

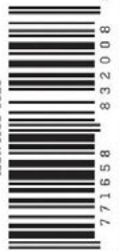
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Iran Case File

August 2024

Your window on Iran from inside and abroad

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Iranian interior witnessed many rapid developments and events at various political, military, social and ideological levels during August 2024. Iranian relations with the Arab world and the broader international community experienced a series of developments and intertwined interactions, which are expected to have repercussions on Iran's foreign relations soon.

Internally, in the political arena, the entire ministerial formation of new Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian gained the confidence of the Parliament, a surprising event given Pezeshkian's "reformist" leanings and the strong support he received from the "reformist" movement. Although the cabinet received parliamentary approval, some ministers faced severe criticism from "hardliner" members of Parliament. Pezeshkian, who sought to form a consensus government uniting all political movements, faced criticism from his supporters in the "reformist" movement for appointing ministers who did not align with the reform path he had promised during his election campaign. Pezeshkian's statements about coordination with the supreme leader also angered the "hardliners," especially supporters of the losing presidential candidate Saeed Jalili, who accused him of using the supreme leader's name to pressure MPs into voting for his government.

In the military sphere, the new Iranian Defense Minister Brigadier General Aziz Nasirzadeh began his tenure by introducing ambitious plans to develop stealth aircraft, heavy destroyers,

satellites, drones utilizing artificial intelligence, and space technology. However, Iran's critical economic conditions may prove to be a significant obstacle to these projects. Additionally, Iran conducted a naval maneuver in the Caspian Sea in August, likely in response to the assassination of Hamas Political Bureau Chief Ismail Haniyeh in Tehran, signaling to Israel that its bases in Azerbaijan could be targeted. Iran also held joint military exercises with Russia, alongside other maneuvers by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) near the Iraqi border, aimed at enhancing the readiness and combat alertness of its forces.

On the social front, recent Iranian reports indicate the continued erosion of the middle class, with experts warning about the impact this could have on Iran's future stability and development. This troubling trend poses a major challenge to Pezeshkian's government, as many are waiting to see how he will address this crisis and reduce its impact on Iranian society. Solutions are urgently needed to address underlying causes such as sanctions, poverty, inflation, and unemployment.

Ideologically, the "conservatives" are working to undermine the "reformists," who returned to prominence after their recent presidential election victory. The "conservatives" have resorted not only to political clashes but also to attacking the intellectual symbols of modern and contemporary "reformism," attempting to undermine both "reformist" policy and its intellectual foundations. Figures like Shariati, Taleghani, Khatami

and Zarif have been at the center of this storm as key "reformist" theorists. The "reformists" have pushed back, labeling these "conservative" factions as exclusionary takfiri currents. The relationship between the two sides appears to be at a turning point: either Pezeshkian will concede and align with "conservative" constants, or a systematic campaign of violence against the "reformists" could ensue.

In terms of foreign relations, August 2024 was marked by significant developments for Iran. In its interactions with Iraq, the report discussed the political implications of the crisis surrounding the amendment of Iraq's Personal Status Law, which has sectarian dimensions that may threaten Iraq's civil character and push the country toward sectarian conflict. The amendment serves external agendas aimed at establishing a Shiite identity for Iraq, risking heightened tensions in a society with multiple sects and ethnicities.

Regarding Iran's interactions with international powers, the report highlights growing tensions with the United States, primarily in response to Iranian threats to retaliate for the assassination of Haniyeh. The United States has been making moves to counter these threats amid concerns about the potential for an escalating conflict. Complications surrounding the nuclear issue remain unresolved, with no clear diplomatic pathway in sight. Furthermore, the upcoming US elections and the global political divide suggest that neither side is willing to make concessions that could advance the nuclear settlement.

DEVELOPMENTS IN IRAN'S INTERNAL AFFAIRS

During August 2024, Iran's domestic landscape witnessed numerous developments at the political, military, social, and ideological levels. The most prominent of these can be summarized by addressing the following issues:

- The Iranian Parliament granted confidence to all ministers of the new government.
- Iran confronted its security challenges with an overly ambitious military vision.
- The continued erosion of the middle class in Iranian society.
- The return of the intellectual conflict between the "reformists" and the "conservatives."

