China.

Iran's military posture remains tough in the face of an impending deadline to revive the nuclear deal. Iran has also opened a new front on its western border, attacking Kurds with missiles and armed drones, killing dozens of people, including a US citizen. The United States shot down an armed Iranian drone as a strong warning to Iran. On the Ukrainian front, Ukrainian forces have successfully shot down 60 percent of Iranian drones. Though Iranian drones

did not play a game-changing role in the Russia-Ukraine war, they did exhaust Ukrainian missile and air defense systems.

Many developments occurred in Iran-Arab relations, particularly in Iran-Gulf relations, which saw significant developments in September. In a new step toward imposing a *fait accompli* on the three occupied Emirati islands, Iran issued authoritative ownership documents for the three islands in September. Furthermore, Iran's UN representative rejected the UAE's request that Tehran end its occupation of the three Emirati islands of Greater Tunb, Lesser Tunb, and Abu Mousa. He described the Emirati demands regarding the three Arab Gulf islands as an act of aggression against the territorial integrity of Iran. Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi was eager to portray himself as a guardian over the region's countries in his idealistic, far-from-reality speech before the UN General Assembly (UNGA), painting a false picture about the importance of Iran in addressing global crises and the differences between the region's countries. He reiterated that Iran's policy is based on the principle of preserving regional stability and national sovereignty for all regional countries. In his speech before the UNGA, Saudi Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Adel al-Jubeir urged Iran to take serious confidence-building measures with its neighbors and the international community. He also urged Tehran to meet its nuclear obligations and cooperate fully with the IAEA.

In terms of Iran-Yemen relations, Iranian officials, including President Raisi, supported the demands of the Houthi militia. President Raisi requested a phone call with the UN secretary general to hold a Yemeni-Yemeni dialogue free of foreign intervention in this country. This is a clear indication of the Iranian government's influence on the Houthi militia's decision to oppose the extension of the ceasefire. This position aligns with both sides' interests — Iran and the Houthis — in putting pressure on the international community and the legitimate Yemeni government to make more concessions that benefit both sides: the Houthis and Iran.

Iraq's political landscape remains fraught in light of the ongoing differences between the Sadrist Movement and the Iran-backed Coordination Framework. This stalemate continues despite Sadr abandoning his demand to dissolve the Parliament; however, he continues to support the government of Mustafa al-Kadhimi. On the other hand, the Coordination Framework sticks to its demand to form a consensual government with full powers and rejects the continuation of Kadhimi's government. All Iraqi blocs fear that Sadr will use the power of street mobilization again, a lever that usually leads to mutual escalation between supporters of the Sadrist Movement and the Coordination Framework, as well as fear that he will threaten to bring back street fighting to the Iraqi scene. This comes while several allies, including Sadr's, are intending to form a new government and organize early parliamentary elections.

Syria is once again a priority on Jordan's foreign policy agenda owing to a number of concerns, including drug trafficking and the presence of Iranian militias on Amman's northern border. Jordan's latest initiative to resolve the Syrian conflict follows a series of initiatives announced by Amman in recent months. There are several factors that could assist Jordan in making

these initiatives a success, including Russia's involvement in the invasion of Ukraine and Jordan's good relations with Moscow. In addition, Iran, which has previously thwarted Jordanian efforts, is occupied by domestic unrest and protests at home. Additionally, the Jordanian government seeks to capitalize on the current Arab and international environment to step up its efforts to resolve the Syrian issue and achieve its security and political interests.

Internationally, Iran and the United States continued to take opposing trajectories to strengthen their levers in the context of reviving the nuclear talks. The outstanding issue between the two countries remains the Iranian request related to the IAEA's suspension of its probe into the traces of uranium found at three Iranian nuclear locations. In the meantime, the protests spreading across various Iranian cities have fueled tensions between Iran and the United States, with some US officials expressing support for the protesters, a move that was considered as interference in its internal affairs. However, in light of the pressures facing Iran and fear of jeopardizing the diplomatic trajectory, Tehran has displayed some flexibility with regard to cooperation with the IAEA and provided answers to the agency's inquiries. On the other side, Washington declared its adherence to the diplomatic path with Iran despite all the differences marring the relationship between the two countries.

In September, Iran-Europe relations continued to deteriorate. This month, the E3 group (Germany, France and the United Kingdom) emphasized the importance of Iran adhering to its nuclear commitments. The IAEA also issued a stinging report warning of Iran approaching the nuclear threshold and its continued efforts to increase enrichment levels and develop its nuclear sites. The IAEA's surveillance mechanism remains limited and superficial; raising concerns that Iran may have enriched uranium up to 60 percent purity. Iran has faced an unprecedented backlash in Albania because of its hacking of the Albanian government's network system using malware to target the Iranian opposition. Albania, a member of the NATO, severed diplomatic ties with Iran, which was widely condemned for its involvement in this illegal activity.

IRAN CASE FILE

September 2022

Internal Affairs

Internal Affairs for September 2022 is divided into four main files. The Ideological File discusses the insults hurled by eulogy reciter Bassem al-Karbalaee against the companions of Prophet Mohammad, highlighting the political dimensions of such an act. The file also touches upon the erosion of human rights, particularly the injustices suffered by women in Iran following the killing of Mahsa Amini, a Kurdish woman by the morality police in Tehran. This is in addition to the furious crackdown by the IRGC and security forces against the Balochis. The Economic File reviews Iran's membership in the SCO, disclosing Iran's goals and priorities behind joining this organization and potential future challenges and opportunities from the organization. The Military File focuses on two main topics: Iran's attacks on Iraq's Kurdistan region, and Iran-made drones facing Ukraine air defenses.



The Ideological File

The Ideological File sheds light on Shiite religious elites in general and Iranian religious elites in particular. It also highlights their impact on the religious and political scene in Iran, as well as the implications for the region's Shiite community. The Ideological File of the past month discussed two issues. The first issue was the statement made by marja Kazem al-Haeri in which he announced he was stepping down as marja; the political and seminarian dimensions of this move, the contexts and impact on the political shifts and alliances in Iraq and the Shiite communities in general. The second issue was the attempt to assassinate author Salman Rushdie and Iran's direct responsibility for this. This month, the Ideological File discusses two issues as well. The first issue discusses the insulting of the Prophet's companions by Shiite eulogy reciter Bassem al-Karbalaei and the position of the Shiite house on this matter. The second issue focuses on the erosion of human rights in Iran and the exacerbation of protests over the killing of Iranian Kurdish woman Mahsa Amini.

Bassem al-Karbalaei and Insulting the Prophet's Companions: The Political Dimensions

Iraqi security forces arrested a man earlier this month on accusations of insulting the imams of Ahl al-Bayt (the Prophet's household). He was referred to the judiciary in accordance with the law to stand trial.⁽¹⁾ A few days after the incident, eulogy reciter Bassem al-Karbalaei released a poem in which he called the Prophet's companions "gangsters."⁽²⁾ This insult was not condemned by state officials, but rather welcomed by pro-Velayat-e Faqih supporters, amid complete disregard of the poem by security and judicial institutions.

Al-Karbalaei is affiliated with the Shirazi movement. Despite the significant differences between the Shirazis and the Iranian government on the one hand, and the differences between the Shirazis and Najaf on the other, al-Karbalaei is vastly popular among Shiites in Iraq and Iran.

Sunni Condemnation

In an official statement entitled "Sunni Endowment Diwan Denounces Insults Against Prophet's Companions," the Sunni Endowment Diwan (Office) condemned the move. It made several demands, including the opening of a full investigation into the case, disclosing its circumstances from beginning to end, identifying the perpetrators, referring those responsible to the judiciary, outlawing insults against religious figures, and tightening religious, legal and social control over the content of eulogy poems.⁽³⁾

Shiite Condemnation

Alaa al-Mousavi, head of the Shiite Endowment Diwan commented on al-Karbalaei's poem that insulted the Prophet's companions. He said, "We don't have an absolute judgment on the Prophet's companions. We don't say that all the Prophet's companions aren't pious or disavow them – God forbid! By no means — nor do we adopt the theory suggesting that all the Prophet's companions are just. Rather, there are among the Prophet's companions those who are pious and there are those who aren't."⁽⁴⁾ By these words, he attempted to contain the anger of the Sunnis. But at the same time, he adhered to the classical theory in Shiite theology. Thus, this incident reveals that there is a traditional Shiite current which avoids undertaking direct discussion with the public or revising issues that stir up differences within the realm of Islam; Sunnis and Shiites. The danger lies in exploiting this Shiite tradition (deep-rooted Shiite stereotypical defamation about Prophet Mohammad's companions) to win the sympathy of the Shiite public, inflame differences and divert attention away from the real problems.

The Dispute to Win the Masses and Popular Incubators

This incident came in the midst of a political crisis and a dispute between the Sadrist Movement and the Coordination Framework and the failure to reach a political settlement to establish a new government since the last parliamentary election. In August, Haeri resigned and severely criticized Muqtada al-Sadr and the Sadrist Movement. In response, Sadr and the Sadrists staged protests in Baghdad, with Sadr announcing his withdrawal from politics. Al-Karbalaei's attack on the Prophet's companions occurred in the midst of the aforementioned social and political crisis, shifting public attention away from political and constitutional differences and toward sectarian and confessional ones. In the above context, all factions attempt to strengthen and consolidate their positions by appealing to their grassroots bases, employing religion and sect as effective weapons in their conflict. As a result, on September 4, 2022, Sadr posted on Twitter that "anyone except the true affiliates of Ahl al-Bayt can commit major and minor sins." He confined the concept of Ahl al-Bayt to Ali, Fatima, and a few close associates. Sadr's Twitter post came just a few days after Haeri announced his resignation as marja. Mohammad al-Sadr, Muqtada's father, advised his followers to follow in the footsteps of Haeri after his death. Sadr and the Sadrists now face a legitimacy crisis. Furthermore, in his resignation statement, Haeri accused Sadr of attempting to claim leadership and ijtihad status, which Sadr denied in response. Sadr attempted to solidify his position through the confessional dimension in the face of his opponents' attempts to delegitimize him and deprive him of confessional standing. Hence, it appears he was attempting to maintain his staunch base of support in the face of his opponents' defamatory campaigns. Sadr is also aware that anyone who attempts to pursue reformist approaches that do not fall within the Shiite collective mindset will face unbearable defamation. Shiite clerics and thinkers such as Sayed Mohammad Hossein Fadlallah, Hany Fahs and others are examples of this. They were opposed to long-held and bizarre traditional

beliefs, which caused them to lose or almost lose their legitimacy.

In short, there are intra-Shiite differences regarding sacred Sunni figures, places, and doctrines. There are attempts to divert public attention away from the real problems facing the Shiite community in Iraq, such as repression, violence, and the spread of ignorance by pro-Iran forces who took over the country nearly two decades ago, and instead shifting focus toward imaginary problems related to sectarian, tribal and religious sensitivities to destroy the Iraqi social fabric.

The Erosion of Human Rights in Iran: Oppression of Women

Mahsa Amini, an Iranian Kurdish woman, was killed by the Iranian morality police in the middle of September for wearing an “improper hijab” as it did not meet the criteria set out by the ruling religious elite. According to international organizations, the issue of human rights in Iran is deteriorating further, particularly with regard to women’s rights.

The ruling religious elites consider not wearing the hijab as a criminal offense that deserves punishment. As a result, the morality police patrols and arrests women and girls who, in their opinion, do not wear the hijab or wear it improperly. Verbal warnings are sometimes ignored by these women. Women who do not wear their hijab properly while driving are stopped by the police. Opponents argue that the proof value of custom (*urf*) in Islamic principle of jurisprudence (*usul al-fiqh*) support the collective behavior of the masses. Therefore, a woman’s hijab cannot be considered inappropriate as long as society accepts and approves it. Opponents highlight the Shiite clerics’ paradox; they turn a blind eye to unemployment, addiction, debauchery and corruption while only raising their voices when strands of women’s hair are visible in public. According to statistics, this has caused women to emigrate to the West, Turkey and Dubai in search of freedom and safety.⁽⁵⁾

Statements of Condemnation

Some “reformists” criticized Khamenei’s and the religious elite’s policy. Mehdi Karroubi criticized Khamenei in an official statement following the murder of Amini, blaming him for the incident. However, Khamenei’s vehement opposition to any counsel or divergent view has not only obstructed the path to change and reform, but has also paved the way for radical strands to dominate the establishment and exclude opposition forces and weaken legal institutions.⁽⁶⁾

Another statement was issued by a group of Iranian intellectuals and thinkers in which they blamed Khamenei for the killing of Amini. According to the statement, “Over the past decades, the morality police patrols have been brutally repressing these wronged people. The imposition of mandatory hijab is a symbol of totalitarian military brutality which governs with dictatorship in the name of religion.” Iranian intellectuals such as Hassan Yousefi Ashkouri, Ali Reza Rajaei, Reza Ali Jani and Sedigheh Vasmaghi signed the statement. The statement noted that “enjoining virtue

and preventing vice” has become a tool to restrict and repress people. It also called for dissolving the morality police patrols.

