

MONTHLY REPORT

Iran Case File

July 2024

Your window on Iran from inside and abroad





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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In July 2024, Iran experienced a series of rapid developments across the political, military, social, and ideological fronts. Iranian relations with the Arab world and regional neighbors were marked by complex interactions likely to influence Iran's foreign relations in the near future.

Internally, on the political level, newly elected Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian officially assumed office with the endorsement of Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei after an inauguration ceremony attended by numerous Iranian officials. Pezeshkian took the constitutional oath before Iranian Parliament members with many foreign delegations present. He began selecting his deputies and ministers and is expected to present a list of proposed ministers to the Parliament in the coming days of August. Given Iran's current situation and the heavy legacy inherited from his predecessors, the Pezeshkian administration is expected to face numerous challenges, particularly amidst the dire economic conditions, stalled nuclear negotiations, US sanctions, and the "hardliners'" dominance over Iranian state institutions.

On the military front, Iranian-Armenian cooperation has reached an advanced stage with the signing of an arms deal involving Shahed and Mohajer drones and several Iranian air defense systems. Meanwhile, Iran continues with its efforts to establish naval bases on the Red Sea coast, seeking permission from Sudan — embroiled in a devastating conflict between the army and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) — to station a helicopter

carrier on its coast and establish a military base in exchange for providing the army with suicide drones to combat the RSF.

Socially, the return of the “reformist” movement to the Iranian political scene has rekindled many controversial issues, including minority rights, where “reformists” views differ from the “conservatives” obdurate stance. Thus, ethnic considerations were central to the electoral process, and indications suggest that addressing minority demands will be a contentious issue for the new president, affecting political dynamics.

Ideologically, Iran has utilized Shiite centers, established even before the clerics came to power in 1979, to propagate its religious and political agenda, exporting Shiism by targeting European countries. Recently, German authorities closed the Islamic Center in Hamburg, accusing it of pursuing extremist Islamic goals, being funded by Iran, and operating under its agenda. Instead of reconsidering their strategy regarding Islamic centers, the Iranians claimed that the German authorities’ actions were due to Zionist pressures and to appease the Zionist lobby, which allegedly contributed to the current German government’s rise to power.

Iran’s foreign relations with the Arab world and the region were marked by significant developments in July 2024. Statements by the Pakistani minister of religious affairs about the disappearance of 50,000 Pakistanis in Iraq sparked controversy, with indirect accusations of recruitment

by pro-Iran militias across Iranian spheres of influence. Meanwhile, the town of Jurf al-Sakhar in Babil Governorate experienced US drone strikes, reportedly aimed at neutralizing a significant source of militia attacks against Israel.

In Iranian-Syrian interactions, various explanations and hypotheses emerged regarding the killing of two prominent Syrian figures, Luna al-Shibl and Muhammad al-Qatirji, linked to foreign relations with Iran and Russia. Their deaths were speculated to result from a decision by Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to rearrange internal alliances and control the political and economic elite. Others viewed the deaths as a manifestation of the Iranian-Russian rivalry over Syrian influence and interests. Regionally, Iran-Israel relations entered a new phase of tension following the assassination of Hamas Political Bureau Chief Ismail Haniyeh in Tehran. This development might escalate into a broader regional confrontation as both parties attempt to establish a new deterrence equation. This trajectory highlights both parties’ continued efforts to enhance their capabilities, especially in intelligence and espionage, where Israel has shown effectiveness compared to Iran’s challenges. This tension could also impact the nuclear file, increasing the likelihood of Iran altering its nuclear doctrine amid the ongoing conflict between Israel and Gaza.

DEVELOPMENTS IN IRAN'S INTERNAL AFFAIRS

During July 2024, Iran experienced numerous developments on the political, military, social, and ideological fronts. The most notable of these developments can be observed by examining the following issues:

- **Multiple Challenges Await the New Iranian President Following His Inauguration**
- **Iran's Arms Deal With Armenia and Persistent Efforts to Acquire a Base in the Red Sea**
- **The Ethnic Dimension in the Pezeshkian Era**
- **Islamic Center of Hamburg Closed**

Multiple Challenges Await the New Iranian President Following His Inauguration

The inauguration ceremony of Masoud Pezeshkian as the new president of Iran took place in Tehran, where he officially assumed his duties with the endorsement of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. The event was marked by a significant gathering that included members of the Iranian Parliament and foreign delegations. Following the ceremony, President Pezeshkian began the process of selecting his cabinet members. It is anticipated that he will present a list of proposed ministers to the Parliament within the coming days to secure the necessary confidence vote. President Pezeshkian is expected to face numerous challenges and obstacles that could impact the effectiveness of his administration, particularly due to the strong influence of the “hardliners” over various branches of the Iranian government. This file will examine the salient points of Pezeshkian’s inauguration, the supreme leader’s stance on the new presidency, and the major challenges that may confront Pezeshkian during his tenure.

