

MONTHLY REPORT

Iran Case File

January 2023

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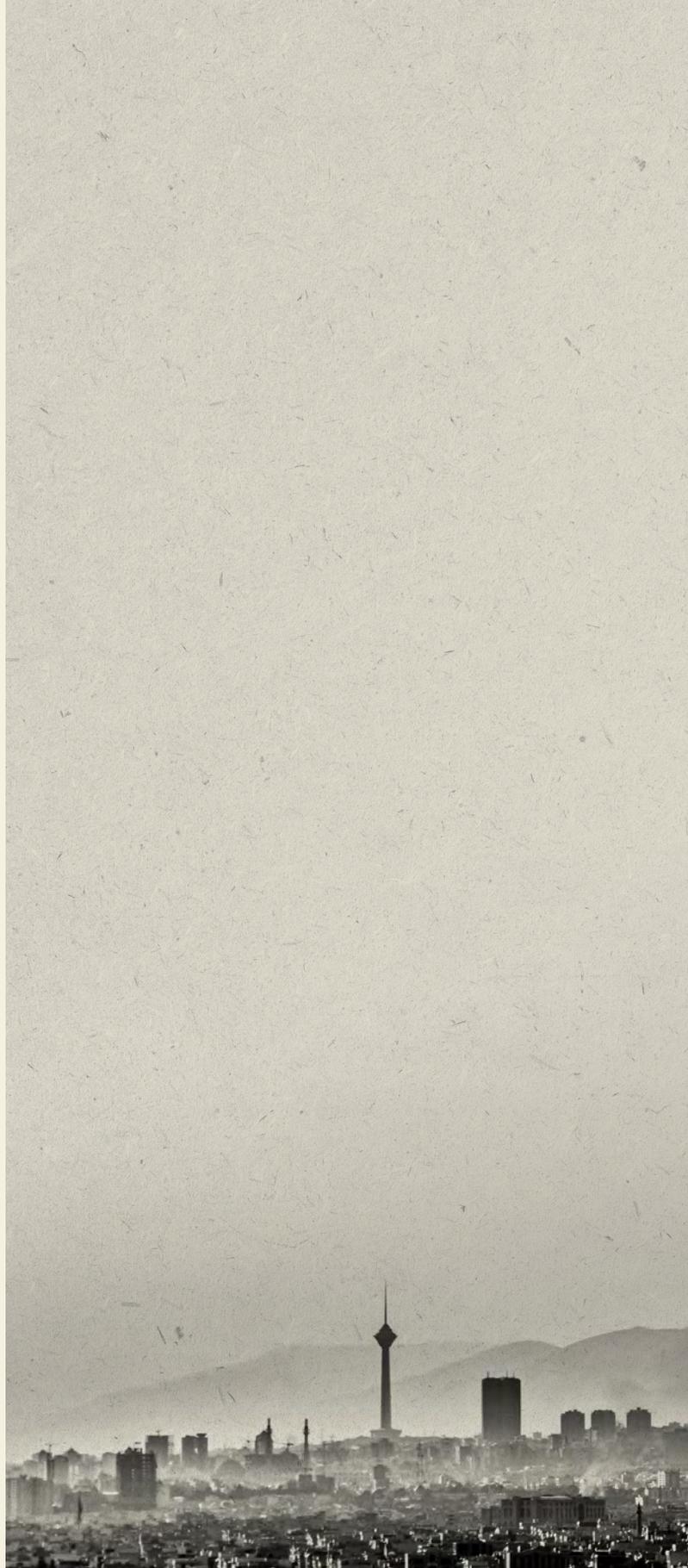
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Contents

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	04
INTERNAL AFFAIRS	08
The Political File	10
The Economic File	13
The Military File	16
The Ideological File	19
The Social File	21
EXTERNAL AFFAIRS	24
The Arab and Regional File	26
The International File	35



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In January 2023, Iranian internal affairs witnessed accelerating and multiple developments at the various ideological, political, economic, military and social levels. As for Iran's relations with Arab neighbors and international actors, they were awash with overlapping events and interactions which are expected to overshadow all internal and external files in Iran over the coming period.

At the political level, the Iranian government has lost most of its popular support on which it relies to demonstrate its legitimacy and international standing. This loss is the result of flawed policies, the ongoing repression against protestors and a failure to resolve Iran's debilitating economic woes in recent years. The deterioration in the government's legitimacy is not limited to dwindling popular support. Many former officials who held top positions in the Iranian government have become outspoken critics and opponents of the political system, even calling for changing it.

At the economic level, the government's financial plan for the Iranian fiscal year 1402 HS —or the new budget plan, the government's spending priorities and its vision of how to generate revenues from multiple sources, including raising the overall growth of revenues by 47 percent through increases in oil and tax revenues as well as selling bonds and government assets were among the important economic events in Iran in January 2023. It has become clear that the Iranian government has exaggerated

the expected revenues. This makes it likely that the government will face a financial deficit by the end of the year. With regard to spending priorities, the government's spending plan revealed an increase in the spending allocated to defense (36 percent increase in the army's budget for example, as well as an increase in allocations for internal security and the state institutions responsible for propaganda at the expense of spending on development and investment which is necessary for boosting economic growth). Despite a large rise in the social welfare budget and a 20 percent increase in the wages of state employees, the social welfare umbrella does not cover all Iranians. Yet, the pay boost was less than the high cost of living and inflation rates that hover around 40 percent. This means that Iranians' purchasing power will continue to erode, as will consumer expenditure, which stimulates economic growth.

At the military level, the deepening of Iranian military cooperation with Russia since the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine war will have consequences in the short, medium and long run on the regional and global security architecture. Iran hopes to meet its need for military equipment and other weaponry, particularly Su35- Flanker-E Russian fighter jets. This is in addition to Iran obtaining Russia's approval to produce military equipment, taking advantage of Russia's reliance on it in the Russia-Ukraine war.

Ideologically, Sunni scholars in Iran are still exerting pressure on Iran's ruling establishment to change its behavior when dealing with the Sunni-majority provinces. They also want an investigation into the Friday massacre in Zahedan. This pressure remained limited to the governmental and popular levels, failing to reach any further levels. But, the government appears to be acting obstinately, pressing ahead with its plans, first completely rejecting Sunni demands and then seeking to malign and distort religious figures through media attacks and calling their intentions into question.

At the social level, the deteriorating living conditions, political crises and the accumulating crises within Iranian society have led to desperation and frustration within Iranian society. Crushed by these crises, Iran has recently seen a significant increase in elite emigration (brain drain) to various countries worldwide. There has also been a spike in suicides.

Iran's relations with Arab neighbors and the international community witnessed important developments in January 2023.

At the Arab level, particularly Iran-Gulf interactions, both Qatar and Oman served as two outlets of hope for the Iranian government to bring closer the viewpoints between itself and the West. This comes after the divergence of views between Iran and the West had reached unprecedented levels across all issues, particularly in the context of the Iranian nuclear issue and Iran's support for Russia in its war on Ukraine. In this respect, Qatar has continued its efforts aimed to resuscitate the nuclear deal, while Oman hosted over the past period a round of talks between Iran and Ukraine. With regard

to the developments related to the negotiations between Saudi Arabia and Iran, observers expect that Iraq will continue to act as a mediator and that the sixth round of talks will be held soon. However, the negotiations' success requires more seriousness on the part of Iran.

The file on Iraqi affairs covers the continued and evolving features of Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shia' al Sudani's internal and foreign policies. The file focuses on the main characteristics of his policies such as his sustained security measures to safeguard sovereignty and domestic balance, his efforts to re-establish mediation between Tehran and Riyadh and his continued openness to the Gulf states as well as to regional and international actors. It became obvious that Sudani continues to pursue his foreign policy based on the notion of striking balances, despite the fact that he is experiencing hurdles that may slow his progress down in comparison to his predecessor Mustafa al-Kadhimi. Yet, these moves are positive and may encourage the continuance of key projects with the Gulf states.

In Syria, several Iranian concerns have emerged after the signs of Turkish-Syrian rapprochement that emerged over the past period. Iran fears it could lose its clout in Syria. It rushed to send its Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian to Damascus and Ankara to set the record straight and reiterate that there will be no settlement in Syria without Iran's participation. Additionally, Iran's foreign minister announced that Iran's President Ebrahim Raisi intends to visit Damascus, which highlights the deep concerns among Iran's decision-making

circles that there could be a new formula concerning Syria's future that excludes Iran. However, this rapprochement also involves immediate benefits for Iran, whether with the Syrian government taking control of the rest of the country's territories, or with the three actors — Russia, Iran and Turkey— all having a common interest in curbing Kurdish-US clout in Syria.

In Yemen, political momentum, and incessant moves — both at the regional and UN levels — were restored with Omani mediation and the holding of several rounds of talks. Yet, the UN Special Envoy for Yemen Hans Grundberg conducted a tour which aimed to quell the military escalation in Yemen and reach a truce again. Despite these moves, it appears that the Houthis are insisting on increasing the level of their demands to the point of rendering unsuccessful the international efforts to resume peace talks with the internationally recognized Yemeni government.

