

MONTHLY REPORT



IRAN CASE FILE

Your window on Iran from inside and abroad

October and November 2022



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

During October and November 2022, the Iranian arena witnessed several and consecutive developments at the ideological, political, economic, military, and social levels. As for Iran's relations with its Arab neighbors and international powers, there were many events and interactions which are expected to impact the overall situation in Iran in the coming period.

Internally, at the ideological level, the Iranian government employed the Friday sermon to reflect its position on various events and issues that the country is experiencing. In this context, a number of Friday preachers recently attempted to defame the protesters and defend the crackdown witnessed during the three-month long protests in the country, particularly in the major and influential cities. The preachers have parroted the same charges leveled by the security establishment and the judiciary against the protesters such as them being atheists and clients and pawns in the hands of external actors, as well as violating Islamic law. On the other hand, Sunni scholars rejected the Iranian government's and the security establishment's approach to dealing with the protesters, particularly in the Sunni provinces. This led to the Iranian government issuing threats against several of them.

Politically, the protests continued throughout various Iranian cities in October and November 2022 despite the excessive violence against the protesters, hundreds were killed, and thousands injured. According to the Iranian human rights organizations, 493 people have been killed during the protests, including more than 50 children and teenagers and 8000, 1 were arrested. In an attempt to influence the course of events and compel the Iranians to cease the protests, the Iranian authorities executed two detainees. The Iranian government has

come under severe criticism by the “reformists” who voiced their support for the protest movement and denounced the crackdown. In addition to domestic activism, the Iranian opposition overseas organized massive protests in several European capitals and exerted pressure to urge Western governments and international human rights organizations to support the Iranian people and hold accountable those responsible for the crackdown.

Economically, it is clear that the Iranian currency received several record blows over the past four years. These are still continuing. A single US dollar has exceeded 38,000 tomans compared to less than 5,000 tomans four years ago. There are deep-rooted reasons for this such as the sanctions and the economic crises experienced by Iran and periodical developments occurring now and then such as the protests, the stalled nuclear talks, and the cutting off of gas supplies to petrochemical plants as well as other reasons. In any case, this decline in the value of the currency significantly impacts living conditions, hiking the prices of food, housing and other items. Iranians are generally quite pessimistic, particularly when it comes to the future of the local currency and living conditions.

Militarily, tensions between Iran and Azerbaijan recently resurfaced after Iran conducted military drills on the border with Azerbaijan. Baku, for its part, monitored these Iranian movements with deep concern, especially given that Iran had conducted military drills in the northwestern regions bordering Azerbaijan, which provoked and angered it. On the other hand, on November 2022, 6, the Iranian military space program successfully tested a rocket capable of propelling satellites into space powered by solid fuel, reflecting the fact that Iran is still developing its military machine. Iran has been vocal in its support for Russia in its war on Ukraine over the last two months. Iran agreed to supply Russia with additional missiles and drones. Parallel to the diplomatic pressures that Iran is putting on Iraq, the IRGC continued to launch drone and missile attacks on Iraqi Kurdistan regions. Tehran claims that Iranian Kurdish armed groups have used these regions to launch attacks against the country.

Socially, the ongoing protests in Iran reflect a new phase in the country's social transformation. They reflect the disputes between the different Iranian social structures on the one hand and the gap between state and society on the other. For example, between the latter there is a gap over lifestyle choices, and the practice of religion; society believes religion should be left to personal convictions whereas the state believes obligations must be enforced. There is also the generational gap, sparked by Generation Z, which has spearheaded the protests and employed new tools to deal with current issues different from those employed by the previous generation.

There were numerous developments in Iran-Arab relations in October and November. At the level of Iran-Gulf relations, the Iranian government accused regional countries, particularly Saudi Arabia, of inciting the Iranian youth to partake in what it called “riots.” This accusation arose amid the government's inability to quell the three-month-long protests. This accusation is a feeble attempt to incite a crisis with so-called external enemies to influence the protests and divert them from their intended course. On the other hand, the West has

begun to express concern that this Iranian approaching of blaming neighboring countries may obstruct the flow of oil, hence endangering global security.

In relation to Iranian interventions in Yemen, the Houthi militia's rejection of extending the military truce which ended in early October is part of its and the Iranian government's desire to keep the Yemeni crisis unresolved and take advantage of it to symbiotically serve their respective interests. In October and November, the militia escalated terror attacks on oil ports in Yemen, which constitute a Houthi-Iranian war on the Yemeni people's resources. Accordingly, the Yemeni Presidential Leadership Council (PLC) designated the militia as a "terrorist organization," paving the way to take future steps against the Houthis.

In Syria, Tehran continued to fortify its position and alliances, with Hamas announcing the resumption of relations with the Syrian government following a breakup and divergence of interests between the two sides. However, Tehran faced a number of disruptions and challenges, including the ongoing Israeli attacks on senior Iranian personnel and leaders in Syria. This is in addition to the Kurdish issue in northern Iraq and northern and eastern Syria, which Tehran and Ankara regard as a critical factor in influencing the trajectory of their domestic crises. Thus, the two countries share a common interest in targeting the Kurds. However, there are strategic concerns and considerations that are not lost in Iranian calculations, particularly the ramifications for its interests regarding Turkey's potential intervention in northern Syria.

Internationally, tensions between Iran and the United States arose as a result of the stalemate gripping the talks to revive the nuclear deal. These tensions are because of opposing viewpoints and Tehran's refusal to respond to the IAEA's inquiries about uranium traces found at three undeclared Iranian sites. This is in addition to Iran's involvement in the war on Ukraine alongside Russia through providing Moscow with drones which the latter has employed to attack Kyiv. This issue has further inflamed tensions between Iran and the United States, particularly after the latter intensified its sanctions against the Iranian government. This file attempts to explore the impact of these developments on the overall relations between the two sides. It is clear that the two sides appear to be clinging to the course of diplomatic talks to revive the nuclear deal, given that reaching an agreement is vital to all parties. Nonetheless, the regional and international shifts give Iran room to maneuver and gain more time, which will obstruct the path of negotiations. Gains could be made by each side through mutual escalation until either the negotiations reach a point of maturity or the room for maneuvering for each side diminishes. This state of no peace/no war will persist unless Iran takes additional steps to breach the nuclear threshold.

With regard to Europe's relations with Iran, they no longer hinge on US concerns about Tehran's nuclear program. Furthermore, Europe expressed concerns about Iran's nuclear and missiles program as well as the lack of Iranian cooperation to assuage concerns about these two files. The European Union, on the other hand, imposed new sanctions on dozens of Iranian government officials and on about six entities for their involvement in cracking down on the protests that have been raging across Iran since September 2022 ,16.



Internal Affairs

Five topics were discussed in Internal Affairs for the months of October and November 2022. The Ideological File shed light on Friday preachers' justification of state violence against protesters as well as the Sunnis' condemnation of this violence. The Political File highlighted the protests that have been continuing for three months despite the repression, how the government has attempted to handle the protesters, the implications of the protests for domestic security and for the standing of religious figures, and finally the criticisms leveled by the "reformists" at home and the growing role of external opposition groups. The Economic File was devoted to discussing the old and new reasons for the Iranian currency's decline against the US dollar, as well as the future implications of this decline. The Military File, meanwhile, cast light on three main themes: the display of military strength between Iran and Azerbaijan, the Iranian bet on missiles and satellites, and the drone and missile attacks on northern Iraq. With regard to the Social File, it discussed the morality police's role in Iran and how it has played a role in managing the public sphere as well as the new generation in Iran and its role in the current protests



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. In September 2022, the Ideological File touched on two issues. The first was the issue of insulting the Prophet's companions by eulogy reciter Basin Karbalaee and the ensuing Shiite reactions. The second issue was the erosion of human rights in Iran and the growing protests over the killing of Kurdish woman Mahsa Amini. This file also discusses two issues. The first is the Friday preachers' defense of the brutal crackdown on protesters in Iran. The second issue is Sunni scholars' criticism of the government's violence against protesters in general, and those in Sunni regions in particular — analyzing the dimensions, contexts and reasons for the violence enacted.

Friday Prayer Leaders and Their Defense of the Government's Violence

Clerics and Friday prayer leaders backed the state violence against protesters, including women and youth, by labeling them as morally decadent, violators of Islamic Sharia, or Western stooges. Clerics legitimized the attacks on protesters and drew religious justifications for killing and using violence against them.

Labeling Protesters as Secularists and Atheists

Ahmad Alamulhoda, Friday prayer leader in Mashhad and the supreme leader's representative in Razavi Khorasan, during a Friday sermon said, "Some of those who want to insult the honorable Prophet have sent ignorant youths to squares to take off the hijab of veiled Iranian women. They have hired mercenaries outside the country who strip down in front of people." ⁽¹⁾ He then accused those who were arrested of not having any concern for religion. In his view, the protesters on the streets are none but secularists and atheists who turn to the West or exploit these events for election gains. Some reacted to Alamulhoda's remarks, citing the government's failure in issues related to rights, economy, and social justice. As a result, the policies of the government constitute the real reason why the post-revolution generation is rising up against the Iranian state, renouncing religion or having little knowledge on religious matters. Moreover, there have emerged waves of and calls for removing the turbans of clerics by the Iranian youth, when seen on the roads or in alleyways. Such radical rhetoric by the religious elite raises important questions about

its substance: its nature, who crafts it, the Friday sermon and its objectives, and how far the Friday preachers are independent in choosing their topics and guiding society. Thus, this leads to the more important question about the government's monopoly over the tools to shape the cultural landscape, barring dissidents from propagating their diverse cultural orientations or readings of religion different from that of the government.

Foreign Conspiracy

Hojatoleslam Qanbar Ali Ahmadi, the Noor region's Friday prayer leader, reiterated that the recent events had been planned by Iran's enemies to deflect the revolution away from its due course or topple the political system. He also alleged that the recent riots had been planned since last June in the United States. He also referred to the supreme leader's remarks in which he reiterated that the "enemy" and the "Zionist regime" were responsible for the riots. He warned the Iranian people to remain vigilant. He also justified sectarianism, mobilization and counter-mobilization saying, "The Iranian people have taken to the streets in several massive gatherings, such as rallies staged after Friday prayers and marches staged by zealous women," he said. "All of these protests have demonstrated that the enemy's movement has ended in humiliation, despite the minor damage they have caused."⁽²⁾

Ahmad Jannati, secretary general of the Guardian Council, echoed the same sentiment. He alleged that all the enemies of Iran have taken to the streets to mire the country in instability through taking advantage of the protests which have failed, as in the past, due to the supreme leader's directives and the Iranian people's vision.⁽³⁾

Mohammad Javad Haj Ali Akbari, a Tehran Friday prayer leader, echoed similar sentiments. He said, "The recent seditious acts have been part of a series of US-incited seditions. They are aspiring to conduct an all-out uprising and partition and topple Iran. However, the vigilance and patient endurance of the Iranian nation have aborted this sedition, which is an indication that the enemies' despair has reached its apex."⁽⁴⁾

Another Friday prayer leader in Tehran, Ahmad Khatami, accused demonstrators of committing major offenses such as adultery, killing and fighting against the Islamic political system by carrying weapons in the face of security personnel, whether firearms or a shank, and accusing the Islamic government of corruption.⁽⁵⁾ In Khatami's view, the protesters have committed all these crimes. Therefore, Friday prayer leaders are justifying violence against protesters and (unjustly) condemning them.

Embroiding Najaf

Some Iranian media outlets close to the "hardliners" quoted Javad al-Shahrestani, Sistani's representative in Iran, as saying that "these protests are not popular. These protesters are a group of thugs. We do not know where they

have come from and what enemy has instructed these schemes to them.” Sistani’s office issued a statement denying Shahrestani’s remarks. “Sistani’s office does not have any representative who could make statements on political issues. Any political position of Sistani is announced only via this news channel.”⁽⁶⁾

Sunni Clerics and Their Criticism of the Violence

Sunni scholars took a firm stand against the policies of the Iranian government and its security apparatuses when addressing the protests in the Sunni-majority provinces. The massive crackdown resulted in the killing of dozens and the arrest of hundreds. The Iranian authorities also threatened some Sunni clerics to deter them from standing up against the government.