Women Against Violence

Female voices have surfaced in opposition to the government’s repression of human rights, particularly women’s rights. “O my dear father, I complain to you about the injustice committed against our people. That day when you spoke about optional hijab before the television cameras, if you just imagine the killing scene of Mahsa Amini. Definitely, you’d throw your turban on the ground in rage,” Ayatollah Taleghani’s daughter wrote on Twitter.⁽⁷⁾

Faezeh Hashemi, the daughter of former Iranian President Hashemi Rafsanjani, was detained by security forces during a protest in the east of Iran against the death of Amini. Hashemi is a former lawmaker and advocate for women’s rights. She was involved in previous encounters with law enforcement. She is an outspoken opponent of the Iranian political system. According to court filings from the time, she was accused of carrying out propaganda against the country and making blasphemous comments on social media. She was sentenced to six months in prison in 2012 on charges of spreading anti-government propaganda.⁽⁸⁾

Counter Jurisprudential Narrative

Mohammad Taghi Fazel Maybodi, a member of the Qom Society of Seminary Teachers, condemned the morality police patrols and their treatment of women. “Official talk about the morality police’s harsh responses and behavior toward women is futile,” he said. “Under the guise of improper hijab, women have faced verbal and physical violence for years. Attacking women because of their dress code is illegal, violates norms, violates the law, and defies common sense.”⁽⁹⁾ He also criticized the implementation of the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice in a way that does not correspond to its true purposes and philosophy in Islam. “Cease using violence in the name of religion,” he said, adding, “in Islam, encouraging virtue and preventing vice entails assisting people in establishing order, which entails combating corruption. It does not imply that the regime organizes police patrols to molest women because of their exposed hair strands.” He advocated for women to be free to wear whatever they wanted. “Women should be allowed to choose their own clothing and hijab.” He further stated, “Islam and jurisprudence emphasize the importance of simply warning women verbally. They cannot be coerced into wearing the hijab through violence and intimidation.”⁽¹⁰⁾

He rejected the argument that allowing women to expose some strands of their hair would lead to the corruption of society. “Let society implode. Society’s corruption will not occur as a result of women’s exposed hair strands, but rather as a result of major looting and siphoning off of the state’s treasury.”⁽¹¹⁾

Tactical Retreat

Mohammad Reza Mablaghi, the head of the Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice, expressed deep regret and sorrow over Amini's death in a series of tweets. He then laid out a number of recommendations to address the issue, including the need for a comprehensive and complete judicial follow-up on Amini's death, as well as the need for a parliamentary probe and follow-up on the issue to further clarify all aspects of this incident and announce the findings to the Iranian people. He also advocated reconsidering the methods used by the Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice and showing remorse for past mistakes. He emphasized that the methods themselves should be in line with the path of virtue because no virtue can be promoted without virtue, which is a cardinal obligation. He stated, "You can't get blood out of a stone," urging that the promotion of virtue and prevention of vice should only be undertaken by those with full knowledge of all religious aspects.⁽¹²⁾ Other voices within the establishment, however, justified the government's policy of repression and violence against women. "After the victory of the Islamic Revolution, wearing the hijab or chador did not become compulsory, but rather permitted by law," Asadollah Badamchian, secretary general of the Islamic Coalition Party stated. "According to the law, the hijab is one of the necessary pillars of an Islamic state and must be worn in accordance with the law. If a woman did not follow the rules in public and wanted to expose parts of her body, who should be in charge of preventing such behavior?"⁽¹³⁾

Conclusion

There is a crisis, which neither Iranian policymakers nor the religious elite want to acknowledge or address. This crisis is not about the hijab or encouraging sectarian strife. These issues are simply byproducts of a larger crisis, which is primarily related to the pro-Velayat-e Faqih elite's reading and interpretation of religion. This reading is based on the sect's exclusive interpretation, rejecting any other reading that attempts to make the Iranian model more rational, moderate and compatible with modern state jurisprudence. Therefore, the emergence of religious violence or fanaticism, accompanied by insulting the sacred places and figures of others, is inextricably linked to the Iranian government's radical interpretation of religion. In addition, protesters against government repression and street violence are being targeted. This includes killings, arrests, beatings and torture, which security personnel see as a way of getting closer to God and the Infallible Imam.

Based on the foregoing, the Iranian government is unlikely to change its behavior because it believes that any change in behavior will be followed by a series of concessions that deal a blow to the core essence of its ideology and model, thereby losing the basis on which it founded its government. At the same time, the government's intransigence will fuel more protests and broaden the scope of its opponents, eroding its legitimacy among the

grassroots. This opens the door to any scenario regarding the government's fate, or at the very least keeps it in a constant and permanent state of failure, preventing any improvement in living conditions or a way out of this current economic bind.



The Political File

In August 2022, the Political File shed light on the attitudes of Iranians toward the performance of the Raisi government one year after it took office. The file discussed two dimensions: “reformist” and “conservative” criticisms of the Raisi government, as well as praise for it from the supreme leader and the “hardliners.” The nature of the protests that erupted in various Iranian cities following the killing of Mahsa Amini, a Kurdish woman, is discussed in September’s file. It also highlights the oppression of Balochis in the Iranian Sistan and Balochistan Province after protests broke out in the city of Zahedan in the aftermath of an alleged rape of a young girl by a police officer. Accordingly, the following key dimensions are analyzed: the public outrage following the killing of Mahsa Amini, and the oppression of Balochis in response to their anger against the Iranian government.

The Killing of Mahsa Amini Incites Public Outrage Against the Iranian Political System

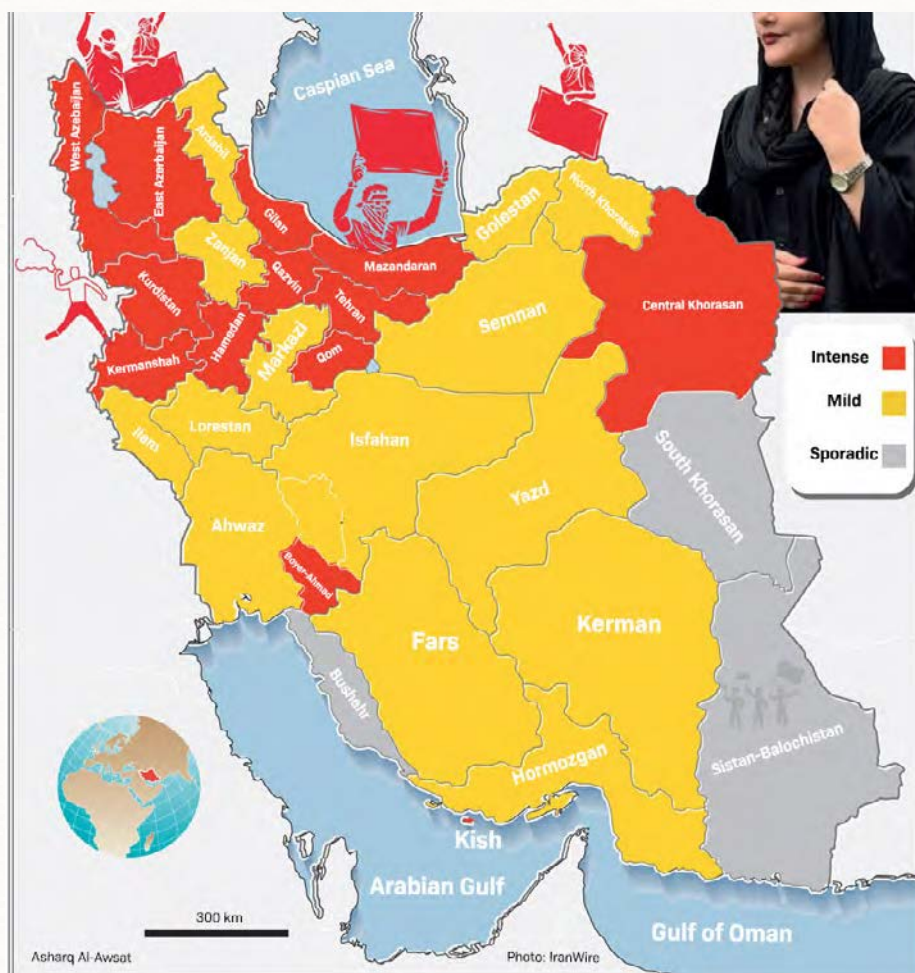
Various Iranian segments and factions took to the streets across Iran to express their outrage over the killing of Amini. The Kurdish woman was arrested by Iran’s morality police as she was accused of not observing the country’s strict hijab laws; her death reignited popular discontent and provoked various Iranian segments and factions to take to the streets. The protesters condemned the killing of Amini and expressed outrage at the Iranian government’s practices despite the heavy-handed response from the Iranian authorities and security apparatuses.

The Iranian government tried to hide the truth by arguing that Amini had died of natural causes. It denied that she had been harshly beaten and it released video footage from inside the detention facility to support its narrative about Amini’s death. But her father dismissed this narrative, saying his daughter had not suffered from any health problems throughout her life, and attributed blame to the police for her death.⁽¹⁴⁾ This means Amini’s death was not because of a stroke as alleged by Iran’s security services. Amini’s CT scan, which was leaked by Iranian hackers, revealed a skull fracture on the right side of her head, caused by a direct blow to it.⁽¹⁵⁾

In comparison to previous protests, women have been key participants in the recent protests, which have lasted for more than three weeks. Some women cut their hair or removed their hijabs. Others burnt their hijabs. The participation of school and university students has also been witnessed in the protests. Students at Tehran University, Sharif University of Technology, Isfahan University, Mashhad University, Alzahra University and K. N. Toosi University

of Technology organized several vigils, with several classes cancelled by university authorities in solidarity with the protesters. Figure 1 highlights the hotspots of Iranian protests that flared up across various Iranian cities after the killing of Amini.

Figure 1: Hotspots of Iranian Protests



Source: Al-Sharq al-Awsat, <https://bit.ly/3RT6jn6>

The Iranian government is fearful of the protests spreading, particularly as the demands have gone beyond mere justice for Amini to include the removal of senior officials and figures. In light of this fear, security forces exercised heavy force against protestors. Protests in Kurdistan, Amini's place of origin, as well as in Tehran and other cities turned violent with clashes breaking out between the protestors and police, with the latter utilizing tear gas canisters, batons, and

live bullets to break up the protests. According to Iran Human Rights, 91 people lost their lives, while dozens have been injured and detained.

The IRGC and intelligence services issued stern warnings to the protesters. To counter the anti-government protests, pro-government rallies were held. Official media outlets aired the pro-government rallies in which people chanted “Death to America” and “Death to Israel,” and condemned the anti-government protesters as being agents of Israel.

