

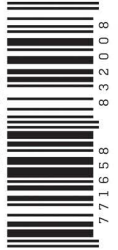
MONTHLY REPORT

Iran Case File

July 2023

Your window on Iran from inside and abroad

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The month of July 2023 witnessed significant developments and escalations at the political, economic, military, ideological and social levels. As for Iran's relationship with its Arab neighbors and international actors, it experienced intertwined interactions that are likely to impact Iranian affairs at all levels in the coming period.

Internal Affairs: At the political level, Iran notably decreased its commitment to the wearing of the hijab against the backdrop of the national protests that erupted after the death of Kurdish woman Mahsa Amini who was detained by Iran's "morality police." The attempt by the Iranian government to relax its hijab policy invoked the ire of the "hardliners" within the Iranian political system. They resorted to placing unbearable pressure on the Iranian government and judiciary. As a result, new decrees were issued; Iran's "morality police" were ordered to detain women who did not wear the hijab properly in public places. The Judicial and Legal Committee ratified a new bill on the hijab to impose severe penalties on women who failed to observe the country's hijab rules. These penalties include imprisonment, travel bans and hefty fines.

At the military level, growing relations between Iran and Belarus through reciprocal official visits helped Iran to boost further its strategic alliance with Russia. Yet, this deepened Iran's involvement in the Russia-Ukraine war because of two prominent developments. First, Iran's military cooperation to set up drone facilities which received scathing

criticism from the West. Second, there is a possibility of a new war front erupting from Belarus against Poland (using Iranian drone facilities); this would be tantamount to declaring war against NATO.

At the social level, the abysmal conditions in Iranian prisons reflect the social and political crises in Iran. Among the detained are opposition figures who are critical of the policies of the Iranian government. The Iranian government mainly depends on violence and the employment of security apparatuses to deal with political opponents. As a result, the Iranian political arena has witnessed further complexities at home and abroad.

At the ideological level, Nouri al-Maliki, the leader of the Dawa Party, criticized the companions of Prophet Muhammed and prominent Sunni figures in a speech he delivered marking Ghadir Khumm, a significant Shiite holiday. His controversial remarks violated the country's Constitution. Observers deemed his remarks as evidence of the dangerous radicalism adopted by the Dawa Party. The Iraqi people are concerned that such remarks may tear apart and jeopardize the entire social fabric of Iraqi society. The Dawa Party ignited tensions not only with the Sunnis but also with the Shiite Sadrist Movement. Some of the Dawa Party's affiliates reportedly defamed the Shiite marja Mohammad Mohammad Sadiq al-Sadr, the father of father Muqtada al-Sadr. This resulted in a backlash from a number of Sadrists who stormed several

offices of the Dawa Party in many Iraqi governorates.

Iran's foreign policy at the Arab and international levels witnessed significant developments in July 2023. As for Gulf-Iran interactions, the dispute over the Dorra gas field resurfaced despite the ongoing breakthrough between the two sides. Iran announced its intention to start drilling and exploration in the gas field which lies within the common maritime border between Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. The three countries, as a result, entered a diplomatic and media debate over the ownership of the field and the rights to exploit its gas resources.

Saudi Arabia's Jeddah city hosted a prominent international event; a summit including more than 40 countries and international organizations to work toward a peaceful end to the Russia-Ukraine war. This summit elicited great interest within Iran. Opinion in was divided between two perspectives regarding Saudi Arabia's successful hosting of such a significant international summit and the growing role that Riyadh has recently assumed. Some Iranian observers praised Saudi Arabia's role at the regional and international levels whereas others claimed that Saudi Arabia's rising role is a result of Iran's decline.

As for Iran-Iraq relations, the intra-Shiite conflict resurged against the backdrop of the Sadrists' anger over the defamation campaign against their revered spiritual leader Mohammad Mohammad Sadiq al-Sadr, the father of Muqtada al-Sadr, across social media platforms. The intervals between the clashes involving the two largest Shiite blocs became shorter, and the scope of the clashes may expand further. As Iraq's early parliamentary election is around the corner, the country is expected to face a new phase of instability that risks

the stability of the Iraqi state since the fighting parties have not yet reached a permanent settlement.

In Syria, the eastern region of the country in early July turned into a battlefield; this region is divided between the forces of influence that share control. It witnessed a limited escalation between the United States, Iran and Russia on the ground and in the air. Each actor had its own aim. It is expected that the escalation between the three actors will increase gradually and may lead to direct/indirect clashes (through proxies) amid the increase in tensions between Tehran and Moscow on one side and Washington on the other side. Tensions are increasing between these actors because of differences over the Syrian and Ukrainian files.

At the international level, tensions are still present between Iran and the United States despite the Oman-Qatar brokered secret talks. Both sides are attempting to leverage their respective cards to improve the terms of the potential nuclear deal. The current escalation is unlikely to lead to a direct confrontation unless Iran crosses the red line imposed by the United States with regard to its nuclear program.

INTERNAL AFFAIRS



This part of the Iran Case File for the month of July 2023 is divided into four main files. The Political File sheds light on the resumption of the “morality police” patrols and the new hijab law that will impose harsher punishments on women who fail to observe the mandated dress codes. The Military File discusses the objectives and results of the Belarussian defense minister’s visit to Iran as well as Iran’s project to build a drone facility in Belarus with Russian support. The Social File focuses on human rights abuses in Iranian prisons and the international reactions to these abuses as well as the conditions inside them. The Ideological File reviews the sectarianism apparent in the remarks of Nouri al-Maliki, the leader of Iraq’s Dawa Party, against Prophet Muhammad’s companions and prominent Sunni figures. It also explains the current disagreements regarding Muqtada al-Sadr’s religious authority with those who oppose the claim that he lacks the religious credentials to be a marja. Finally, the file looks at the criticism launched against his father Mohammad Mohammad Sadiq al-Sadr by Dawa Party affiliates.

The Political File

The announcement by the Iranian police regarding the redeployment of patrols to punish women who do not comply with the country's draconian dress codes sparked renewed debate across Iran. This came after the Parliament's Judiciary and Legal Commission approved new legislation that imposed stricter and harsher penalties on women who breach the regulations and laws pertaining to the hijab, which could amount to a 10-year jail sentence, deprivation of social rights, travel bans and massive fines.

The Return of the Morality Police

After an eight-month hiatus, the Iranian police announced that it would redeploy police patrols — via vehicles and on foot — with the aim of warning and punishing women who continue to violate the Islamic hijab rules. On July 17, 2023, morality police patrols emerged on the streets of several Iranian cities. Extensive video footage was posted on social media platforms showing male and female officers warning unveiled women. Tasnim News Agency, which is affiliated with the IRGC, published a report indicating that the return of the morality police was in response to an order and confirmation by the president of the republic and the judiciary. But a government official reached out to the news agency and asked it to remove the part related to the Iranian president from the report.⁽¹⁾ It appears that the government attempted to distance itself from the issue of the morality police returning out of fear of renewed protests against the compulsory hijab. This resumption of patrol duties comes just before the first death anniversary of Mahsa Ami-

ni, a Kurdish woman who was killed in morality police detention in September last year. Those opposed to the morality police could take advantage of the decision to reinstate its patrols by sparking a new wave of protests, which the government and the entire political system fear.