First: Pezeshkian Appointed by the Supreme Leader, Takes the Constitutional Oath

A few weeks after securing victory in the presidential elections, Pezeshkian was officially inaugurated as the president of Iran in a ceremony held in the

capital city of Tehran. The event was attended by the supreme leader of Iran, along with numerous officials and heads of foreign diplomatic missions. In his inaugural speech, after receiving the formal decree of office from the supreme leader, President Pezeshkian emphasized his commitment to the Iranian people. “Today, I am responsible before all the Iranian people for implementing the laws of the country,” he stated. Pezeshkian highlighted his administration’s focus on ensuring social justice, granting freedoms to all citizens, and strengthening Iran’s defensive and deterrent capabilities. He also expressed a desire to foster constructive international relations, particularly emphasizing the importance of building ties with Islamic countries.⁽¹⁾

During the inauguration, ceremony of Iran’s newly elected President Pezeshkian, Supreme Leader Khamenei delivered a speech emphasizing the successful conclusion of the recent elections. “The elections were held in the best possible way and within a good competitive atmosphere,” Khamenei stated, acknowledging the somber mood across the nation due to the passing of former President Ebrahim Raisi. Khamenei lauded President Pezeshkian’s inaugural address, describing it as “deep and indicative of his commitment to the principles of popular religious sovereignty,” reiterating “we are all committed to supporting him.”⁽²⁾



Two days after his inauguration on July 30, 2024, Pezeshkian officially became the ninth president of Iran, succeeding the late President Raisi. In a ceremony before the Iranian Parliament, Pezeshkian took the constitutional oath and commenced the formation of his government.

Among his key appointments, Pezeshkian named “reformist” leader Mohammad Reza Aref as the first vice president. Aref, a seasoned politician, previously served in the same capacity under President Mohammad Khatami from 2001 to 2005. Additionally, Pezeshkian appointed former Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif as deputy for strategic affairs, and Ali Tayebnia as a senior advisor. However, some of Pezeshkian’s selections have ignited controversy. Notably, Shahram Dabiri was chosen as vice president for parliamentary affairs, and Hamid Pour-Mohammadi was appointed as the head of the Planning and Budget Organization⁽³⁾. Both had

previously faced allegations related to economic corruption. Furthermore, Mohammad Jafar Ghaempanah was named vice president for executive affairs, a move that raised eyebrows. President Pezeshkian is expected to present his cabinet ministers to the Iranian Parliament in the first half of August 2024, following consultations with Khamenei.

Pezeshkian’s triumph in the presidential elections dealt a significant blow to Iran’s “hardliners” who had been poised to continue sidelining “reformist” rivals and maintain their grip on the country’s institutions. However, Pezeshkian’s victory aligns with Khamenei’s apparent strategy to rebuild public trust in the ruling establishment, boost voter turnout, and alleviate internal tensions that have been mounting since 2022. The tragic death of Mahsa Amini, a young Kurdish woman who died in the custody of the so-called morality police, sparked widespread protests across the nation.

A sense of harmony and agreement appears to exist between Pezeshkian and Khamenei, as demonstrated by Khamenei's commendation of Pezeshkian's inaugural address. Khamenei described the speech as profound, highlighting Pezeshkian's commitment to the principles of religious sovereignty, and urged support for the new president in fulfilling his duties. During his first meeting with Pezeshkian and members of Parliament, Khamenei called on the legislative body to assist the president in his endeavors and emphasized the importance of presenting a unified voice to the international community.⁽⁴⁾ Many Iranians perceived Pezeshkian's gratitude towards Khamenei, expressed after his electoral victory, as indicative of the supreme leader's influential role in the electoral outcome. Pezeshkian's remark that, without Khamenei's backing, his name might not have emerged from the ballot box victorious, has been widely interpreted as an acknowledgment of the leader's decisive endorsement.

Second: Multiple Challenges Awaiting the Pezeshkian Government

As President Pezeshkian begins his term, he confronts substantial challenges on both domestic and international fronts. Domestically, Pezeshkian has committed to addressing Iran's longstanding economic difficulties, aiming to revitalize a stagnating economy that has burdened the nation for years. The Iranian populace also anticipates significant reforms

in social freedoms under Pezeshkian's leadership. There are calls for a relaxation of strict social regulations, including a reduction in the enforcement of mandatory hijab policies. Additionally, there is growing pressure for the dissolution of the morality police and an end to its controversial patrols and activities.

Pezeshkian's efforts to improve Iran's economic conditions are closely tied to international engagement, including attracting foreign investment and, crucially, lifting US sanctions. These measures are anticipated to face strong opposition from the "hardliners" who may resist changes that could affect their political and ideological control. Similarly, Pezeshkian's proposed reforms to relax the compulsory hijab and disband the morality police are expected to spark conflicts with conservative clerics and the "hardliners" within Iran. These proposed changes challenge deeply entrenched social and religious norms, potentially leading to significant internal resistance as Pezeshkian seeks to implement his vision for a more open and reform-oriented Iran.

One of the significant challenges for Pezeshkian is assembling his cabinet. In Iran, appointments to key ministries — such as interior, foreign affairs, intelligence, and defense — require the consultation and approval of the supreme leader. This procedural requirement poses a challenge for Pezeshkian, who aims to place "reformist" figures at the helm of government affairs and policy develop-

ment. Furthermore, Pezeshkian may encounter resistance from a “hardliner-”dominated Parliament.

Pezeshkian has committed to pursuing a pragmatic foreign policy, aiming to ease tensions and revive stalled negotiations on the 2015 nuclear deal with the P5+1 group. He has also expressed a clear intention to engage more openly with the West. However, Khamenei has advised Pezeshkian to adhere to the foreign policy framework established by the late President Raisi. This guidance suggests a continuation of the “hardliner” stance, which could impose constraints on Pezeshkian’s efforts to foster closer ties with Western nations. Pezeshkian has repeatedly stated his intention to work within the parameters set by the supreme leader, implying that significant changes in Iran’s nuclear and foreign policies may be limited.

