

MONTHLY REPORT

Iran Case File

April 2024

Your window on Iran from inside and abroad



ISSN 1808-8020



9 771650 832508



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April 2024

ISSN 1658 - 8320

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In April 2024, significant developments unfolded across the political, economic, military, social, and ideological spectrums. Iranian relations with neighboring Arab states, particularly those in the Gulf region, Iraq and Syria, as well as internationally with the United States, saw complex and interconnected dynamics. These interactions are anticipated to have lasting implications for Iran's foreign affairs in the foreseeable future.

Internally, at the political level, Iran experienced a range of reactions following its missile and drone strikes against Israel. Some Iranians viewed these attacks as justified responses to Israeli incursions on Iranian sovereignty in addition to Israel's targeting of Iranian military figures and scholars. Supporters of the Iranian government organized rallies in several cities to endorse these strikes. However, criticism also emerged, with some viewing the attacks as ineffective in advancing Iran's interests. Certain voices characterized the strikes as a political and military setback. In response to dissent, Iranian security and judicial authorities employed various tactics to suppress opposition, including threats of legal action, accusations of treason, and summoning activists for questioning.

Economically, following the Iranian attacks on Israel on April 13, 2024, the Iranian economy faced adverse consequences, including a depreciation of the local currency to around 70,000 tomans per dollar and a decrease in stock market indicators due to concerns

about the potential impact of Israeli retaliation on Iran's economy. While the global impact of the strike was relatively minor, the primary apprehension centered on Israeli responses and the broader ramifications of heightened tensions between the two nations for global economic stability. Given the unpreparedness of major economies such as the United States, Europe and China to shoulder additional economic burdens, particularly amidst existing challenges, these nations urged Israel to pursue a path of de-escalation rather than further confrontation. In response, Israel's military actions remained restrained, leading to a cautious restoration of calm in financial markets and a reduction in fears of escalating instability in the Middle East. However, concerns persisted regarding disruptions to international trade and the global economy, particularly stemming from threats to maritime navigation in the Red Sea posed by groups like the Houthis. These ongoing challenges underscored the interconnectedness of regional conflicts with broader economic ramifications, highlighting the importance of diplomatic efforts to mitigate tensions and safeguard international trade routes.

Concerning the military domain, the ongoing conflict between Iran and Israel has transitioned from covert engagements to overt confrontation. The escalation began with Israel's strike on a building associated with the Iranian embassy in Damascus, resulting in the deaths of notable

IRGC leaders. In retaliation, Tehran launched a direct attack, marking a significant departure from previous tactics, with its messaging carrying more political weight than military intent. Subsequently, Tel Aviv responded in kind, focusing on targets with political significance rather than pursuing purely military objectives. One such action included the targeting of the air defense system in close proximity to Iranian nuclear facilities. This exchange of attacks concluded a round of escalation, effectively reinstating the previous norms of competition between the two sides.

On the societal level, the hijab remains a point of contention between society and the Iranian state. Despite the controversy and protests that this issue caused that almost toppled the ruling establishment, the Iranian authorities remain committed to their vision, which was evident this time in the Noor Plan to deal with what the government calls "combating bad hijab" by the security forces. Reactions to this plan varied at the official and popular levels, which can be considered an indication of upcoming legislation, most notably the hijab law, which is still in the corridors of Parliament.

In an ideological twist, Ayatollah Kazem Seddiqi, the Friday prayer leader of Tehran and the head of the Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice, faced accusations of corruption, which were subsequently proven against him. Despite initially refusing to re-

sign and launching attacks against his critics, he was eventually compelled to step down. The decision came as the ruling elite recognized the growing opposition to Seddiqi, evidenced by mounting criticism and public reluctance to pray behind him. This episode underscores the ruling establishment's efforts to maintain legitimacy by addressing corruption, even when it implicates influential figures within the religious establishment and those closely aligned with power. However, it also raises fundamental questions about the effectiveness of oversight and accountability mechanisms within the seminary and clergy, as well as the ruling establishment's willingness to confront corruption among its loyal jurists.

In April 2024, Iranian foreign relations with both Arab and international counterparts witnessed significant developments and events. Within the Arab sphere, interactions with Gulf countries, led by Saudi Arabia, continued to hold prominence as a pivotal aspect of Iran's international engagement. Despite the signing of a Chinese-sponsored agreement, which initially bolstered Gulf-Iranian relations, Tehran remains cautious of Gulf foreign policy and approaches it through a nuanced, bilateral lens. The Gulf states maintain a stance of preserving diverse options in alignment with their own interests and their vision for regional security and stability.

At the Iraqi level, various explanations have surfaced regarding the

resurgence of attacks against US targets in April 2024 by Iran-affiliated militias, following a period of decreased tensions and attacks. Firstly, it is suggested that the direct military escalation between Iran and Israel played a significant role, with Tehran realizing the depth of coordination between the United States and Israel, particularly evident in decisions such as the strike on the Iranian consulate in Syria. Secondly, the failure of the Iraqi prime minister's visit to Washington to secure a timetable for the withdrawal of US military forces from Iraq contributed to the heightened tensions. Lastly, the Iraqi government faces obstacles in its efforts to expel US forces from Iraq, in addition to the fact that Iran seeks to maintain its influence over Iraq as part of its expansionist agenda.

In the Syrian arena, Israel's intensified strikes on specific Iranian targets since Operation Al-Aqsa Flood on October 7, 2023, indicate a heightened phase in the Israel-Iran conflict within Syrian borders. These strikes, characterized by the precise monitoring of the IRGC's movements and a willingness to target perceived threats without hesitation, signal a new chapter in the ongoing regional tensions. Notably, the recent targeting of the vicinity of the Iranian embassy and the elimination of prominent Iranian figures in Syria underscores the gravity of the situation, conveying messages not only to Iran and Israel but also to the Syrian government and Russia. This escalation underscores the complex

dynamics at play in the Syrian conflict, with multiple stakeholders navigating intricate geopolitical interests and alliances.

In terms of Iranian interactions with international powers, the file highlights US reactions to the Iranian attacks on Israel. The United States played a significant role with regional and international powers in deterring the attack, opting for a strategy focused on exerting pressure and imposing sanctions rather than direct

military intervention. This approach, coordinated with allies, is aimed at posing challenges for Iran despite the gains it may have garnered from the attack, particularly in terms of deterrence vis-à-vis Israel. By prioritizing diplomatic and economic measures, the United States aims to address Iranian actions while avoiding direct military confrontation, thus shaping the dynamics of the regional power balance.

DEVELOPMENTS IN IRAN'S INTERNAL AFFAIRS

In April 2024, Iran witnessed a series of significant developments that impacted its political, economic, military, social, and ideological spheres. In this section of Rasanah's Iran Case File (ICF), we will delve into these developments and examine four key topics as follows:

- Reactions Within Iran to the Iranian Attacks Against Israel
- Iran and Israel: From Shadow War to Direct Confrontation
- The Economic Impacts of the Iran-Israel Escalation
- The Noor Plan: The Imposition of Hijab Before a New Law Is Issued
- The Hawza and Its Position on Corruption

Reactions Within Iran to the Iranian Attacks Against Israel

Iran initiated a direct military strike against Israel in retaliation for an assault on its consulate in Damascus, resulting in the deaths of prominent commanders and officers within the IRGC. Launched on April 13, 2024, these attacks mark Iran's first-ever direct military operation against Israel. The assault has stirred significant debate within Iran, leading to a state of discord between proponents, advocating for the attacks as a necessary deterrent against Israel and a response to the consulate incident and the loss of senior IRGC officers, and critics who express concern over potential repercussions for the Iranian populace already grappling with crises. This file delves into the perspectives of both supporters and opponents of the attacks, alongside the legal actions undertaken by judicial authorities against some individuals involved.

