

MONTHLY REPORT

# Iran Case File

June 2023

*Your window on Iran from inside and abroad*

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## Executive Summary

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The month of June 2023 witnessed significant developments and rapidly unfolding events at the political, economic, military, ideological and social levels. There were also several overlapping developments in terms of Iran's interactions with Arab and international spheres. These are expected to have implications for all Iranian files during the coming period.

**Internally and politically,** changing the venue of the landmark joint press conference with the Iranian and Saudi foreign ministers in Tehran sparked widespread heated partisan debate among Iran's political currents. The "reformists," who remain largely marginalized and excluded from all decision-making institutions, viewed the incident as an appropriate opportunity to launch scathing criticism against the "conservative" current. However, the "conservatives" attempted to mitigate the fallout for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs by accusing the "reformists" of being responsible for the embarrassing incident.

**Economically,** Iran's official institutions once again published conflicting economic indicators. These official tallies do not correspond with those of international institutions. This represents

a desperate attempt by Iranian officials to improve the public outlook regarding the government's economic performance. This move sparked discontent in Iranian society, especially regarding the inflation rate as it did not reflect the bleak reality of life for the vast majority of Iranians. Questionable tallies were also published regarding other important indicators including growth, unemployment and poverty rates. Such a move usually does not achieve its intended goal and often leads to more adverse economic consequences.

**Militarily,** Iran's missile program faces international sanctions to dissuade Iran from pursuing the development of missiles since they could be linked to the Iranian nuclear program in the future. After Tehran unveiled the Fattah ballistic missile last month, Europe plans to extend the sanctions on Iran's missile program. On the other hand, Russia-Iran military and security cooperation continued in June. This was reflected in reciprocal visits, the building of an Iranian factory in Russia and cooperation between both countries' police forces.

**Socially,** abortion is among the major problems facing the Iranian government. It also poses

economic and religious challenges to the ruling establishment. The number of abortion cases, which are prohibited in Islamic law, is growing in Iranian society. Paradoxically, the reasons for abortion differ from those commonly attributed to conservative societies and go far beyond factors related to socioeconomic conditions. This portends looming demographic problems in the medium and long term, particularly if the increasing number of abortion cases overlap with other trends such as late marriage and birth control.

**Ideologically,** political-religious polarization in Iran has increased recently, and the employment of religion in politics has increased. A significant current in the hawza fears the imminent downfall of the ruling elite, especially in light of the Iranian government's inability to resolve the country's overwhelming economic crisis. This will affect the historical status of the hawza in the Shiite and Iranian collective memory as it is viewed as being passive and unwilling to criticize or challenge the ruling establishment and its allies. However, the ruling elite devotes little attention to the hawza's status and is only concerned about strengthening its legitimacy, perpetuating the theory of Wilayat al-Faqih and ensuring the continuation of the status quo.

**Iran's interactions with Arab and international spheres** were rich in important developments and events during the month of June 2023. At the level of Arab and Iran-Gulf interactions, the visit of Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan Al Saud to Iran was the most prominent event in the trajectory of restoring diplomatic ties between the two countries. The Saudi foreign minister's landmark visit to Tehran reflected Saudi Arabia's resolve to break the stalemate in relations between the two countries. It occurred in the context of Saudi Arabia's rapprochement with Iran. This visit was reflective of Riyadh's genuine commitment to what was agreed upon with Iran in Beijing. In spite of the positive outcomes of the visit, the incident of changing the venue of the joint press conference with the Iranian and Saudi foreign ministers sparked widespread controversy in Iran and beyond, exposing rifts among Iranian decision-makers.

**In Iraq,** signs of tactical changes among pro-Iranian armed groups with regard to their formations and names continued. This was reflected in the creation of new front groups under new names in Iranian spheres of influence. Ashab al-Kahf, a pro-Iranian group, announced the formation of three new front groups against the US presence in Iraq:



Seif Allah Brigades, Karbala Brigades and Al-Sabireen Brigades. These groups represent new Iranian tools in the context of the transformations taking place in the regional sphere such as the restoration of Saudi-Iran relations.

**In Syria**, Russia's crisis and the recent rebellion of the Wagner Group raised several questions and scenarios about the prospect of the group's role in the economic and military realms, and the implications of this rebellion for Russia's military presence in Syria. This rebellion caused confusion and concern in Iran due to the potential repercussions on the Russia-Iran alliance, especially in the spheres of influence and joint cooperation, especially in Syria.

**In Yemen**, the formation of the Hadramout National Council was the major event in the Yemeni arena, after a month of discussions in Riyadh. The formation of this council happened as an extension of the objectives set out by the Presidential Leadership Council, which was established on April 7, 2022. These objectives aim to improve the economic and living conditions of the Yemeni people, unify all military and security formations of the various Yemeni forces under one umbrella, and prioritize the aspirations of the Yemeni people by achiev-

ing security, political and economic stability. The provisions of the founding charter of the council reveal the broad political dimensions and objectives that it seeks to achieve. These are based on the alignment of the principles of the Hadramout National Council with those of the Presidential Leadership Council. This will make the province of Hadramout a political destination that positively impacts the Yemeni scene in general due to its economic, social and political significance.

**Internationally**, US-Iran relations witnessed important developments, especially at the diplomatic level. Some Gulf states succeeded in bringing Washington and Tehran back to the negotiating table, albeit indirectly. Instead of reviving the nuclear deal, the talks centered on a temporary deal. However, the talks did not stop the two sides from continuing to strengthen their pressure cards and pursue strident and contradicting policies. The United States kept in place the sanctions against the Iranian government, while Iran's maritime attacks in the Gulf did not stop, nor did its efforts to develop its missile program.

**Iran-Europe relations** took a new turn when the Albanian anti-terrorism police raided a camp of the Mujahideen-e Khalq group following a court ruling which

held that the group was guilty of carrying out illegal activities. Albanian police also shared information about the group with Iran, which was obtained from computer hard drives. Albania

issued official statements that demanded the group to leave the country. The US administration voiced support for the action taken by Albania's police.



# INTERNAL AFFAIRS





**I**nternal Affairs consists of five main files. The Political File discusses the sudden change in venue of the joint press conference with the Iranian and Saudi foreign ministers in Tehran, and the convenient opportunity this presented to the “reformists” to criticize their political rival, the “conservative current.” It also highlights the attempts by the “conservatives” to blame the “reformists” for causing this embarrassing incident. The Economic File discusses the disparities and discrepancies in the economic statistics issued by the Iranian government and the internal pressures that Iranian officials face to improve public perceptions regarding the country’s economic performance. The Military File addresses two issues: European plans to keep the sanctions on Iranian ballistic missiles and the continued Russia-Iran military cooperation. The Social File discusses the position of the Iranian government on the increasing number of abortion cases in Iran and the restrictions on legal abortion and its implications for Iran. Finally, the Ideological File discusses the efforts of the religious and hawza elites to reform the Iranian political system by condemning widespread poverty, injustice and discrimination. It also addresses the continuous criticism expressed by one of the most prominent Sunni jurists in Iran, Maulvi Abdul Hamid, and his defense of the vulnerable in Iran.



## The Political File

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The visit of Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan to Iran on June 17, 2023, marked the tipping point in the resumption of relations between the two countries. Despite the significance of the visit for both countries and the positive outcomes it generated, the incident of changing the venue of the joint press conference between the Saudi and Iranian foreign ministers sparked a huge controversy inside Iran, reigniting disputes between “reformists” and “conservatives” who traded accusations.

### **The “Conservatives” Face “Reformist” Criticism**

The issue of relocating the press conference between the Saudi and Iranian foreign ministers generated a firestorm of partisan debate in Iran. The “reformists,” who have been removed and excluded from all decision-making institutions in recent years, took advantage of the incident to level stinging criticisms at the “conservatives,” taking revenge for and responding to the same accusations leveled against them during the tenure of former President Hassan Rouhani. During that period, the “reformists” were accused of failing to protect the country’s interests. The “reformists” faced “conservative criticism” after every decision they made and policy they wanted to implement.

Perhaps the conflicting and contradictory Iranian statements regarding the reason for shifting the press conference’s venue heightened the criticism. On the one hand, a journalist for the state-run newspaper Jam-e Jam reported that the picture of the late Quds Force Chief Qassem Soleimani, which was mounted to the right side of the podium on a wall immediately above the Saudi flag, was the main reason for changing the venue of the press conference. The Saudis demanded the picture be removed from the hall before the two foreign ministers entered to start their press conference. Therefore, the Iranian side decided to change the conference’s venue, instead, holding it in a nearby hall.<sup>(1)</sup>

Tasnim News Agency, on the other side, offered a different narrative. It said that an anti-Saudi Arabia Twitter post by an Iranian journalist was the reason for the change of venue. Al-Arabiya channel’s news team showed the provocative tweet to the Saudi officials, complaining about the Iranian journalist’s behavior. The Saudi protocol team demanded that the journalist’s tweet be removed and that the press conference’s venue changed as a result. As for Iran’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, it denied both narratives, alleging that a technical problem was behind

changing the conference's venue. This official justification was rejected by Iranian observers as well as by the "reformists," who considered it as an attempt by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to camouflage the awkward situation in which Iran was mired, thus averting the negative repercussions and critical remarks that the Iranian government would attract as a result of agreeing to change the press conference's venue.

