

MONTHLY REPORT

Iran Case File

March 2024

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The month of March 2024 witnessed a flurry of rapid developments and events across various dimensions in the Iranian domestic arena, spanning political, economic, military, and ideological realms. Concurrently, Iran's relations with key actors in the Arab world, specifically Iraq and Syria, as well as its engagements on the international stage with the United States, Europe and Russia, experienced numerous and interconnected interactions. These multifaceted engagements are anticipated to have significant repercussions on Iran's foreign relations in the near future. With regard to the internal political landscape, the victory of the "conservatives," particularly the "hardliners," in securing a majority of seats in the Parliament has heightened concerns among the Iranian populace. There are apprehensions regarding the potential escalation of restrictions on civil liberties and increased political exclusion due to the adoption of "hardliner" policies by the new Iranian Parliament. Concurrently, tensions seem to be brewing within the "conservative" faction itself, with a potential conflict emerging over the new speaker of the Parliament. This discord stems from disagreements between the outgoing Parliament Speaker Mohammad Bagher Ghali-baf, and certain "hardliner" representatives.

Economically, Iran adopts different methods for calculating unemployment compared to international standards, allowing for more control over the reported figures. Official statistics suggest a decline in unemployment

rates to around 8%. However, among the youth and university students, unemployment remains alarmingly high, reaching approximately 80%. Additionally, economic constraints and indicators from the forthcoming contractionary fiscal budget do not bode well for improving economic performance metrics, such as gross domestic product (GDP) growth and investments. These factors undoubtedly adversely impact Iran's job market, further exacerbating unemployment levels.

In the military arena, Iran has conveyed several military messages amid the developments stemming from the Israeli offensive on the Gaza Strip subsequent to Operation Al-Aqsa Flood. It has showcased its maritime capabilities, particularly in submarine development, given the ongoing maritime dimension of the conflict, currently spearheaded by the Houthi militia and its affiliates in the Red Sea. Additionally, there is intensified competition in missile and space capabilities, with Iran striving to secure its position by launching three satellites simultaneously. Geopolitically, the organization of the sixth edition of the Maritime Security Belt maneuvers, which brings together Russia, China and Iran in the Gulf of Oman, serves as a reaffirmation by these parties of their shared interests in ensuring navigation security in the region.

Ideologically, controversy has resurfaced in Iran regarding the issue of succession to the supreme leadership, following a member of the Assembly of Experts' announcement that the next leader has been chosen but kept secret to ensure their safety. However, opponents of this assertion, particu-

larly the hawza clerics, have refuted its validity, arguing that it contravenes the Constitution. They emphasize that the majority opinion of the Assembly of Experts will determine the future leader. Meanwhile, some philosophers and theorists within the Iranian establishment have sought to rationalize the significant decline in the political system's legitimacy, evident in the recent elections where millions of Iranians refrained from voting. They argue that the majority is not always right and that the true intention of the majority should align with religious and devout principles, rather than disobedience and rebellion.

Iranian foreign relations witnessed significant developments and events throughout March 2024, particularly concerning interactions with Arab and international entities. At the Arab level, in the context of Iran-Iraq relations, several motives underpinned former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's efforts to reconcile with his opponent, Shiite cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, leader of the Sadrist Movement. These motives include the growing divisions within the Coordination Framework, supported by Iran, regarding the extent of Iran's involvement in the targeting of US assets in the region through its Iraq-based proxy militias, purportedly in response to Israel's war on Gaza. There are indications that Iran may be influencing Maliki's shifting position and perspectives on various developments. Sadr's desire to re-enter political life presents several opportunities for reconciliation with Maliki. Both leaders recognize that neither possesses all the levers to lead the Shiite faction alone. However, challenges to

reconciliation continue to loom large, notably concerning the centrality of the dispute, since it chiefly concerns leadership and command positions within the Shiite camp, as well as the priority of marjaya supremacy within the Shiite faction.

In the realm of Iran-Syria relations, the Syrian minister of defense's visit to Iran occurred against the backdrop of complex dynamics and challenges facing both parties. The Iranian government placed particular emphasis on this visit, aiming to convey several messages. Firstly, it sought to underscore Iranian support for Syria and reaffirm its influence within Damascus, especially as the visit coincided with the 13th anniversary of the outbreak of the Syrian conflict. Additionally, the timing of the visit held significance for Iran in terms of managing the escalating complexities and challenges to its influence in Syria and Lebanon. This includes the heightened targeting of important Iranian centers and figures by Israeli and US forces in both countries. Therefore, Iranian coordination with the Syrian government becomes imperative to address these challenges and alleviate pressures facing the Iranian government.

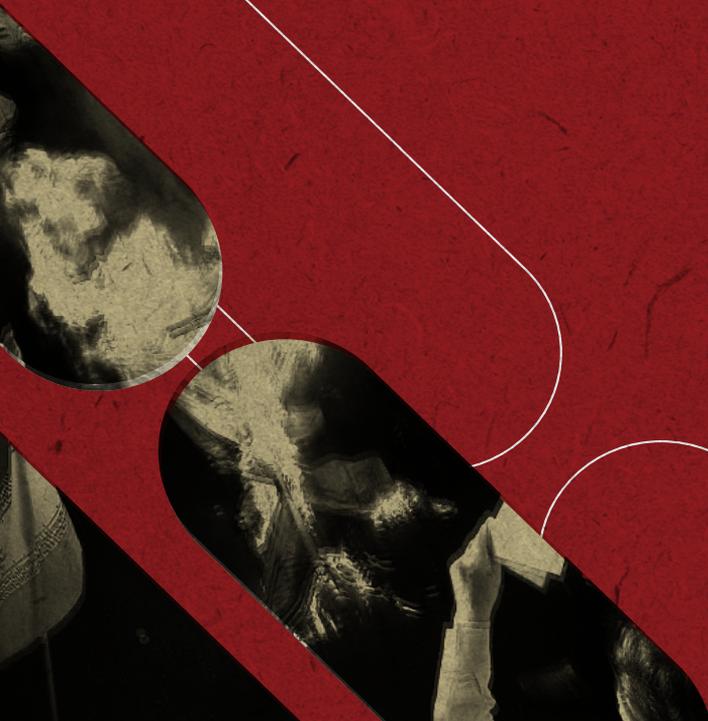
In the realm of Iranian interactions with international powers, there is a noticeable concern shared by Washington and Tehran regarding the potential escalation of tensions, prompting them to engage in secret, indirect negotiations facilitated through the Omani channel. The primary focus of these talks is to address tensions in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, particularly in light of Houthi attacks on transport trucks and naval vessels

belonging to Israel, the United States, and some of its allies. Additionally, discussions concerning the nuclear issue are also on the agenda. There is a likelihood that these negotiations may result in a simultaneous cease-fire, coinciding with a truce in Gaza.

Regarding Iran-Europe relations, the focus remains on traditional contentious issues. In March, tensions between Germany and Iran escalated following Tehran's involvement in an attack on a Jewish synagogue in 2022 by a German citizen of Iranian origin. In retaliation, an Iranian court sentenced a dual Iranian-Swedish citizen to five years in prison on charges related to threatening national security. Additionally, the G7 issued a warning to Iran against selling ballistic missiles to Russia for potential attacks on Ukraine, threatening the imposition of new sanctions. Given past experiences, it appears unlikely that either party will alter its behavior based on the reaction of the other party.

In terms of Iran's relations with Russia, the joint and regular military exercises conducted by both nations, often with the participation of China, serve as confirmation of their growing military cooperation. This cooperation holds significant geopolitical implications for Tehran and Moscow, as it strengthens their regional positioning in countering adversaries and competitors. Furthermore, it benefits their economies amid sanctions and pressure. This cooperation is expected to intensify in the future.