Conclusion

Pezeshkian faces a challenging path ahead, with significant obstacles including a worsening economic situation, ongoing US sanctions, and the uncertain outcome of nuclear negotiations. The strong alignment between Pezeshkian and Khamenei, coupled with Pezeshkian’s reluctance to confront the “hardliners,” may hinder his ability to deliver on the promises made to the Iranian people. This could lead to substantial criticism from various quarters, including within the “reformist” movement. Should Pezeshkian fail to achieve his reform agenda, he might face accusations of compromising his principles

and aligning too closely with “hardliner” policies.

Iran’s Arms Deal With Armenia and Persistent Efforts to Acquire a Base in the Red Sea

As tensions in the Middle East continue to soar, Iran has strengthened its presence in the Caucasus through the recently reported arms deal with Armenia which includes the establishment of a military base. In addition, Iran is accelerating its unrelenting efforts to gain access to Sudan’s strategic naval port in the Red Sea while continuing to supply arms to the Houthis and other affiliated militias in the Levant under the pretext of fighting against Israel. In the ICF for July 2024, we discuss the strategic partnership between Iran and Armenia, and Iran’s efforts to acquire a naval base in the Red Sea.

First: Iran-Armenia Strategic Partnership

The unsurprisingly secret arms deal with Armenia gives Iran’s notion of strategic depth and outreach new meanings. The biggest arms deal in Iran’s recent history amounts to \$500 million, involving the acquisition of Shahed 136, Shahed 129, Shahed 197, Mohajer drones and air defense systems such as Khordad 3, Majid, Khordad 15, and Arman.⁽⁵⁾

Responding to the news story, a spokesperson for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Yerevan stated, “Armenia is currently diversifying its security relations within the framework of international law. We don’t

have any further comment on this.”⁽⁶⁾ The remarks do not deny Armenia’s weapons procurement agreement with Iran. It is also reported that the weapons transfer is part of a comprehensive strategic agreement which includes Iranian bases against foreign (Azerbaijan’s) aggression. In fact, Baku’s deep strategic cooperation with Tel Aviv rattles Tehran.

As per the JCPOA, the restriction on the sale and purchase of Iranian weapons expired on October 19, 2023. After Russia, Armenia is the most significant buyer of Iranian military hardware.

Armenia recently decided to quit its membership of the Russia-centric Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO)⁽⁷⁾ and is strengthening ties with France. Yerevan was disappointed by the Kremlin’s indifference over Baku’s war to liberate the Nagorno-Karabakh region. Earlier, Armenia boycotted CSTO military drills.⁽⁸⁾ Then, why would Russia not obstruct Iran’s sale of arms to Armenia? Iran-Armenian collaboration does not threaten the Kremlin, which has been unable to export weapons since the launch of the Russia-Ukraine war. Besides, it is better for Moscow that Yerevan buys arms from Tehran instead of Paris. Besides, France’s military industry is currently prioritizing the needs of NATO as well as Ukraine.

Not only does Iran benefit from the prolonged Russia-Ukraine war but also extends its outreach adjacent to Israel’s closest ally, Azerbaijan. Iran is alarmed at the prospect of an Azeri at-

tack and the annexation of the Zangezur corridor in Armenia which separates its Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic from Azerbaijan.

Iranian Parliament Speaker Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf reiterated Tehran’s stance during a recent meeting with his Armenian counterpart Ruben Rubinyan, that “any changes to the borders of our neighboring countries are our redline.”⁽⁹⁾

Iran has remained silent over the news of its sizeable arms transfer deal with Armenia. Yerevan has fallen short of denying the agreement. Yet, it is not certain if Iran would be able to deliver the pledged military hardware given that its direct confrontation with Israel might become a prolonged full-scale conflict. Such a scenario provides Baku with an ideal opportunity to capture the Zangezur corridor. The balance of power and time are both against Iran and Armenia lest Azerbaijan decides to exercise restraint.

Second: Iran’s Unwavering Determination to Establish a Red Sea Base

Iran is not giving up its effort to set up a permanent naval base on Sudan’s Red Sea coast despite unsuccessful bilateral talks in March 2024.⁽¹⁰⁾ After supplying Khartoum with suicide drones to fight the Rapid Support Forces, Tehran tried to woo Khartoum with its helicopter carrier ship in exchange for permission for a military base.

“The Iranians said they wanted

to use the base for intelligence gathering. They also wanted to station warships there," an international media house quoted Ahmad Hasan Mohamed, an intelligence adviser to Sudan's military chief.⁽¹¹⁾ Tehran, however, neither confirmed nor denied the bid. In July, Iran modified its proposal to establish a dual-use commercial and military base at Port Sudan.⁽¹²⁾ Though the east African nation rejected the offer again, it continues to show Iran's persisting interest in the conflict. The port in question is located approximately 174 nautical miles west of Saudi Arabia and 650 nautical miles southwest of Israel's Port Eilat. Since the Red Sea is the busiest shipping route, Iran's presence is aimed increasing its leverage by threatening global maritime traffic.