Over the past few months, Iran has seen a major decline in Iranian women complying with the rules related to the hijab, particularly in the capital Tehran and other major cities. And it seems that the decision to reinstate the morality police came as a result of pressures exerted by the “hardliners” on President Ebrahim Raisi and the entities concerned with implementing and monitoring the laws related to the hijab such as the judiciary and the police. These concerned entities have come under stinging criticism from several “conservatives” who accused them of complacency in the face of the rebellion against the hijab. They also warned of the political implications of showing complacency in the face of this phenomenon for Iranian national culture. Yet, the representatives of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei in several Iranian provinces sent a secret letter to President Raisi in which they criticized the widespread phenomenon of not wearing the hijab, which prompted the Iranian Ministry of Interior to release a statement in March in which it said “it will not back down from confronting the phenomenon of dropping the hijab since it represents one of the pillars of the Iranian people's civilization and one of the principles of the Islamic Republic of Iran.”⁽²⁾ As for Chief Justice Gholamhossein Mohseni-Ejei, he described in April 2023 the issue of taking off the hijab as a violation of social

and religious norms, vowing to hold violators accountable.⁽³⁾

The protests that rocked Iran after the death of Amini, who was detained by the morality police in September 2022 under the pretext of not wearing the hijab properly, compelled the Iranian authorities to temporarily halt implementing the laws related to the compulsory hijab in public places. Amid the massive protests that gripped Iran in September 2022, some Iranian newspapers and news agencies quoted Iranian Attorney General Mohammad Jafar Montazeri as saying in a press conference in the city of Qom that the morality police was suspended by those who created it. But no official decision regarding this matter was taken and no other official confirmed the reports of dismantling the morality police. However, it is accurate to say that the patrols largely disappeared during and after the protests, which means that the decline in their role was a tactical measure aimed to contain public anger and to help stop the protests, which has happened. Only a few months after the protests stopped, the Iranian government reinstated the restrictions related to the hijab dress code, starting with the police installing cameras in public places to identify women not wearing the hijab and closing down stores and restaurants for not compelling women to comply with the hijab laws. This is in addition to installing surveillance cameras in public places and roads to identify women who do not comply with the hijab dress code. Yet the security and judicial authorities vowed to try those who promote the trend of taking off the hijab before the criminal courts.

Harsher and Stringent Penalties Against Women Violating the Hijab Law

Concurrently with the return of the morality police to Iran's streets, the Iranian Parliament's Judiciary and Legal Commission approved legislation dubbed the "Hijab and Chastity Law." The 70-article legislation was drafted by the Iranian judiciary and stipulates the imposition of harsh penalties against violators, which could amount to the deprivation of social rights and the imposition of travel bans, in addition to fines ranging from 18 million tomans to 36 million tomans (from \$360 to \$720) for those who wear the hijab improperly in public places or on the street. Yet, the law also stipulates a jail sentence from 5 years to 10 years for those who promote "abandoning the Islamic dress code" in Iranian society.⁽⁴⁾

After the Judiciary and Legal Commission's approval, lawmakers are expected to resume debate on the law amid calls for its amendment. The Parliament speaker remarked that the issue of the hijab has become a security, political and social issue as well as a religious one. He considered that voting in favor of the "Hijab and Chastity Law" a religious and national duty.⁽⁵⁾

The Judiciary and Legal Commission's approval of the law sparked a huge controversy among citizens, social media users, lawyers and the press. Yet several politicians within the Iranian political system also warned against the law.

In this respect, Shargh network wrote that the "Hijab and Chastity bill" consisted of nine articles when it was prepared by the judiciary. It was increased to 15 articles by the Raisi government, which sent it to the Parliament, whose Judiciary and Legal Commission increased its articles to 70, which include unprecedented penalties against wom-

en.⁽⁶⁾ “Reformist” activist Azar Mansouri, who has recently been picked to head the “reformists” front, considers that the law is a declaration of war on society.⁽⁷⁾ She also believes that any kind of coerced intervention in people’s personal lives is not only a strategic mistake by the Iranian government but will also have adverse consequences and will harm the government in the long term. According to her, this dispute will continue unabated because no woman should be forced to wear the hijab.⁽⁸⁾ Meanwhile, member of the Internal Regulation Commission of the Iranian Parliament Ahmad Alireza Beki said that society would respond to this issue and the Parliament would be compelled to take a public decision on it. He reiterated that rather than meeting people’s basic needs, the Parliament consumes lawmakers’ energy by debating on a controversial issue, driving them toward a face-off with society.⁽⁹⁾

In the end, it could be said that the Iranian government’s decision to reinstate the morality police to public places, in addition to debating the “Hijab and Chastity bill” in Parliament, point to the “hardliners” insistence on moving ahead with combating the trend of taking off the hijab, which has become rampant in Iranian society over the past months. But the huge controversy ignited by these two steps could be a prelude to the resumption of a new wave of public protests. Between the “hardliners” opposition to the growing rejection of the hijab and rebellion against it and the concern about renewed protests, the Iranian government finds itself in a real dilemma that could prompt it to make some concessions in the future or resort to excessive force to impose the hijab.

The Military File

Iran and Belarus are committed to strengthening their defence cooperation as well as ties in other sectors such as trade, culture and tourism. Russia’s allies are already instrumental to its war efforts in Ukraine. The recent high-level meetings of Belarusian Defense Minister Viktor Khrenin with Iran’s political and military leadership in Tehran intended to convince Iran to set up a drone factory in the Eastern European country besides sharing technology for its expanding missiles and Soviet/Russian-origin weapons systems.

What Is Behind the Visit of the Belarusian Defense Minister to Tehran?

During the meeting between their defense ministers on July 31, Tehran and Minsk ratified an annual plan for military cooperation.⁽¹⁰⁾ The specifics of the agreement remain undisclosed, hence fueling apprehension against the backdrop of Tehran’s and Minsk’s all-out cooperation with Moscow in the context of its war in Ukraine, and Wagner’s embattled chief relocating along with his fighters to Belarus. In addition, the escalating anxiety has not been helped by renewed tensions with NATO over the deployment of Russian nuclear weapons on Belarusian soil.

“We, like you, clearly and consistently defend our sovereignty and independence. We are united by our common positions on many topical international issues,” Khrenin was quoted as saying in a message on the Telegram channel of the Belarusian Ministry of Defense to his Iranian counterpart Mohammad Reza Ashtiani.⁽¹¹⁾

Khrenin’s visit was a follow-up to

Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko's meetings with Iran's top leadership in Tehran in March when both the sanctioned countries signed several agreements. Next month, Mahan Air started direct flights to Minsk.

With Lukashenko's two-day maiden Iran visit, speculation over the trilateral military cooperation was confirmed (between Iran, Russia and Belarus). Three decades after establishing diplomatic ties with Iran, the Belarusian president stated, "Now, we have come to realize how much we need each other, how closely we should cooperate in this world."⁽¹²⁾

Both countries inked a roadmap for bilateral cooperation for 2023–2025, foreseeing joint action on political, economic and consular matters, as well as collaboration in science, education, culture, arts, media and tourism.⁽¹³⁾

Ukraine claimed that Russia seeks to establish an Iranian drone manufacturing facility in Belarus' Gomel region.⁽¹⁴⁾ The agreement signed most likely included the Shahed and other drone manufacturing facilities at the Gomel site which Iranian engineers had visited in late April or early May this year.

Iran's Project to Build a Drone Factory in Belarus With Russian Support

According to the National Resistance Center's report, "A working group consisting of Iranian engineers, organized by the FSB of the Russian Federation and the KGB of the Russian Federation, visited the "Gomel Radio Factory." During the business trip, they discussed the possibility of the systematic adjustment production of kamikaze drones and it was also reported that drones were being restocked at the Gomel factory."⁽¹⁵⁾

Kyiv had reported last November that Belarus is seeking Iran's cooperation to produce 152 millimeter, 122 millimeter and 300 millimeter artillery shells for its armed forces as well as for the Russian army.⁽¹⁶⁾ According to the report of the Main Directorate of Intelligence of the Ministry of Defence of Ukraine, "the list of issues for discussion with the Iranian side concerns the entire production cycle – from the technology of steel smelting for the component parts of the ammunition to the coloring of the projectiles and the containers used for their packaging."⁽¹⁷⁾

Iran is already building a drone factory in the town of Yelabuga in Russia's Republic of Tatarstan, which will have the capacity to produce at least 6,000 drones a year starting by 2024.⁽¹⁸⁾ The Gomel factory will be Iran's third drone manufacturing plant abroad.

Russia is interested in arms manufacturing units in Belarus which are unlikely to be hit by Ukrainian missiles and drones unlike those on its soil. Despite continued support for the invasion, Belarus has neither been targeted directly by the Ukrainian army nor by Ukrainian parties. However, this may change with time.

