

MONTHLY REPORT

Iran Case File

May 2023

Your window on Iran from inside and abroad

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The month of May 2023 witnessed new developments and accelerating events at the various political, economic, military, ideological and social levels. In the context of Iranian relations with Arab neighbors and international actors, there were a series of events and interlocking interactions, which are expected to have repercussions on the entire Iranian foreign policy files in the coming period.

Internally at the political level, Secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council (SNSC) Ali Shamkhani submitted his resignation after a decade in the position. Though Shamkhani has faced stinging criticism over the past period, his resignation was surprising to observers, given the effective role he had played in recent months, particularly at the level of Iran-Arab relations and representing his country in the Beijing talks that resulted in the signing of the historic rapprochement deal between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Ali Akbar Ahmadian, Shamkhani's successor, is an IRGC brigadier who held several senior positions within the powerful military apparatus and was close to former Quds Force Commander Qassem Soleimani.

With regard to the economy, the seventh five-year development plan (2023-2027) of the Iranian republic was prepared to debate and approve. The plan includes the achieved objectives in all fields —including the economy — over the past five years. The plan also outlines a series of goals aimed at overcoming some of Iran's most perilous economic and devel-

opment challenges. These challenges include declining economic growth, rising liquidity, spiraling inflation and mounting debt, among others. If implemented, the plan has the potential to significantly improve Iran's already faltering economy. However, the plan practically lacks realism in many of its objectives given that there are major challenges impeding its realization such as the shortage of funding, the uncertainty about the future, the difficulties that faced the implementation of the previous five-year plans and other challenges that impacted their effectiveness.

Militarily, Iran has further boosted its military arsenal by unveiling the hypersonic missile Fattah which has massive offensive capabilities. Shortly before unveiling this missile, Iran also disclosed its Khormashahr-4 missile. Through these consecutive announcements, Iran sent messages, particularly to Israel to deter it from carrying out any strike targeting Tehran. On the other hand, Iran continues its military support for Russia in its war on Ukraine. This demonstrates that relations between Moscow and Tehran are proceeding down the path of becoming a strategic alliance, which signals that tensions will characterize Iran-Europe relations.

At the societal level, social problems are intensifying and becoming a source of serious concern for Iran, mainly because they significantly impact the lives of the Iranian people. These include the massive waves of emigration that have adversely impacted the medical sector, with medical practitioners choosing to leave

the country or to shift to another discipline, such as doctors transitioning to cosmetic medicine. In the face of the Iranian government's failure to find radical solutions to this problem — associated with the disparity between societal classes — Iranian society will continue to ratchet up the rhetoric of resentment and rejection, which will likely trigger more factional and popular protests.

At the ideological level, and in light of the mounting violence against clerics throughout Iran and the spread of the phenomenon of removing the turbans of clerics and harassing them on the streets, Iranian jurists warned of the people losing confidence in the religious establishment. They have also warned of involving the hawza and clerics in politics and that their politicization will do more harm than good to the hawza in the eyes of the masses. Regarding Sunni scholars, they have called for the people's problems to be resolved, particularly the economic ones as well as those related to personal and public freedom. They have also criticized the employment of Islam in the public sphere to justify repression.

As for Iran's relations with its Arab neighbors and the international arena, there were a lot of important events and developments during May 2023. In the Arab world, at the level of Iran-Gulf interactions, Iran and Saudi Arabia appointed ambassadors in Tehran and Riyadh. The move came against the backdrop of the Beijing rapprochement deal that resulted in the restoration of diplomatic ties that were severed between the two nations since 2016. The exchange of ambassadors grabbed international media attention amid questions

about the significance of this step in terms of overcoming many of the obstacles that are likely to hinder the improvement of diplomatic ties to previously reached levels. In the context of the exchange of visits between Iranian and Arab officials, the sultan of Oman made a two-day visit to Tehran in which he discussed several issues with Iranian officials. Iran hopes for Oman to play a wider role that includes assisting in restoring ties between Tehran and Cairo as well as playing an effective role in reaching a breakthrough in the stalled nuclear talks.

With regard to Iraq, the Iraqis are debating a proposal to carry out a transboundary project dubbed "Development Road," which involves Arab and regional countries. This is in the context of the competition among Iraqi political factions, each with their own sets of priorities and proposals for transboundary international initiatives. The New Levant Initiative was proposed by former Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi, who was in favor of fully reinstating Iraq's statehood. Similarly, Iraq's current Prime Minister Mohammad Shia' al-Sudani has proposed the Development Road project, a move that comes as his tenure comes to an end and Iraq is on the verge of calling an early election. Nonetheless, the Middle East is undergoing significant changes, with several countries negotiating reconciliations to alleviate ongoing tensions. However, these projects are faced with deeply complicated challenges related mainly to the internal situation in these countries and the nature of relations among them.

Concerning Syria, the month of May 2023 saw Syria being officially readmitted into the Arab League. What is more, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad attended the Arab League summit in Jeddah. This return comes in light of the regional shifts, including the Saudi-Iran reconciliation and the Ankara-Damascus rapprochement aided by Russia and Iran. All these shifts raise questions about Tehran's view regarding such changes and therefore its potential calculus in relation to addressing these developments.

On the global stage, US-Iran relations have been marked by continuous escalation, manifesting in military confrontations between the naval forces of both countries. Iran intensified its maritime attacks on vessels in the Gulf, which prompted the United States to take measures to deter Iran. As the United States continues to pursue its sanctions and pressures to tighten the noose around the Iranian political system and isolate it, the understandings regarding returning to the negotiating table have made no headway. However, the

recent International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) report on Iran's nuclear program indicates that Iran is leaning toward easing tensions. This could provide an opportunity for the various parties to return to the negotiating table in the coming period.

Regarding Iran-Europe relations, Iran reached a prisoner swap deal with Belgium after long negotiations. The deal appears to be laying the foundations for a new stage in Iran-Europe relations in which the issue of democratic values and human rights are of less importance. Some countries were prompted, as was the case with Belgium, to adapt their legal and institutional frameworks to reach compromises with Iran on issues that have political and security dimensions. In parallel, Europe continued to exert pressure on Iran regarding its nuclear program. This pressure is based on IAEA reports, which signals that there will be further European escalation against Iran. This could lead all parties to be convinced of the necessity to resume negotiations to put an end to Iran's illegal nuclear activities.

FORMER SAUDI AMBASSADOR TO THE UN DELIVERS KEYNOTE ADDRESS AT RASANAH SEMINAR



The International Institute for Iranian Studies (Rasanah) held at its headquarters in Riyadh on June 5, 2023 a seminar titled “From Paris to Beijing: Iranian Shifts in an Evolving International Environment and a Divided World Order” in the presence of eminent guests and dignitaries.

The seminar opened with preliminary remarks by Rasanah’s Founder and President Mohammed Alsulami who introduced the illustrious keynote speaker Saudi Arabia’s former Ambassador to the UN Abdallah al-Mouallimi. In his keynote address, al-Mouallimi discussed political shifts in Iran and the international community. He also outlined future developments regarding Iranian militias in the region, Iran’s nuclear program and Saudi-Iranian relations under the China-brokered agreement. The veteran diplomat also provided insightful analysis on Saudi diplomacy with the UN, enumerating the challenges faced and offering solutions. He also discussed regional and international shifts, the overwhelming crises plaguing the region and their repercussions. The event concluded with an informative question and answer session in which al-Mouallimi answered participants’ questions on several regional and international issues.

[The full seminar is available on the Institute’s YouTube channel](#)

INTERNAL AFFAIRS



Internal Affairs for Iran Case File, May 2023 is divided into five main files. The Political File discusses the resignation of Secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council (SNSC) Ali Shamkhani, reviewing the background and potential tasks of his successor Ali Akbar Ahmadian. The Economic File explores the seventh five-year development plan; its concept, terms and future feasibility and past effectiveness. The Military File sheds light on three main developments: Iran's unveiling of its domestically-made hypersonic missile (Fattah), the test firing of the ballistic missile Khorramshahr-4 and the continuous military cooperation between Iran and Russia. The Social File discusses the Iranian shortage of physicians due to migration and physicians shifting from internal medicine to cosmetic medicine. Finally, the Ideological File explores the jurists' warning of the absolute distrust between people and the religious establishment and the Sunni jurists' defending of the Iranian people's interests.