DEVELOPMENTS IN IRAN'S INTERNAL AFFAIRS



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

- A Potential Dispute Over Parliament Speakership Amid Concerns About “Hardliner” Orientations
- Iran Launches Three Satellites and Conducts a Joint Naval Drill With Russia And China
- Unemployment Rates in Iran and the Different Methods of Calculation Compared to International Formulas
- Hawza Interactions: The Debate Over the Next Supreme Leader and the Legitimacy of the Elections

A Potential Dispute Over Parliament Speakership Amid Concerns About “Hardliner” Orientations

The dominance of “conservative” factions, particularly the “hardliners,” in Iran’s Parliament, has sparked concerns among Iranians regarding potential political stagnation and decision-making turmoil. There is apprehension that if the new parliamentarians persist with their “hardliner” stances, it could lead to neglecting people’s interests and rights, especially concerning economic matters and individual freedoms. Despite securing the majority of seats, the “hardliners” are embroiled in a potential power struggle over the position of Parliament speaker, exacerbated by past disputes within the outgoing Parliament between its former speaker Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf and certain “hardliners.” A March 2024 report delves into these significant developments, focusing on two key areas: First, the escalation of extremist influence heightens worries about Iranian citizens facing further restrictions. Second, the prospect of “hardliner” infighting over the Parliament’s speakership adds another layer of complexity to the political landscape.

“Hardliner” Ascendancy Deepens Concerns About the Erosion of Public Freedoms

The outcome of the initial round of parliamentary elections reveals a notable absence of “reformist” and “moderate” voices in the new Parlia-

ment. The Guardian Council’s collective exclusion of “reformist” candidates and the defeat of “moderate” lists across Tehran and other provinces accentuated this trend. These circumstances have allowed “conservative” factions to maintain their grip on power in Iran’s Parliament in its 12th session.

The “hardliner” faction within the “conservative” movement has secured a significant number of parliamentary seats, overshadowing the traditional “conservative” bloc, which saw a decline in representation compared to the previous Parliament. This shift is highlighted by the former Parliament Speaker Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf, who ranked fourth in the recent parliamentary elections in Tehran. Ghalibaf’s drop in position is noteworthy, considering he secured the top spot in the same district during the 2020 elections. In the latest elections, the top three positions in Tehran were claimed by representatives from the Resilience Front, namely Mahmoud Nabavian, Amir Hussein Thabeti, and Hamid Rasaei.

The surge in “hardliner conservatives” in the Parliament has sparked concerns about the potential adoption of more rigid policies on various sensitive issues encompassing politics, the economy, and civil liberties. This inclination toward “hardliner” stances has been evident in the statements and positions of certain “conservative” representatives. For instance, Hamid Rasaei has been vocal in his support for compulsory hijab and previously criticized President Ebrahim Raisi’s administration for its perceived failure in addressing violations of hijab rules. Rasaei attributed

this failure to the emergence of what he termed as a new societal lifestyle promoting nudity and the rejection of the hijab, accusing numerous institutions of inadequately addressing this phenomenon.⁽¹⁾ With Rasaei's election, it is anticipated that he will continue to advocate for this issue, particularly if a new Parliament speaker replaces Ghalibaf. Another "hardliner" figure, Qasim Ravanbakhsh, a parliamentarian from Qom, has pledged to swiftly pursue legislation on the hijab and chastity in the new parliamentary session.⁽²⁾

The criticisms aimed at the government and relevant institutions concerning the hijab issue suggest that the "hardliners" will likely amplify the discussion on the hijab to a considerable degree. This indicates that the hijab issue may resurface prominently in the near future, becoming a central focus of events in the coming period.

Apart from the hijab issue, certain representatives in the previous Parliament, who have been re-elected, have voiced stringent views regarding the Iranian team managing the nuclear negotiations in Vienna. One such figure is MP Mahmoud Nabawyan, who secured the top position in the Tehran capital district. Nabawyan contends that the negotiating team handling Iran's nuclear program consists of individuals who previously collaborated with former Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif. Consequently, he emphasizes the urgency for President Ebrahim Raisi to promptly overhaul the negotiating team and enlist the support of revolutionary, devout individuals committed to the nation's interests. The objective is to

achieve an agreement that safeguards Iranian interests while taking into account red lines for the ruling establishment.⁽³⁾ Raisi has yet to respond to these calls, but it is anticipated that this issue will resurface in the future, especially if Iran and major powers reach an agreement on restarting nuclear talks. Such an agreement could potentially pose significant hurdles to any future negotiations or agreements concerning Iran's nuclear program.

A Potential Dispute Among "Conservatives" Over Parliament Speakership

Immediately following the announcement of the first round of election results and the determination of the overall composition of the 12th Parliament, a race commenced among representatives vying for the presidency of the parliament in the upcoming term. Currently, eight representatives have emerged as notable contenders, including the incumbent Parliament Speaker Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf and Manouchehr Mottaki who previously served as foreign minister in Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's government. Other contenders in the spotlight are Morteza Agha Tehrani, Hamid Reza Haj Babaei, Mahmoud Nabavian, Ali Nikzad, Mojtaba Zonnour, and Hamid Rasaei.⁽⁴⁾

Behind these anticipated candidates for the speakership of the Parliament, there are four main factions, all affiliated with the "conservative" movement. The first faction advocates for Ghalibaf to retain his position as the speaker of the new Parliament. This faction is working to counter the decline in the number of members supporting Ghalibaf and to enhance his

image, which has been tarnished by severe criticism and numerous accusations leveled against him over the past four years.

The second faction comprises representatives of the Resilience Front and “hardliner conservatives” who aim to assert control over the new Parliament and wield greater authority to enforce their “hardliner” policies across various political, economic, and social spheres. Despite securing a significant number of parliamentary seats in the recent elections, their numbers are not sufficient to unilaterally determine who will assume the speakership of the Parliament.

The third faction consists of “moderate conservatives” who secured their seats in the Parliament through the Unity Council list, backed by members with traditional fundamentalist tendencies. While they did not emerge victorious in the capital, Tehran, aside from Manouchehr Mottaki, they managed to secure a considerable share of seats in other provinces.

The final faction comprises a small number of individuals who entered the Parliament as “reformists” and independents. They are likely to form a parliamentary minority, rendering them unable to appoint one of their own as Parliament speaker. However, other factions will likely seek to garner their support, as all the aforementioned blocs that will later form within the Parliament will require their votes, whether for selecting a new speaker or securing backing for crucial decisions. Considering the shared stance of the “reformists” and independents against extremists, they may opt to collaborate with the “moderates” or even “traditional con-

servatives” instead of aligning with the “hardliners.”

Despite the initial expectations regarding the composition of the new Parliament and the potential change in its speaker, it appears premature to delve into this matter fully. Several factors contribute to this, including the fact that the total number of parliamentarians has yet to be finalized. Currently, 246 members have secured their seats in the new Parliament, while 44 seats remain to be determined. The runoff round is slated for Friday, May 10, 2024, encompassing 21 constituencies spread across various Iranian provinces. The outcomes of the second round of parliamentary elections might result in alterations to the composition of “traditional moderate” and independent representatives, who could play pivotal roles in achieving a balanced final composition for the new Parliament and in selecting its new president. Additionally, Ghalibaf may garner significant support from Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, potentially leading to his re-election as Parliament speaker.

Conclusion

In light of the aforementioned dynamics, it can be argued that the Iranian establishment successfully orchestrated the elections in favor of the “conservative” movement, consolidating its control over the Parliament. However, the absence of the traditional dichotomy between “conservatives” and “reformists” in the Parliament may pave the way for competition and divisions within the “conservative” ranks themselves. This internal competition could potentially result in the adoption of more stringent measures aimed at

pressuring the government on various issues. Consequently, the government may encounter heightened challenges from members of the new Parliament, contrary to previous expectations of potential cooperation between the government and the Parliament. With both entities now unified in their “conservative” affiliations, there may be a lack of consensus on visions, goals and orientations, potentially leading to greater internal friction and divergent approaches to governance.

Iran Launches Three Satellites and Conducts a Joint Naval Drill With Russia and China

During the month of March, Iran showcased a host of technological achievements in the military domain. It publicly displayed an indigenously developed air-independent propulsion system (AIP) for its submarine fleet and sent three domestically-built satellites into space. Iran’s navy hosted Russian and Chinese warships for Maritime Security Belt exercises.

Submarine Propulsion Upgrade

Iran’s submarine research and production has come of age as signified by various recent developments, including the AIP, showcased at the DIMDEX 2024 exhibition in Qatar.⁽⁵⁾

At the Doha exhibition, Iran’s Ministry of Defense participated with a model of its Fateh-class submarine with an AIP plug. The propulsion, once tested and deployed, will markedly improve the operational capabilities of the submarines, such as an

increase in underwater endurance. It is reported that submarines could remain submerged for up to five weeks before needing to replenish their oxygen tanks. Although possessing longer endurance, the AIP submarines must resurface to pump oxygen for storage after conversion into a liquid state (LOX) for submerged use. Their underwater operability is determined or limited by the LOX storage capacity.