In an unprecedented move, the army intervened in the crisis, issuing warnings and threats to the protesters. “All of these desperate acts are part of the enemy’s vicious strategy aimed at weakening the government,” it said in a statement, adding that it will stand up to various enemy conspiracies to ensure Iran’s peace and security.⁽¹⁶⁾ For the first time, the Iranian police fully deployed a female unit to counter the protests (see Figure 2), and arrested a number of protest leaders who were effective and influential in mobilizing women to take to the streets and participate in the protests.⁽¹⁷⁾

Figure 2: The Female Unit of the Iranian Police Acting Against Protesters



Source: Rokna, <https://bit.ly/3RNXs63>

The Iranian government believes that the security approach is the best way to deal with the protests. It appears to be unconcerned about the consequences and dangers that may arise as a result of the growing tensions between itself and the Iranian street. Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi threatened protesters in various cities, saying he will not tolerate “acts of sabotage, riots, and tampering with the security of the country and the people.”⁽¹⁸⁾ Meanwhile, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei has not proposed any solutions to quell public anger in Iran. Instead, he ignored the death of Amini and other protesters killed by Iranian

security forces. He leveled the usual accusations against the United States, Israel and traitors abroad, while expressing support for Iran's security forces.⁽¹⁹⁾

Iranian Parliament Speaker Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf pledged to reform the morality police and the methods it uses to prevent the tragedy of what happened to Amini from being repeated. However, he urged Iran's security forces to crack down hard on those who threaten public order.⁽²⁰⁾ Commanding officers of the Iranian armed forces in the country's provinces were directed to violently crack down on protesters based on official documentation that was leaked to Amnesty International on September 21, 2022. Another document, dated September 23, ordered the commander of the armed forces in Mazandaran Province, where some clashes occurred, to ruthlessly repel any protestor, even if it meant death.⁽²¹⁾

Brutal Repression of Balochis Under a False Pretext

In the midst of popular protests in several Iranian cities following the death of Amini, the Iranian government intensified its crackdown on Balochi protesters in Sistan and Balochistan Province bordering Pakistan and Afghanistan. The escalation came after bloody clashes between Balochi protesters and security forces in the city of Zahedan in which 63 protesters were killed, according to Iran Human Rights.⁽²²⁾

To justify the disproportionate violence unleashed on protesters in Zahedan, the capital of Sistan and Balochistan Province, the Iranian government accused rioters and separatists, referring to the separatist Balochi outfit Jaish al-Adl, of attacking a police station in Zahedan with the intention of taking control of it. The attack, however, was eventually controlled by security forces. The police also claimed that one of the detainees admitted that anonymous individuals distributed weapons to elements stationed in front of the police station. However, the office of Zahedan Friday prayer leader, Molavi Abdulhamid Ismaeelzahi, a senior Sunni mufti, called for an investigation into the incident to identify those who issued orders to fire on the protesters. In a statement released by the office, it also presented another narrative, claiming that after Friday prayers, some young men chanted slogans and headed to the police station, pelting it with stones. The police responded by opening fire,⁽²³⁾ killing and injuring dozens.

The following figure shows the number of protesters killed in the protests following the death of Amini as well as the deaths resulting from the crackdown on Balochi protesters in Sistan and Balochistan Province:

Figure 1: Death Toll of Recent Protests in Iran

Province	Death toll	Province	Death toll
Sistan and Balochistan	63 killed	Isfahan	2 killed
Mazandaran	27 killed	Kohgiluyeh and Boyer-Ahmad Province	2 killed

Province	Death toll	Province	Death toll
Gilan	12 killed	Zanjan	2 killed
West Azerbaijan	11 killed	Qazvin	2 killed
Kurdistan	8 killed	Ilam	2 killed
Kermanshah	7 killed	East Azerbaijan	1 killed
Tehran	6 killed	Bushehr	1 killed
Albroz	5 killed	Semnan	1 killed
Razavi Khorasan	3 killed		

Source: Radio Farda quoting Iran Human Rights Organization: <https://bit.ly/3fU93Db>

In light of the Iranian government's attempts to justify the killings of protesters, Molavi Abdulhamid Ismaeelzahi once again dismissed its narrative of a shootout between security forces and Jaish al-Adl. "Neither Jaish al-Adl nor any other group is involved in this carnage," he added. 'A group of military officers, both on foot and in vehicles, opened fire on people gathered near the mosque, killing and injuring a number of young men," he continued.⁽²⁴⁾ This narrative was backed up by Balochi activists, who said that citizens gathered after Friday prayers around the police station in the city of Zahedan in protest against the rape of a 15-year-old Balochi girl by a police officer and in support of the nationwide anti-government protests.

In the aftermath of the attack on the police station, the IRGC announced the deaths of several of its members, including Seyyed Ali Mousavi, commander of the IRGC intelligence unit in Sistan and Balochistan. In addition, Colonel Reza Hashem, an IRGC intelligence officer, died from wounds sustained during the clashes in Sistan and Balochistan Province. Jaish al-Adl, accused of involvement in the incident, categorically denied the Iranian allegations. It asserted that the accusations are an attempt by the Iranian government to shift blame for the deaths of protesters. The group stated that it did not intervene in the protests that have spread across various Iranian cities, as well as in the Zahedan protests, to prevent further oppression against the Balochi people.⁽²⁵⁾

Despite the Balochi people repeatedly asserting that no separatist group was involved in the clashes in Zahedan and the true motive for the protest in front of the police station was the rape of a young Balochi girl by a police officer, the Iranian government continued with its old policy of deceiving the Iranian public and attempting to cover up its crimes, particularly against non-Persian minorities. Additionally, the Iranian government attempted to justify the high death toll caused by the police and the IRGC by accusing Balochis of exploiting

popular demands to investigate a crime to boost separatist demands and it promoted traditional conspiracy theories such as separatist groups wanting to disintegrate Iran's unity.

Conclusion

Over the last six years, Iran has seen a flood of popular protests, the majority of which were organized to demand more freedom and an improvement in living conditions. However, they have quickly become a platform to express dissatisfaction against the government and its policies in general. Perhaps the severe economic pressures placed on the Iranian people as a result of the government's nuclear ambitions, expansionist policies, and failure to meet the basic demands of the people, let alone the excessive violence against the people after each wave of protests, have exacerbated this growing and widespread resentment against the government. Despite the Iranian government's awareness about the significant decline in its popularity and standing among Iranians, it continues to rely on a security approach to put down the protests. Government officials do not fear external conspiracies, as they always claim, but fear internal threats. The Iranian people have reached a point of frustration that could lead them to topple the government, as they did with Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi in February 1979.

The Economic File

ICF report for August discussed the assessment of Iran's economic situation one year after the Raisi government took power. This month's report sheds light on Iran's official accession to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) through discussing three aspects. The first aspect focuses on Iran's membership in the SCO and the organization's goals. The second aspect focuses on Iran's goals and priorities within the organization. The third aspect looks at Iran's current challenges and future opportunities.



Iran's Membership in the SCO and the Organization's Goals

At the 22nd SCO summit in Samarkand, Uzbekistan attended by leaders of the SCO member states, the organization announced the start of Iran's official membership on September 16, 2022. Iran will start formal membership procedures with the goal of completing them before the next summit to be held in India in 2023. Iran was finally granted full membership by the organization's members last year, after years of unsuccessful attempts. It joined the organization in 2005 after gaining observer status. Repeated UN and

international sanctions, as well as the refusal of some member states to grant Iran full membership, hampered its efforts to gain full membership.

The SCO is an organization that primarily seeks to achieve security and political goals in addition to economic goals. The organization's member states account for half of the global population and 28 percent of global GDP. The organization was founded in Shanghai in 2001 and now has eight member states plus observers. The SCO was founded by Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. India and Pakistan joined the organization in 2017, and Iran has recently joined as well, though it is still in the process of completing the full membership procedures (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Member States of the SCO



Source: Shanghai Cooperation Organization.

The SCO's charter calls for member states to work together to combat terrorism, crime, drug trafficking, separatist movements, religious or ethnic extremism, and provide regional security. This is in addition to member states cooperating in the political, economic, scientific, technological and cultural fields as well as in the fields of infrastructure, energy, and tourism. Finally, member states are encouraged to work toward the establishment of a new democratic, just and rational international political and economic order.⁽²⁶⁾

Iran's Objectives and Priorities Within the SCO

Iran hopes to achieve a number of security, political and economic goals by joining the organization, including displaying defiance to the West, mitigating the negative impacts of US sanctions on the economy by increasing oil and non-oil exports to member states, and bolstering transit trade. This is in addition to joining political and security blocs comprising major global powers and

permanent members of the UNSC considered to be rivals of Western powers.

Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi outlined Iran's top priorities in his most recent speech to the organization's member states in September 2022.⁽²⁷⁾ Iran's priorities include financing logistical projects, facilitating trade, and utilizing its geographical location to connect the East and West, which will necessitate strengthening infrastructure between SCO member states, as well as establishing a corridor through Iran from China to Central Asia to the Mediterranean Sea. This requires SCO member states to embark on a joint financing drive. This is in addition to strengthening interbank exchange mechanisms and free trade agreements to facilitate trade among member states and establishing open markets for Iran.

Meeting the member states' oil and gas needs is one of the most important and pressing goals of Iran's membership in the organization. China and India are two of the world's largest energy consumers, and Iran currently has more than 150 million barrels of oil stored and ready for sale that it is eager to market. Iran is also attempting to craft a new security model in Asia based on enhancing multilateralism and challenging the West by being in one organization with the world's major powers. Iran also aims to strengthen its East-leaning diplomacy advocated by Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi, which involves solidifying ties with its neighbors and eastern countries.

The value of trade between Iran and the SCO member states is increasing. It reached \$37 billion by 2021, accounting for roughly 30 percent of total Iranian foreign trade.⁽²⁸⁾ China, Iran's largest trading partner, accounts for the lion's share of this trade. After coming to an almost complete halt since the imposition of US sanctions, Iran's trade with India was resumed in 2022. In the first seven months of 2022, Iran's trade with India totaled \$2.3 billion. It is likely to go up due to Washington's lax implementation of sanctions against Iran.

Future Challenges and Opportunities Facing Iran

The existing US sanctions continue to be a significant impediment to the development of trade and financial exchange as well as joint investment projects between Iran and the SCO member states. However, Iran's refusal to sign international financial treaties to combat money laundering and terrorist financing such as the FATF agreements and others is problematic. This limits financing operations and impedes economic ties with member states such as India, which have strong economic interests with the United States.

The promotion of economic interests between Iran and the organization's member states faces a number of challenges. President Raisi clearly identified some challenges in his speech to the organization's member states at its most recent summit, such as the banking exchange mechanisms between Iran and the member states. It is likely that Raisi was referring to the mechanisms that "suit Iran," such as those that deal in national currencies not the dollar or avoiding international banking requirements such as the ratification of international treaties, and so on. He advocated for customs reductions among member states and signing free trade agreements.

Joint infrastructure projects and international trade corridors through Iranian territory, such as the North-South Corridor and the Middle Corridor, necessitate substantial funding and investment. They encompass thousands of kilometers of land roads, railways, stations, ports, warehouses, and other logistical services along the corridors, despite the fact that Iranian trade is currently primarily based on sea trade rather than land trade. Furthermore, there are a number of projects that started a number of years ago, but they have yet to be completed and face sporadic disruptions due to sanctions and the lack of banking transparency in Iran such as the Chabahar port project. Even the North-South Corridor is currently not fully operational via the Iranian route.

On the other hand, despite the challenges, Iran's membership in the SCO provides significant opportunities for the country in the future, particularly because it came at an appropriate time, that is, when Russia's dispute with the West reached a climax over Ukraine, and the Sino-American conflict over security and economic issues is intensifying. This ensures Iran's alignment on one front with two major powers, increasing the chances of joint gains in economic and other areas.

The recent series of Iranian moves, including the signing of a 25-year strategic and economic partnership with China worth \$400 billion last year, the opening of embassies in Tehran by the UAE and Kuwait last month, and Iran's full membership in the SCO, may indicate that a failure to revive the nuclear deal may not be significant even though this would mean that the sanctions remain in place. Meanwhile, Iran's isolation is fading as a result of its membership in regional alliances.⁽²⁹⁾

We note that, despite the obstacles, Iran's trade with SCO member states has recently increased exponentially. If US sanctions are lifted and safe and effective financial exchange mechanisms are established with Iran, the trade will expand rapidly, particularly with China and India, which have the money and technology that Iran requires. Meanwhile, Iran has cheap oil and gas, and both countries' markets are eager for them. This is in addition to China's relentless efforts to lead the global economy while pushing the US currency and economy backwards, which is undoubtedly in Iran's interest.

Conclusion

By joining the SCO, Iran hopes to achieve a variety of goals, including aligning itself with anti-Western world powers, mitigating the impact of sanctions on its economy, establishing sources of financing and developing trade corridor projects passing through its territory, and promoting its energy resources, among others. Its trade with SCO members is already expanding. Despite significant obstacles to maximizing the benefits of joining the organization, international developments related to disputes between Russia, China and the West might be in Iran's interest, increasing the organization's importance and providing opportunities for mutual gains among its members in the future.

The Military File

The Military File for August 2022 discussed Russia's motives behind the drone deal with Iran and the Iranian gains from this deal. It also discussed Iran's maritime piracy and its temporary seizure of two US sea drones in the Arabian Gulf and the Red Sea under the pretext that they threatened maritime navigation. As for September, the file discusses Iran's attacks on Iraq's Kurdish territories in light of rising anti-government protests and Ukraine's interception of Iran-made drones used by Russia in the Ukrainian battlefield.