At the international level, diplomatic efforts to resurrect the nuclear deal have faltered as has the Biden administration's policy of lowering tensions with Iran. For the time being, the developments indicate that escalation will be the defining feature of US-Iran relations. For its part, the Biden administration has upped the pressure on Iran due to disagreements on a range of issues and questions, the most important of which were disagreements over the aspects of a roadmap for returning to the nuclear deal. Iran's role in the Russia-Ukraine war as well as its provision of drones and advisers, posed a significant barrier to efforts to resurrect the nuclear deal. There is little doubt that this problem has presented

Washington with a tremendous opportunity to unify transatlantic efforts against Iran. There is now greater US-European coordination on Iran. The domestic situation in Iran, including mass protests, has prompted the United States to tighten sanctions against Iran. However, the resumed policy of maximum pressure by the West on Iran did not deter it, instead, Tehran continues maneuvering amid the current developments on the global stage.

With regard to Iranian-European interactions, relations between the two sides have worsened following Iran's brutal suppression of the protests that have erupted in several Iranian cities since September 2022 following the death of Kurdish woman Mahsa Amini at one of the morality police's detention facilities. The spike in Russian attacks on Ukrainian civilians using Iranian drones exacerbated the European anger at Iran, which prompted the Europeans to call for placing Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) on the European terror blacklist. On the other side, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) has warned that Iran may have enough fissile material to build a nuclear bomb.



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INTERNAL AFFAIRS



In Internal Affairs, the Iranian Case File (ICF) for January 2023 sheds light on five essential files. In the Political File, the role of the growing popular discontent in deepening the legitimacy crisis that the Iranian government is facing, which has recently taken on a new character, with former officials and “reformist” figures calling for regime change is discussed. In the Economic File, the new Iranian fiscal year’s budget bill starting from March 21, 2023, is spotlighted. The file provides answers to several questions such as those related to the government’s priorities in light of the domestic situation it is experiencing, and how the government will secure the new budget’s revenues. The Military File casts light on the significance of Iran’s defense cooperation with Russia, the potential implications for regional and global security and Iran’s potential gains from this partnership, particularly with regard to obtaining some Russian-made fighter jets. Regarding the Ideological File, it highlights the criticisms leveled by Sunni scholar Moulavi Abdulhamid against the Iranian government’s security policies as well as the campaigns waged against Abdulhamid by newspapers close to the ruling establishment to publicly mar his reputation. The fifth file discusses Iran’s internal and social issues. In this file, the rise in some dangerous trends in Iranian society such as brain drain and suicides caused by deteriorating living conditions are highlighted.

The Political File

Since the victory of the 1979 revolution, the Iranian leadership has relied on its popular base to achieve legitimacy and demonstrate its prowess on the Iranian street. However, as a result of the Iranian political system's repressive policies, exclusionary approach, and failure to address the multiple and back-to-back crises that have gripped the country in recent years, the Iranian leadership has begun to lose its popular base, which it mobilizes to participate in all events and occasions it organizes. The political system has also lost many of its staunch supporters in recent years who held sensitive positions in the state apparatus but now they have shifted to the opposition.

Popular Discontent Deepens the Legitimacy Crisis

Everyone agrees that Iran is experiencing the severest political and economic conditions in its history as a result of the punishing sanctions imposed by the United States, which have tightened the noose around the Iranian economy. This is in addition to the tsunami of ceaseless protests which Iran has witnessed over the past years, the last of which were sparked in response to the killing of Kurdish woman Mahsa Amini at one of the morality police's detention facilities in September 2022. These current protests, which have not dwindled but rather acquired unexceptional momentum, have put the Iranian government at serious risk as it has so far been unable to stop the popular expansion and support for the protests. In addition, protestors have used slogans against the ruling system and its figures. These slogans have reached the point of calling for struggle until the system is toppled and replaced with a new system that respects the will of the people, preserves their national resources and eliminates injustice, poverty, and international isolation.

So far, the "hardliners" in Iran have not taken any tangible steps to dial

down the mounting discontent on the Iranian street. But some officials and pro-government figures have started to warn of the dangers of continuing to antagonize the people, reminding of the latter's role in the victory of the revolution and its importance in its sustainability. In this respect, Iran's Parliament Speaker Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf said, "The Islamic revolution is meaningless without the people. The revolution won't be Islamic unless the people participate." In an attempt to play on the heartstrings of the Iranian street and appease the public, Ghalibaf said, "Iran's essential source of strength against enemies is the people, not its military equipment or powerful missiles."⁽¹⁾

The Shift in the "Reformists" Position and Calls for Regime Change

The "reformists," who have been calling for reforming the Iranian political system for decades, have experienced divergence in their ranks, especially among key figures. Some have criticized the government's treatment of the people, calling for reforming the current political system (without dismantling it). Others have expressed

frustration with the reform of the ruling establishment, calling for it to be replaced.

Mohsen Rahami, a cleric, “reformist” activist and former lawmaker, said that the ruling establishment is only respected and sanctified when it works to secure the satisfaction of the people. He cited the former USSR, saying, “None has dared to doubt the military, nuclear and missile capabilities of the USSR. But we saw that when a military loses the people’s approval, the military force, missiles, nuclear bombs and satellites never help this regime survive.” These comments reiterate the possibility of the government being toppled in case the repression, dictatorship and crackdown continue.

“Reformist” activist Sadegh Zibakalam previously described the popular discontent and protests as “brewing anger.” He has called for gradual and continued reforms to find a way out of the current dilemma.⁽²⁾

Yet, Azar Mansouri, a “reformist” activist and secretary general of the Union of Islamic Iran People Party, said it is not easy to heal the collapsed mistrust between the people and the ruling establishment. To overcome the crisis, she advocated “first admitting that previous wrong decisions have created a chasm between decision-makers and society, and then recognizing the right to protest.”⁽³⁾

Former Iranian President Mohammad Khatami stated that the reforms have hit a snag and have come to a halt. The people are not to blame if they have reached their breaking point with the ruling system. He dismissed the role of the enemy in inciting the recent protests, stressing that there is a great gap between the people and the lead-



ership, predicting a grim future for the ruling elite.⁽⁴⁾

The sharpest criticism toward the ruling system was voiced by “reformist” leader Mir-Hossein Mousavi who has been under house arrest for a decade now. In a statement, he called for making radical reforms and taking practical steps not to secure legitimacy for the ruling system and ensuring its survival but to preserve Iran. In this respect, he mentioned the reasons behind the persistent protests against state policies, including intransigence and insistence on repression rather than dialogue.

To find a way out of this dilemma, Mousavi called for saving Iran from the accumulating crises through a series of measures including the following:

First, conducting a free and fair referendum on the necessity of changing or drafting a new Constitution for the state.

Second, in case the people positively respond, a constituent assembly should be formed, which will consist of real representatives of the people through free and fair elections.

Third, conducting a referendum on the new provision approved by this assembly to establish a system based on the rule of law, in accordance with human rights and the will of the people.⁽⁵⁾

Mousavi’s statement on saving Iran includes an unequivocal call for the current political system to be replaced and a new democratic system to be established. As a result, Mousavi shifted from a government supporter to an opponent. His recent positions mark a turning point in the political trajectory of a generation of Iranian politicians who until recently had been staunch supporters of the Iranian revolution

and the power structure that subsequently emerged. The importance of the shift in Mousavi’s thoughts and positions lies in the fact that he is one of the first-generation revolutionaries. He had unyielding belief in the revolution and its principles. He was a prime minister and a close aide to the founder of the Iranian republic Ruhollah Khomeini. Until recently, he was a member of the Expediency Discernment Council.

The Iranian administration has so far failed to put a stop to the protest movement that has been going on since September 2022. It has made no concessions to quell the popular discontent or to escape the vortex of peril that is threatening its own existence. Iranian officials referring to the protestors as stooges and conspirators appears to indicate that the ruling elite does not care about nor is it paying attention to the issue of legitimacy for the time being. The leadership is aware that its standing and legitimacy have weakened dramatically and that any retreat will not satisfy the Iranian street. It has opted to crack down on the protestors as it believes that any concessions will raise the level of demands, forcing it to make further concessions in the future.

The Economic File

The Iranian Parliament has passed the budget bill for the coming fiscal year (starting March 21, 2023). The bill includes the government's budgetary plan for the upcoming fiscal year as well as the government's priorities in light of the delicate internal and economic conditions and ongoing street protests in Iran. How will the government secure revenues for the budget? What are the expenditure aspects and the government's spending priorities for the coming year? What are the significations of this given the current economic and social circumstances in which poverty and unemployment rates are rising and food, beverage and housing costs have risen by 50 percent to 80 percent in recent months?



Iran's operational budget for the fiscal year 2023/2024 is anticipated to be 2,164 trillion tomans, or roughly \$49 billion at the free market exchange rate. The budget has grown by 40 percent over the previous year. The toman, the local currency, was devalued against the US dollar, falling from 4,200 tomans to 23,000 tomans.

