

MONTHLY REPORT

Iran Case File

January 2024

Your window on Iran from inside and abroad





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Executive Summary

The start of 2024 marked a significant turning point for Iran with a multitude of rapid developments. The impact of these intertwined developments with not just its Arab neighbors but also the great powers will undoubtedly shape Iran's foreign policy in the foreseeable future.

Iran is set to hold two important elections at the political level, namely for the Parliament and the Assembly of Experts. However, there are concerns within the Iranian establishment that the upcoming elections may witness low public turnout, similar to the two previous elections — the presidential elections in 2021 and the parliamentary elections in 2022. These two elections had witnessed the lowest turnout in the history of the Iranian elections.

The Iranian government has taken measures to encourage participation in the elections amidst widespread dissatisfaction with establishment policies and economic conditions. These measures include increasing the number of candidates in each electoral district and accepting qualified candidates who have influence in both the political arena and society. Additionally, many political parties have chosen to boycott the elections due to the disqualification of several candidates, particularly those from the “reformist” movement.

At the economic level, Iran's national currency, the toman, experienced a significant devaluation against the US dollar. The exchange rate reached over 58,000 tomans per dollar, indi-

cating a nearly 16% decline from the average exchange rate of September 2023, which was 50,000 tomans per dollar. This decline can be attributed to a sharp decrease in the monetary reserve and a severe shortage of foreign currencies despite significant oil revenues. Additionally, the attack on the US base in Jordan by Iran-backed groups would probably have a profound impact on the Iranian economy, further exacerbating the situation. Given Iran's alleged involvement in the attack, it has faced considerable economic ramifications. This fluctuation in exchange rates led to a loss of public confidence in the national currency. Therefore, many turned to purchasing gold, foreign currencies, real estate and assets in neighboring countries.

At the military level, Iran was confronted with three military fronts simultaneously. In Syria, the government did not show any resistance to Iran's attacks on its own territories. However, the Iraqi government was angered by Iran's aggressive behavior and opposed its attacks on Iraqi territories. Pakistan responded to Iran's hostility through a counterattack and adopted diplomatic measures to express its disapproval. In response, Iran swiftly took measures to defuse tensions and avoid any further escalation with its southern neighbor.

The Israeli war on Gaza has resulted in mounting tensions in the region. To safeguard its influence and prevent the conflict from spilling over to its borders, Iran has taken measures to signal

its military capabilities to its adversaries. This has included launching strikes and showcasing its latest advancements in missile arsenal as a deterrent.

The ongoing economic crises have had severe social implications for Iran. One of the most concerning issues is the increasing suicide rate, which has surpassed the global average. This trend is not limited to a specific demographic, with people from all walks of life affected by difficult economic conditions. Despite these challenges, the government has failed to find effective solutions to curb this problem, instead resorting to the same unsuccessful measures due to limited resources. As a result, the situation is expected to continue to escalate and take on new forms.

At the ideological level, the Iranian clerical elite has urged people to participate in the upcoming elections. They used fatwas as a tool to influence people and push them to participate in the elections. However, the government's intensive employment of fatwas through persuasion and intimidation could have a negative backlash, perhaps leading people to boycott the elections in the long run. The clerical elite also used their ideology to frame the government's foreign policy. Semi-state and state-run media outlets scathingly attacked the Taliban government over the attacks in Iran's city of Kerman, accusing the Taliban government of creating an enabling environment for the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) to undertake terrorist activities. The Taliban attempted to defuse tensions and reassure its neighbor Iran by

refuting and condemning the Kerman bombings. The movement also refuted having any ties with Jaish al-Adl (Army of Justice). It is worth mentioning that the root causes of the disagreement between the two theocratic ruling systems run far deeper than the latest attacks. There are stark differences in their ideologies, sects (Sunni/Shiite) and religious interpretations of Islam. This is in addition to the historical disagreement between the two nations, Afghanistan and Iran.

Iran's foreign policy witnessed many shifts and developments in January 2024. As for its relations with Arab states, Iran escalated tensions with Iraq following its consecutive attacks on US and Israeli targets (whether directly or indirectly). Directly: the IRGC targeted what it said to be an "Israeli espionage center" in Erbil. Indirectly: the Iran-backed Kata'ib Hezbollah (KH), the closest armed group to Iran, targeted the US base, Tower 22, near the border triangle in eastern Jordan under the pretext of placing pressure on Washington and Tel Aviv so they cease the ongoing war in Gaza. This attack is a blatant violation of the sovereignty of the Iraqi state amid rising concerns over the expansion of the conflict due to repeated attacks against US and Israeli targets by armed militias and the US and Israeli retaliation through targeting IRGC leaders and deployments in Iraq and Syria

In Syria, several Iranian commanders were targeted by consecutive Israeli strikes. Indeed, Israel intended to send a specific message to Iran through such strikes. In response, Iranian concerns

increased because Israel is increasing the level of its threats; it has been precisely targeting Iran's top military commanders in Syria.

In Yemen, the Houthis backed Hamas in its war against Israel by launching attacks on vessels passing through the Bab al-Mandab Strait toward Israel. Their attacks resulted in a severe economic crisis worldwide. To ensure safe maritime navigation in the Red Sea, the United States formed a military coalition against the Houthis while also making political and diplomatic efforts to curb their attacks and weaken their fighting capabilities. Despite these efforts, maritime transportation firms remain anxious due to the uncertainty surrounding the future of Israel's war on Gaza. Accordingly, the future of the Red Sea still hangs in the balance.

As for Iran's interactions with the great powers, tensions between Iran and the United States escalated following the recent attack by Iraqi armed groups with links to Iran on a US base in Jordan. This has exacerbated the current diplomatic impasse between the two countries. Both sides are attempting to prevent the situation from escalating into a broader regional con-

flict or a direct confrontation beyond accepted norms, while also focusing on containing the ongoing conflict in Gaza.

As for Iran's relations with Europe, tensions are still present over longstanding thorny disagreements between the two sides. The IAEA reiterated concerns about Iran's advancing nuclear program. The Europeans echoed the position of the UN watchdog. The UK imposed new sanctions on Iran against the backdrop of the Iranian government targeting opponents abroad — an act which Iran continuously denies. As for Iran's policies toward the Middle East, the most prominent development was the Houthi attacks on vessels passing through the Red Sea — in response to Israel's war on Gaza. The UK held Iran accountable for the attacks, claiming Iran directed and supported the Houthis in their attacks. The status quo indicates that escalation will continue between Europe and Iran on the same issues in the upcoming period.

NEW RELEASE

Iran and Cultural Centers in Europe: Roles, Dimensions and Limits of Influence



DEVELOPMENTS IN IRAN'S INTERNAL AFFAIRS

The page features a solid red background. In the bottom-left corner, there are several overlapping, rounded rectangular shapes in a light green color. A thin white line starts from the top-left edge and curves downwards and to the right, passing through the green shapes. Another white line forms a partial circle at the bottom right, also interacting with the green shapes.

During January 2024, Iran experienced significant developments at the political, economic, military, social and ideological levels. In this section of Rasana's Iran Case File (ICF), we will discuss these developments, highlighting four key topics as follows:

- A Huge Rise in the US Dollar Exchange Rate Against the Iranian Local Currency
- Iran Escalates Tensions Against Neighbors and Launches Three Satellites
- The Politics of Fatwas
- Iranians Escape Their Grim Reality Through Suicide

As Elections Approach, Concerns Over Low Turnout Mount

The upcoming elections, parliamentary and the Assembly of Experts, set for early March 2024, hold significant importance for the Iranian establishment as the last two electoral events, the 2020 parliamentary elections and the 2021 presidential elections, witnessed historically low turnouts. This decline was the outcome of excluding the “reformist” and moderate candidates, which fueled public dissatisfaction against the government’s policies. These past elections turned into intense power struggles for controlling the Parliament and the presidential office. Despite efforts to boost electoral participation, measures taken by state-affiliated bodies like the Guardian Council, including the exclusion of numerous candidates, may lead to a recurrence of the outcomes of 2020 and 2021 – most prominently low voter turnout.

Parliamentary Elections

The upcoming parliamentary elections on March 1 hold great importance for Iran on multiple fronts. Firstly, they mark the first elections following a series of protests over the past four years, including the recent outcry sparked by the death of Mahsa Amini, a young Kurdish woman, in the custody of the “morality police,” which prompted millions to take to the streets across Iranian cities. Secondly, amid escalating public discontent with the ruling establishment’s policies and ongoing

economic challenges, there have been widespread calls and threats to boycott both the parliamentary and Assembly of Experts elections.