The Political File

In a sudden move, Secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council (SNSC) Ali Shamkhani resigned after serving as Iran's top security chief for a decade. Shamkhani's resignation came despite his active presence in the Iranian political arena in recent times as well as his role in handling the Saudi-Iran reconciliation file. Hours after Shamkhani resigned, Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi issued a decree whereby he appointed Ali Akbar Ahmadian as the new secretary of Iran's SNSC in place of Shamkhani. As has always been the case with former SNSC secretaries, Shamkhani will be ultimately driven out of the Iranian political landscape. Immediately after announcing his resignation, Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei appointed him as a political adviser and member of the Expediency Discernment Council.

Criticism and Pressures Force Shamkhani to Quit His Post

Successive Iranian governments have routinely replaced SNSC secretaries, with the exception of the Mohammad Khatami and Hashemi Rafsanjani governments. Under these two governments, Hassan Rouhani continued to serve as the SNSC secretary for 16 years, becoming the longest-serving Iranian security chief. During the government of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, Ali Larjani served as the SNSC secretary for only two years and was replaced by Saeed Jalili. After Hassan Rouhani was elected president in 2013, Ali Shamkhani was chosen for the position. After Ebrahim Raisi took power in 2021, it was expected that a new SNSC secretary would be appointed. But Shamkhani retained the position, leading to objections from some "conservative" circles. In this regard, Fars News

Agency launched a systematic campaign in October 2021, calling for dismissing all Rouhani-era officials, including SNSC Secretary Ali Shamkhani, secretary of the Supreme Council of Cyberspace, secretary of the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution, and replacing them with revolutionary officials.⁽¹⁾ These "conservative" circles ratcheted up their attacks against Shamkhani, leveling several accusations against him such as his failure to handle the consecutive protests that have rocked Iran and the involvement of some of his relatives in corruption cases that have not been investigated nor proved. This is in addition to the espionage case in which his aide Alireza Akbari was accused of spying for the UK, which resulted in Akbari being executed last January. According to several political observers, this case in particular was seized by his political rivals to remove him from office. It gave them a huge opportunity to attack Shamkhani, including the IRGC affiliated newspapers and websites. Some sources have even argued that the Akbari case was a deliberate setup to oust Shamkhani or force him to resign. This is because the "hardliners" feared his rise to prominence and were concerned that his rise would prompt the "reformists" and "moderates" to nominate him in the presidential election that is scheduled for 2024.⁽²⁾ Yet there is another analysis that suggests that the "hardliners" within the Iranian political system disliked Shamkhani's eagerness to establish relations with neighboring countries, which was evident in their resistance to the role he played in ending the political rupture with Saudi Arabia as well as their coldness to his diplomatic moves to improve ties with other Arab

countries. This led to increasing pressure on Raisi to drive him out of the limelight.

Regarding Raisi's reluctance to replace Shamkhani despite the "hardliners'" opposition to his continuation in office, most analysts suggest that the Iranian government needed him for important and sensitive files, particularly the negotiations with Saudi Arabia. The negotiations were largely of a security nature and Shamkhani had past experience in bringing Tehran and Riyadh closer together in the 1990s. Additionally, Shamkhani is of Arab origin and culture, and it was believed that this would positively impact the talks with the Arab countries, which was evident through Shamkhani representing Iran in the negotiations with Saudi Arabia that were held in the Chinese capital Beijing. The negotiations culminated in the signing of a historical rapprochement deal in March that restored diplomatic ties between the two nations, which had been severed since 2016. He also visited Iraq and the UAE where he signed a number of agreements.

Ali Akbar Ahmadian's Background and the Missions Assigned to Him

The new SNSC Secretary Brigadier Ali Akbar Ahmadian is considered among the hardline commanders strictly embracing the line of the Iranian political system. He was close to former Quds Force Commander Qassem Soleimani. They had served together in the 41st Tharallah Division. In addition, Ahmadian has extensive experience of working in Iranian institutions, primarily those that control decision-making. He has a vast track record. He served as chief of staff of the IRGC's naval forces from 1985 to 1988. He also served as deputy commander of the IRGC naval forces from 1989 to 1997 and was also promoted to commander of the IRGC naval forces, a post he retained until 2000. He was the chief of joint staff of the

IRGC from 2000 to 2007. During this seven-year term, he managed to transform the IRGC, particularly its administrative and organizational structures as well as other dimensions. He became known as one of Iran's most distinguished security specialists. From 2007 to 2023, he served as the head of the IRGC's strategic center.⁽³⁾ Over the past years, Ahmadian had been in charge of developing Iran's defense industries, including missiles and drones. He played a role in transferring military industry technologies to the Iran-backed groups in Yemen, Syria, Iraq, Lebanon and Palestine.

In November 2022, the Iranian supreme leader appointed five new members to the Expediency Discernment Council in place of those who had died. The new members included Ahmadian. It appears that his appointment prepared the ground for assigning him to a more significant post — the SNSC secretary. Ahmadian is likely to carry out the missions that Raisi outlined in his speech when he announced his appointment. These missions include pursuing novel and smart approaches to Iran's national security in all its dimensions: social, political and economic. He is also tasked to make use of the potential of the Iranian people to ensure sustained security based on public consensus. In addition, he will extend Iranian security depth through uniting the efforts of the Iranian intelligence, security, executive and judicial apparatuses.⁽⁴⁾

To conclude, there are attempts by some Iranian sources to reiterate that Shamkhani's resignation was normal and expected. However, the way he submitted his resignation, and the posting of Persian poetry verses by poet Mohtasham Kashani on his Twitter account opened the door for speculation about the possibility that he had not resigned voluntarily but had been forced to resign.

The Economic File

The Economic File sheds light on the concept of a five-year plan and the most important economic items included in it. The file also discusses the sixth five-year plan alongside the seventh to determine their practicality and effectiveness. This discussion is important as it coincides with preparations to introduce the seventh development plan.

The Seventh Five-Year Plan: Concept and Major Components

The five-year development plan is a future plan spanning a set number of years, which sets broad guidelines and objectives for the Iranian government. These objectives are mainly related to development and the economy. The supreme leader lays down the plan's general guidelines and the Planning and Budget Organization is also assigned with outlining its details. The first five-year plan was approved in 1983. These plans have endured many disruptions and extensions because of the internal and external realities that Iran has experienced over the past four decades.

The current plan proposed by the Planning and Budget Organization is the seventh five-year plan (2023-2027). It includes 22 chapters and seven sections covering economic, infrastructure, cultural, social, scientific, technological, educational, foreign and defense policy, security, administrative, legal and judicial aspects.⁽⁵⁾

With regard to the plan's economic section, its most salient items include the following:^{(6) (7)}

- To achieve an average growth rate of 8% during the plan's duration.
- To achieve an average inflation rate of 19.7% and to lower it to 9.5% by the end of the plan.
- The Central Bank of Iran will cooperate with the concerned institutions to approve

and execute financial policies and control the growth of liquidity.

- To create a million job opportunities per year.
 - To introduce the state budget to Parliament in two stages every year.
 - To raise average oil exports to 12.4%.
 - To leverage the geopolitical situation, develop Iran's infrastructure and turn it into a logistical hub for trade, energy and transport.
 - To set a ceiling for the government's and state-owned companies' debts at 40% of GDP. It could be increased to 50%.
 - To achieve a non-oil exports average of 22.6%.
 - To reach an imports growth average of 16.2%.
 - The percentage of public revenues to public expenditures will stand at 94% and could increase to 100% in the final year of the plan.
 - To seek 22.6% growth in gross capital formation.
 - To gradually increase the retirement age so that it rises by 2.5 years at the end of the plan.
 - The government must increase its own assets.
 - All oil and gas export revenues must be deposited into the account of the National Development Fund (after deducting its share). The fund will provide the government with a fixed sum of €25 billion per year.
- How practical is the seventh development plan? And how effective was the sixth five-year plan? The seventh five-year development plan has identified the most dangerous economic and development impediments that have hindered the progress of the Iranian economy. These include the slowed economic growth, increased unemployment, liquidity, inflation and rising levels of public debt. Furthermore, the national

budget is reliant on oil exports and the Central Bank of Iran is not independent from the Iranian government. Observers believe that the plan could address the mentioned impediments if it is implemented in clear phases and the reality is considered as well as the current and future challenges facing the Iranian economy.

