

MONTHLY REPORT

Iran Case File

September 2023

Your window on Iran from inside and abroad





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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Iran Case File for September 2023 reviewed the most prominent developments in Iran at the political, economic, social, military and intellectual levels. It also discussed the latest developments in Iranian foreign policy, particularly Iran's relations with Iraq, Syria and Yemen, and its interactions with international powers: the United States and the EU.

At the political level, Iran witnessed protests on September 16, 2023, in several cities on the first anniversary of the death of Mahsa Amini. Amini was killed in one of the detention centers of the "morality police." Iran's security services imposed strict restrictions on peaceful gatherings before the commemoration. On the day of the occasion, dozens were arrested on various charges, including the possession of weapons, breaching national security and inciting protests. A year after the September 2022 protests, it can be said that they have revealed serious challenges to the Iranian political system, most notably the growing number of unveiled women in various Iranian cities, especially in the capital Tehran. The protests have widened the gap between the ruling establishment and the Iranian people amid increasing calls for regime change.

At the economic level, the Iranian people hope that tourism will witness important developments during the next stage given the country's potential in terms of natural beauty, religious significance and historical and archaeological treasures. Over the past five years, tourism has faced many challenges. Therefore, the number of tourists decreased from 9 million in 2019 to below half of this number in 2022. Some of these internal and external challenges still exist and impact the future trajectory of Iranian tourism. However, the

Iranian government is attempting to revitalize this sector, including the abolition of tourist visas for 50 countries, with the overall aim to help in alleviating the economic struggles in light of the West's continuous sanctions.

At the military level, the IRGC launched its third satellite for the purpose of surveillance. Iranians believe that this satellite is the most advanced and potent orbiting object Iran has successfully hurled into orbit. Noor 3 operates in low Earth orbit, which is thought to work in sync with Noor 2 which was launched in April 2022. Observers predict that Tehran will not only be capable of advanced surveillance through high-tech cameras, but it will also improve and enhance its expertise in the field of ballistic missiles, including accuracy, range and speed.

At the social level, the phenomenon of the arbitrary expulsion of university professors increased significantly in recent months. Iranian statistics indicate that the two years of Raisi's rule has witnessed the expulsion of 65 professors, the largest percentage compared to previous presidents. This phenomenon will likely have disastrous impacts on the future of education and science in Iran, especially after the increase in the emigration of professors and scientists to Western countries. They have been replaced with revolutionary and unqualified professors.

At the ideological level, Shiite and Sunni clerics in Iran agreed that the policy of the ruling elite is going through a crisis. Sunni jurists highlighted the political and social marginalization imposed on Sunnis, confirming that the ruling elite not only marginalizes Sunnis but also ordinary Iranian people. Some Shiite jurists talked about the economic woes that are negatively impacting Iranian society and called for the need to change the policy of the ruling elite as

a path to reform. Others argue that the ruling elite and the whole philosophy of the ruling system must be changed, not only policies or perspectives on governance.

Iran's foreign relations with Arab and international powers experienced significant developments during September 2023. As for its relations with Iraq, Iran hastened to lay the foundation stone to implement the first phase of the Shalamcheh-Basra rail link. The railway has strategic dimensions for Tehran because it is a central lever for the desired Iranian corridor linking Iran to the Mediterranean and is a blow to some of Iraq's strategic projects such as the New Levant Initiative. This Iranian step came against the backdrop of widespread talk about the decline of Iran's position on the map of global trade and logistics axes. There has been increasing discussion on Iran's failure to transform its comparative advantages into global ones, after Saudi Arabia announced, on the sidelines of the G20 Summit, the signing of a memorandum for establishing the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor.

As for its interactions with Syria, Iran returned to mediate between the Syrian and Turkish governments to build a bridge of dialogue along with Russia's attempts in this regard. This was reflected in Iran's proposal to resolve the dilemma of withdrawing Turkish troops which represents a stumbling block to restoring relations between Syria and Turkey. This Iranian plan undoubtedly has hidden goals and implications, some of which became apparent in Tehran's efforts to reduce or end the Turkish presence in Syria and expand its influence in Syrian territory by deploying Syrian government forces in the areas under Turkey's control. On the other hand, the Iranian plan conflicts with Turkish aims. Ankara has its own reasons and considerations for opposing and hindering this Iranian plan so that

it is not implemented.

As for Yemen, the visit of the Houthi delegation to the Saudi capital Riyadh was a significant development in the political settlement to complement the Saudi-brokered talks on the Yemeni peace process. However, the Houthi military escalation that came after the Riyadh talks had several implications and dimensions, primarily reflecting the deepening divisions in the ranks of the militia. In addition, unprecedented popular resentment is growing against the militia, especially in the areas under its control.

At the international level, the prisoner exchange deal signed by the United States and Iran entered into force after Iran released five US citizens. It also involved the transfer of billions of dollars in frozen Iranian funds held in South Korea which were wired to Qatar. Despite this step, which was expected to have positive repercussions on the Iranian nuclear file, the differences between the two countries came back to the fore. Iran canceled the permissions of some international inspectors in response to US and EU escalation against Iran; therefore, it is likely that the nuclear file will be referred to the UN Security Council.

Regarding Iran-Europe relations, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) announced that no progress had been made on the agreement concluded with Iran last March. Tehran continues to enrich uranium at 60% or higher. The IAEA indicated that Iran could make enough uranium to produce nuclear weapons in a short time.

In spite of the pressure of the IAEA as well as European and US attempts to force Iran to respond to the efforts to revive the nuclear deal, Iran is seeking to take advantage of the time factor to increase its stockpile of highly enriched uranium. This means that other options need to be explored to resolve this nuclear dilemma.

DEVELOPMENTS IN IRAN'S INTERNAL AFFAIRS



During September 2023, Iran experienced several political, economic, military, social and ideological developments which are reviewed as follows:

- Mahsa Amini's Death Anniversary: Scattered Protests and Tightened Security Measures
- Tourism in Iran: Potential and Threats
- IRGC Efforts to Access Space Continue
- The Systematic Expulsion of Iranian University Professors Continues Unabated
- Iran's Clerics and the Attempts at Reforming the Political Trajectory

Mahsa Amini's Death Anniversary: Scattered Protests and Tightened Security Measures

On September 16, 2023, the Iranian people marked the first anniversary of the protests that followed the death of the young Kurdish woman Mahsa Amini. She was killed inside one of the "morality police's" detention facilities in the capital Tehran. The commemoration's significance comes amid the fact that Amini has become a symbol for defending public freedoms, opposing the hijab, demanding economic and political reforms, improving living conditions, eliminating corruption and ending injustice.

Ramped-up Security Measures on the Eve of the First Anniversary

As Amini's first death anniversary approached, the Iranian security authorities intensified the crackdown targeting political and rights activists, the relatives of the protesters killed by police fire and the relatives of political prisoners. The police and security forces deployed heavily in Amini's hometown. Several Iranian Kurdish cities experienced an atmosphere of intimidation and threats against taking to the streets to protest. The police arrested a number of citizens and imposed harsh restrictions on peaceful assemblies. On the eve of Amini's death anniversary, the pressures exerted by the security services on civilians, professors, protesting students, labor and cultural union activists as well as on the relatives of political activists, mounted. Several of them were either arrested or threatened. The families of those killed in the Iranian protests faced pressures and were forced not to reactivate their social media accounts and to suspend any activities in the virtual space until the events to mark Amini's first death anniversary ended. In addition, the IRGC sent forces and heavy and semi-

heavy armored vehicles to the Kurdish cities in Iran.⁽¹⁾

In the face of these heightened security measures, over 300 political and cultural activists in Iran issued a statement in which they warned of the dangers posed by the clerical leadership against the Iranian people. They stressed the necessity of holding a referendum and making structural changes to the Iranian political system.

The statement, signed by figures like Abolfazl Ghadyani, Mehdi Nasiri, Parvaneh Salahshouri and Kivan Samimi, indicated that the clerical leadership's structure will shake the country's national foundations and change the course of future developments from a national uprising to a rebellion.

The signatories, the majority of whom live in Iran, particularly in Tehran, cited the country's mismanagement, asserting that "the accumulation of social, political and economic crises resulting from the regime's mismanagement in recent decades has left Iran facing a wide range of bitter consequences."