According to a recent opinion poll conducted by the Iranian Students Polling Agency (ISPA), participation in the upcoming elections could hit its lowest levels since the 1979 revolution led by Khomeini. The results indicate that only 27.9% of citizens are sure to participate, while 36% mentioned that they would not vote. Additionally, there is a low probability of voting for 6.8%, a high probability for 7.4%, and 21.9% of those polled are undecided about whether to participate in the elections.⁽¹⁾

Amid the looming threat of election boycotts and the potential for a repeat of a historically low turnout, state-affiliated bodies are actively seeking to reinvigorate public interest in the elections and overcome the challenge of low voter participation. To achieve this, they have implemented various measures, including increasing the number of candidates to 48 for each seat, as announced by the Guardian Council’s spokesman Hadi Tahan Nazif.⁽²⁾ Additionally, numerous television channels have been assigned the task of promoting candidates during the electoral campaign. Another measure involves approving the candidacy of prominent and popular figures to attract voters. However, despite these

efforts, scrutiny of the lists of disqualified candidates reveals that the Guardian Council has excluded several well-known and influential individuals, albeit their number is limited.

For instance, out of the well-known “reformist” and moderate parties, only four expressed their intention to participate in the elections: the Construction Cadres, the National Trust, the Nedaye Iranian Party and the Moderation and Development Party. However, only three candidates representing members of the central councils of these parties received eligibility approval: Muhammad Baqir Nobakht of the Moderation and Development Party, Mohammad Ali Mohseni Bandabi of the Nedaye Iranian Party and Raouf Qaderi of the National Trust Party. Despite 114 official party members announcing their candidacy, only 30 candidates have been approved, leaving the majority disqualified.⁽³⁾ Moreover, preliminary reports on candidate eligibility reveal numerous “reformist” candidates and some outgoing parliament members have been excluded. These measures contradict the Iranian establishment’s aim to increase popular participation and could add impetus to the growing calls to boycott both the parliamentary and Assembly of Experts elections.

Assembly of Experts Elections

The Assembly of Experts elections have drawn interest from 510 individuals, including 13 Sunni scholars, vying for the 88 available seats.⁽⁴⁾ On January 24, 2024, Guardian Council Spokesman Hadi Tahan Nazif announced that the jurists had completed reviewing

the candidacy applications for the Assembly of Experts elections. Initially, 138 candidates were deemed eligible.⁽⁵⁾ Following discussions on objections raised by some candidates, six more candidates were added, bringing the final tally to 144.⁽⁶⁾

An intriguing development in the upcoming elections is the withdrawal of Ahmed Jannati, who heads both the Assembly of Experts and the Guardian Council, from running due to his advanced age of 96 years. This has sparked speculation about his successor as president of the Assembly of Experts. Some have suggested Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi as a potential candidate, given his eligibility approval by the Guardian Council for the Khorasan Razavi district. However, Raisi’s current focus on the presidency and the myriad challenges facing his government may hinder his candidacy for the Assembly of Experts presidency, as he needs to concentrate fully on addressing domestic issues to secure a second term in the presidential elections scheduled for March 2025. Additionally, it is worth noting that Raisi’s presidency of the Assembly of Experts would not necessarily facilitate his succession to the supreme leader role. Historically, in 1989, the Assembly of Experts chose Ali Khamenei, who was president at the time, as the successor to Khomeini without him holding the Assembly of Experts presidency. Thus, Raisi’s potential ascension to the supreme leader position may not depend on his leadership of the Assembly of Experts.

In a pattern reminiscent of the exclu-

sion of prominent candidates from the parliamentary elections, the Guardian Council also rejected many candidates in the Assembly of Experts elections. Notably, former President Hassan Rouhani, who served three consecutive terms in the council, was denied eligibility to run in these elections. This decision marks Rouhani as the latest president barred from returning to political life, following in the footsteps of Hashemi Rafsanjani and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, whose attempts to run in presidential elections were unsuccessful. Additionally, Mohammad Khatami, another former president, has faced state-imposed restrictions on his political activities, including media appearances, effectively sidelining him from the political arena.

In a statement, Rouhani characterized the decision to exclude him from the elections as politically motivated to benefit individuals who lacked the authority to have a say over the country's interests. He urged the jurists of the Guardian Council to provide clear reasons for his exclusion, emphasizing that the same political motivations had led to the exclusion of thousands of parliamentary candidates. Rouhani asserted that "the revolution belongs to neither a select few nor the nation, and those who exclude honest servants of the nation do not have the right to determine the country's interests."⁽⁷⁾

In addition to Rouhani, two of Iran's prominent security figures faced disqualification: Mahmoud Alavi, former minister of intelligence for two consecutive terms during Rouhani's administration, and Mostafa Pour-

mohammadi,⁽⁸⁾ secretary-general of the Association of Combatant Clerics. Alavi, who served as a member of the Assembly of Experts and the Iranian Parliament for four consecutive terms, was among those excluded. Pourmohammadi, who held positions as minister of justice during Rouhani's first presidential term and minister of interior during Ahmadinejad's first presidential term, was also disqualified.

Conclusion

Despite efforts by the Iranian establishment to encourage widespread participation in the parliamentary elections, all signs suggest a potential decrease in voter turnout, further undermining its legitimacy. Regarding the Assembly of Experts elections, excluding influential figures from Iran's political and security spheres exposes the "hardliners'" plans to sideline such figures from influencing the selection of the Iranian establishment's third leader. This is particularly significant as the next council's tenure will last until 2032, a lengthy period in which unforeseen developments may necessitate the appointment of a new state leader, according to the "hardliners'" perspective.

A Huge Rise in the US Dollar Exchange Rate Against the Iranian Local Currency

The Iran Case File for January 2024 brings attention to a notable surge in the value of the US dollar compared to the Iranian toman. This spike reflects the heightened demand for the dollar within Iran, further exacerbating the depreciation of the Iranian toman. The file delves into the factors contributing to this decline in the toman's value relative to the dollar, shedding light on Iranian citizens' responses to safeguard their finances against the backdrop of this economic turbulence. Additionally, the file explores the ramifications of the ongoing devaluation of the currency on Iran's domestic economic landscape.

Reasons for Iran's Fluctuating Exchange Rates

Toward the close of January 2024, the US dollar price in Iran experienced a sharp surge, surpassing 58,000 tomans per dollar. This notable uptick occurred against the backdrop of attacks targeting a US base situated on the Syria-Jordan border, resulting in the loss of US soldiers. The escalation amounted to a 16% increase compared to the average price recorded in December, which hovered around 50,000 tomans per dollar.

Following the attacks on a US base in late January, the financial sector in Iran grew increasingly apprehensive about potential ramifications on the

Iranian economy. Iranian concerns mounted particularly over the possibility of additional sanctions being imposed if Iran's direct involvement in or connection to the attacks was proven. These concerns compounded existing tensions especially since the Houthis, supported by Iran, started to threaten maritime security in the Red Sea. Furthermore, tensions escalated in the aftermath of the assembly of a US-led multinational naval force to tackle Houthi threats in this important waterway.

The ongoing decline in the value of the Iranian currency is rooted in various underlying factors. Among these are dwindling cash reserves, which have reached their lowest levels, and a severe shortage of foreign currencies despite revenues from oil exports. However, financial transfers face significant impediments because of oil and banking sanctions. Additionally, there is a growing domestic demand for US dollars for the sake of money transfers and purchases of assets abroad. This issue of currency devaluation is not new but has escalated significantly since the reinstatement of US sanctions on Iran in 2018, as illustrated in Figure 1. Over more than six years, the US dollar has consistently appreciated against a backdrop of Iranian currency devaluation, as depicted in Figure 1.

**Figure 1: Price of the US Dollar Against the Iranian Toman
(January 2014 -January 2024)**



Source: Bonbast, <https://www.bonbast.com/graph>.

Despite the founding of the “Currency and Gold Exchange Center” a year ago in February 2023, efforts to stem the influx of foreign currencies have proven to be rather ineffective. The center was created to mitigate the surge in foreign currency prices by offering Iranian export funds to importers and merchants at variable prices as an alternative to the parallel market. However, its pricing mechanism was not entirely liberalized and remained below the free market rate. Consequently, three distinct exchange rates persist in Iran: the official government rate reserved for the import of select strategic goods and medicine, the rate set by the currency and gold exchange center, and the parallel market rate, which commands the highest price and is the most actively traded, reflecting the dynamics of supply and demand.