However, the achievement of many of the seventh five-year plan's objectives seems uncertain given the vast number of internal and external factors impacting the Iranian economy. For example, achieving a massive economic growth rate of 8% necessitates the injection of investments worth billions of dollars and lifting the economic sanctions on Iran. Even lifting the sanctions on oil exports will only ensure achieving this high economic growth rate in the first or second year of the plan.

Though reducing inflation and liquidity rates as well as creating a million jobs were among the most important electoral pledges of President Ebrahim Raisi, he has failed to fulfill these promises. The opposite has proved to be true, with the liquidity rate nearing 40% per year. The Central Bank of Iran has also remained dependent on and subordinate to the Iranian government. Thus, the inflation rate has surged past 50%, with the number of people pushed below the poverty line increasing and the unemployment rate reaching 2.5 million people. This is in addition to the housing crisis, fueled by a surge in rental costs in the capital Tehran by 844% over five years until December 2022.⁽⁸⁾

In addition, financing the plan faces a number of challenges in the short run. How can the government finance the budget or infrastructure projects without relying on oil in light of the scant sources of funding and non-existent economic growth? Moreover, the oil sector itself needs development and \$200 billion worth of investments; international companies continue to avoid

investing in Iran. Yet, there is a massive and growing budget deficit. Hence, the Iranian government increases levels of liquidity to plug the deficit. This results in an increase in government debts to Iranian banks and the Social Security Organization; both are now facing the looming specter of bankruptcy. To save the Social Security Organization, it has been proposed to extend the retirement age so that it is financed via the labor force again. There are also uncertainties surrounding other items of the plan such as the obligation on the government to generate its own assets, and the impact of this on the private sector has not been evaluated.

As for the effectiveness of the past five-year plan, Iranian lawmaker Mohammad Bakmehr said in an interview with Mehr News Agency, "Unfortunately, only 40% of the sixth five-year plan was implemented."⁽⁹⁾ In addition to being non-binding, and many of its items being unrealistic, we find that the economic climate in Iran is beset by risks, structural obstacles and renewed challenges such as the rentier budget that relies heavily on volatile oil prices and is hostage to internal and external shocks — primarily US sanctions, the possibility of further sanctions in the future, health pandemics (coronavirus) and the Russia-Ukraine war. These factors led to extending the past five-year plan after it had expired. At its end, the plan barely achieved its key economic objectives that were set, including an 8% growth rate and investments worth \$175 billion.

In conclusion, the seventh five-year development plan covers real problems and sets key objectives for developing the Iranian economy and resolving its problems. However, the problem with the plan lies in the fact that many of its items are not consistent with the country's reality and the future circumstances that will surely impact the realization of its objectives. This will significantly curb the plan's effectiveness and the possibility of taking it seriously.

The Military File

Iran's strategic focus centers on developing medium-range ballistic missiles (MRBMs) with phenomenal speeds and multiple payloads for a range of about 1,500 kilometers. After weeks of suspense, Tehran launched two MRBMs of separate categories (Fattah and Khorramshahr-4).

Iran Unveils Its First Hypersonic Missile, Fattah

Iran cleared the mist by unveiling its first maneuverable glide vehicle (MaGV) – Fattah – which is touted to reach upto Mach 15 or 15 times the speed of sound – 17,890.2 kilometers per hour – while carrying an accumulative payload of over 1,000 kilograms.⁽¹⁰⁾ Tehran also separately displayed MaGV with endo-atmospheric steering fins along with a solid-fueled sustainer motor having a thrust-vectoring controller (TVC) for altitude course correction to stabilize spinning and possibly to evade counter-measures. The IRGC Aerospace Force is confident that the hypersonic Fattah will penetrate any heavily secured airspace due to its speed, maneuverability and multiple warheads in its cone.

Since hypersonic missiles and glide vehicles are a recent and evolving phenomenon, the countermeasures are not well tested. The United States and Israel have deployed THAAD, Patriot PAC 3, Divid Sling and Barak 8 missile defense systems for intercepting and countering hostile projectiles. In theory, THAAD and PAC 3 face growing challenges due to the rapid development of hypersonic missiles.

“Today we feel that the deterrent power has been formed,” Iranian Pres-

ident Ebrahim Raisi commented on the missile's unveiling. “This power is an anchor of lasting security and peace for the regional countries.”⁽¹¹⁾ The so-called missile-defense evading Fattah can reach Isreal in seven minutes and hit the target with 30-meter accuracy, i.e., circular error probable.

All such tall claims appear to be theoretical calculations as the missile has not been tested so far. Gen. Amir Ali Hajizadeh, the head of the IRGC aerospace program, stated that there had been a ground test of its engine.⁽¹²⁾ While the origin of the heavy-duty powerplant is unknown, no measure exists to prove that the complex interplay of systems works in as a sophisticated manner as boasted. Given Iranian-Russian deepened cooperation, it is plausible that the Kremlin assisted Tehran in the hypersonic program, if not, it handed over off-the-shelf engines. Some speculate that Fattah falls in the same league as Russia's hypersonic missile Kinzhal though their aerodynamic parameters and range set them apart to different categories. Though Ukraine claims to have shot down the Russian hypersonic missile using a US-supplied system, there is no definitive word from the experts yet.⁽¹³⁾

Iran Test Fires the Ballistic Missile Khorramshahr-4

Fattah's launch follows the testing of Khorramshahr-4 in late May. The latest variant of the Khorramshahr series is claimed to carry a payload of 1,500 kilograms and a range of 2,000 kilometers using liquid fuel. Iran boasts that the projectile can be launched at 12-minutes' notice and equips the country



with a first-strike capability. The MIRV package ferried by Iran's Khyber ballistic missile can even be launched from an armored truck beside silos or on-the-ground fixed bases. The finless warhead is self-propelled besides having gas-thrusters for axo-atmospheric maneuvering, mid-course guidance update and for terminal phase maneuvering.

Hajizadeh stated that there is a payload option for Khorramshahr-4 with 80 bomblets, meaning that in such a configuration each munition weighing up to 15 kilograms to 18 kilograms would be traveling independently in the terminal phase. The questions remain: why would Iran use such a sophisticated missile to drop conventional bomblets? Tehran's delivery systems are meant for nuclear weapons delivery but is it hinting at its ambition for tactical nuclear weapons too?

Overall, Iran's missile program appears to have progressed differently from North Korea's. This is abundantly obvious when Iran's Khorramshahr bal-

listic missile lineup is compared with North Korea's own HS-10 variants. Tehran's quick turnover on the hypersonic front strongly suggests some success in getting Russian help in the wake of the Russia Ukraine war. Iran and North Korea have shared know-how besides the transfer of critical parts through each other's resources in the technological blackmarket. For instance, Iran helped North Korea in the development of the RD-250 engine's clone to power its Hwasong 15 ICBM.⁽¹⁴⁾ Tehran's advanced solid-fuel program remains beneficial for Pyongyang.

Russia-Iran Military Cooperation Continues

As for Iranian-Russian military cooperation, there is no let up. Sky News reported quoting documents that both have signed deals to supply munitions for tanks and artillery besides other systems, sub-systems and spare parts which the Kremlin is in dire need of. The first such deal for sample products worth around \$1 million was signed on September 14, 2022. Iran-supplied drones continue to be part of Russia's air assaults but its missiles have not been known to be used yet.

The Islamic Republic of Iran Air Force (IRIAF), meanwhile, still awaits the provision of 16 Su-35s which were to be commissioned by the end of March. The commander of the IRIAF in an interview said, "We do need Su-35s but we (the air force) don't know when they will enter our squadrons. This decision rests with the country's highest officials."⁽¹⁵⁾

Finally, with the JCPOA practically set aside, Iran endeavors to add more sophisticated delivery systems to its arsenal, their greater range and payload paint a dark scenario for the Middle East and the world.

The Social File

Media reports have indicated that the emigration rate in Iran is higher than the global average. This is because of the harsh socioeconomic realities prevalent in Iranian society. Several social problems exist which have prompted Iranians who are talented and skilled to leave the country — using various means — to improve their living conditions. This wave of emigration comes as a result of the gaps between social strata and the impacts of globalization; the cosmetic surgery field has emerged as an attractive hub for medical practitioners and has expanded massively to become a new phenomenon in the country.