The Centre for Eastern Studies (OSW), a Polish government-funded organization, describes the Belarusian arms industry as "a relatively well-developed, internally coherent complex focused on the development of information and telecommunications technologies, automated command systems, electro-optical systems, instrumentation, and modernization packages for the armaments and military equipment of Soviet and Russian construction based on them (aviation, armor, air defense)."⁽¹⁹⁾

Belarus was the 19th largest exporter of major arms in the world from 2013 to 2023, primarily producing components due to the Soviet legacy of proliferating arms instead of entire weapons systems.^[20]

Finally, we can say that Iran is not only going to gain financially by expanding its military exports and footprint but also by feeding on Belarusian technological imports and smuggling networks in Europe, particularly in Hungary. The expanding cooperation with Russia and its ally Belarus increases Iran's strategic nuisance for the West besides refining its development of more sophisticated weapons systems.

If Russia opts to use Wagner mercenaries, now stationed in Belarus, to attack Lithuania for gaining a corridor to its European exclave Kaliningrad, Iranian drones could pose a direct threat to NATO. Russia has several motives to boost its military collaboration with Iran and Belarus, mainly the latter is secure from Ukrainian attacks and its soil can be used to launch drone attacks targeting Europe, if needed.

The Ideological File

Following the US invasion of Iraq, Shiite Islamist movements emerged on the political stage, playing a role in Iraq's political and religious spheres. Rivalries and differences quickly emerged among the main actors of these movements. These differences were not just related to political competition but also involved different interpretations of Shiism, reflecting a deep-seated crisis experienced by many Islamist movements, particularly in relation to interpreting religion. Many still have not shifted to embrace concepts such as citizenship, pluralism and the modern nation-state.

The Crisis Facing Shiite Activist Movements

Among the significations of this deep-rooted crisis is the Dawa Party secretary general's attack on the companions of the Prophet Muhammed who are dear to Sunnis. His inflammatory comments threatened the stability of Iraq's social fabric and overlooked the jurisprudential literature on the matter and the channels of the modern nation-state.

• **Encouraging sectarian rhetoric:** In a speech delivered during the celebrations of Ghadir Khumm, the head of the Islamic Dawa Party Nouri al-Maliki leveled stinging criticism against the Prophet's companions and Sunnis. He said, "Imam Ali continued to be cursed from the pulpits for seven decades. Muslims used to shake each other's hands by invoking curses on Ali." He also described Amr ibn al-As as malicious.^[21] Although his comments are reflective of the sectarian character of the Dawa Party and its leaders, they are also indicative of the major shifts

experienced by the party. In addition, Maliki's incendiary comments were motivated by several objectives and interests. He aimed to politically reposition himself following the major setbacks he and his party have suffered over the past years. Hence, he resorted to employing sectarian rhetoric as a populist tool to boost his party's grassroots support base and increase his popularity among sectarian incubators.⁽²²⁾ Additionally, he wanted to deal a blow to the internal understandings of all Iraqi segments that want a constitutional state and rapprochement with regional actors. Both the current internal and external understandings are a source of concern for the Dawa Party, its projects and intellectual transformations in the post-Baqir al-Sadr era and for its political ambitions in the post-US invasion era.

- **Against the Constitution:** The Iraqi Constitution lays the foundation for the establishment of a pluralistic state. The Iraqi Constitution's Article 3 stipulates that "Iraq is a country of multiple nationalities, religions, and sects. It is a founding and active member in the Arab League and is committed to its charter, and it is part of the Islamic

world." Article 12 of the Constitution also states that "Iraqis are equal before the law without discrimination based on gender, race, ethnicity, nationality, origin, color, religion, sect, belief or opinion, or economic or social status." Therefore, any sectarian rhetoric that targets certain national, religious or sectarian figures or even sacred entities, religions or sects, in effect, breaches the Constitution and targets the Iraqi state and the entire Iraqi people and their aspiration to establish a state based on the Constitution and one that respects Iraqi history and its socio-religious fabric.

Tensions With the Sadrist Movement

Not only did the Dawa Party spoil its relationship with the Sunnis, but it also stirred up tensions with the Sadrist Movement. This was a consequence of the reported insult by a Dawa Party affiliate against marja Mohammad Mohammad al-Sadr (d. 1999), Muqtada al-Sadr's father and the religious marja for the Sadrists who they referred to regarding all religious issues, except for new issues for which they refer to Haeri and then Sistani. Haeri retired in August 2022 after he had attacked the



Sadrist Movement.⁽²³⁾

• **Ideological standoff:** Some Sadrists attacked several of the Dawa Party's offices in multiple Iraqi governorates. A rocket-propelled grenade was fired at the Dawa Party's office in Najaf.⁽²⁴⁾ This came after Hassan al-Azzari, a senior leader in the Sadrist Movement, published a post on Facebook in which he accused the Dawa Party of defaming Ayatollah Mohammad Mohammad al-Sadr by accusing him of having links to the Iraqi Ba'ath Party. Azzari at the same time called for legislation to criminalize any insults directed toward Ayatollah Mohammad Mohammad al-Sadr and his al-hawza al-natiqa, or the "outspoken hawza." An important observation is that the slander against Ayatollah Mohammad Mohammad al-Sadr was reported a Sadrist religious leader rather than a journalist. This means that the Sadrist Movement wanted to employ popular and hawza pressure against the Dawa Party to compel it to approve the issuance of legislation to criminalize any insults against its marjas. The Sadrists also wanted to put the Dawa Party in an awkward position by highlighting that it attacks one of the most influential Shiite marjas of the 20th century and the founder of al-hawza al-natiqa as the Sadrists prefer to call him.⁽²⁵⁾

• **One step back to contain the anger:** The Dawa Party was keen to contain the Sadrists' anger, with Maliki issuing a statement in which he denied the Sadrists' accusations, refuting any insults against Ayatollah Mohammad Mohammad al-Sadr and other marjas.⁽²⁶⁾ Moreover, the Dawa Party reminded the Sadrists of the assistance it provided to them inside and outside Iraq after Ayatollah Mohammad Mohammad al-Sadr's death. The Sadrists, on

the other hand, released several statements, some of which were officially released by Sadr's office while others were unofficial, made by mid-ranking and senior Sadrist figures. Azzari's statement put pressure first on the Dawa Party as he accused it of insulting Ayatollah Mohammad Mohammad al-Sadr. He also said that the insult was part of an orchestrated campaign rather than the irrational act of one Dawa Party affiliate. He also blamed Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, a Dawa Party strategic ally, for not condemning the insults directed at Ayatollah Mohammad Mohammad al-Sadr. The Sadrists then attacked the offices of the Dawa Party in several Iraqi provinces, with the party denying any insults against Ayatollah Mohammad Mohammad al-Sadr while denouncing at the same time the attacks on its offices. In this context, Muqtada al-Sadr issued a statement in which he condemned the attempt to stir up intra-Shiite sedition through the use of violence and weapons. He also warned the believers against being dragged into such seditious acts since there are parties that have no qualms about shedding blood. He also advised the Sadrists not to take any action until they sought the hawza's opinion, adding that the "hawza wouldn't accept this." He welcomed the issuance of legislation that would criminalize insults against scholars. It appears that the Sadrists achieved what they wanted by creating an environment for new legislation to be enacted that would criminalize any insults targeting Ayatollah Mohammad Mohammad al-Sadr and other marjas, in addition, they put pressure on the Dawa Party and Nouri al-Maliki. Hence, the Sadrist Movement contained the situation and warned its members against further

escalation. Muqtada al-Sadr, like Maliki and the Dawa Party, is aware that any confrontation between them will be ideological and bloody. Sadr pointed to this in his statement when he said, “We have previously warned you the war will be ideological. The war should never turn bloody. This is unlawful ideologically and religiously.”⁽²⁷⁾

There are deep ideological rifts between the Shiite Islamist movements, particularly between the two heavy-weight poles: the Dawa Party and the Sadrist Movement. The Dawa Party does not recognize Ayatollah Mohammad Mohammad al-Sadr as a marja but rather traces its religious authority back to Mohammad Baqir al-Sadr. The Sadrist Movement, meanwhile, recognizes Ayatollah Mohammad Mohammad al-Sadr, embracing him as a marja and accepting the project of Mohammad Sadiq al-Sadr, viewing it as complementing and accomplishing the project of Mohammad Baqir al-Sadr rather than opposing it. But the Dawa Party has its own considerations, particularly after getting closer to the line of Wilayat al-Faqih after the death of Baqir al-Sadr as well as because of its close ties with the post-US invasion Iranian project. Though Maliki made concessions to the Sadrists and sought to appease them for fear of a bloody ideological war, he unleashed sectarian rhetoric that targeted an important component of the Iraqi social fabric — the Sunnis. He did not apologize for his sectarian rhetoric against them despite the fact that his inflammatory remarks run counter to the Iraqi state’s Constitution.