Iranian Responses to the Devaluation of the Local Currency and the Impact on Living Conditions

Iranians are accustomed to the consistent depreciation of their currency against foreign currencies. Over the period spanning from the early 1970s to 2021 (1350-1400 Hijri Shamsi), foreign currency values surged by a staggering 3,500-fold. In stark contrast, the minimum wage witnessed a far more modest increase, rising by no more than 1,400-fold from the 1980s to 2021. This stark juxtaposition highlights the enduring disparity between currency devaluation and wage growth experienced by the Iranian population.

As a consequence of enduring decades of economic sanctions and witnessing successive declines in the value of the Iranian currency against foreign counterparts over the years (as detailed in

Rasanah's monthly reports for January and February 2023⁽⁹⁾, the confidence of the Iranian people in holding onto the real value of their wealth in the local currency has dwindled. Consequently, many are inclined to invest in gold and foreign currencies, which they perceive as offering greater stability, in an effort to safeguard their wealth amid looming geopolitical uncertainties. This shift in investment patterns reflects a proactive approach by individuals to shield their finances, anticipating potential disruptions in Iranian exchange markets, a pattern observed in recent years. Additionally, some opt to liquidate their assets in Iran to acquire others abroad, such as real estate investments in neighboring countries like Turkey, contributing further to the local demand for the US dollar.

Looking ahead, it is evident that sharp fluctuations in exchange rates will yield adverse impacts on the standard of living in Iran. This is anticipated to manifest in heightened inflation rates and a consequent decline in the purchasing power of Iranians, particularly impacting food prices which are highly responsive to foreign exchange fluctuations (a significant portion of critical food items are imported). As a result, inflationary pressures will further diminish the value of money, posing challenges for salary earners and wage workers despite projected annual salary increases of around 20% in the upcoming budget. However, with expected inflation hovering about 40%, a substantial 20% gap emerges, signifying a considerable decline in the purchasing power of Iranians and ex-

acerbating the pressures on daily life.

Conclusion

In January, Iran experienced significant exchange rate volatility, marked by a sharp 16% increase in the value of the US dollar, nearing the threshold of 60 thousand tomans per dollar. Several factors contributed to this surge, including sanctions and other economic dynamics. Consequently, societal reactions ensued, with a notable trend toward hedging against this phenomenon, indicative of the Iranian people comprehending the negative impact of this trend on their real wealth and purchasing power. This is particularly concerning given the relatively modest salary growth; thereby, this trend is likely to have a great impact on daily routines and the future prospects of the Iranian people.

Iran Escalates Tensions Against Neighbors and Launches Three Satellites

Iran began 2024 with aggressive vigor by attacking three Muslim countries besides sending four satellites into space amidst escalating tensions with the United States in light of the deaths of US servicemen in a drone attack on a US base on the Syria-Jordan border. Iran fired salvoes of missiles and drones on Syria, Iraq and Pakistan against what it claimed to be Israeli targets in response to the dual bombings in the city of Kerman that killed dozens and injured hundreds on January 3. The bombings occurred while people gathered to commemorate the killing of Qassem Soleimani, who headed the Quds Force. This part of the ICF for January 2024 discusses the rising tensions between Pakistan and Iran, Iran's missile and drone attacks on Syria and Iraq, and finally Iran's launch of Simorgh and Qaem-100

Pakistan-Iran Tensions

Iran's firing of missiles and its dispatch of drones killed two Pakistanis and injured three others in the Pakistani province of Balochistan.⁽¹⁰⁾ Tehran alleged that it targeted the bases of Jaish al-Adl (Army of Justice), a Sunni separatist group that operates in Iran's Sistan-Balochistan Province, which according to the Iranians is allegedly funded by the CIA and Mossad. Not only did Islamabad reject Tehran's claim of the presence of terrorists on its side but also condemned the act as a violation of its sovereignty. Within 48 hours, Pakistan

recalled its ambassador, terminated ongoing naval wargames and suspended all other high-level exchanges while asking Iran's envoy who was on a trip to his home country, to not return. As its warship reached sovereign waters, Islamabad launched a coordinated land and air attack against nine hide-outs of Baloch militants, 50 kilometers inside Iran, killing nine guerrilla commanders. Iran confirmed the fatalities caused by the attack but refrained from escalating tensions further. Thanks to Chinese mediation, Pakistan and Iran agreed to resume bilateral ties and Iran's Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian visited Islamabad on January 29. The neighboring countries share a 900-kilometer sparsely manned border, which is prone to human, drug and arms smuggling.

Prior to the thaw, Pakistani authorities arrested a Zeinabiyoun operative in Karachi for the attempted assassination of Mufti Taqi Usmani in 2019, a renowned Pakistani religious scholar.⁽¹¹⁾ On January 16, Pakistani authorities rounded up four suspects affiliated with Zeinabiyoun, including the militia's mastermind, for their alleged involvement in the assassination of a prominent religious figure, who was gunned down on January 5.⁽¹²⁾

Two days prior to Abdollahian's visit, nine Pakistani laborers were murdered in Iran's Sistan-Balochistan Province, responsibility for which was claimed by the Baloch Liberation Army.⁽¹³⁾ Pa-

kistan, -Iran relations will not be the same again, as Islamabad has deployed missile and anti-craft batteries on the border besides other medium to long-term measures being carried out. In their meeting to de-escalate the situation, the foreign ministers of the two neighboring countries agreed “to immediately appoint liaison officers in Turbat and Zahedan to further strengthen ongoing security and intelligence cooperation.”⁽¹⁴⁾

Iranian Attacks on Syria and Iraq

The IRGC’s ballistic missiles targeted an alleged Mossad spy base in Erbil besides what Iran designates as “anti-Iran terror groups” in Syria. Iran claimed that the missile strike in Iraq destroyed “one of the main espionage bases of Israel.”

“These headquarters have been the center for developing espionage operations and planning terrorist acts” in the region and Iran.” The IRGC also struck several other locations in Erbil targeting “sites of Iranian opposition groups.” Four civilians were killed and six others were injured in the attack.⁽¹⁵⁾ “The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) in response to recent aggressions by the Zionist regime resulting in the martyrdom of IRGC commanders and members of the Resistance Front . . . targeted and destroyed one of the main espionage centers of the Zionist regime (Mossad) in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq using ballistic missiles. This center has been the hub for developing espionage operations and designing terrorist activities in the region, especially in our beloved country,” the IRGC statement said.⁽¹⁶⁾

Iraq’s Foreign Minister Fuad Hussein said no Mossad-affiliated centers were operating in Erbil, classifying the strikes as a “violation of international law.”

“The Iranians don’t want to or cannot attack Israel. They search for victims around them, and so they attack Erbil,” said Iraq’s foreign minister.⁽¹⁷⁾ Iran also targeted the villa of a Kurdish businessman whom it alleged was working with Israel.

The IRGC said it fired ballistic missiles at bases of “anti-Iran terror groups in occupied territories of Syria.”⁽¹⁸⁾

After Kata’ib Hezbollah, an Iraqi militant group affiliated with Iran’s Quds Force, attacked a US base in Jordan, located on the junction of its border with Syria and Iraq, killing three troops and injuring 40, Iran has been bracing for impact. The country’s air defense and missile forces were put on high alert. The militant group, meanwhile, absolved Iran of all responsibility for the drone strike after the US president vowed to avenge the US soldiers’ blood. Kata’ib Hezbollah’s statement read, “Our brothers in the resistance, especially in the Islamic Republic, do not even know the nature of our jihad/military operations. Many times they even objected to pressure and escalation against the Americans in Iraq and Syria.”⁽¹⁹⁾

Successful Launches of Simorgh and Qaem-100

In demonstration of its defiance, Iran launched three satellites for the first time using Simorgh, its carrier rocket developed by the Ministry of Defense and Armed Forces Logistics from the

Imam Khomeini Space Center in Semnan Province. The three satellites – Mahd weighing 32 kilograms, besides two less than 10 kilograms (nano) satellites, named Kayhan-2 and Hatef-1 – “were put at altitudes between 450 kilometers and 1,100 kilometers above the Earth’s surface.”⁽²⁰⁾ The satellites are to test narrowband communication and geopositioning technology. The space launch vehicle (SLV) Simorgh was plagued with failures.