We note here that devaluing the local currency will increase export revenues but at the same time, will increase the inflation rate. The significant growth in the budget (40 percent) is not much, it is nominal, considering the fact that the inflation rate surpassed 40 percent in 2022. It will continue to hover around the same rate and could even increase in 2023, according to the International Monetary Fund's (IMF) estimates.⁽⁶⁾

Thus, this year the Iranian budget is best described as a "contractionary budget." It can hardly keep the same expense levels as the previous year, with no genuine increase that exceeds current and predicted inflation rates.

With regard to the new budget's revenues, the Iranian government predicts the following:

- Growth of oil revenues by 58 percent as 1.5 million barrels per day are exported at \$85 per barrel.
- Growth of tax revenues by 57 percent.
- Significant spike in local borrowing through selling government bonds at 110 percent.
- Selling part of state-run enterprises.
- Growth of overall public revenues by nearly 47 percent.

We observe that the Iranian government is grossly exaggerating its revenue projections. This is because predictions indicate that global economies will face a phase of recession in 2023, which will negatively impact consumption patterns and imports of oil, hence forcing prices to drop. On the other hand, despite the lax implementation of US sanctions placed on it last year, Iran did not reach this level of oil exports (1.5 million barrels per day). However, forecasts of a significant increase in tax revenues are not commensurate with Iran's deteriorating economic situation, which means difficulty in tax collection and an increase in tax evasion, as well as the increasing likelihood of inflationary pressures due to the increase in government debts. Therefore, it is likely that the government will see a considerable deficit by the end of the fiscal year 2023/2024. It is worth noting that the deficit of the current budget whose fiscal year has yet to end reached 300 trillion tomans (\$7 billion) at the free market's exchange rate.

In the context of expenditures, the proposed increase in budgetary allocations compared to the previous budget can be viewed in Table 1:⁽⁷⁾

Table 1: Rates of Increase in 2023/2024 Budget Compared to 2021/2022 Budget

Sector	Rate of increase compared to the previous budget
Army	36% Including the IRGC, Defense Ministry and the law enforcement forces. The increase does not include the regular army or the general staff
Police	44%
Intelligence	52%
Prisons	55%
Islamic propagation	53%
Radio	47%
Social welfare	78%
Grants and financial subsidies	11%
Wages of state servants and pensioners	20%
Government infrastructure investments	25%
Current expenditures	62%

Based on the previous distribution of expenditures, we notice the following:

- There is an emphasis on increasing the allocations for the security and defense apparatuses, both constitute 18 percent of the overall budget. There is also a greater increase in the budgetary allocation for ideological apparatuses when compared to other state sectors, except for social welfare.
- Emphasis on the running or oper-

ational expenditures rather than on investment. This means directing expenditures to keep state apparatuses running by paying wages and so on rather than increasing and boosting production capacities. The 25 percent allocation for investment purposes is lower than the expected inflation rate.

- There is also a decline in real wages and pensions. With the expected real inflation rate of at least 40 percent according to the IMF, this will mean that the proposed 20 percent increase in wages is just half the needed increase to maintain the same purchasing power rather than increasing it. This comes at a time when the monthly minimum pay for government employees is 7 million tomans (\$171 at the free exchange rate of 41,000 tomans), while the average poverty line for a household of four was 7.7 million tomans (approximately \$188) two years ago.

We conclude that the budget in general is characterized by a lack of real growth commensurate with the high inflation rates. The budget mainly focuses on hiked allocations for the state's internal and external security apparatuses as well as its ideological ones instead of more directed for the purposes of development and improving the deteriorating economic conditions that have put pressure on the Iranian street, prompting Iranians to stage continued protests. Furthermore, there is an exaggeration in estimating next year's revenues. Therefore, we expect that there will be a budget deficit, eroding production capacities, and continued printing of banknotes, thereby exacerbating the already chronic inflation crisis in the country. For citizens, we expect an erosion of purchasing power and further deterioration in living con-

ditions than in 2022 and a surge in the number of those falling below the poverty line. Perhaps this could foment social tensions and give further momentum to the protest movement.

The Military File

Iran's deepening defense partnership with Russia since the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine war might lead to short, medium and long-term implications for regional and global security. Tehran's shopping list— despite how long it might be — appears possible due to the increasing dependence of Moscow on Tehran on its war in Ukraine. Iran might not only receive Russia's Su-35 Flanker-E fighter jets but it will also host its drone factory on Russian soil. Tehran is eyeing the prospect of producing Russian military hardware on its soil and the sky is the limit.

Iran enters 2023 with high hopes for enhanced strategic clout and long-awaited military modernization. As Iranian airports prepare hardened hangars and maintenance workshops, its air force pilots and engineering personnel in Russia are honing their skills on the Su-35, the latest generation of the Su-27 whose NATO reporting name is Flanker-E. The two squadrons – 24 jets – are being sold to Iran as part of a comprehensive strategic partnership deal. The jets were originally built for another country, but it withdrew from the deal because of the Russia-Ukraine war and opted for Western systems. With its 3,500-kilometer-range, passive electronically scanned array (PESA) and a dozen hard points to carry munitions, the Su-35 will significantly upgrade Iran's vintage air force. The date of delivery is not yet clear, but some news outlets report it as the end of March when Iran's calendar year begins.

Mehdi Bakhtiari, an Iranian military expert, said: “.... it is not possible to determine an exact time of delivery unless we see the aircraft on the runway of one of the country's military airports because ups and downs of relations between countries can sometimes be affected by a series of changes that are effective in the delivery or even

non-delivery of such products.”⁽⁸⁾

Though the Su-35 in its standard form is an excellent fighter jet for Iran's requirements regarding type and range of weapons, it is not clear yet whether Russia will incorporate Iran's requested upgrades in the systems and weapons package or whether Moscow will consider Gulf security and deny Iran provision of long beyond-visual range (BVR) or standoff weapons.⁽⁹⁾

Iran's Su-35s at their best capability will remain inferior to Saudi Arabia's F-15SAs, Bahrain's F-16s Block 60 and UAE's F-16s Block 70. Gulf air forces not only have the advantage of more sophisticated EASA radars, long range standoff weapons and experienced pilots flying their respective fighter jets but also their integration in multi-domain operations. Heightening tensions on the Azeri border besides the ever-present threat of war with its Arab neighbors, two dozen 4.5-generation fighter jets will not make much difference. However, Su-35s will potentially complement its MiG-29s in combat air patrol. Besides an array of air-to-air and air-to-ground weapons, Iran is likely to get more advanced anti-ship and anti-radiation missiles. As a knee-jerk reaction, Azerbaijan will speed up its procurement of a modern fight-



er jet. Realistically speaking, Iran will need a few years to fully integrate the new planes into its military strategy. For years, Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) has been conducting drills to hone its multidomain operation skills. This new muscle will further intensify the process.

Besides upgrading its air force, Iran has been in dire need of Russia's 300 modern T-90 tanks, and Moscow is willing to give Tehran licensed production rights.⁽¹⁰⁾ Since the invasion of Ukraine is not going to plan, the Kremlin needs modern main battle tanks more than its allies. Although there is no hope for any future acquisition of tanks from Moscow, Tehran has also reportedly been providing munitions and spare parts from its stockpiles of Russian or their Chinese iteration of tanks to Moscow. The likelihood of more T-90 tanks is non-existent as long as the Russia-Ukraine war remains hot. No gunship helicopters are likely to be exported but the Kremlin may sell Iran S-400 batteries sometime in 2024. So far, Tehran claims to have developed

its own equivalent of the S-400 missile defense system. Since the removal of sanctions over Iran's export and import of military hardware, it has been in talks with various nations for industrial cooperation.

Iran is seeking to develop its independent defense production capability. It has invested significantly in developing reverse engineering know-how over the decades. It sourced Western weapons from Afghanistan and Iraq, including the debris of drones, planes and missiles. Russia is providing examples of Western arms captured from Ukrainian forces to Iran as part of the comprehensive defense cooperation. It can help both sides. Besides, Iran is establishing a drone factory in Yelabuga, about 600 miles east of Moscow.⁽¹¹⁾ Though the factory is yet to be constructed, the threat of more capable, quieter and heavier drones in the hands of Russia, Iran, Hezbollah, Ansar Allah and the Wagner Group is real. Like China, Russia's technology exports, including arms sales, will be increasingly hampered by the US ban

on advanced semi-conductors.

Going back to the import of Su-35s and linking it to its quest for self-reliance, Iran has a template to follow, albeit a difficult one. In 2000, China acquired Su-27s from Russia as kits to be assembled locally. In 2004, the co-operation ended because China began producing its domestic copy using Russian engines it had purchased earlier, which was a violation of the agreement. Today, the most advanced Flanker descendants – J-16s and J-15s – fly in Chinese not Russian skies. Geostrategic compulsions and trade incentives led Moscow to sell 24 Su-35 Flanker-Es to Beijing, knowing full well that they would be used to upgrade China's own Flanker variants. For the Kremlin, Beijing is a reliable partner that not only brings good business but also helps relieve significant international pressure. It is fair to assume that Moscow is aware that Tehran will try to use the know-how from the Su-35 to polish its domestic aviation products. It also knows that Iran is no China due to its limited industrial base, constricted supply chain and limited highly skilled manpower. Tehran has deep inroads in the global black-market of technology, hence in the medium term, it may come up with its long dreamed of capable fighter jet.