Position of the Proponents of the Iranian Attacks

Supporters of the Iranian establishment have voiced their backing for the attacks, with hundreds congregating in various Iranian cities to endorse the action. Some emphasized the significance of these attacks for upholding the IRGC's credibility within its sphere of influence across regional countries and within what is referred to as the axis of resistance, as well as among its supporters within Iran. The attacks were seen as a

timely opportunity to showcase Iran's determination and the potency of its missiles and military capabilities while also aiming to halt the targeting and assassination of Iranian military commanders.

Iranian journalist Shahriar Shahriari, writing in the newspaper *Iranian Diplomacy*, reflected on the outcomes of the Iranian attacks on Israel. He asserted that Iran has effectively demonstrated to the world that Israel, without external support, stands as the most vulnerable country. Shahriari argued that Israel's vulnerability stems from its reliance on foreign forces and the lack of independent political visions among its leadership regarding national interests. He contended that Israel lacks a national army and suggested that its leaders would opt to flee to their countries of origin in challenging situations. According to Shahriari, Iran stands as the sole Islamic nation capable of reshaping power dynamics and safeguarding its own interests, security, and those of its supporters. He claimed that Iran no longer relies on proxies to retaliate against Israel and maintains the capability to punish Israel, as well as any other country, if necessary.⁽¹⁾

Others highlighted the psychological impact of the attacks on the Netanyahu government, noting its escalation of meetings during the Iranian operation. The government urged residents in various cities to seek shelter in fortified areas and sound sirens in anticipation of poten-

tial damage from the Iranian attacks, including potential loss of life and property.⁽²⁾ This psychological strain induced by the Iranian strikes has led some to speculate that even a minor Iranian strike on Israel could inflict significant psychological distress on Israelis.

Iran's delay in retaliation to the Israeli bombing of the Iranian consulate in Damascus, which resulted in the deaths of several IRGC commanders and officers, was justified as part of a psychological warfare strategy against Israel. According to the Iranian narrative, one of the effects of this psychological warfare was that Israeli military officials intensified efforts to counter the anticipated Iranian retaliatory operation. This response included inviting the commander of the US military's Central Command aka CENTCOM, along with advisors, to the occupied Palestinian territories, and deploying US warships to areas near the occupied territories. Recognizing the potential threat of a direct Iranian attack, Israel took a series of military measures across the occupied Palestinian territories to bolster defensive capabilities. This included seeking assistance from the United States and its allies. Iran also claimed to have informed the US administration, Israel itself, and regional countries 72 hours prior to the Iranian operation. Additionally, the intensification of media campaigns and the promotion of potential Iranian attacks against Israel during the three days preceding the Iranian operation were all cited

as part of the psychological warfare strategy against Israel.⁽³⁾

Among the Iranian responses in support of the operation against Israel was a calculation of the financial cost incurred. Iranians contend that the attack, executed within a few hours using missiles and drones that are not among Iran's most powerful, had disproportionately high costs for Israel and its allies in countering Iranian aircraft and drones. This assessment was likely based on Israel and its allies deploying large quantities of anti-aircraft missiles to intercept Iranian missiles and drones. Israeli reports, including statements from Rem Aminush, an officer and former chief financial advisor in the Israeli army, supported this claim, estimating the combined cost borne by the armies of Israel, the US, UK, France and Jordan to be over a billion dollars.⁽⁴⁾

Opponents of the Attacks and the Ruling Establishment's Measures Against Them

In contrast to supportive sentiments, some argue that the attacks did not yield any tangible gains for Iran. Instead, they perceive it as a display of weakness on the part of the Iranian government, as it failed to destroy any targets in Israel. This perceived lack of effectiveness has led to ridicule among Iranians. Critics contend that had the Iranian government continued its psychological warfare against Israel instead of resorting to direct military action, better results could have been achieved.⁽⁵⁾

“Reformist” political activist Muhammad Ali Abtahi took to the X platform to condemn war as a detrimental phenomenon that humanity should strive to prevent.⁽⁶⁾ Meanwhile, journalist Mehdi Mahdavi Azad, known for his opposition to the government and residing abroad, emphasized the substantial financial cost incurred by the Iranian economy due to the attack, branding it a “strategic mistake.” Azad drew parallels to a previous Iranian attack on Pakistan last December, the motives behind which remain unclear.⁽⁷⁾ Similarly, Hamed Shibanirad viewed the Iranian attack on Israel as an “ideological, political, and military defeat” for the Iranian political system, while constituting a “political victory for Israel.” Shibanirad noted that in the days preceding the attacks, there was international pressure on Israel due to its actions against Palestinians in Gaza. However, following the Iranian attacks, there was a noticeable international consensus in favor of Israel.⁽⁸⁾

Despite widespread opposition among Iranians to escalating policies against Israel due to concerns about potential repercussions on the Iranian populace, the Iranian government is actively suppressing dissenting voices opposing the war. Employing various tactics, including threats of prosecution and accusations of treason, the government seeks to silence dissent. Additionally, it restricts domestic media from disseminating public opinions critical of the war effort.⁽⁹⁾

Amid mounting criticisms, the Iranian judiciary has taken action by summoning journalists and analysts who recently cautioned against the escalation of tensions between Tehran and Tel Aviv into a direct war, marking a departure from decades of hostility and covert conflict. Among those summoned is Abbas Abdi, a writer and “reformist” theorist, who penned an article titled “The Danger of Responding and Not Responding” in the “reformist” newspaper Etemad. Additionally, film director Hussein Dehbashi faced legal repercussions for his posts on the X platform, where he described the potential war scenario as “terrifying.”⁽¹⁰⁾ In response to critical reactions following the attack on Israel, IRGC’s Intelligence Organization issued a statement urging citizens to report any online activity supportive of Israel. They requested individuals to provide information and details about such web pages and their administrators for further investigation by the judiciary.⁽¹¹⁾

Conclusion

The Iranian attacks on Israel were not executed with the element of surprise, as both the United States and Israel were informed of the strike date beforehand. This suggests that the strikes were intended to be limited in scope, aimed at signaling the Iranian government’s capability to fulfill its threats and vows of retaliation against Israel. These threats were prompted by Israel’s targeting of the Iranian consulate in Damascus, resulting in

the deaths of several IRGC commanders and officers. Despite the limited nature of the Iranian strikes and their outcomes, Iran successfully carried out direct attacks without intermediaries for the first time. This marks a significant shift, indicating Iran's intent to establish a new dynamic in its conflict with Israel, thereby altering the rules of engagement. If this new equation solidifies, the region may face heightened tensions, particularly if Israel conducts targeted attacks within Iranian territory in the future.

Iran and Israel: From Shadow War to Direct Confrontation

Finally, the shadow war between Israel and Iran came to an end after Tel Aviv launched an attack on IRGC and Quds Force officers in Damascus in April 2024. Their conflict changed from an indirect shadow war into a direct formal retaliation. Tehran's spectacular yet ineffective barrage of attacks could not avenge the killings of its top commanders — causing almost no significant damage. Tel Aviv not only launched a counterattack to avenge the strike on its airfield but also took out Iran's air defense system's radar, leaving its Natanz and Esfahan nuclear facilities exposed. In this month of the ICF, we will discuss Israel's attack on the Damascus annex and its targeting of senior IRGC and Quds Force commanders; Iran's direct counterattack with a barrage of missiles and drones; finally, Israel's counterattack on Iran's Eighth Shekari Air Base and achieving its planned target.

Attack on Damascus Annex

An Israeli airstrike on an annex adjacent to Iran's embassy in Damascus, Syria, resulted in the killing of two Iranian generals, five officers and at least six Syrians on April 1. The en masse assassination of Iranian officers enraged Iran which pledged to avenge at a time and a place of its choosing. In line with its policy, Tel Aviv did not claim responsibility for the successful attack. Brigadier General Mohammad Reza Zahedi, the most significant amongst the deceased, was highly influential within Iran's security establishment as well as among its proxies in the Middle East. He was in Syria to plan and coordinate attacks as Israel has been going after Hamas since the October 7 attack while intermittently striking Hezbollah commanders and posts.⁽¹²⁾ An Iraq war veteran, Zahedi had earlier commanded the IRGC's ground and air services and served as deputy of IRGC operations.⁽¹³⁾ In December, Brigadier General Razi Mousavi, a close aide of Qassem Soleimani, was also killed in an Israeli strike in a Damascus neighbourhood. Zahedi was his superior who oversaw the entire gambit of operations through various proxies in the region. Besides, the entire team was taken out in one attack. Though the Iranian government claimed the razed annexe was part of the embassy and some international media outlets confirmed this, it was one of the rented buildings used which did not have diplomatic status. Iranian officials in private suspect the

Syrian government to have leaked the information about the gathering as the strike occurred when only IRGC personnel were in the building.