Repressing the Protests

Molavi Abdolhamid Ismaeelzahi, Sunni Friday prayer leader in Zahedan, denounced the authorities’ violence against protesters. He called on the government to pay heed to the woes of the oppressed. He also blasted what he called the killing of innocent people on September 30, 2022, known as Bloody Friday. No investigation into the killings has been opened by the authorities to date. He also criticized the government’s narrative that the protesters had taken to the streets to demand bread only. “The people have other demands such as freedom and respect,” he said. “They demand their dignity and freedom.” The scholar also denounced dividing people on ethnic and sectarian lines. All ethnic groups, sects and religions should be accorded respect. He advised officials to give room to minorities to express their beliefs and opinions. He said. “We believe it’s necessary to set aside violence when dealing with the protesters. A protester shouldn’t be labeled an enemy and no government in the world should kill its own people. If the regime loses the people, who will then defend it? If I were in power, I would stand by the people.”⁽⁷⁾

In a statement released by his office, he said that the Zahedan massacre was “an unprecedented human disaster which took place on September 30, 2022. Officials have not followed up on this incident so far. Though several weeks have passed, citizens —affected by the massacre — have not received any response and the victims’ relatives have not received any healing for their wounds. Rather, salt is being put on the wounds of the victims’ families.”⁽⁸⁾

Threatening Sunni Scholars

After Molavi Abdolhamid Ismaeelzahi had decried and condemned the government’s policy of repression as well as its attempts to protect the wrongdoers in the security services, the government sent him threats. This prompted some Sunni scholars to declare solidarity with him. Hassan Amini, an Islamic district judge in the province of Kurdistan, issued a statement in which he declared his support for Molavi Abdolhamid. “Threatening Abdolhamid and the rude and irrational attitude towards him is a threat to Sunnis in Iran.” He continued,

“After the heinous crime of killing worshippers at the mosque in Zahedan, the Sunnis hoped that the perpetrators and culprits behind this massacre would be held accountable. But the officials did not have sufficient decency and prudence to take such a measure.” He also denied accusations of secessionism leveled against Abdolhamid and said “they are nothing new. They have been leveled before against the Kurds, Balochis, and Turkmen. All these ethnic groups have been calling for unified rights in Iran. No one seeks separation from Iran. We the Kurds, along with the Balochis and Arabs and the rest of the ethnic groups, demand our human and denominational rights within a unified Iran.”⁽⁹⁾

Containment Attempts

The Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei sent a delegation to Sistan and Balochistan Province in an attempt to contain the angry Sunnis and protesters there. However, the delegation used threats and intimidation against Sunni scholars, according to Molavi Abdolhamid.⁽¹⁰⁾

Abdolhamid said that the hope of the province’s residents were shattered after the delegation’s visit. He said, “People hoped that the supreme leader’s representative would visit Dar al-Ulum (School of Knowledge) in Zahedan — run by him — and check on those wounded in the protests. But Ali Akbari did not do so.”⁽¹¹⁾

Thus, the government continues to use religion and employ it against dissidents, particularly against the young and women protesters as well as against Sunnis and Sunni scholars. This portends the continuation of sectarian polarization as well as political and social bickering within the Iranian state. The status quo will continue unabated as long as the leaders of the Iranian political system do not realize the significance of understanding the demands of all Iranians — in their various ethnic groups and backgrounds — and works to meet them.

Conclusion

The Iranian government is pursuing two approaches in parallel. It justifies violence through embroiling Friday prayer leaders in politics and legitimizing state violence. The second is confessional categorization and hurling accusations of treachery and duplicity at ethnic and religious minorities. Interestingly, the core issues are neither sectarian nor religious, but are primarily the result of the government’s failure and inability to perform at multiple levels, as well as its violence against women who refuse to wear the hijab. Nonetheless, the government has preferred to blame the entire problem on minorities in order to persuade its “hardline” popular incubators that the Islamic political system is being targeted as a whole. However, based on the preceding, it is likely that the government will continue to pursue its strategy, unconcerned about its behavior. It regards changing its behavior as representing a defeat for the revolution, thus of its ideology, culture, and its religious model.

The Political File

The Political File for the month of September 2022 discussed the protests that erupted in Iran following the death of Kurdish woman Mahsa Amini inside a morality police detention facility. The file also touched on the protests that broke out in Sistan and Balochistan Province and discussed the repression facing the Balochi people at the hands of Iranian security and police forces. In the months of October and November, anti-government protests in Iran continued unabated despite the severe and bloody crackdown on protesters resulting in the deaths of hundreds and thousands injured. In this file, we shed light on the major developments that Iran has witnessed over the past two months.

Protests Continue for Three Months Despite the Government's Crackdown

Despite the severe crackdown on Iranian protesters, which killed and wounded hundreds, protests continued in various Iranian cities and provinces. These protests were accompanied by student demonstrations in over 144 Iranian universities. This is in addition to merchant strikes in Tehran and the surrounding provinces. Kurdish-majority cities, particularly Mahabad in West Azerbaijan, Saqqez in Kurdistan Province, and Javanrud in Kermanshah Province, have been among the most active in the protest movement. Security forces, the IRGC, and Basij forces have used live bullets and batons, killing protesters. Protests against Amini's death have coincided with a number of strikes, with merchants in Tehran Bazaar and other cities closing their doors to commemorate the November 2019 protests against the Rouhani government's fuel price hikes. During previous protests, the government was always successful in quickly ending them, which were always peaceful and showed no resistance to the security and Basij forces. Meanwhile, in the current protests, deaths in fact have given more energy to protestors and propelled the wave of protests further. Many funerals have turned into anti-government protests. More concerning, leaked videos from inside Iran show protesters clashing with security forces, hurling stones or Molotov cocktails at them. The riots have progressed to the point of targeting police stations. Some protesters also constructed barricades to obstruct the advance of security forces. The government is concerned that the protesters will establish autonomous geographic cantons in city neighborhoods, causing the protests to be continuous and devoid of state authority. It also fears that the protests will escalate and turn into armed clashes.

The Iranian Government's Response to the Protests

The Iranian government has not abandoned the security approach when responding to the protests. This is apparent in the large number of dead, wounded and detained. According to human rights advocates and the latest statistics of the Human Rights Activists News Agency (HRANA), the death toll in the ongoing protests since September 16, 2022, has reached 493 people, including more than 60 children and adolescents under the age of 18 (see Table 1). In addition, over 18,000 people have been arrested.

Table 1: The Latest Statistics Related to the Iranian Protests:

Protests' death toll since September 16	people 493
Number of dead children and adolescents	children and teens 68
Number of detainees	18,424
Detained students	people 632
Universities that partook in the protests	universities 144
The protests' scope	cities 161
Executions	2

Source: VOA News.⁽¹²⁾

Since the protests started, Iranian security forces have arrested thousands of protesters from various Iranian cities. The aim was to instill fear and terror in the protesters and divert the trajectory of the protests. However, the killings and excessive violence have not quelled the protests; in fact, the momentum has grown, and the protests have spread. In response, the Iranian government started to execute those involved in the protests. The first to be executed was Mohsen Shakari; the revolutionary court had convicted him under the charge of "Enmity to God." He was accused of stabbing a member of the Basij forces, affiliated with the IRGC, and blocking a highway in Tehran on September 25, 2022. The Iranian Human Rights Organization, based in Norway, said that Shakari was executed after a rushed and unfair trial and without the appointment of a lawyer. It warned that the international community's rather passive reaction to the execution will embolden the government and lead to more executions.⁽¹³⁾

Shakari's execution ignited a firestorm of reactions inside and outside Iran and raised tensions among pro-government clerics who were divided between those who supported the "Enmity to God" accusation levelled at Shakari and those who deemed it null and void. The "hardline" cleric Ahmad Khatami lauded the judiciary's strict implementation of the "Enmity to God" punishment against Shakari.⁽¹⁴⁾ Meanwhile, several Iranian clerics rejected the verdict against Shakari since the "Enmity to God" accusation's criteria had not been met. Among those clerics was Mohammad Reza Rahmat who believes that

execution is not a suitable punishment for those who intimidate people, block streets, and injure others. The perpetrators should instead be exiled from the country, or their hands or legs cut off. ⁽¹⁵⁾ Mortaza Moqtadaei, former Supreme Court chief and attorney general, believes that execution as a punishment is only issued when a person commits murder, and it cannot be issued for any other charge. But if they are convicted of threatening or intimidating a group of people using weapons, the concerned persons should not be executed even if they are combatants. ⁽¹⁶⁾

Mohsen Kadivar, an academic and cleric, argued that the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei is exerting pressure on judges to hand down death sentences against protesters. ⁽¹⁷⁾

The second execution over the involvement in the protests was carried out against Majidreza Rahnavard. He was convicted of killing two security personnel and wounding four others on November 17, 2022.

The Iranian Human Rights Organization said that the Iranian judiciary had issued death sentences against five protesters on December 6, bringing the total number of executions to 11. ⁽¹⁸⁾

Implications of the Protests on Internal Security and Religious Figures

The reasons behind the Iranian protests are no longer limited to rejecting what happened to Amini and condemning the killing of hundreds of protesters. The protesters' demands are directly taking aim at the government and its institutions. This is evident through the daily slogans calling for the toppling of the political system, and protestors burning pictures of government officials. In addition, social media platforms have been flooded with videos showing protestors removing the turbans of clerics. The protesters also set fire to the home of Ayatollah Khomeini and part of the hawza in Qom.

The protests impacted the security situation. Iran has recently been rocked with a spate of attacks, starting with an attack on a shrine in Shiraz in October 2022, killing 13 and wounding 20 others. ⁽¹⁹⁾ Militants on motorbikes carried out two separate attacks on November 17, 2017. An attack targeted protesters and security forces in the Ahwazi city of Izeh, which left seven people dead. The second attack, which took place in Isfahan in southern Iran, targeted Basij forces and left two dead. Iran blamed the attacks on the West and Israel. ISIS, however, claimed responsibility for the attacks on the shrine in Shiraz and the attack that took place in the city of Izeh.

Criticisms of “Reformists” and the Growing Role of Opposition Overseas

The “reformists” have not adopted a clear position towards the protests. The continuation of the protests as well as the criticisms leveled against protestors prompted the “reformists” to break their silence and they avowedly expressed

their position in support of the protests and condemned the crackdown on protestors. Former Iranian President Mohammad Khatami described the most prominent slogan of the protest movement “women, life, and freedom,” as a wonderful message about moving towards a better future. He also called on officials to lend a helpful hand to students and acknowledge the flawed aspects of governance. He also warned that imposing restrictions cannot ensure security and stability whether in society or on university campuses.⁽²⁰⁾ In another statement, he criticized the way Iran is governed, describing it as wrong and warned it would cause social collapse.⁽²¹⁾

In addition to Khatami’s statement, the Reformist Front, the “reformist” movement’s main bloc, issued a statement on the 50th day of the protests. It criticized attempts by some parties to link these protests with external factors. “The recent protests are a popular movement to restore life in Iran. It is a result of the policy of denying realities, refusing to recognize the other, accumulated unresolved problems, repeated insults against citizens and repression of life.”⁽²²⁾

In addition to domestic criticisms, the Iranian opposition overseas has rallied anti-government support and organized massive protests. Iranian activist Hamid Ismailion in Berlin organized a protest in which tens of thousands participated. Protests in other European cities were held in conjunction. Iranian media outlets overseas, primarily Iran International channel, which is broadcast from London, has played a major role to the point where the IRGC issued death threats against journalists working for it. The opposition also exerted pressure on Western countries and rights organizations to support the Iranian people through providing means of communication as the internet was shut down by the Iranian government and punishing those responsible for violence. As part of the FIFA World Cup hosted by Qatar, Iranian fans in the stands, during Iran’s match against England, chanted the name of Mahsa Amini. They held up banners and wore T-shirts with protest slogans. Even the Iranian national football team players refused to sing the national anthem in their first match against England.