The signatories subsequently reaffirmed that in order to avoid rebellion, the political system's structure must be changed, and a referendum held reflecting popular sovereignty and the will of the people. "And this is a right we continue to insist on in order to avoid causing harm to Iran."

The aforesaid statement also reiterated that the Woman, Life, Freedom movement has created deeper cleavages within the ruling establishment's structures. It has caused the ruling elite to incur huge costs and unspeakable losses at home.⁽²⁾

Scattered Protests, Dozens of Protesters Arrested

On the first anniversary of the killing of Amini, September 16, 2023, protests were held in numerous Iranian cities, including Rasht, Lahijan, Gorgan, Bandar-e Anzali, Arak, Sanandaj, Kerman-shah, Marivan, Bukan, Ilam, Abdan and Mahabad.⁽³⁾ The road from Baneh to Seqez, Amini's hometown and final resting place, was closed. The presence of security forces in this city and around the Amini family's home was increased. Special forces, security personnel and law enforcement officers were stationed on the streets and squares of numerous major cities.⁽⁴⁾

During the protests in different cities, including Karaj, Qarchak, Isfahan, Tabriz, Sanandaj, Seqez, Divandarreh, Baneh, Marivan and Dehdasht,⁽⁵⁾ dozens of people were arrested. Protests were also held in other cities, including Isfahan, Mashhad and Shiraz. Special unit personnel were deployed in the capital Tehran and photos and videos uploaded on social media showed protestors shouting anti-Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei slogans.⁽⁶⁾

According to official figures, over 260 people were arrested on various counts including attempts to disrupt security, instigating people to demonstrate, planning bomb attacks, assaulting people at gatherings, possession of weapons⁽⁷⁾ and other unsubstantiated charges. The Iranian authorities revealed the death of a Basij member at the hands of two motorbike riders in the city of Nourabad in Fars Province in southern Iran.⁽⁸⁾

The Negative Impacts on the Iranian Political System One Year After the Protests

The protests against Amini's death presented the Iranian government with a slew of fresh challenges. These can be summarized as follows: an increase in the number of unveiled women in Tehran and other Iranian cities, despite repression by security forces who resort

to practices that have exacerbated the crisis such as legal summons, new legislative initiatives, increasing pressure on private companies to impose the hijab law and imposing fines on women who do not comply with the hijab code. Observers consider this to be an indication of the government's inability to handle the increasing popular discontent with the government and its policies. The government fears that this resentment could escalate into a massive popular uprising that could lead to its ousting at any time, especially in light of the continued deterioration of the dire economic conditions which have impacted all segments of Iranian society.

The events in the month of September 2023 have contributed to widening the chasm between the ruling elite and the masses and increasing the resistance and solidarity displayed by the Iranian people in the face of repression. Yet there have been rising voices demanding regime change, which means that relying on the security apparatus, repression and intimidation will not fill this gap. But it could instead lead to renewed protests on a scale bigger than the preceding protests, which could expose the ruling theocracy to the danger of downfall.

Conclusion

The protests held on Amini's death anniversary were not large in scale. But they constituted a source of huge concern for the government and its security apparatuses, which is evidenced by the heavy security presence in various Iranian cities. Yet, the anniversary restored the momentum of the Iranian public protests, reaffirming the pledge to work to achieve the objectives of Iran's Woman, Life, Freedom movement.

Tourism in Iran: Potential and Threats

The tourism sector in Iran is likely to see significant growth in future years. This comes after the Raisi government disclosed plans to revitalize this sector which has deteriorated in recent years. In light of Western sanctions, tourism helps to stimulate the Iranian economy and alleviate people's suffering. Thus, this file will focus on the potential of tourism and its significance to the Iranian economy. It will also touch on the number of tourists visiting Iran in recent years, as well as the threats facing this sector.

Tourism: Potential and Significance for the Iranian Economy

Iran's tourism sector has much potential as the country attracts many visitors from neighboring countries. This potential includes the country's natural areas such as forests, mountains, lakes, wild parks and marine islands, and religious tourism, the most important of which is visits to sacred tombs and shrines. Qom and Mashhad are two of the most prominent cities in Iran. This is in addition to historical and archaeological tourism, the core theme of which is Iran's millennia-old civilization, which can be seen in various Iranian cities, including Shiraz and Isfahan.

Other types of tourism include medical and cosmetic tourism as well as recreational, commercial and shopping tourism, which draw a large number of people who are fans of various Iranian products, particularly traditional ones like Iranian carpets, nuts and caviar. The value of Iran's national currency has plummeted against the US dollar, making tourism less expensive when compared to other regional countries. However, there are several impediments to the growth of tourism, which we will discuss later.

The Iranian economy depends heavily on tourism. This sector employs a huge

number of Iranians, reaching approximately 1,440,000 in 2022, accounting for 6.1% of total employment in Iran, in addition, it promotes Iranian goods, products and services. Furthermore, this sector provides income and direct and indirect jobs as well as foreign currency which Iran needs during periods of sanctions, as has been the case for nearly five years.

In 2022, the amount spent by tourists in Iran reached \$6.2 billion.⁽⁹⁾ In the same year, tourism accounted for 4.6% of Iran's GDP. Tourism is a component of the service sector, and this sector in general constitutes the largest portion of Iran's GDP.

According to the World Islamic Travel Index report,⁽¹⁰⁾ Iran was classed as one of the Islamic countries that was most appealing in the context of what is known as "halal" tourism in 2022 and placed seventh in the world in terms of attracting Muslim travelers. According to this index, Malaysia was ranked first, followed by Indonesia, then Saudi Arabia, Turkey, the UAE and Qatar, before Iran. Halal tourism complies with Islamic requirements such as the absence of gambling, alcohol, prohibited food (i.e., pork) and other items/activities (i.e., promiscuity) not permitted under Islamic law.

Evolution of Tourism in Iran

The current Iranian government is considering strategies and proposals to revitalize tourism, such as exempting up to 50 countries from entry visa requirements, encouraging medical tourism and granting loans to Iranians to boost domestic tourism. After declining tourism rates in recent years, the government is attempting to restore this once vibrant sector to its former status.

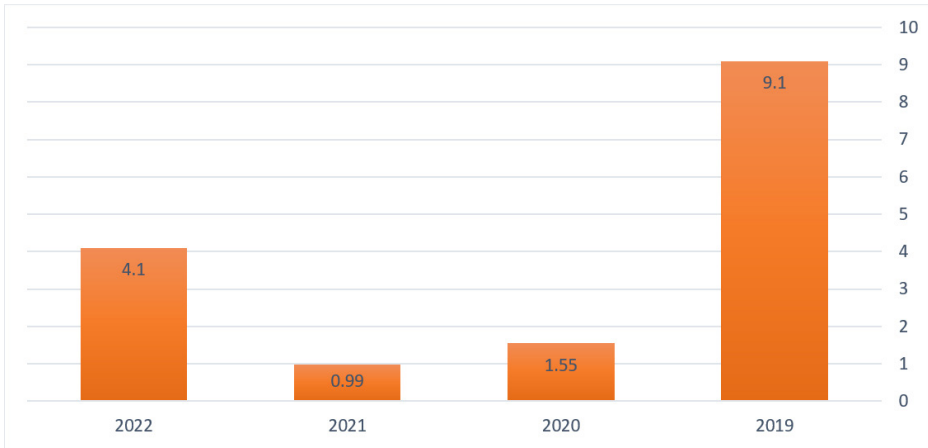
Iran's tourism sector has been badly disrupted over the previous five years. According to the World Tourism Orga-

nization,⁽¹¹⁾ after reaching more than 9 million tourists in 2019, the number fell to 1.55 million in 2020, then only about 1 million the following year, before slightly improving in 2022, recording approximately 4 million tourists (see Figure 1).

Threats

Over the past five years, the influx of tourists has been impacted by several factors, leading to a total suspension in some years. Most of these factors are associated with internal security events and political tensions, foremost of which relate to the consequences of

Figure 1: The Number of Tourists Coming to Iran Between 2019-2022 (in Millions)



Source: World Tourism Organization.

Though the number of tourists in 2022 was below the rate posted in 2019, in 2022 this number increased by 39.2 %, according to the World Travel and Tourism Council.