In the short term, Iran is going to comply with its commitment to supply ballistic and cruise missiles of choice to Russia for its spring offensive in Ukraine. The sale of a few thousand expendable drones will not fetch \$2 billion or more to pay for 24 Su-35s.

Iran's efforts to integrate Russia's military technology into its air force; the weakest component in its defense triad, will get an immense morale boost

while not being able to achieve a balance of power with its neighbors and adversaries alike. Tehran will continue its efforts to integrate its reverse-engineered and improvised munitions to enhance the platform's capability.

The Ideological File

There are still deep rifts between the Iranian establishment — and its religious elite — and the Sunni leaders in Ahwaz and other provinces following the continued protests that Iran has been witnessing since last September. The government still adopts the carrot-and-stick approach to calm the situation in the Sunni provinces and puts pressure on Sunni dignitaries to defuse tensions.



- Moulavi Abdulhamid's criticism of the political system:** The Sunni Friday prayer leader in Zahedan continues to criticize the government's security policies pursued from time to time. In a clear and explicit criticism of the ruling elite due to the security measures in Sistan and Balochistan, he said, "Those in their 80s and 90s cannot take decisions for today's youth." It appears that Abdulhamid was referring to Khamenei, who is 83, and other officials such as Ahmad Jannati, the Assembly of Experts chief, who is 95. Abdulhamid called for changing the Constitution and laws which he views as the root cause of Iran's problems. "Everywhere in the world, laws are updated after 20 or 30 years. Unfortunately, our Consti-

tution didn't see change in 44 years. The authorities should take into account the new circumstances." However, he rejected the "Death to Khamenei" slogan and called on the protesters not to chant such slogans again.⁽¹²⁾

Thus, Abdulhamid is exerting pressure through three issues. The first is his criticism of Iranian officials and their inability to understand the demands of the youth and women. The second is the call for changing the Constitution. The third is, at the same time, his rejection of insulting the supreme leader. This rejection of the "Death to Khamenei" slogan is per se a pressure on the ruling establishment since it makes it difficult for the Iranian leadership to target or arrest him. Adviser and member of Abdulhamid's office Abdul Majid Muradzahi revealed the intense pressures imposed on Abdulhamid to prevent the protests in Zahedan. He said, "He (Abdulhamid) was threatened and intimidated." But Muradzahi asserted, "The protests will continue as long as the issue of bloody Fridays and those killed and wounded remain unresolved."⁽¹³⁾

- Pressure and threats:** Among the host of pressures on Abdulhamid is the defamation and distortion campaigns carried out by Iranian newspapers against him. Iran newspaper wrote an article titled "The CIA Investment in

Moulavi Abdulhamid” who has played a role in the protests in Zahedan since the unrest began. Despite the end of the protests, according to the newspaper, he has continued his role in undermining security and national unity through his divisive remarks.⁽¹⁴⁾ Criticizing Abdulhamid, Mohsen Kouhkan said, “It’s better for the people in the country to know that we have many great, famous and knowledgeable Sunni scholars. The blame is attributed to the radio and television apparatus which does not put a spotlight on them. Now, only Abdulhamid is the famous Sunni scholar.” He also blamed the presidential candidates who visited Abdulhamid only. “All the presidents should rectify this mistake.”⁽¹⁵⁾ It is as if he points to the possibility of finding an alternative to Abdulhamid to lead the Sunnis or that he is encouraging Iranian politicians to hold meetings with other Sunni scholars to strip him of the symbolism and presence he enjoys among Sunnis. On the other side, the Iranian authorities arrested Muradzahi. According to IRNA news agency, he was arrested on accusations of “stirring up public opinion.”⁽¹⁶⁾ It appears that this step is a message to Abdulhamid: he is not immune to being targeted or arrested.

This is not the first time one has witnessed tensions between the political system and Abdulhamid. There are deep differences between the two sides which have surfaced over the past years. Abdulhamid has called more than once for changing the Iranian Constitution so that ethnic and religious minorities can secure their full rights. The political system blames Abdulhamid for not being completely loyal to the establishment, thus he cannot be fully controlled by it. Needless

to say, Abdulhamid puts the establishment in an embarrassing position both regionally and international.

The Social File

The harsh living conditions that Iran is experiencing have resulted in a number of social problems. The ruling religious elite's domestic and foreign policy options have disillusioned the Iranian people, creating an atmosphere of pessimism about prospects for improvement, at least in the medium term. These problems have forced many Iranians to commit suicide and thousands have left the country.

Iran's Brain Drain Extends to Include University Students

The brain drain among Iranians has recently peaked. According to the Iran Migration Observatory, the number of students who left the nation surpassed 66,000. This figure suggests that the number of Iranian students who opted to emigrate is increasing. Yet, asylum seeking grew by 35 percent in 2021, whereas the global rate is 30 percent, indicating that asylum seekers fleeing Iran was greater than the global average. The causes for the increase in migration, according to the observatory's head, include the country's dreadful living conditions. Of the 85 million inhabitants, 63 million are of working age, and 40 percent are economically active.⁽¹⁷⁾ More importantly, Iranians have lost hope that the situation will improve. According to a poll conducted by the observatory, in the summer and spring of 2022, 74 percent of students said that the country's future is grim and gloomy. The poll showed 53.5 percent of respondents had a negative outlook regarding the country's future, while 20.1 percent had a very negative outlook.⁽¹⁸⁾

Doctors leaving the country reflects the drain brain problem among the educated and elite strata. This issue caused great controversy in January. The head of the Medical Council of Iran

expressed concern about the increasing rate of emigration among doctors. The emigration of any doctor is a huge loss since the cost of educating a medical student is high. He announced that the council receives 3,000 applications for emigration every year. In January 2023, a member of the Parliament's Health Committee indicated that a substantial number of doctors are currently migrating to the Gulf states. More than 4,000 Iranian doctors have emigrated from Iran in the last three years. Donya-e-Eqtesad newspaper published in on September 11, 2022 a report in which it announced that 160 cardiologists left Iran during the year. According to the newspaper, 16,000 general practitioners have emigrated from Iran in the last four months. On the other side, the Ministry of Health warned of a staffing crisis. Official Ministry of Health statistics show a nursing staff shortage of at least 100,000 nurses. This comes at a time when the Minister of Health Dr. Behrang Eynollahi dismissed published reports concerning the level of emigration by doctors as media hyperbole, claiming that the human resources situation is good. "We don't have any issue providing services⁽¹⁹⁾, and the ministry has upgraded the quality of education and training so that it has the necessary efficiency to eliminate the threat," he said.⁽²⁰⁾



The Crises Gripping Iran Are Causing a Spike in Suicide Rates

Among the most salient indicators exposing desperation and frustration within Iranian society is the rise in suicides. According to reports, 23 workers committed suicide between March 21, 2022 and December 29, 2022, or within 283 days, due to poverty, delayed salaries, wage dues, or layoffs and dismissals from work. Officials in the health and social support sectors, university professors and social scientists have warned of the seriousness of the escalation of crises in Iranian society as conflict, violence, murder, theft, betrayal, suicide, kidnapping, child abuse, embezzlement, corruption and moral degradation have increased. They considered that the increase in suicide figures is a natural result of ignoring the continued impact of the living, psychological and social crises on human beings. According to statistics, 71 percent to 80 percent of suicide victims are under the age of 40, indicating that the majority are young people.^[21]