Conclusion

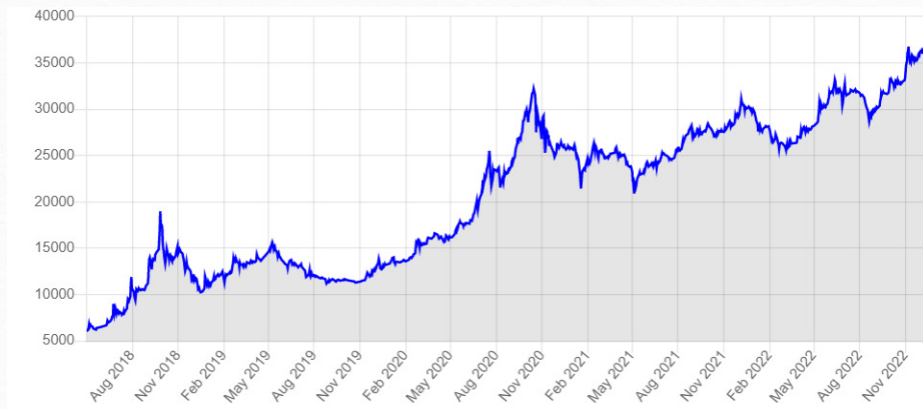
The repression at the hands of Iranian security and police forces has failed to stop the protests, but their actions have in fact added further momentum to the protest movement. The excessive repression of protestors and the insistence on using the security approach reflects the government’s deep concern that the protests could evolve and lead to a massive popular uprising that would topple the political system or significantly change its structure. In light of its failings in handling the protests and its fears, the Iranian government is taking some measures, though nominally, to contain the popular anger and discontent. The Iranian attorney general announced the possibility of dissolving the morality police, whose practices have played a major role in sparking the current nationwide protests.

The Economic File

The September 2022 Economic File reviewed Iran's official membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, particularly in the context of Iranian objectives as well as the challenges and opportunities that await Tehran. This file looks at the decline in the value of Iran's local currency to a record level against the dollar. The file first analyzes the new and old reasons behind this decline and then moves on to look at the potential future consequences and implications.

The toman, Iran's local currency, declining in value against the dollar is nothing new. However, November witnessed a precipitous decline with the dollar posting a new record increase against the Iranian toman. A single dollar surged to 36,000 tomans. It even surged again, posting 38,000 tomans per US dollar in mid-December, a record new level reached within a matter of a few weeks. The last record level the dollar reached was posted last June when it exceeded 33,000 tomans (see Figure 1). What are the reasons behind this perpetual decline in the value of Iran's local currency since last October?

Figure 1: The Dollar Exchange Rate Against the Toman (2018-2022)



Source: bonbast.com

New and Old Reasons for the Decline in Iran's Local Currency Against the US Dollar

There are direct reasons behind the toman's recent decline in value as well as other root causes that have generated a series of devaluations over the past four years.

Among the immediate reasons behind the recent decline is the concern and bleak outlook regarding the future. It is a fact that future forecasts either positively or negatively impact stock markets and exchange rates. This bleak outlook has been exacerbated by some key factors:

- The German foreign minister's statement that the European Union was considering to possibly designate the IRGC as a terror organization. The IRGC has played a major role in circumventing the sanctions imposed on Iran, hence its blacklisting would impede Iranian exports abroad and lead to a potential scarcity of US dollars in the Iranian market.
- Reduction in the amount of gas dedicated to the petrochemicals industry. This industry is among the most important export industries that generate hard currency for the country. It accounts for more than 30 percent of Iran's non-oil exports and approximately one-quarter of the sources of hard currency. There are fears that this industry's exports could be cut off in the future, hence negatively impacting the country's overall exports and leading to a surge in the dollar exchange rate and the trend of converting savings into US dollars.
- The withdrawal of money from the capital market in Tehran (stock exchange) amid growing fears that protests will mount and grow out of control. The main stock market index has declined since late October. There has been a spike in Iranians changing local currency into dollars and crypto currencies, which has led to the heightening demand for the dollar on the black market. The dollar's price has increased due to the tight supply.
- Military officers and government retirees were handed salary increases. This has recently occurred despite the country's harsh financial and economic situation. Perhaps this decision could prompt some people to feel that the protests will get out of control and the government has attempted to appease some important segments such as military officers. This government move could prompt investors to take precautionary financial measures, such as changing local currency to currencies that preserve the value of their money such as the dollar. This, as indicated above, has led to the demand for the US dollar surging. Raising wages, on the other hand, means an upsurge in liquidity, which will fuel inflation, already at high levels, which will prompt investors and savers toward dollarization and taking precautionary measures by purchasing the dollar for fear that their money would lose their value in the future.
- Low possibility of reviving the nuclear deal.

There are also longstanding reasons for this bleak outlook and the decline in the value of the local currency (see Figure 1). These can be summarized as follows:

- Poor economic growth, increased cash liquidity and inflation. These are essential factors that have led to the currency's decline over time. Slow gross domestic product (GDP) growth (3 percent) and its contraction in some years (-1.8 percent in 2018 and -3.1 percent in 2019) means that there is a shortage

in the supply of goods and services (value added) against the backdrop of a growing Iranian population and overall demand. This shortage causes price hikes — given that the annual inflation rate exceeds 40 percent. The growth of cash liquidity in the economy at uncontrolled rates (at least 37 percent per year) — not commensurate with GDP growth rates — has exacerbated the situation. In other words, there are not enough goods or services that sufficiently meet consumer demand, hence causing prices to spike. The local currency's value declines, losing its importance as a store of value. Its exchange rate against foreign currencies plummets over time as is the case with the toman since the US withdrawal from the nuclear agreement in 2018.

- Increased imports coupled with insufficient exports and frozen assets. Turning to imports to meet local needs and compensate for the shortage in domestic supplies necessitates sufficient foreign currency reserves. In case these reserves shrink, the foreign exchange rate rises. This has been the case in Iran over the past four years even amid the recent increase in Iranian exports. A large part of these revenues — estimated at \$115 billion — are frozen overseas due to the US sanctions on Iran's banking system.
- US interest rate hikes. Converting capital into foreign currencies, particularly the US dollar, has increased, raising demand for it and increasing its exchange rate. Exchange rates of many currencies worldwide have declined against it. Iran has been among the countries in which the demand for the US dollar has increased in order to preserve the value of savings. Needless to say that the US dollar is used to facilitate Iranian capital flight and for investing overseas to escape domestic crises.

Future Implications and Consequences

The significant decline in any country's local currency leads to increasing production costs in the short run, particularly the costs of production inputs and raw materials imported from abroad experience a rise. This in turn reduces the supply of goods and commodities, which triggers further price hikes. This is the case in general. In the Iranian case, however, the impact is double. The Iranian economy was facing international isolation as well as a spike in the cost of production even before the surge in the US dollar exchange rate. Therefore, the local currency will likely continue declining as long as the siege and US sanctions remain in place.

As a result, the impact of the increase in the cost of production and imported commodities will be doubled. This cost increase will have an impact on domestic prices. This means that by the end of 2022, inflation could be higher than 40 percent as predicted by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for 2022-2023. This will happen if the sanctions remain in place and the same Iranian monetary and financial policies — particularly the uncontrolled injection of cash liquidity — continues to be pursued. It is now known that further inflation will sharply impact the poor, approximately

50 percent to 70 percent live below the poverty line in Iran.

The local currency's decline will impact the prices of food and medicine, including house prices, a sector in which rents have posted a 47 percent increase compared to last year, according to most recent statistics of the Central Bank of Iran. Food prices increased by about 70 percent in the same month, a level extremely dangerous for Iran's internal security.

On the other hand, the local currency's decline may have a positive impact, which is increasing the competitiveness of Iranian exports — theoretically. This is because the value of domestic goods has become cheaper for those outside the country, thereby increasing the attractiveness of Iranian goods. However, US sanctions on Iranian exports and on transferring money to and from Iran will make it practically difficult to make the most of this currency decline. As such, the Iranian export sector will not see the full benefit in light of the current circumstances.

Perhaps the most dangerous consequence is the spread of social frustration and the lack of an optimistic outlook as well as a spike in immigration rates. This poses an acute danger for the economic, social and political stability of any society. Iranian newspapers published an article by Iranian economic expert Rahman Saadat⁽²³⁾ titled “Society's Hope for a Credible Economic Future Dies,” in which he warned of the people's suffering due to the policies pursued over the past decade. He called for implementing reforms that will benefit all people — not just certain segments. The latest immigration statistics showed that 2,800,000 Iranians traveled abroad in 2022, according to the report of the Supreme Council of Iranians,⁽²⁴⁾ in search of a better life and future.

Conclusion

Finally, it is clear that the Iranian currency has been going through an extensive spate of devaluations over the past four years. These devaluations are continuing and have not stopped since the imposition of the sanctions. There are other reasons for the currency's decline, primarily related to the situation of the domestic and global economy. The record fluctuations the currency witnesses from time to time may have more to do with speculation, rumors, negative internal developments, and a bleak outlook concerning the future. In any case, the currency's collapse has immediate impacts on the levels of prices at home. It also has dangerous consequences for domestic security, with its impact felt at the societal level.

The Military File

The Military File of September 2022 discussed Iran's attacks on Kurdish opposition sites in Iraq's Kurdish-populated territories. The Kurdish forces managed to intercept a considerable number of Iranian drones — which Russia uses in its war on Ukraine. The file for October and November 2022 reviews the resurfacing of tensions between Iran and Azerbaijan and Iran's continuous development of defense capabilities after it tested a solid-fueled engine by firing a new satellite-carrying rocket and launched a space tug capable of shifting satellites to different orbits as well as its continuous attacks targeting Iraqi-Kurdish territories.

Iran and Azerbaijan Saber-rattling

Perplexed by nationwide protests, Iran first pounded Iraqi Kurdistan for over a fortnight⁽²⁵⁾ and then held a military drill along the Azerbaijan border. On October 17, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) kicked off the exercise – Mighty Iran – along the Aras River in Ardabil and East Azerbaijan.⁽²⁶⁾ On October 20, Iran's foreign minister inaugurated its consulate in Kapan, located in the southernmost Armenian province of Syunik.⁽²⁷⁾ Baku observed both uncomfortably. Tehran had conducted wargames in its southwestern bordering regions last October too and drew Baku's ire.

“Iran's political and military officials talked about the recent military exercises and unveiled its purposes. Exercises were planned in advance and carried out in accordance with the periodic exercises of the Armed Forces of Iran. Exercises have not been directed against any neighboring countries and development of relations with neighbors is a priority for us,” Iran's Ministry of Foreign Affairs clarified.⁽²⁸⁾ Last year, Azerbaijan held a military exercise with Turkey in its Nakhchivan exclave. This time, Baku approved Turkey's military's request for a special forces drill.

The IRGC exercise comprised long columns of tanks, multiple-launch rocket systems, air defense, gunship helicopters, paratroopers and of course armed drones.⁽²⁹⁾ Though land forces were a major part of the notable wargame, the real emphasis seems to have been on special operations involving the building of pontoon bridges and securing contested posts through parachuted troops being guided by armed and surveillance drones.

In response, the Azeri military's special forces conducted their wargame along the country's southern frontier.⁽³⁰⁾ Baku's special forces simulated a retaliatory move in response to an enemy attack, which tried to threaten by

crossing the river. Baku employed its special forces' units in concert with its air force units, and air defense systems. In addition, it employed its missile units and artillery.

The war of words intensified too. When Iranian media and politicians brand the Azeri leadership as a “puppet regime,” the Azeris shout back “mullah regime” at Tehran.