The Social File

Several media outlets have highlighted the resumption of public executions, an upsurge in political arrests, further human rights abuses and torture in Iranian prisons. For the latter, there are several reasons including an increasing level of discrimination and injustice on the basis of race, religion, class and gender. As a consequence, Iranian public outrage has reached onerous levels, manifested through protests or via other channels like cinema, art or the press. This escalating Iranian anger raised the concern of the IRGC which believes in violence and imprisonment as the most apt measures to continue the subjugation of the Iranian people.

Iranian Jails and Human Rights Abuses

Public executions have resumed in Iran and human rights organizations have said that the decline in executions over the past few years was not due to political change but rather because of COVID-19 and the restrictions that were imposed on Iranian society.⁽²⁸⁾ In the first half of 2023, the number of executions reached 354, with the aim to intimidate the Iranian people. Furthermore, 20% of the executions targeted the Balochi Sunni minority as well as other ethnic and religious minorities, 206 people were executed after being convicted in drug smuggling cases. Two executions were carried out in public while six women were also executed.⁽²⁹⁾ Iranian prison practices flagrantly violate the Islamic values that the Iranian government purportedly promotes, which is a source of great embarrassment for it. Prisoners reportedly are deprived of their basic rights such as medical treatment and rarely

have access to specialist physicians. This is in addition to religious and social discrimination in jails among several other injustices faced. For example, wealthier prisoners get long off-days, have access to private hospitals and there are special wards dedicated to senior officials. The rich also have their own amenities and have access to better facilities. Political prisoners, on the other hand, live in dire circumstances.⁽³⁰⁾ In addition, fabricated cases are filed against political prisoners, who face additional accusations, on the basis of which they are retried.⁽³¹⁾

Human rights abuses in prisons reflect the priorities of the Iranian political system. It intensifies its force against prisoners of conscience and political opponents who are considered the biggest challenge for the system. Racism and social discrimination are punitive punishments that the Iranian authorities adopt against politician prisoners due to their criticism of the political system. It is also worth mentioning that the press and cultural figures have played a role in confronting the violence taking place in Irani-

an prisons. Media figures, journalists, actors, singers and writers have participated in the recent protests, expressing their opposition to the violence exercised by the Iranian government. They have been arrested and tried on charges of spreading propaganda and breaching national security; a report released by the Press Syndicate said that 70 journalists⁽³²⁾ have so far been arrested.

International Reactions to the Conditions Inside Prisons and Freedoms in Iran

The fact-finding committee affiliated with the UN announced that it would monitor the activities of the committee appointed by the Iranian president to investigate the protests. It also called for ending the suppression of protests, the release of prisoners and ceasing the immunity granted to criminals and holding them accountable.⁽³³⁾ The international positions included the sanctions imposed by the UK on the IRGC over human rights abuses. The sanctions included freezing Iranian assets and imposing travel bans on several Iranian decision-makers.⁽³⁴⁾ It also



imposed sanctions on 13 individuals and entities involved in gross human rights abuses. Among those placed on the UK sanctions list were five officials working in Iranian jails. At these jails, torture and mistreatment prevail. Sanctions were also imposed on the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution which is tasked with imposing social and cultural norms on Iranian society. In addition, six main actors involved in suppressing freedom of expression on the internet were also sanctioned.⁽³⁵⁾

These sanctions and international objections are significant; however, they cannot not effectively curb human rights abuses inside Iranian jails. Leaks about human rights abuses are still a source of concern for the Iranian government, which is determined to continue its crackdown on prisoners without leaving any tangible evidence.

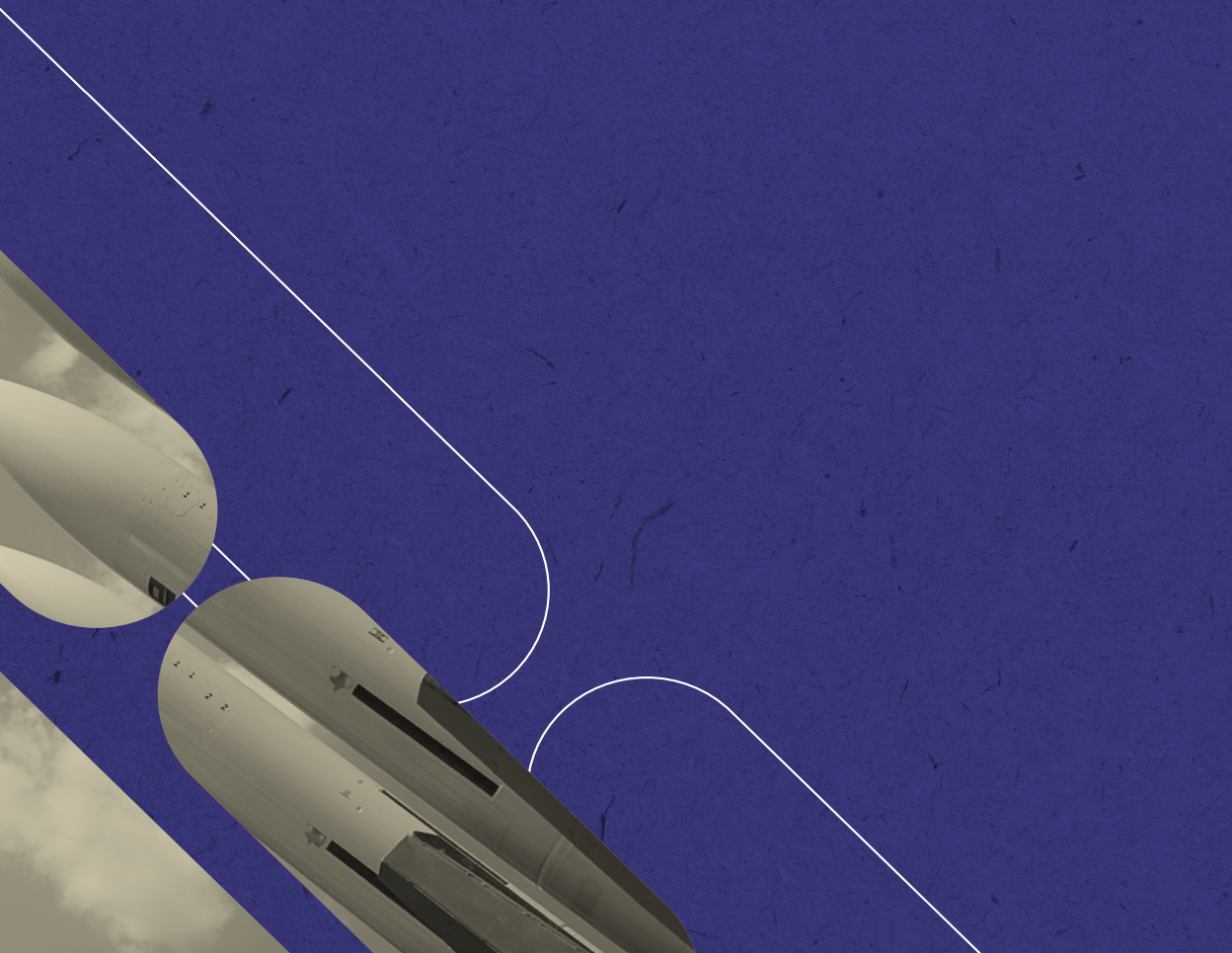
In conclusion, as a result of the injustice and discrimination inflicted on Iranians, the Iranian government has found itself in a real dilemma, prompting it to reinstate public executions and intensify torture as a tool to intimidate and deter the Iranian people. The Iranian government was expected to address the reasons that prompted the Iranian people to take to the streets, resolve disputes, restore their stolen rights and ensure that their homeland is safe and secure. The Iranian people have been deprived of these basic rights for a long time.