"Reformist" commentators and politicians opposed the official narrative, accusing the "hardliners" who pushed relations with Saudi Arabia to the brink of collapse under Rouhani (2013-2021). Prominent "reformist" figure Abbas Abdi wrote, "In principle, I am not opposed to changing the venue of the press conference. Some considerations must be made when establishing relationships. What would those who yelled yesterday do if such an incident occurred during the tenure of former Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif? You've made a mockery of yourself!"<sup>(2)</sup>

For his part, Ali Abtahi, vice president under former President Mohammad Khatami, said, "When the 'hardliners' and extremists set fire to the Saudi embassy building in 2016, which resulted in the severance of relations, the current politicians welcomed the attack. As for us, we had strongly condemned their act for the sake of the country's na-

tional interest. Today, and for the sake of the same national interest, we also welcome the switch in the 'hardliners' approach that has led to restoring ties with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia."<sup>(3)</sup>

Hamid Aboutalebi, who was a political adviser to Rouhani, commented on the matter, "If Iranian foreign policy had been based on the country's national interests and had a national character rather than a factional one, the battlefield (under the command of the IRGC) and diplomacy would not have intermingled in such a confusing way. Each facet of relationships with the outside world would have had a strategy sketched out." He went on to say that during such a critical visit, and in view of Iran's harsh external conditions, "decisions and programs have to be asserted not differences."<sup>(4)</sup>

"Reformist" lawmaker Jalil Rahimi Jahanabadi said, "Unfortunately, we have some sort of extremism in the country due to these incorrect behaviors." He pointed out that changing the conference's venue rested with the team in charge of protocol. He added, "Of course, if such a thing happened during the 'reformists' tenure, the 'conservatives' would have put on their shrouds and set fire to the whole country. But I believe that this incident was more caused by the poor organization of the protocol team in the Foreign Ministry. The situation could have been addressed in a better way."



Jahanabadi attempted to thwart the “conservatives” by calling for not using the incident to condemn the Ministry of Foreign Affairs as well as avoiding partisan disputes and using them to undermine the country’s interests.<sup>(5)</sup>

### **The “Conservatives” Attempt to Accuse the “Reformists” of Being Responsible for the Incident**

In the face of “reformist” criticism, some “conservatives” and their media institutions embarked on defending the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. They accused the “reformists” of being behind the incident. Tasnim News Agency, which is affiliated with the IRGC, sought to lay the blame on a “reformist” correspondent in the crisis related to Qassem Soleimani’s picture. The news agency aligned with the “hardliners” stated, “Everything was proceeding normally. All of a sudden, a “reformist” journalist posted a tweet hostile to Saudi Arabia and Al-Arabiya network to provoke the Saudis and insult them.” According to the journalists present in the hall, Al-Arabiya news team showed the tweet to the Saudi officials, complaining about the Iranian journalist’s behavior. Tasnim News Agency added, “This prompted the Saudi team in charge of protocol to request changing the hall ahead of the press conference, asserting at the same time that the journalist must delete his provocative tweet.”<sup>(6)</sup>

The “conservative” Keyhan newspaper accused the Iranian media of

overblowing the incident. It also accused some political parties — mainly the “reformists” — which it said have a charge sheet of attempts to harm the country’s interests, and sought to render the visit as well as the Raisi government’s diplomatic efforts unsuccessful. However, the remarks made by Prince Faisal bin Farhan in his meeting with Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi showed that the two regional powerhouses’ vision for restoring ties would not be impacted by such marginal issues.<sup>(7)</sup>

Lawmaker Salman Zaker, member of the Iranian Parliament’s social committee, defended the foreign minister, saying that the minister took the country’s interests into consideration when he agreed to switch the press conference’s venue. He also added that any measure that aims to address the situation in the country’s interest is welcomed.<sup>(8)</sup>

In conclusion, the incident of changing the venue of the joint press conference between the Saudi and Iranian foreign ministers may have provided a good opportunity for the “reformists” to launch stinging criticism against the “conservatives” and call into question the prudence and diplomatic shrewdness of the Raisi government’s officials. However, the “conservatives” control of all decision-making institutions in Iran may stymie any attempt by the “reformists” to polish their image before the Iranian public in advance of the Iranian parliamentary elections set for March 2024.

## The Economic File

Iran's state institutions released conflicting economic tallies. Sometimes they contradict those published by international institutions. The Economic File for June 2023 discusses the issue of conflicting economic tallies in Iran and the reasons behind this.

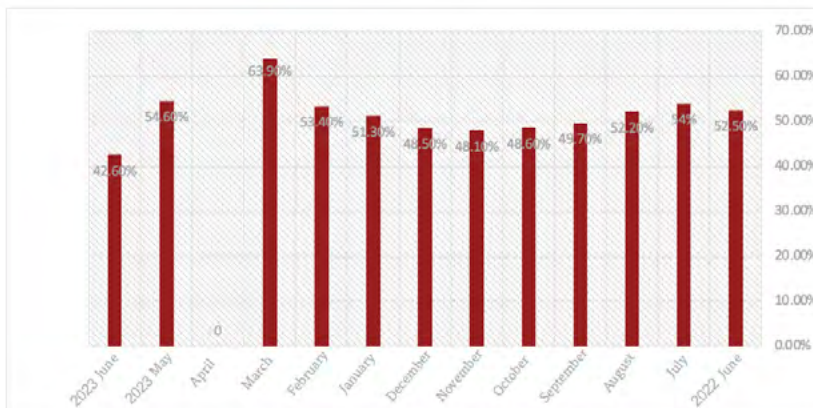
### Conflicting Iranian Tallies

Conflicting economic tallies have recently sparked a debate in Iran, especially as they contradict those issued by international institutions. This file will also shed light on the stark contrast between the statistics released by the state and the tangible realities in the country, particularly the overall tallies related to the country's economic growth, inflation, unemployment and poverty levels. Iranian officials have sought these days to make the government's policies and performance appear successful through publishing questionable statistics.

Usually, these statistics are challenged by a host of Iranian economists. However, this time the challenge was even stronger as the figures related to real-life indicators such as the inflation rate that can be accurately assessed by every Iranian. According to the Statistical Center of Iran, the inflation rate declined to 42.6% in June compared to the same month last year. The same center revealed last month that the May inflation rate was 54.6%, implying a 12% drop in inflation compared to the previous month (see [Figure 1](#)).

Another Iranian body, the Tehran Chamber of Commerce, Industries and Mines, announced via remarks made by the head of the chamber's research unit that the inflation rate in June ranged between 40% and 54.2% encompassing 26 Iranian provinces. This means that the chamber's results are different from that of the Statistical Center of Iran.

**Figure 1: Consumer Price Index From June 2022 to May 2023 in Comparison to the Same Months the Previous Year (Annual Inflation).**



Source: Statistical Center of Iran  
Prepared by Rasanah

With regard to economic growth tallies, we find that there is a clear divergence between local and international tallies. According to the World Bank's (WB) data, Iran's real GDP would expand by 2.5% in 2022-2023, whereas Iranian reports indicated 4% growth for the previous year.<sup>(9)</sup> Iranian statistics reported a positive real growth rate in 2018 and 2019 (the start of the sanctions and subsequently the coronavirus outbreak), however the WB's statistics showed a substantial contraction or negative growth in the economy for the same two years at -1.8% and -3.1%, respectively. In addition to the difference between local and international statistics, we find that the growth rate for 2022-2023 according to domestic calculations was significantly driven by the rebound in oil exports, not by new investments in other job-creating fields, which is reflective of the misleading indications about the economic situation in the country.

The same holds true for the disparity between official and actual unemployment rates, given the differences between how unemployment is calculated according to international standards and how it is measured in Iran. Working age, working hours and workforce definition are examples of such international standards. These standards change from time to time, sometimes resulting in an unemployment rate that is lower

than the actual one. The Iranian government estimated the annual unemployment rate to be at 9% according to the Iranian calendar.<sup>(10)</sup> The actual rate, meanwhile, would be higher than the officially announced rate if the way the unemployment rate is calculated changes. As regards the rate of those falling under the poverty line, it varies between one-third and half of the population. According to some estimates by independent Iranian experts, two thirds of the Iranian population live below the poverty line amid a lack of confirmed official data.

### **Internal Pressures to Embellish the Economic Performance of the Iranian Government**

Perhaps one of the strongest pressures placed on government officials to embellish the country's economic performance is the pressure exerted by Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei to curb inflation and ease social pressures. The Iranian supreme leader called the new Iranian year (which started on March 21, 2023), the year of confronting inflation, which has not been achieved so far, nor over the past two years. This call occurred against the backdrop of high liquidity rates in the economy which stimulate inflation, weak economic growth and sanctions and external crises, all sending inflation rates soaring over 50%, not seen in Iran in decades. The re-



current protests, increasing social pressures, soaring poverty and pessimism about the future are among the reasons that prompted the government to publish positive economic data in a bid to quell public anger, instill hope, confer legitimacy and display resilience in the face of US sanctions, giving the impression that the ruling elite is not bothered by them.

Thus, it could be said that the phenomenon of conflicting tallies in Iran will not help in changing reality. They reflect a false picture and provide misleading information to decision-makers and investors, particularly in the context of the former developing future economic plans that should be crafted on a sound economic basis.