Iran's Retaliatory Salvo of Missiles and Drones

On April 13, Tehran started its counter-attack on Tel Aviv to avenge the killing of IRGC and Quds Force commanders and officers in Damascus. The airspace of Iran was closed for commercial traffic in a tell-tale sign of the impending attack. At 8pm GMT, Iran fired the first wave of drones toward Israel which was later followed by more drones and missiles. To confuse and overwhelm the Israeli air defense system, pro-Iran militias in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Yemen also fired projectiles against Israel. Interestingly, Hamas did not partake in the campaign. Alongside Israeli air defense and air force assets, American, British, and Jordanian militaries also intercepted the Iranian drones and missiles, marking the first large-scale countermeasures against a massive swarm attack. A few missiles hit an Israeli air force base where a few empty hangers and a parked C-130 suffered 'minor' damage. An Arab child was injured due to falling debris of an Iranian object. Israeli citizens were awake and ducked for cover as air raid sirens sounded in over 720 locations.⁽¹⁴⁾ Estimatedly, Iran fired 320 drones and missiles while around 30 were hurled from Yemen, Iraq, Syria and Lebanon.

Israel's Symbolic Revenge Attack

On April 19, Iran's Eighth Shekari Air Base in Esfahan was hit by an Israeli

counter-counterattack. Though Tehran denied the attack, but satellite imagery proved the damage to an S-300 mobile radar on higher ground. Iran claimed shooting down three drones before their explosion. Tehran portrayed that the attack failed as all incoming drones were detected and destroyed while not acknowledging the standoff missiles fired by the Israeli planes from Iraqi airspace. Tel Aviv reportedly fired multiple standoff missiles which Tehran could not detect,⁽¹⁵⁾ one of which struck the radar of S-300 air defence system near Natanz while the other exploded mid-air. Though Iran only claimed to have taken down drones, an Israeli official told the New York Times that the second missile was deliberately detonated by the air force as the first had successfully struck the intended target.⁽¹⁶⁾ Israel used quadcopter drones to confuse and distract Iranian air defenses. Satellite imagery revealed damage to 30N6E2 Tomb Stone radar, an integral part of Russia-made S-300 PMU2 missile defense system.⁽¹⁷⁾

To expose the coverup further, a comparison of two undated before and after satellite images of the base was published by news outlets to highlight damage to the S-300 battery.⁽¹⁸⁾ Israel's attack on the radar system sent a clear message to Iran i.e., the Esfahan and Natanz nuclear sites are vulnerable and could be hit. The Esfahan complex is only about 22 km south from the air base while the Natanz gas centrifuge enrichment plant about 105 km to the north.

Nasser Kanaani, Iran's Foreign Ministry spokesman, rejected the claims made in international media, stating, "Iran's defense system operated properly, the attacker did not reach their objectives, and the incident did not hold any military significance."⁽¹⁹⁾

Since the showdown, both sides are vigilantly observing the situation and weighing the future course. While Israel and its allies estimatedly fired missiles worth \$1.5 billion to shoot down predominantly inexpensive drones and missiles, the quest for cheaper air defense systems is becoming a dire need. For Iran, the vulnerability of its airspace has been profusely exposed, and solving this will not come at a modest cost.

Conclusion

Iran-Israel confrontation entered a new phase following the recent attacks. Iran's counterattack on April 13 and Israel's retaliation after six days revealed that the two countries are prepared for escalation if attacked. It means that the region is likely to be pulled into a new war in the future, with destructive ramification affecting all countries in the Middle East.

The Economic Impacts of the Iran-Israel Escalation

The Iranian drone attack on Israel on April 13, 2024, triggered economic responses at both the Iranian and global levels, with concerns arising about the potential economic ramifications on a global scale. This may have contributed to Israel's limited

response against Iran, manifested in a targeted strike in Isfahan on April 19 of the same month. Western pressure on Israel to de-escalate further underscores fears of negative political and economic consequences for all parties involved. This file will explore three main aspects: firstly, the impact of the Iranian attacks on the global economy; secondly, the repercussions on the Iranian economy; and thirdly, the readiness of the international economy to withstand further tensions in the Middle East.

The Implications for the Global Economy

As regards the global economy, sudden military confrontations, particularly in the Middle East, typically prompt swift reactions across several fronts, either independently or in tandem, contingent upon the nature of the clash, the level of escalation, and the contextual factors surrounding the event. Among the most significant reactions are fluctuations observed in energy prices, major financial markets worldwide, shipping rates, insurance and international transport, asset prices, and occasionally certain raw materials and essential metals.

Hence, the Iranian military strike on Israel left a mark on the global economy, evidenced by a surge in energy prices to around \$92 per barrel, reaching its peak in six months. There were concerns that if the escalation persisted, prices could surpass the \$100 mark per barrel, posing a

significant threat to global growth. However, following the restrained Israeli retaliation, stability was restored, with prices settling back below \$90 per barrel.

As energy prices climb, this has a ripple effect on shipping, transportation and insurance costs, subsequently driving up the prices of consumer goods and contributing to higher global inflation rates. For instance, container prices from Southeast Asia to Europe surged by 50% compared to the previous year due to maritime tensions. Amidst such turmoil, the demand for safe-haven assets like gold intensifies, with prices hitting historic highs at \$2,400 per ounce. Similarly, silver and basic metal prices also experience an upswing.

Following the Iranian attack, global financial markets experienced a downturn, with indices like the US NASDAQ Composite Index dropping by 1.8%. Similarly, the Chinese Shanghai Index declined by 1.4% and the Japanese Nikkei by 1.2%. Gulf financial markets mirrored this trend, with the Saudi market sliding by 0.3% and the Qatari market by 1.42%, alongside other global stock exchanges.

The Impacts on the Iranian Economy

The economic fallout from the Iranian attack was swiftly evident, with financial markets dipping and gold and foreign currency markets in Iran experiencing a surge. The price of the US dollar shot up from around 60,000 toman to approximately 70,000 to-

mans in a short time span, signaling market traders' apprehensions about the event's magnitude and the potential economic ramifications of a forceful Israeli response. However, prices stabilized once it became clear that the Israeli reaction was less severe than anticipated.

Fluctuations in exchange rates in Iran typically lead to hikes in the prices of essential food items, exacerbating the country's already high annual inflation rate, which surpasses 40% and can soar to over 70% for necessities like food and beverages. The direct impact of the rising dollar is felt in Iranian markets, adding to the burden on citizens already grappling with inflated prices. Given the timing, with Iranians already enduring economic hardships, further price hikes are unwelcome. These economic strains amplify living pressures and may fuel discontent among the populace. Yet, the government seeks to mitigate this discontent by rallying public support around the attack, fostering a sense of victory over Israel through morale-boosting slogans.

Is the Global Economy Ready to Endure Fresh Tensions in the Middle East?

Undoubtedly, the international economy has been grappling with significant challenges for over four years, with ongoing efforts to recover from their lingering effects. Just as it was beginning to rebound from the temporary setback of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Russia-Ukraine conflict

exacerbated global conditions. The economic landscape has been further complicated with events like Al-Aqsa Flood and threats to international navigation in the Red Sea. The cumulative result is a heightened array of economic challenges, including sluggish growth, energy price fluctuations, rising transportation and insurance costs, heightened global inflation, mounting government debts, tax impositions and increased societal pressures, all contributing to tensions among the general populace.