Earlier on January 21, Iran launched the Soraya satellite into low Earth orbit with the Qaem-100 SLV developed by the IRGC Aerospace Force. The three-stage solid-fuel ballistic missile hurled the satellite placing it in an orbit 750 kilometers above the Earth’s surface in 11 minutes.⁽²¹⁾

“The IRGC will conduct the test launch of ‘Qaem-105’ next year. Within the next three years, Iran will test launch the ‘Qaem-120’ satellite carrier, which is planned to send satellites into an orbit of 36,000 kilometers above the Earth,” Commander of the IRGC Aerospace Force’s Space Division General Ali Jafarabadi stated.⁽²²⁾ Iran’s first military satellite, Noor-I, was launched in April 2020 followed by Noor-II in March 2022 via the Qassed SLV. Iran’s space ambitions are viewed with much suspicion as the same technology is essential for the development of a long-range ballistic missile system.

Conclusion

With much of the UNSC sanctions lifted, its missile technology reaching maturity and Russia committed to deliver its 4++ generation Su-35 fighter jets along with gunships and radar, Iran is preparing for full-scale confrontation

with its foes. The Russia-Ukraine war has benefited Iran as it has distracted the world from its nuclear program. The Israel-Hamas war and the Houthi attacks in the Red Sea are thickening the smokescreen Tehran needs to realize for its stratagem. Despite opening so many fronts, Iran’s enemies remain divided and confused.

Iranians Escape Their Grim Reality Through Suicide

Iranians face numerous problems and diminishing future prospects, with many turning to suicide to escape their grim reality amid unresolved crises. The surge in suicide rates has led to discussions in the Iranian media about this concerning trend. Rather than abating, the phenomenon is escalating in both scale and scope, impacting diverse social and age demographics. The phenomenon is rooted in political, economic, social and cultural factors and it risks exacerbating societal divisions and amplifying the failure of the ruling elite, especially in the absence of a coherent approach or strategy to tackle this issue.

Iran's Suicide Crisis

In Iran, suicide is a concerning issue, with the country ranking 130th out of 180 nations in terms of suicide rates. The suicide index stands at 7.4 per 100,000 people. However, the index may not fully capture the extent of the problem, as it excludes attempted suicides and cases hidden by families, which often go unrecorded. Suicide is prevalent across various provinces, particularly in areas facing challenging socioeconomic conditions. Moreover, it impacts all segments of Iranian society, spanning from the elderly to teenagers and young adults, regardless of their employment status. As such, the actual prevalence of suicide is likely higher than official indexes or statistics suggest.⁽²³⁾

The suicide crisis in Iran is multifaceted, with economic, social and psychological factors contributing to its prevalence. Nearly 40% of Iranians live in abject poverty and suffer injustice and inequality.⁽²⁴⁾ Economically, a significant proportion of Iranians face extreme poverty, exacerbated by widespread unemployment and low wages.⁽²⁵⁾ Socially, issues like domestic violence and forced marriages⁽²⁶⁾ add to the crisis, along with high rates of misery, depression and mental health issues.⁽²⁷⁾ While various reports and analyses acknowledge the phenomenon's complexity, economic hardship appears to be the primary driver, with the situation worsening over the years. This has led to suicide impacting not merely the unemployed, but also educated individuals who feel their careers and financial prospects are not in line with their qualifications, leaving them torn between emigration and suicide. Additionally, societal changes, including alienation and drug abuse, are contributing to the suicide crisis in the country. Moreover, the impact of religious values and principles declined among many Iranians because of corruption perceived in the clerical establishment.

Government's Response

The Iranian government has attempted to tackle the suicide crisis through various means. Initially, it established a widespread social support system to

alleviate poverty, including the founding of 4,000 charities for the underprivileged. However, this initiative was unexpectedly halted, with the budget for 2024 not earmarking specific provisions for aiding the aforesaid segment of people.⁽²⁸⁾ A poverty eradication plan involving government-issued vouchers for access to critical goods was implemented to ease pressures on family expenses and support mental and social well-being. The introduction of the 1570 emergency line, providing free psychological counseling services for students and parents, supplemented the mentioned initiatives.⁽²⁹⁾ Despite these efforts, suicide rates continue to rise unabated, suggesting that the current policies serve merely as temporary remedies rather than addressing root issues. Consequently, there is a pressing need for comprehensive institutional reforms and strategic shifts in domestic policies to navigate effectively the economic and social crises plaguing the country.

Conclusion

The ongoing shortcomings in socio-economic policies in Iran could exacerbate the suicide crisis, with government interventions hindered by the absence of a cohesive approach or strategy to address the root causes of the suicide crisis. Ultimately, the Iranian government's decisions over the years are to blame for the country's suicide crisis. Of note is the failure of the religious dimension, an aspect that is integral to the Iranian government, to provide a convincing narrative to dissuade Iranians from contemplating suicide, given its prohibition in Islamic law.

The Politics of Fatwas

Fatwas (religious edicts) are considered among the most important tools utilized by the Iranian establishment to achieve its political objectives and convince its supporters and popular incubators of its policies. It conveys to the masses that its policies are based on an accurate reading of religion, given that they are in line with religious edicts and juristic deductions. As the parliamentary elections scheduled for March 1 draw near, the Iranian government is grappling with political adversaries who are calling for boycotting the elections. In response, the government has resorted to issuing a religious decree rendering electoral participation obligatory. Beyond this maneuver, the government is also employing ideology as a tool in its foreign policy, notably highlighted in the ideological clash between Iran and the Taliban following the Kerman bombings.

Elections and the Political Employment of Fatwas

Wilayat-al Faqih loyalists and traditionalists in Iran often invoke religious decrees to legitimize or enact political decisions.⁽³⁰⁾ Lately, there have been widespread calls to boycott the upcoming parliamentary elections in Iran with critics insisting that the elections will be rigged. Nevertheless, official and semi-official Iranian newspapers have urged citizens to engage actively in the electoral process. Additionally, certain jurists have voiced their support for participation, encouraging people to participate in the elections.

Khamenei and mandatory participation: Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei characterized the calls to boycott the elections as “hostile acts” which are contradictory to Islam. He made these remarks during a meeting with a group of maddahs (eulogists) in which he discussed the parliamentary and Assembly of Experts elections. During the meeting, Khamenei highlighted that some individuals aim to undermine the integrity of the elections and spread despair among the populace, alleging that such actions run counter to the principles of Islam and the “Islamic Republic.”⁽³¹⁾

Khamenei underscored the essential nature of public participation, framing it as both a duty and a right of the people. He emphasized that elections serve as a crucial mechanism for individuals to select legislators, law enforcers, and members of the Assembly of Experts. By labeling elections as “necessary” and “obligatory,” Khamenei imbues these terms with significant legal implications. Consequently, he asserted that it is not permissible for voters to boycott the elections despite acknowledging that the decision to boycott is — just like participation — fundamentally a political act.

Sham elections: The supreme leader’s remarks coincided with increasing dissent from the reformists, moderates and other factions because of efforts to sideline and prevent their participation in the elections. Hassan Rouhani voiced his frustration over the alleged

manipulation and lack of authenticity in the electoral process, stating, “If people believe that their involvement in the elections can make a difference in their lives, they will participate.” However, he emphasized that people are unlikely to engage if they perceive their participation or non-participation to be inconsequential.⁽³²⁾ He emphasized the significance of political diversity in elections, stressing that it is not solely about the quantity of candidates. He cautioned against individuals believing that ballot boxes hold no value, stating, “Our efforts must concentrate on ensuring that ballot boxes play a definitive role in fostering societal progress. If ballot boxes are compromised, we will be left with nothing.” He further warned of dire consequences if ballot boxes are disregarded, predicting potential violent upheaval. He asserted that there is no substitute for the current system and advocated for reform as the sole path forward.⁽³³⁾ Rouhani issued a stark warning of potential violent upheaval if the people’s will is disregarded in the electoral process while simultaneously advocating for reforming the system from within. This is not the first time that Rouhani has characterized Iranian elections as fraudulent and manipulated; he has done so in the past, even during his tenure as president. Sheikh Haider Hoballah correlates the fraudulent nature of the elections with the supreme leader’s absolute guardianship. The supreme leader’s legitimacy stems from God and the Infallible Imam, not from electoral processes, rendering his actions immune to the

influence of elections or the opinion of the masses.⁽³⁴⁾

The Taliban and Iran: Centrality of Ideology

The Taliban swiftly denounced the Kerman bombings in Iran, which claimed the lives of numerous individuals and injured countless others in early January 2024. The attack occurred near the shrine of Qassem Soleimani, a site of significant symbolism as it represents the IRGC and the “Islamic Revolution.” In response to Pakistani media reports suggesting a close connection between the Taliban and Jaish al-Adl (Army of Justice), the Taliban refuted any association with the group.⁽³⁵⁾