Iran Attacks Iraq's Kurdish Region

For a fortnight, Iran has been spewing artillery shells and missiles along with suicide drones on Iraq's semi-autonomous Kurdish region. Iranian officials claim to be targeting Iranian-Kurdish opposition groups such as Komala and the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran (KDPI) near Soran's sub-district of Sidekan, north of Kurdistan's capital city of Erbil and in Koya, and some 65 kilometers east of Erbil.⁽³⁰⁾

The IRGC has reportedly killed more than two dozen civilians so far including a pregnant woman and a US citizen while injuring scores. The figures of the dead and the injured vary depending on the source of information. The artillery bombardment and drone strikes in the Mount Halgurd area, adjacent to the Iranian border "destroyed some outposts, without causing casualties among our ranks," according to Komala, an Iranian-Kurdish- opposition group.⁽³¹⁾

The IRGC alleges that exiled Iranians in the Kurdistan region are to be blamed for fomenting nationwide protests in the aftermath of Mahsa Amini's death. The Iranian military claimed that there were no civilian casualties as "precision missiles" and "suicide drones" were used in the attacks. In a statement issued late on Thursday, the IRGC said they were using "all kinds of missiles, kamikaze and combat drones" in the operations against the bases and headquarters of those it designated as "terrorists."

Furthermore the statement said, "These operations will continue until the terrorist groups are disarmed and we ask the central government and the government of the northern region of Iraq to show more seriousness in their responsibilities towards Iran as a neighbor."⁽³²⁾

While Iraq's President Barham Salih termed Iran's bombing campaign as "a serious escalation and a violation of the country's sovereignty, security, stability, and safety of its citizens," Tehran's ambassador was given a demarche. The Iraqi Foreign Ministry said Iran's attacks were a "dangerous development that threatens Iraq's security and sovereignty."⁽³³⁾

Given Iran's prolonged and intense attacks with the use of missiles, artillery and drones, the ongoing campaign across the border in Iraq is the longest in a decade.⁽³⁴⁾

The situation remains volatile as the United States had to scramble its fighter jets to shoot down approaching Iranian drones following the killing of a US citizen a day before. The volleys of munitions continue to sporadically rain on Iraq's eastern Kurdistan region but with more caution.

US State Department Spokesperson Ned Price strongly condemned Iran's "brazen attacks" across the border, and Germany rejected "attempts to locate the causes of the Iranian protests" in Iraq's Kurdish region.⁽³⁵⁾

Iran's Fars News Agency justified the attacks on Iranian-Kurdish opposition groups to avenge "their evil support of the anti-revolutionary elements for the disturbances and actions of thugs and with the aim of punishing and extorting these groups."⁽³⁶⁾ Iran has intermittently targeted exiled Iranian-Kurds inside Iraq⁽³⁷⁾ while continuously carrying out sting operations in Europe. Tehran could not attack Iraq's Kurdish region during the Saddam era but relied on its agents to murder dissidents; for example Abdulrahman Ghassemlou, secretary general of the KDPI, was assassinated in 1989.⁽³⁸⁾ Particularly after the assassination of Quds Force Commander Qassem Soleimani, Iran started to ramp up its rhetoric about Mossad's presence in northern Iraq to justify the firing of missiles and deployment of suicide drones for targeted killings.⁽³⁹⁾ Last September, the IRGC used artillery from Iran's West Azerbaijan Province to hit Iraq's Kurdish region. The heat has been mounting from the Kurdish side as well which allegedly killed an IRGC officer in August 2019. To hunt down dissident outfits, Tehran fired Fateh 110 missiles in 2018 targeting the leadership of a faction of the then split KDPI.

The sole objective of the ongoing military campaign in Iraq's Kurdish region is to divert attention away from the protests that have engulfed Iran since Amini's death. Two weeks into the operation against exiled dissidents, Iran has failed to split the populace along ethnic and sectarian lines. The use of force in northern Iraq comes with serious risks, ranging from angering nationalist elements such as Muqtada al-Sadr to provoking foreign powers such as the United States into defending their interests.

Iran-made Drones Face Ukraine Air Defenses

To make up for its diminishing inventory of ballistic and cruise missiles, Russia extensively deployed Iran-made drones during September.⁽⁴⁰⁾ Moscow received its first consignment of the Shahed-131, Shahed-136 and Mohajer-6 drones in August with reportedly more deliveries to follow.

Ukraine's defense forces were predominantly able to intercept them whenever one drone or more were dispatched to attack military targets. After suffering some insignificant non-military losses, the Ukrainians figured out ways to track, jam and shoot down the drones, mainly suicide ones. Iran's rather more advanced Mohajer-6 drones have been taken down as well, near Odesa on September 21.⁽⁴¹⁾

According to the Ukrainian Ministry of Defense, “From September 30 to October 6, the Defense Forces of Ukraine destroyed 24 Shahed-136 kamikaze drones.”⁽⁴²⁾

Kyiv claims that “In total, since the beginning of the use of UAVs of the Shahed-136 type by the enemy, they used 86 units, of which 60% were destroyed.”⁽⁴³⁾

The Iran-made drones, especially the Shahed-136 and Mohajer-6, can be heard from miles away due to their noisy two-stroke engines that leave trails of smoke. The low-flying, slow drones are dispatched in pairs or droves due to their vulnerability to an assortment of weapons.

Ukraine is shooting down Iranian drones with different air defense systems, or even with small arms but anti-aircraft guns such as the ZSU-23-4 Shylka or Germany's Gepard remain the best counter-measures.⁽⁴⁴⁾

The drones are not deployed against high-value tactical targets but unprotected civilian buildings, either administrative offices or residential blocks. While Ukraine has effectively used its military capability to precisely strike the enemy's infantry, Iranian drones have a larger payload and can be used to slow down the advance.

Russia's options are limited due to its smaller quantities of medium-range precise cruise missiles and armed drones, hence the reliance on Iran's rudimentary weapons will remain.

“It (the Shahed-131) is a primitive handmade product. It is not a high-tech conveyor belt production like the Turkish TB2 Bayraktar, American or Israeli UAVs,” said Yuri Ignat, spokesman for Ukraine's air force.⁽⁴⁵⁾ Kyiv claims to have downed 60 percent of incoming drones and the kill rate is going to increase further.

President Volodymyr Zelenskyy warned in an interview, “I will say to the invaders even if you find more weapons such as the Iranian Shahed drones with which you are trying to bomb our cities such as Bila Tserkva, it won't help you in any way.”⁽⁴⁶⁾ As per the bilateral arms deal, Iran is required to supply hundreds of drones to Russia in a possible barter for a dozen Su-35 fighter jets.⁽⁴⁷⁾ The Kremlin may not acquire more Iranian drones if they fail to make an impact on the battlefield amid the Ukrainian counter-offensive in the eastern and southern regions.

Conclusion

Iran's ongoing attacks in Iraq's Kurdish-populated territories have not made even a minuscule impact on the domestic protests. Evidently, the outrage expressed on the streets is more homegrown than foreign-sponsored. On the Ukraine battlefield, the dismal performance of Iran's drones belies its claims about their capabilities — after Ukraine announced it downed nearly 60 percent of Iran-made drones (the Shahed-136).

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Arab Affairs

Arab Affairs examines the Iranian measures to impose a fait accompli on the occupied Emirati islands, and Iran-Gulf relations at the UN General Assembly. This section explores the dimensions of the Houthi-Iranian position on the ceasefire and the Presidential Command Council's response to the Houthis' refusal to extend the ceasefire. It also explores the cumulative challenges for the Sadrist Movement in dissolving the Iraqi Parliament, Sadr's adherence to his demand for the dissolution of the Parliament and the management of the next stage, the challenges facing the Coordination Framework in forming the next government, and the implications of Iran's attacks on northern Iraq. This section also examines Jordan's initiative for resolving the crisis in Syria and the threats emanating from Syria on Jordan's border, and the possibilities of success or failure of the Jordanian initiative.



Iran and the Gulf

The August 2022 file discussed the positive developments in Iran-Gulf relations, such as Kuwait and the UAE reinstating their ambassadors to Tehran. In addition, it reviewed the impact of Iraq's political instability on Baghdad's chances of continuing to play a mediating role in the Saudi-Iran talks. The file for the month of September 2022 discusses Iran's hostile action of issuing ownership documents to the UAE regarding the three disputed islands; considered as an Iranian attempt to create a new reality. The file will also address the statements made by Iranian and Gulf officials at the UNGA, which shed light on the policies of both sides toward each other.

Imposing a Fait Accompli on the Occupied Emirati Islands

In a new step to consolidate control and impose a fait accompli on the three Emirati islands: the Lesser Tunb and the Greater Tunb belonging to the Emirate of Ras Al-Khaimah, and Abu Musa in the waters of the Arabian Gulf, whose ownership is disputed by the UAE, Iran's judiciary issued title deeds for the three islands. This issuance means that the territories of these three islands have become assets in Iran's real estate records. In addition, each island is considered a real estate unit consisting of 2,400 shares. The "Islamic Republic of Iran" is also listed as the owner. ⁽¹⁾

Iran's Denial of the Facts

As part of the Iranian escalation in relation to the dispute over the islands, the Iranian delegate responded at the end of the 77th meeting of the UNGA to what he classed as allegations made by the UAE Minister of International Cooperation Reem Al-Hashemi in regard to the islands. He said, "The Emirati official's allegations and repetition of baseless claims concerning the Iranian islands in the Arabian Gulf is tantamount to an attack on Iran's territorial integrity. Iran considered such irresponsible remarks and fake claims to be an intervention in its internal affairs and a violation of the fundamental principles of international law, including the principle of good neighborliness and respecting the internal affairs of other countries."

The Iranian delegate also declared that the three islands of Abu Musa, the Greater Tunb and the Lesser Tunb in the Arabian Gulf are inseparable from Iranian territory. "Iran asserts its sovereignty over these islands, and any claim to the contrary is completely rejected." ⁽²⁾

This provocative step came despite the Iranian government reiterating its determination to maintain bilateral relations with the UAE and open channels of communication and positive relations with its Gulf neighbors. This step may complicate the efforts made by the UAE and the Gulf Cooperation Council

(GCC) countries to resolve this crisis through dialogue and understanding. It coincided with the return of the UAE ambassador to Tehran. This Iranian step aims to impose a fait accompli for the new UAE ambassador.

Iran's military forces carried out an air landing on the three islands on December 2, 1971 following the British withdrawal from the UAE.⁽³⁾ Iran still refuses to go to the International Court of Justice in response to the UAE's call. The latter believes that the real key to reaching a permanent solution about the ownership claims of these islands is to accept international arbitration.

UAE Adherence to Its Historical Rights and Confidence in the Fairness of International Arbitration

The UAE asserts its ownership over the three islands based on extensive historical documentation. However, Iran's continual refusal to accept international arbitration and its sudden actions to document its ownership of these islands in fact demonstrates the weakness of the Iranian argument, and reflects Iran's aggressiveness and rejection of the truth.

The UAE has strong evidence to prove its ownership over these islands. Heidi Farouk, an expert on international borders, confirmed the existence of 1,302 historical documents proving the UAE's ownership of Abu Musa. They range from concession contracts between the ruler of Sharjah and the German government to explore the wealth on the island to correspondence with the German government and others. The UAE's ownership of the Greater and Lesser Tunbs is evidenced by 586 documents. These include correspondence between the rulers of Sharjah and Ras Al-Khaimah with the tsar of Russia and the British Foreign Office over the islands, and between the latter and the rulers of Persia.⁽⁴⁾

This unprecedented Iranian escalatory step where a country issues title deeds to prove its ownership reflects the weakness of its claims and the lack of historical and legal proof of Iranian ownership over these islands. It also reveals ongoing Iranian machinations to consolidate and impose a fait accompli.

Iran-Gulf Relations at the UNGA

At the 77th session of the UNGA in New York, the Gulf and Iranian sides exchanged messages about how to end tensions in the region. These messages come at a significant time amid global tensions with the political and economic ramifications reaching the Gulf.

Iran Suffers Domestic Crises While Directing Its Narrative to the World

The speech of Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi at the UNGA referred to Iran's policy which he said was based on principles and ways to solve problems through dialogue without the interference of external powers. This speech reflected the continuation of the Iranian policy to impose Tehran's vision on other countries and presented Iran's positive role in eliminating the evil of terrorism. Raisi attempted to delude the international community and neighboring countries about the necessity and effectiveness of Iran's role. He stated, "Our policy is to preserve stability and national sovereignty for all nations in the region. Without the strength and role of Iran, ISIS would be Europe's neighbor from the Mediterranean side ... The solution to conflicts and disputes in our region is

to respect the will of peoples to decide their fate by referring to public opinion. This aspiration can be realized only through two basic conditions: 1) ending foreign aggression and occupation, and the sincere cooperation of governments to counter terrorism ...Iran, as it is resolutely defending all the rights and interests of the Iranian people, seeks broad economic and political cooperation and rapprochement with the world. Iran wants maximum interaction with all countries of the world, especially with its neighboring countries and I call on them heartily. A new chapter has emerged. Iran is ready to redraw the map to create a better world full of rationality, justice, freedom, morals, and spirituality.”⁽⁵⁾ However, Raisi’s idealistic rhetoric coincided with the outbreak of the wave of demonstrations in Iran and a ruthless crackdown launched by Iranian security forces. The Iranian people called for the overthrow of the Iranian government, which has focused on foreign projects while neglecting the concerns of its citizens. The demands of the Iranian people expose the empty rhetoric of Raisi and his government’s unrealistic policies and directives.