Iranian Parliament Grants Confidence to All Ministers of New Cabinet

Following several days of deliberations, the Iranian Parliament voted to grant confidence to all 19 ministers proposed by President Masoud Pezeshkian. This approval of the entire cabinet was unexpected, especially given Pezeshkian's "reformist" inclinations and the "hardliner" control over the majority of parliamentary seats. In this file, we address the following points: the government's attainment of parliamentary confidence despite objections from "hardliners" about certain ministers; criticisms directed at Pezeshkian regarding his ministerial appointments; and the discontent among the "hardliners" due to Pezeshkian's statements about coordinating with the supreme leader on the ministerial nominations.

First: The Government Wins Parliamentary Confidence Despite "Hardliner" Objections to Some Ministerial Nominations

On August 21, 2024, the Iranian Parliament, dominated by the "hardliners," approved all the ministers proposed by the new newly elected President Pezeshkian. This consensus, achieved by Pezeshkian's government ministers, is a first in 23 years, with the last government to achieve complete cabinet approval being President Mohammad Khatami's in 2001. The new government, which officially began

its duties in August, includes 19 ministers, one of whom is Farzaneh Sadeghi, the minister of roads and urban development.

Despite all proposed ministers receiving parliamentary approval, some "hardliners," particularly those close to the losing presidential candidate Saeed Jalili, sought to challenge the qualifications of certain ministers. For instance, they questioned the suitability of Minister of Economy Nasser Hemmati, a former competitor of the late President Ebrahim Raisi and ex-head of the Central Bank during Rouhani's administration. They also targeted Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi, who had been criticized by the "hardliners" for his role in the 2015 nuclear negotiations with the P5+1, which the "hardliners" opposed. Additionally, they questioned the eligibility of Health Minister Mohammad Reza Zafarghandi due to his support for the 2009 protests and his rejection of the election results favoring Mahmoud Ahmadinejad at that time.

Second: Criticisms Leveled at Pezeshkian Over Cabinet Nominations

Since the announcement of the cabinet formation, it is evident that it diverged from the expectations of many "reformists" and their desire for reform and change, as it included several "hardliner" ministers who were part of the late President Ebrahim Raisi's administration. As a result, Pezeshkian faced severe criticism

for appointing these ministers, who were perceived as inconsistent with the reform agenda that he promised during his electoral campaign. Nevertheless, Pezeshkian urged his critics to wait for the cabinet to commence operations before evaluating its performance.

Political activists, social media users and journalists also accused Pezeshkian of failing to fulfill his promises regarding the appointment of a Sunni minister. The lists circulated on social media suggested the inclusion of a Sunni Iranian minister, but the final list did not feature this option.

Another point of criticism was the age of the ministers. The youngest ministers are Minister of Communications Sattar Hashemi and Minister of Roads and Urban Development Farzaneh Sadeghi, both aged 48. The oldest minister is the Minister of Economy Nasser Hemmati, who is 67 years old. The average age of the proposed ministers is 59.7 years, which contradicts Pezeshkian's previous promises of forming a government of younger individuals. Additionally, critics pointed out that the inclusion of three ministers from the previous administration of Raisi implies a continuation of the former government's policies.⁽¹⁾

Third: Pezeshkian's Remarks on Coordination With the Supreme Leader Raises "Hardliner" Ire

Ministers of the Iranian government are selected by the president. However, Iranian presidents have tradi-

tionally nominated ministers after consulting and coordinating with the supreme leader. These ministries typically include interior, foreign affairs, intelligence, defense, and culture and Islamic guidance. Pezeshkian, however, explicitly stated in his speech before the Parliament that he had consulted with Supreme Leader Khamenei regarding the list of proposed ministers before presenting it to the Parliament — a practice not followed by his predecessors, who either did not consult the supreme leader on this matter or did not disclose such consultations.

This disclosure provided a convenient pretext for the "hardliners" to launch a wave of criticism against Pezeshkian. For example, MP Hamid Rasai criticized Pezeshkian on X (formerly Twitter), stating, "Pezeshkian has unprecedentedly used the supreme leader's name to endorse his government."⁽²⁾ "Hardliner" MP Malik Shariati argued that leveraging the supreme leader's name to gain parliamentary approval was a grave mistake because if the proposed ministers had failed to secure the Parliament's confidence, it would have put the Parliament in opposition to the supreme leader's choices.⁽³⁾ Additionally, the editor of establishment-aligned Keyhan newspaper Hossein Shariatmadari expressed his disapproval over Pezeshkian's statements, "Pezeshkian's claim that he chose his ministers after coordinating with the supreme leader quickly became an excuse for the regime's

open adversaries to criticize democracy, the Parliament's status, and even the president's powers in Iran."⁽⁴⁾ Overall, these criticisms suggest that Pezeshkian's use of the supreme leader's name had a significant impact on securing parliamentary approval for all proposed ministers.