The Ministry of Defense-affiliate Malek Ashtar University of Technology (MUT) has the mandate for research on top-secret projects such as upgrading capabilities of submarines, missiles and radars.⁽⁶⁾ Subject to US sanctions, the university boasts dedicated capabilities for testing various systems, including naval ones.

In line with its tradition, Tehran boasted about its AIP capability before fully installing and commissioning it in the Fateh-class submarine. It is reported to take a year and if successfully done, all submarines in the class will be upgraded too. The improvement is dubbed as “a qualitative leap from its predecessor, the Ghadir class with a modest displacement of 120 tons, whereas the Fateh class displaces around 600 tons.”⁽⁷⁾ After three Russian-supplied Kilo-class submarines, the Fateh-class submarines are already the Iranian navy’s most potent under-sea asset due to their firepower with four 533 millimeter torpedo tubes in the bow besides mines and anti-ship missiles. Acquired in the 1990s, the Kilo-class displaces 3,000-ton (submerged) submarines.

HI Sutton, a naval technology expert, believes, “AIP will not make the submarine top-tier; it is still a small and

relatively basic boat, but it makes it comparatively stealthier.”⁽⁸⁾

Though Tehran’s submarine development program began in the 1980s with North Korean cooperation, the Iranian navy today comprises a rather bigger fleet of midget submarines based on the North Korean MS-29 Yono class. The Ghadir-class submarines are a derivative of the North Korean vessel.⁽⁹⁾ Over the years, Iran has invested significantly in developing munitions for its submarines. For instance, it reverse-engineered a North Korean anti-ship torpedo and named it Valfajr. Similarly, Iran’s “indigenous” Jask-2 submarine-launched anti-ship missile tested at Velayat-97 and the Zulfiqar-99 drills is a derivative of the Chinese C-704 family. Hoot, a rocket-cum-torpedo, is, in fact, the Russian VA-111 Shkval. The Iranian navy is equipping its Fateh submarines with this weapon.

Launch of Pars-1 and Two Other Satellites

Iran launched the Pars -1 remote-sensing (RS) satellite from Russia’s Vostochny Cosmodrome in an orbit of 500 kilometers. The 134-kilogram satellite is equipped with three cameras and orbits 500 kilometres in space.⁽¹⁰⁾ It was accompanying two more military satellites about which no details were released, which are thought to be geographic information system (GIS) satellites. For a satellite to be in sun-synchronous orbit, it should be 600 kilometers from Earth. Iran’s Minister of Communications and Information Technology, Issa Zarepour, described the Pars-1 satellite as “100% Iranian.”⁽¹¹⁾ Iran has so far launched 13 satellites in the last two years.

The RS and GIS play a pivotal role in military operations as command, control, communication and coordination in military operations are largely dependent on the availability of accurate information for quick decisions for operational orders. Military forces use high-resolution satellite images in a variety of applications including cartography, intelligence, battlefield management, terrain analysis, military installation management and monitoring of possible terrorist activity.

Maritime Security Belt 2024

The sixth iteration of trilateral exercises between Iran, China and Russia off the Chabahar coast in the Gulf of Oman, involving over 20 warships, was held. Neighbouring Pakistan and Oman participated as observers. The four-day drill — the Maritime Security Belt — 2024 — was “aimed at strengthening maritime cooperation and safeguarding regional peace and stability,” read a statement from the Chinese Defense Ministry.⁽¹²⁾ China’s navy participated with a guided-missile destroyer and guided-missile frigate, while Russia dispatched the cruiser Varyag from its Pacific Fleet. The trilateral naval wargames have been a yearly fixture since 2018.

Warships of the three countries undertook the four-day exercise under the theme of “Working Together to Create Security and Peace.” The Chinese destroyer Nanning participated along with Iran’s Jamaran destroyer and Russia’s frigate Admiral Gorskov, and the three vessels maneuvered in a predetermined formation.

IRCG Navy Rear Admiral Amrollah Nozari, the commander of the Imam Ali Naval Base, stated, “We took part

in this exercise with three vessels and two fast attack crafts, covering an area of 17,000 square kilometers. This area includes three of the world's five strategic straits, located in the northern Indian Ocean region, which is a crucial hub for energy and trade traffic globally."⁽¹³⁾

Though the exercise was focused primarily on maritime shooting, joint search and rescue, communications, counter-terrorism and counter-piracy operations, the Iranian military gained an invaluable opportunity to learn from the Chinese and Russian navies besides testing the capabilities of its naval assets and personnel in simulated scenarios but using live ordnance.

Conclusion

Iran vehemently demonstrated confidence and the capability of its military technology and expertise of its armed forces, particularly since the UNSC sanction on its arms deal expired. In an increasingly geopolitical world, Tehran flaunted its defiance through the naval drill on the one hand and expressed self-confidence in achieving technological milestones despite decades-long technological sanctions.

Unemployment Rates in Iran and the Different Methods of Calculation Compared to International Formulas

The economic report for March 2024 looks at the pressing issue of unemployment rates in Iran, shedding light on the disparities in their calculation

compared to international standards and analyzing the ramifications of the new year's budget on the unemployment landscape. This comprehensive analysis is structured around three key axes: firstly, an examination of the current state of unemployment in Iran; secondly, an exploration of the differences in the methodology employed for calculating unemployment within Iran compared to international norms; and thirdly, an assessment of the implications of the 2024 budget on unemployment trends.

The Reality of Unemployment in Iran

At the outset, it is crucial to underscore the challenges faced in obtaining accurate unemployment statistics in Iran due to the government's sensitivity toward this issue, coupled with discrepancies in calculation methods that could potentially lead to a manipulation of final results, as will be discussed later in this analysis.

Nevertheless, the Iranian government's spokesperson has announced a decline in unemployment rates since Raisi assumed office, citing a decrease from 9.7% to 8.2%⁽¹⁴⁾ of the total workforce in Iran, compared to 11.3% in 2018/2019. This ostensibly indicates a downward trend, according to official figures. However, despite this decline, the absolute numbers remain significant, signaling that millions of Iranians are still unemployed, particularly concerning given that the labor force comprises at least 35 million individuals. Consequently, this situation has adverse implications for internal security and stability.

Furthermore, youth unemployment rates have surged, particularly among

university graduates. The unemployment rate among young people is estimated at 15%,⁽¹⁵⁾ while it soars to approximately 40% among university graduates during the year 1402 Hijri Shamsi (2023/2024).

Different Methodologies of Calculating Unemployment Rates Compared to International Norms

By international standards, the unemployment rate represents the proportion of unemployed individuals within a society's total workforce. Iran aligns with this standard; however, it diverges in its definition and scope of the labor force, termed the "economically active force." This discrepancy affects the calculation of the unemployment rate, often leading to a lower figure when measured against this larger workforce.

In Iran's classification, the economically active force encompasses a broader range of individuals compared to international standards. This includes those aged 10 and above who are either wage workers or unemployed. Individuals excluded from this classification are those under 16 years old, as well as those who are not actively seeking employment, regardless of age (such as housewives or retirees).

According to the Iranian classification, the definition of labor or the economically active force encompasses both wage workers and the unemployed in society from the age of 10 and above.

Iran's classification of the workforce extends to encompass individuals such as housewives, retirees, prisoners, school and university students,

family members working without pay, and conscripts. This diverges from international standards, which typically excludes such groups from the workforce equation. The variance stems from reasons like working without pay, lack of desire to work, or both. Additionally, this is due to the inclusion of individuals aged 10-16, a group largely consisting of school-age children.

To provide a clear illustration, let us consider a hypothetical society with 100 people. Among them, there are 50 workers, five unemployed individuals, and 10 housewives, retirees, and conscripts combined. According to international standards, the labor force would be calculated as 55 (50 workers + five unemployed). This results in an unemployment rate of 9% (five divided by 55 multiplied by 100).