The Saudi Call for Iran to Take Serious Confidence-building Steps

At the 77th session of the UNGA, the Saudi minister of state for foreign affairs stressed that the Middle East is in urgent need of security and stability in order to meet the aspirations of its peoples and to end the causes of tension and conflict. He said, “International peace and security cannot be achieved with an arms race and the possession of weapons of mass destruction, but rather through cooperation between countries to achieve development and progress. Hence, we urge the international community to intensify efforts to counter the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and make the Middle East free from weapons of mass destruction, and we also call on Iran to fulfill its nuclear commitments, to cooperate fully with the International Atomic Energy Agency and to take serious steps to build confidence with its neighbors and the international community.” On the other hand, he called for confronting practices that support terrorism, “We call on the international community to cooperate to confront the evils of terrorism and extremism, and we must continue to work hard to address this scourge, which has nothing in common with any race, religion or belief. We stress the need for the international community to stand firmly against the countries that support and sponsor terrorism and extremism, and that seek to exploit their extremist ideology as a means for expanding and creating chaos and destruction.”⁽⁶⁾

Meetings on the Sidelines of the UNGA Session

On September 24, 2022, UAE Foreign Minister Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed met with Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian in New York on the sidelines of the UNGA session. During the meeting, both sides expressed a desire to further expand relations at various levels. The Iranian foreign minister announced his country’s readiness to host a meeting of the Higher Committee for Joint Cooperation. For his part, the UAE foreign minister pointed to the importance of historical and cultural relations between his country and Iran, stressing his country’s readiness to develop economic and trade cooperation and to hold a joint meeting of the two countries’ businesspeople. He said that he looked forward to the participation of Iranian delegations in regional meetings,

including the renewable energies conference hosted by Abu Dhabi. He also expressed his hope to visit Iran in the near future. The UAE foreign minister also discussed initiatives regarding Iran-Gulf relations.⁽⁷⁾

Kuwait's Foreign Minister Sheikh Dr. Ahmed Nasser Al-Sabah also met with the Iranian foreign minister on the sidelines of the 77th session of the UNGA. During the meeting, both ministers discussed topics related to bilateral relations between Kuwait and Iran, regional and international files, as well as issues of mutual interest.⁽⁸⁾ As per Iranian media, Abdollahian addressed the progress made between Iran and the "brotherly and neighboring country of Kuwait, and he also stated that Iran's policy is focused on full cooperation with its neighbors, including the Arab Gulf states. The Kuwaiti minister asserted the determination and will of his country's leadership to develop relations with Iran, and Kuwait's position in support of regional negotiations and dialogue. He also invited the Iranian foreign minister to visit Kuwait to discuss the enhancement of bilateral relations and regional developments.

Conclusion

The Iranian judiciary's issuance of title deeds for the three islands will not resolve the controversy over their ownership and sovereignty. However, this step exposed Iran's unilateral approach, which delays the resolution of outstanding issues. This step also comes at a time when the Gulf countries are seeking to improve relations and reduce tensions. In spite of Iran's official statements regarding its desire to strengthen cooperation with its neighboring countries, it works at this time to exploit the international community's preoccupation with major international and regional events to impose a fait accompli on the three islands.

Iran-Gulf relations are still marred by Iran's old calculations and the discrepancies between its official statements and actual practices on the ground. The transformations taking place in the international arena increase the prospects of a continuing stalemate in Iran-Gulf relations.

Iran and Yemen

The August 2022 file discussed the bloody events of Shabwa and the position of the Presidential Command Council (PCC) on those events, and the Houthi militia's exploitation of the events. In addition, the file addressed the dimensions of the ceasefire's extension for two months that started in April, and the repercussions of the extension on the Yemeni arena. The September 2022 file analyzes the motives behind the Houthi militia's refusal to extend the ceasefire, which expired at the beginning of October, the possible repercussions on the Yemeni scene in light of this non-extension, and the implications of the consensus between the Houthi militia and the Iranian government on the non-extension. Finally, the file also discusses the PCC position on the ceasefire.

The Dimensions of the Houthi-Iranian Position on the Ceasefire

UN Special Envoy to Yemen Hans Grundberg announced that an agreement had not been reached on the extension of the UN truce in Yemen, which began on April 2, 2022, because of the Houthi militia's belligerence. However, he appreciated the legitimate government's positive response regarding the new proposal to expand the ceasefire and its terms. The reasons for the Houthi militia's refusal to extend the ceasefire and the consensus between the militia and Iran will be discussed in the following sections.

The Houthi Position

The Houthi militia's refusal to extend the ceasefire for 6 months comes after it had engaged in a series of violations and political evasions as well as after it had procrastinated, misled and gained strength by relying on foreign powers, i.e., Iran, during the previous ceasefire. The aforementioned confirms the militia's lack of seriousness in ensuring peace and stability in Yemen.

Many observers believe that several internal and external factors related to international aspects and Iran's role contributed to the Houthi militia refusing to extend the ceasefire. Internally, the Houthi militia is seeking to achieve maximum political gains and aims to push the international community so that it pressures the legitimate government to agree to its conditions. One of the most notable conditions is that the legitimate government pays the salaries of Houthi employees, including the salaries of militants who are fighting against the legitimate government and the Yemeni people. Some observers believe that the Houthi's position is an attempt to take over power in Yemen while the legitimate government manages all public services. This means that the militia will not be occupied with any task but focused on battles — just like

Hezbollah in Lebanon; the militia has the power while the government is in charge of providing public services.⁽⁹⁾

The Houthi militia views the truce as a “political battle” and the imposition of a will, although it provides common ground to reach a political solution that would meet the aspirations of the Yemeni people for peace and stability. The militia’s military and ideological wings particularly played a major role in thwarting the extension of the ceasefire and international endeavors for paving the way to design a political settlement in the country. The militia has the necessary supplies to prolong the conflict in Yemen. Some sources mention that the militia collected more than 200 billion Yemeni riyals, almost \$800 million, during the ceasefire. The minister of defense in the internationally unrecognized Houthi government Muhammad Nasser al-Atifi called on the militia to be “vigilant, exert further efforts and conduct more training.” He added that the Houthi militia “will spare no effort in acquiring capabilities, resources, and methods.”⁽¹⁰⁾

The Iranian Position

The UN intensified contact with Iranian officials in regard to the extension of the ceasefire in Yemen. The Iranian Foreign Minister’s Senior Advisor for Special Political Affairs Ali Asghar held talks with UN Special Envoy Hans Grundberg. Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi received a call from UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres. In the call, Raisi said, “Iran has always emphasized the lifting of the siege, establishing a ceasefire in Yemen and trying to resolve the crisis through an intra-Yemeni dialogue, and reaching an understanding without foreign interference in the country. Your colleagues at the United Nations support this.”⁽¹¹⁾

Observers believe that when Iranian officials called on the UN to implement the Houthi militia’s current and previous demands, they actually reaffirmed Iran’s influential role in thwarting the ceasefire. Some believe that the Iranian position on the Yemeni ceasefire is to mitigate rising tensions at home by using it as a bargaining chip in the nuclear talks to make gains and concessions. In addition, the Iranian political system exploits the Yemeni crisis to exert regional and international pressure to ensure the success of the nuclear talks. The talks with Europe and the United States regarding the nuclear file have not been successful so far in achieving the aspirations of the Iranian government. Iran exploits the Yemeni crisis through the Houthi militia in order to achieve its interests in the region without considering the interests and needs of the Yemeni people.

The PCC on the Houthi’s Rejection

The legitimate government refuted the Houthis’ fallacies on the provisions of the ceasefire as their responses reflect the militia’s continuous attempts to evade any potential breakthrough to establish peace. In a statement, the legitimate government said that it chose not to respond immediately to the Houthis’ fallacies to give the international endeavors some room to succeed. The government’s position stems from the PCC position as well; to make the interests of Yemen and its people a top priority.

In a statement, the government confirmed that it will always be on the side of the Yemeni people and with those who want peace and aim to alleviate the suffering of the Yemeni people. The Yemeni government held the Houthi militia responsible for bringing the peace efforts to a dead end. It also called on the UNSC and the international community to assume their responsibilities to confront the threats of the Houthi militia, which does not only target Yemen but also threatens the interests of the international community to serve the interests of the Iranian political system, which is facing internal and external crises.⁽¹²⁾

The government also indicated that the Houthi militia has looted around 60 billion riyals of Hodeidah's revenues, (almost \$239 million), and spent the money on its attacks targeting Ma'rib during the last period rather than paying salaries to civil service employees.

The legitimate government reported that since 2019 it has paid the salaries of more than 120,000 civil servants and retirees within the Houthi militia's controlled areas. It has also paid the salaries of retirees and civil sector employees in Hodeidah and the health sector, and 50 percent of the salaries of higher education employees. The government also led a discussion with the UN to allocate part of the humanitarian aid to cover salaries. However, the monetary split caused by the Houthi militia (split Yemen into two monetary and economic zones over the past several years),⁽¹³⁾ employee salaries were suspended at the beginning of 2020. Meanwhile, the Houthi militia imposed double levies on the commercial sector and revenues from the economic zone and rejects any responsibility toward paying the salaries of citizens and financing basic services.

The legitimate government confirmed that the Houthi militia exploits humanitarian issues to serve its commercial interests and seeks to thwart the ceasefire, while ignoring the real interests of citizens and serves the interest of Iran's political system. The statement added that "The government has done everything it could to preserve this truce to alleviate the suffering of our people. However, the Houthi militia seeks to break this truce, by imposing political conditions that increase each day. These are accompanied by threats, provocations and lies, including threatening companies operating in the oil sector and shipping companies."⁽¹⁴⁾

Conclusion

The Houthi militia's refusal to extend the ceasefire demonstrates its desire to continue its violent approach, and to evade calls for peace and favor its own interests and those of Iran's political system at the expense of the interests of the Yemeni people. By threatening maritime navigation, energy resources in the region and increasing its leverage on the legitimate government, the Houthi militia seeks to blackmail the international community so that it pressures the government to make further concessions in order to obtain further political and economic gains. On the other hand, the PCC, which supports the ceasefire and finding a political solution, seeks to provide the international community with a clear picture about the party that holds the prime responsibility for the deteriorating situation in Yemen, obstructing the peace process,

and threatening international peace and security. The PCC hopes that the international community and the UNSC will take stronger action against the Houthis' behavior.



Iran and Iraq

The August 2022 file discussed the implications of the Shiite-Shiite armed clashes in the Green Zone, the implications of Sadr's decision to withdraw from politics at home and abroad, the positions of Shiite alliances regarding potential escalation, and the direction of the Iraqi landscape amid the crisis between the Sadrist Movement and the Coordination Framework. The September 2022 file discusses the challenges that impede the Sadrist trajectory to dissolve the Parliament, the developments in the Sadrist position on dissolving the Parliament, the management of the next stage, the challenges in forming a new fully-fledged government, and finally the implications of Iranian attacks on northern Iraq amid the massive protests inside Iran against the Iranian government.

The Cumulative Challenges for the Sadrist Movement in Dissolving the Parliament

Iraq has seen several developments that will cast a shadow over the prospects of the Sadrist Movement to influence the future political process in the country. Sadr's influential pressure card, dissolving the Parliament and calling for early parliamentary elections in the face of the pro-Iran Coordination Framework has faced the following challenges:

■ **The decision of the Federal Supreme Court:** In an unsurprising step, the highest judicial body in Iraq ruled on September 6, 2022 that it did not have the constitutional authority to dissolve the Parliament, relying on the explicit constitutional provision in the 2005 Constitution. This provision sets out the constitutional mechanism for dissolving the Parliament in accordance with Article 64. The jurisdiction of the court is set out in Article 93 of the Constitution and Article 4 of the Court Law, which does not cover the dissolution of the Parliament. In this context, these constitutional provisions cannot be ignored, and no authority can exceed the constitutional limits anymore. Overstepping the limits would be a clear violation of the Constitution and indicate a complete nullification of the political process.⁽¹⁵⁾ This position will not help Sadr in achieving his goal of dissolving the Parliament; however, he has said he will not exceed the constitutional provisions.