Conclusion

Regardless of the crushing sanctions and public outrage, Iran's rulers are unceasing in their pursuit to expand the country's clout through military diplomacy. The bid for establishing a naval base in Port Sudan has so far been fruitless while the arms transfer deal with Armenia may also succumb to US and European pressures. Considering the odds, Tehran will still adamantly strive to seek any degree of success in this escalation.

The Ethnic Dimension in the Pezeshkian Era

The emergence of the ethnic dimension in the Iranian political process manifested only recently in two contexts. The first was during the

electoral process; in which opinions pivoted around the idea that the electoral behavior of citizens was based on ethnic considerations. The second emergence of the ethnic dimension however came post elections. At the time, there had been an obvious surge in minorities' political activities that were encouraged by Pezeshkian's promises to respond to minority demands. These demands revolved around granting minorities roles in state institutions to allow them to take part in the decision-making process. The ICF Social File for July assesses the role of Iranian minorities in the electoral process and their stance post-elections.

First: The Role of Minorities in the Electoral Process

The ethnically and religiously diverse nature of Iranian society leaves an ethnic footprint on the political scene generally, while a more prominent one on the electoral scene in particular. Minorities' complaints are often concerned with the deprivation of their political, economic and cultural rights. Thus, they lean towards the "reformist" movement that aims to change several stringent policies adopted by the "conservative" movement. That being said, there was a clear absence of minorities during "conservative" candidate Saeed Jalili's electoral campaigning. "Reformist" candidate Masoud Pezeshkian's electoral program on the other hand highlighted minority demands,⁽¹³⁾ and promised to achieve social justice, balanced development and structural

reforms.⁽¹⁴⁾ In particular, Pezeshkian stated, “Kurds, Arabs and all those living in this country must have a place on the basis of merit, this country must be built by the Iranian people and the deserving people, not just by one group and one faction.”⁽¹⁵⁾ Pezeshkian was also hosted by Sunnis in the country. During his meeting with them he emphasized the importance of solidarity between all ethnicities and sects, and asserted that differences will only lead to the country’s failure on all levels.⁽¹⁶⁾

Following Pezeshkian’s electoral victory, some readings suggested that his win was attributed to the Azeri provinces to which he belongs. Tasnim News reported that the votes in favor of Pezeshkian were a result of ethnic biases rather than based on political, economic or other considerations, and that voting based on ethnicity or on a candidate’s place of origin, was unprecedented. However, the difference in some provinces shows that ethnicity was not the only factor in Pezeshkian’s success.⁽¹⁷⁾ Nevertheless, one cannot deny the role of ethnic groups in the victory of Pezeshkian — who was able to win the votes of Turks, Kurds, Arabs and Baloch owing to his independent personality and defense of minority rights.⁽¹⁸⁾

Second: Iran’s Minority Communities Following Pezeshkian’s Win

The “reformist” background of the new president and his advocacy of freedoms and rights during his election campaign not only motivated minorities to vote for him, but also served

as a catalyst for minority demands. In meetings and congratulatory letters to the new president, religious and ethnic minority leaders reminded the new president of the promises he made and urged him to ensure that they are fulfilled. However, it is not necessary for the president to follow through with his promises, as there are fixed parameters within the political system both at the constitutional and political levels that cannot be ignored, especially as the supreme leader has the final say.⁽¹⁹⁾ Perhaps the most prominent example of this is the reaction of many “conservatives” to the Chairman of the Transitional Leadership Council Mohammad Javad Zarif’s statements regarding the criteria for selecting members of the Ministerial Council, in which he favorably distinguished those belonging to minorities. “Conservative” media outlets devoted columns and editorials criticizing the principle of “positive discrimination,” categorizing it as conflicting with national unity. Media outlets also interpreted Zarif’s statements as “promoting to undermine the official doctrine,” and went as far to interpret them as “considering belonging to the Shiite doctrine as something negative.”⁽²⁰⁾

In addition, the dire economic state of the country with its limited resources and challenges curbs the fulfillment of minorities’ living demands. Furthermore, the proximity of Sunni provinces to border areas makes them subject to tensions and violence. Therefore, the most that mi-

norities can obtain during this stage are development projects that would assert that there is no systematic exclusionary policies taken against minorities by the state. In this context, it is not unlikely that some marginal government positions will be granted to figures belonging to minorities as an attempt to appease them.

Conclusion

These developments may indicate that issues relating to ethnic dimensions will be vividly present on the political scene during Pezeshkian's presidency, and may be among the controversial issues between the president and the "conservative" forces. Even if Pezeshkian succeeds in fulfilling some of the promises he made, they will not meet the aspirations of minorities, especially in light of the "conservatives'" rejection of their demands along with Pezeshkian's desire to steer away from factional arguments and disputes.

Islamic Center of Hamburg Closed

German authorities have shut down the Islamic Center of Hamburg and its associated institutions, citing their pursuit of "radical Islamic goals," according to a statement from the German Interior Ministry. The Islamic Center of Hamburg is a significant hub affiliated with Iran and a key asset for Iranian interests in Europe, and its closure has led to discontent among Iranian officials. The ICF Ideological File for July 2024 file delves into the background of the Islamic Center of Hamburg, explores the reasons for

its closure, and analyzes the reactions from Iranian officials in response to this development.

First: What Is the Islamic Center of Hamburg and Why Has it Been Closed?