Endnotes

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EXTERNAL AFFAIRS



This part discusses Iran's interactions with both its Arab neighbors and international actors. As for its relations with the Gulf states, the dispute over the Dorr gas field resumed after Iran announced its intention to start drilling and exploring in the gas field, which lies within the common maritime border between Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. Saudi Arabia, accordingly, issued a statement refuting Iran's claims. This part also sheds light on Iranian reactions to the international summit held in Jeddah to forge a roadmap to end the Russia-Ukraine war. As for Iran's interactions with Iraq, the Iraqi file discusses the factors and dimensions of the renewed conflict between Sadr and Maliki as well as the latter's attempts to delegitimize Sadr as a marja in order to erode his influence among the followers of the Sadrist Movement. As for the Syrian file, it reviews the implications of the recent mobilization and escalation between Syria's allies (Iran and Russia) and the United States in the country's eastern region. This is in addition to analyzing their variant objectives and aspirations. At the international level, the uncertainty surrounding the nuclear talks as well as US and Iranian attempts to impose pressure in order to gain as much leverage as possible in the negotiations are discussed.

Iran and the Gulf States

In June 2023, the Gulf states witnessed a development which some saw as a test to the Saudi Arabia-Iran deal: Iran, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait all publicly declared their rights to the Dorra gas field in the Gulf.

Jeddah hosted an international summit to work toward a peaceful settlement of the Russia-Ukraine war. This meeting drew responses and interest from Iranian newspapers and media outlets. They presented the meeting as a significant Saudi breakthrough, heralding a change in Iran's perspective toward Saudi Arabia and reflective of its close monitoring of the ongoing transformations inside the country. Iran believes that the ongoing Saudi transformations have contributed to Riyadh's growing role and global influence. In contrast, Iran faces internal crises and growing international isolation.

Iranian Claims Over the Dorra Gas Field

Against the backdrop of the resumption of Saudi-Iran relations and the exchange of ambassadors between the two countries, the Dorra gas field is back on the table after Iran announced its intention to drill and explore for natural gas. This gas field is located in the shared maritime zone Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. Iran's assertion opened a wide diplomatic debate between Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Iran over the ownership of the field and the countries that have the legal right over its sovereignty and can benefit from its resources. However, despite the facts, Tehran continues to insist on its share and refuses to invoke the principle of maritime border demarcation. Iran has dismissed this issue over the past years. The dispute over Dorra raises questions regarding the sustainability

of the China-brokered Saudi-Iran deal that was signed in March 2023. Iran is fully aware that its claims regarding the Dorra gas field have no legal basis. So, the essential question is: what are the reasons and motives behind Iran's claims, particularly in light of the recent positive developments in regional relations? The Arab region in general and the Gulf in particular witnessed shuttle diplomacy by the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs to improve relations and resolve outstanding issues.

Iran's position on the Dorra gas field; refusing to demarcate maritime borders between Iran and Kuwait and the Iranian demand that Kuwait recognizes a 40% share for Iran in the field before holding any demarcation talks all stand in contrast with Iranians calls for resolving all problems in a way that leads to establishing an economic and security border that shields the region from external interventions. It also points to Iran's distorted perspective with regard to its Gulf neighbors, especially in light of the resumption of diplomatic ties between Riyadh and Tehran. This is added to the divisions within the Iranian ruling elite between those who seek to continue with the agreement with Riyadh and take further steps to cement it in various fields in order to benefit from it economically and improve Iran's regional standing and those opposed to it and wanting to derail the reconciliation with Saudi Arabia and render it unsuccessful, thus allowing tensions with the country to continue.⁽¹⁾

Iran is seeking to accumulate political cards for other ends and this explains the way it is handling the Dorra gas field and other issues. This includes pressuring the Gulf states so that they make concessions to Iran in

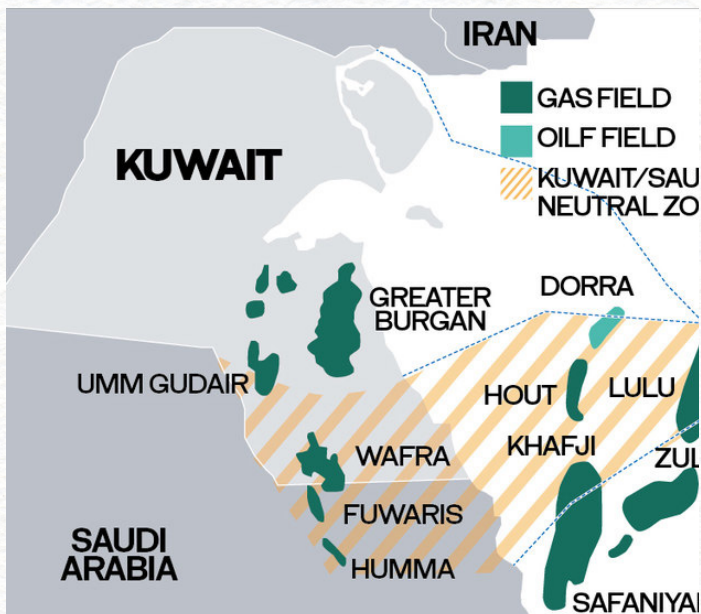
this gas field and to send a message back home that the Iranian government is defending the rights of the Iranian people in line with its notion of national security and that it has influence over many issues because of the political cards it holds. By connecting the issue of the Dorra gas field with the recent drills conducted by Iran in the disputed islands between Iran and the UAE, we notice that Iran's behavior has not changed even though the ink on the recently signed Beijing agreement has not dried yet. For Iran to reap the benefits of this agreement, it must build trust and engage in mutual confidence-building measures rather than continue to stir trouble.

Jeddah Summit: The Success of Saudi Policy in the Eyes of Iran

On August 5, 2023, an important meeting was held in Jeddah for national

security advisers and representatives from over 40 countries and international organizations, including the UN. His Excellency, Minister of State and Member of the Council of Ministers and National Security Adviser Dr. Mosaad bin Mohammad al-Aiban chaired the meeting that aimed to identify a peaceful end to the Russia-Ukraine war. This meeting reflected a continuation and culmination of the efforts of Saudi Arabia in this regard since March 2022. The meeting received widespread media coverage and elicited great international interest. The participants agreed on the importance of continuing international consultations to build common ground that would pave the way for peace. They also emphasized the importance of benefiting from the views and recommendations put forward during the meeting.⁽²⁾

Map 1: Map of Dorra Gas Field



Source: Arab News.⁽³⁾

This meeting resonated greatly in Iran. Once the preparation for this meeting was announced, a wide range of comparisons and analyses were presented in the Iranian media, particularly regarding why Saudi Arabia was playing an important role as a mediator in this global crisis. Two trends were apparent in the Iranian media:

- Praising the role of Saudi Arabia at the regional and international levels: In this regard, Ali Bigdeli, an international affairs researcher, mentioned that Saudi Arabia's role as a mediator did not come easily, but was the result of a long period and intensive visits by Saudi delegations back and forth to bring closer together the views of Russia and China and consultations with the United States so that it would be ready to host a conference for peace and reconciliation between Ukraine and Russia. He said that Saudi Arabia has sought in recent years to play a key role in international events and explained that over the past decades, no country in the Middle East has played a role in resolving international crises like Saudi Arabia is doing today. Saudi Arabia works to create diversity and pluralism in the region and is also trying to bring about a change in relationships in the region.⁽⁴⁾ Similarly, Reza Mehrabian, a researcher on regional issues, said during an interview with ILNA that Saudi Arabia's hosting of this meeting was an extension of other efforts to cement Riyadh's regional and international status.⁽⁵⁾

- Comparison between the Saudi and Iranian Positions on the Russia-Ukraine war: Arman Meli newspaper's analysis mentioned that Saudi Arabia's role as a mediator in the peace talks between Ukraine and Russia could have been played by Iran if it did not take the side

of Russia by supporting it with drones. Iran's support for Russia precluded it from acting as a mediator in this conflict. Iran should have consulted with Saudi Arabia and Russia in order to ensure its participation in the mediation process.⁽⁶⁾ Tosee Irani, an Iranian newspaper, drew a comparison between the achievements of Riyadh and Tehran in the context of the Russia-Ukraine war. It pointed to the fact that Saudi Arabia's stance on the Russia-Ukraine war placed Riyadh in the optimum position to host the peace talks. This mediating role confirmed Saudi Arabia's transformation into a regional powerhouse and beyond. However, Iran's position on the Russia-Ukraine war is completely different to Saudi Arabia's. Iran has been accused of colluding with the aggressor as it sided with Russia. Needless to say, Iran's position ignited public outrage within the country. Therefore, Iran's tattered reputation in the international arena has been further damaged, potentially exposing it to additional sanctions. Worse yet, Iran's alignment with Russia became an excuse for foreign opponents of the nuclear deal to argue against its revival. Saudi Arabia's success is because of a balance in its foreign policy, with the results of a recent poll showing that the country's soft power surpasses that of Iran.