At present, major global economies like the United States, Europe and China are ill-prepared to shoulder additional burdens, whether at the governmental or societal levels. This sentiment extends to the Iranian and Israeli economies, currently embroiled in conflict.

The US economy, grappling with a two-year struggle to boost growth rates and employment while curbing high inflation, faces the prospect of further inflationary pressures should conflict erupt in the Middle East, driving energy prices higher. Meanwhile, the looming specter of the US presidential elections motivates policymakers to preemptively mitigate consumers' energy expenses before the election season. Conversely, European economies find themselves in a direr situation than their US counterpart, marked by sluggish economic growth, elevated inflation, unemployment, debt, and taxation. This predicament is particularly pronounced in Germany, the engine of the Europe-

an economy. Consequently, Germany and several Western powers, including the UK, have cautioned against military escalation between Iran and Israel due to concerns over the potential economic fallout.

While Gulf economies and oil-exporting nations might initially benefit from rising energy prices due to the influx of additional revenue into their budgets, regional instability poses a threat to investments and financial market stability. Moreover, increased inflation leads to higher import bills, exacerbating economic challenges. China, on the other hand, grapples with a surplus in domestic production amidst weak consumer spending, jeopardizing economic stability. To address this surplus, China relies on stable international markets and growing external demand. Consequently, any escalation and military tensions in the region could impede global trade, diminish purchasing power, and undermine the competitiveness of Chinese goods in foreign markets.

For both Iran and Israel, the current economic landscape is far worse compared to previous years and is ill-prepared for further setbacks. Iran faces numerous economic challenges, although it has shown some resilience with the partial recovery of its oil exports over the past year. However, chronic inflation, currency depreciation, growing budget deficits, poverty, unemployment and daily life pressures have plagued the country for over five years since the

reimposition of US sanctions. On the other hand, Israel's ongoing conflict with Gaza, spanning over six months, has inflicted over \$70 billion in direct and indirect material losses. These losses include military expenditure, war financing,⁽²⁰⁾ the contraction of GDP, budget deficits, and disruptions across key sectors like exports, tourism, trade, construction and public services, thereby undermining overall security and stability.

Conclusion

The Iranian strike on Israel primarily impacted the Iranian economy negatively, with relatively lesser effects observed globally. However, the primary concern revolved around potential Israeli reactions and the ensuing escalation between the two nations, and its impact on global economic stability. Given the unpreparedness of major economies to handle additional economic burdens, both the United States and European countries urged Israel to opt for restraint rather than escalation. Israel's measured military response helped restore a cautious calm in financial markets, alleviating fears of a spiraling situation in the Middle East. Meanwhile, the global economy and international trade continue to grapple with the ramifications of maritime disruptions in the Red Sea.

The Noor Plan: The Imposition of Hijab Before a New Law Is Issued

Iranian authorities have introduced the Noor Plan as part of their strate-

gy to address the issue of hijab compliance, allowing the morality police to resume previous activities until a new law is enacted by Parliament. This initiative has reignited the longstanding debate on this contentious issue, generating extensive coverage in newspapers and Iranian media. Amidst internal challenges and external developments since October 2023, concerns about the future have emerged. This file will examine the key components of the Noor Plan and the procedures of the morality police, as well as highlight voices opposing the plan.

The Morality Police and Proponents of the Noor Plan

The Iranian police have implemented the new Noor Plan to address what the government refers to as “the fight against ill-veiling.” Trained by the IRGC, the Basij forces, dubbed “Mehr Ambassadors,⁽²¹⁾” have been deployed for this purpose. Social media posts on April 14, 2024, depicted the presence of police forces and guidance patrols across Iran. Women who oppose compulsory hijab were reportedly detained, facing legal penalties for defying the law.⁽²²⁾

In this context, Iranian police chief Ahmad-Reza Radan emphasized that the hijab and chastity issue is purely social and cultural, not a security concern. Despite this stance, police forces have been heavily deployed in various cities and have encountered resistance from citizens in some locations.⁽²³⁾ Several officials, including

the head of the judiciary, entrusted the implementation of this project to the Iranian government.⁽²⁴⁾ It is noteworthy that besides the police, 25 other government institutions have backed Resolution 427 from the Supreme Council for the Cultural Revolution, which aims to expand chastity and veiling.⁽²⁵⁾

Similarly, the head of the Cultural Commission of the Islamic Consultative Assembly expressed confidence in the progress of the project, expressing hope for its swift submission to the Guardian Council for approval.⁽²⁶⁾

Voices Rejecting the Plan, Viewing It as a Violation of Law

Some representatives warned that the implementation of the Noor Plan could spark protests reminiscent of those following the tragic death of Mahsa Amini in 2022, with potentially devastating consequences in the country's streets.⁽²⁷⁾ They urged President Ebrahim Raisi to halt the project to avoid a potential revolution. Member of Parliament Muhammad Safri criticized the initiative, expressing concern over its repercussions amidst Iran's ongoing economic and social challenges and foreign conflicts. Safri emphasized the need for a comprehensive approach involving media, cultural, educational, and legal elements to address the hijab issue.⁽²⁸⁾ Representative Ali Reza Nouri highlighted that the legal procedures regarding the hijab and chastity law have not been completed and therefore lacks validity until approved by

the Guardian Council, emphasizing its inconsistency with the Iranian Constitution.⁽²⁹⁾ Former President Hassan Rouhani also criticized the revival of guidance patrols and the implementation of the Noor Plan.⁽³⁰⁾

Conclusion

The implementation of the Noor Plan underscores the ruling establishment's desperation to assert its authority and maintain control over the populace. However, these efforts are likely to backfire, with the resurgence of the morality police employing more repressive tactics and the premature enforcement of the hijab and chastity law, which has yet to be ratified. This premature action signals the potential for renewed unrest, as segments of society resist compliance with new regulations, potentially sparking confrontations with security forces that could escalate into larger protests.

The Hawza and Its Position on Corruption

In recent times, the hawza in Iran has found itself embroiled in a heated debate following allegations of corruption levied against Ayatollah Kazem Seddiqi, who serves as the Tehran Friday prayer leader and heads the Headquarters for Promoting Virtue and Preventing of Vice. This development is significant, representing mounting pressure on the ruling religious elite, raising questions about their involvement in covering up or engaging in corruption, and underscoring the

perceived ineffectiveness of independent oversight mechanisms. This debate follows other contentious issues related to the hawza addressed in last month's Iran Case File, particularly regarding recent attempts by certain hawza heavyweights to manipulate the succession of Mojtaba Khamenei as the next supreme leader. Additionally, jurists have scrutinized the formalities surrounding majority endorsement, challenging its role in legitimizing elections and restricting the definition of the majority to regime supporters, whom they deem righteous and pious. The controversy surrounding Seddiqi brings into question the notion of a "good and pious majority," revealing how networks of interests and corruption exploit religion and political rivalry to advance their agendas. This report will delve into several aspects: firstly, examining the accusations of corruption within the hawza; secondly, analyzing the character of Seddiqi, the accused Friday prayer leader; and finally, scrutinizing the media's defense of Seddiqi despite his admission of corruption.

The Hawza and Corruption Accusations

In documents unveiled last March, it was revealed that Seddiqi had acquired a 4,200-square-meter garden adjacent to the Imam Khomeini School in Ezgul, Tehran, through the establishment of a family company named Pirvan Andisheh Hai Qaim. He admitted to the land acquisition,

expressing remorse, stating, "I apologize to God for this oversight, and I extend my heartfelt apologies to the nation's leaders, including our supreme leader [Ali Khamenei]."⁽³¹⁾

Consequently, following accusations of land seizure in Tehran, "reformists" and opponents called for the resignation of Seddiqi. Initially resistant to stepping down, Seddiqi took to the pulpit and launched a verbal attack against his critics. On April 4, during his first sermon since the corruption allegations surfaced, Seddiqi criticized his detractors, asserting that they should not have "crushed their brother,"⁽³²⁾ attributing the incident to inadvertence. However, the turnout for the sermon was notably sparse, with only a few dozen attendees, indicating public discontent. This development was seen as a blow to the ruling establishment, highlighting public frustration over the corruption scandal involving a cleric renowned for his loyalty and piety, who had previously engaged in political maneuvering against the government's opponents.⁽³³⁾ It appears that the establishment, feeling the weight of embarrassment, placed pressure on Seddiqi to tender his resignation — which he eventually did during the Friday sermon. Consequently, the establishment found itself compelled to salvage the reputation of the ruling establishment by sacrificing the individual while endeavoring to safeguard the remaining networks and interests. However, what remains unaddressed or perhaps deliberately

overlooked by the system's stakeholders is the efficacy of the state's accounting and monitoring institutions in tracking the wealth and actions of clergy members and holding them accountable when necessary. Moreover, questions arise regarding the establishment's capacity to combat corruption within the seminary community, especially among the ruling elite, institutions, and officials at large.