The Iranian response to the Taliban: Following the twin bombings near the shrine of Qassem Soleimani in Kerman, Iran, which caused fatalities and injuries, the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) claimed responsibility for the attacks. In response, Iran conducted airstrikes on targets in Syria, Iraqi Kurdistan, and near the Pakistani border. Iranian media intensified accusations against the Taliban, alleging that they created an environment conducive to extremist activities within Afghan territories. However, Taliban officials refuted claims of facilitating ISKP movements toward Iranian cities, accusing the United States of attempting to sow discord between the Taliban and regional countries, notably Iran.⁽³⁶⁾ Despite tensions, the Afghan Foreign Ministry, now under Taliban control, issued an official statement expressing condolences to Iran and reaffirming solidarity with the Iranian government and its people.⁽³⁷⁾ Despite

condemnations from some Taliban officials, doubts persisted regarding the Taliban's position on the Kerman bombings, with accusations of Kabul sympathizing with the attackers and terror attacks. Former Iranian Ambassador to Afghanistan Mohammad Reza Bahrami criticized what he termed as the Taliban's "malicious behavior" concerning the Kerman incident, particularly noting the absence of the term "terrorist" in their condemnation.⁽³⁸⁾ Iranian media adopted an aggressive stance against the Taliban, labeling them as a terrorist organization and alleging their alignment with the global powers of arrogance such as the United States and the UK.

The roots of ideological differences: Iran's perception of the Taliban-ISKP conflict is complex. While Tehran acknowledges the deep-rooted animosity between the Taliban and ISKP, it remains vigilant against ISKP gaining ground in Afghanistan. Iran aims to exert political pressure on the Taliban government due to religious, sectarian and political differences. Issues like water disputes and border conflicts exacerbate tensions between the two sides. Iran capitalized on the Kerman bombings to accuse the Taliban of either supporting terrorism or failing to combat it effectively. These accusations even extended to portraying the Taliban as a tool of global imperial powers, especially of the United States. These accusations reflected the underlying discord between Iran and the Taliban. Tehran's concerns extend beyond mere security and include apprehensions regarding a traditionalist

Sunni presence on their eastern border, fearing potential alliances with Pakistan and other Sunni powers like Saudi Arabia and Turkey to the West. Overall, the ascension of the Taliban to power and the establishment of the Islamic emirate have sparked concerns in Iran, leading to strained relations between the two sides. Mutual accusations exacerbate tensions, with the Taliban accusing Iran of supporting and arming Afghan Shiite groups. At the same time, Iran accuses the Taliban of adopting a lenient policy toward ISKP. This discord reflects a broader ideological dispute rooted in the Sunni-Shiite divide, with each party representing the classical interpretation of their respective beliefs. Both the Taliban and Iran are actively engaged in political activism, heightening the potential for conflict. However, the Taliban harbors genuine fears of Iranian hegemony, viewing Tehran's actions as a threat to its religious principles. Iran's aspirations for dominance over its neighbors, exemplified by airstrikes in Pakistan, clash with the Taliban's religious principles; the group rejects outside guardianship. These ideological and geopolitical tensions complicate efforts to achieve balanced relations between the two parties.

Conclusion

The Iranian establishment is employing religious decrees to counter opposition calls for boycotting elections, thus asserting their legitimacy and necessity. The supreme leader's endorsement underscores the ruling elite's concern over boycott movements potentially tarnishing the elec-

toral process. Concurrently, the Iranian government persists in employing ideological strategies in external conflicts, exemplified by its media campaign against the Taliban following the Kerman bombings. This offensive underscores deep-seated ideological

disparities and elite apprehensions about the emergence of another Sunni power along Iran's eastern border. Consequently, Iran seeks to exert political and religious pressure on the Taliban while aiming to embarrass it in the international context.

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IRAN-ARAB INTERACTIONS



The Middle East witnessed a flurry of activity in January 2024, with Iran taking center stage in its interactions with some Arab countries. The situation escalated significantly, with mounting tension in Iraq after Iran's attacks on US and Israeli targets, and Kata'ib Hezbollah's attack on a US base in eastern Jordan. Meanwhile, Israel responded with a series of strikes targeting top commanders in the IRGC, and the Houthis faced a backlash from the West for their attacks on vessels passing through the Red Sea to Israel. In this section of Rasanah's ICF, we will explore these three prominent developments as follows:

- Iranian Tensions Reemerge in Iraq
- Iranian-Israeli-Russian Triangle of Tensions in Syria
- Western Confrontations With the Houthis in the Red Sea

Iranian Tensions Reemerge in Iraq

Tensions have been mounting in the Middle East since Operation Al-Aqsa Flood and Israel's large-scale war in the Gaza Strip. As a consequence, Iraq witnessed in January 2024 a new spike in tensions because of Iran's aggression against US and Israeli targets under the pretext of pressuring Washington and Tel Aviv to end the war in Gaza. Iranian aggression was carried out either directly through the IRGC or indirectly through its deployed armed militias in Iraq. Both clearly violated Iraqi sovereignty and Iran exploited the territorial integrity of an Arab state that is working to achieve security and stability and limit its domestic crises which have deepened mainly because of Iranian interventions.

Iranian Attacks on Erbil and the Border Triangle

Iranian attacks targeting Israeli and US targets took place in two Iraq regions. The first, Erbil, where the IRGC announced on January 2024 that it had launched around 24 missiles targeting an alleged Mossad spy headquarters in this city, the capital of Iraqi Kurdistan.⁽¹⁾ These launches were part of a series of strikes targeting Israeli spy headquarters and anti-Iran groups in Iraq and Syria. However, Israel did not comment on the Iranian allegation. The IRGC strikes killed four Iraqis and wounded six others.

The second is the Iraq-Jordan-Syria border triangle. The Iraqi Hezbollah, the closest armed militia to Iran, according to US officials, targeted the

US base, Tower 22, near the triangle border region in northeastern Jordan on January 28. The targeting of this base was a serious turning point in the escalation trajectory in the region because of US casualties. The Biden administration held Iran and its armed groups, especially the Iraqi Hezbollah, responsible for the attacks on Tower 22.⁽²⁾ Many experts expected that the US retaliation would be firm to send strong deterrence messages to Iran and its armed groups. In addition, this US response would impact the headquarters of pro-Iranian armed groups in Iraq or Syria or both, or keep in place the scenario of assassinations carried out indirectly inside Iran.

Iranian attacks targeting US and Israeli targets, which were mostly carried out by drones loaded with explosives and ballistic missiles, are part of a new round of violence in the Middle East. These attacks occurred against the backdrop of fears of broader regional conflict because of the eruption of the Gaza war and the subsequent waves of escalation between pro-Iran armed militias, the United States and Israel in Iraq, Syria and the Red Sea. In their retaliatory responses, the United States and Israel targeted many IRGC commanders in Syria. Many experts read the Iranian attacks in the context of the Gaza war and analyze their ramifications for regional security.

The Iranian attacks also happened a few days after Iranian threats to avenge the Kerman bombings that took place

near the tomb of Qassim Soleimani, the former Quds Force chief. Iranians were holding a ceremony to mark the anniversary of his death; he was killed via a US drone strike near Baghdad International Airport in January 2020. The red flag of revenge was raised above the dome of the famous Jamkaran Mosque in Qom, south of the capital, Tehran, to signify the necessity of avenging the dozens of deaths and injuries at Kerman.

The Iranian attacks in Erbil, unlike past ones, occurred from a distance of 1,200 kilometers, with missiles flying through Iraqi airspace over US sites and targets. These attacks carried an important message for Washington and Tel Aviv: Iran has missile capability, range and accuracy to hit specific targets.

Iran employed the attacks targeting US interests to pressure Washington and Tel Aviv to end the Gaza war. Many observers believe that Iran has a number of goals that are motivating its continuous attacks. The most notable goals are to pressure the United States to pull out its forces from Iraq, prevent further assassinations of Iranian commanders in Iraq and Syria and any subversive operations in the Iranian interior as well as forcing the Iraqi Kurdistan government to shut down Israeli spy centers. The Iranian-Kurdish opposition strongly oppose the Iranian government's policies with it exploiting the turbulence in the Middle East.