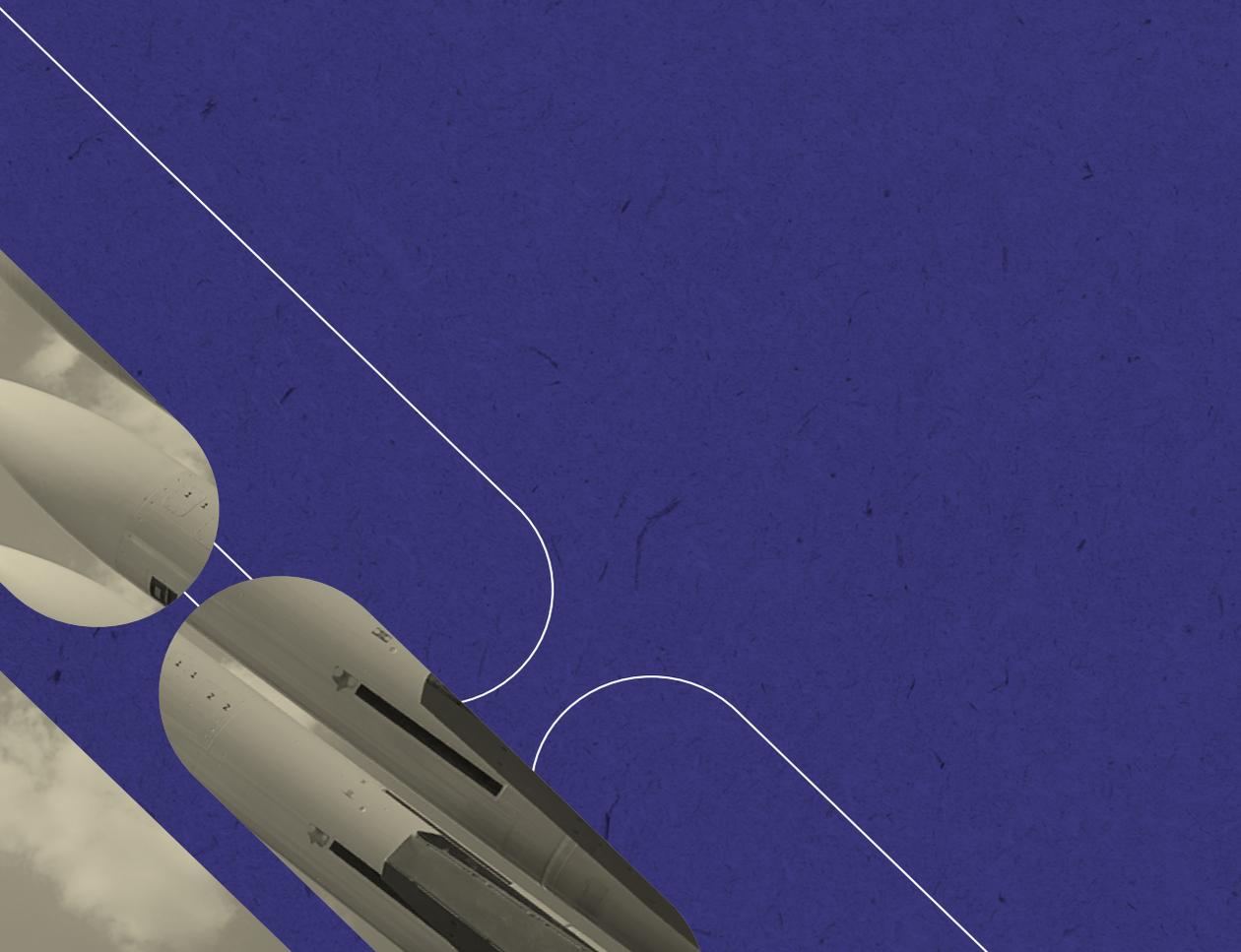
Several factors are leading to hiked rates of immigration and suicide in Iran: social, cultural, psychological, economic, and political factors. The last two factors, however, play the big-

gest role in the high rates of emigration and suicide. Iran has seen a significant increase in unemployment, a lack of job opportunities, inflation, and rising living costs in recent years, in addition to further crackdowns on freedoms, and handing down of harsh sentences including executions.

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EXTERNAL AFFAIRS



External Affairs discusses Iranian relations and interactions with Arab and international actors. At the Arab level, the Gulf states, represented by Qatar and the Oman, served as two outlets for Iran. The two countries are making huge efforts to bring close the viewpoints of Iran and the Western countries, whether with regard to the nuclear talks or discussing the tensions between the two sides. These tensions were generated after the Western countries accused Iran of supporting Russia in its war on Ukraine. In the context of Iraq, the file discusses the domestic and foreign characteristics of the policy of the new Iraqi premier toward Iran, his internal and external motives to pursue the policy of striking balances and the challenges obstructing him from pursuing this policy. As for Syria, the file discusses the tour of Iran's foreign minister which included Syria, Lebanon and Turkey and the messages Iran wanted to send through this tour. With regard to Yemen, the file discusses the new round of peace talks aimed to bring to a halt the Yemeni crisis and the Houthis' position on the international efforts to bring about peace in Yemen.

Internationally, the file discusses the decline of diplomatic efforts to revive the nuclear deal and the United States resuming the policy of pressures, deterrence and sanctions through three courses of action: supporting internal protests, targeting drone manufacturing facilities and attacking the Iranian oil industry. When it comes to Europe-Iran relations, the file discusses the significant deterioration in relations between the two sides, with the European countries opting for imposing sanctions on the IRGC as a result of the violent repression carried out by the Iranian government against protesters and its continued support for Russia in its war on Ukraine.

The Arab and Regional File

Iran and the Gulf States

The role of the Gulf continues to evolve in international interactions. This includes the attempted efforts to de-escalate in the Gulf region. In response to Iran's involvement in the Russia-Ukraine conflict, any return to the nuclear deal between Iran and the P5+1 is unlikely in the short term, especially amid Tehran's strained relations with Europe due to its military support to Russia and its human rights violations during the recent popular protests. This consequently will leave no room to improve the economic situation amid Iran's deteriorating conditions, complicating the landscape for Iranian decision-makers, especially amid the ever-widening gap between the Iranian people and the political system due to the latter's failure to meet public demands.

Accordingly, the Gulf countries, in particular Qatar and Oman, offer hope for the Iranian political system, particularly to narrow the difference between Iran and the sponsoring states of the nuclear deal. The gap between Tehran and the West has reached an unprecedented level in all issues and files, especially the nuclear deal. However, given the current reality, Qatar persists in its efforts and attempts to mediate between Iran and the Western countries to revive the nuclear talks.

Qatar's foreign minister met his Iranian counterpart Hossein Amir-Abdollahian during his visit to Tehran on January 29, 2023. The two foreign ministers held a joint press conference during which they outlined the major points of discussion. Regarding Iran-Gulf relations, the Iranian for-

eign minister welcomed Qatar's view on fostering regional dialogue to clear up some misunderstandings, tensions, and regional problems. However, he believes that talks and accountability are necessary preconditions for achieving strong and long-term collaboration in the region. He also thanked the Qatari foreign minister, who he identified as a brother, for Qatar's mediating role in the nuclear talks. This, therefore, demonstrates how important the efforts of Qatar are to Iran, and that Doha is working tirelessly to restart the nuclear talks. Significantly, Iran's foreign minister drew a link between the nuclear talks and the Russia-Ukraine war by saying, "The Qatari foreign minister proposed some ideas about the war in Ukraine. The first round of military and political talks between Iran and Ukraine were held in Amman during the past months. In response to Qatar's efforts and initiative, we welcome any move to hold the second round of talks between Iran and Ukraine."⁽¹⁾ The Iran-Ukraine negotiations mean that Iran has managed to impose its own perspective on the West, and it may yield benefits such as returning to the nuclear file in return for ending its support for Russia. This possibility is supported by the Qatari foreign minister's reference to US messages to the Iranian side when he said, "The Americans gave us a message to convey to Iran." On the other hand, the Qatari foreign minister also referred to the current reality of the nuclear talks, "Unfortunately, the situation we are in today and over the past weeks and months was not good and positive, and we seek stability in the region and are

trying to resolve the misunderstandings so that preparations can be made to return to the agreement.”⁽²⁾

The Iranian foreign minister also referred to the exchange of messages between Bahrain and Iran through an intermediary. He also stated that dialogue is well underway toward achieving sustainable cooperation. However, this dialogue is yet to make clear Iranian intentions which are questionable in the context of the emergency conditions Iran is experiencing.

As for progress in the Saudi-Iran talks, observers expect that Iraq will continue to play the role of a mediator so that the sixth round of talks are held soon. In its analysis of the developments in bilateral and regional relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia, ISNA news agency published an interview with the former Iranian Ambassador to Saudi Arabia Mohammad-Ali Hosseini, during a seminar. The former ambassador stated that Iran still views Saudi Arabia as a “black box,” (ambiguous), adding that Iran is facing a new Saudi Arabia, completely different to the past decade, and that the country is witnessing serious and real transformations. He also stated that Iranian and Saudi Arabian differences are regional rather than bilateral. The ambassador explained that in “our interaction with Saudi Arabia, we must replace the confrontation model with the competition one.” He believes that the first step toward collaboration with Saudi Arabia is to scrutinize it and its internal developments, and to be aware of Saudi concerns, as well as to review its current reforms and their prospects. The ambassador also voiced his regret that Iran has been a “problem” in the new developments in the regional and

international arenas, while Israel has become a “solution.”

Responding to a question about what should be done to end the tense relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran, he said, “I believe that think tanks in our country should be more active in the field of Saudi Arabia than in the past, and that we still do not have a branch of Saudi studies under the Faculty of Global Studies at the University of Tehran.” He explained that “the relationship with Saudi Arabia could provide opportunities, privileges, and threats at the same time, and that we must understand Saudi Arabia as it is [...]. Iran needs to activate informal diplomacy, and that past experiences demonstrate that the activation of informal diplomacy in this field can be successful, and the Saudis also welcome this kind of dialogue.”⁽³⁾ These remarks prove that Iranian policy must appeal to and abandon its narratives that bear no relation to reality and are not supported by any facts. They are also an important indicator of the significance of the output of think tanks, particularly when it comes to providing policymakers with accurate information that could help in making rational decisions.