However, in 2022, more than half of the visitors entering Iran came from Iraq (55% of the total tourists), followed by Azerbaijan and Turkey (6%) and Kuwait (2%). In effect, the entire sector is virtually and exclusively focused on tourists from a single country. This is a drawback since it means that the sector will be badly harmed if there are unstable internal conditions in Iraq, tense political relations between the two countries, or other factors that could impede the flow of tourists from Iraq to Iran.

the US withdrawal from the nuclear deal in 2018. The latter raised travel and accommodation costs and led to restrictions on travel to Iran. In addition, the shooting down of the Ukrainian jetliner in early 2020 and the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic in 2020 negatively impacted Iranian tourism. Sporadic episodes of protests and violence, primarily the protests over the killing of Mahsa Amini in 2022 and the reports of European tourists arrested on charges of spying have not helped the tourism sector. The aforesaid have undermined confidence in Iranian tourism, with tourists unsure of their personal safety. Iran’s reputation has also been damaged, especially in Western media outlets. The aforesaid are the main threats facing Iran’s tourism sector. The runaway inflation and soaring prices the country has been experiencing

over the past three years are among the factors that have undermined domestic tourism. Inflation has surged by 111% since Raisi took office in 2021; meaning prices have more than doubled in two years. According to Director General of the Tourism Office of the Ministry of Tourism, Cultural Heritage, and Handicrafts Mustafa Fatemi, domestic tourism dropped by 60% last fall. The annual inflation rate provided by the Statistical Center of Iran for hotel and restaurant price inflation in particular is usually the highest among all subcategories of inflation, frequently exceeding 80%, significantly affecting domestic tourism.

Conclusion

The significance of tourism for the Iranian economy lies in the fact that it provides a large number of job opportunities for Iranians, generates foreign exchange and invigorates domestic spending and consumption. However, the tourism sector lacks stability be-

cause of the tensions caused by Iran's foreign policy, the repeated violent protests at home, and the declining confidence on the part of Western tourists when it comes to their personal safety in Iran. This is in addition to exchange rate volatility, the continued rise in inflation, which is negatively impacting domestic tourism. This has led to a sharp decline in tourist inflow rates. In case Iran does not address these issues, Iran's future share of tourism in the region will severely decrease in light of the competition among the region's countries to attract the highest number of tourists.

IRGC Efforts to Access Space Continue

Iran's elite military wing — the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) — launched its third satellite for global surveillance. CubeSat is the most advanced and potent orbiting object Tehran has successfully hurled into orbit. Iran placed satellite — Noor 3 — in low Earth orbit, which is thought to work in sync with Noor 2 that was launched in April 2022. The space object, equipped with powerful cameras and other imaging devices, belongs to the IRGC. Both the military CubeSats are orbiting roughly 450 kilometers above the Earth at an angle of 59.8 degrees to the equator. Each trip around the planet's axis takes 90 minutes.

Noor 3: Capabilities and Objectives

“God willing, this year will be a fruitful year for the country's space industry,” said Iran's Minister of Communications and Information Technology Issa Zarepour.⁽¹²⁾ In August, Iranian Defense Minister Brigadier General Mohammad Reza Ashtiani said, “We are involved in the development and launch of satellites. Under our plan, we will have two to three satellite launches this year, something we hope to be successful.”⁽¹³⁾ The IRGC's investment in Noor satellites aims to ensure uninterrupted access to space and on-orbit operations, space situational awareness and Earth surveillance. For Iran's everyday use, its space program aims at secure communication, observation and reconnaissance.

Noor 1, Iran's first military satellite, launched in April 2020, was its 14th attempt to send an orbiting object into space, however, it fell back to Earth after a year.⁽¹⁴⁾ The speculation surrounding the IRGC's parallel space program was confirmed with the satellite's launch from the Shahroud missile test site instead of the Imam Khomeini Spaceport.⁽¹⁵⁾ This time as well, the IRGC used

an transporter-erector launcher (TEL) instead of following the standard practice of launching satellites.

On November 6, 2022, Iran's military-run space program tested a solid-fueled engine by firing a new satellite-carrying rocket.⁽¹⁶⁾ The solid-fuel rockets take a relatively shorter time compared to liquid fuel ones and are safer to operate from a hidden location or using TEL. If Iran can sort out the technological challenges of war-head re-entry, its long-range ballistic missile program will come of age. On October 4, 2022, Tehran claimed to have successfully sent a space tug, a device that can transfer a satellite from one orbit to another.⁽¹⁷⁾ Interestingly, Iran did not use an entirely solid-fueled SLV this time. The Qased rocket's upper stage is filled with liquid fuel inside the underground shelter and after the assembly, it is brought out on levelled surface for the launch. The solid-fueled mid-stage helps reduce the preparation time and extends the range as well.

The presence of orbiting satellites has monumental significance for Iran's ballistic and cruise missile guidance system and their deterrent capability. As much as the satellite launch vehicle (SLV) capability directly feeds into its ballistic missile program, it also brings into calculus and debate the militarization of space and thus the drafting of a corresponding defense policy.

There are differing views on whether the West must insist on halting all testing and development of Category 1 missiles as defined by the Missile Technology Control Regime.⁽¹⁸⁾ Iran insists that its ballistic missile and space programs are not in violation of UN Security Council Resolution 2231, which endorsed the 2015 Iran nuclear deal. The text of the resolution clearly aims to avoid “any activity related to ballistic

missiles designed to be capable of delivering nuclear weapons.”⁽¹⁹⁾

Iran’s Space Voyage

Though Iran’s interest in space technology dates back to 1958 when it was among the founding members of the UN Committee on the Peaceful Uses of Outer Space, Iran’s Space Agency was formed in 2004 and it reports to the Iranian president via the Supreme Space Council. Under its theocratic leadership, the space program has been fraught with unique and multifaceted challenges. The IRGC’s first bid to develop an SLV was obliterated on November 12, 2011, when an explosion rocked the Shahid Modarres solid-fuel research facility near Bidganeh and Malard, killing Brigadier General Hassan Tehrani Moghaddam along with 38 others.⁽²⁰⁾ After about a decade of efforts at home and smuggling equipment from around the world, a solid-propellant motor named Salman came about powering the Qased SLV’s second stage flight. Its swivel nozzle helped with vital flight control and a light-weight carbon-fiber casing extended the range, none of which appear to be the result of indigenous research.

After the grainy footage from Noor 1 and 2, the IRGC can expect better quality visuals from the new CubeSat. For reference, Noor 2 has a resolution of 10 meters. Given its deepened collaboration with Russia in the wake of the Russia-Ukraine war, Russia would have most likely helped Iran in satellite making technology including high resolution cameras.

Noor 3 adds redundancy⁽²¹⁾ to the IRGC space capability otherwise limited to Noor 2. They strengthen self-operated real-time capability for the global positioning system (GPS), or in other words, a satellite-based radionavigation system vital for firing ballistic and cruise missiles in times of conflict. Tehran will no longer have to depend on GPS service-providing allies like China and Russia during crunch times. The military satellites can provide SAT-com, a prerequisite for effective drone-based war-fighting and surveillance.

Conclusion

Iran plans to launch one or more satellites in the coming weeks, which may likely be ferried by a solid fuel rocket instead of Qased. Currently, Iran has capped its range to 2,000 kilometers but the space program can provide the necessary knowledge and technical finesse to Iran’s engineers to extend the range and payload with greater accuracy. Iran’s pursuit would be for further solid-fueled SLVs, which do not entirely feed into its ICBM work. Tehran’s pursuit of space gives her the excuse to hone its command over the complexities of projective velocity and metallurgy.

The IRGC’s launch of Noor 3 is more than a defiant signaling to the West and its neighbors. Thanks to deepened military ties with Moscow, Tehran will not only be capable of global surveillance with sophisticated cameras but also have the capability to refine and strengthen its ballistic missile expertise, including accuracy, range and speed.

The Systematic Expulsion of Iranian University Professors Continues Unabated

The Iranian media is awash with reports of the continual arbitrary expulsion of Iranian professors from universities for various reasons. The wave coincides with the anniversary of the killing of Kurdish woman Mahsa Amini and the protests that broke out following her death. This is also happening amid other social problems which — combined — contribute to the brain drain among the Iranian elites. Therefore, there have been rising voices protesting against and opposed to the policies that are driving out Iranian human capital from the country. The positions of the political forces vary — with some supportive of the Iranian government's policies while others oppose recent government decisions.