Iraq's Response

Iraq took a stance on the Iranian strikes that targeted Erbil and the border triangle region. The Iraqi leadership stat-

ed that these Iranian incursions violated Iraqi sovereignty and security and breached the Iran-Iraq security agreement, under which Iran agreed to cease its military operations in Iraq. Iraqi President Abdul Latif Rashid stated that the Iranian attacks violated Iraqi sovereignty and undermined security and stability. Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shia' al-Sudani also condemned the strikes, describing them as an outright aggression on Iraqi territory and he called for diplomatic and legal measures to protect the country's national security. Iraqi National Security Advisor Qasem al-Araji denied the existence of Mossad headquarters in Erbil and dismissed the Iranian allegations as completely unfounded.

The Iraqi prime minister also ordered the formation of a committee headed by the national security adviser to investigate the Iranian attacks and Iran's allegations of the existence of Mossad spy headquarters in Erbil. The Iraqi Foreign Ministry summoned Iran's charge d'affaires, handed him a note of protest over the attacks and recalled the Iraqi ambassador in Tehran for consultations.

A day after the strikes, the Iraqi Foreign Ministry also filed a complaint by addressing two identical letters to both the secretary-general of the United Nations and the president of the UN Security Council over Iranian aggression on Iraqi territory. The complaint included that the pretexts and allegations made by Iran to justify its attacks on Erbil with ballistic missiles were fake and that they breached the sovereignty of a neighboring state that

is a member of the United Nations and violated the principle of good-neighborliness.⁽³⁾ This complaint reflected Iraq's full awareness of the risks posed by Iran for the future of the Iraqi state. The Iraqi government needs to exert more effort to control the proliferation of uncontrolled weapons to safeguard the country's national interests and its future relations with regional partners.

The Kurdistan regional government and the people of the region rejected Iranian aggression via different methods. These methods ranged from official condemnations, popular protests and the call of the Chambers of Commerce to boycott Iranian products as a pressure card in response to Iran's frequent attacks on the region. This was a surprising stance taken by Iraqi traders for the first time in Iraqi Kurdistan, which is an important market for Iranian products. The volume of trade exchange between Iran and Iraqi Kurdistan reportedly ranges annually from \$6 billion to \$8 billion,⁽⁴⁾ primarily constituting Iranian exports to the region. Construction materials and food items ranked first in Iranian exports to the region. The geographical proximity and the low cost of transportation play a role in advancing bilateral trade relations. About 400 trucks loaded with Iranian goods enter the region every day.⁽⁵⁾ Therefore, the region is an important market for Iran, especially with Iran's need for hard currency. The region needs Iranian products for their low cost compared to other alternatives, which are expensive for the Kurdish interior.

Conclusion

Iran is using both direct and indirect escalation tactics against US and Israeli targets to strengthen its regional influence since the onset of the Gaza war. By doing so, Iran aims to highlight the strength of its regional influence and pressure the United States to withdraw its forces from Iraq. This is part of Iran's expansionist project, which disregards the interests, security and stability of its neighbors. Unfortunately, this project is having negative consequences for the Iraqi and Syrian people, who are paying the price. It is also adversely affecting the future of their growing relations with Arab countries in the region.

Iranian-Israeli-Russian Triangle of Tensions in Syria

With the onset of 2024 and amid the ongoing Israeli war on Gaza with its numerous repercussions sparking regional and international concern, the ripple effect of the events in Gaza on the Syrian scene has garnered significant attention. This encompasses the stances taken, the on-the-ground realities and the influence on stakeholders active within Syria. This part of the ICF for January discusses Israel's strategy of escalation which shifted toward executing qualitative, high-impact strikes aimed at the leadership of Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) in Syria.

Israel's Targeting of Iranian Leaders and the Challenge Iran Faces in Syria

Israeli forces initiated a series of targeted operations against key IRGC figures and individuals who were of strategic importance and held pivotal roles. Extensive logistical and intelligence data played a key role in Israeli operations against senior Iranian figures in Syria. On January 20, 2024, an Israeli operation at the heart of Damascus led to the elimination of several Iranian military leaders.⁽⁶⁾ This was followed by another Israeli attack on January 29, 2024, impacting the Sayyidah Zaynab area in Damascus. The attack reportedly targeted a consultancy site associated with the IRGC. Before this, Razi Mousavi, a prominent IRGC leader, was killed in an Israeli airstrike in Damascus.⁽⁷⁾ These actions enabled Tel Aviv's government to deliver a significant blow

to Iran and inflict substantial losses on the Iranian military leadership in Syria. The new Israeli approach targets active Iranian figures driving the "Axis of Resistance," marking a departure from the previous focus on Iran's infrastructure and proxies in Syria.

In the wake of these events, Iran's senior military and political leaders sought to amplify their response, fluctuating between denunciations, threats and calls for their government to counter the Israeli strikes forcefully. Yet, the most notable aspect of the Iranian reactions was the interpretation that the aforesaid Israeli strikes occurred because of a security vulnerability in Iran's ranks. These strikes occurred in an arena typically regarded as a premier Iranian security stronghold. This prompted questions regarding Israel's ability to obtain precise intelligence on the movements and meetings of Iranian leaders in Syria, especially in Damascus and its outskirts.

Iran and the Inquiry into the Source of the Breach

Amid a flurry of doubts and speculation, statements and news from the Iranian media hinted at the possibility of Moscow and Damascus being responsible for the security breach that compromised Iran's field leaders in Syria.⁽⁸⁾ Widespread speculation suggested that Damascus may have leaked security data about Iranian targets in Syria to Israel. Concurrent-

ly, there have been lingering Iranian suspicions about Russia's role, either directly by facilitating Israeli selective targeting operations through leaks or indirectly by possibly overlooking the need to inform Tehran in advance of such operations. This comes in light of the existing protocol of cooperation and coordination between Moscow and Tel Aviv, which requires that the latter informs the former about any impending targeting operation or air raid. This protocol would have allowed the Russian side to pass the targeting information on to the intended party, enabling them to evacuate their locations to avoid casualties.

Mounting tensions between Iran and Russia on the Syrian front are unfolding alongside their strained relations on other issues, including Russia's ongoing support for the UAE's claim over the three islands disputed with Iran. That being said, the intricate web of interests and their implications compel the Iranian government to refrain from any actions that could potentially widen its dispute with Russia in Syria. This restraint is driven by Iran's strategic considerations and priorities, such as Tehran's preparations for the post-conflict phase of its ongoing proxy war with both the United States and Israel. This phase necessitates Iran's preservation of one of its most significant leverage cards – its alliance with Russia – which is critical amid its confrontations with both the United States and Israel.

Furthermore, broadening the scope of their disputes could potentially lead Moscow to enhance its security co-

ordination with Tel Aviv. Numerous reports have already suggested that Russia is formulating new security arrangements in southern Syria, specifically in the Golan Heights, to manage the potential escalation between Israel and Iranian militias in that region.

Conclusion

Based on the above, it is evident that the triangular relationship between Iran, Israel and Russia in Syria is becoming increasingly strained and complex. This is mainly due to Tel Aviv's efforts to neutralize the sources of security threats from Syria by targeting key Iranian figures who pose threats to its security. Concurrently, Iran is alarmed about Israel's potential plans to significantly broaden its future operations, which casts a shadow of uncertainty over Iran's relations with both Damascus and Moscow. Despite its challenges, Tehran's options as well as its room for maneuver, both within and outside Syria, are limited. Therefore, it will likely strategically manage its influence in Syria and de-escalate its growing disputes with Russia over specific issues. This is particularly relevant in light of the strategic challenges that the region is expected to face shortly, mainly due to the adverse effects of the ongoing Israeli war in Gaza on regional dynamics, including Syria.

Western Confrontations With the Houthis in the Red Sea

The United States has taken numerous measures, including military, political and economic ones, to contain the security threat posed by the Houthis in the Red Sea against the backdrop of failed attempts to end the Israeli war on Gaza. The Houthis have attacked Israeli ships heading to Israel in response to the ongoing Gaza war. Iran-backed armed groups in Iraq have also retaliated by launching attacks on US military sites in Syria. Meanwhile, Hezbollah and Israel have been engaged in a confrontation since the start of the Gaza war in October 2023. These developments reveal the serious danger of expanding the scope of Israel's war on Gaza in light of each party's intransigent position on the conflict. The expansion of the conflict will have ramifications for Yemen, the region and the entire world.