■ **Annoyance of Kurds and Sunnis:** Observers of Iraqi affairs report of a shift in the position of Sadr's allies: (Sunnis and Kurds) on the demands of the Sadrist Movement (dissolving the Parliament and calling for early elections). On September 12, 2022, during their meeting in Erbil, the Sunni Alliance of Taqaddum and Azm and the Kurdistan Democratic Party expressed their mutual desire to proceed with government formation, and then to dissolve the Parliament to end the political stalemate in Iraq.⁽¹⁶⁾ This was prompted by



Saleh Muhammad al-Iraqi's proposal via Twitter on September 8, 2022 for the Sunnis and Kurds to withdraw from the Parliament to make it lose its legitimacy and dissolve thereafter.⁽¹⁷⁾ The calls of the Sunnis and Kurds conflict with Sadr's position as he demands the dissolution of the Parliament first, however, their position is consistent with the Coordination Framework which demands a fully-fledged government to be formed first. This reflects the annoyance of Sadr's allies about his inflexible positions. Therefore, Sadr's current problems are not limited to the Coordination Framework but also encompass his Sunni and Kurdish allies who are now distancing themselves from his positions to end the stalemate in the country.

■ **The failure to win over Al-Al-Kadhimi:** The Sadrist Movement also failed to convince Al-Kadhimi to give up on his neutral position on the crisis with the Coordination Framework and to move closer to the Sadrists. Al-Kadhimi did not actually respond on September 1, 2022 to Saleh Muhammad al-Iraqi's call for the dissolution of some pro-Iran armed militias and the dismissal of Faleh al-Fayyad, the head of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF). According to Iraqi, the head of the PMF is partisan, weak and unqualified and is keeping the PMF from controlling border crossings and ports.⁽¹⁸⁾ This non-response reflects Al-Kadhimi's awareness of the risks of siding with any alliance amid the complexities of the acute crisis in Iraq. If he sides with any of the alliances, he will become the weakest party as he will face a fierce campaign from forces of the Coordination Framework that will accuse him of siding with the Sadrist Movement. The latter no longer has many pressure cards against the Coordination Framework after it gave up on the use of the street card, and in light of the court's decision and the position of its allies.

■ **Formation of a new coalition to form the next government and manage the next stage:** The leaders of some political forces agreed on forming a new government and created a new coalition called The Will of the State. It includes forces from the Coordination Framework (pro-Iran), the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, the Babylon Movement, and the former allies of Sadr: the Sunni Alliance and the Kurdistan Democratic Party. It has not been announced yet as per media reports because the leader of the Fatah Alliance Hadi al-Amiri called for the coalition not to be announced until after an expected visit of a delegation that will include himself, the leader of the Kurdistan Democratic Party Nechirvan Barzani and the head of the Sunni Sovereignty Alliance Khamis al-Khanjar to meet Sadr in order to reach an understanding on the formation of the new Iraqi government.

The quest to form the new government reflects the frustration of all parties, including Sadr's allies, with the political stalemate in the country, and their desire to form a powerful alliance as an alternative to the Sadrist Movement. This alliance aims at ending the political stalemate by resuming parliamentary sessions, which were reconvened on September 28, 2022. This step is contrary to Sadr's position as it prepares the ground for designating the new president and forming the next government. Some observers have linked the resignation of Al-Halbousi, which was rejected by the Parliament, and the new alliance to his desire for the latter to renew confidence in his position as the leader of the Sunnis, thus reconfirming his significant standing in the Iraqi political equation.

These aforementioned developments will weaken the position of the Sadrist Movement in the face of the Iran-backed Coordination Framework and limit Sadr's room for maneuver. They will force him to concede ground and reconsider the options that remain, including the ones proposed by his allies such as the Al-Halbousi Initiative⁽¹⁹⁾ to resolve the crisis. However, any new escalatory steps will result in Sadr facing unimaginable consequences.

Sadr's Adherence to Dissolving the Parliament and the Management of the Next Stage

One day after the court's decision, on September 7, 2022, the Sadrist Movement proposed a new initiative to resolve the dispute with the Coordination Framework. It stated that the president of Iraq and Al-Kadhimi's government must be kept in place to oversee early parliamentary elections.⁽²⁰⁾ The Coordination Framework rejected this proposal as it opposes the continuity of Al-Kadhimi as he seeks to reduce the power of the militias and achieve a balance in Iraq's foreign relations. In addition, Al-Kadhimi is committed to completing the rest of the constitutional entitlements including the formation of a fully-fledged government to oversee early parliamentary elections. However, Sadr is aware that the results of any election under the umbrella of a government that is loyal to the Coordination Framework will be tainted.

Under this initiative, the Sadrist Movement, for the second time, gives up its demand to dissolve the Parliament and call for early parliamentary

elections, just as it reversed its position on changing the system completely. This may mean that Sadr is aware of the agreement of all political forces, including his Kurdish and Sunni allies, to dissolve the Parliament in order to end the political stalemate, and that the street card has become costly and dangerous because pro-Iran militias are ready to escalate violence to preserve Iranian gains in Iraq.

Renowned journalist Mohammad Bazzi⁽²¹⁾ believes that in spite of Sadr's claim of withdrawing from politics, he may return to the scene and take advantage of the October protests' anniversary to strengthen his position on dissolving the Parliament. According to Bazzi, Sadr's campaign has failed to limit Iranian influence in Iraq as it has been unable to weaken pro-Iran armed militias in Iraq and influence the power-sharing arrangements in the country. As a result, Sadr's chances and ambitions to become the most powerful Shiite leader in Iraq have been hampered, while the prospects of the Coordination Framework have improved.

The Challenges Facing the Coordination Framework in Forming the Next Government

All signs on the Iraqi landscape indicate the desire of most political alliances, including Sadr's allies, to complete the constitutional process by resuming parliamentary sessions to elect a new president and form a new fully-fledged government to oversee early parliamentary elections. However, several challenges face the Iran-backed Coordination Framework in its endeavors:

■ **Sadr's rejection to complete the constitutional process:** Supporters of completing the constitutional process are concerned about Sadr's reaction and his possible call for his supporters to take to the streets once again, especially as he is committed to dissolving the Parliament first and keeping in place Al-Kadhimi's government to manage the next stage. Everyone is concerned about the formation of the next government without the participation of the Sadrist Movement as it has mass popular power.

■ **The differences regarding the continuity of Al-Kadhimi and the announcement of a new alliance:** The Sadrist Movement and the Coordination Framework have been at odds over whether Al-Kadhimi should continue in his position or not. While the Sadrist Movement is committed to Al-Kadhimi's continuity after he gave up on his demand to dissolve the Parliament first, the Coordination Framework rejects his continuity and insists on forming a new fully-fledged government. In addition, differences persist within the Coordination Framework over Sadr and the government formation led by Mohammed Shia al-Sudani. Maliki's State of Law Coalition takes a hard line against Sadr and supports the formation of new government by al-Sudani. However, it is in favor of replacing al-Sudani with another nominee acceptable to Sadr such as Abadi or Asaad al-Eidani or is even open to the idea of Jaafar al-Sadr's nomination. The Fatah Alliance is ready to reach an understanding with Sadr, even about the possibility of Al-Kadhimi continuing in power. A prominent leader of the pro-Iran Fatah Alliance indicated that the new coalition Will of the State, which has not been announced yet, is divided

internally on coordination with Sadr. He explained that Amiri and Abadi have reservations about moving forward without pre-coordinating with the Sadrist Movement while Maliki and Khazali are committed to the path of the new coalition without coordination with Sadr. The Sunni and Kurdish alliances are concerned about the collapse of the new trajectory and are inclined toward establishing Shiite-Shiite coordination between the Sadrist Movement and the Coordination Framework before forming any new government. ⁽²²⁾

■ **Protesters taking to the streets to commemorate the October protests:** One of the most important challenges facing those who advocate the formation of a new government is the call of civil forces and independent supporters of the October protests. They call on the Iraqi people to commemorate the third anniversary of the October protests that erupted in 2019. The protestors called for ending corruption, holding the corrupt accountable, ending the control of pro-Iran militias over Iraqi decision-making and achieving a balance in foreign relations by ending Iraq's dependence on Iran – demands which are consistent with Sadr's positions. This call may provide Sadr an opportunity to leverage the new trajectory to form a new government.

The Implications of Iran's Attacks on Northern Iraq

Iran launched several missiles and drones targeting the bases of Iranian Kurdish dissidents: the Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan and the Kurdistan Freedom Party, both based in Iraqi Kurdistan. They were accused of supporting and fueling the Iranian protests against the government in Tehran. These attacks continued until the September 3, 2022 in disregard of official Iraqi denunciations. The attacks killed and wounded civilians, including women, the elderly and children amid widespread regional and international condemnation.

The Iranian protests in the aftermath of Mahsa Amini's killing by the morality police for not wearing the hijab properly sparked the Iranian attacks on Iraqi Kurdistan. Many observers believe that Iran aims to achieve several goals from its attacks on the Iraqi Kurdistan Region, most notably to divert regional and international attention away from the nationwide protests and to show that the protests are fueled by anti-Iranian separatists rather than spurred by popular national demands. The protests quickly expanded across all Iranian provinces and there was also anger against the deterioration of socioeconomic conditions because of the government's policies at home and abroad.

Conclusion

Recent developments reveal that the Iraqi political scene remains stalled due to the ongoing differences between the Sadrist Movement and the Coordination Framework, although Sadr is willing to give up on his demand to dissolve the Parliament first but adheres to Al-Kadhimi continuing in office as the prospect of forming a new government arises. Iraq's political

forces, except the Sadrist Movement, aim to complete the constitutional process by forming a new government. However, Sadr insists on Al-Kadhimi's continuity to oversee the upcoming parliamentary elections. All coalitions also fear that Sadr will use the street card, resulting in escalation between supporters of the Sadrist Movement and the Coordination Framework, and raising the prospect of renewed violence in Iraq.



Iran and Syria

The August 2022 file discussed the timing, implications and repercussions of the US-Israeli escalation toward Iran in Syria and the implications of the Syrian-Turkish rapprochement. The file for the month of September 2022 discusses the nature of Jordan's initiative that seeks to mobilize support for a political solution to resolve the crisis in Syria as well as Jordan's position on the growing threats emanating from southern Syria. The final part discusses the factors that could contribute to the fate of Jordan's initiative to resolve the Syrian crisis.

Jordan's Initiative for Resolving the Crisis in Syria

As part of international endeavors to find a political solution to the Syrian crisis, Jordan proposed an Arab initiative through which it seeks to mobilize international and regional support to end the Syrian crisis.⁽²³⁾ The initiative was evident in the remarks made by Jordan's Foreign Minister Ayman Safadi on the sidelines of his participation in the 77th session of the UN General Assembly days after his meeting with Syria's Foreign Minister Faisal Miqdad. Jordan's announcement of its initiative called The Jordanian Document comes after the failure of its previous efforts. According to official statements, this initiative is based on UN resolutions 2254 and 2642 that set out a roadmap for a negotiated settlement in Syria, and delivering humanitarian aid to Syria.

This initiative is Jordan's third in relation to the Syrian crisis. Earlier, Amman pursued the political trajectory of Arab normalization with Assad's government. The Jordanian king's efforts mirrored this Jordanian trajectory, with attempts to convince the US administration of this latter initiative during his visit to Washington in late July 2021. He spoke about the need for dialogue between active forces in the Syrian file with the Assad government. After this visit, numerous security and political meetings were held between Russian and Jordanian officials. These culminated in the re-opening of the Nassib border post between Jordan and Syria, and the revitalization of cross-border exchange with the Syrian government. Other Arab parties responded positively to the previous Jordanian initiatives, including Egypt, which embarked on the project of transferring gas and electricity via Jordan and Syria to Lebanon. However, after several meetings between the officials of the four concerned countries, the project has not yet been operationalized because of political, financial, and logistical factors.

Recently, Jordanian security has faced threats emanating from southern Syria, particularly from drug trafficking and Iranian influence on the border. These threats put an end to Jordan's first initiative. In May 2022, the Jordanian

position changed as it threatened to resort to deploying military force in southern Syria in light of drug trafficking, with Jordanian officials describing the operations as the systematic targeting of Jordanian territories. Therefore, Amman turned from an actor aiming to facilitate Arab normalization with the Syrian government to one that is focused on curbing Iran's growing threat on its common border with Syria. The crisis reached its peak last June when Jordan backed the idea of establishing a "Middle Eastern NATO" to confront Iran's threats. However, this initiative did not receive the support of many countries of the region. It was announced without much movement to make it a reality on the ground.