Seddiqi's Personality and the Establishment's Behavior

Seddiqi's controversial persona sheds light on the conduct of the ruling religious elite and its intricate connection with religion and the Shiite sect. Notably, among the anecdotes for which Seddiqi gained notoriety was a statement made on IRIB Qur'an, following the passing of Ayatollah Mesbah Yazdi. He purportedly relayed a myth about the posthumous washing of Ayatollah Yazdi, claiming that the deceased opened his eyes during the ritual, gazed upon those present with compassion, and then closed his eyes once more.⁽³⁴⁾ This myth provoked widespread ridicule against the clergy. Seddiqi, however, faced no accountability or dismissal for his remarks at the time. He was renowned for his displays of tears, his outward piety and his staunch opposition to the establishment's adversaries, whether domestic "reformists" or foreign entities like the West and the United States. Therefore, he called for an end to the campaign against him

saying, "They should not crush their brother!"

Defending Seddiqi Despite His Involvement in Corruption

Despite Seddiqi's admission of guilt and his apology, the fundamentalist media rallied to his defense, framing the campaign against him as an assault on "revolutionary clerics." Newspapers aligned with the establishment contended that the allegations against Seddiqi concerning the unlawful seizure of land were part of a concerted effort to undermine clerical figures loyal to the revolution. They further insinuated that the subsequent attack on Ayatollah Alamolhoda, Khamenei's representative in Razavi Khorasan, was part of the same scheme aimed at targeting revolutionary clerics.⁽³⁵⁾ Subsequently, Seddiqi accused his critics of being backed by foreign interests and pursuing foreign agendas. Despite being cognizant of Seddiqi's corruption and being compelled to accept his resignation due to public pressure and defiance against the establishment, the government staunchly defended him. It attempted to shift the blame onto the "reformists" and opposition figures, alleging that they were opposed to the revolutionary stance of the clergy and by extension, against the revolution and its founding principles.

Conclusion

In the absence of effective oversight and accountability institutions, the influence wielded by jurists and clerics, particularly those with close ties

to the ruling elite, has swelled. The government has turned a blind eye to allegations of corruption and the accumulation of wealth by certain jurists and Friday prayer leaders, opting instead to ensure their loyalty and utilize religious discourse to bolster the establishment's legitimacy and maintain support, particularly among religious communities and followers. However, the revelation of Seddiqi's corruption has left the ruling elites red-faced. Initially attempting to downplay the incident as unintentional, Seddiqi himself issued an

apology before ultimately resigning under mounting public pressure and following a significant boycott of his Friday sermon. This underscores the establishment's desire to salvage its reputation by cutting ties with Seddiqi, albeit belatedly. The establishment's delayed decision reveals its miscalculation, as it underestimated the momentum of public opposition against Seddiqi. Importantly, this episode underscores the extent to which popular pressure can compel the establishment to alter its policies.

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IRAN-ARAB INTERACTIONS

Iran's relationship with Arab states has undergone significant developments. In terms of its relationship with the Gulf states, the West has made serious efforts to revive the peace process with Israel, with the ultimate goal of establishing a Palestinian state. However, Iran is expected to hinder this process. Additionally, Iran has made attempts to pressure the Gulf states into aligning with its own plans and projects. In Iraq, experts have offered several explanations for the pro-Iran armed groups' resumption of attacks on US targets. In Syria, the Israeli targeting of an annex to the Iranian consulate and the death of several prominent Iranian military commanders have ushered in a new phase in the Israeli-Iranian conflict in Syria. In this section of the ICF, we will discuss the aforementioned developments in greater detail as follows:

- Attempts to Draw the Gulf States Into the Cycle of Conflict Between Iran and Israel
- Armed Groups Resume Operations Against US Targets
- Israel's Targeting of the Iranian Consulate in Damascus and Its Potential Impact on Actors in Syria

Attempts to Draw the Gulf States Into the Cycle of Conflict Between Iran and Israel

The recent exchange of attacks between Iran and Israel heightened tensions in the region, raising concerns about the impact it could have on both the political and economic stability of the region. Many political experts and analysts have suggested that the situation may force neighboring countries to take a stance on the matter. They may either choose to use intimidation tactics or attempt to persuade the two nations to find a peaceful resolution. The countries in the Middle East are working to resolve the conflicts in the region, including the longstanding Palestine cause and the worsening humanitarian crisis arising from the war between Israel and Hamas. However, Israel and Iran are pursuing their own interests without considering the other country's perspective. This part of the ICF will discuss Western endeavors to revive the peace process with Israel, Iran's response and threats against the Gulf states through its attempt to force the Gulf states to align with its position.

Western Endeavors to Revive the Peace Process With Israel

The normalization that the West aspires to establish between Saudi Arabia and Israel returns to the forefront, coinciding with the visit of the US secretary of state to the region. Many Western newspapers reported that one of the goals of the visit of the US secretary of state to Saudi Arabia

was to discuss normalization. The Times of Israel reported that the US secretary of state would discuss with the Saudi authorities efforts for a normalization deal between Riyadh and Tel Aviv, a mega deal that includes Washington giving Riyadh agreements on bilateral defense and security issues, as well as nuclear cooperation. In return for normalization, the Arab states and Washington would place pressure on Israel to agree on a pathway for Palestinian statehood, something Netanyahu has repeatedly rejected.⁽¹⁾

With reference to the Washington-based Foundation for Defense of Democracies (FDD), Blinken is reportedly discussed the normalization of Saudi-Israeli relations with Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman in Riyadh. Blinken's trip came weeks after White House National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan postponed a planned trip to Riyadh, where he intended to talk over the terms of a future deal.⁽²⁾ FDD analysts argue that threats emanating from Iran may influence the Saudi position. "Iran's unprecedented missile attack, its accelerating nuclear work, and the threats posed by its proxies from Lebanon to Yemen serve as fresh reminders of the mutual strategic benefit of Saudi-Israeli normalization backed by US defense commitments to both parties. If leaders focus on core long-term strategic interests and avoid complicating the simple, the pathway to normalization remains achievable," said Richard Goldberg, FDD senior adviser.⁽³⁾

Some sources claim that Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar provided information they had obtained from Iran on the timing of Hamas' attack on Israel and passed this to the US administration, arguing that it is a sign of position change towards Israel.⁽⁴⁾

Some believe that the deal, according to Saudi terms, is a solution to Israel's inability to get out of its current crisis and address the growing international indignation against it. US Senator Lindsey Graham told CNN, "If we can get a deal between Saudi Arabia and Israel, it ends the Arab-Israeli conflict, it isolates the Iranians, it creates some hope for the Palestinians, it provides security in a real way to Israel," adding that this deal will not create division between Republicans and democrats. "Without this deal, there is no solution to the Palestinian problem," Graham said.⁽⁵⁾