Prime facie, Iran's President Ebrahim Raisi had a cordial meeting with his Azeri counterpart in Astana on October 13.⁽³¹⁾ According to a top presidential aide, Raisi “rejected any change in the historical borders, the geopolitics of the region, and the Iran-Armenia transit route” and any changes would “elicit a decisive response from Iran.”⁽³²⁾

Over the past two months, Iran has neither succeeded in quelling the home-grown protests nor managed to successfully blame its neighbors and foreign powers or divert attention by invoking patriotic sentiments. The row with Azerbaijan may soon result in an embassy opening in Israel⁽³³⁾ after Turkey announced the opening of a consulate in Susha, much to Iran's dismay.⁽³⁴⁾ Tehran has been perturbed by Armenia's invitation to European observers on the border with Azerbaijan. The same presidential aide also claimed that the Iranian president “also rejected the European military presence in the region under any cover.” He added that “internal issues would not distract from Iran's strategic interests.”⁽³⁵⁾ The European Council announced the deployment of 40 monitoring experts along the Azerbaijan-Armenia border, and the mission will not last more than two months. Furthermore, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) conducted an “assessment mission” to Armenia between October 21 and October 27.⁽³⁶⁾ On November 7, Armenian and Azeri foreign ministers were jointly hosted by US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken.

Iran's Gamble With Satellites and Missiles

As the prospect for reviving the nuclear deal continues to wane, Iran has taken its defiance to a new level. Iran's military-run space program tested a solid-fueled engine by firing a new satellite-carrying rocket on November 6.⁽³⁷⁾ The solid-fuel rockets take a relatively shorter time compared to the liquid fuel ones and are safer to operate from a hidden location or using a transporter-erector launcher. If Iran can sort out its technological challenges related to warhead re-entry, its long-range ballistic missile program will come of age. Instead of Iran's space agency carrying out the launch, the IRGC conducted it to send an unnerving signal to its neighbors and world powers. On October 4, Tehran claimed to have sent a space tug capable of shifting satellites to different orbits.⁽³⁸⁾ Building and operating a space tug is a technologically challenging process, and if Iran successfully achieves this capability, it can be used to target other satellites that it finds disruptive or hostile. Earlier, Tehran had sent its Khayam satellite into space using a Russian satellite while it had also tested an earlier version of the

solid-fueled space-launch vehicle. These developments violate its JCPOA commitments and hence are termed as destabilizing by world powers and most of Iran's neighbors.

Iran's space ventures come on the heels of its shipment of ballistic missiles – Fateh-110 and Zolfaghar types – to Russia after the delivery of about 2,400 drones of three different types.⁽³⁹⁾

The two sides reached a deal on October 6 during the visit of Iran's Vice President Mohammad Mokhber to Moscow.⁽⁴⁰⁾ Fateh-110 has a range of up to 300 kilometers with high accuracy while Zolfaghar, also a surface-to-surface missile, can hit up to 700 kilometers. The ensuing talk launched by the European troika and the United States to discuss Iran's violations of UN Resolution 2231, and accordingly reimpose UN sanctions may not succeed at the UNSC but due to Russia's veto, Tehran's remains intransigent.⁽⁴¹⁾

The bilateral partnership has reached new heights since Russia's war on Ukraine. Coordinator for Strategic Communications at the National Security Council at the White House John Kirby noted that “a relatively small number” of Iranian trainers and technicians were in Crimea “to help the Russians use [the drones] with better lethality.”⁽⁴²⁾

Missiles and Drone Strikes in Northern Iraq

Alongside Tehran's diplomatic pressure on Baghdad, the IRGC continued its missile and drone attacks into November as well.⁽⁴³⁾ The district Koy Sanjaq in Erbil Province was targeted as well as other towns and districts in the same province as well as in Sulaymaniyah Province. Multiple deaths were reported.

The more frequent phenomenon of attacks has become the new normal since the killing of Mahsa Amini. Though the protests rage across Iran, they appear fiercer in the country's Kurd and Baloch regions. For the Kurdish parts, Iran has singularly blamed Iranian-Kurdish opposition groups across the border for fueling the protests.

Iran military commander Major General Hossein Bagheri, stated, “We will never accept that 3,000 armed men on the other side of the Iranian border have factories to produce bombs. We will carry on with the operations targeting them, and there will be large-scale operations.”⁽⁴⁴⁾

Iran is also threatening to conduct limited ground incursions inside northern Iraq, a warning that was issued in 2016 and 2021, though Tehran refrained from following through on its words.

Conclusion

Iran's domestic woes can entice its neighbors to play their part in response to more or less four decades of interference. The ongoing protests across Iran have repercussions for Iraq, Turkey, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Afghanistan, Pakistan and not to mention the Gulf states. Brandishing military might within and on its frontiers can incur costs. The developments in October highlight the

limits of Iran's military power at home and abroad. The hard reality of Western sanctions still hurts, and the nuclear deal is marginally likely to be revived after the US midterm elections. Its advancement in achieving inter-continental ballistic missile capability and the transfer of short-range missiles after supplying drones to Russia abundantly illustrates Tehran's posture – playing tough to hide its weaknesses.

The Social File

Since mid-September, Iran has been gripped by unending waves of protests. They have differed from previous protests because they erupted and quickly spread across the country over a social issue – the hijab. Thus, they differ from the waves of protests that erupted in 2017 and 2019, which were sparked primarily by economic reasons as well as from the 2009 Green Movement protests, which were ignited primarily due to political reasons.

This file sheds light on Iran's ongoing protests which are the result of cumulative social problems, analyzing two key social aspects that make the current protests different from previous ones. First, the political system's method in dealing with public affairs (evident in the jurisdiction of the morality police and the public response to the morality police). Second the role of Generation Z (the generation of Iranians born from 1997 to 2012) in helping the protests to continue by using social media platforms to express opposition against the ruling system.

The Morality Police and the Political System's Management of the Public Sphere

The killing of Kurdish woman Mahsa Amini at the hands of Iran's morality police, which is the primary reason behind the new wave of protests in Iran, is indicative of the dilemma the ruling establishment is facing when managing the public sphere as well as its policies toward individual freedoms. The morality police is one of the tools employed by the government to control the public sphere, with Iranian society having to submit to its dictates. The morality police suppress personal freedoms and the Iranian people's aspirations. The killing of Amini has rekindled debate about the tools needed to regulate the public sphere, particularly to ensure conformity with religious obligations such as mandatory hijab and the non-mixing of sexes, and freedom of speech on social media platforms.

In this context, Iranian writer Mehrdad Ahmadi Sheikhan points out that the morality police's role has gone through three stages. The first began at the start of the revolution where guidance patrols had worked under the direction of the "revolutionary committees" and were quite strict on implementing revolutionary rules. In the second stage, women were convinced that the patrols were only doing their job. The police patrols, for their part, were convinced that society had undergone profound shifts. Each party appeared to be enduring the other.⁽⁴⁵⁾

To contain these shifts, the political system has worked to create a parallel public sphere to the strict public sphere of Wilayat al-Faqih with the aim of stifling the voices of opponents. According to writer Ali Hashem, this has been done through establishing mega malls and cafes similar to those in Europe as well as through supporting technological enterprises. All these measures have reflected the political system's intent to create room for a social strata — which opposes its religious orientations — particularly the young generation, to live inside their own bubble, so that they do not enter into direct confrontation in open areas of public opinion against the political system. The parallel public sphere has gradually turned into an imaginary state within the actual state governed by the guardian jurist (Wali al-Faqih). In this imaginary state, opponents succeeded in exercising their freedoms which were — only a few years ago — considered untouchable redlines. These freedoms entail abandoning the strict compliance with the mandatory hijab code, gender integration, rave parties in northern Tehran homes, and circumventing the ban on social media platforms.⁽⁴⁶⁾

The third stage began when Ebrahim Raisi's government ascended to power, government supporters and loyalists have come back with the intent to impose social restrictions reminiscent of the 1980s marked by the harsh implementation of religious codes. As a result, they have reinstated the guidance police vehicles, and their intermittent deployment throughout Iran's cities has turned into a daily presence, with a harsh response (to alleged violators of the country's Islamic laws).⁽⁴⁷⁾

After the protests' outbreak, the debate on the issue has resurfaced once again. While the "conservatives" are insisting on the continuation of the radical approach to fight the Western cultural invasion of Iranian society, an opposing current reiterates the necessity of avoiding measures based primarily on deploying the security apparatuses and meting out punishments. This opposing current argues that such issues should be wholly considered as personal freedoms. Sheikhani concluded, "Like it or not, the continuation of some acts by guidance patrols will lead to nothing but continued confrontations, which will benefit nobody, particularly the regime. That the absence of guidance patrols from the streets didn't cause the people to change their dress code, it's better to let the people live their lives (as they wish)."⁽⁴⁸⁾

Ali Larijani, the supreme leader's adviser and member of the Expediency Discernment Council, echoes the same attitude. In an interview with Ettela'at newspaper, he called for addressing the mandatory hijab law in the same way as the law banning satellite dishes. He called for not taking a hard line on the hijab, comparing the situation under the Iranian government with that under the shah. There was the option to take off the hijab. But there were women still wearing it back then.⁽⁴⁹⁾

It appears that this issue will remain a source of contention given that it is closely related to daily life. The debate over it will be rekindled on many occa-

sions. For example, male and female students removed the barrier separating them at a restaurant. The managing editor of “conservative” Javan newspaper commented on the clashes that took place between student Basij units and the students at Sharif University of Technology. “They begin at mixed restaurants, and then move to mixed dormitories and mixed swimming pools,” he wrote on Twitter, in reference to the students’ gradual renouncement of the regime’s codes.⁽⁵⁰⁾ “Reformist” political activist Rahmatullah Bekdali, meanwhile, commented on some photos showing Basij students crying over the mixing between male and female students at a restaurant in Sharif University of Technology. He mocked them saying, “I would like to tell those dear students to look at those two pictures: millions of men and women mix together at the hajj pilgrimage season every year as well as the Arbäeen marches. Sometimes they sleep beside one another. Won’t you send a notice to God?”

Generation Z and the Protests

The participation of school students and adolescents – Generation Z – was one of the most prominent features of Iran’s recent protests, which makes them different from past protests. The presence of this segment has brought the protests into the limelight. Several reports have covered these protests, given the large number of youngsters detained in the regime’s crackdown. This segment only consists of 6 million (less than 7 percent) of the country’s populace of 83 million. Like their peers worldwide, they are characterized by apathy toward politics, religion and customs and traditions. They voice their opinions, even if they transgress the government’s traditional redlines. They also do not care about the way they will be judged or assessed. Their active presence on social media as well as their easy access to it has granted them better analytical skills and a platform to express their fears and speak fearlessly.

This generation made its first notable appearance in 2014 when tens of thousands attended Mortaza Bashai’s funeral, the famed young pop star. Such a massive turnout was the norm for a religious figure or a person who lost his life supporting the Iranian republic’s values. A turnout of thousands did not happen before to celebrate the life of a musical icon, not to mention a figure deemed a threat to Islamic values.⁽⁵¹⁾

Generation Z has come up with some creative ways to express their anger, differing with traditional methods. For example, this generation has made use of videos, pictures, posts and comments on social media platforms to express their opinions. An example of this is the “turban tossing” campaign as well as methods of concealing their identity facilitated by coronavirus masks that many protesters, particularly students, had worn to hide their true identities from the security services — and avoid being chased by them. Additionally, celebrities rather than traditional political leaders have played a major role in the protests. Among these celebrities is the former Persepolis F.C footballer Hossein Mahini who was arrested due to his support for the protests, and his col-

league Ali Karimi. In addition, singer-songwriter Shervin Hajipour has played a role in the protests, with one of his songs becoming popular among the protesters. He was arrested due to this song but was soon released on bail. There are other celebrities who have also partaken in the protests.

Given this context, the Iranian government has rushed to address the younger generation in the country. It has been aware of the magnitude and enormity of this dilemma in case it continues unaddressed. The government on the one hand attempts to take measures to deter this generation and attempts to attract them to its side on the other. The government has used the security apparatuses to deter this generation, which was reflected in the large numbers of youngsters killed in the protests. To draw this generation to its side, the government has pursued a political and media approach by promoting a narrative that portrays this generation as victims of an outside conspiracy that has polluted their minds via social media platforms. These outlets disseminate foreign cultural values and incite them against their own homeland and government. Thus, the government seeks to attract this generation to its side through offering an alternative.