Purging Iranian Universities

The “reformist” Etemaad newspaper indicated that during the past two years while President Ebrahim Raisi's has been in office, the systematic expulsion of university professors is unprecedented compared to the tenures of other presidents. The number of dismissed professors reached 65⁽²²⁾ and have been replaced with politicized, revolutionary — but unqualified — professors. What raised Iranian anger is that the expulsions were carried out by the minister of interior under the pretext that those expelled were enemies of the nation.⁽²³⁾ This of course threatens the job security of professors in various Iranian universities. Observers believe that the Iranian government's “purges” are nothing more than attempts aimed to cover up its weaknesses and fears of potential uprisings and protests on the anniversary of Amini's killing. University campuses have always been a hotbed for protests against the Iranian government over the past four decades.

The Mass Dismissal of Academics Draws Various Reactions While the Government Remains Defiant

The reactions to the mass purge of university professors varied between the “conservatives” ruling the country and their rival “reformists.” We find that the “reformists” accused the authorities of dismissing university professors on security and political grounds chiefly pertaining to their position on the protests. The “conservatives,” on the other hand, justified the dismissals, arguing that there are professors outside Iran who are working to foment crises and spoil the relationship between the people and the government.⁽²⁴⁾

In addition, Iranian society is not unified, with proponents and opponents of the purges raising their voices. The proponents accuse the professors of supporting attempts to oust the Iranian government, foment protests and endorse violence. What has raised controversy is the response from the head of Tehran University, who denied the dismissals, alleging that some professors had been suspended from work due to “moral reasons” and lawsuits had been filed against them. He noted that those dismissed lacked the required moral and academic credentials. In addition to the professors, hundreds of students have also been expelled, they have been dislodged from their apartments, fined and arrested for their participation in the protests.⁽²⁵⁾

As a result of the mass expulsion of professors and the concern among academics about the possibility of being dismissed, the phenomenon of elite emigration to advanced countries — Iran's educated human capital — has seen a significant spike in recent times. The emigration of specialized cadres has hit a record-breaking level in Iran

during the tenure of President Raisi⁽²⁶⁾ as a result of arbitrary dismissals, social, economic and political problems. For instance, about 50% of Tehran University's professors have emigrated to other countries. This has created a major problem since it threatens the future of education as well as future generations.

⁽²⁷⁾ In order to stop the systematic expulsion of professors and given the danger such dismissals pose to the educational system in Iran, a large number of professors and 12 technical associations sent an open letter to the minister of science, research and technology, in which they called for stopping the dismissals of professors, rescinding the dislodging of students and halting the security crackdown in universities. They also called for creating space for personal freedom, respecting pluralism, recognizing opposing views and allowing freedom of expression. The signatories also reiterated that civilian protests are

one of the essential pillars of academic life. According to the signatories, since the protests have been held via peaceful means such as in the form of dialogue, sit-ins, artwork, music and the singing of the national anthem, punishment is not warranted.⁽²⁸⁾

Conclusion

The Iranian government's continued politicization of educational issues, violation of the principles of social justice and equality, pursuance of repressive means that target universities under the pretext that they have become a crucible for opposition movements and protests could be counterproductive — yielding results contrary to what it seeks to achieve. These practices instead foment discontent and resentment within Iranian society in general and among students in particular, which prompts them to stage new protests to claw back their rights.

Iran's Clerics and the Attempts at Reforming the Political Trajectory

It appears that the problem of diminishing rights and freedoms for not only Iranian minorities but the Iranian population at large remains a subject of incessant debate in Iran amid official denial and total heedlessness on the part of the Iranian government toward the problem. This is in addition to mounting opposition from the general public as well as from some *hawza* jurists. Both Sunni and Shiite clerics have criticized the Iranian government due to the deteriorating political and economic conditions, urging the ruling elite to make reforms and enforce the rule of law. Sunni jurists have attempted to prompt Iranian government officials to make good on their promises to the Sunnis with regard to the public sphere. Moreover, Shiite jurists have attempted to trigger reforms from within the ruling establishment, seeking a change in policies and behavior.

Sunni Jurists and the Ongoing Pressure

Molavi Abdul Hamid, a prominent Sunni scholar in Iran, criticized Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi for not fulfilling the promises that he made to the Sunnis during his election campaign. The cleric said, "This government has not fulfilled any of the promises it made to the Sunnis during the elections."⁽²⁹⁾ He said that appointing a Sunni governor, deputy minister or ambassador was one of the major promises that remains unfulfilled. He also blasted the absence of Sunnis from the army's top brass, which was not the case during the shah's reign.

However, Hamid did not cast himself in a sectarian light or as someone who is demanding purely minority rights. Instead, he stressed the fact that Sunni

demands are like those of the entire Iranian people, including the resolution of the economic problems and an improvement in Iran's relations with the outside world.⁽³⁰⁾ In response to growing criticism, the head of Al Mustafa University stated that Iran is the world's biggest backer of the Palestinian Sunni Muslims⁽³¹⁾ in what appeared to be a response to — or a denial of — accusations of wrongdoing against Sunnis inside Iran. Hamid, who has been leveling stinging criticism against the government since the Bloody Friday killings, asserted that Iranian officials should be held accountable for killing protesters, noting that pelting stones should not be met with firing bullets. He said, "If there's no justice or freedom, this is the end of the regime."⁽³²⁾ He also lambasted the clerics who embrace *Wilayat al-Faqih*, saying that a ruler is not appointed by God but by the people. And the ruler should be popular and should serve the people. In oblique condemnation of the absolutism of *Wilayat al-Faqih*, the Sunni scholar said that there is no ruler that enjoys absolute authority and that absolute guardianship rests with God alone."⁽³³⁾

The foregoing remarks reflect that Hamid is employing the public sphere in Iran, which is marked by resentment over the government's security and economic policies, to fortify himself by embracing the Iranian people's general demands. He is attempting to carve out some gains for Sunnis in Iran who have been excluded from many fields and lack access to services.

Shiite Clerics and Reform From Within the Regime

Hamid was not the only cleric to criticize the political system. Hassan Kho-

meini also criticized what he described as the “economic pain” within society due to the decline in the country’s GDP and shrinking investments. He said, “Officials should get out of their offices to inspect this disaster.”⁽³⁴⁾ He then compared Iran to neighboring nations — perhaps alluding to Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states — in terms of the pace of development. He believes that the solution to the crisis in Iran is mainly political. “This means that resolving the country’s problems with regard to the economy, the sanctions and other issues could be brought about by changing the country’s domestic policies. And if we do not have a government with deep popular support and a strong backing from the disenfranchised and middle classes, as well as the major cities and villages, overcoming the current crisis won’t be possible.”⁽³⁵⁾ The solution, according to him, will be either by making change and installing a new government that enjoys massive popular support, or that the current government changes its behavior and policies and seeks to satisfy the people until it obtains popular support and the masses rally behind it.

In the same context, Mahdi Nassir, the former editor-in-chief of Kayhan newspaper, said that there should be nothing obligatory under the Islamic rulership, “But you see that there are some people who can impose a legal ordinance on women, punish and fine them at the time when many scholars and clerics have stated that this ordinance is not obligatory like prayers or fasting. And no one could impose it on the people by force.” He added, “Nobody could ask you to become a Muslim by force and move society toward clerical rule and sharia government by force and oppression. The ordinances of Sharia cannot be imposed on the people.” He also warned of the lying and hypocrisy with-

in society due to suppression and coercion. He also criticized the government in two respects: several remarks by government jurists and officials about the enjoining of virtue and the prevention of vice. He stated, however, that the enjoining of virtue and the prevention of vice should be enacted on the condition that a person is fully aware and knowledgeable of the circumstances and context in which it is being enforced. If the policy of enjoining virtue and preventing vice becomes counterproductive or causes more harm than good, it then is unlawful. The second respect in which he criticized the government is the duality toward the issue of hijab. He wondered why the government had not held accountable the unveiled women who attended the funeral of a leader or the rally of February 22 (the day whereon the Iranian revolution emerged victorious) and embraced them with open arms, but now it is punishing unveiled women on different occasions.⁽³⁶⁾

According to the “reformist” politician Mehdi Karroubi, the solution lies in the peaceful struggle against the ruling establishment rather than insurgency in order to change the ongoing political situation. He released a statement in which he said, “Our chief slogan in 2009 (The Green Movement protests) was change. Now, there is no way out but change. Making substantial changes within the establishment in a peaceful manner remains within the realm of possibility.”⁽³⁷⁾

Conclusion

As Sunni scholars are demanding their rights, a host of Shiite clerics within the hawza are demanding an improvement in their conditions and a change in the country’s domestic policies. The issue is not only confined to diminishing rights and freedoms, but it is related to issues deeper than this. Hamid criticized the ruling establishment’s doctrine that the

ruler has a divine mandate (invested by God); and Karroubi, too, blasted Wilayat al-Faqih. The crowds partaking in the protests raging since the killing of Ameni are also opposed to Wilayat-al Faqih. This impacts the ruling elite's legitimacy, thus necessitating a shift in their policies, strategies and behavior — both internally and externally.