Iran's relationship with Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states is still being tested, and Iran is still driven by a desire to expand and dominate. This was evident through Iran's behavior in the context of the Dorra gas field and the disputed islands with the UAE. Although Iran has announced its acceptance to settle the disputed issues diplomatically, this change of course is because of an Iranian fear of reversing the normal-

ization process with Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states. Iran's behavior was to test the reactions of the Gulf states and to quickly extract benefits from the recent reconciliation and the evasion of long-term commitments. However, this behavior is embarrassing and exposes Iran in front of China and the world, which are now fully aware of the parties willing to promote the values of international law and cooperation to resolve the outstanding issues. Iran has not yet understood that its hostile and interventionist behavior has intensified its isolation while the role of Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states is growing at the regional and international levels. In addition, the Saudi role in the context of the Russia-Ukraine war is praised in Iran. This was apparent from the positive Iranian responses to Riyadh's success in hosting the global summit to resolve the Russia- Ukraine crisis. This summit was observed with great interest by Iran's elite and media outlets. This is in addition to the comparisons drawn between Saudi Arabia's balanced foreign policy and Iran's lack of neutrality and belligerent behavior that have put it in an unenviable position internally and externally.

Iran and Iraq

During July 2023, the Iraqi arena witnessed a new chapter in the bloody Shiite struggle between the two largest Shiite forces: the Dawlat al-Qanoon Coalition led by the head of the Shiite Dawa Party Nouri al-Maliki and the Sadrist Movement led by Shiite cleric Muqtada al-Sadr. This new chapter arose in the aftermath of a series of bombings targeting a number of Dawa Party offices. Sadr supporters closed down some of the Dawa Party's offices after they accused some Dawa Party affiliates of tarnishing the legacy of their late marja (spiritual leader) Mohammad Mohammad Sadiq al-Sadr (father of Muqtada al-Sadr) on social media. These accounts claimed that Muqtada al-Sadr's father enjoyed good ties with the former Ba'ath party of Saddam Hussein.

Factors Behind the Renewed Conflict Between Sadr and Maliki

Political factors are mainly behind the differences between Sadr and Maliki. These factors center on the differences in the nature of the Iraqi government (national majority/consensual), its form and external orientations. Both parties have conflicting projects. Sadr firmly adopts a political project that advocates the formation of a national majority government under the umbrella of an independent and sovereign Iraqi state that has a balanced approach in its foreign relations. In contrast, Maliki fights for a consensual government that is subject to the influence and decision-making powers of Iran-backed militias.

In addition, there are ideological differences associated with the conflict between the two camps, particularly differences over religious points of emulation and leadership over the Shiite

community. Maliki strongly supports the Qom marjaya in the context of the historical and ongoing struggle against the Najaf marjaya to ensure that the dominance of Wilayat al-Faqih is established across the Shiite world. Sadr disagrees with Maliki on the dominance of the Qom marjaya and attaches more importance to the local or Arab marjaya — in spite of the past differences between Najaf and the Sadrists over political positions regarding the Najaf marjaya since the assassination of Muqtada al-Sadr's father at the end of the 1990s. The disagreements between the two widened during the US invasion of Iraq. The Sadrists characterize the Najaf marjaya as passive. Despite these disagreements, this does not mean that Sadr has a poor relationship with Najaf, but he has a relatively good bond as he is aware of its independent nature. Najaf works to contain Sadr by allowing him, unlike the rest of the politicians, to communicate with the Supreme Marja's Office. Sadr believes that he has the right to lead the Shiite community due to his growing popularity.

Dimensions of the Renewed Conflict Between Sadr and Maliki

•Resorting to force and violence: Like the previous rounds of the bloody conflict between supporters of Sadr and Maliki, the Sadrists' criticism of the Dawa Party because of its alleged tarnishing of the image and reputation of Shiite marja Mohammad Mohammad Sadiq al-Sadr was accompanied by simultaneous attacks, which were apparently coordinated. Dozens of the offices of the Shiite Dawa Party were bombed, vandalized or completely closed down on the orders of the Sadrist Movement. Unknown gunmen also targeted the headquarters of the

Badr Organization which is led by Hadi al-Amiri, the headquarters of Ansar al-Wafia, and the headquarters of Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq led by Qais al-Khazali in Najaf. Some videos on social media showed the Sadrists storming the Dawa Party's offices and tearing and burning Maliki's photos.



The headquarters of the Dawlat al-Qanoon Coalition is closed by the Sadrists in Basra.

Photo: Shafaq News.

•The attempts of Sadr's adversaries to undermine his great popularity: The latest clashes are just a new cycle of the longstanding conflict between the two parties. Pro-Iranian political arms such as Dawlat al-Qanoon, the Dawa Party and others have attempted to undermine in different ways the wide popular support base of Muqtada al-Sadr that has contributed to him becoming the dominant figure in the Iraqi equation since the October Protest Movement, known in Iraq as the Tishreen Movement. This is done to serve the interests of pro-Iranian forces. These pro-Iranian political arms were successful in their efforts as Sadr lost his religious authority that was granted to him by Haeri — who stepped down as a marja (religious authority) after

announcing his retirement from political life. Haeri also confirmed that Sadr had not attained the qualifications necessary to perform *ijtihad* and called on his followers to follow the religious leadership of Qom. In response, Sadr withdrew from Iraqi political life. In the latest round of the conflict, Sadr's opponents defamed his father's legacy; videos and posts on social media platforms went viral, insulting the legacy of Mohammad Mohammad Sadiq al-Sadr and accusing him of having good relations with the Ba'ath Party led by former Iraqi President Saddam Hussein — though many reports indicate that the Ba'ath party had Sadr's father assassinated in 1999.

- **The reduced time between the rounds of conflict:** It has been noted that the intervals between the rounds of conflict between Sadr and Maliki have become shorter over the past five years. As the intervals between the rounds of conflict (2008, 2014, 2019) were four to five years, it decreased significantly during the last four rounds (2019, 2021, 2022), and then the last round in 2023 continued for almost one year. This is an indication that the conflict between Sadr and Maliki has exacerbated, and that it is centered on fundamental rather than marginal issues.

Undermining the Religious Authority (Marjaya) of Sadr's Father to Erode His Popularity Among the Sadrists

The time of the early parliamentary election in Iraq is quickly approaching (before the end of 2023) as the one-year rule of Mohammed Shia' al-Sudani, as agreed between the coalitions in November 2022, is nearly ending. The pro-Iranian political arms are aware of the growing influence that Sadr enjoys among the Iraqi people. Haeri's call on

the Sadrists to emulate Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei has not impacted Sadr's influence. Thus, the pro-Iranian political arms have sought to reduce Sadr's political and religious power and delegitimize him among Shiites and tarnish the longstanding legacy of his family. Since Sadr partook in Iraqi political life following the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, he has secured significant power and great influence in the Iraqi equation. He quickly turned into the wild card and managed to win the backing of the majority of Iraqi Shiites. Over the years, Sadr has been able to quickly mobilize the Iraqi street against pro-Iran's adversaries. He also supported the rising popular movement against Iranian influence in Iraq following the October protests in 2022. Sadr has been helped by his family's legacy in terms of its Shiite religious authority (*marjaya*) and popularity. Sadr also has an armed and strong group that allows him to influence the Iraqi equation and even stand against the influence of pro-Iranian armed factions over Iraqi decision-making.