As was the case in past crises, the Iranian government embraced the foreign conspiracy card and considered generation Z to be a victim of Western soft power via the internet and social media platforms which incites them against their homeland. Ayatollah Mohammad Abul-Qasim Dolabi, member of the Assembly of Experts, said, "Those adolescents have been raised up in this poisoned cyberspace. It's clear that those individuals will set fire to banks, the Quran and mosques under the spell of this cyberspace." He also added, "It's clear what the nature of those teens' demands is. Their demands are bestial. Demanding women getting naked as well as spreading indecency in society isn't a human demand. We need to study the reasons why they have made these demands. The state's authorities should pay attention to the standards of the hijab, chastity and marriage."

Gholamreza Mesbahi-Moghaddam, member of the Expediency Discernment Council, drew a connection between the new generation and the role of celebrities in the recent protests. "A big number of people follow celebrities in cyberspace (on social media). Therefore, celebrities occupy a special place in the minds of their fans." He also spoke of the pressure exerted on some celebrities to adopt an anti-government stance. He noted, "Some people want to attract celebrities to their side this way. Therefore, they exert pressure for those people to be compelled to adopt a position hostile to the Islamic Republic and to be able to exploit them and use them in fueling riots."⁽⁵²⁾ For his part, Mostafa Nakhai, in an interview with Fars news agency on October 6, commented on the recent protests and the reasons behind them. He said, "According to schemes of Americans, Zionists and their clients inside and outside Iran and with the help of several pundits, celebrities and sports figures have begun to ride the

wave (of the protests), exploiting the youth's sincerely patriotic sentiments." He added, "They have attempted to indoctrinate our youth and drag them into the streets through spreading lies and intensive propaganda campaigns. This has caused these tragic incidents to happen in different parts of the country. With the continued fanning of the flames of unrest, they were attempting to achieve their end: continuing the riots."⁽⁵³⁾

In parallel with the severe crackdown, the Iranian government adopted flawed policies to make this generation support the revolutionary political system. On this issue, Iranian Attorney General Mohammad Jaffar Montazeri pointed to the involvement of teens as young as 16 in the ongoing protests due to the virtual space. "They have become involved in the riots while they are ignorant of the facts and what's being plotted behind the scenes. I have instructed attorney generals that if the detainees are minors, they should prepare for them a program and clarify (the truth) for them. They are our children, dear to our hearts. We shouldn't deal with them in a way that makes them part ways with us."⁽⁵⁴⁾

Mohammad Mahdi Kazimi, director of preparatory and secondary education affairs at the Ministry of Education said, "We should work to educate all students. All of them are citizens of the country and registered in the official education system. And we don't take any measures that lead to expelling students. If they engage in riots under the spell of their patriotic emotions, we should raise their awareness. Not a single student has been expelled. Moreover, there's no such a thing as the expulsion of students. We either speak to students or inform their parents to raise their awareness."⁽⁵⁵⁾

The political system has also worked to show off that some members of Generation Z are loyal to the system. Jam-e Jam, released by the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB), pointed on its official page to teenagers' participation in the marches commemorating the anniversary of the storming of the US embassy under the title "Born in 2000 With 1980s Zeal."⁽⁵⁶⁾

Conclusion

Iran's ongoing protests reflect the tense relationship between Iranian society and the ruling establishment. Iranians are no longer convinced of the legitimacy of the political system, which suggests that the protests will mount and further unfold in the short and long term. The most acute danger facing the government when it comes to handling the profound social transformations is that they strike at the very fundamentals of its ideology. As a result, responding to these changes requires changing the entire legal system. Thus, this can only be achieved through a partial or total change of the ruling elite.

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ARTICLE

Significance and Implications of Hacktivists Releasing Iranian Nuclear Documents

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Iran over the years has faced cyberattacks, with key government apparatuses and installations targeted by hackers. A new twist amid the ongoing protests in response to the death of Mahsa Amini is a new successful hack of the email system of Iran's Nuclear Power Production and Development Company. The hacktivist group Black Reward claimed responsibility and threatened to release the hacked documents – 50 gigabytes of data – If the Iranian government did not release all political prisoners and protestors who had been detained over the last month. The group stated on social media...

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Arab Affairs

Arab Affairs discussed three key topics, the first of which highlighted Iran-Gulf interactions in the context of two significant developments: Iranian threats to Saudi Arabia and the return of international interest in securing energy supplies amid Iranian threats. Meanwhile, the second topic focused on Iran-Yemen interactions by discussing the dimensions of the Houthi escalation and attacks on oil installations in Yemen, the implications of the Yemeni Presidential Leadership Council's designation of the Houthis as a terrorist organization, and the international and UN position on the Houthi militia's escalation. The third topic focused on Iran-Syria interactions in three areas: the return of Hamas to Damascus and Iranian efforts behind this move, Iranian and Turkish attacks on Kurds in northern Syria and Iraq, and the resumption of Israeli assassination operations against Iranian military leaders in Syria.



Iran and the Gulf States

The Gulf-Iran file for September 2022 addressed Iran's issuance of ownership documents for the three islands Greater and Lesser Tunbs and Abu Musa disputed between itself and the UAE to create a new reality. It also discussed Gulf-Iran relations, reviewing the remarks made before the UN as well as the meetings of the foreign ministers of some Gulf states and their Iranian counterpart.

In this file, the implications of Iranian threats against Saudi Arabia will be discussed in the wake of the protests inside Iran. The implications of the return of global interest in the security of the Gulf and shipping lanes will be also discussed given the outcomes of the 2nd Saudi International Maritime Forum and the Manama Dialogue.

Iranian Threats Against Saudi Arabia

The Statements of the IRGC Commander Against Saudi Arabia

The Iranian government is experiencing instability and confusion because of the national protests, with their ramifications hitting the domestic front hard. Iran's failure in containing these protests has led it to accuse regional countries of encouraging Iranian youths to participate in the protests according to the IRGC commander. However, the IRGC commander's statement failed to inflame the Iranian street against the targeted regional countries because the public are aware that these accusations are false and are no longer deceived by the Iranian political system.

Commander-in-Chief of the IRGC Hossein Salami devoted part of his speech at the military exercise dubbed "The Revolutionary Guard Force" in Aras, near the border with Azerbaijan on October 17 to send messages to regional countries, especially to Saudi Arabia. He said, "Al Saud regime must stop playing media games with our youth and the zealous people of Islamic Iran, and we warn them in this regard." He added that they openly seek to provoke our youth, and we advise them to exert control over these media outlets. Otherwise, they will pay the price. Note you have entered this field and know that you are vulnerable. You better be careful."⁽¹⁾

Hossein Salami described the media efforts of the enemy as clear evidence, according to him, of their defeat from Islamic Iran in the real world, and said the enemy chose the virtual space to wage war against Islamic Iran to turn

the youth away from Islam, history, and the political system, but it also failed in this field and these failures will continue. He added, “Iran’s youth reacted well by ignoring the media hype, and the few of those youths who have been deceived will soon discover the existing facts.”

Speaking at the military exercise, Salami indicated that the main message of the drill near the border of Azerbaijan was friendship and brotherhood with neighboring countries, and added, “This is the principle of our policy, and as long as our neighbors do not conspire or show enmity, but interact and have coexistence with us and appropriate relations with us, we will maintain friendship and cooperation too. Otherwise, our policy will change.”⁽²⁾ The contradiction and the obvious threat in Salami’s remarks reflected the growing security pressures and concerns for Iran’s military establishment, and its escalating threat perception.

The Military Threat

US officials said on November 3, 2022, that Saudi Arabia had shared intelligence indicating that Iran could be preparing for an imminent attack on the kingdom. “We are concerned about the threat profile and remain in constant contact through military and intelligence channels with the Saudis,” the US National Security Council said in a statement. It added, “We will not hesitate to act to defend our interests and our partners in the region.”⁽³⁾ These threats to the kingdom come as Tehran is carrying out a crackdown to confront the massive protests, and the government is trying to fabricate a crisis with those whom it calls external enemies to influence and derail the protests.

The IRGC commander’s statements have several implications and dimensions, notably the government’s inability to provide logical explanations and solutions to quell the anger of the Iranian public. In addition, they reflect the failure of the security approach, and the government’s usual behavior of pointing the finger of blame at external enemies. The harsh rhetoric toward Saudi Arabia can also be analyzed in the context of the stalled nuclear talks, with Tehran perhaps hoping for further leverage at the talks. The United States has not prioritized the nuclear talks in the current period because of the Iranian supply of arms to Russia, and Tehran’s violations of human rights in the context of the government’s crackdown on protesters.

International Attention Redirected to Secure Energy Supplies

Through active moves and Western statements, the West has begun to sense the cost of Iran’s reckless actions, impeding oil supplies to the world, which will exacerbate the current energy crisis. By reviewing international actions allied with experts analysis, consensus on the need to reduce risks to global energy security has begun to emerge. This consensus was reflected in the regular dialogues held in the region.

The Significant Statement by the President of the European Commission

President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen, while speaking at the opening of the 15th Manama Dialogue in Bahrain, addressed the importance of Gulf security to Europe and the threat posed by the Iranian government and its arms not only to the Middle East, but also to Europe. She particularly noted that several Gulf states have been warning for years about the risk of Iran supplying rogue countries around the world with drones, and it took Europe too long to understand a very simple fact that while working to prevent Iran from developing nuclear weapons, Europe must also focus on other forms of Iranian weapons including drones and ballistic missiles.⁽⁴⁾ These statements were made in the context of tense Europe-Russia relations following Moscow's invasion of Ukraine and the suspension of Russian gas to Europe. Therefore, the Europeans are attempting to restore their relations with the Gulf states, the ideal alternative source of gas supplies for Europe.

US Central Command Deploys Unmanned Vessels in the Gulf

Speaking at the 18th Manama Dialogue, US Central Command Commander General Michael Cuellar reiterated that Task Force 59 will deploy 100 unmanned surface and subsurface vessels in Gulf waters by 2023 to boost deterrent capabilities against threats. He also stated that this force was created to integrate unmanned systems and artificial intelligence into Middle Eastern operations after several drone attacks against ships, adding that Washington is adopting a pilot program in the region to stave off drones in concert with regional partners.⁽⁵⁾

The Gulf's View on Iran's Threats

During the Manama Dialogue, Secretary-General of the Gulf Cooperation Council Nayef al Hajraf said that aim of the GCC states is to establish peace in the region and the world, as well as to protect their own interests and security. He also stressed the need to reconsider the Iranian nuclear deal and to maintain the stability of all countries. He called on Iran not to wreak havoc in the region, especially its support for the Houthis in Yemen, adding that the Iranian nuclear negotiations do not have to be limited to the 2015 nuclear deal only. He also indicated that major initiatives are welcome, and that the GCC has always been part of this solution, that sharing ideas, facing joint challenges, and meeting ethical requirements are essential, and that the time to act is now.⁽⁶⁾

Growing Challenges to Iran

Amid the international shifts in politics, energy supplies, and intertwined security issues, Iran is facing increasing pressure; it attempts to adopt a strategy which is able to address internal challenges along with international developments/shifts. However, the government has not taken into account its limited abilities and the time needed to address these challenges and shifts. There-

fore, the risks to the political system are increasing as the Iranian street has lost confidence in its ability to improve living conditions, and the promised economic breakthrough has not yet been realized. As the political system put off resolving some societal issues, the Iranian street exerted more pressure on the status quo. As a result, the government worked to fabricate an external crisis to distract the Iranian street after it failed to peddle the narrative of a conspiracy by external actors. For example, the government launched military actions targeting northern Iraq, allegedly to confront the Kurdish opposition that it accuses of supporting the domestic protests, and continued its hostile maritime policy in Gulf waters.

Conclusion

Gulf-Iran relations are still stagnant, with no prospect of improvement given the complexities surrounding the Iranian government and the international environment and the changing priorities of major powers. In terms of Baghdad's efforts to improve Iran-Saudi relations, the new Iraqi government likely needs more time to evaluate its independence to make decisions, and to resume its mediation role between Saudi Arabia and Iran that was initiated by the former Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi as a gateway to improving the Gulf-Iran relationship.