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IRAN-ARAB INTERACTIONS

The page features a solid teal background. In the bottom-left corner, there are several overlapping beige shapes: a large rounded rectangle, a smaller circle, and a larger rounded rectangle. A thin white line starts from the top-left, curves downwards and to the right, then curves back to the left, ending near the bottom-right. Another thin white line starts from the bottom-left, curves upwards and to the right, ending near the bottom-right. The text 'IRAN-ARAB INTERACTIONS' is centered in the upper half of the page in a bold, white, sans-serif font.

Iran's interactions with the Arab world witnessed a host of significant developments, particularly with Iraq, Syria and Yemen which are reviewed as follows:

- The Implications of Iran's Rapid Implementation of the Shalamcheh-Basra Project
- Iran's Action Plan for the Withdrawal of Turkish Troops From Syria: Iranian Goals and Turkish Objections
- Houthi Escalation Following Peace Talks in Riyadh: Implications and Messages

The Implications of Iran's Rapid Implementation of the Shalamcheh - Basra Project

On September 2, 2023, in the presence of Iran's First Vice President Mohammad Mokhber and Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shia' al-Sudani, the foundation stone was laid to implement the first phase of the Iran-Iraq rail link (see Picture 1). Once operational, this rail link holds the potential to transport millions of passengers between the two countries. The Basra (southern Iraq)-Shalamcheh (western Iran) project is 36 kilometers in length and will take over 18 months to complete. The second phase, which has not yet begun, will extend from Basra port to Syria's Latakia port on the Mediterranean Sea through the Abukamal border crossing between

Iraq and Syria. This is the most difficult and challenging stage for Iran. The cost of the two phases is \$10 billion and \$148 million will be allocated for the first phase.⁽¹⁾

The timing of laying the foundation stone for the first phase of the rail project a few days before the Saudi announcement of the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) at the G20 Summit has raised many questions about the motives behind the sudden announcement to initiate the project, although it was disrupted for years. What is the economic feasibility of the project, and considering the timing, what message is Iran conveying to the region and world?



Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shia' al-Sudani laid the foundation stone of a railway between his country and neighboring Iran. September 2, 2023. Photo: RT, <https://cutt.us/jEZM5>.

The Reasons for Announcing the Rapid Implementation of the Project

Most of the reasons that have hindered

the implementation of the proposed Iranian project for more than a decade are still outstanding. Iran's socioeco-

conomic conditions continue to deteriorate. The economic sanctions on Iran remain in place, making it difficult for Tehran to raise the necessary finances to cover the costs of the project. The security situation in Iraq and Syria is still unstable and volatile. The Iraqi side has not removed the mines littered on the roads in the transit areas since the Iran-Iraq War. US pressure to prevent the project from being implemented is still ongoing because the US administration is aware of the Iranian goals behind its implementation. Considering the aforesaid, what prompted Iran to spontaneously announce its intent to proceed with the implementation of the project?

Iranian decision-makers expected negative domestic reactions if global logistics and trade projects were announced at the G20 Summit without Iran's involvement. Therefore, to avert the negatives, Tehran quickly announced the project to highlight its qualifications and capabilities to be part of logistical corridors and routes at a time when geopolitical developments reflect a decline in its position on the map of global logistics and trade axes.

From the sidelines of the G20's 20th meeting, Saudi Crown Prince and Prime Minister Prince Mohammed bin Salman on September 10 2023, announced the signing of a memorandum of understanding to establish IMEC. Consequentially, Iranian voices were raised concerning the decline of Iran's status in global logistics. They considered the announcement a failure on Iran's part as it was unable to turn its comparative advantages into global competitive advantages. They compared the decline of Iran's position with Saudi Arabia's success in highlighting its competitive advantages and linking these to the global economy. However, these voices also linked Iran's failure with the Iranian

government's inability to fully leverage the country's advantages and showcase these advantages both regionally and internationally.⁽²⁾

Other Iranians considered the exclusion of Iran from the new international equations, including rail, land and sea routes, as a major blow to Iran's economy and security.⁽³⁾

In terms of global logistical corridors, Iran's competitive position has declined because, according to many Iranians, it does not have the infrastructure or finances, in addition, it lacks the investment climate because of its internal and foreign policies. Therefore, Iran was not considered by the countries involved in IMEC despite its geographical location, ports, enormous resources and promising investment opportunities. The International North-South Transport Corridor is no longer an Iranian priority, in addition, Iran's opportunities with regard to the Chinese Belt and Road route have also diminished, and it has also been excluded from the Zangezur Corridor. However, the Gulf states have gained the trust of many regional and international actors thanks to their vision and leadership. This has pushed them to engage in the global economy and attract many major powers. The latter consider Saudi Arabia to be an important and influential actor in international affairs, which places the country at the apex of several major projects and global trade and logistical corridors. Given this Iranian reality, it was in Iran's interest to move quickly and implement the Shalamcheh-Basra corridor.

Comparing the Gains for Both Parties

According to expert opinion, the project has strategic dimensions for Iran, hence its gains will be much more than Iraq's. Although the project will be financially beneficial for Iran and will help in addressing its economic crisis, it will also

facilitate the Iranian corridor that will link Iran to the Mediterranean; hence it is more than just about the transportation of passengers from one point to another. Therefore, Iran's goals are of a strategic nature, while Iraq's are merely to transport passengers between the two countries.

The aforesaid Iranian goal is evidenced by the speech of Iran's Minister of Roads and Urban Development Mehrdad Bazrpash when he said that the project would enable his country to be linked with the ports of Western Asia and the Mediterranean Sea.⁽⁴⁾ This will strengthen Iran's status and position on the Chinese Belt and Road route, creating a strategic base for Beijing to compete with Washington in the Middle East, and even hindering the New Levant Initiative aimed at connecting Iraq to the Arab sphere. This project includes Iraq, Egypt and Jordan and was proposed by former Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi.

Iran will be central to the flow of goods, services and people. Therefore, the flow of goods and gains will be one-way from Iran to Iraq, which exports little to Iran compared to what it imports from Iran. The number of Iranian Arbaeen visitors to Iraqi shrines substantially exceeds

the number of Iraqi visitors to Iran. The project will offer Iran a significant financial return since it will activate its economic, commercial and tourist movements in Iraq and Syria, and even enable it to control reconstruction projects in the two countries. Iran will use this project to smuggle and transport weapons to its armed militias in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon. However, Iraq will receive transit fees from Iran when the project is completed, especially in the second phase.

Conclusion

The railway, if implemented, will be a strategic gain for Iran while it will be merely a corridor for Iraq. More dangerously, this project will deal a blow to Iraq's most important and beneficial projects such as the New Levant project that aims to restore Iraq to the Arab region and hinder Gulf-Iraqi efforts to strengthen their relations. It will also remove many barriers to further entrench Iran's influence in Iraq and Syria. The presence of armed militias along the proposed corridor will limit the options of the Iraqi and Syrian parties, compelling them to reconcile their interests with Iran's.

Iran's Action Plan for Withdrawal of Turkish Troops From Syria: Iranian Goals and Turkish Objections

On September 17, 2023, Tehran proposed its own approach on the Syria-Turkey file and the path toward rapprochement between the two parties and bridging their outstanding differences. Through the Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, Iran proposed an initiative on the withdrawal of Turkish troops stationed in Kurdish areas from Syria's northern territory, in exchange for Damascus' pledge to protect the security of the border with Turkey and prevent any attacks against it. Iran and Russia would be part of the equation and act as the guarantors for the concerned parties. Iran's proposal was submitted two weeks after the remarks of Russia's Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov in which he confirmed that Moscow had submitted a proposal to Damascus and Ankara to conclude an agreement that "legitimizes" the presence of Turkish troops in Syrian territories.