Founded in 1953, the Islamic Center of Hamburg is one of the oldest Islamic institutions in Germany. It publishes magazines in both German and Persian and houses a library with over 6,000 titles on various Islamic and Shiite topics. However, the center has faced allegations of promoting Shiism, violating German laws, and acting as a front for advancing the Iranian agenda.⁽²¹⁾

The German Interior Ministry has confirmed that the closure of the Islamic Center of Hamburg and its affiliated institutions stems from their pursuit of "extremist Islamic goals." The statement revealed that authorities executed court-ordered searches at 55 locations connected to the center across eight states.⁽²²⁾ Additionally, the four Shiite mosques associated with the center are set to be closed. The decision to ban the Islamic Center of Hamburg followed evidence gathered from inspections of these locations in November 2023. The German intelligence agency had previously classified the center as extremist, citing its open promotion of "anti-Jewish and anti-Israel" rhetoric.⁽²³⁾ The Interior Ministry also accused the center of attempting to incite an Islamic revolution in Germany.⁽²⁴⁾ In response, an Iranian official has denied any connection between the Is-

lamic Center of Hamburg, with those in Berlin, Munich, and Frankfurt. The official claimed that these centers operate independently and were established prior to the Iranian revolution.⁽²⁵⁾

Second: The Iranian Response

Iranian officials have interpreted the German decision to close the Islamic Center of Hamburg as part of a broader attack on Shiism and an attempt to fabricate charges. They argue that the new German administration, influenced by the Zionist lobby, made the decision to appease this lobby. Iranian media have criticized the move as contradictory to the principles of freedom and democracy,⁽²⁶⁾ suggesting it targets the Shiite sect. Ali Bagheri Kani, Iran's acting foreign minister, expressed strong objections to the closure in a phone call with his German counterpart.⁽²⁷⁾ He denounced the measures as "illegal" and "violating human rights," characterizing the closure as a politically motivated act aimed at opposing Islam and advancing Zionist interests. In response, the German foreign minister stated that legal recourse is available for the center to address its grievances through the country's judicial system.

In response to the closure of the Islamic Center of Hamburg, Iranian officials have sought to frame the issue as a broader attack on the Shiite community rather than a targeted action against Iranian interests. They have portrayed the decision as a product of

"Zionist" influence within Germany, aiming to rally Shiites and Muslims in the West against the German authorities. This narrative suggests that the real motive behind the closure is not solely to target Iranian institutions but to undermine the Shiite community and the Islamic presence more generally.

Conclusion

Since the success of the Iranian revolution, Iran has actively established Islamic centers across Europe and the Western world as part of its soft power strategy. These centers, initially set up for advocacy, preaching and guiding the Shiite community, have evolved into significant instruments for advancing Iranian interests. Over time, they have shifted from merely serving the community to becoming tools for promoting Shiism, influencing European policy and supporting extremist groups outside Europe, including the Lebanese Hezbollah, Shiite militias in Iraq, and the Houthis in Yemen. In response, several European countries have taken measures to safeguard their national security from the activities of these centers, with the Islamic Center of Hamburg being a primary focus due to its central role in Iran's operations in Germany and Europe. Iran, in turn, has framed these actions as an attack on Shiism as a whole, rather than a reaction to Iranian activities perceived as hostile and in violation of German laws.

IRAN-ARAB INTERACTIONS

Iran's relations with several Arab and regional countries are undergoing significant changes. In Iraq, Baghdad faced a political crisis with Islamabad after the Pakistani minister of religious affairs claimed that about 50,000 Pakistani citizens had disappeared in Iraq. In Syria, various theories emerged regarding the deaths of two prominent figures from the Syrian political sphere, suggesting they were either killed by an order from President Bashar al-Assad or due to the Iranian-Russian conflict over interests in Syria.

Iran's interactions with Arab and regional countries are analyzed through the following developments:

- Controversy Erupts in Iraq Over the Disappearance of Thousands of Pakistani Pilgrims and the Targeting of Jurf al-Sakhar

- The Killing of Muhammad al-Qatirji and Luna al-Shibl: The Conflict of Interests in Syria

- The Assassination of Haniyeh Highlights the Ongoing Intelligence War Between Iran and Israel

Controversy Erupts in Iraq Over the Disappearance of Thousands of Pakistani Pilgrims and the Targeting of Jurf al-Sakhar

In July 2024, Iraq witnessed developments that were closely tied to Iran's strategic interests within the country. For example, Pakistani Minister for Religious Affairs Chaudhry Salik Hussain's statement on July 27, 2024, about the disappearance of 50,000 Pakistani pilgrims in Iraq following the Ashura commemoration stirred debate. While official statements attributed this to job-seeking, unofficial narratives suggested pro-Iran militias might be involved, potentially recruiting them for conflict. On a different note, an attack on militias occurred in the Iraqi town of Jurf al-Sakhar on July 30, 2024, stemming from the Gaza war and its regional aftermath.

First: The Disappearance of 50,000 Pakistanis in Iraq

Quoted in Pakistan's *The Nation* newspaper, Minister for Religious Affairs Chaudhry Salik Hussain, during a meeting with the Permanent Committee for Religious Affairs and Interfaith Harmony in the Parliament on July 26, 2024, made statements that stirred debate about the disappearance of 50,000 citizens in Iraq. These remarks resonated beyond Pakistan and raised questions as these "disappearances" involved as many as 50,000 people. In response to the backlash, Hussain published a post on X the next day, July 27, 2024, stat-

ing that his words were manipulated and taken out of context to harm Pakistan.