## The Military File

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Iran's progress in its missile program earned headlines globally after its announcement of developing the Fatah hypersonic ballistic missile. The boast seems to have added to its legal woes vis-à-vis EU sanctions. Brussels is mulling the extension of sanctions to bar Iran's access to ballistic missile technology beyond the agreed timeframe. While tensions with the West persist, Tehran and Moscow continue to expand their military cooperation in the wake of the Russia-Ukraine war.

While the IAEA remains far from satisfied with Iran's approach to full compliance with its monitoring and safeguard obligations and talks with the E3 (UK, France and Germany) and the United States to revive the JCPOA remain inconclusive, the EU plans to retain its ballistic missile sanctions beyond October 18, when they are scheduled to expire under the 2015 nuclear deal.<sup>(11)</sup>

Brussels is hesitant to lift otherwise time-barred curbs on Tehran due to its supply of deadly drones to Russia; the risk of transferring missiles to the Kremlin and of course, its violation of JCPOA commitments in response to the US withdrawal heightens the risk of Iran developing its nuclear payload. Iran is barred from buying, selling or transferring drones and their components capable of flying more than 300 kilometers without the approval of the UN Security Council.

"The Iranians have been told quite clearly (of plans to keep the sanctions) and now the question is what, if any, retaliatory steps the Iranians might take and (how) to anticipate that," Reuters reported quoting an anonymous European diplomat.<sup>(12)</sup>

Iran has made strides in missile development by reverse engineering and smuggling parts from the black market, extending the lethal outreach of its ballistic and cruise missiles to a declared 2,000 kilometer range.

The issue appears non-negotiable as long as Tehran-Moscow arms cooperation specific to the Russia-Ukraine war lasts. For Iran, the extension of sanctions related to ballistic missile technology poses no particular impediment. Its military industrial complex has flourished in qualitative and quantitative terms both during the Western and UN sanctions. The absence of sanctions can make access to the desired technology easier and cheaper but so far, it appears a bridge too far for Iran.

The E3 are likely to have conveyed the message to Iran during the June 12 meeting with Iran's top nuclear negotiator Ali Bagheri-Kani in Abu Dhabi.

EU diplomat Enrique Mora also reiterated the decision to his counterpart during their meeting in Qatar. By August, EU officials will begin to lay the groundwork for extending the curbs to be followed by the nod of 27

member-states before being tabled in front of the European Parliament.

Undeterred by the EU warning and despite the nascent normalization process with its Gulf neighbors, Iran announced its decision to equip its Damavand 2 destroyer with hypersonic missiles in the wake of the recent disclosure of Fattah.<sup>(13)</sup> The Damavand-2, on sea trials currently, is being projected as a game changer for the Iranian navy with sophisticated radars besides other lethal capabilities.

### **Iran-Russia Cooperation**

Since the June 24 mutiny carried out by the Wagner Group, only a few military commanders of friendly countries have spoken to their Russian counterparts. Chief of Staff of the Iranian Armed Forces Mohammad Bagheri held a phone conversation with Russia's Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu. The two are likely to have discussed matters concerning Iran's drone factory being built in Russia's Alabuga Special Economic Zone, about 850 kilometers east of Moscow. So far, Iran has been shipping drones, mortars and other munitions via the Caspian Sea. Since the conflict in Ukraine is shaping into a protracted war, Moscow will rely heavily on Iranian drones to erode and overwhelm Ukraine's air defence systems even if all are intercepted.

In return, "Russia has been offering Iran unprecedented defense cooperation, including on missiles, electronics, and air defense," John Kirby, US National Security Council

official told journalists.<sup>(14)</sup> Iran's shopping list includes Mi-35 helicopters, naval and land-based radars, YAK-130 combat trainers and Su-35 fighter jets, but nothing has been delivered to date. Sixteen Su-35s, which were to be delivered sometime in March, have not reached Iran so far. It is speculated that the 4.5 generation fighter aircraft originally built for Egypt would now be inducted in the Russian air force to make up for losses and upgrade its capability. Some speculate that the delivery may happen in the later part of the year.

A new dimension of Iran-Russia cooperation is set to unfold soon, given the rare visit of Iran's police commander to Moscow to acquire online and on-site surveillance equipment to ward off future protests.<sup>(15)</sup> Commander of the Iranian Police Brig. Gen. Ahmad-Reza Radan held a meeting with Russia's National Guard Commander Viktor Zolotov to sign a long-term deal on policing and law enforcement. Radan also discussed cooperation on "special services" with Putin's confidant and longstanding head of the National Security Council Nikolai Patrushev. Besides cameras, sensors and training for spying, Iran is Russia's customer for advanced digital-surveillance capabilities.<sup>(16)</sup>

To conclude, the trends in Iran's military build-up, collaboration with Russia and tensions with Europe continue. Tehran wants to benefit from Moscow's invasion of its neighbour while proving the futility of Western sanctions.



## The Social File

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Iranian society is bearing the brunt of low economic and population growth rates as well as poor development indicators. This has resulted in a spike in abortions and a growing reluctance among Iranians to start families. Abortion cases have risen to 1.3 million per year, 44% of which are spontaneous, while the remaining percentage are deliberate and criminal, reaching up to 500,000 cases per year. However, such statistics are inaccurate since some abortion clinics operate in secret for women who cannot comply with the country's strict laws. The Iranian government is attempting to curb this phenomenon and ascertain the factors contributing to the rise in abortion rates. Some Iranian media outlets reported that the government is deploying security patrols to follow up on abortion cases and fight against this phenomenon.

### **The Iranian Government's Position Toward Abortion**

Abortions are a crime, according to Iranian Minister of Health and Medical Education Bahram Eynollahi, who also stated that the data of every pregnant woman would be recorded during the initial pregnancy test, and the health of the baby determined. The minister also said that pregnant women would be registered and monitored until they give birth to pre-

vent abortions. The minister noted that the decision to abort is not taken by doctors, but the outcome of a parliamentary decree that itself is based on a green light given by the judiciary. An official from the Ministry of Science, Research and Technology (MSRT) declared the need to eliminate anti-procreation educational content from all disciplines in the country's higher education institutions. Iranian social activist Fatemeh Masjedi argues that the government continues to pursue its plans for abortion, knowing that it will fail. She stated that the Iranian government's efforts to end abortion should not be considered more than mere propaganda. The activist claims that Iranian women, particularly young women, have modified the way they perceive family and reproduction. They have become acquainted with current contraception and abortion methods. They understand how to terminate a pregnancy and are aware of all means to prevent it.<sup>(17)</sup>

Iran has formed a paramilitary to patrol the country to prevent abortions. These patrols are carried out by the Basij militia, which is linked to the IRGC, and they try to ensure that health offices and clinics do not perform abortions outside of the legal framework. They warn individuals involved in abortions that they will face

serious consequences, and they revoke the licenses of medical practitioners, thus banning them from operating. Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi has also prohibited government clinics from offering free contraception and abortion pills.<sup>(18)</sup> An illegal abortion clinic in Ahwaz was also closed and security officials were urged to report any activity in this area.<sup>(19)</sup> On the other side, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei has often emphasized the need to raise the population growth rate and provide incentives to families that have more than one child. The government put certain measures in place to achieve this, but administrative complexities have made these difficult to implement.<sup>(20)</sup>

### **Conditions of Legal Abortion and Consequences in Iran**

Abortion is illegal in Iran unless one of the following three conditions is met: the fetus has a growth defect, a congenital abnormality, or the mother's life is endangered if the pregnancy is continued. The abortion will not be performed unless an expecting mother approves it and completes the necessary paperwork. An abortion would be carried out if the fetus is less than four months old.<sup>(21)</sup>

Abortion affects both men and women psychologically, physically

and socially. It may deprive women of the ability to have children in the future, which is one of the reasons men seek divorce. It may also contribute to psychological depression<sup>(22)</sup> and lead to population decline. There are concerns about Iran's aging population due to young people unwilling to marry and have children. The young fear poverty and are anxious because of hearing news of frequent abortions taking place in the country.<sup>(23)</sup>

Unwanted pregnancies for economic reasons, unsuitable time and place, the fetus' sex, or the parents' refusal to accept responsibility, prohibited relationships or poor health are among the reasons for abortion.<sup>(24)</sup>

In conclusion, with the growth of abortion cases and a fall in the desire to have children, the Iranian government is facing a serious problem that could have a detrimental impact on all conditions in Iran over the next few years. This necessitates Iran to address the true causes of this phenomenon as well as focusing its efforts on improving economic, social and political conditions, improving health care, facilitating administrative systems to build a decent life for women, paying attention to and respecting women's rights and refraining from persecuting them.

## The Ideological File

A host of jurists and hawza figures condemned the clergy's disregard for the bleak economic and social realities of the Iranian people. Meanwhile, others claimed, in justification of the ruling elite's rationale, that the country's conditions are better than ever. They also denied that there are economic pressures or social problems faced by the Iranian people. The Ideological File seeks to look at these claims and analyze them.

### **Attempts at Reform: Condemning Poverty, Injustice and Discrimination**

Hawza jurists are divided into several categories. There are those who criticize the ruling elite, seek to reform it and rectify its behavior and even change the way it governs the country. On the other hand, there are jurists who want to change the Constitution and the entire system of government while others back the political system and work to enhance its legitimacy. The religious texts have always been a tool of employment by all Iranian parties — with the ultimate goal of convincing Shiite incubators — or the Iranian people. Thus, sharp polarization and disputes flared up. Moreover, such employment of the religious texts impacted the clerics themselves, who are at times employed by the ruling elite while at other times their behavior is merely a reaction

to the ruling elite's employment of the hawza.