Shortages Caused by the Exodus of Medical Practitioners Plague the Medical Sector

The head of the Iranian Association of Surgeons has warned of increasing levels of emigration among physicians and other medical staff. As many as 5,000 doctors have are seeking to emigrate and the rate of admission of students in the field of surgery is very low, which poses a threat to the medical sector in the country. In light of this development, patients could be forced to seek medical treatment abroad.⁽¹⁶⁾ Though there are some bodies that aim to train more medical students, this does not suffice or make up for the shortage in physicians. Yet there are some medical centers that do not even have physicians. Those physicians who are in Iran have been ordered not to leave the country by the Iranian authorities.⁽¹⁷⁾ The deputy of Nursing at the Ministry of Health and Medical Education (MOHME) in Iran has said

that the shortage in the nursing sector reaches approximately 70,000.⁽¹⁸⁾

The primary reason behind the crisis gripping the medical sector is the decreasing economic incentives, particularly the devaluation of the local currency because of the economic sanctions. In addition, the Iranian government has transferred the authority to set the price of medical services and medicine from the medical sector to the Supreme Council of Health Insurance. It did this under the pretext of making things less troublesome for the people and its desire to lower prices. This decision sparked anger among doctors since the new prices are both illegal and unjust for doctors. Furthermore, doctors are angered by the fact that they are forced to remain in the country and are unhappy with the conditions of the health system, inappropriate wages and poor working conditions for medical practitioners. All these factors have created a unsatisfactory environment that has prompted medical practitioners to want to leave the country. Medical graduates have not set high expectations and only seek sufficient financial compensation to make ends meet. They prefer to emigrate despite their awareness of the difficulties they would face.⁽¹⁹⁾ Canada, Australia, Germany, France and Oman are the main countries that receive Iranian immigrants.⁽²⁰⁾

Physicians Shift From Internal Medicine to Cosmetic Medicine

Among the remarkable shifts in Iranian society is that a large segment of medical specialists have transferred to cosmetic medicine and the promotion

of related products. Medical practitioners have chosen to enter the fields of hair and teeth transplantation, or to offer botox and laser treatments. In addition, some have entered the field of plastic surgery, while others are offering dermatological treatment. Many have made a lot of money from selling nutritional supplements, medical supplies and marketing cosmetic products. The financial compensation is much better than the salaries of medical practitioners in Iran.⁽²¹⁾ The head of the Medical Tourism Department said that medical tourism in Iran has declined due to the emigration of doctors. Several tourists have visited Iran for cosmetic procedures.⁽²²⁾ The expansion of the cosmetic surgery industry in Iran as medical practitioners abandon their areas of specialization reveals that Iranian society is experiencing growing distinctions between its classes; cosmetic surgery has become common among the wealthy. It also highlights the fact that Iranian society is also coping with the changes that various societies are experiencing as a result of globalization. This reality indicates that the Iranian political system has in effect failed to fully implement its cultural project. As society continues to move against the political system's desired trajectories, the political system and society are bound to clash, especially in light of the political system's adoption of plans that will put further pressure and stress on society in various ways.

Finally, the emigration of doctors reflects the failure of the system to rectify its medical policy, improve the economic circumstances of medical practitioners and meet their demands. To date, the Iranian authorities have failed to take steps to keep the country's medical manpower or curb their emigra-



tion or even attract them to the medical field. Those working in the medical sector call for their salaries to be raised, more incentives, and for treatment prices to be adjusted in line with the medical services that are offered. They also want more medical jobs to be created and the equal distribution of physicians. However, Iran's harsh economic realities mean that the Iranian authorities have been unable to meet the mentioned demands due to limited resources. The differences between the Iranian classes are expected to further widen as the policies and solutions presented depend mainly on the political system's internal and external policies.

The Ideological File

The Ideological File this month sheds light on the relationship between the hawza and the jurisprudential community on the one hand and the Iranian ruling elite on the other. Both Sunni and Shiite jurists warned of the loss of popular confidence in clerics because of the policies of the ruling elite.

Jurists Warn of the Loss of Public Confidence in Clerics

Violence has recently escalated against clerics throughout Iran. It started with protests and then campaigns by young men and women activists to remove the turbans of clerics and even harass them on the streets. These acts placed the religious establishment in an awkward position before the public since it had continued for a long time to be keep a distance between itself and the state. Its legitimacy and centrality in the eyes of the people were strengthened because of this decision to keep a safe distance from the state.

Cleric Alavi Borojerdi warned of the mounting distrust toward the religious establishment. He conveyed a message to the ruling elite, saying that “the gap between the masses and clerics is widening. This wide gap and lack of confidence will have dangerous consequences.” He also reiterated that the jurists are no longer safe in Iran. “Our mistakes have caused our uniform and turbans to become worthless. The religious students are facing a difficult situation. And if these mistakes aren’t rectified, the situation will become more difficult.”⁽²³⁾

Thus, employing the hawza and clerics in the political process and politicizing religious discourse have

damaged the reputation of the hawza among the Iranian people. But the Iranian religious elite has remained heedless to this fact given that it has legitimized and justified its domestic and foreign policies by employing the hawza. However, this will undoubtedly lead the hawza’s reputation to totally collapse in the future, with the majority of people losing confidence in it, with it turning into a government-controlled institution that people can neither rely on nor rally around. In such circumstances, the hawza will be forced to either revert to pure religious scholarship — without involvement in politics or interference in the public sphere — or even disappear completely as has been the case with religious establishments over the course of history.

Sunni Jurists and Defending People’s Interests

Sunni jurists have warned of the worsening economic and political situation, with particular concern regarding declining levels of freedom and the denial of rights. Moulavi Abdul-Hamid said, “People’s conditions are worsening and they suffer from several problems. If the officials do not resolve the



problems we face, they should at least address the problems the rest of the people are facing.”⁽²⁴⁾ By making such a statement, Hamid seems to be appealing to the wider Iranian people, transcending all the narrow sectarian affiliations. He is attempting to put the ruling establishment in an awkward situation by declaring that it has failed to resolve the problems of Sunnis and Iranians in general as well.

Then Hamid criticized the priority given to the security option to address issues, when there is a need for these to be handled via economic, political and social means. He said, “If people’s problems are to be resolved by arresting protesters and politicians, I call on them [protesters] to turn themselves in to the authorities for people’s problems to be resolved. But in fact, people’s problems cannot be resolved by incarcerating and repressing them but rather by sitting down with those people.”⁽²⁵⁾ The “people” he refers to are not only the Sunnis but include the wider Iranian population. Thus, Hamid’s approach is consistent, he is addressing the Iranian people and raising their concerns rather than appearing as championing a certain sect.

Finally, Hamid also criticized the involvement of Islam in the public sphere to justify repression. He said, “There are different interpretations of Islam. According to our interpretation of Islam, locking up politicians, insulting political prisoners, torturing them and coercing them into confession have nothing to do with Islam. Rather, a government should pay heed to those who politically criticize.”⁽²⁶⁾ This is an important point from Hamid. He first admits that there are several readings and interpretations of Islam, declaring that in his own interpretation, locking

up prisoners, torturing and insulting them have nothing to do with Islam. At the same time, he exposes the reading adopted by his rival “hardliners” who have made torture and insults part of Islam, citing justifications from religious texts. It could be said that Hamid is practicing a smart and well-considered opposition, appealing to the wider Iranian people that his cause concerns all Iranians. At other times, he has criticized the religious reading adopted by the religious elite, offering an alternative reading that puts his rivals in an awkward situation at the popular and political levels. Regardless of his position and whether it is tactical, his position is a diplomatic and political one in the first place. At the religious level, his position reflects a moderate attitude, thereby putting the ruling elite in an awkward situation.

There are voices emerging from within the scholastic community — both Sunni and Shiite — that are critical of the system. Jurists within the hawza have criticized the lack of confidence in clerics because of their employment by the ruling elite to justify its policies. Meanwhile, other Sunni clerics have criticized the ruling elite because of its failure to resolve political and social issues. The former have attempted to bring to the ruling elite’s attention to the widening gap between the masses and clerics due to its intensive policies that politically exploit and employ the hawza, thus placing it in an awkward position before the masses. Sunni scholars, meanwhile, have attempted to defend the people’s interests and shoulder the burden of their pressing issues. Both sides are united on criticizing the ruling elite’s policies, blaming it for the loss of public confidence in clerics.