In relation to understanding the false perceptions toward Saudi Arabia, Sabah Zanganeh, a former Iranian diplomat said during the aforementioned seminar, “It is not possible to simply open the Saudi box,” meaning to simply understand and untangle the thorny issues with Riyadh. He touched on some Saudi economic successes, but he called for caution about propaganda by saying, “We should not act in such a way as to create the impression that we are in dire need of Saudi Arabia, or on



the contrary, to create the impression that we are indifferent to relations with Saudi Arabia.”⁽⁴⁾

In conclusion, many Iranian practices demonstrate Iran’s lack of seriousness to reach an understanding on the thorny issues with Saudi Arabia, which generally indicate that Iran is indifferent to improving relations with the Gulf states and establishing serious relations with Saudi Arabia. This may hinder the sixth round of talks between Saudi Arabia and Iran. In case this round is held, it may not yield significant outcomes.

Iran and Iraq

Since the Iraqi Parliament gave a vote of confidence to the cabinet headed by Muhammad Shia’ al-Sudani on October 27, 2022, the debate goes on over whether Sudani will pursue a balanced approach, or will he submit to the dictates of pro-Iran armed militias in making his internal and external decisions. This is in light of the fact that he was nominated by the pro-Iranian Coordination Framework, which seeks to keep Iraq within Iran’s orbit owing to its centrality in the country’s strategy.

Iran in Light of Sudani’s Internal and External Policies

Since Sudani assumed power, his gov-

ernment’s policies have been aligned with his desire; to boost “openness to the world, and achieving a balance in external and internal affairs.” His goal cannot be achieved without bolstering security measures, strengthening the army, protecting state sovereignty and maintaining an internal balance of power. For balancing Iraq’s foreign policy, the Sudani government needs to open up to countries in the region (the Arab and Gulf states) and the world — Iran, definitely, will not tolerate such policies. The most prominent characteristics of Sudani’s policies are reviewed as follows:

- **Continuation of security measures to preserve sovereignty and internal balance:** Sudani continued to pursue the endeavors of his predecessor Kadhimi in attempting to control the Iran-Iraq border. He upgraded the existing surveillance system with high-tech cameras to combat drug trafficking and the smuggling of currency to Iran, especially after media outlets reported on the growing activities of smuggling networks, which have managed to deliver \$100 million per month to Iran.⁽⁵⁾

Sudani also expressed his desire to restructure the Iraqi intelligence apparatus to implement his ministerial approach. This is because ISIS activities have escalated; Transparency International ranked Iraq among the worst

countries in terms of security and stability; the US State Department cautioned its citizens against traveling to Iraq because of safety reasons; and the country's national security decisions are not handled by one state apparatus because of the dominance and military capabilities of armed militias, particularly their drones and Katyusha rockets. The armed militias always steer security decisions to strike foreign targets beyond state parameters.

- **Resuming mediation between Riyadh and Tehran:** Before his trip to France at the end of January 2023, Sudani reiterated his intentions to accelerate efforts to resume mediation between Riyadh and Tehran so that the sixth round of talks are held between the two countries. These talks are likely to move from discussing security issues to political ones in order ease regional tensions during 2023, especially as the past five rounds contributed to stopping the Houthi attacks on Riyadh, the two sides' support for a ceasefire in Yemen, the return of Iran to the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, the increase in the share of Iranian pilgrims, and an agreement to arrange the re-opening of consulates. The latter, however, has stalled due to diverging views on the Yemeni file, the outbreak of Iranian protests, and the changes in the political leaderships in Iran and Iraq.

- **Maintaining cooperation with and openness toward the Gulf states:** Sudani started his agenda by meeting the ambassadors of the Gulf states, beginning with the Saudi ambassador. He attached high priority to his foreign visits to the Gulf capitals, including Riyadh, Abu Dhabi, Kuwait, and Doha. During his meeting with the Saudi Crown Prince on the sidelines of his participa-

tion in the Arab-Chinese summit in Riyadh at the end of 2022, he reaffirmed his strong rejection of armed militias threatening the Arab Gulf states from Iraqi territory.

The most prominent sign of Sudani's openness toward the Gulf states was his inclusion of the "Arabian Gulf" in the title of the football tournament (the Arabian Gulf Cup) that was held in Baghdad – despite knowing of Iran's longstanding sensitivities over the use of this term when referring to the waterway between it and the Gulf states. He announced the launch of the 25th Arabian Gulf Cup in Iraq after a long absence of nearly three decades. It involved the brotherly Gulf countries, and Iraqis were extremely happy with their participation, sparking great controversy within the corridors of the Iranian government, resulting in the summoning of the Iraqi ambassador in Tehran.

- **Maintaining openness and rapprochement with regional powers:** Sudani visited Iran and Jordan. He plans to visit Turkey and Egypt. In coordination with the Jordanian leadership, Sudani organized the second Baghdad Conference for Cooperation and Partnership in Amman at the end of December 2022, with the participation of international and European representatives as well as: the presidents of Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, and France; the foreign ministers of Saudi Arabia, Oman, Qatar, Bahrain, and Iran; and the ambassadors of Turkey and Kuwait. Kadhimi organized the first conference in Baghdad, and it was an opportunity for regional dialogue and de-escalation of tensions between the conflicting regional powers, thereby benefitting the security and stability of Iraq, dis-

tancing Iraq from settling scores and preventing it from continuing to be an arena of conflict between regional rivals. The third conference will be held in Egypt this year.

- **Fostering openness and rapprochement with the West:** Contradicting Tehran's expectations regarding Sudani's policy toward Washington and the acceleration of expelling foreign forces from Iraq, Sudani expressed, during an interview with *The Wall Street Journal*, his desire to retain foreign forces in Iraq, referring to US and NATO forces, until ISIS is eliminated completely.⁽⁶⁾ Sudani also visited two European countries that are influential in international affairs: Germany and France. His first visit yielded coordination with German companies to invest in energy projects in Iraq, and the second culminated in the signing of a comprehensive strategic partnership agreement with France. Sudani will likely visit Washington.

Motives Behind Sudani's Policy of Balance at Home and Abroad

Several motives prompted Sudani to adopt the policy of balance. He realizes the dangers that will face his government if he acts according to the restrictions set by the Coordination Framework. Sudani is fully aware of the presence of a new Iraqi equation, in which the Iraqi street plays an influential role in favor of Iraqi patriotism, military strength and the return to the Arab sphere. All these motives gave Sudani some latitude to prove that he is independent, and that he can distance himself from pro-Iranian leaders such as Nouri al-Maliki.

Accordingly, Sudani preferred to strike a balance amid the differences between Washington and Tehran, and

Riyadh and Tehran to avoid facing the same scenario of former Prime Minister Adil Abdul-Mahdi, and to proceed on the path of external balance and openness to win Gulf, regional and even international support for his government so that he can complete his one-year term until early elections are held again, and be an acceptable mediator to the conflicting regional parties.

The Challenges Facing Sudani in Proceeding With His Policy of Balance

The pro-Iranian arms obstructed Sudani's internal policies and moves, especially as they control the government and Parliament. Therefore, they may deprive him of sufficient support in the files that run counter to Iran's vision. He also faces security challenges related to the proliferation of weapons and the dominance of armed militias, and the growing activities of ISIS. In addition, he also inherited outstanding crises, to which Iran is a party, such as water, electricity, corruption, and unemployment.

Iraq is still an arena of conflict and settling scores. Both Ankara and Tehran add further pressure on Iraq in the water file. The regional powers are also at odds on ways to achieve stability in Iraq. Riyadh and Abu Dhabi believe that the solution is to support Iraq's economy and offer investment opportunities. However, Cairo and Amman believe that the solution is to reconstruct state institutions. Tehran views the solution through the lens of its sectarian project and reiterates the withdrawal of foreign forces from Iraq as it accuses them of being the source of instability in the country. However, Tehran does not consider its militias as a threat to Iraqi security. Ankara believes

that the solution is to strike the PKK in northern Iraq and considers it to be the reason for terrorism in its territory.

The previous findings demonstrate that the Iraqi equation has given Sudani some room for maneuver, and he has used it for his benefit. He has pursued a policy of internal and external balance. Although he faces many challenges that may hinder his progress on this path compared to the Kadhimî government, this approach is effective and acceptable and can lead to successive strategic projects with the Gulf countries in various fields, especially energy.

Iran and Syria

To continue the accelerating pace of rapprochement, which has been ongoing since mid-2022 between the Syrian and Turkish governments, Tehran entered this process with the Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, visiting Damascus followed by Ankara. His visit to the latter had many messages and implications.

The Iranian Foreign Minister's Visit to Lebanon, Syria and Turkey

Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian made several visits to the region, which were quite significant in terms of their timing and implications. His visits included Beirut, Damascus and Ankara, respectively. These visits come in the context of Iranian disengagement from Syria because of the Iranian government's preoccupation with its domestic crisis, namely the popular protests. Iran's foreign moves were mostly limited to Iraq for the sake of its vital interests. Iran has taken particular interest in Iraq's political process, particularly regarding the rift between the Coordination Framework (CF) and the other Shiite

forces as well as taming the Sadrist Movement. Tehran has threatened military operations against the Kurdistan Region of Iraq because it believes that the Iranian Kurdish parties present there are supporting the protests inside Iran.