Rising Iranian Pressure on the Gulf States

Iranian newspapers employed rhetoric filled with messages of mobilization, threats and the imposition of "guardianship" on the Gulf states and some Arab countries. Khorasan newspaper published an analysis entitled: "The Fruitlessness of the Arab NATO Strategy." The analysis implicated the Gulf states in helping Israel to secure its needs, objecting to Jordan's defense of its sovereign airspace, claiming that Arab states handing over their security to Israel is absurd. The analysis also warned that this will jeopardize the security of these coun-

tries and that the leaders of the region will pay a high price in this confrontation. It implicitly threatened Arab countries, arguing that logic dictates that Arab rulers should stay away from the "Zionists" to continue living in comfort and safety instead of normalization and cooperation with the occupation. In an implicit threat to the Gulf states, it mentioned that the Houthi attacks do not, "currently" harass any Saudi and Emirati ships.⁽⁶⁾

Entekhab newspaper stated that some Middle East experts believe that the argument of regional actors, especially Saudi Arabia and Jordan, which reportedly intercepted Iranian drones, is that they have the right to protect their sovereign airspace. Yet, their intercepting of Iranian missiles and drones conflicts with their political opposition to the Israeli war on Gaza, the analysis added. Accordingly, if Iran's attacks spill over into wider conflict with Israel, regional actors, which are viewed as Israel's defenders, may find themselves targeted by Iran and pushed into the flames of a regional war. The newspaper expected that the war between Israel and Iran could expand rapidly, reaching the Arab Gulf states.⁽⁷⁾

Kayhan, a newspaper affiliated with Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei's office, also expressed more direct threats. It stated that the UAE-Saudi land route is within the range of Yemeni missiles and drones and that the years-long war between these two countries against Yemen has not yet officially ended, especially as the Ye-

menis unveiled their hypersonic missile with a range of 2,000 kilometers. It also added that Arab and non-Arab rulers —who betray public opinion and the Palestinian people — should be afraid from now on since the supreme leader had warned that these Islamic governments would be punished for their betrayal.⁽⁸⁾

Conclusion

Despite attempts to create tensions and pull Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries into a cycle of conflict, these nations are currently distancing themselves from such conflicts. They are focusing on anything that can prevent the region from being held hostage to the goals of regional projects. The success of the Saudi vision to help the region overcome its challenges is evident in the country's transparent and fair dealings with all parties, including the United States. The constructive efforts of Saudi Arabia could enable other nations to achieve their interests while ensuring that the Gulf states also benefit and share the responsibilities of maintaining security and stability. This approach must be adopted by the Gulf states to avoid entanglement in the schemes and machinations of both Israel and Iran.

Armed Groups Resume Operations Against US Targets

After a period marked by a decline in armed attacks carried out by pro-Iranian militias targeting US interests in Iraq, lasting for over two months, these militias have once again initi-

ated attacks on US targets, including military bases, forces and diplomatic premises, within an already tense regional atmosphere. On April 22, 2024, two drone attacks were launched against US forces stationed at Al-Asad Airbase (IATA) in western Iraq; no damage or casualties were reported. Several factors are cited as explanations for the resurgence of militia attacks against US targets in Iraq. Firstly, the escalation between Iran and Israel is seen as a contributing factor. Secondly, the outcomes of the Iraqi prime minister's recent visit to Washington are believed to have influenced this development. Finally, the intricate internal dynamics within Iraq itself are considered to have played a role in the resurgence of attacks.

Implications of the Direct Military Escalation Between Iran and Israel

The direct military escalation between Iran and Israel in April 2024 has disrupted the previously established calm, which followed the visit of Quds Force Commander Ismail Qaani to Iraq at the end of January 2024. Qaani's visit aimed to pressure armed militias to reduce and halt their attacks against US targets. However, with the recent escalation, attacks on US targets have resumed. Tehran is evidently aware of the robust strategic relationship between Washington and Tel Aviv, as well as the depth of Israeli-US coordination in decision-making processes. This coordination was notably demonstrated in the strike on the Iranian consulate in

Syria, resulting in the deaths of prominent IRGC leaders. Moreover, US President Joe Biden has affirmed that Iran will not be permitted to attack Israeli targets, even if it means potentially engaging in war against Iran to defend Israel⁽⁹⁾ and providing significant military support to Tel Aviv. In resuming attacks on US targets, Iran aims to exert pressure on Washington to expel its forces from Iraq.

The recent statement by Abu Ali al-Askari, a security official of the Iraqi Kata'ib Hezbollah, indicating that the fighters of Kata'ib Hezbollah are awaiting orders from the Iranian supreme leader to retaliate against any Israeli targeting,⁽¹⁰⁾ sheds light on the significant influence and role of Iran in the resurgence of militia attacks against US or Israeli targets, or possibly both. This underscores the special relationship between Iran and these militias, which empowers Tehran to exert considerable control over their actions and decisions.

Sudani's Visit to Washington Fails to Establish Clarity on US Withdrawal From Iraq

In mid-April 2024, the visit of Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shia' al-Sudani to Washington, which lasted a week, did not yield the anticipated outcomes from an Iranian perspective. The visit failed to establish a timetable for the withdrawal of US forces from Iraq or to outline clear objectives for their mission. Instead, Sudani and his delegation, including 135 officials (ministers of oil and energy,

finance and planning, governor of the central bank, and prominent bankers and businessmen), focused on activating the strategic agreement between the two nations. The US administration expressed a strong desire to foster a partnership with Iraq, leading to discussions about a new US-Iraqi agreement across various sectors. Washington also urged Sudani to intensify efforts to prevent attacks on its bases in Iraq. During the visit, the two parties signed approximately 18 memorandums of understanding (MoUs)⁽¹¹⁾ covering areas such as energy, economy, and the development of the oil sector and pharmaceutical industry.

In addition to the aforementioned discussions, media reports suggest that meetings between Iraqi officials and US administration representatives delved into the concerns of the US government. Foremost among these concerns is the necessity for financial reforms within the Baghdad government. Washington seeks greater control over the movement of the dollar, particularly as it perceives the Iraqi government's efforts to combat dollar smuggling to Iran and to counter money laundering and terrorist financing operations, particularly those linked to paramilitaries in Iraq, notably those affiliated with Iran. Furthermore, discussions revolved around ensuring Iraq's independence in the electricity sector, aiming to diminish Iran's leverage gained through exporting electricity to Iraq. These concerns are inter-

twined with another issue regarding Iran's potential methods to circumvent strengthened US sanctions via Iraqi channels.

The Iraqi Government's Challenge: Expelling US Forces From Iraq

The resumption of attacks on US forces in Iraq by militias aligned with Iran underscores their objective to complicate matters for the Sudani government. They aim to compel the government to prioritize the goal of expelling US forces from Iraq and to realize the potential for influencing Iraq's security landscape until the departure of US troops. Consequently, Iran's strategy seeks to establish itself as the predominant actor in the Iraqi arena, capitalizing on its central role in the regional geopolitical landscape, shaped by historical, geographical, political, economic, and security considerations.

Conclusion

While expelling US troops has become a primary objective for Iran in Iraq, achieving this objective has been complicated by internal divisions among the armed militias and within the Coordination Framework. However, the outcomes of Sudani's visit to Washington are likely to exacerbate these divisions further. There exists a faction supporting Sudani's government and advocating for the continuation of US support to ensure its stability and longevity, while another faction insists on the immediate implementation of the demand to expel

US forces from Iraq. These divergent perspectives within the Coordination Framework could heighten tensions and hinder cohesive action toward a shared objective.

Israel's Targeting of the Iranian Consulate in Damascus and Its Potential Impact on Actors in Syria

Since the Israeli military campaign against the Gaza Strip intensified on October 7, 2023, the Israeli government has adopted a policy of military escalation beyond the Gaza Strip. This has involved targeting Iranian leaders and proxies in Syria and Lebanon. The operation on April 1, 2024, targeting an annex building of the Iranian embassy in Syria and resulting in the deaths of several high-ranking Iranian commanders in the IRGC raised significant questions regarding Israel's motives behind this shift in its strategy toward Iran, the implications expected from this escalation on Iran and Israel as well as its potential impact on the Syrian government and other actors in the Syrian arena.