Military Strikes

As part of Operation Prosperity Guardian, the United States launched a series of assaults on Houthi strongholds to deter the group from jeopardizing navigation in the Red Sea. US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin announced that these strikes, carried out in collaboration with the UK against Yemen's Houthis, were aimed at radar systems and infrastructure for drones and missiles. "This action is intended to disrupt and degrade the Houthis' capabilities to endanger mariners and threaten global trade in one of the world's most critical waterways," he said.⁽⁹⁾

These military strikes managed to end the seizure of ships but failed to force the Houthis to back down from their belligerency. Although these strikes

have thwarted many attempts of missile firing and diminished Houthi capabilities by striking the militia's radar bases, drones and missile platforms, they have been unable to prevent the launch of missiles from Yemeni territory targeting vessels or the dispatch of booby-trapped boats. Even though many of these missile launches have been deemed a failure, the concern remains of the possible targeting of ships and their hijacking. The aforesaid implies a continual threat to navigation in the Red Sea, which has severe implications for the global economy. In retaliation to the strikes, the Houthis have expanded their targets to include US and British vessels along with Israeli ships.

Political Pressure

On the political front, numerous measures have been implemented to pressure the Houthis into halting their attacks. On January 10, 2024, the Security Council issued a resolution denouncing the Houthi targeting of Red Sea vessels and demanding an immediate cessation.⁽¹⁰⁾ The United States also re-designated the Houthis as a terrorist group⁽¹¹⁾ and sanctioned, along with the UK, four Houthi leaders.⁽¹²⁾

In this context, President Biden's reversal of his predecessor Trump's decision to designate the Houthis as a terrorist militia highlights the US administration's inconsistent stance. It appears to base its classification of terrorist groups on its own strategic interests rather than objective considerations. This contradictory behavior forces regional powers, primarily Saudi Arabia, to continuously distance themselves

from the United States when it comes to handling regional crises. In general, US attempts to force the hand of the Houthis are doomed to failure as the militia continues to adhere to its positions.

On the diplomatic front, the United States and the UK continue to accuse Iran of supplying the Houthis with weapons, technology and intelligence to assault ships in the Red Sea. The United States also urged China to pressure Iran to dissuade the Houthis from continuing their actions.⁽¹³⁾ As reported by Reuters, citing four Iranian and diplomatic sources, “Chinese officials have asked their Iranian counterparts to help rein in attacks on ships in the Red Sea by the Iran-backed Houthis, or risk harming business relations with Beijing.”⁽¹⁴⁾ However, the Iranians assert that the Houthis operate autonomously and that Chinese ships are not at risk as they are not the primary targets.

The Repercussions of Recent Developments on Yemeni Reconciliation Efforts

Recent regional events have further complicated the already complex Yemeni crisis. By declaring that their strikes are in defense of the Palestinians, the Houthis are trying to enhance their popularity among the Yemenis, while the Yemeni government underscores the international community’s past mistakes that have inadvertently empowered the group to become a global threat. Consequently, Red Sea navigation has emerged as a point of contention between the two warring sides, imposing additional burdens on the United Nations in its quest for a swift resolution to the Yemeni crisis. Despite the ongoing mil-

itary skirmishes between the Houthis and the United States and the UK, UN Envoy to Yemen Hans Grundberg persists in his efforts to broker a Yemeni crisis resolution through the UN roadmap, via his talks with Houthi leaders and the legitimate government.

However, it seems that the ongoing events will likely hinder these efforts, as the Houthis persist in their attacks both in the Red Sea and in areas controlled by the legitimate government.⁽¹⁵⁾

The Houthi assaults in the Red Sea have ignited a new debate between the two sides. The government, while underlining its unwavering and principled stance on the just Palestinian cause and calling for an end to the Israeli aggression in the occupied territories, simultaneously accuses the Houthi group of drawing the country into a military confrontation “for propaganda purposes.” It asserts that the most viable strategy at this point is the restoration of state institutions.⁽¹⁶⁾

Conclusion

Regardless of the extent to which US and allied strikes can disable the Houthi military machine to secure navigation in the Red Sea, these actions will merely limit attacks, not eliminate them entirely. This gives enough cause for concern about passing through the Bab al-Mandab Strait. Concurrently, in the aftermath of the Israel-Gaza conflict, the fallout from the current events on Yemen’s political process hinges on the stance of the United States and Western powers on the Houthis and their political role. This is particularly relevant if a settlement is reached that permits the Houthis to play a role in state institutions.

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**IRAN'S RELATIONS
WITH REGIONAL AND
INTERNATIONAL POWERS**



The recent attack by Kata'ib Hezbollah, an Iran-backed group in Iraq, on a US base in Jordan has led to a significant escalation in US-Iran relations. Meanwhile, longstanding issues have caused tensions between Iran and European nations. The UK accused Iran of targeting Iranian opponents abroad and orchestrating the Houthis' attacks on the Red Sea. In this section of Rasanah's ICF, we will examine two significant topics as follows:

- Despite Simmering Tensions, the US and Iran Continue to Avoid a Direct Face-Off
- Iran Facing Tensions With the IAEA and the UK

Despite Simmering Tensions, the US and Iran Continue to Avoid a Direct Face-Off

The ongoing Gaza conflict continues to escalate tensions between the United States and Iran, bringing them closer to a potential large-scale confrontation that both sides are striving to avoid. What initially began as localized confrontations in Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, Yemen and areas surrounding the Red Sea and the Bab al-Mandab Strait have now extended to encompass Jordan. This expansion of the conflict has led the United States to reassess its red-lines and rules of engagement, with Washington holding Iran partially responsible for the actions of its militias. The evolving dynamics suggest that the conflict is indeed widening and may eventually compel both parties into a confrontation they are diligently seeking to avoid.

Confrontation on Multiple Fronts Via Proxies

Washington has accused Iran of instigating and supporting Houthi attacks on ships, presenting its case before the UN Security Council. Despite Iran's official objections to this accusation, on January 10, 2024, the United States successfully passed Security Council Resolution No. 2722. Acting in conjunction with the UK on January 12, the United States launched attacks on several Houthi military sites in Yemen, a move condemned by Iran, a supporter of the Houthis. The United States had previously urged Iran to cease its support for the Houthis, including providing the militia with various anti-ship missile capabilities, coastal radar systems and ship movement data.

Iran opted not to heed this call and instead, shortly after British warnings, directed the destroyer Alborz toward the Red Sea via the Bab al-Mandab Strait. Tehran also endorsed Houthi actions targeting ships associated with Israel en route to the Red Sea. This move appeared to convey two messages: first, Iran's assertion of its right to a permanent presence in the Red Sea and nearby vital corridors; second, its steadfast support for the Houthis.⁽¹⁾ Iran has managed to carry out several attacks in the Red Sea through its proxy, the Houthis, while the United States has struggled to garner Arab or international support to address this challenge. Despite joint efforts with the UK, Houthi attacks on commercial vessels have not stopped.

Iran distanced itself from the attack carried out by Iranian proxies in Iraq against the US base, Tower 22, in the Rukban area on the Syrian and Jordanian border, resulting in the deaths of three US soldiers and injuries inflicted on 30 others, mainly in response to the targeting of a deputy leader of the Popular Mobilization Forces and the primary official responsible for Baghdad's security Mushtaq Talib Al-Saidi. In response, the US State Department attributed responsibility to militias supported by the IRGC for attacks on US forces in Iraq and Syria. Iran sought to mitigate US reactions by affirming through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Iranian mission to the United Nations that it did not seek to broaden the conflict's scope, and that resistance factions in the region do not take

orders from Tehran when it comes to their decisions and actions, and that Tehran bears no responsibility for the attacks.^[2]

The attacks carried out by Iranian-affiliated militias in Iraq, Syria and subsequently Jordan, along with US responses targeting the headquarters of the Popular Mobilization Forces and some of its leaders, created pressures and challenges for the US presence in the region. For example, Iraqi public pressure prompted the Iraqi government to announce its intention to establish a bilateral committee to end the presence of international forces, led by the United States, in Iraq. Additionally, the Biden administration has started discussions about withdrawing US forces from Syria. These developments align with Tehran’s long-term goal of ending the US presence in Iraq and the broader region, a strategy it

has been pursuing for some time.

Similarly, in Lebanon, Hezbollah, Iran’s proxy, rebuffed Washington’s initial proposals to de-escalate tensions with Israel, such as withdrawing its fighters from the border. However, it maintained open diplomatic channels to prevent a full-blown war, aligning with Iran’s strategy of unity across various arenas. Iran seeks to link regional truces with the Gaza ceasefire, viewing any weakening of resistance parties as a threat to its influence and territorial integrity in the future.