The minister further explained that they did not "disappear" but are rather "absent" and not affiliated with any entity or organization. He also noted that the number 50,000 does not only apply to 2024 but extends to previous years. He claimed that these individuals are job seekers and that he will meet with the Iraqi side to sign a memorandum of understanding concerning their regularization.⁽²⁸⁾

Prior to Hussain's explanation, the Iraqi government announced an investigation into this matter. Iraqi Labor Minister Ahmed al-Asadi said it was likely that the "absconders" from the Ashura ceremonies had fled with the intention of engaging in illegal work. He expressed his ministry's concern about the increasing number of undocumented Pakistani workers in the country. On July 28, 2024, the Iraqi Foreign Ministry dubbed the disappearance news as inaccurate.⁽²⁹⁾

It explained that it had officially communicated with Minister Salik Hussain who responded by acknowledging confusion in the reporting of his statements. He also stated that he would summon the media outlet responsible for publishing the inaccurate news to investigate the matter. These clear reactions are attributed first to the huge number indicated by the Pakistani minister and second to the firsthand experience of Iran in recruiting Pakistani and Afghan fighters to join the battlefields in Syr-

ia. Concerns were also aggravated amid reports of Iran-backed militias seeking to deploy across the Iraq-Syria-Jordan border triangle. Yemeni Media Minister Moammar al-Eryani warned on July 27, 2024 of the repercussions of the transfer of Shiite Pakistanis to the Houthi-controlled areas, a statement that coincided with the news of the disappeared Pakistanis.⁽³⁰⁾ It is worth noting that the Hijri month of Moharram is the most important religious seasons in Iraq as millions of Shiites gather in Karbala for the Ashura commemoration. Estimates indicate that the number of foreign visitors is around 6 million, including tens of thousands of Pakistanis ranging between 80,000 to 100,000.

Second: Reasons for the Focused Targeting on Jurf al-Sakhar

The Iraqi town of Jurf al-Sakhar, located in Babylon Governorate and known for its Shiite majority, has been subject to intensive US strikes. Three locations in the town were targeted on July 30, 2024 by drone airstrikes. Multiple sources and reports suggest that these strikes were carried out by the United States to neutralize significant militia strongholds that pose a threat to Israel. Interestingly, these actions coincided with an Israeli escalation in Lebanon, which included the killing of a key Hezbollah figure, Fouad Shukur, and an attack targeting prominent Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh in Tehran.

Jurf al-Sakhar, a significant enclave for Iran-aligned Iraqi armed group Kata'ib Hezbollah since 2017 follow-

ing its liberation from ISIS, enjoys a strategic location. Located at the crossroads of southern, central and eastern provinces, Jurf al-Sakhar boasts military infrastructure that has transformed it into a readily deployable military site. The area includes testing grounds for projectiles and missiles, as well as ample space for weapons development dating back to the Saddam Hussein era. Additionally, extensive underground facilities provide protection against military attacks and function as assembly and operational centers for drones and advanced missiles and can even serve as headquarters for Iranian commanders and advisors.⁽³¹⁾ As per reports, weapons arrive disassembled from Iran and are assembled, tested and deployed in military workshops within Jurf al-Sakhar's outskirts. The aforementioned has granted the town an advantage to become the most important logistic base for Iran and advanced hub for the IRGC. For this reason, Kata'ib Hezbollah has designated it a restricted area, forbidden to citizens seeking to return after the town's liberation from ISIS.

Conclusion

Iran's previous recruitment of Pakistani and Afghan fighters for the Syrian battlefield has led many observers to believe that the recently disappeared Pakistanis may also have been recruited. These operations are undertaken by the Iranians to achieve their regional agenda amid growing regional tensions. In Iraq, Jurf al-Sakhar has turned into a safe haven

and operational center for Kata'ib Hezbollah and other militias where weapons are developed in a stark violation of Iraqi sovereignty. The town is beyond the reach of any government oversight, an area operating outside the law where even state security is denied access. It is therefore expected to have been excluded from official visits since the removal of ISIS.

The Killing of Muhammad al-Qatirji and Luna al-Shibl: The Conflict of Interests in Syria

A series of security events, such as the mysterious car accident that killed Luna al-Shibl, known for her proximity to Moscow and the Syrian political leadership, has raised questions and controversy about the inner workings of the economic and media network relied upon by Syrian President Bashar al-Assad throughout the crisis that has gripped Syria since 2011. This was followed by the killing of businessman Muhammad al-Qatirji, close to Assad and Iran, after his car was targeted on the road between Damascus and Beirut. The Syrian official narrative attributed his death to an Israeli drone strike.

The assassination of these two prominent figures, both close to the economic and diplomatic corridors of the Syrian presidential palace, and linked to Russia and Iran respectively, provoked numerous questions about the motives and calculations of domestic and foreign parties behind these operations on Syrian soil. This file will discuss the following two axes: Shibl

and Qatirji and the intersection of the Syrian network of interests between domestic and foreign entities and the implications stemming from the assassination of influential Syrian figures.