Abdollahian's visits aimed to highlight the point that the protest movement will not prevent Tehran from interacting with the world and playing a regional role, especially when it comes to securing its national security and long-term strategic interests. The visits were also for the purpose of keeping pace with the rapid regional developments in Syria and Lebanon, primarily Turkish attempts to move closer to Syria. The defense ministers and intelligence chiefs of Turkey and Syria met, with the Russian defense minister also in attendance in Moscow on December 28, 2022. Tehran did not participate in this meeting. Abdollahian's visit to Beirut aimed to assert Iran's presence in Lebanon, which has been continuously eroding since 2022.

The Iranian Foreign Minister's Visit to Syria

One can conclude a host of aims Iran intended to achieve through its foreign minister visiting Syria. This visit is considered the most significant visit made by Abdollahian in the region, given the dramatic transformation in Syria's foreign policy over the last few years. One of the most notable foreign policy transformations made by Damascus was its rapprochement with Turkey; the strategic opponent to the Syrian government since 2011. The agenda of Abdollahian's visit to Lebanon also dealt with the Syrian crisis as any escalation in Syria would cast a shadow over Lebanon. Abdollahian's

visit to Syria can be viewed through the following two axes:

• **Iran's discontent and fears over Turkey's role in Syria:** Upon the arrival of Abdollahian to Damascus, Tehran expressed its desire to strengthen its relations with Damascus and expand bilateral economic and commercial cooperation. Abdollahian also expressed his full confidence in the Syrian positions, decisions and vision of the dialogue with Turkey and the meeting of the officials of the two countries, which he called a positive step for the benefit of the two countries and the region.⁽⁷⁾ In spite of welcoming the Turkey-Syria rapprochement, Iranian officials could not hide their annoyance over being completely excluded from this rapprochement process involving Russian mediation. One of the reasons for Iran's annoyance over Turkey's rapprochement with Assad is that Tehran called for mediation between the two sides on many occasions, but Turkey turned down these calls as Iran often proposed to mediate when Turkey intensified its military operations in northern Syria.

Iran's annoyance was also apparent in the domestic Iranian press. It alluded to Iranian dissatisfaction with Moscow's push to achieve Turkish-Syrian reconciliation while excluding Iran and attempting to curb its role and position in this reconciliation as Tehran is the third party in the Astana process. This exclusion has caused divergences within the Iranian ruling establishment, with some elements calling for caution before judging the Moscow mediated meeting,⁽⁸⁾ while others expressed concern over the impact Turkish-Syrian reconciliation on Iran's influence in Syria.

• **Anticipating possible Turkish-Syrian reconciliation through enhancing further rapprochement with Damascus:** Teheran anticipated the strong signs of the new phase in Syria and its relations with a number of regional and international parties by intensifying interactions with the Syrians since the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine war last year. Iran recently announced a possible visit by the Iranian president to Syria.⁽⁹⁾ Iran also placed further economic pressure on Syria by cutting off oil supplies. Iran told Syria that it has to pay double the price in advance and in cash for new oil shipments and refused new deliveries on credit.

In conclusion, for Iran, the Turkey-Syria rapprochement creates a balance of power in Syria and raises its concerns at the same time. Apparently, the recent interactions between Moscow, Damascus and Ankara mean that Iran is excluded and marginalized, and that Iranian influence is weakened in Syria. Thus, Iranian moves have reflected this concern. However, Turkish-Syrian rapprochement can also ensure some benefits for Tehran, especially the reintegration of Syria into the regional system, which would suit Tehran's interests. In spite of the limited differences, common interests and a greater goal bring together the Astana trio. Turkey, Syria, Russia and even Iran have mutual interests: ending the clout of the Kurds and weakening Washington's support to them. The impact of the rapprochement on Iran's presence will also be limited, especially as Iran is one of the most important actors and pillars that support the Damascus government. Therefore, Iranian clout will not be threatened easily, because of Iran's military presence in Syria and the great economic cooperation between the two countries.

Iran and Yemen

The political moves at the international and regional levels have intensified concerning Yemen since January 2023. Omani mediation resumed and new remarks made by UN envoy to Yemen Hans Grundberg, which aim to reduce the military escalation in Yemen and reach a true once again, thereby shaping the prospective political settlement. This resumption comes amid the continued belligerency of the Houthi militia and its increasing demands in order to resume peace talks with the internationally recognized Yemeni government. The Houthi militia is calling for the Yemeni government to pay the salaries of its military personnel and to fully open Sana'a International Airport and the Port of Hodeidah.

A New Round of Peace Talks

Amid “no peace and no war” dominating the Yemeni landscape since the end of the military truce in October 2022, Oman’s mediation has resumed, contributing to accelerating the pace of talks more than ever before. Muscat has intensified its moves recently to find a way to reach a political settlement and avoid military escalation once again. An Omani delegation held talks with the leaders of the Houthi militia in Sana'a in the first half of January 2023, lasting five days. This is the second visit of the Omani delegation in less than a month, as it previously visited Sana'a on December 25, 2022.⁽¹⁰⁾

The UN envoy to Yemen touched on the Omani talks and mediation when he briefed the UN Security Council. He stated that the discussions have focused on options to ensure military de-escalation and measures to prevent economic deterioration and mitigate the impact of the conflict on civilians.

“We are currently seeing an intensification of regional and international diplomatic activity to resolve the conflict in Yemen, and I would like to reiterate my appreciation for the efforts of Saudi Arabia and Oman in this regard,” said Grundberg. At the same time, the UN envoy for Yemen reiterated that he is hopeful about the intensive talks at the present time, adding, “Yemen needs an agreement that includes a shared vision for the way forward, in order to avoid a return to full-blown conflict.”⁽¹¹⁾

In this regard, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia Prince Faisal bin Farhan stressed during his speech at the Davos World Economic Forum on January 18, 2023, that the only way to end the conflict in Yemen was through reaching a political settlement, underlining the importance of finding a way to get the truce reinstated and working to transition it to a permanent ceasefire. “The conflict is only going to end through a political settlement and that needs to be the focus, and I can say that we are making progress but there’s still work to be done,”⁽¹²⁾ During a panel discussion, Prince Faisal bin Farhan stated that dialogue is the best way for resolving the differences in the region, and that Saudi Arabia focuses on development rather than geopolitics. “Focusing on development rather than geopolitical affairs is a strong signal to Iran and others in the region that there are other paths to work together and achieve prosperity,” hesaid.⁽¹³⁾

The Implications of the Houthi Position on Peace Efforts

The Houthi militia is still resistant to all peace efforts and insists on its conditions, which resulted in the failure to extend the truce in October 2022, and

remain a stumbling block to arriving at a political settlement. In this regard, the Houthis' spokesman and the head of its negotiating team Muhammad Abdul Salam Falita stressed the militia's adherence to the conditions which were described as impossible, by saying, "Any solution to the Yemeni crisis must be based on disbursing the employees' salaries from oil and gas revenues according to the 2014 budget," including the reopening of airports, ports, and roads and the release of all prisoners.⁽¹⁴⁾

The Houthi militia previously threatened to continue its terrorist attacks against Yemeni ports to prevent oil exports.⁽¹⁵⁾ The so-called head of the Supreme Political Council Mahdi al-Mashat said on a previous occasion, "[We] reaffirmed the firm position to protect the capabilities of the people and prevent the plundering of their oil and gas wealth, as it is correct constitutional behavior and logical and legitimate behavior."⁽¹⁶⁾

Many observers believe that the Houthi militia and the Iranian government that stands behind it, when they speak on behalf of the Yemeni people and raise the stakes with the stipulated conditions, are attempting to impose a new political equation in the country. The militia is seeking to share resources with the Yemeni government, thus implicitly wants its authority to be recognized. In addition, the reopening of airports and paying salaries provides the militia with another opportunity to maneuver and open more doors for political and military bargaining in accordance with the Iranian government's agenda. This can be read through examining the statements of Iranian officials in the context of all Yemeni

initiatives and peace talks. Iranian officials have always called for lifting what they call the "economic siege" as a prerequisite for finding a political solution to the Yemeni crisis; this involves reopening ports and airports, disbursing salaries, and attempting to present the Houthi militia as a Yemeni actor that fights in the name of Yemen and the Yemeni people, while ignoring the Presidential Leadership Council (PLC), which represents all Yemen's political elements. Iran's behavior stems from its belief that any support for the peace process and lasting peace in Yemen will make the Houthis engage with the rest of the Yemeni components in the political process. The Houthis will accordingly give up on their ambitions of exclusionary dominance over Yemen's political and military arenas. Iran eventually will lose its influence in Yemen.

Despite the relative de-escalation in Yemen, which has led to optimism among the peace-seeking parties, the realities of the Houthi and Iranian positions toward the political process complicate the scene and the trajectory for reaching a settlement in Yemen. The Houthi militia's conditions to resume political talks are nothing but an attempt to consolidate their authority by sharing economic resources with the legitimate government, thus allowing it to continue working on its ideological project in Yemen which is based on the Iranian Wilayat al-Faqih model. To eliminate the Houthis' control over state employees' salaries, the PLC may resort to paying the salaries according to the 2014 payroll — directly by the legitimate government. The payment of salaries by the Houthis will consolidate further their influence in their controlled areas.