While Iran and its proxies disrupt Washington’s regional calculations, the latter has ramped up sanctions targeting entities affiliated with and supporting Iran in a bid to diminish its influence. The following table outlines the notable sanctions imposed during January 2024:

Date	Measure
January 12	The US Treasury Department added two companies based in Hong Kong and the UAE to its sanctions list, citing their involvement in activities linked to Iran and the Yemeni Ansarallah group.
January 17	Inclusion of the Ansarallah group on the list of Specially Designated Global Terrorist groups.
January 19	A man was sentenced to prison by the US Department of Justice for unlawfully sending large equipment to Iran, breaching US sanctions.
January 22	The United States acted against Fly Baghdad, an Iraqi airline, and its CEO by placing them on the sanctions lists. This move was in response to their alleged support for the Quds Force of the IRGC and militias linked to Iran in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon. Additionally, two aircraft registered in Iraq and owned by Fly Baghdad were classified as prohibited property. Furthermore, the United States designated three leaders and supporters of Kata’ib Hezbollah, an Iranian-aligned militia in Iraq associated with the Quds Force, along with a company accused of facilitating business and money laundering for Kata’ib Hezbollah’s benefit.

January 25	The United States and the UK jointly imposed sanctions on four military officials belonging to Ansarallah. These sanctions were in response to their alleged involvement in supporting recent attacks carried out by the group.
January 29	Both the United States and the UK enforced sanctions on a network of individuals implicated in targeting Iranian dissidents at the behest of Iran, along with certain high-ranking members of the IRGC. Additionally, the 840th Revolutionary Guards Unit was added to the sanctions lists of both countries.

Source: Prepared by Unit of Regional and International Studies, the International Institute for Iranian Studies (Rasanah), 2024.

Maritime Attacks and Nuclear Concerns

Besides the ongoing regional tensions, Iran is adopting strategies to complicate US decision-making, capitalizing on the Biden administration's reluctance to engage in direct conflict with Tehran, particularly against the backdrop of the upcoming US elections. For instance, on January 11, 2023, Iranian naval forces conducted a helicopter-borne landing operation to seize an oil tanker near the coast of Oman, citing a judicial warrant.⁽³⁾ Washington condemned the action as "illegal," warning that further attempts by Tehran to disrupt shipping in the strait could escalate into direct military confrontation with the United States — a scenario the latter has been keen to avoid thus far.⁽⁴⁾

Amid escalating tensions, Iran successfully launched three satellites into orbit, heightening US apprehensions regarding Tehran's ballistic missile program and nuclear aspirations. The United States suspects Iran of using this satellite launch as a cover to advance its ballistic missile capabilities, further complicating the situation.

Additionally, US officials have raised concerns about Russia's collaboration with Iran, alleging that Moscow is aiding Tehran in enhancing its satellite reconnaissance capabilities and providing extensive defense cooperation, including in missiles, military electronics and air defense systems. Moreover, Russia's interest in acquiring medium-range ballistic missiles is seen as an attempt to bolster its defense capabilities while engaging in an indirect conflict with the West, particularly in Ukraine.⁽⁵⁾

Iran is adopting a policy of nuclear ambiguity, using it as a leverage tool amid the ongoing conflict or to exploit current exceptional circumstances to advance its nuclear program. Director General of the International Atomic Energy Agency Rafael Grossi expressed concern about the lack of dialogue channels with Iran and the dwindling diplomatic efforts. He warned that the escalation in the Gaza conflict could push Iran toward possessing nuclear weapons, particularly if the conflict widens and Iran's influence or borders face increased threats. There are also apprehensions that Iran might adjust its nuclear stance in anticipation of the

US elections, possibly with a return of Trump to power, as diplomatic avenues seem bleak. However, it is unlikely that the Iranian establishment would gamble on any nuclear strategy that could pose an existential threat to the republic.

Conclusion

Iran has played a significant role in fueling conflict contrary to the wishes of the United States. Recent developments in January indicate an expanding confrontation between Washington and Tehran, affecting new arenas and risking regional and international security, notably in the Red Sea region. However, this confrontation remains

indirect, primarily through proxies. Both sides have been cautious to avoid direct conflict, recognizing that it would not serve their long-term interests in the region and globally. Nevertheless, the possibility of direct confrontation cannot be ruled out entirely, given the significant conflicting interests at play. Escalating damage to shipping routes and its potential exacerbation, along with the erosion of the United States' regional influence and deterrence capabilities against Iran and its allies, could further fuel tensions.

Iran Facing Tensions With the IAEA and the UK

Iran-Europe relations remain marred by friction over human rights, the nuclear deal, and more recently, terrorism and piracy by the Houthis in the Red Sea. The status quo prevailed regarding the plight of detained foreign nationals but the galloping advances in Iran's nuclear program led to an unusual expression of alarm by the IAEA chief. This part of the ICF for January discusses Iran's nuclear maneuvers and the continuous development of its nuclear program, the eruption of disagreement and the exchange of accusations between Tehran and London against the backdrop of the UK's new sanctions on Iran, and the repercussions of these developments on the future of bilateral relations.

The Nuclear Gambit

Iran is "restricting cooperation in a very unprecedented way" and is punishing the agency for the actions taken by the United States and European countries, said IAEA Director-General Rafael Mariano Grossi at the World Economic Forum in Davos.⁽⁶⁾ He termed Iran's behavior as "unacceptable" for the agency which is being held "hostage" due to political disputes with others. Grossi said that diplomacy is vital "to prevent the situation deteriorating to a degree where it would be impossible to retrieve it." The IAEA noted that Tehran is not providing "the whole range of information" and responding to its specific questions about its nuclear activities. In December, the IAEA reported an in-

crease in uranium enrichment to 60%. The picture is blurry as the agency's access remains extremely limited though Iran is obligated to be transparent. "Iran is the only non-nuclear weapon state which is enriching uranium at this very, very high level – very close to weapons grade," Grossi told The National.⁽⁷⁾ The IAEA chief visited Iran last March in a bid to save the JCPOA and halt the clandestine activities before they became too alarming.

Now he observes, "A snapshot shows a programme which is galloping ahead, moving ahead with ambitious goals. We have nothing against that. But we say the visibility of the international inspectorate, the IAEA, must be commensurate with those activities."⁽⁸⁾

Director of the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran Mohammad Eslami "expected there would be no significant progress towards implementing the Joint Statement, particularly with regard to JCPOA nuclear-related commitments, while sanctions remained in place."⁽⁹⁾ Iran's Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Nasser Kanaani reiterated that the environment for talks "still exists" if the talks are held "within the framework of our redlines."⁽¹⁰⁾ Earlier in December, Iran's Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian stated that the 2015 nuclear deal was becoming "useless."⁽¹¹⁾ On its part, Iran increased production of enriched uranium to 60%, according to the latest IAEA report. Eslami downplayed the report, saying Iran has not expanded its capacity to

enrich uranium to 60%, likely referring to the fact that Iran has not dedicated additional centrifuges for enrichment at that level.

France, Germany, the UK and the United States condemned Iran's move to increase uranium enrichment and jointly noted that such an action "carries significant proliferation-related risks."⁽¹²⁾ It also termed Iran's decision as a sign of "lack of goodwill towards de-escalation" in a "tense regional context."

Spat With the UK

Angered over the new UK and US sanctions imposed on certain Iranians for allegedly targeting Iranian opposition activists, Tehran issued a demarche to the British ambassador to protest against these "baseless accusations." "Following the continuation of the British regime's accusations against the Islamic Republic of Iran, Simon Shercliff, the British ambassador in Tehran, was summoned to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs ... and was informed of our country's strong protest," IRNA state news reported.⁽¹³⁾

Tehran criticized London for a "destructive and unconstructive" act toward Tehran.

"This is a bitter historical irony that a country that is the founder and supporter of organized terrorist groups, drug trafficking, and criminal gangs wants to make accusations against the Islamic Republic of Iran and its loyal and honest forces, who are at the forefront of fighting organized crimes," the official, cited by IRNA, said.⁽¹⁴⁾

Earlier, UK Foreign Secretary David Cameron condemned the "attacks by Iran-aligned militia groups against US forces."

Conclusion

Iran's relations with Europe have remained tense but stable since Tehran's decision to gradually violate the JCPOA clauses. Relations are likely to deteriorate given the continued support of Iran for the Houthis and its proxies' belligerence in other parts of the Middle East. Besides, a steady stream of detentions of European citizens visiting Iran, including some dual nationals, further strains bilateral ties. The Raisi government is continuing the policy of controlled direct escalation while ratcheting up tensions through its proxies elsewhere in the Middle East.

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Iran Case File

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