However, according to the Iranian classification, the labor force size would be 65 (50 workers + five unemployed + 10 housewives, retirees, and conscripts). Consequently, the unemployment rate would be approximately 7.7% (five divided by 65 multiplied by 100). This discrepancy in defining the labor force between Iran and international standards leads to a lower reported unemployment rate compared to internationally accepted standards.

The 2024 Budget and Its Impact on Unemployment

The government's proposed budget for the fiscal year 2024/25 (March 21–March 20) signifies a contraction in real terms, with anticipated spending reaching around 2,429 trillion tomans (approximately \$49 billion at the free-market exchange rate), marking an increase of roughly 17%.

This comes amidst an inflation rate surpassing 40%. The budget proposal anticipates potential cuts in fuel subsidies, a projected 50% boost in tax revenues, and constrained oil revenues. Furthermore, there are no indications of progress in the nuclear dossier or the lifting of economic sanctions⁽¹⁶⁾ on Iran, adding to the economic challenges faced by the country.

This implies that the new budget falls short in terms of stimulating economic growth, fostering investments, boosting production and adequately developing societal services to effectively reduce the prevailing unemployment rates, let alone drive them downwards. Undoubtedly, unemployment carries far-reaching ramifications across political, economic, psychological, and security dimensions, ultimately leading to heightened rates of emigration, brain drain, and talent outflow. Moreover, it results in the local economy failing to reap the benefits of skilled labor and facing brain drain—with skilled professionals leaving the country.

Conclusion

The true extent of unemployment in Iran remains elusive, as calculations diverge from internationally recognized standards, allowing for the potential manipulation of results. Unemployment rates are on a notable rise, particularly among young people and university graduates, with figures nearing 40%. Moreover, the forthcoming Iranian budget indicators suggest a deflationary outlook, offering little promise for ameliorating the overall economic situation, including unemployment rates.

Hawza Interactions: The Debate Over the Next Supreme Leader and the Legitimacy of the Elections

A debate has flared up within the esteemed hawza institution concerning the potential ascension of Mojtaba Khamenei to the leadership role currently held by his father. This development prompts profound inquiries into the hawza's stance regarding Mojtaba's potential assumption of power in Iran. In close proximity to this deliberation lies the assertion by certain clerics that true legitimacy does not solely emanate from electoral processes but rather from individuals characterized by piety and righteousness, irrespective of mere numerical majorities. This debate unfolds in the wake of significant political events, notably the parliamentary and Assembly of Experts elections, both held on March 1, 2024. It is noteworthy that discussions on employing the Friday sermon in these elections were mentioned in last month's file. However, the implications of these discussions extend beyond the electoral period. Religious authorities have actively sought to shape the post-election landscape along two distinct trajectories. The first trajectory involves efforts to facilitate Mojtaba's succession to his father's position as the supreme leader. Simultaneously, there is a concerted endeavor to reinforce the legitimacy of the political system and counter skepticism arising from low voter turnout in the elections. These endeavors are categorized into

two primary themes: the hawza and the next supreme leader, the (nexus between) numerical majority and the ruling establishment's legitimacy.

The Hawza and the Next Supreme Leader

A contentious debate erupted within the hawza concerning the prospective successor to the current supreme leader, with some hawza clerics considering Mojtaba Khamenei as a potential candidate. Sadiq Mohammadi,⁽¹⁷⁾ a prominent cleric within the hawza, openly criticized Mousavi Jazayeri, a member of the Assembly of Experts, for suggesting that the identity of the future supreme leader should remain undisclosed to safeguard his security. Mohammadi expressed concern that such secrecy could foster mistrust among the populace, as it might imply hidden agendas or backroom dealings. He argued against Jazayeri's stance, contending that transparency and public trust are paramount in the selection process. Mohammadi voiced his concerns, stating, "This raises suspicions among the people. People will say there appears to be a certain person behind the scenes to assume the position of future supreme leader. I tell him that you have thrown the Assembly of Experts into the inferno of doubt."⁽¹⁸⁾ He then refuted Jazayeri's assertions, reiterating, "What you mentioned is fundamentally incorrect, and the issue of the future supreme leader is not a secret. Rather, the supreme leader will be presented to the Assembly of Experts at its due time, and their selection will be determined by the majority opinion of the Assembly's members."⁽¹⁹⁾

Although Mohammadi referred the matter to the Constitution and con-

stitutional institutions, he equated Jazayeri's words as tantamount to revealing a state secret. Then he tried to establish constitutional legitimacy for Mojtaba Khamenei's candidacy for the position of the supreme leader, explaining that the qualities of the supreme leader are mentioned in the Constitution (Article 109). Therefore, the supreme leader has the academic qualifications necessary to achieve justice and piety, the correct political and social vision, resourcefulness, courage and administration, and has full and sufficient strength to lead. Therefore, according to him, the conditions of the supreme leader are specific and unambiguous. He concluded from this that Mojtaba Khamenei has the right to be chosen by the Assembly of Experts, as he is a Muslim jurist who has been studying jurisprudence and legal theory in Qom for years. Therefore, he could be one of the candidates.

The aforesaid raises significant questions regarding the hawza's position on Khamenei's succession, particularly concerning Mojtaba's potential ascension. Do such remarks signal a precursor to Mojtaba's assumption of his father's position, or do they reflect differing viewpoints and discord within the hawza and government? However, interpreting these remarks reflect the hawza's desire to play a role in selecting the supreme leader, and its apprehension that a decision might be made without consulting it. It is important to note that Mohammadi does not represent the entirety of the hawza but rather a faction within it, and there exist other jurists who may refrain from openly voicing their opposition to Mojtaba's appointment. There are others who

remain indifferent and do not have a stake in who assumes leadership. However, another layer of insight can be gleaned from these remarks. Mohammadi alludes to Mojtaba's involvement in studying and teaching within the Qom hawza, suggesting his legal qualifications and close ties with hawza's jurists. This sets Mojtaba apart from other ruling elites who often distance themselves from the hawza due to their political engagements and roles within state institutions. Consequently, these remarks serve as a signal for hawza-affiliated clerics to potentially endorse Mojtaba as a legitimate member of the hawza community, possessing the necessary qualifications from a jurisprudential perspective, should he be selected.

The Majority and the Ruling Establishment's Legitimacy

The ruling establishment's intellectuals and theorists often downplay the significance of "plurality and majority" within Shiite political jurisprudence. They argue that the notion of majority rule is not inherently valuable, contending that the majority may not always be correct. Instead, they characterize most people as entrenched in "blindness," "misguidance," and other doctrinal terms commonly invoked in political discourse.

Some have raised concerns regarding the recent parliamentary elections in Iran, held on March 1, questioning their legitimacy. They argue that the representatives elected may lack widespread acceptance due to low turnout, with 59% of eligible voters abstaining from participation. Consequently, the elected representatives may not enjoy majority support, leading to doubts about the legitimacy of

their actions in governing the state. Ayatollah Alamolhoda responded to these concerns by asserting that, in Islam, the notion of majority is not inherently authoritative. Instead, reference is made to the majority only when doubts arise, or there is a clear favorable preference.

Moreover, he emphasized that the term "majority" in this context refers to the religiously observant and devout majority, not those who are disobedient or rebellious. Therefore, contrary to the directives of the Leader, individuals who did not participate in the elections do not hold sway over those who did, according to the principles of positive preference.⁽²⁰⁾ The recent remarks by Alamolhoda shed light on the mindset of the ruling religious elites regarding governance and legitimacy, yet they also carry significant risks. By dismissing the majority that did not adhere to the supreme leader's decree mandating election participation, they effectively marginalize a sizable portion of the political system, deeming them unreliable and their opinions inconsequential. According to this perspective, only those who comply with the supreme leader's directives are considered pious and righteous and deserving of consideration.

This stance reinforces the notion of election engineering and its formalities and undermines the entire political framework. Essentially, it suggests that the supreme leader holds absolute authority over decisions regarding participation, effectively nullifying the populace's role in shaping governance. According to Alamolhoda's proposition, it is not within the people's rights to remove or appoint

the leader; instead, it is solely at the discretion of the supreme leader. This echoes Khomeini's comparison in his book "Islamic Government," wherein he likened the people to young boys and the supreme leader to their guardian and custodian, akin to a father's guardianship over his young children.