Conclusion

It is undeniable that Pezeshkian managed to achieve a significant breakthrough that eluded all Iranian presidents following former President Mohammad Khatami. While Pezeshkian's use of the supreme leader's name to endorse all members of his government may have contributed to this success, other important factors also played a role. Pezeshkian's commitment to following in the footsteps of the late President Raisi, his coordination with Parliament Speaker Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf, and the inclusion of various political currents within the Iranian system in his ministerial appointments was crucial. Additionally, the appointment of several ministers from Raisi's government to the new administration also likely contributed to this achievement.

Iran Faces Security Challenges With an Overly Ambitious Military Vision

Iran's new Defense Minister Brigadier General Aziz Nasirzadeh has announced ambitious plans aimed at bolstering the country's capabilities across several areas of defense, including armament, aircraft, destroy-

ers, satellites, and drones. However, these projects are expected to face significant challenges, particularly due to the financial constraints Iran is currently grappling with. In parallel, Iran has conducted naval maneuvers and military exercises with Russia in the Caspian Sea, along with military drills near its border with Iraq, to strengthen its military presence in the northwestern region and the Caspian Sea. This file explores for August Nasirzadeh's defense initiatives and the recent military activities, along with their broader implications.

First: The Ambitious Plans of Iran's New Defense Minister

Brigadier General Aziz Nasirzadeh, taking office amid heightened tensions with Israel and escalating Houthi piracy in the Red Sea, has laid out a defense agenda that is bold, even by Tehran's standards. His goals include developing short-take-off-and-landing aircraft, heavy destroyers, a wide array of satellites, and AI-powered drone squadrons.⁽⁵⁾ Nasirzadeh is also pushing to advance Iran's space technology by launching over 20 satellites into orbit. His defense proposals highlight the expansion of Iran's air and naval warfare capabilities, missile technology, air defense systems, and aerospace sector. Among his other ambitions is the development of multi-mission heavy destroyers equipped with high-speed missile-launching ships.⁽⁶⁾

Nasirzadeh is optimistic that Iran's military diplomacy will facilitate the

export of its latest defense products to neighboring regions, Latin America, and Africa. However, the Iranian government, under the late President Ebrahim Raisi, lacked the financial resources to support such a grand vision, compounded by a technological deficit. The defense minister's hope for enhanced defense cooperation with Russia appears overly optimistic, given that Iran is betting on Russia during difficult times without the necessary financial or technological strength.

Second: Naval Maneuvers in the Caspian Sea and Exercises Near the Iraqi Border

Recently, the Iranian navy launched maneuvers in the Caspian Sea from the Astara military base,⁽⁷⁾ simulating the destruction of virtual targets. Amid renewed tensions with Israel following the assassination of Hamas Political Bureau Chief Ismail Haniyeh, these war games signal Tehran's readiness to strike Tel Aviv's alleged bases in Azerbaijan. Over the years, Iran has steadily increased its naval presence and vigilance in the Caspian Sea and along its tense land border with Azerbaijan.

In July 2021, Iran conducted the high-profile military exercise "Sustainable Security 1400" in the Caspian Sea, spanning approximately 77,000 square kilometres.⁽⁸⁾ This drill involved offensive and defensive scenarios using combined arms tactics, including naval drones, missile launchers, fighter jets, helicopters,

and warships.⁽⁹⁾ Iran's naval presence in the Caspian Sea continues to grow, especially after commissioning the 1,400-ton destroyer Deylaman, which is equipped with cruise missiles and torpedoes and capable of detecting ships, drones, helicopters, submarines, and aircraft.