Why has Jordan announced a new initiative despite the failure of its previous initiatives? What are the factors that will contribute to its success or failure? This question is important considering the volatile political and strategic conditions in the region against the backdrop of a stalemate in the Vienna nuclear talks and the impact of the Russia-Ukraine war on the foreign policies of many regional countries.

Jordan and the Threats Emanating From Syria

Jordan considers itself to be the most harmed because of the ongoing Syrian crisis. It suffers from the consequences of this crisis such as the proliferation of militias in southern Syria which smuggle drugs and weapons into Jordanian territories. The Russia-Ukraine war has escalated the threats facing Jordan as it disrupted the balance of power in Syria as Moscow was forced to reduce its military presence to focus on the Ukrainian theater. Russia has limited its presence mainly to areas where its military bases are located such as in Hmeimim and Tartus port. This provided the IRGC with an opportunity to recalibrate its influence and presence in many Syrian regions, especially in the southern arena through various ways such as establishing the largest military base in southern Syria (Malik al-Ashtar),(24) targeting opponents of the Iranian government, intensifying assassinations in southern Syria and finding loyalist cadres to fortify Iran's influence in Syria.

Success or Failure of the Jordanian Initiative?

There are several questions and expectations concerning whether the Jordanian initiative will succeed in light of ground obstacles and realities, most notably the correlation between the success of Jordan's efforts and the interaction of the parties involved in the political process in Syria (Iran, Russia and Turkey), including the position of the Syrian government itself as well as the positions of other major actors involved in the Syrian file.

The success of the initiative also depends on the implementation of UN resolutions 2642 and 2254. The positions of regional countries or major actors involved in the Syrian file have diverged sharply; the Russians and the Iranians are seeking a solution that suits their own interests, such as keeping the current government in power. Meanwhile, the Russian and Iranian governments are also seeking to lift the sanctions on Damascus and accelerate projects of early reconstruction in Syria. However, the United States and the West in general

refuse to lift the sanctions unless a real political transition is underway in line with UN resolutions. Therefore, Jordan faces a dilemma in finding a consensual solution that is agreeable to all the parties involved in the Syrian file.

Clashes with drug and weapons smugglers on the Syrian-Jordanian borders have declined slightly since mid-July 2022 compared to May and June of this year. This decline can be attributed to the understandings reached between Amman and Damascus that entered into force resulting in border stability and a decline in smuggling, and a temporary truce.^[25] The Damascus government is seeking to calm the Syrian equation given the recent preoccupation of its supporters, Russia, and Iran, with their own crises and internal problems. The Russia-Ukraine war has forced Russia to rearrange its foreign policy priorities and the West is mainly focused on the Ukrainian front as well. Against this backdrop, Jordan believes that Arab countries have a margin for presenting new initiatives to end the Syrian crisis. This was reflected in Amman announcing a new initiative. Tehran also has been suffering since the first weeks of September from the protests that erupted in several provinces. The demands of the protesters have worsened the government's position, making it more concerned with fixing its domestic front rather than focusing on external issues.

Arab depth and the threats of the continued impact of the Syrian crisis on Arab regional security are among the key factors that forced Jordan to announce its latest initiative. Several initiatives have been proposed since the Arab League initiative to resolve the Syrian crisis, such as Egypt's recent New Levant initiative, the attempts of Gulf States on several occasions to remove Iran from Syria and the previous Jordanian initiatives. However, the conditions were not favorable and those initiatives failed to allay Jordan's concerns. In addition, the divergent Arab positions on the Syrian file and the lack of consensus among Arab actors still exist. Therefore, these initiatives have failed to move from theory to practice.

The Jordanian announcement has come before the Arab League Summit. Amman aims to present this new initiative to resolve the Syrian crisis at the Arab League Summit which will be held in Algeria at the beginning of November 2022. This initiative calls on the Syrian government to take serious steps toward finding a political solution. However, the Syrian government insists on raising its demands and has refused to make concessions in order to find a political solution to the crisis. With Iran's expansion on Syrian territory increasing, it is unlikely that the Jordanian initiative will succeed in the near future.

However, there are some signs that may contribute to the success of Jordan's initiative. Turkey's threat to launch a military operation was blocked by Russia and Iran. Thus, this Turkish operation was recently put on hold. On the other hand, reciprocal steps were taken by Turkey and Syria for moving toward rapprochement and political cooperation. In an interview with journalists in mid-August, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan revealed that "advanced steps must be taken with Syria" stressing Turkey's commitment to Syria's unity. This will provide a suitable regional environment to improve Jordan-Syria

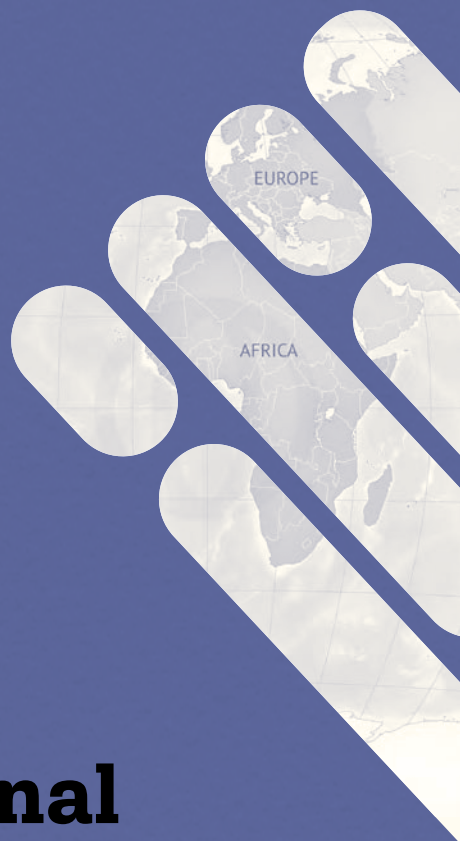
relations, hopefully bringing the Jordanian initiative to an advanced level and eventually leading to a political understanding on Syria.

Conclusion

The Syrian file is on Jordan's foreign policy agenda as Amman announced its latest initiative to reach a political solution in relation to the Syrian file. The security challenges and economic crises Amman is facing because of the Syrian crisis have pushed it to propose this new initiative. The success of the initiative, which is still an idea and requires many steps to be unanimously agreed upon, depends on what concessions the Syrian government and Iran in southern Syria are willing to make. Amman will seek to pressure both countries to limit their activities in the south in order to reach a settlement. However, this does not mean in any way that this initiative will successfully achieve a qualitative breakthrough in the Syrian crisis due to the complexities of the crisis, and the intertwined interests of the active forces. Even if this initiative fails like the previous ones, it is still considered as a Jordanian attempt to preserve its role as an important regional and international actor, particularly emphasizing its presence in the most important files impacting its strategic interests.

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International Affairs

International Affairs discusses Iranian interactions with the United States and Europe. On the US-Iran level, this section explores the faltering nuclear talks, mutual leverage, US support for the Iranian protests and the future of mutual relations. In terms of EU-Iran relations, this section examines the International Atomic Energy Agency's warning to Iran regarding its growing uranium inventory, Raisi's talks with the E3 group at the UN, and the Albanian government's severance of diplomatic ties with Iran over cyber-subversion.



Iran and the United States

The August file concluded that the United States and Iran showed some flexibility on the European proposal to revive the nuclear deal. It was expected that such a step would pave the way for reaching an agreement to revive the nuclear deal within four months, during which the two sides test their mutual commitments, and eventually re-implement the provisions of the 2015 nuclear deal. The main unresolved disagreement was Iran seeking the closure of the UN watchdog's investigations into enriched uranium particles at three undeclared sites. Washington rejected Iran's demand; a step that further complicated the situation, sending the negotiations back to square one. The two countries moved in opposing directions to enhance their bargaining chips in the talks — meanwhile protests erupted in Iran and affected their relations. Amid the mounting pressure and concerns about collapsing diplomacy, Iran showed some flexibility with the UN watchdog regarding its inquiries about its nuclear activities.

As for September, the file addresses three main topics: the faltering nuclear talks, mutual leverage exercised by Tehran and Washington, and US support to the protests in Iran.

The Faltering Nuclear Talks

The main unresolved disagreement that hindered the progress of the European proposal was Iran's demand that the UN nuclear watchdog close its investigations regarding uranium particles found at three sites. Iran sought to close the investigations before approving the European proposal, so it can exercise further pressure in the future if needed. Iran believes that if the investigations continue, reaching a nuclear deal becomes meaningless. Washington and the West rejected Iran's condition — linking its return to the nuclear deal with the UN watchdog's closure of its investigations — arguing that this demand makes their views diverge further.⁽¹⁾

The US administration faced pressure from Republican and Democrat lawmakers who called on President Biden to halt the Iran nuclear deal in the absence of strong guarantees. It is worth noting that the Biden administration is probably wary of any ramifications of concluding a nuclear deal with Iran ahead of the 2022 midterm elections scheduled for November 8 as it seeks to bolster Democratic support. The Biden administration, therefore, preferred to stall the nuclear talks. The US administration also faced pressure from Israel and its lobbies inside the United States.⁽²⁾ Whereas the Raisi administration faced similar pressure from its “hardline” elites who deem their government's approval of the European proposal

as an unacceptable compromise and submission to US conditions to revive a deal without ensuring guarantees — given the country's latest nuclear progress.⁽³⁾ Despite facing some obstacles and exchanging accusations, Washington and Tehran expressed their commitment to diplomacy to revive the nuclear deal. In his speech at the UNGA, Biden underpinned his administration's decisive position on preventing Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons while emphasizing the continuation of diplomacy for the mutual revival of the nuclear deal once Iran adheres to its commitments under the deal. Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi stressed his country's seriousness to return to the nuclear deal if he secured the needed guarantees. The new condition set out by Raisi on the sidelines of UNGA is that Iran will not return to the nuclear deal unless the UN watchdog closes its investigations.

It has become evident that the two sides, while maintaining diplomacy, are taking opposing paths to enhance their bargaining chips. Iran continued to upgrade its nuclear activities and hinder IAEA monitoring. Amid the current volatile conflict between international powers and the lack of cooperation on Iran's thorny issues, Iran is assured of Russian and Chinese rejection of any resolution against it.⁽⁴⁾ The United States expressed concern over the IAEA report on Iran's enrichment of uranium up to 19 times more than the permitted amount, which means that Iran has approached closer to breakout time. The report gives Washington a bargaining chip against Iran as it paves the way for the Board of Governors to pass a resolution against Iran and the board would probably be able to refer Iran's nuclear violations to the UN Security Council to forge international consensus against Iran. The US and IAEA pressure against Iran has approved fruitful; Iran expressed its willingness to answer IAEA questions regarding its three sites. Director of the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran Mohammad Eslami met with IAEA Director General Rafael Grossi, as Iran probably wanted to reach a settlement on the three nuclear sites so it can open the door again for the European proposal to revive the 2015 nuclear deal.

Mutual Leverage

The United States enhanced its sanctions on Iran during September 2022. The US Department of the Treasury designated Iran's Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS) for engaging in cyber-enabled activities against Albanian government computer systems.⁽⁵⁾ The Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) designated three companies, and one individual (named Rahmatullah Haidari) involved in banned dealings with Russia. The three companies are: Design and Manufacturing of Aircraft Engines (DAMA), Paravar Pars Company, and Baharestan Kish Company.⁽⁶⁾ The United States designated Iranian individuals involved in providing Iranian unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) to Russia for its war against Ukraine.⁽⁷⁾ Following Iran's cyberattacks on US institutions, the US Department of the Treasury designated 10 individuals and two entities linked to the IRGC. The US State Department's Rewards for Justice (RFJ) program offered a reward of up to \$10 million for information leading to the identification or location of any person who is involved in malicious cyber activities against US critical infrastructure.⁽⁸⁾ The US Commerce Department added three Iranian-owned and operated aircraft (Boeing 747) for transporting goods, including electronic items, to Russia in violation of

the Bureau of Industry and Security's (BIS) stringent export controls on Russia. The total number aircraft identified on the list for violations of US export controls is 183.⁽⁹⁾

In response to this wave of US sanctions and amid the hindering of nuclear talks, Iran continued to enhance its bargaining chips. The Iranian Defense Ministry "provided 51 cities in the country with the necessary installations and equipment for passive defense," Deputy Defense Minister Mehdi Farahi said. The IRGC unveiled a new ballistic missile dubbed Razvan with an operational range of 14,000 kilometers and with a speed eight times faster than the speed of sound. Iranian-made drones have reached the battlefield in Ukraine. According to the latest estimates of Western military sources observing the war in Ukraine, Iranian-made drones used by the Russian army have contributed to halting the advancement of Ukrainian troops toward the east; Kharkiv.⁽¹⁰⁾

As part of its policy of circumventing the economic sanctions, Iran has attempted to intensify cooperation with Russia on a joint system for financial transfers with the goal of integrating Russia's card payment system Mir with Iran's Shetab payment system in the near future. In addition, both countries are aiming to establish an alternative to the SWIFT payment system for mutual settlements in collaboration with several other countries. These moves come as both parties seek to avoid using the US dollar and mitigate harsh sanctions. In the same vein, the Iranian government has agreed to use and mine cryptocurrency to import goods from abroad. This follows the announcement of the first import transaction using cryptocurrency. The Head of Iran's Trade Promotion Organization Alireza Peyman Pak asserted that by the end of September 2022, digital currencies and smart contracts will be extensively used in Iran's foreign trade with other countries.