This theory traces back to the foundations of the "Islamic Republic." In his discourse on the desired form of the Shiite state, Tabatabaei underscored its fundamental distinction from modern democratic systems, emphasizing Islam's unique character vis-à-vis "democracy." According to this viewpoint, Islam delineates between two categories of laws: immutable and mutable. While modern systems permit mutable laws to be altered based on the majority opinion (a simple majority of half plus one), in Islam, the mutable rulings are determined through consultation (shoura). However, crucially, they are contingent upon real-life rights and interests rather than mere numerical majorities⁽²¹⁾. Tabatabaei elucidated that the notion of majority in Islam transcends numerical superiority; instead, it pertains to the interests determined by the jurist. Alamolhoda's assertion further refines this perspective, narrowing down the definition of the majority to encompass only the righteous and pious who adhere unwaveringly to the directives of the supreme leader.

Conclusion

Some hawza clerics voiced objections to the assertions made by a member of the Assembly of Experts, who claimed that the identity of the next leader was known but kept secret for safety reasons. These clerics viewed this stance as a breach of the Constitution and interpreted it as potentially paving the way for Mojtaba Khamenei to succeed his father. They argued that Mojtaba, a qualified jurist with a background of study and teaching in the Qom hawza, meets the constitutional criteria for leadership succession if the Assembly of Experts chooses. On the contrary, Ayatollah Alamolhoda rebuked those who cited low voter turnout as undermining the legitimacy of Parliament and the Assembly of Experts. He contended that what truly matters is the participation of devout individuals who heeded the Leader's directive to vote. According to Alamolhoda, the numerical majority of those who boycotted the elections and defied the leader's orders to participate are of little consequence compared to the adherence of the pious and righteous. However, this perspective represents an attempt to redefine legitimacy in a manner divergent from the conventional understanding prevalent in most political systems and divergent from the explicit declarations of the Iranian establishment itself. Simultaneously, it tacitly acknowledges that the numerical majority is not in favor of the current government.

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IRAN-ARAB INTERACTIONS



The Middle East continues to experience significant developments with regard to Iran-Arab interactions. Recent reports suggest that former Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki is seeking to forge a rapprochement with his rival, the leader of the Sadrists, Muqtada al-Sadr. This could have far-reaching implications for Iraq and Iran's clout. Meanwhile, the visit of the Syrian defense minister to Tehran has garnered significant attention from Iranian officials, given the heightened crises and complications between the two countries. In this part of the ICF, we will delve deeper into these topics and explore their potential impact on Iraq and Syria.

The Implications of Maliki's Convergence Efforts With Sadr

Iraqi Shiite circles reported on the efforts of former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, the leader of the State of Law Coalition, to converge with his opponent, the Shiite cleric leader of the Sadrist Movement, Muqtada al-Sadr, amid the divergence between the alliances of the Coordination Framework, which comprises the State of Law Coalition. Maliki's efforts and messages through covert brokers to converge with Sadr raise significant questions about the real motives for the convergence with Sadr, its prospects and challenges.

Factors Driving Maliki to Move Closer to Sadr

The growing differences between the constituents of the Iran-backed Coordination Framework⁽¹⁾ over the extent of the military involvement of pro-Iran armed militias in Iraq in the Gaza war and against US sites as part of its position within the Iraqi political and military equation represent one of Maliki's most significant motivations to converge with Sadr. Maliki expressed his rejection of violating the rules of engagement with the United States and the Iraqi political and military equation in Iraq.

Many observers also link Iran to the shift in Maliki's position in order to heal the rift in the Shiite house, adversely affecting Iran's efforts to significantly expand in Iraq. Iran expresses discontent over the growing interests of some militias and their potential violation of the

traditional rules of engagement vis a vis the United States. This may evoke a US retaliatory reaction that adversely affects Iranian influence in Iraq, and entangle it in an open war with the United States. Iran's Quds Force Commander Esmail Qaani reportedly visited Iraq where he met with the leaders of some armed groups,⁽²⁾ a day after Washington held Iran and its militias responsible for the deaths of US soldiers at the Tower 22 base. His visit aimed to place pressure on militia leaders to reduce or mitigate attacks against US targets.

The divisions within the Coordination Framework also reveal that Maliki did not overcome the difficulties facing the Shiite leadership. Sadr's political retirement did not provide Maliki stability due to the presence of allies, which disputed with Maliki, undermining his influence in the Iraqi equation. In this context, he is concerned that the growing relationship between Prime Minister Mohammed Shia' al Sudani and the leader of Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq Qais al-Khazali could create a solid Shiite alliance which would be beyond his control and limit his influence. He realizes that encouraging Sadr to return to political life and devise a bilateral formula, Maliki-Sadr, is the best way to block the emergence of an alliance between Sudani and Khazali. It is perhaps what is most concerning to Maliki. He believes in the reality of the Iranian point of view that Sadr's isolation contributes to deepening divisions and paving the way for a disastrous Shiite-Shiite conflict.

Maliki read some signs as reflecting Sadr's desire to return gradually to political life. For example, Sadr

urged the masses to take to the streets to rally in solidarity with the Palestinians against the Israeli war in Gaza, carrying a message that he is still influential and has not lost the ability to mobilize the public. Sadr made a private and mysterious visit to the house of the supreme Shiite authority Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani. It coincided with an inter-Shiite discussion on the electoral law amendment to prepare the ground for early parliamentary elections. Sadr urged the current leaders to return to the grassroots to communicate with the masses and has done this on various occasions.⁽³⁾ The aforesaid is regarded as a precursor to Sadr returning to the political arena.

Chances of Rapprochement Between Maliki and Sadr

The likelihood that the conflict between Maliki and Sadr escalates is one of the most significant opportunities for their rapprochement. Both parties are aware that they do not possess all the decisive cards to assume the position of the sole authority over Shiites because Maliki and his ally, Iran, are aware of the pillars of Sadr's strength and pressure cards in Iran. Sadr's strength was tested in the previous rounds of conflict with the Coordination Framework. It was concluded that Sadr is an unbridgeable card and perhaps the most influential figure on the Iraqi scene.

Sadr realized the strength of the pro-Iran arms during the rounds of conflict with Maliki, which constituted a real test of the scale of the strength and influence of Iran-

backed Shiite alliances in the Iraqi arena, so they cannot be overlooked. Sadr failed to achieve his goals over the past few years because of the proliferation of weapons. He did not succeed in taking over the exclusive command of Shiites to consolidate the equation of government formation on a national basis. The Shiite conflict between Sadr and Maliki in the latest round centers on the question of government formation: should it be national or consensual based? Sadr is convinced of his failure to win the battle in future rounds because of the uncontrolled weapons card, which can completely destabilize Iraq.

The two major Shiite rivals: the State of Law Coalition and the Sadrist Movement are aware that the majority of the influential political forces in the Iraqi equation are almost completely convinced of the need to ensure balanced rule at home between the supporters of a strong nation-state and non-state actors and ensure there is balance in foreign policy (between regional and international actors) to achieve security and stability at home. This will save the country from the cycle of settling scores between conflicting regional and international parties, and instead, these parties can contribute to solving Iraq's complex crises.

The Challenges Facing Maliki-Sadr Rapprochement

The outstanding conflict between Sadr and Maliki is centered on the position of leadership over Shiites and whether Qom or Najaf has priority when it comes to religious authority over Shiites. Either side making concessions on the aforesaid

is out of reach. Both parties have influential pressure cards in Iraq, preventing further concessions to settle the crisis. This is due to the fact that the parties do not show any signs of reconsidering their position on the outstanding issue. Sadr holds onto the path of creating a strong nation-state, while Maliki pursues the path of preserving his interests in line with Iran's. This divergence renders Iraq vulnerable to the power of armed militias.

The conflict between Maliki and Sadr has been ongoing for more than a decade and a half. Sadr does not forget the fact that Maliki pursued a policy of exclusion and marginalization against the symbols of the Sadrism Movement during his two terms as prime minister, in addition, he has not forgotten the leaks attributed to Maliki that are offensive to him, and the efforts of Maliki and his allies from the pro-Iran alliances to influence the broad grassroots support of Sadr, in various ways. These include the delegitimization of his religious credentials. This was confirmed by Haeri, who was followed by the Sadrists before he submitted his resignation. He mentioned that Sadr failed to reach the level of *ijtihad*, and called on Sadr's followers to follow the Qom *marjaya*. Moreover, he tarnished his father's image and the legitimacy of his *marjaya* by saying that he had close ties with Saddam Hussein.