In conclusion, the Shiite conflict is one of the most serious threats to the Iraqi state and threatens to push Iraq to the brink of a wave of violence with multiple rounds — which will risk Iraq's statehood. The Shiite conflict is also one of the most serious threats to Iran's clout in Iraq because its political influence has been undermined by internal divisions. Those that Iran was counting on to extend its sphere of influence and even preserve its existing forms of influence are the parties to the current intra-Shiite conflict. The conflict is between Maliki, who wants Iraq to remain within the circle of Iranian influence, and Sadr. The latter's intentions are not clear to either Iraqis or Ar-

abs as he does not have a real vision for the future of Iraq. He also committed strategic mistakes in the political battle against his adversaries. Now, Iraq, a country which could have easily become strong and prosperous in light of its capabilities and enormous resources, stands on the threshold of another extended crisis. Iran cannot play the role of an influential actor in the intra-Shiite conflict convulsing Iraq. The Iraqi crisis has become an integral and continuous part and reflection of Iran's crises since the 1979 revolution, internally and externally. The intra-Shiite conflict poses a further challenge to Iranian influence in Iraq because it is a conflict between those that Iran is relying on to preserve its influence and ensure the implementation of its plans in the country.

Iran and Syria

In July, the Syrian arena witnessed further military developments in the form of mobilization and maneuvers between Syria, Iran, Russia and the United States and their respective forces and militias. These developments occurred amid fears that tensions could escalate into clashes and a proxy war between the different parties. In this file, we discuss the background and motivations regarding the recent moves in Syria and the direct and indirect messages conveyed by the various parties.

Mobilization and Escalation Between Syria's Allies and the United States in Eastern Syria

The area, east of Syria, or what is known as the east of the Euphrates, witnessed military mobilization and counter-mobilization operations, the emergence of new forces, conflicting statements and clashes between Iran and the United States on the ground and simultaneously clashes between Russia and the United States in the air. Over the past weeks, the United States deployed military and logistical reinforcements from Iraq to the US bases in Al Omar oilfield and Conoco gas field near the lines of contact with the Syrian government's forces and Iranian militias, especially toward the east and north of Deir Ezzor Governorate and on the periphery of Hasaka Governorate, north-eastern Syria. US mobilization coincided with US military drills with local allies in northeastern Syria, one day after the end of similar exercises at the US Al-Tanf base on the Iraqi-Jordanian-Syrian border, eastern Syria.

On the other hand, the activities of Iranian militias and the pace of their military mobilization have recently increased in eastern Syria. They transferred short and medium-range mis-

siles, dozens of military vehicles and hundreds of their members to the areas located on the line of contact with the international coalition forces in eastern Syria. With Russian and Iranian support, the Syrian government conducted military exercises in that area. This suggests that these forces repositioned, re-deployed and raised their combat readiness for any possible future military operation.⁽⁷⁾ This was accompanied by a coordinated media campaign launched by the three parties regarding an imminent US attack in Deir Ezzor against civilians. This was part of a campaign to raise local opposition against the US presence in Syria and support Iranian and Russian efforts to recruit local Syrians into their militias.

This move created an environment of escalation and coincided with air clashes between Iranian and Syrian drones in Syria's airspace. Each side accused the other of violating the rules of engagement and non-conflict protocols, which had been effective a few years ago between Washington and Moscow in the context of activities in Syrian airspace.

Diverging Calculations of the Parties to the Escalation and the Expected Implications

The escalation between pro-Iran forces, Russia and the United States in Syria is not a new phenomenon but occurs regularly. The significance of this escalation reflects the developments and transformations in the international and regional arenas. The reasons for the recent re-escalation at this particular time coincides with the growing struggle between the United States, Russia and Iran, which casts a shadow over the Syrian crisis and the Russia-Ukraine war. The United States adopted a pressing escalatory posi-

tion against Russia and Iran as they increased the quality and level of their collaboration, most recently illustrated by Iran's military shipment to Russia during the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war. Many reports revealed that that Iran and Russia plan to intensify their attacks against US forces in Syria.⁽⁸⁾

With regard to the other implications of the escalation, Iranian moves and attempts to fuel tensions are consistent with Tehran's strategic goals in Syria and the region in order to expand the sphere of its control over the banks of the Euphrates River to secure its only land route to the Mediterranean Sea via Al Bukamal which borders Iraq. Iran plans to pressure the United States to withdraw its forces from the region, allowing it to fill the vacuum left by the United States at various economic, social, security and military levels. Because of Russia's growing preoccupation in Ukraine, Iran's margin of maneuvering has increased in Syria, with Moscow turning a blind eye to its activities in Syria.

For Russia, this escalation falls within the context of its attempts to pressure the United States in Syria and force it to withdraw its forces from the country and reduce its presence there. This Russian aim is based on Turkish and Iranian support which was evident at the recent Astana talks.⁽⁹⁾ Russia recently attempted to undermine US positions in Syria by decreasing its coordination with US troops.

Related to the current escalation on the ground, Iraq is not isolated, especially as it is connected to Syria, hence the escalation is likely to have a negative impact on it. The implications for Iraq come at a time when the Iraqi government searches for political stability and intends to establish cooperation

mechanisms and pursue a balanced foreign relations approach. Therefore, one of Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al-Sudani's aims during his visit to Syria was to reduce the potential negative repercussions of this escalation on Iraqi interests.

Regarding the repercussions of this escalation between the Iranian and Russian forces and the United States on the ground and in Syrian airspace vary in their extent. Some believe that the recurrence of this escalation could raise the risk of unintended incidents occurring that may lead to further escalation and an unwanted military confrontations. This position is based on the reality of recent US moves in the region. For example, the United States has reinforced its presence in the areas bordering Syria with fighters and weapons. This could be interpreted as the United States preparing for any unaccounted development. On the other hand, there is a position that believes that this escalation will raise tensions between the concerned parties in Syria, but it will not lead to a direct and open confrontation. Many events have proven this over the past years. Coordination exists between the various parties, and they are keen not to enter a stage of military confrontation, the United States and Iran are not interested in this. Russia also does not have sufficient capabilities to fight the United States in another strategic area due to the great cost imposed on it in the Ukrainian arena.

Overall, these developments lead to many complexities that are occurring much more regularly despite the expectations that followed Syria's return to the Arab League. A potential military clash between the parties is unlikely. The parties are not interest-

ed in military clashes in Syria, even if indicators on the ground point to the opposite. The escalation is likely to be limited to competition and skirmishes, and with each party imposing pressure and counter pressure on the other. The escalation's trajectory is greatly linked to developments in Iran-US relations, particularly progress in the Iranian nuclear file and developments in the Russia-Ukraine war which also has implications for Russo-Iran relations.

Iran and the United States

Over the past three months — since May 2023 — the secret negotiations sponsored by Oman and Qatar between Iran and the United States have not seen any breakthrough. This stalemate has been reflected in Iran's foreign policy moves, with it expressing its traditional policy of hostility toward the United States. Iran has continued to pursue its foreign policy moves to resist pressures and sanctions, accumulate levers and shift away from the West. The aforementioned were the driving factors behind President Ebrahim Raisi's visit to some Latin American and African countries, in addition to Iran seeking membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, which is led by Russia and China, and intensifying its attacks on oil tankers and vessels in the Gulf. The United States, on the other side, has continued to impose sanctions on Iran and enhance its military presence in the region as a deterrent. The United States also clarified that other options are not ruled out in case Iran crosses the redlines that it has set. This file sheds light on these developments and analyzes their significations and implications for the relationship between the two countries.