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EXTERNAL AFFAIRS



This part of the Iran Case File discusses Iran's interactions and relations with Arab countries and the world. As for its relations with Arab countries, Iran's ties with the Gulf states have massively progressed; new ambassadors were appointed in Riyadh and Tehran and Oman's sultan visited Iran. As for Iran-Iraq relations, the file reviews Iraq's Development Road project proposal, its challenges and opportunities as well as Iran's position on this project. With regard to Syria, the file discusses Syria's readmission into the Arab League and Iran's response to it. At the international level, the file sheds light on the current tug of war between Iran and the United States regarding the stalled nuclear talks and their methods to counter mutual leverage. As for Europe, the file discusses the prisoner swap of an Iranian diplomat (jailed in Belgium) with European citizens as well as the European warning regarding Iran's nuclear violations.

THE REGIONAL FILE

Iran and the Gulf States

In May 2023, the Gulf states and Iran started to build on their warming ties after a long period of estrangement that affected all dimensions of bilateral cooperation. The identification of new areas of cooperation and limitations necessitate continuous interaction to boost ties and ensure cooperation remains on the right track.

The Appointment of Ambassadors and Reshaping Ties

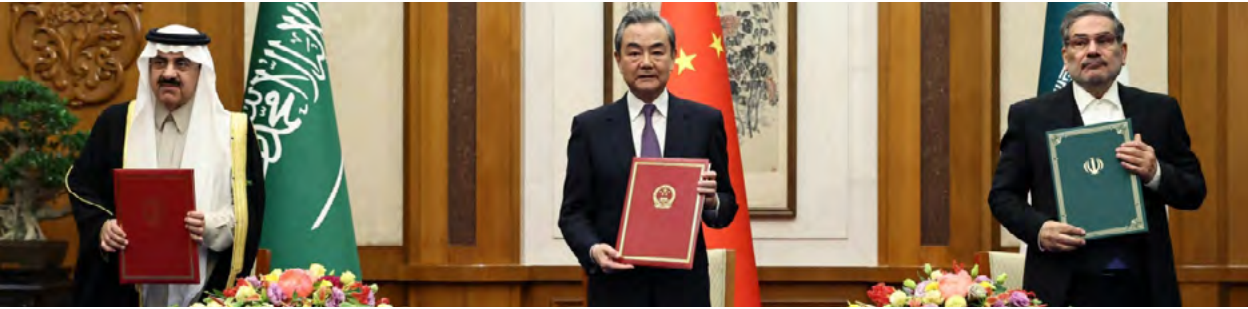
The news of the exchange of ambassadors between Tehran and Riyadh resulted in much media attention and the generation of extensive political analyses. News reports discuss their potential roles in establishing sound relationships to overcome distrust and boost cooperation in accordance with internationally recognized principles and rules. The exchange of ambassadors between Iran and Riyadh was preceded by the reappointment of ambassadors from Kuwait and the UAE to Tehran.

The challenges that the newly appointed ambassadors are expected to face include the continuous monitoring of their performance and the need to overcome many obstacles; they will need to shift from the expression of goodwill to establishing mechanisms to achieve mutual interests. Furthermore, they need to consider the institutional structural differences between Iran and the Gulf states in terms of their respective administrative and economic

structures, in addition, the sanctions imposed on Tehran must be considered.

In the in-depth analysis published by Iranian Diplomacy (IRD), former ambassador of Iran to Venezuela Mostafa Alaei mentioned that the Gulf states, in particular Saudi Arabia, have laid out a vision for economic and cultural development within the framework of major long-term projects over recent decades, and that five major projects of the Gulf states are among the 10 mega projects that are being implemented globally. He raised an important question, how can Iran benefit from the agreement with Saudi Arabia? He believes that Iran must define its interests accurately, as the Gulf states did, and that it only has the tools that are suitable for furthering tensions and hostility. He added that Iranian policy should focus on development needs and put less emphasis on weapons to establish security. In regard to the advantages of the recent understandings, he thinks that countries with economic and commercial projects will be able to build on regional understandings, including the Saudi-Iran agreement.⁽¹⁾

During his recent visit to Saudi Arabia and the meeting with his Saudi counterpart, Iran's Minister of Economic Affairs and Finance Ehsan Khandozi said that the development of economic relations with Saudi Arabia could be delivered through several axes within the framework of drawing up



an inclusive map of economic relations between the two countries. This includes the coordination related to Hajj and economic and banking affairs. He also stated that it was agreed that private sector delegations, including the directors of Iranian and Saudi companies, would hold meetings during the next three months. These meetings aim to endorse relations between the private sectors of the two countries within the framework of the roadmap that was agreed upon. He also indicated that talks between Iran and Saudi Arabia have been held in the field of oil and gas and that the two sides have a desire to cooperate in this field. The minister also stated that the two countries discussed issues related to the resumption of flights and the reopening of banks.⁽²⁾

On the other hand, ISNA News Agency provided a sobering reminder of the adverse effects of severed diplomatic relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran because. The value of exports and imports between Iran and Saudi Arabia reached about \$212 million in 2015, a year before the severance. It is hoped that the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries will open the way for further economic cooperation, because Saudi Arabia has always been an important trading partner for Iran. The volume of trade between the two countries sometimes reached about \$1 billion.⁽³⁾

In spite of this optimism, many positions indicate hesitation and lack of clarity in terms of future goals. In this regard, the Research Center of the Iranian Chamber of Commerce published a report entitled “The Formulation of a Roadmap to Push Forward Economic Relations Between Iran and Saudi Arabia.” It reviewed the background of relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia, and the prospects of relations as per the recent developments. The report indicated that Saudi-Iran relations would resume at a minimum level against the backdrop of global transformations and the lack of trust between the two sides. It also added that if relations between the two sides are judged in the context of international relations such as interactions, understanding, strategic cooperation and alliance, Iran and Saudi Arabia have just entered the interaction phase after a long period of maximum strategic competition. If the interaction phase is successfully implemented, the two countries will move to the understanding phase, which will prepare the ground for strategic and stable cooperation. In such an atmosphere, according to the research center, the points of view of both sides will definitely converge on developing the best strategy to push forward economic relations. However, the worst approach rests on “many and hasty requests.” This implies

danger in case the Iranian side will expect great results in the short term and formulate proposals based on its mentality to achieve maximum benefits in the shortest possible time, potentially hampering the revival of economic relations between the two countries.⁽⁴⁾ Therefore, the newly appointed ambassadors will play an important role in reducing misunderstandings and building bridges to achieve the set aspirations of both sides and to overcome the many gaps of doubt and uncertainty.

Sultan of Oman's Visit to Tehran: Extending and Expanding Understandings:

Oman's Sultan Haitham bin Tariq made a two-day visit to Tehran on May 28. He headed a high-level delegation that included Deputy Prime Minister for Defense Affairs Shihab bin Tariq al-Said, the minister of foreign affairs, the minister of finance, the chairman of the Oman Investment Authority, the minister of commerce and industry, the minister of energy and minerals and the chief of staff of the armed forces. The size of the delegation reflected the importance of the message Sultan Haitham wanted to deliver. It was to reiterate Oman's successes in the country's relations with Iran, particularly in trade and investment and its mediating role that has defined the relationship between the two countries.

In recent years, Oman has been one of the main actors mediating between the West and Iran. The latest involvement of Oman in mediation efforts was its help in the exchange of prisoners between Iran and Belgium. The Omani mediation resulted in the return of the Iranian diplomat Assadollah Assadi, who had been sentenced to 20 years in prison

in Belgium. In exchange, Iran released Olivier Vandecasteele, a Belgian aid worker.⁽⁵⁾

Oman is also currently mediating to converge the points of view between Iran and Egypt. The breakthrough in the resumption of negotiations between the United States and Iran regarding the nuclear issue can be considered as an important step toward improving ties between Iran and the West in general.

Observers believe that the visit of Oman's sultan to Iran reflected the importance of the discussed issues. If the discussed issues were not sensitive in nature, they would have been followed up through diplomatic channels. This visit occurred amid a wave of rapprochements in the region, most notably the Riyadh and Tehran agreement, the strengthening of relations between Iran and the UAE, and the reintegration of Syria into the Arab League. These understandings may be extended to include the restoration of the Egypt-Iran relationship. Iran aspires to break the nuclear deadlock so that it can seek some sanctions relief.