On the other hand, Maliki has not forgotten that Sadr prevented him many times from obtaining a new ruling mandate; Sadr's recent position prevented Maliki from forming the government that the current prime minister Mohammed Shia' al-Sudani

formed. Maliki has also not forgotten the current government's efforts to pull the rug from the State of Law Coalition and reduce the chances of Maliki's influence in Iraqi governance.

Conclusion

Maliki's recent efforts to align with Sadr indicate that the Iran-backed Coordination Framework is facing a significant challenge in reconciling the fundamental differences that exist among its members. These differences may lead to the formation of new Shiite alliances, which could potentially undermine the Coordination Framework's cohesion. Maliki's actions also suggest that Iran has a role to play in his endeavors and that certain leaders of pro-Iran militias and alliances in Iraq have personal interests that may conflict with those of the Coordination Framework. This could increase the likelihood of division and rivalry among the various factions, and potentially even cause some to break away from the Iranian line to pursue their own interests and gains.

The Visit of the Syrian Defense Minister to Tehran Amid Heightened Crises and Complications Between the Two Countries

Officials of both Syria and Iran are used to making mutual consecutive visits. The visit of Syrian Defense Minister Major General Ali Mahmoud Abbas to Tehran on March 16, 2024, acquired significance in terms of

its timing. It happened under new circumstances and developments in the context of Iran-Syria relations. Hence, the busy schedule of Major General Ali Mahmoud Abbas, and his meeting with Defense Minister Mohammad Reza Ashtiani, Chief of Staff Mohammad Bagheri and the Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council Ali Akbar Ahmadian reflected that Tehran paid special interest to the visit, especially to send messages to domestic and international audiences. Through this visit, Iran sought to confirm its influence in Syria as tensions stepped up with Washington and Tel Aviv due to the ongoing war in the Gaza Strip and the IRGC's role in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen. This file will address this visit and its implications by discussing the following axes: Iran's support to Syria and Iranian influence in Damascus, the continuation of bilateral coordination against Washington and Tel Aviv, joint support to Hezbollah and the preparation for the potential change in the security landscape in southern Lebanon.

Iran's Support to Syria and Its Influence in Damascus

The visit of the Syrian defense minister to Tehran coincided with the 13-year anniversary of the outbreak of the Syrian conflict on March 15, 2011. Hence, the visit's timing reflected Iran's eagerness to project that it will continue its military cooperation with the Syrian government.⁽⁴⁾ Through this visit, Iran also aimed to overcome the decline of its military cooperation with Syria. It has been over a year since the last visit of the Syrian defense minister to Iran, which

took place in January 2023. During this visit, the two countries discussed military cooperation, joint military exercises, and the provision of the Khordad 15 air defense system to the Syrian army.⁽⁵⁾ However, unexpectedly military cooperation began to decline since then. This coincided with the outbreak of Operation Al-Aqsa Flood on October 7, 2023. The ongoing war in Gaza since that date revealed many imbalances and the lack of coordination between the Iranian and Syrian forces to prevent Israeli strikes on Syrian territory and Tel Aviv's targeting of Iran's top military advisers in Syria. Lack of trust increased between the two sides; they exchanged accusations and held each other responsible for the losses resulting from the Israeli attacks.

The Continuation of Bilateral Coordination in the Face of Washington and Tel Aviv

Damascus and Tehran exploited this visit to continue military and security coordination against the backdrop of mounting attacks launched by Israel inside Syrian territory that targeted Syrian and Iranian sites as well as those belonging to Iranian proxies. This coordination was evident in the statement of Iranian Defense Minister Mohammad Reza Ashtiani during his meeting with his Syrian counterpart. He stressed the importance of countering Israeli attacks and working to deter Israel, noting the urgent plans and measures regarding this. This likely signals Tehran's plans to sign further agreements to enhance military cooperation, especially regarding air defense systems.

The intensity and scope of Israeli attacks stepped up following the outbreak of the Israeli war on the Gaza Strip. The Israeli government works to reduce and slow down Iran's support to the militias in Syria and consequently hamper its ability to manage the supply of arms from Iran to Syria and finally to Hezbollah in Lebanon. In this context, the timing of the new Israeli military strikes in conjunction with the visit were quite significant. On March 17, 2024, Israel targeted two sites in the Damascus countryside, including an arms depot. A few days later, another attack bore Israeli fingerprints was launched on various sites in Deir Ezzor at the Syrian-Iraqi border.⁽⁶⁾ These attacks reflected Israel's attempts to send counter messages to Iran and Syria, especially that it is willing to expand the scope of escalation and hamper the continuation of military cooperation between them. Israel believes that it is the main target of this cooperation between Iran and Syria.

Coordination between the two sides against US interests cannot be ruled out. The visit's timing also coincided with reports that the United States and Iran had held a round of secret and indirect talks in Oman in early 2024. They evidently decreased the attacks of the Iran-backed militias in Syria and Iraq against US bases. The most serious attack was against Tower 22, a US base on the Jordanian-Syrian border, forcing the United States to carry out a series of retaliatory strikes against Iran's pro-militias in both Syria and Iraq, which eventually led to a decrease in the attacks targeting US bases.

Hence, the visit was a desired opportunity for Tehran to hold discussions on the ways to continue Iranian-Syrian understandings at least for now. They ensure Iran's non-involvement directly in the current war waged by Israel in the Gaza Strip, and Iran is eager for this to continue in order not to complicate and strain the understandings with the United States. It is noteworthy that in parallel with the visit, Iranian factions and militias began to resume the targeting of Israeli bases instead of US ones by launching an attack on an Israeli air base in the Golan Heights.⁽⁷⁾ This trend may continue during the next stage, in light of Israel's determination to continue the military operations in Gaza and possibly carry out operation Rafah.

Support to Hezbollah and Preparation for a Potential Change in Southern Lebanon

International, regional and diplomatic efforts were made to settle the heightened crisis between Hezbollah and Israel to prevent the Gaza war spreading. The possible escalation of military confrontations between the two parties, and Israel's potential invasion of southern Lebanon to completely remove the security threats on its northern border, mean that Hezbollah, Iran and Syria have kept all options and possibilities open. Israel's quest may drive the three parties to coordinate with each other to deal with Israeli threats. In the meantime, several Iranian moves have been noted recently. In addition to the visit of the Syrian defense minister to Iran and other visits and meetings between Iran and Syria, Hezbollah's head

of coordination Wafiq Safa visited the UAE under the mediation of Syria and Quds Force Commander Esmail Qaani visited Beirut⁽⁸⁾ where he met with Hezbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah. From the perspective of the Syrian government and Iran, Israel's intention to expand the war toward Lebanon and threaten Hezbollah involve greater risks than those posed by the ongoing war between Hamas and Israel in the Gaza Strip. This is because of the centrality of Hezbollah to Iran and Syria, which obliges them to continue coordination to avoid potential risks.

Conclusion

It can be argued that Iran will face challenges in meeting the desired goals after the visit of the Syrian defense minister. The statements issued during and after the visit are common features of visits between

the two parties, especially to deflect attention from the rather meagre tangible outcomes while Israel continues to target Iranian sites in Syrian territories. These visits and arrangements can be a motive for Israel further expanding the scope of its attacks inside Syria in preparation for a new possible war in the coming stage. Israel attempts to undermine Iranian influence inside Syria, confuse the Iranian military system in Syria, and deter the Syrian government from returning to the phase of lack of communication which was apparent during the period between the start of the Gaza war and the visit of the Syrian defense minister to Iran.

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IRAN'S RELATIONS WITH INTERNATIONAL POWERS



The delicate balance of international relations is at play once again as tensions escalate between Iran and the United States, despite reportedly secret talks brokered by Oman. Meanwhile, Iran's involvement in regional attacks and arms support to Russia have significantly strained its relationships with European countries. On the other hand, cooperation between Iran and Russia in economic, security and military fields, including maritime navigation with China, has been noteworthy. In this segment of the ICF, we will delve into the ongoing tensions in US-Iran relations, Iran's provision of weapons to Russia, and the details of the joint naval drill between Russia, Iran and China.