First: Shibl and Qatirji and the Intersection of the Syrian Network of Interests Between Domestic and Foreign Entities

On July 15, 2024, Arab and international media outlets reported the killing of one of the most famous Syrian businessmen, Muhammad Baraa al-Qatirji, after his vehicle was targeted in the Sabboura area near the Syrian-Lebanese border. This incident sparked various accusations, with some blaming the Syrian government and others blaming Israel for Qatirji's assassination.

Qatirji was seen as a warlord who exploited the ongoing crisis in Syria since 2011 to build a vast network of companies across various economic sectors, including oil, gold, real estate, and tourism. He became a crucial pillar and economic front on which the Syrian presidential palace relied during economic predicaments and crises. Moreover, he established military influence in government-controlled areas,⁽³²⁾ and maintained close ties with Iran's Quds Force by interlinking his economic relations with lucrative contracts with major Iranian companies operating in Syria. He also contributed to financing both the Quds Force and Hezbollah by transporting weapons and oil from the eastern region in Bukamal, Deir Ezzor

and the Syrian Desert to Lebanon. On the other hand, the news of the death of Assad's advisor, Luna al-Shibl, in what was reported as a random car accident, stirred controversy and suspicions about the nature of her death and the actual reasons behind it. Over the years, Shibl was among the inner circle around Assad, accompanying him to meetings, sessions, and even his limited foreign trips. She was also considered a key member of the Syrian Economic Council. Her name often sparked controversy amidst reports of a strong relationship with Russia and her close ties with senior Russian officials, with some reports alleging her involvement in leaking intelligence information concerning Iran.

The two incidents raised questions about whether Syria is entering a phase of eliminating those close to the presidential palace and preparing for a new, different political and economic era compared to the period that marked the Syrian scene post-2022. Alternatively, these incidents of assassination/death may be among the most prominent manifestations and forms of competition that have begun to surface between the active parties on the Syrian scene.

These issues and questions are based on timely considerations that coincided with these incidents. For instance, the deaths of both Shibl and Qatirji on the Yafour-Sabboura road occurred in conjunction with an expansion of the circle of assassinations targeting figures close to Assad's authority, which varied between Israeli airstrikes, car

accidents, and planted explosives. This opens the door to questions about the responsible party.

Second: The Targeting of Influential Syrian Figures — Significations and Implications

Several interpretations suggest that the series of assassinations of influential Syrian figures imply a restructuring of the Syrian government to benefit Assad's authority and ensure internal discipline within his ruling system. This hypothesis is built on signs and indications observed in Syria in recent periods, including an undeclared conflict within the Syrian government factions due to the expanding influence of Iran and Russia on various security, military and economic levels, which has contributed to reducing Assad's security authority. Many leaks have revealed Shibl's involvement in exchanging information with external parties, and that Qatirji had built strong relations with both the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and Hezbollah. These two figures were considered close to Assad's inner circle, but with external communication, internal conflicts and conflicting interests, targeting them might be part of rearranging internal alliances and controlling the political and economic elite within Assad's defined lines.

Other opinions adopt this hypothesis, considering there is an internal movement by Assad to exclude many prominent older figures who have witnessed the Syrian crisis since 2011 and influenced Assad's foreign policy

decisions. These figures include key personalities from Assad's close circle, primarily General Ali Mamlouk. This exclusion comes as a kind of preparation for political entitlements in the Arab and regional arenas that Assad seeks to engage in, serving his ability to dominate decision-making within his ruling system. This view aligns with a broad political movement to restore relations with his government, sparked by the appointment of a new Italian ambassador to Damascus,⁽³³⁾ the first such move following the call by European countries, including Italy, Austria, Croatia, Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Greece, Slovakia and Slovenia, to reevaluate relations with Syria and engage with the regime. The call included a proposal to establish an EU envoy to Syria who can communicate not only with Syrian actors but also with other countries in the region, along with resuming communication with the regime's ambassador to the EU in Brussels.⁽³⁴⁾ However, there are significant weaknesses in linking the deaths of Shibl and Qatirji to Assad's role, as the Syrian economy has plunged to its lowest depths, and Assad has not achieved any positive economic outcomes from restoring regional relations. How could he dispense with Qatirji, who is one of his most important economic pillars? Moreover, Shibl represents a communication and balance element between Assad's relations with Russia versus Iran, so attributing a hidden role to Assad in Shibl's death means remov-

ing him from this balance and placing him under greater Iranian influence, which is unlikely as Assad seeks to extricate himself from the Russian anvil and the Iranian hammer.

The second explanation for the motivations behind the incidents involving Shibl and Qatirji leans towards suggesting that the elimination of these names was the result of Russian-Iranian competition in Syria, with each country attempting to eliminate the centers of power affiliated with the other. Despite the two countries' agreement on supporting Assad's regime in Syria and their military coordination and logistical complementarity, the economic scene is different. There is a hidden conflict between Iran and Russia regarding the division of Syrian economic resources and strategic geographical locations such as ports, oil fields, and phosphate mines. They also compete over reconstruction plans and the restructuring of the Syrian government itself, each with its tools and people within Syrian institutions, leading each side to attempt to limit the most prominent Syrian figures representing the other party.