1. Criticizing the jurists: Hoja-toleslam Hassan Khomeini has criticized the majority of clerics because of their neglect of the crises facing the Iranian people. He reiterated that if people's lives are not established on a sound basis, then their hereafter also cannot be established on a sound basis as well. Therefore, according to him, "We cannot ignore our family, community and country and then believe that we will be admitted to Paradise. We should be sensitive toward poverty, injustice and discrimination."<sup>(25)</sup> He also warned of depending on anything other than God such as power, money and submitting to injustice.<sup>(26)</sup> He considers the neglect of people's affairs and suffering as a crime, with those guilty of this possibly being deprived of Paradise, as is the case with submitting to injustice, power and money. It appears that this criticism is targeting the ruling elite. The importance of this criticism lies in the fact that the source is Khomeini's grandson, a heavyweight figure and a hawza cleric as well.

He openly criticized those who obey and follow in the footsteps of oppressive rulers, including the clerics who do not serve religion and those who only carry an outwardly religious appearance.

Supporting oppressive rulers is a betrayal of the divine message and the religious person who does not stand up to oppression cannot be considered as truly religious.<sup>(27)</sup> In his message to the jurists linked to the elite's network of power and assets, he warned them of the consequences of this relationship in case of not genuinely criticizing its governance philosophy and approach and showing concern for societal worries such as the deteriorating socioeconomic conditions. Continuing his criticism of the jurists, Khomeini's grandson did not forget to remind them of two of the Iranian republic's features which are the most important according to him: the republic and the authority of the people.<sup>(28)</sup> These two pillars necessitate that the clerics should not be coopted by the political system. Rather, they should exercise oversight over the ruling elite and should stand with the Iranian people rather than on the side of oppressive rulers. This would ensure that they have sound beliefs rather than merely an outwardly religious appearance.

2. Defending the ruling elite and silencing critics: In response to Hassan Khomeini's criticism, Hossein Hamadani, the supreme leader's representative in Albroz Province said, "Displaying ungratefulness to God's favors is widespread and permeates all our affairs. One of these favors is the Islamic system. Those who lived

under the shah know very well the meaning of Islamic governance and the Islamic system."<sup>(29)</sup> He also criticized those who advocate the replacement of the Islamic political system with a democratic one. He stated, "They wish to remove the Islamic system and that a system rather than Wilayat al-Faqih be established. They seek to establish a democratic system and so on, and this is a display of ungratefulness toward the favors we have."<sup>(30)</sup> He reiterated that the favors are not only tangible but also moral such as the favor of guardianship, love for Ahl al-Bayt and the guardian jurist. According to him, people's foremost pursuit should not be attempts to seek freedom and democracy, instead they should thank God for the main favor, that is, the guardian jurist.

Mohsen Araki<sup>(31)</sup> responded to those who criticize the politicization of the hawza. He said, "The hawza's foremost concern is intervening in politics since clerics are heirs to the prophets. Prophets had been sent to manage society in all spheres of life."<sup>(32)</sup> The politics which he is referring to does not include holding the ruling elite accountable, rectifying its behavior and modifying its policies. In effect, through the use of politics, he is alluding to comprehensively supporting the ruling elite. He continued, "Some argue that the hawza's scope of work is only proselytism. So, what is proselytism? It is complying with the



commandments of the Prophet and God. It is politics *per se*. The purified (infallible) imams carry out this mission on behalf of the Hidden Imam. Yet the guardian jurist is vested with ruling on behalf of the Hidden Imam. Obeying him is obligatory.”<sup>(33)</sup> Thus, according to him, politics is obedience to the ruler (the guardian jurist). Whoever criticizes or opposes the rule of the guardian jurist is not undertaking politics according to him. Rather, he is engaging in a form of questioning and rebellion that should be repelled according to traditional Shiite jurisprudential heritage, which is not in line with the politics of a modern nation-state.

### **Continued Criticism: Maulvi Abdul Hamid and Defending the Vulnerable**

Maulvi Abdul Hamid, a Sunni scholar in Iran, continued to criticize the ruling elite and its policies. However, his criticism of the elite’s governance is quite significant this time as he criticized the way it treats women and Bahai’s. During a Friday sermon, he called for releasing detainees and political prisoners. Abdul Hamid’s aim was to rally all the Iranian people, regardless of their sectarian affiliations and differences, against the ruling elite’s policies, capitalizing on the concept of citizenship and the philosophy of the modern nation-state.

Concerning the issue of women, Abdul Hamid addressed the

ruling elite, “You should respect and appreciate women. There are those who believe that the mission of women is to care for children and perform housework only. But the role of women is important and is needed in the struggle for grand causes.”<sup>(34)</sup>

He also referred to the anger of women regarding the ruling elite’s policies. “The complaints of women today are caused by their loss of standing, respect and dignity. Their cries cannot be silenced until they achieve the standing that they desire.”<sup>(35)</sup> Abdul Hamid’s remarks occurred against the backdrop of the escalation of the Iranian government’s crackdown on women, especially targeting those who oppose the obligatory hijab or breach the country’s strict dress codes. He aimed to play on the heartstrings of all Iranian people, particularly the segments targeted the most by Iran’s security apparatuses.

As for the Bahai’s, Abdul Hamid criticized the ruling elite’s violence against them, “Though Bahai’s aren’t Muslims, they are Iranian citizens and humans. Their tombs should not be destroyed, and the government should not refrain from handing over the bodies of the deceased from among them to their relatives, opting for secretly burying them elsewhere.”<sup>(36)</sup> Here he used a smart ploy. He shut the door on any attempts by the clerics to defame him or accuse him of saying things that he did not mean

to convey in his defense of the Bahai's. So, he cited their rights as Iranian citizens and humans in the first place. "They are Iranian citizens and humans, so the government should treat them in accordance with the Constitution, applicable laws, religious freedom and prosecution rather than repress them or break laws and moral codes when dealing with them.

In conclusion, it appears that the religious and political polarization and the employment of religion to achieve political ends in Iran are increasing day after day.

There is a huge segment within the hawza that is concerned with the ruling elite's failures, particularly at the economic and social levels, as this will impact the hawza's historical standing in the collective memory of Iranians and Shiites. The Iranian ruling religious elite, meanwhile, is not so much concerned about the standing and prestige of the hawza inasmuch as they are concerned about enhancing their own legitimacy, sustaining Wilayat al-Faqih and keeping the post-1979 equation unchanged.

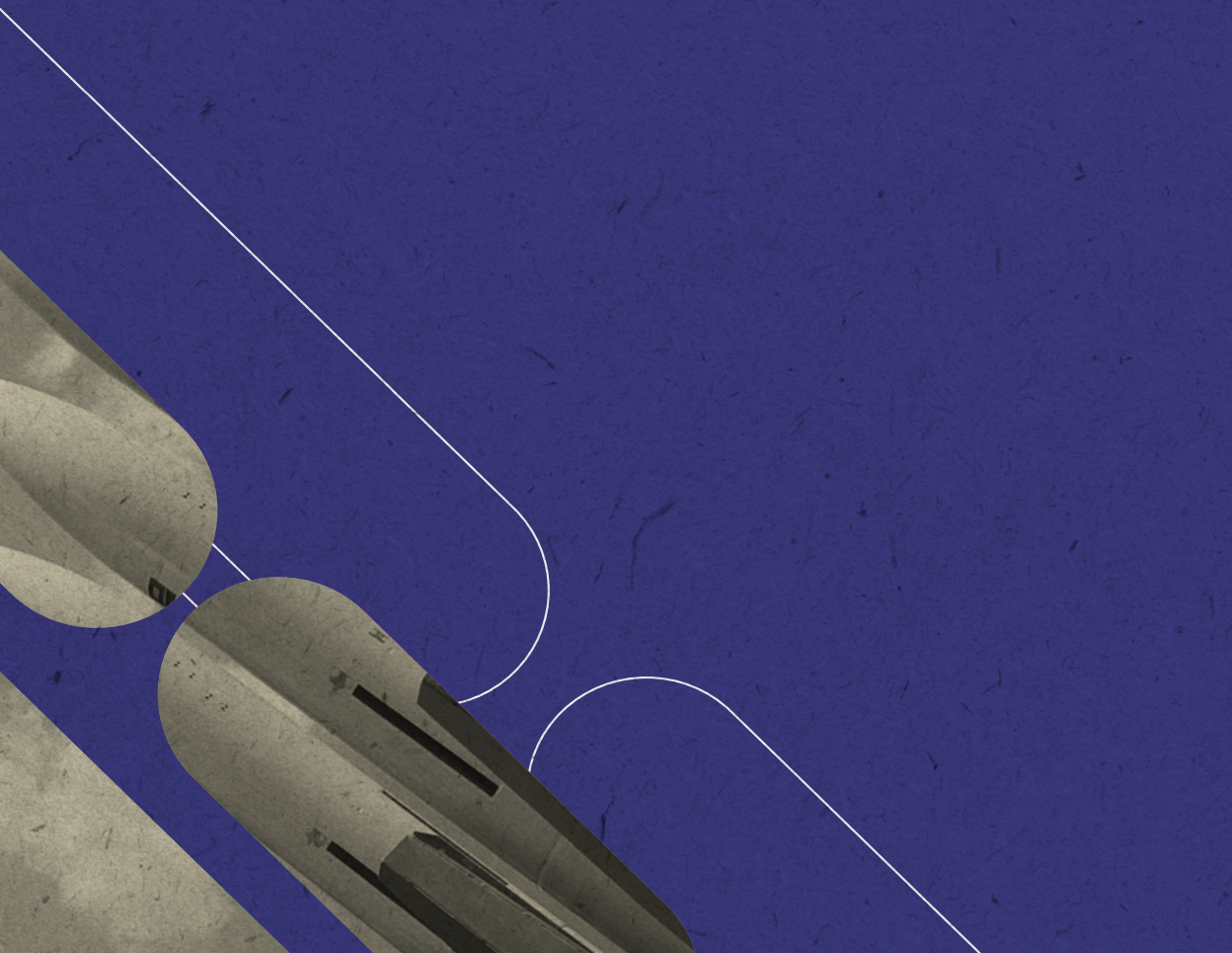
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# External Affairs