Tensions Continue in US-Iran Relations Despite Omani Mediation

Despite the Oman-brokered US-Iran talks to contain the ongoing escalation in the Red Sea, for which the Houthis are responsible, and discuss the potential return to the stalled nuclear talks, March 2024 indicates that tensions are still the main feature of relations between the two countries. These tensions were reflected in the mutual accusations at the UN Security Council, the developments in the context of the Iranian nuclear file and the hostile actions of both sides, including sanctions and US pressure on Iran. The March 2024 file sheds light on the most significant developments witnessed in the aforesaid files, the impact on US-Iran relations and trends. It also addresses the following three axes: covert negotiations to contain the escalation in the Red Sea, the uncontrolled nuclear file, and the limited efficacy of US sanctions.

Covert Negotiations to Contain the Escalation in the Red Sea

The United States called Iran to the UN Security Council meeting held on March 14, 2024, to discuss the developments in the Middle East and to halt arms transfers and other activities that help the Houthis in their targeting of vessels in the Red Sea. Washington said arms transfers and other activities violated the arms embargo imposed by the international community. In response, Iran's ambassador and Permanent Representative to the UN Amir Saeed Iravani, sent a letter on March 18 to the president of the

Security Council saying that the allegations of Washington and London were baseless over the situation in the Red Sea and Yemen and that they were unproven and were used by the United States to justify and legitimize its illegal actions and military aggression against Yemen.⁽¹⁾

Despite the confrontation, indirect secret negotiations reportedly took place between the United States and Iran, brokered by Oman. These negotiations were regarding the security of the Red Sea and the Houthi attacks. Washington is attempting to pressure Iran in many ways so that it uses its influence on the Houthis to urge them to stop the targeting of US and Israeli vessels. If true, the secret negotiations signal the two sides' desire to contain the escalation and the failure of the US deterrence campaign against the Houthis.⁽²⁾

The Uncontrolled Nuclear File

It is still being determined whether the secret Oman-brokered negotiations led to any progress on the nuclear file, which is witnessing serious developments. The annual US intelligence assessment revealed on March 11, 2024, that Iran's advanced nuclear program has not yet produced a weapon. However, it warned that Tehran has accelerated the production and operation of centrifuges to enrich uranium, the fuel used for both a bomb and nuclear power plant. The report said that Iran has expanded its conventional and unconventional military arsenal.

The meeting of the IAEA Board of Governors held in early March 2024 confirmed this critical situation. The director of the IAEA, Rafael Grossi,

admitted that the UN agency had lost the continuity of knowledge about the production and stockpile of centrifuges, rotors, heavy water, and uranium ore concentrates in Iran. Despite the gravity of this situation, the United States and the European troika avoided severe confrontations with Iran. They contained themselves and merely issued a statement calling on Iran to halt its nuclear escalation while maintaining the sanctions that should have been lifted under the so-called sunset provisions stipulated in the nuclear deal.⁽³⁾

Thus, Iran seems closer than ever to the nuclear threshold. Some esti-

mate it is at zero distance with all its available enriched uranium quantities, advanced centrifuges, and technical knowledge. The risk has further aggravated after the hardliners in Iran tightened their grip on the Parliament and are likely to demand further stringent measures on the nuclear program, especially if Trump returns to the White House at the end of 2024. However, the Iranian president confirmed the peaceful nature of the Iranian nuclear program. This ultimately means that the Biden administration, which is preoccupied with international competition and involved in many world conflicts,⁽⁴⁾ no longer controls this file.

Table 1: US Sanctions on Iran (March 2024)

Dates	Actions
March 6	Sanctions on ship owners and two vessels for their role in shipping commodities on behalf of Saed al-Jamal, an Iran-based financial facilitator of the Houthis who are supported by the IRGC's Quds Force.
March 5	The FBI in Florida wanted Majid Dastjani Farahani for questioning on the recruitment of individuals for various operations in the United States in retaliation for the murder of Qassem Soleimani.
March 12	Sanctions in coordination with Bahrain on three Iran-based operatives and a financial facilitator linked to al-Ash-tar Brigades, an Iranian-backed group and US designated terrorist group.
March 12	Biden renewed the national emergency with respect Iran, which gives the president broad powers to unilaterally impose sanctions or other punitive measures and regulate trade.
March 13	The United States asked Panama to ban Iranian vessels sanctioned by it from using its flag.

Dates	Actions
March 15	The United States designated one entity and identified one vessel as blocked property for involvement in illicit trade on behalf of the Houthis. Sanctions were imposed targeting the Information Services Corporation and the Technology arm of the Central bank of Iran.
March 20	Sanctions on procurement networks based in Iran, Turkey, Oman and Germany that purchase goods for the Iranian Self-Sufficiency Jihad Organization.
March 26	Sanctions on further actors that helped in shipping goods and aiding the Quds Force, the Houthis and Hezbollah in carrying out financial operations. The new US sanctions targeted six entities, one person and two oil tankers.

US Sanctions With Limited Effectiveness

The Biden administration pursued the policy of sanctions against Iran along with embracing the path of diplomacy. However, its approach was more relaxed than the maximum pressure campaign adopted by Trump on Iran. Sources suggest that Iran benefits from oil sale proceeds amounting to 1.4 million oil barrels, mainly to China. The US overlooked the opportunity to restore comprehensive sanctions on Iran through the snapback mechanism with the help of the European Troika. Instead, the United States was content with imposing ineffective sanctions and overlooked the strict application of oil sanctions as demanded by some members of the US Congress.

Table 1 shows the US sanctions on Iran during March 2024. In March, the US president renewed a sanctions waiver to allow Iran to access \$10 billion in fulfillment of the prisoner

swap deal signed by the two countries in the fall of 2023. This rather relaxed US approach to Iran, likely emboldened Iran to show more defiance. This is evidenced by Iran's joint drill with Russia and China in the Oman Sea. This drill reflected a geopolitical dimension within the framework of the regional competition between the United States and Iran. In addition, Iranian authorities issued a judicial order to seize an American ship that Iran held while sailing in the Gulf of Oman in August 2023. The authorities justified this decision as a response to US sanctions.⁽⁵⁾

Conclusion

US-Iran relations are at a dangerous juncture as Biden approaches the end of his first term. His administration is preoccupied with the conflict in Ukraine, competition with China, the Israeli war on Gaza, as well as the internal competition that potentially brings Trump closer to winning a new presidential term ahead of Biden. The

aforesaid have led Iran to impose further complications on the outstanding issues, most notably the nuclear file, during the next stage. Iran is getting closer to the nuclear threshold, and it is using international and US conditions to strengthen its regional influence by encouraging some of its proxies, such as the Houthis. The United States has failed to deter their actions that target maritime traffic in the Red Sea. Iran also directs its militias in Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq against US targets, but without taking direct responsibility to ensure there is no direct confrontation with the United States.

Tensions Rise In Europe Due to Iran's Involvement in Bombing Attacks and Arms Support to Russia

Iran's relations with Europe showed no signs of improvement. However, recent developments in the relationship between Europe and Iran might lead to further tensions in the near future. This comes after an Iranian national was linked to an attack on a synagogue in Bochum, leading Germany to summon the Iranian ambassador. Additionally, European countries have warned Iran about the potential consequences of its excessive support to Russia with ballistic missiles. Further complicating matters, a Swedish-Iranian national has been sentenced to five years in prison for charges related to plotting against Iranian national security.

Germany Summons Iran's Ambassador

The German Foreign Ministry summoned the Iranian ambassador over Tehran's role in an attack on a synagogue in Bochum in November 2022.⁽⁶⁾ An Iranian-German has been sentenced to two years and nine months in prison for his role in an Iran-backed attack on a synagogue in Bochum.

The Higher Regional Court (OLG) in Düsseldorf found 36-year-old Iranian-German Babak J. guilty of conspiracy to commit aggravated arson and attempted arson. In December 2023, the court determined that the arson plot was orchestrated by "Iranian state agencies," while German security officials linked the plot directly to the Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). The culprit was sentenced to two years and nine months in prison. A Molotov cocktail was fired at a school adjacent to the synagogue. Babak J. was also found involved in a previous synagogue attack in Essen. He had plans for a third attack on a Dortmund synagogue but was arrested beforehand.