In addition to these naval maneuvers, Iran and Russia recently conducted joint naval patrols in the Caspian Sea, following the assassination of Haniyeh. According to official statements, the Russian navy contributed two small artillery and missile ships (Buyan-class), while Iran deployed the patrol ship Shahid Nazeri, the fast attack boat Joshan, and the frigate Deylaman.⁽¹⁰⁾ Moreover, the IRGC held military exercises in Kermanshah, near the Iraqi border, aimed at enhancing combat readiness and maintaining vigilance.⁽¹¹⁾

Conclusion

The economic and financial distress Iran is experiencing poses a significant obstacle to its ambitions to modernize its military arsenal. This means that the military projects proposed by the new Iranian defense minister remain contingent upon resolving the nuclear crisis and lifting the US sanctions imposed on the country. Additionally, Iran's naval maneuvers in the Caspian Sea, near Azerbaijan, which maintains good relations with Israel, along with the exercises conducted by the IRGC near the Iraqi border, serve as a message primarily directed at Israel. Tehran is signaling its readiness

to retaliate for the assassination of Haniyeh, either by striking Israel's alleged bases in Azerbaijan or by directly targeting Israel.

Iranian Society's Middle Class Continues to Erode

The debate over the importance of the middle class has resurfaced in Iran, following reports about the ongoing erosion of this social segment and warnings from experts regarding its potential impact on Iran's development in both the short and long term. The issue of middle-class decline poses one of the greatest challenges for the new government, led by Masoud Pezeshkian, particularly in terms of finding sustainable solutions to preserve this crucial class that helps maintain economic and social stability in Iran. This file identifies the causes and consequences of the erosion of the middle class in Iran and analyzes the Pezeshkian government's plan to rescue this vital demographic.

First: Causes and Consequences of the Erosion of Iran's Middle Class

The erosion of Iran's middle class has multiple causes, with sanctions being one of the most prominent factors. These sanctions have impacted nearly every aspect of Iranian life, including the social, economic, political, and healthcare sectors.⁽¹²⁾ According to Hammihan newspaper, economic sanctions have shrunk the middle class by 11% annually, pushing citizens into poverty. This trend has also resulted in the increased emigration

of middle and upper class⁽¹³⁾ Iranians due to economic and social instability, a bleak outlook for the future, political obstacles, sanctions and pervasive corruption.⁽¹⁴⁾ Another key factor contributing to middle-class decline is the tax increase introduced by Raisi's government. In the 2024 national budget, tax revenues increased by 50% compared to 2023, now constituting 45% of the state budget. Under the Seventh Development Plan, economic programs are heavily reliant on taxes, which are predicted to have irreversible social consequences. Masoud Nili, an expert in economic affairs, has highlighted the decline in individual income, which correlates with the weakening of the middle class. Current statistics reveal that 35% of Iranians are living in extreme poverty, while 57% are on the poverty line, and only 8% are considered wealthy. These figures underscore the widening gap in income inequality⁽¹⁵⁾ within Iran. Economic growth and development expert Nasser Zakeri stresses the importance of measuring the size of the middle class, as it serves as a key indicator of a country's development. If the middle class continues to shrink and descend into poverty, families will struggle to afford their children's education, thus depriving society of a critical driver of development. Furthermore, the housing crisis, exacerbated by poverty and flawed government policies,⁽¹⁶⁾ poses additional challenges. A study conducted in Iran shows that nearly one-third of Iranian households are

affected by poverty, with 5 million people suffering from hunger. While Iran ranks among the top 10 countries with low hunger levels according to the Global Hunger Index, millions are still at risk of food insecurity⁽¹⁷⁾ due to widespread poverty and soaring inflation. As a result, many middle-class families are at risk of falling into the lower class, further deepening the cycle of poverty.

Second: The Pezeshkian Government's Plan to Salvage the Middle Class

In his presidential campaign, Pezeshkian criticized the tax policies imposed by the previous government, which disproportionately affected the middle class and vulnerable groups. He promised to increase tax exemptions for citizens. However, Pezeshkian may struggle to fulfill this promise due to the current economic reality, including imbalances in the energy and banking sectors, difficulties in reviving nuclear negotiations, and challenges related to lifting sanctions amid ongoing regional and international tensions.⁽¹⁸⁾ To save the middle class, the 14th government must prioritize controlling inflation. In this context, economic expert Bahaeddin Hosseini Hashemi stresses, "Reducing liquidity and addressing the budget deficit in a non-inflationary manner plays a crucial role in rescuing the middle class." He further adds, "The economy needs privatization, and the government should focus solely on policy-making, not decision-making.