**I**nternational Affairs highlights Iran's relations and interactions with the Arab and international spheres. Gulf-Iran relations witnessed major developments marked by the visit of Saudi Arabia's foreign minister to Iran, and the resulting confusion and controversy in Iran due to the changing of the venue of the joint press conference with the Iranian and Saudi foreign ministers. Iran-Iraq interactions included the emergence of new pro-Iran groups in the Iraqi arena, their significance is analyzed in terms of timing and objectives. The Syria file addresses the Wagner Group's operations in Syria and Iran-Russia relations in the country in the wake of the Wagner rebellion. The Yemen file discusses the formation of the Hadramout National Council as the major event in the country in the month of June 2023. The composition, structure and political objectives of the council are discussed. The international file discusses the possibility of holding a new round of indirect talks between Iran and the United States after a series of regional mediations, most notably by Oman. It also discusses the continued pressure exerted by the two parties against each other and their manipulation of the various levers of influence. Regarding Iran-Europe interactions, the Albanian police raid on the camp of the People's Mojahedin Organization of Iran (PMOI) near the capital Tirana is analyzed. This group was found guilty of undertaking illegal activities and the Albanian authorities handed over information concerning the group to Iran, including hard drives. This indicates a reduction in Albanian and US support for Iranian opposition groups.

## THE REGIONAL FILE

### Iran and the Gulf States

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June 2023 witnessed the beginning of a breakthrough in Gulf-Iran relations. The Iranian capital Tehran received the Saudi foreign minister, which was the first visit by a Saudi official to Tehran since the crisis began between the two sides in 2016. Saudi Arabia also received more than 80,000 Iranian pilgrims. Trust issues, however, still threaten the relationship despite the witnessed progress. Both the Gulf and Iranian sides need to do more to implement the commitments outlined in the Beijing Agreement between Iran and Saudi Arabia, which constitute a real guarantee that the improvements in the relationship shall continue on an upward trajectory.

#### **Saudi Initiative Aims to Break the Ice**

The visit of Prince Faisal bin Farhan Al Saud, Saudi Arabia's foreign minister, on June 17, 2023, to Tehran was an ice breaker that initiated communication between the two countries. Having concluded the agreement between the two sides under China's sponsorship in March, the Saudi king extended an invitation to the Iranian president to visit Saudi Arabia. The Saudi foreign minister also extended a similar invitation to the Iranian foreign minister to

visit the country. Yet, a visit from the Iranian side did not take place despite accepting the invitation, which alludes to hesitation from the Iranian side and perhaps a display of disinterest in pursuing this relationship. The visit of the Saudi foreign minister to Tehran aimed to reassure Iran and indicate Saudi Arabia's willingness to comply with the rapprochement deal.

Speaking at the press conference during his visit, Saudi Arabia's foreign minister stressed that relations between the two countries should be based on mutual respect for independence and sovereignty, non-interference in internal affairs, and commitment to the principles of international law and the Charter of the United Nations and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation. He also expressed hope that the return of relations would reflect positively on the two countries expanding cooperation in various fields, achieving common interests and bringing about a positive change to the region, the Islamic world and the world at large. These objectives can be achieved through joint commitment to maintaining stability, security and economic

development along with developing bilateral cultural relations.<sup>(1)</sup>

### **Domestic Controversy in Iran**

Following a meeting between the foreign ministers of Saudi Arabia and Iran in the Iranian capital of Tehran on June 17, 2023, the Iranian side agreed to change the venue where the press conference between the two ministers would be held as the Saudi side objected to the initial venue where a picture of Qassem Soleimani was displayed. This Saudi objection caused a stir in Iran, especially in the media and on social media networks. Conflicting justifications emerged to explain the delay in holding the press conference and the reasons for changing the venue.

The press conference issue grew into a broad partisan debate in Iran. The “reformists,” who have been largely marginalized and excluded from all decision-making institutions, used the incident as an opportunity to criticize the “conservative” wing that runs the country.

Seeking to accommodate the Saudi request regardless of the symbolic importance that Soleimani holds, indicated that the Iranian ruling elite is willing to make the Beijing Agreement work and strengthen relations with Saudi Arabia, overlooking ideological differences. However, the aftermath of this incident indicated that there are Iranian voices who oppose the Beijing Agreement and seek to hinder it from coming

to fruition and question the benefits of building relations. A clear example of this is Saadullah Zarai’s bleak analysis of the matter in Kayhan newspaper that is closely linked to the Iranian ruling elite. Zarai dismissively interpreted what was said by the Saudi foreign minister and suggested that the Saudi move is not based on a genuine commitment to restoring relations. In fact, Zarai’s interpretation seems to have an objective of maintaining tensions and disrupting the progress toward identifying and building joint interests and paving the way for a positive foundation that would bring about gains for both sides. The analyst also said that the Saudi foreign minister’s speech was negative and frenetic.<sup>(2)</sup>

Some activists and media figures criticized the Iranian government for the Saudi foreign minister’s visit to Tehran, including human rights activist Mohammed Jawad Bahlwan. He pointed out that the press conference’s statements were merely a denial of reality, political facts and norms, and an attempt to cover failures through using nationalistic slogans with other countries. He pointed out that the aftermath of changing the venue had been costly for Iran’s foreign policy apparatus.<sup>(3)</sup>

The continuous domestic debate, addressing the new relationship with Saudi Arabia through a partisan and sectarian lens, makes



the Iranian orientation remain chaotic. This will limit Tehran's ability to adapt to the new phase and to benefit from important development opportunities that will serve the region as a whole.

### **The Iranian Foreign Minister's Gulf Tour**

Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian visited several Gulf countries, including Qatar, Oman, Kuwait and the UAE. The points of discussion during the visit, according to Iranian sources, included concluding negotiations on the exchange of prisoners, unfreezing Iranian funds and addressing regional and international issues.<sup>(4)</sup>

Interestingly, the visit did not include Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, this is in spite of the fact that the Iranian foreign minister has received an official invitation to visit Saudi Arabia to further discuss the Beijing Agreement and to strengthen relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran. The move indicates that Iran may still be hesitant about accelerating the normalization of ties with Saudi Arabia.

Recently, the Iranian side raised new claims about the right to a natural gas field in Kuwaiti waters, causing renewed tensions between Kuwait and Iran.<sup>(5)</sup> This prompted Saudi Arabia, which

shares oil and gas fields with Kuwait in the divided region, to issue an official statement confirming that the ownership of the natural resources in the subdivided region, including the entire Al-Durra field, is the joint property of Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, and they alone possess full sovereign rights to exploit that area and that Saudi Arabia renews its previous calls on the Iranian side to begin negotiations to demarcate the eastern border of the submerged area divided between Saudi Arabia and Kuwait in accordance with the provisions of international law.<sup>(6)</sup> The tensions raised by this issue may complicate the restoration of relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran under Chinese auspices.

In conclusion, although there is a noticeable improvement in relations between Iran and the Gulf countries, it is, however, shrouded in ambiguity on the Iranian side so progress remains slow. This raises fears of a future setback that will affect the parties' previous efforts to improve relations. The ambiguity on the Iranian side also raises many questions about Iran's seriousness in moving its relations with the Gulf countries from the realm of tensions to a relationship that is characterized by cooperation, transparency, clarity and mutual trust.

## Iran and Iraq

In the wake of the China-brokered agreement to restore relations between the two regional heavyweights, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and Iran, a debate has arisen among regional affairs experts over the Iranian ruling elite's commitment to the terms of the agreement, Saudi demands and the duration of the commitment. In addition, questions have arisen over whether Iran's signing of the agreement reflects a tactical or strategic shift and the repercussions of this agreement on regional countries, including Iraq.