Iranian Goals

There are several reasons behind the Iranian proposal to withdraw Turkish forces from Syria:

- **Addressing the main outstanding differences between the Syrian and Turkish governments and the expansion of the latter's control:** the plan to restore relations between Damascus and Ankara has stagnated for months, despite talk of Russian mediation and previous optimism after a meeting that was held between Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his counterpart Bashar al-Assad. This stagnation is an outcome of the persistence of contentious issues between the two sides, most notably the withdrawal of Turkish forces from northern Syria. Damascus believes that a new political process to improve relations with Ankara without

the latter withdrawing its forces from northern Syria is impossible. In addition, the lack of progress in the rapprochement between Turkey and Syria is also likely because of the fact that Syria does not have a positive position when it comes to a several files, hence contributing to the stagnation of relations. Against this backdrop, Iran wants to turn the page on the Turkey-Syria dispute by diminishing Ankara's concerns about the security threats emanating from Syria. This could be done by pushing Syria to play a greater role in north Syria along with Iranian and Russian guarantees. According to the broader Iranian vision, this proposal, if implemented, would contribute to strengthening the position of the Syrian government and provide it with more options to deal with regional and international developments. Iran, by implementing this action plan, will establish new principles for its relations with regional and international actors, which are concerned in Syrian crisis.

- **Ensuring the non-exclusion of Iranian interests:** Through this proposal, Tehran seeks to play a direct role in sponsoring the Turkish - Syrian dialogue process, which Moscow has long been doing so. Tehran fears that the understanding and partnership between Russia and Turkey and the reconciliation under Russian auspices between Ankara and Damascus without agreeing on the Turkish withdrawal from Syria, would strengthen Turkey's presence without a reduction in its forces, thus marginalizing its role in Syria.
- **Building on the Syrian-Turkish consensus regarding the Kurdish issue:** Syria, Iran and Turkey have adopted a strict position against Kurdish presence

in Syria and Iraq because of historical and political reasons and contexts. The escalation of tensions that broke out in August 2023 between the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and the forces of local Arab tribes in Deir Ezzor, attracted Turkish attention and Turkish President Erdogan announced his support for the Arab tribal forces in their battles against the SDF. This confrontation is one of the rare occasions when Ankara and Damascus have found common ground in recent years. Iran is betting on the Turkish support shown to Assad to neutralize the SDF in the eastern and northern Syrian regions to facilitate the bridging of differences on other issues. These issues include the reconciliation path between Assad and Erdogan, the return of Syrian refugees and the withdrawal of Turkish troops from Syrian territory.

Turkish Objections

Iran's proposal was rejected by Ankara, particularly its point of Turkish withdrawal from northern Syria. Several factors motivated Ankara to reject the Iranian proposal:

- **The continuous security concerns despite the reassuring messages from the Iranian and Syrian sides:** the withdrawal of Turkish military presence is unacceptable to Ankara; the Turkish vision (presence of Turkish troops) is based on limiting security threats from

terror outfits. They include the anti-Turkish government or Iranian militias that are active on Syrian territory. The Turkish vision is also focused on addressing the migration and refugee files in the absence of a comprehensive political solution to the Syrian crisis. Hence, the Iranian proposal is not feasible for Turkey.

- **Cementing Turkish gains:** Ankara seeks to cement its military presence in Syria's northern territory and to use this presence as a future leverage card to put pressure on the Syrian government regarding outstanding files like the refugee file. Ankara wants Syrian refugees to return to their homeland, in addition, it believes its military presence will allow it to participate in international talks regarding the Syrian crisis and its future.

Conclusion

By implementing its action plan, Iran seeks to achieve several objectives related to its vision particularly political and security arrangements in Syria as well as its relations with major actors in the Syrian arena. However, in light of Turkish considerations and the complexity of the security situation in northern and eastern Syria, the Iranian proposal was rejected by Turkey and it is unlikely to be priority for it in the foreseeable future.

Houthi Escalation Following Peace Talks in Riyadh: Implications and Messages

Yemen experienced a significant moment in the context of the political path during the month of September. A Houthi delegation visited Riyadh to partake in peace talks led by Saudi Arabia. The visit received international and UN applause as it represented a significant step to end the ongoing struggle between the different Yemeni elements. However, the Yemeni landscape witnessed Houthi escalation inside and outside of Yemen. The targeting of Bahraini forces stationed on the southern border of Saudi Arabia as part of the Saudi-led coalition was the most hostile action, resulting in the deaths of four Bahraini officers. This file will review the implications of the Houthi escalation and discuss the Houthi visit to Riyadh.

The Houthi Visit to Riyadh

As an extension of the positive developments in the Yemeni peace process, a Houthi delegation visited Riyadh on September 14, 2023, to discuss with the Saudi leadership ways to end the Yemeni crisis against the backdrop of the joint effort led by Saudi Arabia and Oman. The visit came to complement the meetings and discussions held by the Saudi team headed by Ambassador Mohammed al-Jaber in Sana'a. The visit was also an extension of the Saudi initiative announced in March 2023.

The Yemeni people hope that the efforts of the parties seeking peace will culminate in ending the conflict between the Yemeni parties and bringing an end to their suffering. The Yemeni government affirmed its commitment to meeting the aspirations of the Yemeni people, primarily peace and stability

in Yemen. In a statement issued by the Yemeni news agency, the Yemeni government confirmed the continuation of its open approach to all initiatives to establish a just and comprehensive peace according to the three references. It also guaranteed to end the coup and restore Yemen's state bodies, security and development.⁽⁵⁾

The UN and many international parties lauded the endeavors of Saudi Arabia and Oman. The UN Special Envoy for Yemen Hans Grundberg expressed his gratitude to Saudi Arabia and Oman in light of their efforts to reach solutions to several contentious issues and facilitate the resumption of an intra-Yemeni political process under the auspices of the UN. "The renewed momentum is an important step that contributes positively to the United Nations' effort to mediate an agreement between Yemenis on measures to improve living conditions, a sustainable nationwide ceasefire," the UN envoy said.⁽⁶⁾

The Dimensions of the Houthi Escalation Following the Riyadh Visit

Many observers believe that several implications and dimensions stem from the Houthi escalation which is part of the militia's political maneuvers to exert further pressure on the parties seeking peace in order to achieve more gains. The escalation aimed to deflect attention from the growing popular anger against the Houthis in the areas under their control, and the state of unprecedented divisions and regional developments that have led to confusion in the Houthi position. The Houthi divisions and intra-militia crises are discussed below:

Intra-Houthi Schisms and the Sana'a Conference

The Houthis threatened to dissolve the General People's Congress (GPC) and remove its leader Sadiq Amin Abu Ras from his position. This came after leaders of the GPC in Sana'a embraced the Yemeni people's demand to pay the salaries of civil servants in the areas under the militia's control. Mohammed Ali al-Houthi, a member of the militia's governing council, ordered the GPC's and the leadership's properties to be sold and allocated to the Teacher Support Fund. Ali al-Madani, the brother of Taha al-Madani, who led the Houthi attack on Aden in 2015, demanded that the GPC be dissolved and its leaders tried. He also called for the execution of what he called "traitors."⁽⁷⁾

According to Asharq Al-Awsat newspaper, two leaders of the GPC in Sana'a, who spoke on the condition of anonymity for security reasons, said that the Houthis realize that since the death of former Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh that the party does not support them and does not stand with their orientations that seek to make sacred the concept of imamate rule according to the Iranian model. They added that the party had compromised with the Houthis to protect its members from being arrested and oppressed.⁽⁸⁾

The rift with the GPC, which is also referred to the Sana'a wing, emerged in late September when the Houthis besieged the house of GPC leader Sadiq Amin Abu Ras. The Houthi leader Abdul Malik al-Houthi then announced the dissolution of the government of bin Habtoor, a member of the GPC. Many observers believe that the Houthi move aims to remove the GPC Sana'a wing completely, their coup partner. Some sources talk about the plan to

nominate Abdul Malik al-Houthi as the supreme leader of the Houthi revolution and to establish a political entity called the "Expediency Discernment of the System," similar to Iran's Supreme Political Council.⁽⁹⁾

On the other hand, the GPC in Sana'a stressed its commitment to defending the September 26 revolution, its goals and the republican system that will enable the Yemeni people to choose their rulers and guarantee the freedom of expression and equality for all citizens.⁽¹⁰⁾

Intra-Houthi Divisions

The timing of the Houthi attack reveals significantly deep intra-divisions, given the fact that the militia's political figures did not take responsibility for the attack nor promote it via media outlets as usual. It was not promoted as an act of heroism, confirming that the militia is facing an unprecedented challenge represented by intra-divisions.