In conclusion, the upgrading, defining and integration of interests could lead to the continuity and development of Saudi-Iran and Arab-Iran relations. Therefore, the newly appointed ambassadors and intellectual elites must play a key role in revitalizing diplomatic relations. These efforts will help in shifting the region from tensions and conflict to establishing harmony between the peoples of the region. The regional states could contribute to Iran improving its international standing, which would allow it to help its deteriorating economy and avail of new economic opportunities.

Iran and Iraq

In May 2023, the Iraqi government announced a proposal to implement a cross-border international project under the name of Development Road that includes 10 Arab countries as well as other regional countries. This proposal comes at a time when the Middle East in general and Iraq in particular are experiencing critical developments amid the current international transformations that have caused global economic crises including food shortages, supply chain disruptions, volatility in energy supplies and rising global inflation rates. In addition, the region is witnessing transformations involving reconciliations and settlements. The aforementioned opens up space for questions related to the proposal's content and timing. In addition, there are questions surrounding Iran's position on this proposal and the opportunities and challenges regarding this proposal in the context of Iraq's internal and external conditions.

The Content of the Iraqi Development Road Project

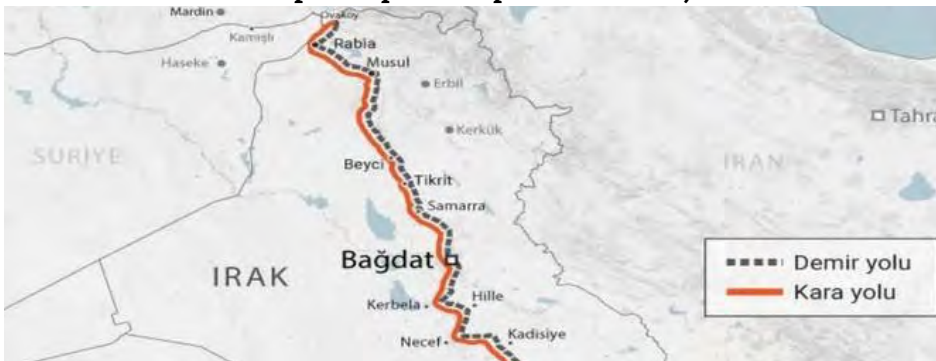
During his speech at the 32nd Arab summit held in Jeddah on May 19, 2023, Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammad Shia' al-Sudani expressed his country's desire to propose a cross-border international economic project

under the name of Development Road.⁽⁶⁾ This proposal is an economic artery to strengthen the interests and ties between Arab countries and non-Arab neighbors of Iraq, including Iran and Turkey.

On May 27, 2023, Iraq hosted an expanded international conference that was attended by Iraq's 10 Arab and non-Arab neighboring countries, which according to the Iraqi proposal are located within the project's scope: Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Syria, Jordan, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the UAE, Oman and Iran. The conference aimed to attract the attention of these countries to this mega project proposal.

Iraq has defined this proposal as a land project to construct parallel roads: an international highway and railway with a length of approximately 1,200 kilometers to transport goods and passengers. It is expected to start from Grand Faw Port in Basra and extend across 10 Iraqi provinces (see Map 1) all the way to Turkey and then to Europe later on. The financial cost of this project is estimated at \$17 billion. Iraqi officials expect it to take between three years to five years to be completed, if the other countries accept the proposal. The project is expected to yield annual profits of about \$4 billion and provide possibly about 100,000 jobs.

Map 1: Iraq's Development Road Project



Source: NRTTV,

The Baghdad government has proposed this project against the backdrop of Iraq experiencing political, sectarian and doctrinal conflicts among the constituents of the Iraqi state over two paths: whether the country should pursue a nation-state or sectarian path. This proposal comes as the one-year tenure of Sudani's government is nearly up after which new parliamentary elections will be held. This proposal is presented amid Iraq deciding to be an arena to settle regional crises and conduct dialogue between conflicting parties rather than an arena of conflict and battles.

Iran's Position on the Proposed Development Road

Historical experience shows that such project proposals may appeal to Iran for several reasons, primarily as it is a manufacturing country compared to the other countries proposed to be involved in the project. Therefore, it will be a key beneficiary if the project is implemented, as it will be able to market its goods. The Iranian government led by President Ebrahim Raisi also seeks to enhance its trade relations with Iran's neighboring countries to market the country's products, secure much needed financial revenues and mitigate the impact of the sanctions on the Iranian home front. These considerations can be viewed as part of Iran's economic diplomacy. In addition, the collective nature of the project will help in alleviating the impact of Iran's blockade and isolation.

The project is of value to Iran because the proposing country of the project — Iraq — is a neighboring country where it has extensive relations and influence. Through its relationship with Iraq during the current stage, Iran aims to focus more on pragmatic dimensions.

This is illustrated by the efforts made to establish economic companies linked to Iran in Iraq, the rapid implementation of the railway project with Iraq, and the call for Iraq to increase trade and investment between the two countries.

However, Iran may have reservations about joining the project because it will impede some of its other projects such as the International North-South Transport Corridor and the Iranian corridor that connects Iran to the Mediterranean Sea via Iraq and Syria. If implemented, the project will strengthen Iraq's relationship with its Arab surroundings and limit Iran's desire to keep Iraq within its sphere of influence. A Western writer highlighted ⁽⁷⁾ that the presence of understandings on the energy lines between Ankara and Baghdad within the framework of the proposed project would deprive Iran of a source of income from Turkey. This would deepen Iran's economic crisis, especially amid the harsh US-led sanctions regime.

Opportunities and Challenges to Iraq's Development Road:

The project offers some great opportunities. It is a meeting point of interests and economic diversification and an opportunity for some countries that fall within the scope of the project to diversify their sources of income and enhance investment and trade opportunities. The project has strategic dimensions as it links Asia with Europe, benefiting from the wide geographical reach of the countries that are likely to be involved. It is an opportunity to address the economic crises arising from the Russia-Ukraine war such as the disruption of supply chains and food shortages. In addition, the regional reconciliations are likely to play a positive role in the project's

implementation and reaping of benefits. The project is of significance when considering the negativities of the Russia-Ukraine war. It will also help cut transportation times by almost half, as road trips take a much shorter time than those via sea.

However, the project faces many challenges, most notably the proposing state is riddled with political crises. Iraq is divided between those who support a path toward a nation-state and those who prefer the country to be riddled by ethnic and sectarian differences. Moreover, Iraq faces serious crises such as unemployment, corruption and electricity/water shortages. In geographical terms, the project faces challenges too, including the rugged mountainous border region between the Kurdistan Region of Iraq and Turkey and the route of the project which passes through the disputed areas between the government of Baghdad and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. Finally, Iraq's security crises are a threat to the proposal such as the uncontrolled proliferation of weapons and the refusal of militias to surrender their arms. This is of concern to Iraq as it has no authority over the proliferation and carrying of weapons in its territories, a clear threat to the project.

Many challenges are also related to the project's sources of financing and the divergent positions of the countries that are likely to be involved in the project. Each country has a different position on the project, especially as each country looks at the costs and benefits that will be incurred from the project. Some manufacturing countries' share of the profits will be greater than those that do not manufacture. This project will impact the other projects of these countries and their trade.

Many complex conflicts and crises exist among the proposed participant countries, although some have decided on reconciliation and settlement to end the disputes. Some of these countries have poor infrastructure, whereas others are beset with political and sectarian conflicts.

Those who support a path toward Iraqi statehood compete with those who do not over the proposal of cross-border international projects. Former Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi, who aimed for Iraqi statehood, proposed the New Levant project. On the other hand, Sudani, who is close to the Coordination Framework, has proposed the current Development Road. However, both are aware of the nature and the numerous complex and very serious challenges facing such collective projects. In fact, these challenges do not seem easy to overcome at all.

Iran and Syria

With the Arab League's decision to readmit Syria, the focus during the Jeddah Summit was on Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, who headed his country's delegation after an absence from the Arab landscape for more than 12 years. Many questions have been raised about the context and motives behind Syria's readmission into the Arab League, Iran's position on this and the possible challenges facing Syria's reintegration into the Arab fold.

The Official Syrian Readmission Into the Arab League

The Arab League held its 32nd meeting in Jeddah amid exceptional regional and international crises and conflicts. The key focus was Syrian President Assad's return to the Arab League after 12 years of absence, during which Syria witnessed one of the most complex crises in the region.