Currently, 70% of our GDP is controlled by the government and public institutions. All institutions, even while maintaining their tasks, should contribute to a unified treasury, with their resources, expenditures, and revenues managed by the government." Hashemi also emphasizes the need for comprehensive government management and the elimination of monopolies, as they lead to corruption and hinder the country's economic growth.⁽¹⁹⁾

Additionally, banking infrastructure must be reformed, and banks should be regulated in order to undertake international transactions. It is also crucial to lift sanctions related to the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) and those concerning countering the financing of terrorism (CFT).⁽²⁰⁾

Conclusion

Given the ongoing poor economic conditions, the failure of social and economic development plans, and the lack of social justice, there is a looming possibility that Iran's middle class — the most crucial social and economic driver — could disappear. This places an even greater burden and responsibility on the new Iranian government under Pezeshkian, particularly with regard to reducing poverty, lowering inflation, and implementing effective and fundamental changes in development plans to ensure balance, stability, and a decent life for all citizens.

The Intellectual Dispute Between the “Reformists” and “Hardliners” Reemerges

There has long been an intellectual struggle in Iran between the “reformists” and “hardliners,” and it resurfaced following Masoud Pezeshkian’s election to the presidency, as he is aligned with the “reformist” camp. This dispute extends beyond contemporary intellectual issues to encompass political and religious dimensions, with both sides questioning each other’s representatives. The “hardliners” have sought to discredit Pezeshkian and his fellow “reformists” even before they officially began governing, aiming to either derail or hinder the “reformist” agenda by obstructing their efforts. The “hardliners”’ criticism has targeted three main areas: institutional, political, and religious.

1. Institutional critique: Gholamreza Fayyazi, a member of the Assembly of Experts representing North Khorasan Province, launched an attack against prominent figures such as Mohammad Khatami, Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, and Ali Shariati, stating, “Dr. Ali Shariati, may God’s curse be upon him, was certainly an infidel. Khatami is not a Shiite, and Rafsanjani is also accursed. If he is not cursed, then no one is.”⁽²¹⁾ With these remarks, Fayyazi is targeting the intellectual roots of the “reformist” movement by attacking its theorists and philosophers. He understands that the threat posed by the “reformists” does not stem primarily from their politi-

cal activities or public leadership but rather from their ideas and beliefs. Therefore, by consistently pressuring and attacking these ideas, the radicals aim to either force the “reformists” to alter their views on the structure of the political system or tarnish their image in the eyes of the public.

There is an irony here: this takfiri rhetoric is not just a voice confined to the hawza or isolated from public affairs; it is present within the highest and most important institutions of the Iranian state, particularly among those responsible for selecting the next supreme leader. This presence allows observers to gauge how the process of choosing the next supreme leader might unfold, given that radical or takfiri elements are entrenched in the leadership of key institutions.⁽²²⁾

The “reformists” responded to this takfiri rhetoric and cursing through their media, with one of them stating, “If figures like Beheshti, Musa al-Sadr, and Taleghani were examples of drawing masses of people to embrace the faith and the sect (entering the religion of God in crowds), in contrast, these clerics cause people to leave the religion of God in crowds when they presume they can divide heaven and hell among people, determining who is cursed and who is not.”⁽²³⁾ The “reformists” also criticized the Assembly of Experts’ budget, which amounted to 437 billion tomans for this year, roughly 50 million tomans per hour, from the people’s money, to support “such takfiris who ignite hatred and animosity within society.”⁽²⁴⁾

2. Political criticism: The attack on the figures of the “reformist” movement by a member of the Assembly of Experts occurred in the context of a new “reformist” president assuming office in Iran. It was an attempt to pressure the new president, ensuring he does not push his agenda too far and to remind him of the strength of his “hardliner” opponents. Despite the apparent alignment between President Pezeshkian and Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, there remains space for “hardliners” and radicals to launch attacks on Pezeshkian and the “reformists.” This space is provided through semi-official newspapers, which are close to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), indicating the approval of both the supreme leader and the IRGC in applying pressure on the new president.

In the same context, Hossein Shariatmadari, editor-in-chief of Keyhan newspaper and a de-facto representative of the supreme leader, criticized the new president’s cabinet formation due to the past positions of some nominees regarding the principles and foundations of the revolution and the political system.⁽²⁵⁾ Shariatmadari offered a new interpretation of the relationship between institutions in the Iranian republic, asserting that the elected president does not have the right to nominate whomever he pleases for ministerial posts. Instead, it is the right — and duty — of parliamentarians to reject the president’s nominees, “Members of Parliament are elected by the people and repre-

sent them, having sworn an oath to protect the sanctity of Islam and safeguard the achievements of the revolution for the Iranian people and the principles of the Islamic Republic... They are entrusted with a sacred responsibility by the people, acting as trustworthy guardians. Therefore, assigning individuals with opposing views to sensitive ministerial roles is incompatible with the oath they have taken.”⁽²⁶⁾