Mona Safwan, a Yemeni writer, stated that the Houthi militia presents itself to the world as a terrorist gang. She said, "The Houthis reaffirm their same stereotypes [about them] that they are a non-state group, prefer wars and are unserious about peace. They present themselves as a gang and militia, and non-state." She raised the question, "Is there anyone who wants to embarrass the Houthi delegation and was the blow against the wing that is close to Saudi Arabia more than it was against Saudi Arabia? If the group [the Houthis] can't unite, evade what it committed and don't dare to address and confess that [its mistakes], how will it participate in ruling Yemen? What is the role of its leaders represented by Abdul Malik al-Houthi? Or is there someone stronger than him inside the group?"⁽¹¹⁾

Some confirmed that the Houthi attack was an outcome of the militia's affili-

ation with Iran and that the talks with Saudi Arabia would weaken its subordination to Iran. Hence, peace in Yemen will be inconsistent with the orientations of this militia that wants the war and escalation to continue. All possible scenarios suggest divisions in the militia's ranks. Yemeni Information Minister Moamar al-Eryani confirmed the Houthi divisions, saying, "The reality is that the Houthi terrorist militia suffers deep intra-divisions due to the growing conflict between their leadership over the funds looted from state revenues, estimated at hundreds of billions of riyals. It also refers to the corruption that has spread in their joints in light of the deteriorating economic and living conditions."⁽¹²⁾

Exporting Internal Crises

Yemen witnessed an increase in popular discontent against the Houthis due to their deliberate starvation and the imposition of levies and taxes on Yemenis in areas under their control without paying salaries from the oil and customs revenues. The popular anger increased during the month of September; its manifestations can be noticed in the anti-militia media campaigns, the ongoing teachers' strikes because of the non-payment of salaries, and the unprecedented popular celebrations to mark the anniversary of the September 26 revolution. The Houthis provoked and threatened those who celebrated the anniversary of the Yemeni September 26 revolution and arrested thousands who raised the Yemeni flag.

Rights Radar for Human Rights called on the Houthis to immediately release all detainees, respect the convictions of the Yemeni people and depoliticize any spontaneous activities and not to use them as a pretext to suppress personal and public freedoms.⁽¹³⁾

Some believe that the escalation either at home or outside Yemen is nothing but a tactic to unite the domestic front of the militia and to divert attention from the difficult political and living conditions of the Yemeni people in the areas under the Houthis' control.

Conclusion

In spite of the positive atmosphere that has prevailed over the Yemeni landscape recently and the unprecedented fundamental changes to the peace process in Yemen, the Houthi escalation, following the Riyadh talks and the military parades of the Houthi militia in Sana'a, reveals confusion in the Houthi position and the militia's indifference to the aspirations of the Yemeni people to achieve security and peace. In addition, the Houthis are unwilling to pay salaries to alleviate the suffering of the Yemeni people in spite of the huge funds the militia receives from oil revenues and levies. This, consequently, increases the level of popular discontent against the militia. The Houthi attack directly revealed the intra-division and the presence of parties inside or outside the ranks of the militia that want to prolong and fuel the conflict further.

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Rasanah News



Rasanah, in collaboration with Med-Or Leonardo Foundation hosted a workshop at the foundation’s headquarters in Rome on the prospects for Saudi-Iranian relations and its implications for the region and the international order. Founder and President of Rasanah Dr. Mohammed Alsulami and Vice President Dr. Ahmed al-Garni discussed the role of Saudi Vision 2030 in the de-escalation of tensions in the region, the prospects of the Saudi-Iran agreement, the BRICS expansion, and Saudi relations with China and the United States as well as many other pressing developments.

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Rasanah signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with Med-Or Leonardo Foundation. Founder and President of Rasanah Dr. Mohammed Alsulami and Med-Or Director General Letizia Colucci were present at the signing.

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IRAN'S RELATIONS WITH REGIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL POWERS

The Iran-US prisoner swap agreement constitutes a critical juncture in the course of their relations. Despite some glimmers of optimism that the prisoner exchange will positively influence the nuclear talks, no significant breakthrough has been achieved yet. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) confirmed that it did not achieve any progress regarding its agreement concluded with Iran in March 2023, adding that Tehran has been enriching uranium up to 60% purity. In this part, two major topics are discussed as follows:

- Despite the Success of the Prisoner Swap Deal, Iran and the United States Reverted Back to a Face-off
- Iran Approaches the Nuclear Threshold

Despite the Success of the Prisoner Swap Deal, Iran and the United States Reverted Back to a Face-off

Forecasts suggested that the prisoner swap deal involving Iran and the United States would pave the way for resurrecting the nuclear talks. However, this scenario did not materialize, on the contrary, the two sides reverted back to confrontation and mutually exerting pressure. This file attempts to shed light on the developments related to the relationship between Iran and the United States in light of the prisoner swap deal and the exacerbating disagreements over the Iranian nuclear program. The file also spotlights attempts by each party to enhance its levers before the crucial UN Security Council meeting on the nuclear agreement in October 2023.

Accomplishing the Prisoner Swap Deal Amid Internal Criticism Targeting the Biden Administration

The prisoner swap deal concluded between the United States and Iran entered into force, with Iran releasing five US detainees. In return, the United States had South Korea transfer \$6 billion of frozen Iranian assets to Qatar. This came after US Secretary of State Antony Blinken issued a blanket waiver to international banks to transfer these Iranian assets without fearing US sanctions. In addition, the United States released Iranian detainees. The deal generated Republican criticism of US President Joe Biden, as the Republican Party believes that the deal will enhance Iran's economic strength at a time when it is ramping up attacks on US interests in the region. The White House, on the other hand, defended the deal, saying that it would not affect the sanctions imposed on Tehran. Ironically, when the prisoner swap deal was not

yet in effect, the IRGC detained a US-Iranian dual national, implying that Iran did not abandon its hostage diplomacy that it pursues in the context of its relations with the United States. This was a negative message with regard to the two countries' future relations.⁽¹⁾

Wrangling Over the Nuclear Issue Reemerges

In terms of the nuclear issue, the United States called on Iran to take steps to cooperate with the IAEA in order to give room for diplomacy to work. Iran, on the other hand, called on the United States to prove its goodwill to resuscitate the nuclear deal. These calls, however, have not yielded any new talks despite the talk about Omani and Qatari mediation. Worse, tensions have returned to the scene, with the United States, the UK, France and Germany calling on Tehran to immediately cooperate with the IAEA on issues like explaining the reasons behind the existence of uranium traces in three undisclosed locations, according to the latest report by the UN watchdog. This united move comes in response to Iran withdrawing permits to IAEA inspectors, a measure aimed to curb the monitoring of Iranian nuclear activities, according to the remarks of IAEA Director General Rafael Grossi. The IAEA is accused by Iran of changing its stance because of US pressure.⁽²⁾ Iran, meanwhile, defended its position, with the Iranian president saying that the Iranian decision came in response to some remarks from Western members of the IAEA. Iran's behavior generated concern and frustration in Washington. This was expressed by Blinken on September 15, 2023, when he said that Iran's decisions indicate that it is unconcerned about being a responsible party in the nuclear program.⁽³⁾

Continuation of Regional Confrontation

The United States still places confronting Iran as a priority in its regional policy. During a meeting between President Biden and Israeli Premier Benjamin Netanyahu, both reiterated their commitment to ensuring that Iran does not acquire nuclear weapons in the future. President Biden also reiterated the close and continued cooperation between the United States and Israel to counter all the threats posed by Iran and its proxies. There is no doubt that repairing the relationship between the United States and the Gulf states — the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor in partnership with Washington, the possibility of the United States concluding a joint defense agreement with Saudi Arabia, helping Riyadh to launch a peaceful nuclear program, the normalization of relations between Riyadh and Tel Aviv, the security agreement between the United States and Bahrain, the security meetings between US officials and their counterparts in the region, not to mention the increasing US role in the Caucasus after the recent developments in the Karabakh region — will enhance US interests in the region and threaten Iran’s interests and regional standing. While Iran is wary of these moves and views some of them as threatening its interests and security, it has successfully launched a satellite into space as part of its efforts to resist the US presence in the region. The Iranian move comes amid US concerns about the possibility of Iran using space technology to enhance its nuclear program. The IRGC naval forces shone a laser at a US he-

licopter over the Gulf states’ airspace, and Iranian hackers, too, targeted US satellite, defense and drug companies in the United States and worldwide to obtain sensitive information.