Iran and Yemen

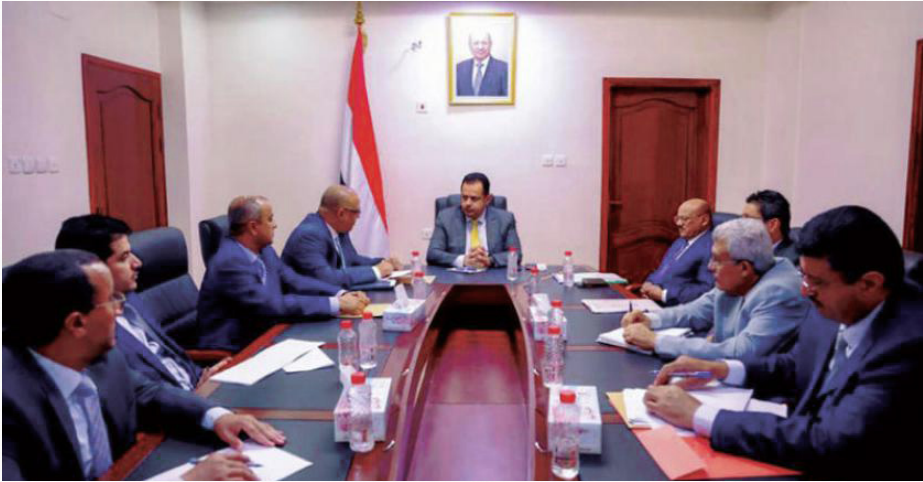
The September 2022 file discussed the implications of the Houthi-Iran rejection to extend the truce and the response of the Presidential Leadership Council (PLC) in this regard. The file for October and November discusses the political and military dimensions of the Houthi military escalation against the oil ports in Yemen and several areas after the extension of the truce ended. As a result, the PLC designated the Houthis a terrorist organization. The PLC had used all solutions possible to reach a political settlement with the Houthis and made many concessions stemming from its aim to establish peace and stability in Yemen and meet the demands of the Yemeni people. This file discusses three main topics as follows: the ramifications of the escalation of Houthi attacks on oil ports, the PLC designation of the Houthis as a “terrorist organization” and finally, the UN position on the Houthi escalation.

The Dimensions of the Houthi Escalation and the Targeting of Oil Installations in Yemen

On October 21, 2022, the Houthis targeted al-Dhaba Port, one of the most important and oldest ports in Hadramout Governorate, eastern Yemen, with two armed drones. The attack came weeks after the Houthis threatened to target international navigation routes and energy sources. Prior to this, the Houthi militia targeted the Rudum oil terminal with two successive attacks on October 18 and October 19, 2022. By the end of the first hours of the truce, the Houthi militia stepped up its military escalation against the governorates of Taiz and Dhale. Ma'rib also witnessed several deadly attacks.⁽⁷⁾

On November 9, 2022, the Houthis targeted a ship in Qena commercial port in Shabwa Governorate with a drone, but the port's air defense shot down the drones. The Houthi attack coincided with the entry of a ship to unload thousands of tons of diesel. The attack could have caused a major environmental catastrophe in the Arabian Sea, had it not been for the air defense.⁽⁸⁾

Many observers believe that the Houthi escalation has many political and economic dimensions related to regional and international developments. The Houthis, through this escalation, aim to send messages to key international actors who are keen to secure international energy supplies, most prominently the United States and the EU to place pressure on the PLC to make further concessions to the Houthis. The escalation is also part of Iran's plan to perpetuate the Yemeni crisis by shuffling the cards and threatening to spread violence in



the region and harm the world's economic and security interests in order to reap the maximum gains in the nuclear negotiations and mitigate the international sanctions it suffers from.

In this context, Yemeni Minister of Information Muammar al-Eryani noted that Iran continues to support Houthi terrorist attacks. In addition, the US Navy's Fifth Fleet announced the interception of an Iranian vessel carrying 70 tons of ammonium perchlorate which is used to produce medium-range ballistic missiles fuel, and the intercepted vessel carried 100 tons of explosive urea heading from Iran to the Houthi militia on November.⁽⁹⁾

The Significance of the PLC's Designation of the Houthis as a Terrorist Organization

Following the terrorist acts of the Houthi militia and its endeavor to disrupt the extension of the truce before the Yemeni National Defense Council issued Resolution No. of 2022 classifying the Houthis as a terrorist organization. This is "in accordance with the Crimes and Penalties Law, the Arab Convention on Combating Terrorism, and international and regional conventions and treaties ratified by the Republic of Yemen."⁽¹⁰⁾ The PLC directed the Yemeni government to immediately implement the resolution and compile a blacklist of entities and companies affiliated with the Houthis. The PLC stated that the resolution is part of the diplomatic and economic defense plan to protect the interests of the Yemeni people and curb Iran's subversive acts. Further, it threatened to withdraw from the expired truce agreement and the Stockholm Agreement, confirming that all options are available in dealing with the Houthi escalation. The council called on the international community to assume its responsibilities in halting the Houthis' behavior that threatens regional and international security and stability.⁽¹¹⁾ Meanwhile, the PLC reaffirmed that the designation will not affect the humanitarian and economic aid directed to the Yemeni peo-

ple in areas controlled by the Houthis as the council's foremost priority is the Yemeni people. The PLC stressed on protecting the commercial and industrial sectors in Houthi controlled areas, taking all measures to ensure the smooth flow of goods, and developing the necessary alternatives to avoid any ramifications that may affect the living conditions of the Yemeni people.⁽¹²⁾

Observers believe that the PLC's designation of the Houthi militia as a terrorist organization came after the council made many concessions to reach a political settlement, with its main aim to preserve Yemeni national interests. The council gave up on many bargaining chips gained through military operations for the sake of forging a potential settlement. However, following the designation, the military and political confrontation against the Houthis will most likely resurface. Within the framework of the agreements to combat terrorism, the internationally recognized government in Yemen can ask for international assistance, acquiring sophisticated arms and technologies and intelligence data.

The International and UN Position on the Houthi Terrorist Escalation

Houthi terrorist acts sparked wide-scale international and UN condemnation. The UN envoy to Yemen, Hans Grundberg, condemned the Houthi escalation, stressing the need for the Houthis to abide by international and humanitarian law to protect the Yemeni people and infrastructure. The EU delegation to Yemen condemned the Houthi attacks on international vessels as “an affront to core principles of the Law of the Sea.”⁽¹³⁾ The Houthi attacks endanger freedom of navigation through regional waterways, impede access to Yemeni ports, deprive Yemenis of the purchasing basic commodities, and disrupt the flow of basic commodities into Yemen. The EU delegation to Yemen stressed that “[the] path forward is to reduce tensions, de-escalate, and redouble efforts to end Yemen's conflict through a negotiated settlement. This is the only way to ensure that all Yemenis can benefit from the country's resources and enjoy a more prosperous future. We will continue supporting efforts led by UN Special Envoy Grundberg to renew the truce and reach a political settlement to the conflict in Yemen.”⁽¹⁴⁾ The US ambassador to Yemen said, “We remind the Houthis that the world is watching their actions and that the only path forward to ending eight years of destructive war is to de-escalate and redouble efforts to reach a durable ceasefire.”⁽¹⁵⁾

Many observers believe that the international community's position on the Houthis' behavior which endangers international navigation, the security of Yemen and the region, and global energy resources does not correspond to the size of the danger of the Houthi militia. Some world powers merely condemned without taking any firm action against the Houthis. Some argue that the international community and the United States are focusing only on the

extension of the truce and to halt direct military confrontation only to secure world energy sources, regardless of the political and military implications on the position of the legitimate government in Yemen. However, the militia is taking advantage of this to maximize the political, economic, military and media gains, so to strengthen its position. The Yemeni crisis, as a result, will continue unless the international community takes tangible measures to make the Houthis engage in a political settlement and halt its hostile activities as well as its affiliation with the Iranian political system.

Saudi Arabia called on the international community to take a resolute stance on the Houthis' and Iran's attempts to thwart peace in the country. During the cabinet's session on October 19, 2022, Saudi Arabia called to classify the Houthi militia as a terrorist organization, boycott it, and dry up its sources of funding. The council reaffirmed Saudi Arabia's continuous support for all international efforts to bring peace to Yemen.⁽¹⁶⁾

Conclusion

After the end of the truce in early October, the Houthis attempted to change their battle tactics; from direct military confrontation with the legitimate government to an economic war on the resources of the Yemeni people by targeting oil ports. They also stepped up their military escalation on some fronts and threatened international navigation in the Bab al-Mandab Strait. The Houthis aimed to reshuffle the cards, inflame tensions further in the region while exploiting international concerns over securing energy sources — eventually the international powers will place pressure on the legitimate government to make more concessions. Further, the Houthis aims to entrench their control over northern Yemen as a de facto authority. The PLC's designation of the Houthi group as a terrorist organization is a decisive step to curb Houthi power at the political, military and economical levels and dry up all forms of external support to the militia. Therefore, all options, including military confrontation, are possible to tackle the Houthis' military and political escalation with legal measures. As part of their responsibility, the international powers which aim to establish peace in Yemen need to assume a stronger stance against the Houthis and not merely condemn their acts.

Iran and Syria

The file for September discussed the Jordanian initiative for reaching a political solution in Syria, the threats from Syria, and the factors that would determine whether the Jordanian initiative would be successful or not. However, this file discusses the return of Hamas, the resumption of its relationship with the Syrian government, and Iranian efforts in this direction. It will also address the motives and justifications for Iranian and Turkish military escalation against the Kurds in both Syria and Iraq. Finally, the file will review the resumption of Israeli assassination operations against Iranian leaders in Syria.

The Return of Hamas to Damascus and Iranian efforts

Hamas officially revived relations with the Syrian government after a decade-long rupture and a decline in the relationship between the two sides. To understand this decision, one needs to review several changes in the regional landscape, and the role of Iran, Hezbollah and other key actors.⁽¹⁷⁾

Hamas' repositioning comes amid many changes, including the increasing clout of the resistance faction within the movement; this faction is close to Hezbollah and Iran. Accordingly, the leak that referred to the obvious role of Iran and Hezbollah in bridging the gap between Hamas and Damascus was not coincidental.

Given the constant shifts in global power equations, Hamas must have considered these in their political calculations. Against this backdrop, Hamas sought rapprochement with Damascus while working to seize any available opportunity given the power shifts. Anyone who observed the remarks and statements of Hamas' leaders after the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine war would have noticed the movement's quest to understand the transformations resulting from this war, and its attempt to find common ground with Russia and to invest the latter's tense relationship with Israel for its own interests.⁽¹⁸⁾

Hamas' decision to return to Syria is also because of the restrictions imposed on it by most Arab countries and in light of the Arab Spring waning, and the rise of anti-Islamist forces. These factors contributed to weakening or ending the movement's activity in a number of Arab countries. The movement has also been impacted by the structural shifts in the regional environment incubator. Turkey aimed to pursue the trajectory of "zero problems" with neighboring countries. Furthermore, Gulf reconciliation, with the rapprochement between Qatar and its Gulf neighbors. As a result, Hamas lost its Qatari and Turkish strategic depth.

On the other hand, from Assad's political perspective, restoring relations

with Hamas is a timely move to improve his image through showing himself as someone who supports the Palestinian cause. Assad seeks to legitimize and give confidence to his government at the regional and popular level, and to respond to Iranian pressure. Tehran is the most prominent supporter of the Assad government and Hamas.

Tehran wants to align Hamas more closely to Damascus, allowing it to rearrange the relationship between its allies and arms in the region and revive the “resistance axis” while it encounters many internal and external challenges. Iran is most critically in need of enhancing its regional and international alliances.⁽¹⁹⁾

Hezbollah signed the maritime border deal with Israel, thus compelling Hamas to undertake alternative roles on behalf of Iran regarding its skirmishes with Israel. This has helped Iran bridge the gap between Hamas and the Syrian regime in order to facilitate cooperation.