Israel's Message Through Targeting the Iranian Consulate

On April 1, 2024, Israel launched a qualitative attack on Syria by striking an annex building that Iran labeled as its consulate near its embassy in the Syrian capital, Damascus, killing a number of military commanders of the Iranian Quds Force. This Israeli escalation is among the most aggressive targeting of Iranian inter-

ests in Syria over the past two years, marking an unprecedented shift in Israel's strategy toward Iran. This is due to the scale of the human losses, especially of important military cadres and leaders.⁽¹²⁾ Mohammad Reza Zahedi was designated as one of the top Iranian leaders not only by Iran⁽¹³⁾ but also by the anti-Iranian parties in Syria. The Israeli strike, which was against the building near the Iranian embassy in Damascus, was a message from Israel. It dealt a severe blow to the Iranian presence in Syria, specifically targeting the masterminds behind the October 7, 2023 operation in the Gaza Strip. Israel's attack on the embassy was seemingly aimed at disrupting Iran's efforts to invest in the relative truce it had brokered with the United States at the beginning of 2024. Through investing in this truce, Iran would be able to supply weapons and military equipment to its proxy forces and factions via a land route from Tehran through Baghdad and Damascus to Beirut. Given the persistent threat posed by various armed groups, Israel has undertaken measures to curtail Iran's surplus power, particularly within the Quds Force command structure. These efforts are aimed at reducing the influence of these militias and their commanders and ultimately enhancing regional security.

According to official statements, Iran considers the recent attack on its consulate as an act of aggression. The building in question is associated with Iran's diplomatic mission

in Damascus, which means that the attack was a violation of both Syria's sovereignty, as it was responsible for safeguarding the diplomatic mission, and Iran's, as it was a symbolic attack on its diplomatic headquarters, by Israel. The attack was carried out against Iran's diplomatic mission and direct interests in Syria. Moreover, Tehran believes that the scale-up of Israeli military escalation against its presence and military commands in Damascus is a clear transgression of the course of escalation management according to the traditional patterns of confrontation in the Syrian arena. Therefore, from Tehran's perspective, this attack was an Israeli warning that redlines no longer exist when it comes to targeting the Iranian presence in Syria.

The Syrian Government's Position on the Israeli-Iranian Escalation

The ongoing escalating operations between Israel and Iran have put the government of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in an increasingly uncomfortable position. Iran has consistently accused the Syrian intelligence services of involvement in these operations, or at the very least, failing to report them to prevent their occurrence. These accusations stem from the absence of the Syrian government in the commemoration of International Quds Day. Many leaders of the so-called Axis of Resistance, including Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi, Hezbollah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah, head of the Polit-

ical Bureau of the Hamas Movement Ismail Haniyeh, and the official of the Houthi group in Yemen, Abdul Malik al-Houthi, as well as a representative of the Islamic Resistance in Iraq participated in International Quds Day. Syrian Assad and his family publicly visited the neighborhoods of Damascus while tensions were in full swing between Tel Aviv and Tehran. Syria was part of this mutual tension. This scene accompanying the Israeli-Iranian escalation on Syrian territory sent messages that were read differently. The most remarkable messages revealed that Syria had distanced itself from the ongoing war in Gaza; it adopted a position divergent from the Axis of Resistance, indicating that Syria will not be a battlefield for Iran's retaliation for Israel's attack on the consulate in Damascus.

Israeli-Iranian Escalation and the Future of Iranian Militias in Syria

The recent exchange of missile strikes between Israeli and Iranian forces in Syria raises questions about the fate of Iran-backed militias in the region. Will this confrontation develop from attacking Iran's factions and proxies in the region to targeting Iran directly at home? In fact, the reciprocal response between the two parties confirms that the focus and aspirations of Israel are unlikely to open a direct war with Iran and more likely toward maintaining the strategy of targeting top Iranian commanders and officers and Iranian proxies in Syria. It will likely expand the scope of its strikes

to include Homs, the countryside of Hama, Aleppo, and the Syrian coast. The Israeli government no longer accepts, after the blow it received from Hamas in Operation Al-Aqsa Flood, the presence of threatening forces in its neighboring countries.

Tehran does not want in any way to enter into a confrontation with Israel, either directly or indirectly, but rather seeks to address and contain the potential Israeli escalation toward its influence in Syria and protect the gains it has achieved over the past decades. According to leaked news, Iran resorted to reducing its military presence, redeploying and changing the location of its commanders,⁽¹⁴⁾ in a move that has overlapping objectives. This includes a precautionary measure and the repositioning of its forces in other areas for fear of new Israeli strikes. The Iranian moves may create confusion for Syria and Israel, deluding all parties that it left Syria with the aim of defusing the military escalation on its spheres of influence in Syria as well as having enough time to investigate the leaking of sensitive information about Iranian interests to Israel.

Russia's Response to the Israel-Iran Escalation

The ramifications of the ongoing war in Ukraine have strained Russian-Israeli relations due to the clearly biased position of Israel, the European Union and the United States toward Ukraine at the expense of Moscow and the clear disputes that became

more apparent after Israel waged a war on the Gaza Strip on October 7, 2023. The Israeli targeting of an Iranian embassy annex building brings the relationship between the Russian-Israeli parties to a new juncture. Many Kremlin leaders believe that the Israeli operation was a violation of international law and an act of “terrorism.” Russia called for an emergency UN Security Council meeting following the attack on the Iranian consulate. In general, Russian statements signal Russian fears that the Israeli war in Gaza could scale up to a wider conflict against Syria, Iran and proxies throughout the region, which could involve the allies of the stakeholders, including Russia, in another conflict that it does not want to enter. Therefore, the Russian government is currently focused on managing tensions and maintaining stable relationships with all major players involved in the Syrian conflict. Given the Ukrainian situation and the importance of Tel Aviv’s cooperation in certain areas, Russia relies on Israel, while Iran remains a critical player on the ground, allowing Russia to maintain its influence within the region. Nevertheless, Russia is cautious not to permit Tehran to gain full control of Syria, as this may potentially disrupt the balance of power and trigger Israel’s military aggression.

Conclusion

The incident that occurred on April 1, 2024, in which Israel targeted a high-ranking general of the Irani-

an Quds Force near the Iranian embassy in Damascus, had significant implications for Iranian interests in the Syrian arena. The extent of the Israeli attack on the Iranian embassy in Damascus, coupled with the death of a key Iranian commander, created a state of confusion in Iran’s calculations and its sphere of influence in Syria. Consequently, Iran was compelled to adopt a new approach to deter Israel while safeguarding its interests and preserving its influence in Syria, thereby avoiding an all-out war with Israel. This was evidenced in the calculated and announced strike inside Israel, which was also met with a similar response from Israel in terms of limitations and calculation, revealing the readiness of Iran and Israel to change the dynamics of the mutual clash. Both countries demonstrated that they have the ability to target the territory of the other and confirmed that the direct targeting of the other will lead to a reciprocal direct response. The likely scenario is that both parties return to their traditional rules of engagement that prevailed before the April 1, 2024, i.e. the regional operations in their respective spheres of influence. International and regional calculations, along with those of Israel and Iran, indicate a rejection of further Iranian-Israeli escalation and entry into an open war. Accordingly, Israel will seek to strike hard inside Syria, both at the security and military level, to avoid stabilizing the strategic deterrence equation that Tehran has sought to demonstrate to

Israel and increasing tension between the Iranian and Syrian governments. Thus, Tehran will proceed with military and security repositioning in

Syria, arranging its relations with the Syrian government and strengthening its military and security relationship with the Russian government.

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IRAN'S RELATIONS WITH INTERNATIONAL POWERS

Regarding Iran's relationship with international powers, the United States, in conjunction with its regional and global allies, managed to prevent Iran's direct attack on Israel. The United States also successfully urged Israel to avoid escalation and respond with a limited counterattack, thereby preventing a direct war between the two countries. In this section of the ICF, we will discuss the consequences of the US response to Iran's attack on Israel and its impact on the relationship between the two countries.