In an indirect indication of Russian-Iranian competition in Syria, Russian President Vladimir Putin, during Assad's unexpected visit to Moscow, sought to affirm the possibility of improving economic relations between the two countries,⁽³⁵⁾ following weeks where Syrian economic relations with Iran dominated the news, with the latter reminding Damascus

to implement the economic agreements concluded between them, disregarding Russian interests. Furthermore, the repeated Israeli airstrikes on Iranian sites in Syria, coordinated with Russia, have created tensions between Moscow and Tehran. Iran feels infiltrated by Israel through influential figures within its presidential institution, especially those close to Russia. Several indications link Shibl to the assassination of IRGC leaders inside the Iranian consulate in Damascus. Conversely, the assassination of Qatirji also revealed internal security breaches in Syria and the leaking of information to Israel about the movements of one of the most prominent figures linked to the Assad's regime and Iran in Syria.

Conclusion

The elimination of figures who played significant roles in Syrian economic and political affairs indicates turbulence within the corridors of the Syrian presidency. This does not necessarily mean Assad's regime is on the verge of collapse, but it implies one of two things: either there is an internal conflict that Assad seeks to contain and reorganize his internal system, or Assad's rule over Syria, and the power that should be vested in the head of the regime, has become more fragmented and vulnerable to external infiltrations. This infiltration may be to the extent that it allows for the assassination of figures close to the regime leader without him being able to do anything about it.

The Assassination of Haniyeh Highlights the Ongoing Intelligence War Between Iran and Israel

Israel and Iran continue to engage in indirect confrontations through various means. These include mutual threats related to the ongoing conflict in Gaza and operations by Hezbollah and other pro-Iran militias against Israel. Tel Aviv is actively addressing the Iranian nuclear issue to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons or to negotiate a new agreement that might allow Iran to maintain its regional influence, which poses threats to Israeli national security. This file examines the espionage wars between Israel and Iran, focusing on the assassination of Hamas Political Bureau Chief Ismail Haniyeh in Tehran, the recent discovery of an Iranian spy cell in Israel, and new Israeli measures concerning the Iranian nuclear file and their impact on future confrontations between the two nations.

First: The Assassination of Haniyeh and Espionage Wars

Israel executed strategic strikes, killing Haniyeh in Tehran during the inauguration of Iran's new President Masoud Pezeshkian. The details of the assassination remain unclear due to conflicting reports and Israeli silence. However, military experts generally agree on a significant security breach within the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). Despite Iran's previous claims of dismantling Israeli spy cells, the Mossad networks within Iran appear unaffected. The absence

of recorded security incidents with an espionage dimension for a considerable time, despite escalating tensions between the two countries, is attributed to Israeli priorities. Initially focusing on nuclear-related targets, Israel later shifted its focus to IRGC and Quds Force leaders, particularly those involved with Hezbollah in Syria.

In a related development, Israeli media reported the arrest of three Israeli citizens suspected of conducting security activities under Iranian intelligence's direction. One suspect was instructed to hang advertisements in Tel Aviv, deposit money at various locations in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, deliver packages containing severed animal heads or dolls with knives and threatening messages, and set forests on fire. The suspect agreed to all tasks except murder and arson. He recruited two other Israelis, who completed some tasks for money.⁽³⁶⁾ Subsequently, the Israeli General Security Service (Shabak) arrested a senior official at a prominent medical institution on suspicion of compromising state security.⁽³⁷⁾

Second: Israeli Projects Addressing the Iranian Nuclear Program

The Israeli government is concerned that the deadlock in the Iranian nuclear negotiations could hinder the chances of reaching a new agreement, allowing Iran to progress toward developing a nuclear bomb. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, preoccupied with judicial reforms in 2023 and the ongoing conflict with Hamas since October 7, has not prioritized this issue. However, recent

intelligence suggests that Iran may be accelerating its nuclear program, aiming to produce a nuclear weapon before the potential inauguration of former US President Donald Trump, if he wins the upcoming US presidential election.

To address this, Netanyahu is reorganizing a series of working groups focused on the Iranian nuclear issue, informed by new intelligence suggesting Iran's intent to "shorten the timetable" for acquiring nuclear weapons. The working groups, comprising security forces, the Foreign Ministry and intelligence agencies, are overseen by the National Security Council. They include six groups, one led by the Mossad, focusing on the Iranian nuclear program, while another addresses Iran's influence operations in Israel and its support for regional proxies.⁽³⁸⁾

This strategic move may be a response to Iran's recent rhetoric, indicating a shift in its nuclear doctrine to deter an Israeli attack. The International Atomic Energy Agency's latest report confirmed that Iran had installed four of the eight sets of IR-6 centrifuges at the Fordow Fuel Enrichment Plant. Iran plans to expand its enrichment capacity at the Fordow plant, with additional centrifuges to be operational within three to four weeks.⁽³⁹⁾ Concurrently, Israeli threats to use nuclear weapons against Iran have increased, highlighted by Israeli Knesset member Avigdor Lieberman's recent call to employ non-conventional weapons against Iran.⁽⁴⁰⁾

Conclusion

The escalation between Iran and Israel persists amid the stalemate in reaching a resolution to the conflict between Hamas and Israel, with both parties adhering to their conditions. The growing involvement of the Houthis and Hezbollah in the conflict further complicates the situation. The likelihood of renewed direct confrontation between Israel and Iran has increased, raising concerns about a potential regional war. This tension could impact the Iranian nuclear issue as Iran seeks to develop nuclear weapons to achieve strategic deterrence.

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