Iranian and Turkish Attacks on Kurds in Northern Syria and Iraq

Iran and Turkey continued their military escalation against the Kurds inside the Syrian and Iraqi territories. Iranian and Turkish shelling, drone and fighter jet attacks have intensified over the past few weeks. Ankara stepped up its attacks (Operation Claw-Lock) against Kurdish areas inside Syrian territory; the Kurdish People’s Protection Units (YPG) and the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) in northern Iraq, which Ankara holds responsible for the bomb attack in Istanbul on November 13.⁽²⁰⁾ The Turkish strikes coincided with the IRGC’s announcement to target the headquarters of Kurdish groups in northern Iraq which Iran accuses of supporting the protests in the country following the death of the Iranian Kurdish woman Mahsa Amini in mid-September.

The interests of the guarantor states of the Astana process (Russia, Iran, and Turkey) intersect over the military escalation against the Kurds in northern Syria and Iraq. Both Ankara and Tehran have their own apparent reasons for targeting the sites of the two Kurdish organizations (YGP and PKK), which were added to their respective terror lists because of their threats to national security and separatist aspirations. They also have hidden reasons to impact the domestic front; in Ankara, the attacks will impact Turkish voters ahead of the upcoming parliamentary and presidential elections in June 2023 and Iran will use these attacks to pressure the two Kurdish parties: the Kurdistan Democratic Party and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, to influence the Kurds inside Iran to calm the massive protests that broke out after the death of Amini. The protests first erupted in her hometown, the province of Kurdistan in western Iran. Iran has also accused the authorities of Iraqi Kurdistan of harboring CIA and Mossad agents, both of which it accuses of fueling the protests in the Iranian Kurdistan region. Iran fears that Syrian Kurds will support the Iranian Kurds, especially since the Iranian Kurdistan region is geographically linked to Syrian Kurds areas via Iraqi Kurdistan.

The Turkish military threat is no longer limited to aerial attacks, it may ex-

pand to an actual ground invasion. US President Joe Biden and Russian President Vladimir Putin⁽²¹⁾ have limited pressure to put on Ankara to dissuade it from carrying out a new ground incursion into Syrian territories, and Washington needs Turkey in the Ukrainian file. Russian is vacillating between implicitly accepting or superficially rejecting Turkey's incursion into Syria given Russia's desire to target US proxies in Syria, which thwarted Moscow's continuous efforts to make Damascus agree on a political settlement. In addition, Moscow is in urgent need to maintain coordination with Turkey, especially as this coordination has yielded many fruitful outcomes because of Turkey's positions such as its non-compliance with the sanctions of Western countries on Moscow. In addition, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan succeeded in concluding the grain deal between Russia and Ukraine across the Black Sea, alleviating the world food crisis. President Putin also agreed with President Erdogan to establish a Russian gas hub on Turkish territory amid the international and regional factors and variables related to the Russia-Ukraine war. Iran's preoccupation with the local protests and its targeting of Iranian Kurdish opposition groups inside the Iraqi Kurdistan region also gave Ankara the opportunity to bypass the opposition of Turkish parties to its military operation on Syrian and Iraqi borders.

Apparently, Iran is perplexed over another possible Turkish incursion into Syrian territories. Iran's confusion is due to two main reasons: first, any moves to undermine the Kurds whether in Syria or Iraq serves Tehran's interests due to the existing Iranian-Kurdish conflict. Second, Iran is concerned about Turkey's increasing activity in northern Iraq and Syria and the future of Turkish expansionism in the region. The possible Turkish incursion into Syria will greatly affect the course of the Astana process, and will weaken Iran's ally, Bashar al-Assad. Iran established with Assad what is commonly known as the "useful Syria triangle" and aimed to expand further this triangle until Assad restores control over all Syrian territories. However, curbing the Syrian Democratic Forces is apparently more important to Tehran than Assad restoring his control over all Syrian territories.

The Return of Israeli Assassinations of Iranian Leaders in Syria

The mysterious assassinations of IRGC officers have resurfaced as Tehran announced the killing of Daoud Jafari in a roadside bomb near the capital, Damascus, accusing the Israeli army of carrying out this assassination.⁽²²⁾ However, this accusation completely contradicts another narrative of Jafari being killed in Ukraine with his body transferred to Syria.⁽²³⁾ Since the beginning of 2022, Tel Aviv stepped up its raids and attacks on the sites and positions of Iranian militias and their leaders inside Syria. It launched a series of intense raids, focused on the Syrian airports in Damascus and Aleppo to prevent the transfer of arms supplies. The raids also targeted drones and missile systems

to undermine Iranian military capabilities, which pose a security threat to the Israeli military establishment.

Jafari was an expert on Iranian drones and supervised the missile and drone shipments that arrived at Damascus International Airport, and the development of plants in Syria, Iraq and Lebanon for the production of drones, especially suicide drones, which have become famous over the past weeks in the Russia-Ukraine war. He also deployed Iranian air defenses in Syria.^[24]

The Israeli operation came at a critical time amid Iran's increasing drone threat, and the growing concerns inside Tel Aviv about the repercussions of the Tehran-Moscow joint cooperation, and Russia's possible defense of Iranian military positions in Syria, hence reducing Israel's margin of maneuver there.

Iranian internal developments have pushed Tehran to a point of strategic weakness, especially amid the chaotic environment in the Iranian street because of the popular uprising and the growing resentment against the government. The protests are a major concern for Iran's security establishment. The internal movements complicated the IRGC's foreign files as its regional priorities shifted toward Iraqi Kurdistan. The official statements of the Iranian government indicate that this region is employed as a platform to fuel the protests inside Iran against the state.

Jafari's assassination also coincided with an escalation in mutual threats and growing Israeli military operations that target either the infrastructure of Iranian militias or their military supplies. These operations are likely to increase with Netanyahu's return as head of the Israeli government,^[25] which foreshadows the upsurge in Israeli threats against Tehran and an increase in Israeli strikes in Syria to contain Iran's growing power in Syria.

Conclusion

The Iranian-Turkish escalation against the Kurds in both Syria and Iraq as well as the escalation between Iran and Israel puts the focus back on Syria as an arena of conflict for the sake of regional and international interests. The decade-long conflict still exists and is likely to escalate. Deteriorating domestic conditions in Turkey and Iran are forcing Ankara and Tehran to divert attention from the domestic strife by targeting the Kurds in northern Syria and Iraqi Kurdistan. On the other hand, Israel did not stop its attacks against Iranian targets and leaders. The Israeli raids are no longer confined to the areas near Damascus, but rather have expanded to include the cities on the Syrian coast and the Iraqi border. Israel also targeted Iranian military leaders in Syria. The prospect of this escalation gaining further momentum is very likely in the future due to the stalemate in the nuclear talks between Iran and the P5 + 1 group. Moreover, most countries are preoccupied with the Russia-Ukraine war, and Tehran is indirectly involved in the conflict despite it facing unprecedented protests.

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STUDY

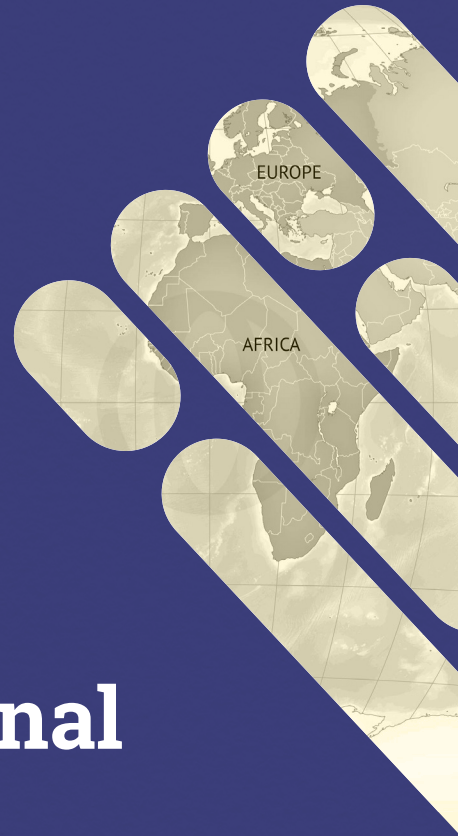
Iran's Foreign Policy Compass Amid International Conflict

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The international arena has witnessed rapid shifts amid growing strategic competition between world powers resulting in heightened conflict and confrontation. The United States found itself obliged to exert all efforts possible to protect its hegemony in a unipolar world. This has intensified the US conflict with the re-emerging Russia and ascendant China. This competition has pushed Russia and China to revive their old ties and establish new ones, providing room for smaller countries to enhance their interests, policies, and partnerships. Iran, crippled by US sanctions, has found opportunities within the international arena to enhance its interests and challenge US hegemony — which according to the Iranian perspective is adopting unjust policies toward it. Thus, the study aims to answer a significant question: to what extent have the current international shifts impacted Iran's foreign policy?...

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International Affairs

International Affairs discussed the Iranian interactions with the United States and Europe. With regard to US-Iran relations, the interactions between the two sides were addressed through four topics: the stalled nuclear talks and Iran's reduction of its nuclear commitments; Washington's intent to intensify sanctions and support the Iranian protests; and finally its enhancement of regional deterrence capabilities and Iranian attempts to impose counter pressures. As for Iran-Europe relations, the most prominent interactions between the two sides in October and November 2022 were monitored, including the European reactions to the protests in Iran as well as the growing concern about Iran's nuclear program and its arsenal.



Iran and the United States

The September 2022 file concluded that the European roadmap to revive the nuclear deal had faltered due to an unresolved point of contention: Iran's request for the IAEA to close its investigation into the uranium particles discovered at three undeclared sites. Iran has yet to provide an explanation on the matter to the agency. However, Iran's request was rejected by the United States. Accordingly, the negotiations have been complicated and the crisis returned to square one. The two sides continued to move along opposing trajectories to strengthen their bargaining positions, meanwhile the Iranian protests impacted relations between the two sides. In light of the pressures on Iran and concern that the diplomatic path might collapse, Tehran demonstrated some flexibility when it came to cooperating with the IAEA and responding to its inquiries.

This file discusses the following three topics: first, the stalled negotiations and Iran reducing its nuclear commitments; second, the US approach to intensifying sanctions and supporting the Iranian protests; and third, the United States' attempts to strength regional deterrence and Iran's efforts to balance the pressure on it.

Stalled Negotiations and Iran's Efforts to Reduce Its Nuclear Commitments

The European proposal about the roadmap to revive the nuclear agreement was stalled due to Iran's position on the need to settle the dispute with the IAEA. The US response to this issue was to back away from



supporting the negotiations temporarily. Washington used the Iranian protests as a chance to put further pressure on Iran, and the US position hardened after Iran aligned with Russia in the Russia-Ukraine war.

Although Tehran had agreed a roadmap with the IAEA to resolve all outstanding questions, Tehran noticed a shift in the US position. In this context, Mohammad Eslami, director of the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran, met with IAEA Director General Rafael Mariano Grossi on the sidelines of the IAEA General Conference Vienna in October 2022. However, Iran has not been cooperating sufficiently with the agency. Therefore, the IAEA passed a resolution on November 17, 2022 criticizing Iran. It accused Iran of rebuilding its stockpile of uranium and continuing to prevent agency officials from undertaking verification and monitoring at nuclear sites. A new resolution was passed accusing Iran of not cooperating with the IAEA's investigation into traces of uranium particles found at three undeclared sites.