Within its plans to move away from the West and join an alliance countering the United States, Iran has signed a memorandum of obligations to secure permanent membership in the SCO. Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi stated before the organization's summit in Samarkand in mid-September, "The organization should adopt solutions to face the extremely tough US sanctions and its unilateralist approach," suggesting the intensification of trade cooperation among the organization's members. In light of Iran's unwavering demand for the end of the US presence in the Middle East, Raisi reiterated in his speech to the UNGA that regional security should be ensured from within the region rather than from outside. Although Iran and the United States share consensus on the continuation of the ceasefire in Yemen, their confrontation is still fierce in Iraq. For example, the United States shot down an Iranian drone over Iraqi airspace, and the US State Department criticized Iranian ballistic missile attacks on the headquarters of Iranian Kurdish opposition forces based in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

US Support for the Iranian Protests

The United States has weighed in on Iran's internal crisis, which erupted following the death of Mahsa Amini at the hands of Iran's morality police in Tehran on September 16. The US administration and officials, including US President Joe Biden, declared their support for the protesters, referring to the Iranian people's right to freedom in his speech before the UNGA. Furthermore, the US administration has decided to

improve the flow of information in Iran. It has committed itself to ensuring that the Iranian people have free access to internet-based information. This step will assist protesters in overcoming the government's imposition of restrictions on internet access as part of its attempt to dampen the protests' momentum and monitor the protesters. CEO of SpaceX Elon Musk called on the United States to relieve his company of the sanctions imposed on Iran to provide internet services via satellite to the Iranian people. Indeed, despite US sanctions on Iran, the US Department of the Treasury issued directives to expand internet access for Iranians, which had an impact on the momentum of the protests.⁽¹¹⁾ In connection with this, the US State Department imposed new sanctions on Iran's morality police and seven security officials accused of grave human rights violations. In a statement, the US Department of the Treasury also demanded that Iran end its systematic oppression of women and allow peaceful protests to happen, in addition, it promised to support the Iranian people.⁽¹²⁾ On the other hand, Iran viewed the US position as evidence of interference in its internal affairs, a violation of its sovereignty, and has claimed that it is fueling protests and supporting rioters. Iran's Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian stated that US interference contradicts the White House's diplomatic path. According to US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan, his country's participation in nuclear talks with Iran does not imply turning a blind eye to the government's violations against its own citizens. There is no doubt that the US interventions worry the Iranian government, which harbors deep suspicions of the United States. Iran believes that the United States is attempting to destabilize and undermine the government's legitimacy.

Conclusion

The developments in US-Iran relations in September 2022 point to a number of significations and conclusions. The two sides are sticking to diplomacy to resolve differences on the nuclear issue and resurrect the 2015 nuclear deal. Both US President Joe Biden and Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi emphasized this in speeches before the UNGA.

On the other hand, escalation appears to be ruled out in light of the ongoing international polarization and the United States' lack of preparedness for military reengagement in the region, let alone the potential cost of any military confrontation for regional stability. This is in addition to the potentially disastrous impact on energy and trade in the region's key waterways.

However, it appears that the two sides will not abandon their pressure policy due to mutual distrust. Even if the United States resolves the nuclear differences and returns to compliance with the nuclear deal, there are significant reservations about Iran's overall behavior and orientations that are hostile to the United States and its allies.

The US intervention in the Iranian protests bolstered the ruling elite's view that Washington's main goal is regime change in Iran. A faction within Iran's ruling elite sees the nuclear deal as an opportunity to address the accumulating socioeconomic crises. Another camp, however, sees this deal as a threat to Iranian society's identity and culture, as it means economic subordination and a significant retreat from Iran's nuclear accomplishments, harming the country's interests and standing.

Iran and Europe

The Iran-Europe file for August 2022 touched upon the fresh tensions in Iranian-Swedish relations, and the positions of the EU and the IAEA on reviving the nuclear deal. As for September, the file discusses IAEA concerns over the future of the nuclear deal after it failed to verify Iran's active centrifuges while alarming the world about the mounting stockpiles of highly enriched uranium in Iran. The file further discusses President Ebrahim Raisi's remarks before the UNGA on Iran's willingness to return to the nuclear deal once Iranian interests are guaranteed. This is in addition to the decision of the Albanian government to cut ties with Iran after Tirana discovered the involvement of IRGC-affiliated hackers in espionage attacks on its network system.

Iran's Nuclear Program Shocks the IAEA

The IAEA flagged concerns about its inability to verify Iran's active centrifuges while alarming the world about its soaring stockpiles of highly enriched uranium over the past quarter.⁽¹³⁾

The agency stated, "Considerable challenges would remain to confirm the consistency of Iran's declared inventory of centrifuges and heavy water."⁽¹⁴⁾ Since June, Iran has disconnected IAEA surveillance cameras, which are installed to record activities at certain nuclear facilities. The UN nuclear watchdog is faced with considerable information gaps and cannot establish a baseline on centrifuges and heavy water.

Aside from the JCPOA requisites, Iran has been deliberately failing to meet its commitments as a signatory to the NPT.

According to the IAEA report, Iran's uranium enriched to 60 percent increased from 43 kilograms in May to 55.6 kilograms in August 21. If Iran's warhead is designed as envisaged in the early 2000s, 90 percent HEU is required.⁽¹⁵⁾ However, more than 60 percent HEU can still be used in a nuclear bomb but will be significantly more challenging to assemble and detonate. Overall, Iran's current pace of secrecy (while being an NPT signatory) is aimed at reducing its breakout time and enhancing its negotiating leverage. Observers and experts have long feared that in case of the existence of an unknown nuclear facility, Tehran might be able to surpass the current estimates. There has so far been no evidence of such a clandestine facility but leaving the IAEA locked out of its key facilities is alarming enough.

The agency reported in September that Iran's stockpile of uranium enriched to 20 percent swelled from 238.4 kilograms in May to 332 kilograms in August. With the addition of 93.5 kilograms over a quarter, it is estimated to possess

enough 20 percent enriched uranium to reach weapons grade level soon enough for a bomb.

Though the JCPOA restricted Iran to a limited number of centrifuges, Tehran notified the IAEA of its plan to install another six cascades of IR-2 centrifuges at its Natanz Fuel Enrichment Plant, increasing the total number to 12 cascades, or some 2,000 centrifuges. These are besides two additional cascades of IR-6 centrifuges installed at the Natanz Fuel Enrichment Plant to produce uranium enriched to 5 percent. At the Fordow facility, Tehran has deployed some 1,000 centrifuges in compliance with the country's December 2020 nuclear law which is in stark defiance of the nuclear deal.

Raisi at the UN and Talks with the E3 Group

At the UNGA, Iran's President Raisi sounded a cautious note, stating that the country will reembrace the JCPOA if "the interests of the Iranian nation are guaranteed."⁽¹⁶⁾ In his previous interaction with US media, he said Tehran seeks a fair deal with guarantees as the United States can no longer be trusted.⁽¹⁷⁾ Iran has rigidly stuck to its position against reopening the IAEA probe into its pre-2003 nuclear activities or any material found relating to those activities. It has evaded the agency's queries about uranium particles found at three undeclared locations during the 2019-2020 period.

On September 14, EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell told AFP that the prospects for the JCPOA revival have diminished after Iran sought additional changes to the proposed draft accord. Borrell noted that the "last proposals from the Iranians were not helping."⁽¹⁸⁾

"There will not be a better offer," said Catherine Colonna, France's Foreign Minister, on the sidelines of the UNGA.⁽¹⁹⁾

Borrell voiced a similar conclusion, saying, "There is a proposal from the [EU] coordinator on the table and it will remain on the table. I don't see a better solution and it won't become caduque (elapsed, obsolete)."⁽²⁰⁾

In the E3 group joint statement, Germany, France, and the UK noted, "In this final package, the Coordinator made additional changes that took us to the limit of our flexibility. Unfortunately, Iran has chosen not to seize this critical diplomatic opportunity. Instead, Iran continues to escalate its nuclear program way beyond any plausible civilian justification."⁽²¹⁾

Tehran is adhering to its latest draft as Iran's Deputy Foreign Minister Ali Bagheri stated in Budapest that the readiness of the other sides to give sustainable assurances will result in reaching a deal swiftly and their commitment will guarantee the preservation of the agreement.⁽²²⁾

Albania Breaks Diplomatic Ties with Iran over Cyber-subversion

Iran suffered unprecedented retaliation after breaching a foreign government's cyberspace in September. Albania, a NATO member-state, chose to expel the Iranian ambassador and Iran's embassy staff.

According to the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (

FBI), hackers linked to the IRGC were spying on the Albanian government's network system for 14 months.⁽²³⁾ The cyberespionage might have gone unnoticed had the hacking group not chosen to launch a ransomware attack in July.

As per the CISA and the FBI, upon being detected and countered over the ransomware activity, the hacker group deployed "a version of ZeroCleare malware." The July attack that crippled Albania's government functions was to forbid Tirana from supporting the Mujahideen-e Khalq (MEK), a dissident Iranian group whose 3,000 members reside in the country.⁽²⁴⁾ The group's malware attack was launched on July 18, five days ahead of the MEK's World Summit on Free Iran. The two-day event, set to start on July 23, was cancelled over security concerns. Quite similar to the Paris event in 2018, this summit was targeted by the IRGC using Iran's diplomatic cover. Assadollah Assadi, 49, who worked at the Iranian embassy in Vienna, is serving a 20-year jail term handed down by a Belgian court for organizing a terror plot to bomb a gathering of the National Council of Resistance of Iran in Villepinte, north of Paris in June 2018. The so-far anonymous Iranian hacking group exploited an internet-facing Microsoft SharePoint through CVE-2019-0604, one of the most exploited bugs since 2020 by criminals as well as state actors.⁽²⁵⁾

Albania's National Agency of Information Society had to shut down the government's network system "in order to withstand these unprecedented and dangerous strikes, until the enemy attacks were neutralized."⁽²⁶⁾

In an interview with CBS on the sidelines of the UNGA summit, President Raisi said the information was untrue and instead was based on "allegations and claims made by a terrorist group."⁽²⁷⁾

On September 13, five days after Tirana announced its severance of ties with Tehran, the same hacking group launched another attack. It deployed GoXML.exe, a ransomware-style file encryptor, which was "digitally signed with a certificate issued to the Kuwait Telecommunications Company (KSC), a subsidiary of Saudi Telecommunications Company (STC)."⁽²⁸⁾

The counter-retaliatory attack hit Albania's Total Information Management System, forcing the closure of passport checks at the land border, airports and seaports, as well as impacting the cross-referencing of people on fugitive databases.⁽²⁹⁾

No wonder that the National Cyber Power Index 2022, released in September by the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, Harvard Kennedy School, lists Iran as tenth among the most comprehensive cyber powers.⁽³⁰⁾

Conclusion

Hope for renewal of the nuclear deal dimmed further as the deadlock persisted during September and Iran's uranium enrichment beyond 60 percent continues. Iran also continues to deny the IAEA access to its nuclear facilities. The momentum for reviving the deal is also losing steam due to ongoing protests across Iran, which are not only adding to the bitterness in Tehran against the West but also increasing its insecurity. With the "hardliners" increasingly exercising an upper hand in Iran, room for flexibility has further

contracted. Finally, Tehran is demonstrating zero tolerance toward dissident groups, reflected in its cyberattacks on the Albanian network system because of Tirana's support for and housing of MEK dissidents.



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