Uncertainty Surrounding the Nuclear Talks

Diplomatic efforts to resurrect the nuclear deal or even negotiate a tentative agreement between Iran and the United States failed. Despite Iran increasing uranium enrichment up to 60% purity, amassing massive amounts of enriched uranium and possessing nuclear know-how, the two countries remain committed to diplomacy. So far, the European parties have ruled out the activation of the snapback mechanism, unless Iran increases its enriched uranium production up to 90%. According to the US Office of the Director of National Intelligence, "Iran is not currently undertaking the key nuclear weapons development activities that would be necessary to produce a testable nuclear device." European dissatisfaction with Iran's supply of drones and weapons to Russia, as well as the October 18 expiration of restrictions on Iran's research, development and production of ballistic missiles, in addition to its import and export of missiles, drones and related technology, have not altered the US-European approach to Iran (see Table 1).⁽¹⁰⁾

Table 1: JCPOA Sunset Dates

Date	Regulations to Be Removed
October 2020	UN Embargo on Iranian conventional weapons exports and imports
October 2020	UN visa ban on Iranian citizens involved in nuclear, ballistic missile, and defense industry research
October 2023	UN limits on Iranian ballistic missile research and development
October 2023	UN ban on Iranian missile and drone imports and exports for systems with a 300 kilometer plus range
October 2023	US sanctions on individuals linked to Iran's nuclear program
October 2023	EU sanctions on Iran's nuclear program

July 2024	Sanctions on Iran's advanced IR6 and IR8 centrifuge testing and production
October 2025/ January 2026	JCPOA snapback mechanism, which when triggered can re-impose sanctions
January 2026	The majority of sanctions on Iranian centrifuge import, production, and development, along with JCPOA oversight of Iran's nuclear imports
January 2031	enrichment cap on Iranian uranium, uranium stock- 3.67% pile limits, nuclear facility construction, and aspects of IAEA monitoring
January 2036	All IAEA monitoring of Iranian centrifuges
January 2041	All IAEA monitoring of the Iranian nuclear program

Source: John Jenkins, the Iran Question and British Strategy, Policy Exchange, (2023): 36.

However, in light of the current uncertainty surrounding the ongoing nuclear negotiations, and while the compass of US policy remains unknown, the Biden administration placing Robert Malley, the US special envoy for Iran, on leave and putting his security clearance under review earlier in July 2023 has cast a shadow over the talks. He was one of the architects of the 2015 nuclear deal as well as the diplomatic approach adopted by the Biden administration. Malley was subject to a federal investigation over his mishandling of secret data, some of which is related to Iran. In addition, the approaching US presidential election in 2024 and the growing bipartisan opposition to the Biden administration's Iran policy have led to declining enthusiasm toward resurrecting the 2015 nuclear deal. The situation on the opposing side is not very different. The internal debates in Iran are adding further complexity to the landscape. There is a camp that believes that the diplomatic path is ineffective and fears that there will be no guarantees to ensure the deal's survival in order to reap the gains that arise from it. On the other hand, there is a camp that points to the

necessity of settling the differences between Iran and the United States.⁽¹¹⁾

In any case, despite the unlikelihood of reaching a settlement, Iran does not want to cross the redlines, hence it showed some signs of cooperation with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). The United States and its European allies appear satisfied with this outcome and do not plan to escalate. This was demonstrated by US Secretary of State Antony Blinken's statements, in which he stated that the diplomatic approach is still on the table, but that alternative options are not ruled out. This is backed up by joint drills with Israel on July 10, 2023, that were intended to allow the Israeli Air Force to participate in long-range strikes against strategic targets hundreds of miles outside the country's airspace.⁽¹²⁾ Still, Iran has a vital interest in rendering the talks successful. Therefore, Ali Akbar Salehi's call to launch an open and comprehensive dialogue with the United States found widespread acceptance in Iran. The viewpoint related to prioritizing diplomacy does not seem to appear to have been impacted by the traditional Iranian policy of hostility toward the West, with this clearly re-

flected in Tehran backing Russia in its aggression against Ukraine.

Clashes and Mutual Leverage

Perhaps there is no hope on the horizon to revive the nuclear deal. The United States and Iran continue their hostile policy toward each other. The United States, for its part, has continued to impose sanctions and apply pressures on Iran, as the following table shows (see Table 2). Similarly, Iran has remained dedicated to its foreign policy agenda as it attempts to move away from the West and strengthen ties with US adversaries. In this context, we can interpret the announcement of Iran's accession to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization⁽¹³⁾ and the Iranian president's trip to countries in Latin America that share Iran's hostility toward the United

States. These countries will allow Iran to achieve some economic opportunities to circumvent the US sanctions as well as grant it a foothold close to US borders. The same applies to President Ebrahim Raisi's visit to some African countries in July 2023, an arena that is witnessing fierce competition between regional and global powers. It appears that Iran is quite confident regarding the dwindling effectiveness of the sanctions. Iranian Minister of Oil Javad Owji told IRNA news agency that Iran's daily capacity is 3.8 million barrels of crude oil and gas condensate, adding that Iran has succeeded in securing deals worth \$40 billion with its ally Russia and neighboring countries over the past months.⁽¹⁴⁾

Table 2: US Measures Against Iran

Date	Measure
July 9	In the case of Masih Alinejad's complaint against Iran, a court in the District of Columbia in the United States levied a \$3 million punishment on the Iranian government. This sum, according to the court, must be paid from Iranian funds that have been frozen in the United States or Europe.
July 19	The United States prevented 14 Iraqi banks from conducting transactions in US dollars. The move came as part of a comprehensive campaign targeting the transfer of US dollars to Iran.
July 26	Behrouz Mokhtari, an Iranian-American, was sentenced to 41 months in jail and ordered to forfeit approximately \$2.8 million in criminal gains and more than \$1.5 million in California property for conspiracy to violate the sanctions.
July 21	The International Maritime Organization's executive body voted to reject Iran's proposal to hold an international maritime event in October 2023. This came as Washington stated that Iran had no right to hold any official international maritime gathering since it has consistently demonstrated its contempt for the rules, standards and safety of international navigation. It should be noted that Iran's request was approved in 2015.

July 28	Republican Senator Marco Rubio and Democratic Senator Alex Padilla introduced the “The Mahsa Amini Human Rights and Security Accountability Act” bill in the US Senate, with the goal of strengthening sanctions against the Iranian leadership for severe violations of human rights in Iran.
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Source: Unit of Regional and International Studies, Rasanah IIIS, (July 2023).

In addition, maritime confrontations have intensified. On July 5, 2023, the US Navy aborted an Iranian attempt to seize two oil tankers in the Gulf of Oman near the Strait of Hormuz. On July 6, members of the Iranian navy fired shots at a Bahamas-flagged oil tanker operated by the US oil company Chevron (CVX.N), following Iranian allegations, denied by the tanker’s owner, that the ship was involved in a collision that injured five members of the crew of an Iranian ship. The IRGC then carried out another attack on an oil vessel in Gulf waters on July 7, 2023, under the pretext of smuggling oil. The operation occurred while some US jets attempted to prevent the ship’s detention, but it was eventually impounded at the port of Bushehr. Commander Tim Hawkins, a spokesman for the US Fifth Fleet, stated that the US Navy was monitoring the interception of the ship in international waters but opted not to respond further. As the conflict heated up, the IRGC deployed ships armed with long-range missiles near the Strait of Hormuz. In response, the US Navy sent a guided missile destroyer, F-16 fighter jets and additional naval forces to the Gulf to boost the US military presence.⁽¹⁵⁾ In reaction to Iran’s maritime attacks, lawmakers from both US parties pushed the Biden administration to confiscate sanctioned Iranian oil and gas supplies. It is not unlikely that the Indonesian Coast Guard detained a large Iranian-flagged

tanker on July 11, 2023, at the request of the United States.⁽¹⁶⁾

In a nutshell, it is clear that the geopolitical developments serve Iran in its confrontation with the United States. Normalizing relations with Saudi Arabia has put an end to its regional isolation. Yet, the Russia-Ukraine war has enabled it to enhance its relations with Russia and avoid alternative US options, at least for the time being. The strategic competition heating up between China and the United States has opened the door for Iran to enhance its “turning eastwards” policy and working as part of a large bloc to resist the United States. At the same time, the US policy toward Iran has lost some of its momentum in light of its receding interest in the Middle East. Recent developments indicate that if Iran achieves a breakthrough in its nuclear program, the United States will not resort to military escalation. However, Iran is keen not to provoke the Biden administration by crossing the redlines; it safely maneuvers around its interests while maintaining its longstanding approach toward the United States. In other words, there is no nuclear escalation on the part of Iran and there are no options other than diplomacy on the part of the Biden administration. A suitable deal between the two sides is awaited, with both at the same time moving ahead with amassing levers and engaging in indirect confrontation.

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