Iran viewed the UN watchdog's report as a bargaining chip for the United States, therefore, it resorted to increase its uranium production to 60 percent at Fordow and on a similar production facility at the Natanz plant, as well as installing more advanced centrifuges in the two facilities. This represents a further Iranian breach of its nuclear commitments, and a step that helps it to move toward manufacturing a nuclear bomb if it decides to do so. Iran's nuclear actions provoked Washington, whose president promised that he might agree to a military option against Tehran if diplomacy, pressure and sanctions fail.⁽¹⁾

Amid the differences over many files, the US administration stated that returning to the agreement was no longer a priority. Iran's foreign minister stated that Tehran is to make concessions to Washington and will work to

reach an agreement within the framework of its red lines. The Iranian supreme leader also recommended to adequately scrutinize the course of the negotiations. He also stressed that the United States cannot be trusted, and it should not be said that Biden is different from Trump, because they are not different at all.⁽²⁾

Nevertheless, the Biden administration still believes that the JCPOA is the best way to prevent Iran from possessing a nuclear weapon. Although the Republicans have succeeded in



controlling the House of Representatives, their lackluster victory in the mid-term elections gives the Biden administration an opportunity to maintain its approach toward Iran. Therefore, while some Republicans are pushing for closing the door to reviving the JCPOA as Iran came to the negotiating table with bad intentions and to waste time, US Special Envoy for Iran Robert Malley stated that the United States will leave the door open to resume diplomacy because it is still the best method to prevent Iran from possessing nuclear weapons. Although the agreement is not on the US agenda currently, Iran does not want the negotiations to collapse. Malley believes that the United States will pursue interactions and follow-up on developments through the Europeans to avoid the point of no return.⁽³⁾

The US Approach to Intensifying Sanctions and Supporting the Iranian Protests

The Biden administration stepped up the pressure on Iran by imposing further sanctions, which affected many sectors, individuals, and companies inside Iran or those that cooperate with it abroad or its affiliated militias, and the major sanctions were the ones that affected the oil and petrochemical sectors (see Table 1). This indicates that the United States is reconsidering the intensification of pressure to deprive Iran of economic resources that can be used to enhance the legitimacy of the government. The sanctions also affected those who cooperate with Russia and produce the drones that Moscow uses in Ukraine. Accordingly, the United States, the UK and France raised this issue in the UN Security Council as it breached Security Council Resolution 2231, and the new sanctions included entities and persons involved in cracking down on the Iranian protests.

The United States has taken the Iranian protests as an opportunity to exert further pressure on the Iranian government, and probably force it to return to the negotiating table and comply with IAEA's demands. In this context, Biden supported the Iranian demand to access the internet by providing more access to secure and foreign servers. US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken met with Iranian activists to discuss what Washington could do to support the protests. At the UN, the United States supported the call for an independent investigation to hold accountable those responsible for the violence being carried out against Iranian protestors. Both the United States and Albania co-hosted a UN *Security Council* Arria-formula meeting to discuss the Iranian protests, and it included briefings, one of which was for the UN special rapporteur to provide insight into the human rights situation in Iran. US Vice President Kamala Harris said that the United States would work to remove Iran from the UN Commission on the Status of Women because of the Iranian government's violation of women's rights and crackdowns on protestors.

Table 1:The US Sanctions on Iran and Its Regional Arms During October and November 2022

Date	Sanctions
October 6 ,2022	Sanctions against Ahmad Wahidi, minister of interior and Eisa Zarepour, minister of communication and five senior officials of Iran's security apparatus for cracking down on peaceful protestors and blocking internet access in the country
October 26, 2022	Sanctions on 14 Iranian officials and three entities in Iran, and the US Treasury Department warned non-US persons or foreign companies of cooperating with these individuals or entities because they would also be exposed to third-party sanctions for violating US sanctions. These sanctions are part of the US Treasury Department's previous sanctions following the Iranian protests in September 2022 .
November 3, 2022	The US Treasury Department sanctioned a network of front and shell companies established to facilitate the illegal export of Iranian oil around the world. The network consists of six individuals, 17 entities, and is blocking 11 vessels because they helped in evading the sanctions and provided support to Hezbollah and the Quds Force of the IRGC by facilitating the sale of oil for hundreds of millions of dollars for the benefit of these two organizations
November 15, 2022	The designation of the IRGC Aerospace Force, Qods Aviation Industries, which produces Mohajer -6 drones, and Shahed Aviation Industries Research Center, which facilitate Iran's drone supplies to Russia used by Russian forces in their attack against Ukraine.
November 16, 2022	Sanctions on six senior employees of the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting because of the allegation that this media corporation is not objective and acts as a tool in the Iranian government's mass suppression and censorship campaign against its own people.
November 17,2022	The US Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) sanctioned Gulf Petrochemical Industry Commercial Co. (PGPICC) and Triliance Petrochemical Co. Ltd. (Triliance), as well as the National Iranian Oil Company (NIOC) and its marketing arm, Naftiran Intertrade Company Ltd. (NICO). These sanctions are over purchasing and facilitating the sale of Iranian petroleum and petrochemical products as well as transferring money to Iran's petrochemical sector in order to circumvent US sanctions imposed on Iran in this sector.

The United States' Attempts to Strengthen Regional Deterrence and Iran's Attempts to Balance Pressure on It

In response to US pressure, Iran announced new sanctions on US individuals and entities, including the CIA, accusing them of “inciting violence and unrest” in the Iranian republic and the Iranian supreme leader accused the United States of being behind the Iranian protests.

Raisi maintained the same position by calling the protests a failed attempt by the United States to repeat the 2011 Arab uprisings in the Iranian republic. In response to the US president's pledge to liberate Iran, Raisi stated that “the 1979 Islamic Revolution liberated Iran.” Khamenei blocked again any call for negotiations under the pressure of the Iranian protests by saying that the negotiations with the United States will not end the unrest in the country and that the United States will always ask for more, because it seeks to derail the revolution.

Iran also announced that it has tested a new satellite carrying rocket. The United States called the launch “unhelpful and destabilizing.” Iran also admitted that it shipped drones to Russia before the Russia-Ukraine war. As is well known, the United States accuses Iran of using its space program as a cover for developing its missile program.

After Iran threatened the freedom of navigation and reinvigorated its policy of escalation and transferring arms to the Houthis in Yemen, the United States resorted to further deterrence power. In this context, US forces shot down an Iranian drone in northern Iraq.⁽⁴⁾ US Central Command Commander General Michael Kurilla announced that a US-led naval force would deploy more than 100 unmanned vessels in Gulf waters within the next year to ward off maritime threats. The US Central Command launched warplanes toward Iran based in the Gulf as part of the elevated alert status of US and Saudi forces.

The United States accused Iran of launching a drone attack on an oil tanker associated with Israel off the coast of Oman. This attack coincided with the US Navy intercepting a fishing vessel bound for Yemen from Iran carrying more than 70 tons of missile fuel on board. The United States also condemned Iran's violations of Iraqi territorial sovereignty, with Tehran launching deadly attacks against the Iraqi Kurdistan Region from November 20 to November 22.

Conclusion

Both the United States and Iran declare their adherence to the negotiation's trajectory, but they are still concerned about proceeding with the final steps to reach a settlement to return to the nuclear agreement. The United States is concerned over Iran's continued hostile behavior and defiance of international norms and rules. This is clearly evident in Iran's alignment with Russia in the war against Ukraine. The Iranian drones reached the heart of Europe. The US administration is still facing internal and regional opposition about the unconditional return to the nuclear deal, i.e., without pushing Iran to make major concessions and meet key demands.

Iran believes that the international and regional transformations give it an advantage to gain more time and exert new pressures so as not to make sub-

stantial concessions at the negotiating table and that the non-closure of the agency's investigation could justify its exposure to pressure in the future and could also lead to an unconditional return to the nuclear deal; i.e., return without meeting the major conditions and demands. Washington may exploit this to impose further sanctions, or even restore all US sanctions by activating the snapback mechanism.

As the negotiations did not reach maturity, the calculated escalation from both sides will remain the driving factor behind their interactions. The United States will exert pressure on the Iranian government by imposing sanctions, supporting the protests, and condemning it internationally. At the same time, Iran will continue to strengthen its pressure cards through further reducing its nuclear commitments, and testing its ability to survive without the nuclear agreement.

Iran and Europe

The Iran and Europe file for September discussed IAEA concerns over the future of Iran's nuclear program after it failed to investigate the active configurators in Iran. The UN watchdog warned the world of Iran's growing uranium stockpile. The file also reviewed the remarks made by Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi before the UN General Assembly on the return to the nuclear deal as well as the decision of Albania's government to cut diplomatic ties with Iran. For October and November, the file discusses the continuous tensions and escalation between Iran and Europe. During these two months, the vital military aid Iran provided to Russia was not the only reason for this escalation but also the confrontational approach that the Iranian government adopted to curb internal protests and human rights violations. The Europeans, as a result, resorted to impose new sanctions on Tehran.

Fallout of the Iranian Protests in Europe

Dozens of Iranian government officials and about half a dozen organizations are subjected to renewed European punitive measures. The figures sanctioned include the provincial heads of the Iranian Law Enforcement Forces and the IRGC as well as the Commander of the Iranian Army's Ground Forces Brigadier General Kiyumars Heidari for their role in the brutal crackdown on the recent protests.⁽⁵⁾

The European Union (EU) also sanctioned Iranian state television broadcaster Press TV as "responsible for producing and broadcasting the forced confessions of detainees." Vahid Mohammad Naser Majid, the head of the Iranian Cyber Police, was blacklisted for his responsibility in arbitrarily arresting people for expressing online criticism of the Iranian government. Now, Iran's Minister of Interior Ahmad Vahidi is also on the EU sanctions blacklist for committing serious human rights violations.

The EU's punitive measures included a travel ban and an asset freeze. Besides, EU citizens and companies were barred from doing business with the listed individuals and entities. The human rights sanctions also included a ban on exports to Iran of equipment which might be used for cracking down on protestors or monitoring telecommunications.

The number of individuals and entities subject to EU punitive measures because of the Iranian government's human rights violations now total 126 individuals and 11 entities.

Georgia discovered and foiled an alleged IRGC plot to murder an Israeli businessman. According to the details released, the Iranian terror cell comprised a Pakistani and a Georgian-Iranian citizen, both of whom were arrested by the police, with weapons, ammunitions and cell phones recovered.⁽⁶⁾

British MPs received a warning from the government against the imminent



threat of cyberattacks and possible harassment in the context of ongoing protests in Iran.⁽⁷⁾ In October, an Iranian hacking group called “Homeland Justice,” leaked Albanian police files containing the names of people allegedly “suspected” of various crimes.⁽⁸⁾

Softqloud GmbH, a Germany-based company, is facing charges for helping Tehran’s efforts to censor the internet amid the ongoing protests.⁽⁹⁾ Softqloud GmbH is one of the four digital connection gates that link Iran to the World Wide Web. Another company, Arvancloud, also signed an agreement with Iran to help censor the internet. The company was providing services to Iran’s Cloud project, which is mandated to create a closed national intranet. This company rejects the charges, saying that “A cloud service provider is not able to play a role in censorship of the internet, neither in Iran nor in any other part of the world.”⁽¹⁰⁾

Growing Concerns Over Iran’s Nuclear Program and Weapons

On the nuclear front, the IAEA Board of Governors resolution noted that Iran has consistently violated its obligations under the Comprehensive Safeguards Agreement, a key part of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons.⁽¹¹⁾ The additional protocol necessitates Tehran to cooperate with the IAEA and fully account for its past and present nuclear activities.

The IAEA is running out of patience because of Iran’s procrastination in explaining the man-made uranium particles found at three undeclared nuclear sites. For four years, the UN agency has been seeking information about nuclear material and activities at a fourth site.

In November, the IAEA director general expressed “serious concern” over the lack of progress in clarifying and resolving the outstanding safeguards issues. The agency has been requesting “technically credible explanations” regarding the presence and origin of uranium particles detected at the sites in question.

Iran’s “weapons proliferation” is a threat to Europe, President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen warned while speaking at the Manama Dialogue in Bahrain. She also noted that “Several Gulf countries have been

warning for years about the risk that Iran feeds rogue nations around the world with drones.” The top EU diplomat admitted, “It took us too long to understand a very simple fact that while we work to prevent Iran from developing nuclear weapons, we must also focus on other forms of weapons proliferation, from drones to ballistic missiles.”⁽¹²⁾

Conclusion

For Iran, relations with Europe are no longer linked to US concerns over its nuclear program. For the Europeans, especially the E3 (the UK, Germany and France), Iran’s human rights violations are a serious cause for concern. Tehran has repeatedly persecuted dissidents and will not relent. As a result, European states will have to safeguard their sovereignty and the rights of their citizens as well as the people of Iran who will otherwise increasingly choose to take refuge on the continent— escaping the repression of the Iranian political system.

Endnotes

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