G7 Warning Over Ballistic Missile Sale

The Group of Seven (G7) warned Iran against transferring ballistic missiles to Russia for attacks on Ukraine. "Were Iran to proceed with providing ballistic missiles or related technology to Russia, we are prepared to respond swiftly and in a coordinated manner including with new and significant measures against Iran," the G7 leaders said in a statement.⁽⁷⁾ Tehran has reportedly supplied Moscow with a significant number of surface-to-surface missiles to help her meet short-

fall munitions. As one of the punitive measures, the G-7 may ban Iran Air's – the country's flagship airline – from operating flights to Europe. Since October, Iran is no longer barred by the UN Security Council from importing and exporting military hardware. The United States and EU still maintain the curbs. EU is already working on a plethora of sanctions against Iran and other countries aiding Russia against Ukraine.⁽⁸⁾

Swedish-Iranian Sentenced to Prison

In another blow to its human rights record and already troubled relations with Europe, Iran has upheld the five-year sentence for Saeed Azizi, a Swedish-Iranian dual-national found guilty of “assembly and collusion against national security.”⁽⁹⁾ The Tehran Province Court rejected the plea of the 60-year-old patient with prostate cancer who was arrested by security forces on November 12 shortly after he flew back from Sweden.⁽¹⁰⁾

Azizi (jailed since 2016) is one amongst quite a few foreign nationals incarcerated in Iran including diplomat Johan Floderus (detained in April 2022) over an allegation of espionage. Swedes are attracting Iran's ire particularly due to the award of a life sentence to Hamid Nouri, a former Iranian prison official, in Sweden for grave breaches of international humanitarian law and murder in 1988.

Conclusion

Iran remains undeterred by European officials' statements against its belligerent behavior on the continent and

against its citizens at home. Differences over Iran's nuclear program notwithstanding, it seeks to free the IRGC-affiliated citizens jailed in Europe over human rights abuses as well as terrorism-related charges.

A Joint Military Drill and Bilateral Cooperation Between Iran and Russia

Recent developments suggest that the relationship between Russia and Iran is steadily advancing, characterized by notable collaboration despite divergent perspectives on some issues. A significant manifestation of this cooperation in March 2024 was their joint involvement in military exercises held in the Gulf of Oman within the northern Indian Ocean alongside China. This military engagement was accompanied by ongoing economic cooperation across various sectors. Against Western pressures and sanctions, both nations are actively seeking avenues to sidestep these restrictions and collectively mitigate their impact. Their joint efforts aim to diminish Western influence, driven by a shared objective to counter US hegemony and reduce external pressures. This file scrutinizes the key developments observed in their relationship throughout March, shedding light on indicators and prospects for further collaboration. This file will primarily spotlight the joint military maneuvers led by the two countries' navies in conjunction with China and then examine the bilateral cooperation enhancements between Russia and Iran.

Joint Drills Serving Shared Geopolitical Ambitions of Moscow and Tehran

In March 2024, Iran, Russia and China orchestrated a joint naval exercise dubbed the “Maritime Security Belt” in the Gulf of Oman within the northern Indian Ocean. Over 20 warships participated, with observers hailing from Oman, South Africa, India, Pakistan, Kazakhstan, and Azerbaijan. The primary objective of this exercise, which has been recurrent since 2018, is to uphold maritime security in the region collaboratively. These maneuvers underscore the collective military collaboration among the three nations. Simultaneously, they occur amidst heightened concerns regarding international navigation in the Red Sea, where the United States leads a coalition to counter Houthi assaults on a critical global trade route.

Consequently, this joint exercise signifies a significant message regarding potential future military alliances in the region amid escalating international rivalries. It provides adversaries of the United States with a strategic foothold amid intense global competition over trade routes, sea lanes and aspirations for control, with repercussions extending to global supply chains. These maneuvers orchestrated by the involved parties could mark the initiation of broader maritime cooperation, serving their respective aspirations and economic and political objectives on the global stage.⁽¹¹⁾

Furthermore, the joint maneuver holds significant strategic value for Iran and Russia. For Iran, collaborating with naval forces from Russia and China provides invaluable military expertise across technical, weapons and tactical

domains. These exercises align with Iran’s ambition to bolster its naval capabilities and advance its expansionist agenda, a trajectory it has pursued in recent years. Additionally, in the broader context of the escalating indirect conflict between Tehran and Washington, particularly heightened following the Israeli offensive in Gaza, these maneuvers assume heightened importance for Tehran. Yet, for Moscow, the joint exercises represent a concerted effort to redirect its global trade away from Western constraints, particularly amid the ongoing conflict in Ukraine. By participating in these maneuvers, Russia underscores its determination to diversify its economic ties and reduce reliance on Western markets.

Bilateral Cooperation Developments

The collaborative endeavors between Russia and Iran persist steadfastly, notwithstanding the challenges and constraints confronting both nations. Among the noteworthy advancements in their cooperation are as follows:

Potential Military Deals Raising Western Concerns

In a related military context, reports are indicating Russia’s intentions to procure ballistic missiles from Iran. This prospect prompted a stern warning from the United States and its G7 partners on March 15, 2023, cautioning Iran against the potential consequences of transferring such missiles to Russia. It is noteworthy that Western accusations have surfaced, alleging Iran’s involvement in supplying Russia with drones utilized in the Russia-Ukraine conflict, alongside providing ballistic missiles to address Russia’s depleted

stockpile resulting from the war. Iran will leverage these transactions to acquire advanced Russian aircraft, such as the Su-35, and contemporary air defense systems. These developments provide insight into the rationale behind recent Western, particularly US, sanctions targeting both nations, notably amidst ongoing concerns regarding Russian-Iranian military cooperation. This collaboration remains a focal point of apprehension for the United States and its Western allies.⁽¹²⁾

Increasing Economic Cooperation

While both countries grapple with international isolation and stringent Western sanctions, there are indications of a surge in their cooperation, especially on the economic and commercial fronts. Notably, trade in goods between Iran and Russia has surged by 77%⁽¹³⁾, accompanied by efforts to expand cooperation areas, particularly in the oil and gas sector.

In March, an investment initiative in transportation and transit was unveiled to amplify the volume of goods transported via land, sea, and railway routes connecting the two nations. Additionally, discussions led by the Iranian Minister of Energy explored linking the Iranian electricity grid with Russia's via Azerbaijan,⁽¹⁴⁾ resulting in the signing of 19 cooperation agreements to bolster relations further. Russia appears poised to finalize a comprehensive cooperation agreement with Iran, potentially paving the way for a more profound development in their relationship.⁽¹⁵⁾ Concurrently, efforts are underway to establish a trade corridor traversing Azerbaijan and Iran, leading to Iranian ports in the Arabian Gulf. Anticipated to conclude by 2028, this corridor promises to reduce transit time by 25% to 30%

between Russia and ports in the Arabian Gulf and Mumbai, aligning with the countries' endeavors to circumvent and overcome sanctions.⁽¹⁶⁾

Security Cooperation

Russian and Iranian collaboration extended beyond economic and commercial realms to security cooperation. According to a Reuters report, Iran shared intelligence with Russia regarding an attack on a music hall in Moscow, which claimed the lives of numerous individuals. Tehran obtained this information during the interrogation of detainees linked to bombings in the city of Kerman in January 2023.⁽¹⁷⁾

Conclusion

The prevailing circumstances faced by Russia and Iran have spurred a deepening of economic and military cooperation between the two nations. Evidently, interactions on these fronts bolster their ongoing geopolitical endeavors and serve their interests regionally and internationally amidst the Russia-Ukraine conflict and the Gaza war. These conflicts pose formidable challenges, restrictions, and confrontations with the United States and the broader Western sphere. There is little doubt that the trajectory of their relationship will witness further collaboration in the foreseeable future, mainly as they contend with a shared challenge: devising channels and mechanisms to confront isolation and pressure while also countering and neutralizing US pressures and thwarting the United States ambitions to instigate regional upheavals that undermine their influence. These concerted efforts are already underway, shaped by a strategic imperative to compete beyond critical arenas, thereby averting confrontations deemed too costly.

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