Syria's readmission into the Arab League comes in the context of a series of rapprochements in the region. The China-brokered Saudi-Iran deal helped in creating a climate of stability and pacification and established the building blocks for regional disengagement between Iran and Saudi Arabia, and among other Arab countries. The readmission is also a necessity for all Arab parties, while taking into account the rapid regional transformations and the growing Russian, Chinese and Iranian influence in the region. On the other hand, Turkey-Syria relations enter a new turning point toward rapprochement. This shift has been brokered by Russia and Iran. In spite of the diverging conditions and demands, this rapprochement is about to pay off

in the wake of the two quadripartite meetings that involved Syria, Turkey, Russia and Iran. The two meetings were hosted by Moscow. The first meeting brought together the defense ministers of Russia, Iran, Syria and Turkey on April 25, 2023 to coordinate efforts to normalize relations between Ankara and Damascus, and the second gathered the foreign ministers of these countries on May 10, 2023,⁽⁸⁾ during which a roadmap was set up for resetting relations between Syria and Turkey

According to Syria's perspective, its readmission into the Arab League is yet another victory to add to its victory in the war. However, it continues to face the challenge of establishing peace and stability in its territories. Syria's readmission is not sufficient to achieve this aim. In fact, Syria must align its aspirations with the current regional flow of political and economic relations in the context of the resetting of regional ties. This means that Syria must create the appropriate conditions for the return of Syrian refugees and preserve its territorial integrity and sovereignty. The closing statement of the summit affirmed the commitment to end the role of militias and confine the role of security solely to national armies and security forces. This was clearly directed at Iran and Syria since numerous Iranian-affiliated militias exist in Syria.

Iran's Perspective on Syria's Readmission Into the Arab League

Although Iran welcomed Syria's readmission into the Arab League, this decision raised several questions regarding Iranian calculations and its position on the new Syria.⁽⁹⁾ All

the aforementioned developments represent several wins and challenges for Iran. It is now working to lessen internal pressures and problems, break its regional isolation, and improve its relations with its neighboring countries. In addition, it aims to resolve several regional crises to reduce their cost on the Iranian domestic front. As a result, Iran hopes to preserve its successes and maintain its influence in Syria at all levels (economic, social and military). It was able to extend and entrench its influence in the country because of the years of isolation imposed on the Syrian government.

Iran's acceptance of Syria's readmission into the Arab League was evident in Iran's several moves that preceded and followed Syria's readmission, such as the visit of Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi to Damascus in early May.⁽¹⁰⁾ This visit was the first one for an Iranian president to Damascus since the visit of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in 2010. It occurred prior to Syria's official participation in the Arab League and was part of Iran's realization of the change in the pattern and quality of its influence in Syria in the coming period. Raisi aimed to strengthen ties between the two governments by signing many agreements covering various economic fields. The majority of these agreements relate to establishing joint banking mechanisms between the two countries. Other agreements relate to the fields of communication and customs tariffs. The recent visit also included agreements on reconstruction, energy, electricity generation, transportation and housing projects.⁽¹¹⁾ Tehran aspires to lead the reconstruction process while the Syrian president aims to make every possible effort to secure the funds

needed to reconstruct Syria's dilapidated economy, which is the outcome of the war, isolation and sanctions over the past 12 years. Undoubtedly, Raisi's visit reflects the Iranian realization of the need to abandon its hostile rhetoric and promotion of militarization and destruction. Furthermore, the Syrian government realizes the need to focus on reconstruction and add this more to its language and discourse. These realizations come in the context of the new regional atmosphere and achieves the Iranian "spider strategy."

In conclusion, the recent Arab League summit demonstrates Arab desires to take advantage of the current transformations in the international system and recalibrate several Arab policies to rebuild the agenda of joint Arab action in the region. Syria's participation in this summit reflects the Syrian government's desire to exploit these regional transformations to suit its own goals and policies. On the other hand, the Syrian readmission into the Arab League creates a mix of challenges for both Damascus and Tehran and opportunities which the latter has sought to seize and attempt to readapt in accordance with its strategic perspective.

THE INTERNATIONAL FILE

Iran and the United States

Although the door of diplomacy remains open and there are efforts to bring the United States and Iran back to the negotiating table, confrontation and escalation remain the hallmark of bilateral interactions. The May 2023 report attempts to shed light on the developments related to US-Iran relations and the future of bilateral relations in light of recent developments.

Wranglings Over the Nuclear Talks

The G7 summit in Hiroshima conveyed that the United States and the European nations involved in the nuclear accord are committed to diplomacy. This was preceded by a reiteration of the same viewpoint by Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein-Amir Abdollahian. Iran and South Korea are negotiating the release of \$7 billion in frozen Iranian assets. It appears that there are efforts to bring closer the viewpoints, which was echoed by Abdollahian who said, "We continue receiving messages from the Americans and send messages to them via mediators." In this context, it is worth noting that Oman's Sultan Haitham bin Tariq carried a message related to the nuclear talks during his Tehran visit in late May 2023.

However, these efforts have failed to end the stalemate so far since the nuclear negotiations were stalled in September 2022. As time goes by, the matter becomes much more complicated. Though Iran is keen to preserve the path of diplomacy

and keep the negotiations door ajar, it continues its efforts to mitigate the impact of sanctions and is intending to take advantage of the rapprochement with Saudi Arabia and other Arab countries to end its isolation. In addition, it aims through the aforementioned to bypass pressures, while continuing to develop its nuclear capabilities.

The complications of the Iranian nuclear file overshadow the US home front. The file has become a source of bipartisan contention between the Republicans and Democrats. Both parties are preparing for the 2024 presidential race. In this context, Republican Congressman John James introduced a bill that would significantly dash the Biden administration's hopes to enter into a nuclear agreement with Iran. Under this proposed bill, any nuclear deal between the Biden administration and Iran would be classified as an official treaty, which requires Congressional approval.

Yet, a legacy of distrust and hostile acts are still overshadowing and making matters more complicated. There have been understandings between the United States and the IAEA on monitoring Iran's nuclear facilities, including the conclusion of an investigation into the three undisclosed sites in which the UN watchdog found traces of uranium enriched up to 83.7% purity and the installment of surveillance cameras at some sites. However, the United States and the European parties are still concerned about Iran's nuclear program

which is edging closer to the nuclear threshold as the days pass by, with its enriched uranium stockpile reaching unprecedented levels according to the latest IAEA report released in late May 2023. Iran's enriched uranium stockpile has reached 4.7 tons, 32 times more than the amount specified in the 2015 nuclear deal.⁽¹²⁾ Perhaps this was the motive behind the United States and the European troika moving to trigger the snapback mechanism. In addition, arrangements have been discussed with Israel to counter Iran's nuclear program, including aiding in carrying out a military strike against Iran's nuclear facilities if the worst case scenario plays out.⁽¹³⁾

A Face-off and Mutual Levers

As the path of negotiations remains suspended, relations between the two sides continue to be marked by tensions and confrontation. Among the manifestations of this confrontation is the Biden administration's imposition of further sanctions on Iran in May. Moreover, tensions were not confined to the imposition of sanctions, with both sides amassing levers and means of deterrence. In an important message of deterrence to Iran, the US Army equipped its A-10 aircraft with bombs weighing 250 pounds, which US officials said aimed to bolster the capacity to destroy weapons warehouses used by Iran-backed militias in the region. This development happened against the backdrop of US forces facing attacks in Syria. On the other side, Iran strengthened its own force of deterrence. Tehran test-fired a ballistic missile with a 2,000-kilometer range. These US moves come as it awaits the revocation of the restrictions imposed on the Iranian missile program in October 2023, a measure that could give

Iran a free hand to develop its missiles. Iran has also exploited the ongoing circumstances on the global stage, with it seeking military equipment from Moscow, including attack helicopters, radar systems and Yak-130 combat training aircraft. It is worth noting that reports indicate that Iran and Moscow have signed a deal under which Tehran will purchase Russian-made Su-35 fighter jets.⁽¹⁴⁾