The International File

Iran and the United States

Diplomatic efforts aimed at reviving the nuclear deal have been curtailed as well as the Biden administration's appeasement policy toward Iran. Recent developments demonstrate that escalation has been the main distinctive feature of US-Iran relations since the beginning of 2023.

The United States announced that the revival of the nuclear deal is no longer a priority.

This came in a statement by White House Spokesperson Ned Price when he said that the nuclear deal was not on the White House's agenda.⁽¹⁷⁾

Although the Iranians tried to keep the lines of communication open with the Europeans, Iran's support to Russia in the Russia-Ukraine war created an unfavorable environment in the EU as it considers imposing further pressure on Iran. This includes the European Parliament's call to designate IRGC as a terrorist organization.

Given the changing position of the European parties on the talks, Western diplomacy toward Iran has lost its momentum; the Europeans — who were a key mediator in the nuclear talks between Washington and Tehran through placing pressure on both sides — are not willing to continue their diplomatic efforts.

As the talks have stalled, the United States decided to impose further pressure and sanctions on Iran. They mainly aim to impact the legitimacy of the government at home and curb its ability to have influence abroad through three tracks: firstly, supporting the internal movement to pressure the government; secondly, targeting the production and export of drones to deprive Russia of significant military support in the war against Ukraine; and thirdly, targeting the oil sector that provides the government's budget with financial revenues. The latter track is to weaken the revenue options of the government.

Table 1: The Most Prominent US Sanctions and Leverages on Iran (January 2023)

Date	Sanctions
January 6	Imposing sanction on six executives and board members of Quds Aviation Industries for sending drones to Russia. Sanctions were also imposed on the director of Iran's Aerospace Industries Organization for overseeing Iran's ballistic missile program.
January 23	The United States, the UK and the EU imposed sanctions on 10 Iranian individuals and an additional entity. This is the ninth round of sanctions that targeted government entities for the crackdown since the beginning of the nationwide protest in 2022.

January 24	The United States imposed sanctions on the financial network run by Hassan Moukalled, which facilitates Hezbollah's financial activities in Lebanon.
January 25	The US House of Representatives overwhelmingly approved a resolution expressing solidarity with the Iranian people who have been risking imprisonment and even death to protest against the country's theocracy.
January	The United States raised the issue of Iran's exports to Syria in the UN as they violated Resolution 2231.
January	The United States pressured China to stop importing oil from Iran, as Iran's oil exports to China climbed to about 1.3 million barrels per day in November 2022.

These pressures have not yet forced Iran to reconsider its position; however, it still holds the United States responsible for obstructing the nuclear negotiations. Therefore, Tehran continues its policy of reducing its nuclear commitments. It still enriches uranium at a purity rate of 60 percent and installed more advanced centrifuges. Iran carries out the mentioned violations while it has reduced the International Atomic Energy Agency's (IAEA) access to its nuclear sites. It also counts on its relations with China and its economic and military collaboration with Russia to counter Washington's pressure.

As Iran's belligerence continues, US decision-makers have other alternatives on the table to confront its overall behavior. This was confirmed by the US president and his administration members. The joint military exercises with Israel form part of the US deterrence policy toward Iran and its commitment to prevent Iran from developing nuclear weapons.

Reportedly, the attack on the military factory associated with the production and storage of drones involved US-Israeli coordination, especially as it coin-

cided with the joint military exercises that simulated operations for attacking Iranian nuclear sites and possible naval confrontations with Iran. However, if the United States did not actually participate in this attack, it was carried out with the green light from Washington.

In conclusion, the Biden administration increased its pressure on Iran after they both turned their backs on the Vienna talks to revive the nuclear deal due to a divergence on a number of issues and files, primarily differences over the roadmap to return to the nuclear deal. Iran's participation alongside Russia in the war against Ukraine and its supply of drones and advisors added a fundamental challenge to the efforts to revive the nuclear deal. Undoubtedly, this file provided a tremendous opportunity for Washington to unite transatlantic efforts against Iran. Europe engages in greater coordination with the United States concerning Iran. Iran's domestic situation, including the popular protests, has prompted the United States to put further pressure on Iran. However, Iran did not provide the desired response to the return of the policy of Western pressure.

It still tests its ability to maneuver amid the current developments on the international scene. Iran's options are limited after the Raisi government failed to overcome the country's problems without reaching an understanding with the West. Thus, in light of the top priority; to save the Iranian political system, the Iranian government may make more concessions that lead to de-escalation. Otherwise, any uncalculated options may bring the option of military confrontation back to the fore.

Iran and Europe

Iran's relations with Europe worsened further after its violent crackdown on the Iranian protests and its detainment of tens of thousands of citizens.⁽¹⁸⁾ Additionally, the increasing number of Russian attacks on Ukrainian civilians using Iran-supplied drones have further isolated Iran, prompting calls for listing IRGC as a terrorist organization. The IAEA has, meanwhile, expressed unprecedented alarm since the US withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). The agency believes that Tehran has enough fissile material for developing a few nuclear bombs.

In Europe, Iran's IRGC is faced with being listed as a terrorist organization for its crackdown on Iranian protestors and supplying drones to Russia. The European Parliament passed a resolution on January 19, which also calls for Tehran to end its human rights violations and for Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and President Ebrahim Raisi to be added to the sanctions list as well.⁽¹⁹⁾ Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) were introducing an amendment to an annual foreign policy report. With an overwhelming majority, 598 MEPs supported the motion while nine opposed

it and 31 abstained. At best, it is a political move expressing disdain for the Iranian ruling establishment and its key players for violating human rights and the sovereignty of other states. The European Parliament's resolution is not binding and policy decisions are reached through consensus among the 27 member states.

European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen seems on board, "We are looking indeed at a new round of sanctions and I would support also listing the Revolutionary Guards. I have heard several ministers asking for that and I think they are right."⁽²⁰⁾ The UK is already mulling over blacklisting the IRGC.

European Foreign Policy chief Josep Borrell finds proscribing the IRGC to be counter-productive as it would leave Iran uninterested in reviving the nuclear deal. He told *The Financial Times*, "The JCPOA is not dead but it is completely stalled [...] You can imagine that it would be increasingly blocked if [the terrorist designation] was done by other states... it would make things certainly more difficult." He added, "If the Iranian regime is so bad... we have to try to avoid this kind of regime having a nuclear bomb." He concluded, "And I do not know another way of doing that than making the JCPOA work."⁽²¹⁾ Borrell is the most optimistic Western politician in regard to reviving the nuclear deal whose future hangs on balancing relations since the US withdrawal. Iran's support for Russia in the Russia-Ukraine war has adversely impacted public opinion in Europe.

Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian threatened recently that the window for reviving the JCPOA "is open but won't always be." Iran "will move in another direction" if the West continues its "hypocritical and interventionist" behavior.⁽²²⁾

Briefing the European Parliament on January 24, IAEA Director General Rafael Mariano Grossi said that in the absence of “almost no diplomatic activity,” the JCPOA is akin to “an empty shell.”⁽²³⁾ The IAEA estimates that Iran stockpiles 70 kilograms of uranium enriched at 60 percent while 1,000 kilograms of HEU enriched at 20 percent. Grossi believes the stockpiles are “enough nuclear material for several nuclear weapons.” To reach the ideal enrichment level of 90 percent for weapons grade uranium, Tehran needs a little time for processing with no technological obstacles in its path. The next phase will then be fabricating nuclear bombs or payloads to be married with delivery systems. Iran is likely to receive Russia’s nuclear-capable Su-35s in March besides an assortment of medium range ballistic missiles.

On February 1, the IAEA lambasted Iran over changes to the interconnection between the two clusters of advanced machines enriching uranium to up to 60 percent purity at the Fordow Fuel Enrichment Plant (FFEP). The discovery was made during a surprise inspection on January 21 2023. IAEA inspectors reported that the IR-6 cascades were “interconnected in a way that was substantially different from the mode of operation declared by Iran.”⁽²⁴⁾ Iran cannot make such changes without prior notification to the IAEA, which in turn will have to adjust its procedures to “ensure effective verification.”

The visit of IAEA Deputy Director General and Head of the Department of Safeguards Massimo Aparo to Iran to discuss the outstanding question between Iran and the IAEA regarding the traces of processed uranium at three

undeclared sites did not result in a breakthrough. Therefore, Grossi might travel to Tehran in February to continue the dialogue process.

Iran is likely to buy more time through further talks while continuing to take more provocative steps in further violation of the JCPOA while moving closer toward deterrence capability.

If the changes to the IR-6 cascade interconnection at the FFEP are any guide, Iran seems to be gearing up toward increasing its coercive bargaining power with the commission of Su-35s in the coming weeks. Hence, the Europeans may hold back on declaring the IRGC as a terrorist organization.

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Iran Case File

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