Results of the US Reaction to the Iranian Attacks on Israel

In response to the Israeli bombing of its consulate in Damascus, resulting in the deaths of several senior Iranian leaders, Iran launched a direct attack on Israel, a strategic ally of the United States in the Middle East. Notably, Iran refrained from targeting US interests, aligning with the established US principle of ensuring Israel's security. Recognizing its commitment to Israel's defense, Washington mobilized its military assets and, in collaboration with the UK, deployed additional resources to the region to safeguard Israel from potential Iranian attacks. This report will examine three main aspects: first the US response to the attacks on Israel; secondly, the escalation of pressure and sanctions on Iran; and finally, Iran's measured response to the perceived threats.

US Repulsion of Iranian Attacks Against Israel

In its attack on Israel, Iran employed approximately 300 drones and missiles, constituting an unprecedented assault. The United States played a pivotal role in countering this threat, collaborating with European and regional allies. Aircraft carriers stationed in the Mediterranean intercepted Iranian ballistic missiles during the attack and successfully downed hostile aircraft. Additionally, US forces preemptively neutralized over 70 Iranian drones before they could reach Israeli airspace. A Patriot missile battery intercepted a ballistic

missile near Erbil, Iraq, believed to be en route to Israel. Furthermore, US air defenses in the region responded to several other attacks. This operation served as the inaugural trial for the integrated regional defense system that the United States aims to establish to counter Iranian aggression in the region. Despite Iran's unprecedented attacks on Israel, indicating a shift in engagement rules and a more aggressive stance, the United States prioritized de-escalation between the parties. Despite Israel's desire to retaliate to maintain deterrence, the Biden administration publicly declared its non-involvement in any Israeli offensive against Iran. This stance elucidates the diplomatic exchanges between Washington and Tehran, underscoring both parties' efforts to prevent broadening the conflict's scope.⁽¹⁾

Ramping Up Pressures and Sanctions on Iran

Rather than opting for direct confrontation, Washington initially responded to Iran's aggression by imposing additional sanctions. The House of Representatives passed nearly a dozen bills aimed at imposing further restrictions on Iran's leaders, institutions, economy, and armed forces. These measures included legislation targeting Iran's oil exports to China⁽²⁾ and addressing Iran's human rights record. Notably, on April 23, 2024, the US Senate nearly unanimously passed a foreign aid package, including the Mahsa Amini Act for Human Rights and Security Accountability.

Additionally, the Ships Act, which was approved by Congress, is set to impose new sanctions on individuals, oil refineries, ships, and ports involved in the illicit sale of Iranian oil. These sanctions entail barring relevant ships from entering US ports for two years.⁽³⁾ Concurrently, the US Congress approved a new aid package for Israel amounting to \$26 billion,⁽⁴⁾ reinforcing the US-Israel alliance.

Washington capitalized on the attack to rally support from the Group of Seven (G7) for collective action to intensify economic pressure on Iran. Additionally, it urged the European Union to promptly designate the IRGC as a “terrorist organization.”

In line with these efforts, US Deputy Special Envoy for Iran Abram Paley conducted discussions during his visit to the South Caucasus region with officials from Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan regarding compliance with sanctions on Iran. This shift in policy echoes the maximum pressure approach previously adopted by the Trump administration towards Iran.⁽⁵⁾

Iran’s Limited Response

Amid escalating tensions, implicit understandings between Washington and Tehran initially suggested that the conflict’s scope would not widen. However, Iran resorted to its proxies

Table 1: US Sanctions on Iran (April 2024)

Date	Measure
April 4	Adding an entity to the sanctions list, designating 13 ships affiliated with it as prohibited property, and updating the name of a vessel on the list of Specially Designated Nationals have been undertaken due to their involvement in facilitating illicit trade in support of Iran’s General Staff of the Armed Forces and the Ministry of Defense and Armed Forces Logistics.
April 18	The sanctions targeted Iran’s drone program, steel industry and automobile companies, affecting 16 individuals and two entities. These measures were implemented due to their involvement in facilitating the production, testing and deployment of Iranian drones to entities operating on behalf of the IRGC.

Date	Measure
April 23	Sanctions imposed on two Iranian companies and four individuals from Iran. Their involvement, whether direct or indirect, in malicious cyber activities on behalf of the IRGC Security Cyber Command led to this action.
April 25	Sanctions were levied on 16 entities and eight individuals, with five ships and an aircraft designated as prohibited property. These measures were implemented due to their role in facilitating the illicit trade and sale of Iranian drones, supporting the Ministry of Defense and Armed Forces' Logistics in Iran, as well as Iran's drone development and supply program. In tandem with these actions, the UK and Canada are also imposing sanctions on various entities and individuals involved in drone supply activities and other Iranian military endeavors.

Source: Center for Studies and Research, Rasanah IIIS (2024)

in Iraq to launch attacks against US forces stationed there. This marked the first such incident in three months, with US forces in both Iraq and Syria facing separate assaults involving missiles and suicide drones. Meanwhile, Hezbollah intensified its attacks against Israel as part of its strategy to unify the arena. Additionally, the IRGC detained a ship partially owned by Israel in the Arabian Gulf, further escalating tensions. Concurrently, Houthi rebels escalated their efforts to disrupt navigation traffic in the Red Sea, posing challenges for Israel and the US-led coalition's efforts to safeguard freedom of navigation. These incidents underscore Iran's readiness to employ various means, including naval attacks through its

allies, in response to a potential US attack.

Furthermore, Iran launched a diplomatic campaign against the United States within the corridors of the United Nations, citing what it perceives as the inconsistency of US positions regarding the attack on the Iranian consulate, the Iranian retaliation against Israel, and its stance on the Gaza war. Iran also condemned the US veto against the recognition of the State of Palestine on April 19, 2024. Additionally, Tehran capitalized on the growing student movement in US universities sympathetic to Gaza and critical of the Biden administration's policies, aiming to highlight US complicity in what it terms the ongoing genocide in Gaza. In addition to

diplomatic maneuvers, Iran wielded various strategic levers. It threatened to retaliate against any Israeli attack and even vowed to target Israel's nuclear program if Iran's nuclear facilities were struck. Moreover, Tehran warned of potential revisions to its nuclear doctrine, as Major General Ahmed Haq Talab of the IRGC, tasked with safeguarding Iranian nuclear sites, suggested that Iran would "reassess" its nuclear policies in the event of an Israeli strike on its nuclear installations.⁽⁶⁾

Conclusion

One of the key outcomes of the Iranian attack on Israel and the subsequent response from the United States is the demonstration of the United States' success in countering Iranian aggression. The effectiveness of the integrated regional security system, which the United States has been cultivating for some time, has been underscored. This success is likely to embolden certain regional countries that have been hesitant to join this security alliance. With its primary objective being to counter the Iranian threat, the alliance's efficacy in thwarting these attacks could serve as a significant deterrent against future Iranian provocations, limiting its regional maneuverability. Moreover, the Iranian attacks have fostered unity between the Republican and Democratic parties in the United States. It can be argued that the recent imposition of sanctions, if enforced, signals

a return to the hard-line approach towards Iran adopted during the Trump administration. Should these sanctions be upheld, they could have internal ramifications within Iran, potentially exacerbating domestic conditions and increasing pressure on the leadership.

Conversely, Iran has introduced new rules of engagement, prompting Israel to reconsider potential direct strikes that could infringe upon Iran's sovereignty or interests, including targeting its senior leaders. The recent strike has also established a new precedent for managing relations with the United States, revealing the existence of mutual understandings and messages aimed at tension management. Overall, there seems to be a shared desire between the United States and Iran to avoid escalation. Moreover, Iran tested its regional understandings through these strikes, as evidenced by the lack of public intervention from the Gulf states in repelling the Iranian attacks. This suggests the potential for neutralizing the positions of the Gulf states, as long as Iran upholds its commitments made since the rapprochement agreement with Saudi Arabia. However, these current developments pose obstacles to the progress of nuclear diplomacy with Iran. Simultaneously, they afford Tehran an opportunity to bolster its capabilities and potentially shorten the timeframe for acquiring a nuclear weapon, should it opt to do so.

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