As the maritime threats posed by Iran escalated, the United States increased the number of patrols by its vessels and drones in the Strait of Hormuz in collaboration with its European allies. At the same time, the United States attempted to convince regional allies to deploy dozens of vessels to protect international waterways. This is in response to Iran's increasing attacks on ships and tankers transporting oil in the Gulf, the last of which was carried out on May 3, 2023. The Panama-flagged oil tanker Niovi was captured by the IRGC while cruising through the Strait of Hormuz between Iran and Oman, the second incident in a week. In this regard, the Pentagon announced that Iran had harassed or attacked 15 commercial vessels carrying international flags since 2021.⁽¹⁵⁾ In the context of this confrontation, Iran deployed its naval vessels in the Panama Canal for the first time, an important message from Iran that it is moving into the US maritime backyard.⁽¹⁶⁾ In addition, the confrontation in May included raising human rights issues as a lever against Tehran. In addition to the continued sanctions and supporting the opposition overseas, the US Department of State's 2022 Report on International Religious Freedom, released in May 2023, pointed to the violations and repression of religious freedoms in Iran. There is no doubt that this issue has become much

more prominent after the nuclear talks stalled and Iran's support for Russia in the Russia-Ukraine war — in addition to the outbreak of mass protests following the killing of Kurdish woman Mahsa Amini.⁽¹⁷⁾

For its part, Iran has reiterated its rejection of US sanctions. Iran's UN Permanent Representative Amir Saeid Iravani on May 3, 2023, delivered a message to UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres and the President of the General Assembly Csaba Körösi, in which he rejected US sanctions as unjust and having a profound humanitarian impact on the Iranian home front.⁽¹⁸⁾

In conclusion, the current status quo of relations — marked by stalled negotiations and mounting confrontation — face several challenges. On top of these challenges comes Iran edging closer to the nuclear threshold in addition to the challenges expected when the restrictions on Iran's missile program in October 2023 are lifted. In 2020, restrictions on arms sales to Iran were lifted, and Iran has continued to defy the United States on the issue of the Russia-Ukraine war. This is in addition to the extensive confrontation in the region, including the naval one.

However, in the face of these challenges, there remain some options, including diplomatic ones. The European proposal, rejected in September 2022 by the United States, continues to stand as a ready-made roadmap to which the two sides could refer to in order to dissipate their fears. Yet there are non-diplomatic options, whether by returning to the UN Security Council and the United States prompting one of the European signatories to the nuclear deal to trigger the snapback mechanism at the UN Security Council to fully blow up the nuclear deal and comprehensively reinstate sanctions

to isolate Iran. The United States could also coordinate efforts with Israel to obstruct Iran's nuclear program through a strike targeting its nuclear facilities. But given that the scenario of escalating confrontation with Iran is ruled out due to current international and regional dynamics, and that there are no prospects for settling the current disagreements, this leaves the Iranian issue at the mercy of the unknown — with no alternative plans and scenarios.

One could also say — given the current ambiguous landscape where there are neither negotiations nor alternative options, with Iran enhancing its uranium enrichment capabilities to levels enabling it to develop a nuclear bomb whenever it intends to do so — there is a deliberate intent by the Biden administration to push Iran closer to the nuclear threshold. By doing so, the Biden administration wants to further narrow the options available for the Republicans and curb the future influence of allies abroad on this file such as Israel and other regional powers — as was the case in 2018 — thus imposing a *fait accompli* on all actors and ensuring the nuclear deal will continue to serve as a mechanism for addressing Iran's nuclear program. At the same time, the US administration will not abandon its commitment to prevent Iran from possessing a military nuclear program through monitoring activities conducted by the IAEA. The Biden administration is doing so based on the conviction that the nuclear deal is the best option to address Iran's nuclear program, which granted Iran the right to enrich uranium and develop a nuclear program for peaceful purposes. Of course, this is contingent upon Iran not already imposing a *fait accompli*, which it may have started to do since abandoning its nuclear obligations in 2019.

Iran and Europe

Iran won a major victory in May when it exchanged four foreign nationals it had detained for years for its diplomat who had been convicted in Belgium. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) also gave Tehran relief when its board shied away from passing a censure resolution as it had done in November for failing to comply with its safeguards and monitoring obligations.

Iran, Europe Conduct Prisoner Swap

Iran's diplomat Assadollah Assadi, who was caught and convicted for a terror-plot, was sent to Oman on May 26, 2023 as part of "Operation Blackstone" in exchange for Belgian aid worker Olivier Vandecasteele, an unnamed Danish national and Massud Mosaheb and Kamran Ghaderi who possess dual Austrian-Iranian nationality.⁽¹⁹⁾

Vandecasteele was arrested in Iran in 2022 on charges of espionage and sentenced to 40 years in prison in 2023. Assadi was sentenced to 20 years for involvement in a terror plot to blow up a gathering of Iranian dissidents in France in 2018. His and Vandecasteele's trials are incomparable from the angles of transparency and fairness. None of the prisoners exchanged as part of the deal have spoken publicly yet.

Despite the aforementioned exchanges, the fate of Ahmad Reza Djalali hangs in the balance, a professor at the Flemish Free University in Brussels and a Swedish-Iranian doctor, who was arrested by the Iranian authorities in 2018. He faces a death sentence on espionage charges.

Oman's role as a facilitator for Iran's hostage diplomacy, and the Belgium government's act of creating

a precedent are coming under sharp criticism. However, Assadi's release also highlights the latest success of Tehran in using foreigners and dual nationals as a shield to cover up its illegal actions and bend the foreign and domestic policies of other sovereign countries.

This episode can lead to encouraging Tehran to continue its covert operations abroad while imprisoning foreign nationals for an eventual swap deal. As seen in Assadi's case, Iran was so confident of his freedom as part of a deal that it did not even consider appealing the court's judgment. Lodging a plea would have extended his prison stay till the review process was completed. Negotiations were an easy and swift route with greater prospects of success.

Iran's quest to detain foreign and dual nationals became part of its strategy after 2014 when their swap started taking longer.⁽²⁰⁾ Jason Rezaian, a US-Iranian dual national detained in Iran from 2014 to 2016, is a case in point. In his memoir Rezaian wrote, "Obama's foreign policy adviser Ben Rhodes apologized for my release taking so long (which was awkward but fulfilling), acknowledging that I was a victim of the nuclear negotiations."⁽²¹⁾

In months ahead, South Korea's release of \$7 billion in Iran's frozen assets could lead to American-Iranian Siamak Namazi, Emad Shargi, Morad Tahbaz and a few others being released.

Europe's Warning of Nuclear Violations

In his report to the Board of Governors, IAEA Director General Rafael Mariano Grossi noted that Iran continues to fail to honor its commitments under

the JCPOA since February 2021. The report noted that Iran's HEU stockpile rose over a quarter in three months. "The inventory of enriched uranium is growing at a very fast pace, and the activities are also growing. So, the presence of the IAEA should be commensurate with that."⁽²²⁾

The E3 – France, the UK and Germany – however, did not hold back from their scathing criticism of Iran's evasive and illegal activities. The E3 mainly focused on two "particularly concerning actions:" a) centrifuge configuration changes made by Iran at Fordow without prior notice to the IAEA and uncovered during an unannounced inspection, b) detection of particles of uranium enriched at 83.7%, which is grossly inconsistent with the declared level of enrichment.

The UN watchdog's "assessment of the activities undertaken by Iran in the other location at Marivan remains as set out previously: that Iran conducted explosive experiments in preparation for the use of neutron detectors."⁽²³⁾ The E3 also sought early provision of technically credible information on the whereabouts of nuclear material and contaminated equipment in relation to the sites at Turqzabad and Varamin.

The E3 also pointed to the discrepancy, detected more than a year ago, between the amount of natural uranium declared at Jaber Ibn Hayan Laboratory, located in Lavisian-Shian, a northeastern neighborhood of Tehran, and the amount verified by the UN watchdog. The IAEA considers Iran's

latest declaration "not to be based on scientific grounds, and therefore, not acceptable."

The E3 warned, "If Iran fails to implement by the next Board the essential and urgent actions contained in the November 2022 Resolution and the March Joint Statement in full, the Board will have to be prepared to take further action, including if necessary, making a finding on whether the Agency is not able to verify that there has been no diversion of nuclear material."⁽²⁴⁾

Iran's reluctance to implement its March commitment that it made to the IAEA director general and its continuous enrichment of uranium in greater quantities and higher levels, as well as the UN watchdog's muted reaction hints at progress in backdoor talks between Iran and the United States. The recent visit of the sultan of Oman might have created a silver lining. Meanwhile, a smoke-screen of ambiguity remains.

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