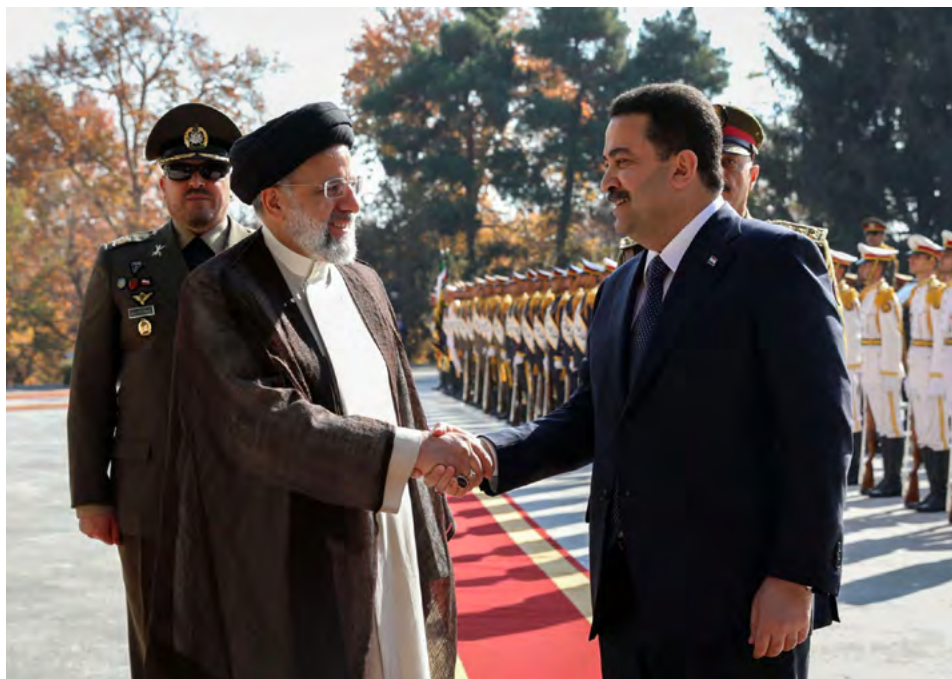
### **The Birth of New Pro-Iran Groups in the Iraqi Arena**

The signs of tactical changes were apparent in terms of the changes made to the formations and names of pro-Iran militias in Iraq. Certain formations were dismantled in response to repeated regional and international calls to end the intractable crises in Iraq. However, new ones were created with new names in Iranian spheres of influence in the country. Media outlets in June 2023 reported that the pro-Iranian Ashab al-Kahf group promoted via the internet three new front groups against the US presence in Iraq. These three new formations are: the Seif Allah Brigades, the Karbala Brigades and Al-Sabireen Brigades. These new groups announced that they had entered a new stage of fight-

ing which they called "the occupation," meaning countering US military forces and intensifying fighting until these forces leave Iraq. They criticized Prime Minister Mohammed Shia' al Sudani for setting a timetable for the US military withdrawal from Iraq.<sup>(7)</sup> These new formations reflect the continuation of Iranian interference in the internal affairs of other countries through militias and proxies.

Ashab al-Kahf was established in 2019 as a front group for pro-Iran armed militias and attacked US targets in Iraq, including troops, logistical support convoys, diplomatic headquarters and civilian training sites. However, it increased its attacks against US targets after the assassination of former Quds Force Chief Qassem Soleimani and the deputy head of the Popular Mobilization Forces Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis near Baghdad International Airport in early January 2020. It sought retaliation for Soleimani's killing by exerting pressure on the United States to withdraw its forces from Iraq. This group claimed responsibility for violent armed attacks against US targets, either alone or in cooperation with the Iraqi Hezbollah Brigades or Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq.

Many reports noted Ashab al-Kahf's links to Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq led by Qais al-Khazali. This was ev-



ident from Ashab al-Kahf's statements and how they were largely compatible with those issued by Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq. The latter's social media account also promoted the activities of Ashab al-Kahf. It has also used areas close to Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq's headquarters in attacks against US targets.<sup>(8)</sup>

### **The Timing and Objectives of Establishing the New Formations in Iraq**

The establishment of three new front pro-Iran groups in Iraq occurred against the backdrop of the region witnessing major shifts since the signing of the Saudi-Iran agreement in Beijing to restore diplomatic relations. The agreement includes the principles of non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries and good

neighborliness in accordance with the new stage in relations between both sides.

Iran, which is represented by traditional armed groups in its spheres of influence, is aware of the beginning of a new phase in relations with Saudi Arabia. Ultimately, this necessitates it to change the course of its foreign policy so that Riyadh moves ahead in its relations with Tehran and allows Iran's crises at home and abroad to be mitigated. However, Iranian ideology, politics and the nature of its political system indicate that Iran's foreign policy shift is tactical rather than strategic. Hence, the new formations aim to help Iran and its infamous traditional militias to hide their fingerprints and interventions

and also to protect them from any embarrassment or responsibility. Iran continues with its expansionist policies and operations against US targets but via new formations that carry different names as well.

These new groups or shadow militias can easily attack US and even non-US targets, because they are unknown, neither their fighters, headquarters or media platforms are known, compared to the more well-known traditional groups. However, intelligence agencies keep these new groups under surveillance. These new groups can easily connect directly to the IRGC in comparison to the traditional groups. At the outset, these groups have no special interests compared to the traditional groups that have private and personal interests, conflicting sometimes with Iranian interests when it comes to regional arrangements and settlements. These new groups insulate the traditional mi-

litias in Iraq from criticism, while allowing Iranian directives to be executed without leaving any Iranian fingerprints.

In conclusion, if we scrutinize the constants of the Iranian political system that are enshrined in the Iranian Constitution and major Iranian files related to domestic and international affairs, we can conclude that Iran will adopt pragmatic means or establish new formations in order to continue with its operations against US targets; meaning that no Iranian fingerprints are left behind. The centrality of the ideology is the most important pillar in the structure of the Iranian political system and is prioritized over the other pillars. Therefore, the majority of Iranian observers suggest that Iran will continue to pursue its plans but with new tools and formations; however regional and international actors are familiar with this Iranian ploy.



## Iran and Syria

The Wagner Group's rebellion against Russia's leadership shook the world, with its ramifications far reaching. Via a negotiated deal, Wagner's chief Yevgeny Prigozhin left for Belarus. The attempted rebellion has raised many questions about the implications of this crisis for the status and prestige of Russia in the eyes of its allies, especially in the Syrian arena. In addition, there are questions concerning the impact of this crisis on Wagner's operations in Syria, as well as its impact on Iranian militias in Syria and the prospects for Russia-Israel cooperation in Syria.

### **Wagner's Activities in Syria**

Wagner's presence is not limited to the Ukrainian arena, it is deployed across many countries around the world. Wagner has some of its forces deployed in Syria. This group's activities in Syria commenced in 2015, which coincided with Russia's direct military intervention to help the Syrian government. Russia depended on this group's forces to minimize casualties among the regular forces and to protect phosphate and gas fields in Syria that Russian companies had heavily invested in. The group also has front companies that invest in Syria's oil and gas sectors.<sup>(9)</sup>

The Syrian government depends increasingly nowadays on Iranian and Russian power to keep the Syrian state standing as well as to keep in place its economic, military and

political structures. Any threat to one of these powers is a major threat to the existence of the Syrian state and would disrupt the Syrian strategic equation established in 2011. Hence, the developments in Russia naturally raised concerns in Damascus, with fears that Russia would end or weaken its focus on Syria. Moreover, Syria needs Russian support to resist the international and regional pressures on the Syrian government, especially in the context of finding a suitable political solution, involving the return of refugees and displaced persons. There is also pressure on the Syrian government to curb the Captagon drug trade and the growing presence of Iranian militias in Syria. Damascus cannot depend on Iran alone, because of its economic crisis and the change of course in its foreign policy.

### **The Wagner Rebellion and Its Implications on the Syrian Arena**

The Kremlin's first move to contain the crisis of its military arm abroad started in Syria, with multiple reports indicating Russian intentions to restructure the group in the country. Russia raided Wagner offices in Syria, arrested some of the group's elements and pulled out others from across the country and stationed them at the Russian operations center in Hmeimim air base, located in western Syria.<sup>(10)</sup> Other reports cited a message from Russia's President Vladimir Putin to Damascus, con-

veyed by Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Vershinin, as part of Moscow's efforts to contain any future repercussions and to reassure Damascus of its handling of the Wagner rebellion.

Regardless of what will happen regarding the group's restructure and operations, the Kremlin remains dependent on Wagner forces in Syria, particularly in the context of the continuation of the Russia-Ukraine war. The Kremlin needs to pull out a large portion of its regular forces from Syria to deploy in the Ukrainian battle theater. It is also concerned about Iran filling any vacuum that would be left by the withdrawal of Wagner forces from Syria and Iranian militias taking over phosphate mines and oil and gas fields that are guarded by the group's forces.

In addition, maintaining the group's presence in Syria is also strategic, as it helps in preserving Russia's image and influence in the region. Russia is still an indispensable player in Syria. Russia's support to the Assad regime helped Moscow access many resources and exploit the conflict of interests between Iran and Israel in Syria and abroad. To reach a political settlement, Russia has acted as a mediator between the various parties to the conflict.

### **Post-Wagner Crisis: Iran-Russia Relations**

The news of the Wagner Group rebellion caused anxiety in Tehran.

The Iranian government bets on Putin staying in power and on Russia's growing international and regional influence. Any attempt to weaken Russian power is indeed a concern for Iran and will certainly upset the balance of power equation and the Iran-Russia alliance, especially in the joint arenas of influence and cooperation like Syria. Iran has always benefited in Syria and depended on Russian cooperation to mitigate the risks posed by Israeli airstrikes that target its militias present in Syria. Against the backdrop of the Wagner crisis, the Russia-Ukraine war and its repercussions on Russia's military presence in Syrian territories, Iran is increasingly concerned over Israel's and the United States' growing activities in Syrian airspace. Israel has stepped up its airstrikes targeting Iranian sites in Syria, including those of strategic interest to Iran. Therefore, Tehran seeks to prepare itself for this scenario through collaborating with Moscow and Damascus to establish a joint command.<sup>(11)</sup>

In conclusion, Russia's situation and the Wagner mutiny raises several questions, the answers to which may emerge over the next few months, particularly regarding the nature of possible Syrian-Russian interactions with forces on Syrian territory, their impact on bilateral relations between Tehran and Moscow, and the repercussions of the Wagner rebellion on the US and Israeli positions toward the Syrian situation.