Standoff at the UN Over Support for Russia and Iran’s Violation of Resolution 2231

The UN corridors witnessed a new face-off between Iran and the United States. The US representative at the UN Security Council addressed a letter to the head of the body in which he accused Iran of violating Resolution 2231. The letter was accompanied by a secret CIA report that proved Iran’s involvement in providing military support to Russia in the context of the Russia- Ukraine war. Iran, in response, presented a memorandum in which it considered the US accusation to be totally false and illegal, adding that the United States has no right to take such a measure under Resolution 2231 itself. Perhaps the United States, by putting forward this memorandum, is paving the way for referring Iran’s file to the UN Security Council, taking advantage of its European allies who have announced that they will extend the sanctions related to Iran’s nuclear program, which were supposed to expire on October 18, 2023.

Resuming the Intensification of US Pressure and Sanctions

Further momentum in US sanctions, as Table 1 indicates, is reflective of the fact that the atmosphere of calm that accompanied the prisoner swap deal has dissipated, with both parties back to square one, resuming a face-off.

Table 1: Major US Sanctions and Pressure on Iran During September 2023

History	Measure
September 14	The US Congress approved the Mahsa Amini Human Rights and Security Accountability Act. This act will oblige the US government to impose sanctions on senior Iranian officials, including the supreme leader, due to the crackdown on the nationwide protests and human rights violations.

September 15	The United States placed 25 individuals, three Iran-sponsored media outlets and an Iranian company concerned with internet research on its sanctions list. The measure was taken in coordination with the UK, Canada, Australia and other partners as these persons and entities are linked to the violent crackdown launched by the Iranian government against the popular protests that broke out across the country following the death of Mahsa Amini.
September 18	The US Treasury Department included former Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad on its list of sanctions because of his involvement in enabling the arbitrary arrest of US citizens during his tenure. It also included the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Intelligence and National Security, imposing restrictions on entry visas for three Iranian government officials because of their human rights abuses during hostage-taking operations.
September 19	A network consisting of 11 individuals and entities, scattered across four countries, were placed on the list of US sanctions for their cooperation with Iran for the procurement of drones and military planes. The list included three individuals located in Iran, an entity based in China, three entities in Russia and two individuals in Turkey.
September 27	A network linked to the IRGC was placed on the sanctions list. This network consists of five entities and two individuals located in Iran, China, Hong Kong, Turkey and the UAE involved in the purchase of sensitive parts for the Iranian drones that Tehran sells to Russia.

Source: Prepared by the Unit of Regional and International Studies, the International Institute for Iranian Studies (Rasanah)

Conclusion

Distrust still dominates the relationship between the United States and Iran. This was apparent in the cautious and hostile behavior of both parties toward each other. The prisoner swap deal did not convince either side to move ahead to take advantage of the atmosphere of openness to recommence talks to revive the nuclear deal which has remained stalled over the past decade. On the contrary, each party resumed attempts to accumulate levers in anticipation of a decisive showdown on October 18, 2023 at the UN, when the sunset clause expires. On this day, the parties to the nuclear deal according to its terms are supposed to relax the sanctions against Iran's development, production and testing of ballistic missiles as well as its import and export of drone and missile-related technology. Iran would then submit the Additional Protocol for approval to the

Iranian Parliament in exchange. This is unlikely to happen now, and there is no prospect to conclude a new deal because of a lack of time and growing distrust. The options that remain include either starting a new round of talks mediated by Oman or Qatar or an undeclared truce by the two sides to avoid escalation and confrontation as both parties seem unprepared for this scenario at the present time. The worst scenario will see the United States, through its European allies, initiate the snapback mechanism via the UN Security Council. The likelier scenario will see the mutual pressure resulting in a new round of talks, which have become inevitable as the nuclear deal has entered a stage of deep ambiguity.

Iran Approaches the Nuclear Threshold

The IAEA reported no progress in its endeavours with regard to its March agreement with Iran which reportedly continues to enrich uranium at or above 60%. IAEA Director General Rafael Grossi seems less upbeat about taking Tehran to task for violating its monitoring and inspection commitments as well as on other unanswered activities.

UN Watchdog Admits Its Ability to Monitor Iran's Nuclear Program Has Declined

In its report published on September 4, 2023, the nuclear watchdog admitted that due to Iran's refusal to resolve outstanding safeguards violations, its ability to monitor Iran's complex and growing nuclear program continues to be significantly reduced.⁽⁴⁾ Hence, the agency's capability to detect diversion of nuclear materials, equipment and other capabilities to undeclared facilities remains greatly diminished.

"The (IAEA) Director General (Rafael Grossi) regrets that there has been no progress in resolving the outstanding safeguards issues in this reporting period," read one of the agency's reports regarding Iran's inability to credibly justify the origin of uranium particles found at two undeclared sites.⁽⁵⁾

The increase in the country's stockpile of 60% enriched uranium was relatively slower during the current reporting period yet it is piling up by an estimated 7.5 kilograms to 121.6 kilograms, according to the five-page evaluation.⁽⁶⁾

The agency noted that a fraction of the cameras and other monitoring devices could be reinstalled despite Iran's March agreement. The cameras and monitoring equipment were removed last year. The IAEA does not have access to the footage that its cameras record. "The Director General reiterates that for Agency cameras to be effective, including those installed at Esfahan, the

Agency needs access to the data they record."⁽⁷⁾

The September report also states that Tehran retains the ability, using 40 kilograms of 60% highly enriched uranium (HEU) and three or four advanced centrifuge cascades, "to break out and produce enough weapon-grade enriched uranium for a nuclear weapon in 12 days." Currently, Iran would only need one-third of its existing stock of 60% enriched uranium but "this breakout could be difficult for the IAEA to detect promptly, if Iran delayed inspectors' access."⁽⁸⁾

What Can Iran Do Amid Weak UN Watchdog Monitoring?

The IAEA noted that "Iran could produce enough weapon-grade uranium (90% purity) for an additional five nuclear weapons within the first month of a breakout, bringing the total to enough WGU for six nuclear weapons since May 2023...In summary, Iran could produce enough WGU for six nuclear weapons in one month, eight in two months, nine in three months, and ten in four months. Iran's stockpile of 60 percent HEU was 121.6 kg (Uranium mass, or U mass) or 179.9 kg uranium hexafluoride mass (hex mass) as of August 19."⁽⁹⁾

The agency estimates Iran's current total operating enrichment capability at about 19,100 separative work units (SWU) per year, where only cascades enriching uranium during this reporting period are included in this estimate. As of this reporting period, Iran was not yet using its fully installed enrichment capacity at the Fordow nuclear plant.

The nuclear watchdog recorded no progress on resolving a discrepancy in Iran's natural uranium inventory at the Uranium Conversion Facility (UCF). The IAEA previously reported a shortfall in Iran's declaration.

The situation is dire as “for more than two and a half years Iran has not provided updated declarations and the Agency has not been able to conduct any complementary access under the Additional Protocol to any sites and locations in Iran.”⁽¹⁰⁾

Conclusion

The UN watchdog and Western countries (the United States, the United

Kingdom, France and Germany) have placed pressure on Iran in the hope of reviving the JCPOA via a separate agreement. Iran seems keen to continue to increase its stockpile of highly enriched uranium. This means that Iran can reach nuclear breakout time within a short period. Thus, more effective solutions need to be conducted in order to address this looming threat.

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