## Iran and Yemen

The formation of the Hadramout National Council stands out as the most prominent political event in Yemen in June 2023. After a month-long consultation in the Saudi capital of Riyadh, political and tribal elites formed the Hadramout National Council, which was announced on June 20, 2023. This new political initiative will be of great importance to the political process in the southern region of Yemen and the country as a whole. The formation of the council came about because of Hadramout's economic and social significance in Yemen. The goals of the council are considered as an extension of the objectives announced by the Presidential Leadership Council which was established on April 7, 2022. The goal is to improve the economic and living conditions of the people of Yemen and to unify all military and security formations of the various Yemeni forces under one umbrella: the Presidential Leadership Council which is the only internationally recognized legitimate authority in Yemen. The following parts review the organizational structure of the Hadramout National Council and its key members as well as the demands and political objectives of this council.

### **Organizational Structure of the Hadramout National Council**

The council includes representatives from Yemeni state institutions, including ministers, governors, deputy ministers, assistant deputy chiefs, provincial representatives in the Council of Representatives and the Shura Council and military and security leaders. It also includes all stakeholders from Hadramout's social sphere, academics, representatives of women and youth, civil society organizations, urban migrants and prominent figures. There is also room for civil activists who share the council's vision. The framework of the council can be implemented as long as a seven-member board under the chairmanship of former Minister of Transport Badr Mohammed Baslamah is formed. This board will work in coordination with the governor of Hadramout directly and will prepare for the first general conference of the council. The board will also prepare a comprehensive vision for its organizational and basic structures in addition to its internal regulations within two months of the council's establishment date.<sup>(12)</sup>

### **Political Demands and Objectives**

The provisions of the council's founding charter reveal its broad

political dimensions and objectives. These objectives primarily aim at achieving political stability, a goal of high priority for the Presidential Leadership Council. This will be achieved through consolidating the Yemeni state's authority by neutralizing any disputes over its services and security institutions in Hadramout that are deemed harmful to the country's interests. To this end, the official spokesman for the Hadramout National Council Abdul Qadir Bayazid confirmed that the council's outcomes affirm "commitment to common goals with the Saudi-led Legitimacy Support Coalition, the declaration of the transfer of power (the transfer of power to the Yemeni Presidential Leadership Council), the impartiality of the Presidential Leadership Council and its supporting bodies, and the right of Hadramout

National Council to participate in decision-making and representation in parliamentary chambers and various bodies to ensure the protection of the interests of the people of Hadramout."<sup>(13)</sup>

Members of the council are also working on procedures to address the litany of grievances that have accumulated over the past years. On the future of the political role of the Hadramout Governorate in light of the inflamed situation in Yemen, Bayazid stressed that the council would work to keep "the components as they are, but this council, which will be formed in the near future, will rise to the aspirations of the people of Hadramout, enabling them to manage their own affairs and to resolve decades of accumulated crises that have afflicted Hadramout."<sup>(14)</sup>





It is noteworthy that the council's political mandate attracted both local and international support. Bayazid said, "We met in Riyadh with His Excellency Rashad al-Alimi, chairman of the Presidential Leadership Council, who expressed his gratitude and admiration for Hadramout and the wonderful model it has provided over the ages, and expressed his support for everything that the young men of Hadramout are doing and promised a visit to the area to listen attentively to the concerns of its people." Bayazid also referred to "meetings that were held with the deputies of the President of the Presidential Leadership Council and Prime Minister Maeen Abdulmalik Saeed, and a number of ministers who visited the delegation in Riyadh. The council also held discussions with the Saudi side and the ambassadors of the European Union, and they were informed of Hadramout's sentiments and its desire for safety and stability by preventing its institutions from engaging in any future conflicts."<sup>(15)</sup>

In conclusion, the council has all the necessary resources to achieve its goals, starting with the support it enjoys both from the Yemeni government, which has participated in the council through its representatives in various political and security state institutions and at all central and local levels. It also enjoys the significant support of Saudi Arabia, which hosted the talks that culminated in the formation of the council with all its diverse structures and principles. But this does not preclude the existence of some challenges: most prominently, the presence of some political forces that give priority to personal and factional interests over public interests. Therefore, these forces remain wary of the new council. As a result, some may try to directly or indirectly oppose the formation of the council, while others may engage in it to achieve personal interests or try to sabotage or disrupt it from within. The council has a formidable task ahead to overcome these obstacles.

## THE INTERNATIONAL FILE

### Iran and the United States

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The indirect talks between the United States and Iran on the nuclear program have restarted, thanks to Gulf mediation and European supervision. The Iranian supreme leader has given the Raisi government permission to proceed with the negotiations — on the condition that Iran retains its nuclear rights. It appears that events have progressed beyond the negotiations to resurrect the 2015 nuclear deal. Instead, there is talk of an interim deal to reduce tensions, this was formerly referred to as a “few for few” deal. It seems that the two sides are willing to proceed down this trajectory given the internal pressures the two governments are facing as well as the geopolitical shifts in the region and the world. The June 2023 file attempts to shed light on the most remarkable developments in Iran-US relations and the direction they reflect for the time being.

#### **A New Round of Indirect Talks**

In June 2023, Iran and the United States resumed exploring new diplomatic opportunities via regional mediation efforts, most notably by Oman in partnership with the EU which has been overseeing the negotiations since April 2021. This is according to the remarks of

the Omani foreign minister who declared that Iran and the United States are nearing a prisoner swap deal. In addition, Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs Spokesperson Nasser Kanaani said that the Omani capital Muscat hosted indirect talks between Tehran and Washington. This comes after reports of direct talks between the US envoy for Iran Robert Malley and the Permanent Representative of Iran to the United Nations Amir Saeid Ira-vani in New York as well as a meeting between Iran’s chief nuclear negotiator Ali Bagheri-Kani and the EU mediator Enrique Mora in Doha in a bid to revive the nuclear deal.

Getting back to the negotiating table gives an indication that the United States and Iran are unwilling to make the escalation reach a point of no return. It is also an indication that they have an interest in maintaining parallel and balanced trajectories that have governed their relationship for decades — according to the no peace-no war formula. However, it is clear that the ongoing negotiations are moving in a direction different from the previous ones that stopped in September 2020 when the EU laid out a roadmap aiming to revive the same nucle-

ar deal during a specific period of time. Reports indicate that the United States is floating proposals that have been raised over the past two years but were not accepted by Iran. They revolve around an interim deal under which Iran would be obliged to stop uranium enrichment at 60% purity and continue cooperation with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). In return, Iran would be able to export 1 million barrels of oil per day, and some of its overseas assets would be unfrozen. In addition, Iran would be given some sanctions relief for its compliance.

Perhaps this proposal reflects the scope of the concessions both sides could make at the negotiating table. This provisional deal would allow the Biden administration to control Iran's nuclear program, reinstate the IAEA's oversight over Iran's uranium enrichment and cease the accumulation of highly enriched uranium. Thus, the deal bars Iran from edging closer to the nuclear threshold. In addition, the interim deal bypasses the domestic obstacles — differences between the Democrats and Republicans and intra-democratic divergences — and the lack of consensus on reinstating the old deal with Iran. This will put the Biden administration in an unguaranteed confrontation with the US Congress in case it revives the nuclear deal. Moreover, the Biden administration does not

want any new deal with Iran to impact its popularity ahead of the US elections, campaigning for which has started. In other words, the Biden administration wants “easing tensions” more than reaching an agreement with Iran that could cause internal or even regional disturbances for it, given the concerns raised by Israel and some regional powers about the progress Iran is making in its nuclear program.<sup>(16)</sup>

Regarding Iran, though it insisted in the past on resurrecting the 2015 nuclear deal with few modifications, it could be more open to an interim deal during these negotiations. This comes after the European signatories to the original nuclear deal threatened to reinstate the snapback mechanism, thus reinstating all the international sanctions. Yet, the negotiations could prove effective for the Iranian government in terms of easing the economic and political pressures on it. The internal protest movement has been repressed, with the United States reducing its pressure on the Iranian political system. Hence, the Raisi government has more time for maneuvering and mitigating the impacts of the economic pressures and international isolation. This is added to the possibility of Iran's frozen assets being released, which would help rehabilitate the political system whose legitimacy has declined significantly in recent months. However, there's no

doubt that this truce is a temporary solution for the Iranian ruling elite. Its outcomes remain uncertain in the long term and therefore it is resisted by some parties inside Iran.<sup>(17)</sup>

There are positive indications, with Iran showing willingness to cooperate with the IAEA, which was confirmed by the agency's report in June 2023 and the United States allowed Iraq to pay \$2.7 billion of its debts owed as a confidence-building measure. Nonetheless, there is some ambiguity shrouding the negotiations, which are still being held behind closed doors, with the two sides denying press reports speaking of extensive understandings. This was echoed by the US secretary of state, "There will be no deal in the near future." The Iranian mission in the UN reiterated that there is no interim deal on the agenda that could replace the nuclear deal, all indicating the difficulty of expecting a final outcome to be concluded.<sup>(18)</sup> This ambiguity is due to several thorny issues that continue to overshadow the talks, most prominently the Iranian support for Russia in its war on Ukraine, as well as Tehran's uranium enrichment activities and stockpiles, which have reached unprecedented levels. This is in addition to Iranian attacks that target US troops in Iraq and Syria as well as maritime navigation in the Arabian Gulf, not to mention the faltering of the prisoner swap deal.

## Sanctions and Mutual Levers

In another context, while mistrust is the hallmark of relations between the United States and Iran, the two sides continued exerting pressures mutually and deploying the various levers they possess. For its part, Washington continued its sanctions on Iran. It is clear that the United States has mounting concerns about growing Iran-Russia military ties. Iran, in turn, seeks to purchase SU-35 fighter jets, attack helicopters, radars and Yak-130 aircraft worth billions of dollars. Russia also receives equipment from Iran which is necessary for establishing a drone plant inside the country. According to White House Spokesperson John Kirby, US data suggests that drones were manufactured in Iran and shipped via the Caspian Sea to be used by Russian forces in the operations against Ukraine.<sup>(19)</sup>

In order to catch up with the strategic shifts in the region, including the increasing Chinese clout and the end of the regional isolation imposed on Iran, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken visited the region's countries. During the visit, the US official discussed his country's strategy in the region, stressing the need to counter the "biggest danger" posed by the Iranian political system. Blinken also reiterated that all options are on the table to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons. This is a US attempt to manage the strategic shifts deemed unfavor-



able for it since Iran and Saudi Arabia normalized their relations in March 2023.<sup>(20)</sup>

On the other side, the commander of the Iranian navy announced that his country, Saudi Arabia and three other Gulf states intend to form a naval alliance that will also include India and Pakistan. This move comes in order to reduce US influence in the region and benefit from the normalization of relations with Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states. This alliance could curb US and Israeli clout in the region, resolve the misunderstandings and establish deeper ties with the region's countries. In the same context, Iran has continued its threats to maritime navigation in the Arabian Gulf. According to the US navy, three Iranian fast-attack escort ships carrying armed personnel approached a cargo ship at close range.<sup>(21)</sup> On June 6, 2023, Iran unveiled a hypersonic missile capable of evading air defenses, in a message of deterrence to the United States and Israel.

In conclusion, there is no doubt that geopolitical events in the region and around the world have accelerated the nuclear talks between the United States and Iran, which were stalled since September 2022. The two sides are more inclined to strike a deal that leads to tensions being reduced rather than resurrecting the 2015 nuclear deal. Returning to this deal creates hurdles for both countries,

not to mention the significant regional and global opposition in light of Iran's support for Russia's war on Ukraine. However, any understandings in this respect will not put an end to the chronic hostility between Washington and Tehran, nor will they stop Iranian efforts to enhance its nuclear expertise and project as the supreme leader has directed. Iran will take advantage of the talks as the government will resurrect its legitimacy and strengthen its ability to withstand pressures. It will also strengthen relations with allies, particularly Russia and China. It will also take advantage of the regional shifts and the major opportunities created by the normalization of relations with Saudi Arabia. The easing of tensions will buy Iran more time, including the imminent expiration of the sunset provisions one after the other, the nearest of which is the imminent expiration of the sanctions imposed on its ballistic missile program in October 2023. This comes after the expiration of the embargo on arms sales which took effect in October 2020. This will confer legitimacy on Iran's military ties with Russia and China. Perhaps these challenges are the reasons why these ongoing nuclear negotiations have not yielded a decisive result so far. There is no genuine guarantee or deterrence for ensuring that Iran will change its behavior and approach.

## Iran and Europe

In a surprising move, the Albanian counterterrorism police raided a camp of the People's Mojahedin Organization of Iran (PMOI), located 30 kilometers west of the capital Tirana. Not only did the police raid the camp, but the Albanian authorities also handed Iran 13 hard drives, which they said contained extensive information about the terrorist activities carried out by the PMOI.

### **The Significations of the Shift in Albania's Approach to the PMOI and Cooperation with Iran**

The Albanian police raided several PMOI headquarters in the capital Tirana in compliance with an Albanian court order. The order was issued after investigations conducted by the Special Courts against corruption into illegal activities carried out by the PMOI. The investigation concluded that the group breached the asylum agreement signed in 2014 that was granted on humanitarian grounds. During the police raid, PMOI members reacted violently to the police officers, which prompted the latter to use force, firing pepper spray and teargas. The clashes resulted in the killing of a PMOI member named Ali Mostashari, who was 65 years of age. The Albanian police claimed that he died of heart failure.<sup>(22)</sup> Though there are no diplomatic relations

between the two countries, the Albanian authorities handed over hard drives seized at the camp, which Albania said contained information related to the PMOI's illegal activities.

It is worth noting that in September 2022, Albania expelled the Iranian ambassador and severed diplomatic relations with Tehran. This came after Albania discovered that IRGC-linked hackers were behind a cyberattack that targeted several of the state's institutions with the aim of paralyzing the Albanian government, rendering it unable to perform its duties and preventing it from supporting the 3,000 PMOI elements living on its soil.<sup>(23)</sup>

Albania's National Agency for Information Society announced that it was forced to shut down all state websites until the enemy's attacks were neutralized to remain steadfast in the face of these unprecedented and dangerous cyberattacks.<sup>(24)</sup>

On September 13, five days after Tirana announced severing diplomatic ties with Tehran, the same group waged another attack using the same programs.<sup>(25)</sup> The retaliatory attack targeted the Total Information Management System (TIMS) in Albania. This caused disruptions in passport screening services at the land borders, airports and seaports as well as at the

information center dealing with fugitive data.<sup>(26)</sup>

Perhaps this attack aimed to send a message to Albania and its NATO allies that severing diplomatic relations will not immunize it against cyberattacks. In this context, it appears that Iran has compelled Albania to take measures against the PMOI.

### **Albanian and US Positions Supportive of PMOI Wane**

Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama echoed this decline in support by saying, “Albania doesn’t seek to enter into war with the Iranian regime, and it doesn’t accept to host anyone who has abused our hospitality.”<sup>(27)</sup> He added, “Our country is being used as a trench in a war that doesn’t concern us. And this is impossible. They (the PMOI) have every right to fight for their freedom. But in order to do so, they should first leave Albania.”

Albania’s decision to deliver the hard drives of the confiscated computer to a hostile nation with which it just cut diplomatic relations appears strange. Tirana’s totally different reaction toward Iranian dissidents suggests that further prosecutions await PMOI members in Iran as well as their families and friends.

The National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI), a global umbrella organization for Iranian dissidents, said that the fault “unquestionably lies with the governments of the United States

and Albania.”<sup>(28)</sup> The NCRI’s criticism of the US government shows the latter’s state of denial, since Washington announced from the very beginning its full support for the Albanian raid. “The Albanian State Police have assured us that all actions were conducted in accordance with applicable laws, including with regard to the protection of the rights and freedoms of all persons in Albania. We support the Government of Albania’s right to investigate any potential illegal activities within its territory,” the US State Department statement said.<sup>(29)</sup> It seems that the US position has so much to do with the Iran-US talks that necessitate the release of prisoners and easing escalation before awaiting a breakthrough concerning the Iranian nuclear program.

The message that Tirana and Washington sent to Iranian dissidents was stern, carrying several significations, including that Washington will not support dissident activities aimed at changing the political system in Iran. It also delivered the message that PMOI members have limited options for the time being, foremost of which is disappearing from the scene — instead moving their activism to Europe — and waiting for a new opportunity to resume activities. But this does not mean that Albania or the United States will allow Iran to use informants or hired killers to kill dissidents.

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## Rasanah's News

# Rasanah Holds a Seminar on “The Historical Role of Saudi Arabia in “the Algerian Revolution



On July 12, 2023, The International Institute for Iranian Studies (Rasanah) organized a seminar entitled “The Historical Role of Saudi Arabia in the Algerian Revolution.” Rasanah Vice President Dr. Ahmed Al-Qarni opened the seminar with a welcoming speech and the session was moderated by the Director of the Center for Studies and Research Maj. Gen. Ahmed Al-Maimouni.

Rachid Ould Boussiafa outlined the most prominent axes of Saudi Arabia's historical role in the Algerian revolution and the role of Algerian reformist figures such as Sheikh Bashir Ibrahim and Sheikh Tayyib Aqbi that have started from Medina.

He highlighted the Arab support, particularly Saudi Arabia's pivotal role in the Algerian revolution and the invaluable support given by King Salman bin Abdulaziz, the Governor of Riyadh at the time, who personally supervised

the donation campaigns for the Algerian revolution. Boussiafa reviewed in detail the Saudi financial support provided during the Algerian revolution, as Saudi Arabia was one of the first Arab countries to support the Algerian revolution against French colonialism. He also referred to the role of King Saud bin Abdulaziz in supporting the Algerian cause at the United Nations, whether on the political or material level.

The seminar also discussed Saudi support for the Algerian revolution in the media, as it was the first to raise the Algerian issue in the Security Council during that period. He explained this role through historical documents that confirmed the importance of Saudi support for the Algerian revolution at the media, political, diplomatic and financial levels. The Algerian revolution commenced in 1954 until the declaration of Algerian independence in 1962.



# **Iran Case File**

June 2023





# Iran Case File

June 2023

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