3. Religious criticism: Clerics wasted no time in taking the initiative to attack Pezeshkian and his close “reformist” associates, such as Zarif and Khatami. Ruhollah Qarahi, the director of the Imam Mahdi Hawza in the Hakimiya district of East Tehran, criticized the thinking of Zarif and Khatami, describing their approach as dangerous in practice. Qarahi explained that the main issue between him and the “reformists” is their fear of the Americans and reluctance to confront the powerful. He accused Rouhani of stating that there is a leader of the world whom Iranians must accept, implying that Khomeini was wrong to launch the revolution in the first place. Qarahi argued that if the “reformists” thinking prevailed, the political system would eventually collapse. He further claimed that their alleged ties with the UK through permitting the British Embassy in Tehran to raise the Ukrainian flag, was a sign that the British Embassy felt safe due to their friends [the “reformists”] being in power.⁽²⁷⁾

4. Potential scenarios: In this context, it may be necessary to raise questions about the future relationship between the “reformist” and “hardliner” factions in Iran. Is the current wave of excommunication, curses and accusations of treason against “reformist” figures a prelude to a violent campaign targeting “reformists,” similar to what occurred in the late 1990s and early 2000s? Or is it merely an effort to pressure the new president to distance himself from the “reformists,” creating a space that allows the “hardliners” to maintain control over decision-making or secure an active role in governance?

In any case, it seems that these pressures have borne fruit, even in the current cabinet formation, where it was said that Pezeshkian consulted with the Iranian supreme leader and appointed only a small number of “reformists,” ignoring Sunnis as well as ethnic and religious minorities, despite his campaign promises to address these issues. This suggests that there were red lines he could not cross or that he had not been given the green light by the supreme leader. These omissions were notably criticized by Molavi Abdolhamid.⁽²⁸⁾

Conclusion

The “hardliners” aimed to pressure the “reformists” through two key approaches. The first was to criticize and tarnish the reputations of “reformist” theorists in an attempt to sever the ideological link between Pezeshkian and his government on one side, and

these intellectuals on the other. The second was to launch fierce political attacks, painting the “reformist” and “moderate” candidates for various ministries as neither revolutionary nor committed to the principles of the revolution. This was a clear strategy to force them into a defensive position, deterring them from taking any actions contrary to the “hardliners” standards and views within state institutions. The “hardliners” critique of the “reformists” covered all areas: institutional via official bodies, political, and religious. This indicates a strong intent to undermine the “reformists” should they attempt to implement their agenda without consultation or approval from the supreme leader and state institutions. Looking ahead, two potential scenarios emerge. Either the rift between the two sides will widen, leading to physical and judicial violence against the “reformists” from the radical “hardliners,” or Pezeshkian will work to appease the “hardliners” by adopting a middle ground to placate the ruling religious elite. The latter scenario appears more likely, given the coordination already evident between him and the supreme leader in the cabinet nominations.

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IRAN-ARAB INTERACTIONS

Iran's relations with several Arab and regional countries saw significant developments. In Iraq, the issue of constitutional amendments was the major event of the month, given its sectarian dimensions and its potential role in undermining the civil character of the Iraqi state. These developments inevitably risk fuelling sectarian conflicts, as efforts to impose an exclusively Shiite identity clash with Iraq's multi-sectarian, multi-ethnic and multi-faith society.

The political dimensions of the personal status law crisis in Iraq are also examined.

Political Dimensions of Iraq's Personal Status Law

A wide-ranging debate arose during August 2024 in Iraq between its political, religious and ethnic forces regarding the amendments supported by the pro-Iranian Coordination Framework to the Personal Status Law No. 188 of 1959 Paragraph No. (57). This controversy has emerged amidst civil and popular feminist concerns about the passage of the law. This law has the support of some religious authorities in Najaf and Sunni alliances that support the amendments in exchange for issuing a general amnesty law to release thousands of prisoners from the Sunni component in what was described as a Shiite-Sunni political deal to pass the amendments. The following sheds light on the most prominent political dimensions to the Personal Status Law amendments crisis:

First: Features of the Proposed Amendments to the Law

Iraq's Personal Status Law of 1959 is a "general and comprehensive civil law" applicable to all Iraqis without discrimination in race or sect. Thus, the old law was devoid of any sectarian bias at the expense of the rest of the Iraqi sects. Meaning the general perception of the state's relationship with society in terms of law is purely based on national foundations, as part of an Iraqi strategy that strives to achieve Iraq's best interests. The new amendments however revolve around three main elements:

1. The addition of a clause to Article 2 of the law, permitting Iraqis to choose between either the Shiite or Sunni sect which then results in the jurisprudence of the chosen sect to be applied in matters of personal law. The new clause states, "When concluding a marriage contract, an Iraqi man or woman has the right to choose between the Shiite or Sunni sect with its provisions applied in all personal status matters. Anyone who has not previously chosen to apply the provisions of a particular sect when concluding a marriage contract may submit a request to the competent personal status court to apply the provisions of Sharia to personal status, according to the sect he chooses. The court in return must accede to their request."⁽¹⁾ The addition of this clause clearly abolishes the civil nature of the law and imposes a sectarian identity on the state, signaling a departure from the formation of an inclusive and unifying national identity in favor of a narrow sectarian one that serves external agendas aiming for the Iraqi state to have a Shiite identity.

2. Omission of Clause 5 of Article 10 of the law, which criminalizes marriage contracts outside the competent court.⁽²⁾ This clause disassociates the law and the judiciary from personal matters related to sects, and legalizes the issue of underage marriages that are conducted by the thousands outside courts in illegal offices. With this, it is not only expected that the rights of Iraqi women and families will be lost, but it will also unleash a

wide range of multiform marriages, which would lead to further dissipation of societal values and the loss of the rights of many Iraqi women.

3. The court's ratification of adult marriage contracts in accordance with the legal or religious authorization from the judiciary or the Shiite and Sunni endowment offices, after verifying the contract terms with no impediments between the spouses. This clause distinctly permits marriages of individuals who reach puberty regardless of their age. That being said, it is known that the majority of women reach puberty long before the legal age for marriage (18 years). This in turn leads to the widespread practice of "child marriage," known as "minors" in international law, where families push their daughters to marry at an early age.

Second: Implications and Repercussions of the Personal Status Law Amendment Crisis

The personal status law crisis reveals a set of profound implications and repercussions in Iraqi society due to its correlation to the identity and future of the Iraqi state:

1. A Move Toward Establishing a Shiite Identity for the Iraqi State
Iraq is governed by a parliamentary system, meaning that the parliamentary majority maintains the right to pass or suspend laws, and here lies the danger. The parliamentary system allows the Coordination Framework to pass laws constitutionally. This in return facilitates the

framework to achieve its ultimate goal of changing Iraq's identity and establishing a Shiite one. To do so, the Coordination Framework passes as many laws that outline the path toward achieving that goal, such as passing the Ghadir Day law to impose a Shiite narrative over all other narratives held by other Iraqi sects and ethnicities.

2. A New Interpretation to Iraq's Political System Dilemma

The personal status law crisis reveals a new interpretation to Iraq's political system conundrum since it came under Shiite control in 2003. The problem here is that the ruling Shiite component lacks national programs, including a plan for collective identity which benefits all without exclusion or marginalization. Rather, it maintains sectarian programs that serve the sub-identity, thus the Iraqi government under Shiite control encroaches on the essential rules of successful governance known worldwide. These rules maintain the interests of national groups, hence, any regime is capable of proposing solutions to resolve internal crises. Unfortunately, due to its deviation — in reality — from its essential mission, the Iraqi government has been caught in a vicious cycle in terms of resolving crises as a consequence of serving only the Shiite-Iranian agenda which aims to establish a Shiite identity that facilitates the passage of Iranian projects.

3. Growing Risk of Sectarian Conflicts
 Proceeding to impose a Shiite identity on a multi-sectarian and multi-ethnic society will further strengthen the power of the Shiite bloc and its dominance over the capabilities of the Iraqi state. This in turn will heighten discontent and resentment amongst the Sunni and Kurdish communities, increasing the risk of sectarian strife. These sectarian conflicts reap nothing for the Iraqi state but destruction and devastation by destroying resources and wealth and wasting human energies. Needless to say, the risk of sectarian conflicts is increasing in light of the instability Iraq is experiencing owing to its internal crises and the transformation of Iraq into an arena of liabilities as a result of pro-Iran militias' involvement in regional conflicts and their bombing of US targets within Iraq.

4. Prioritizing Sectarianism in the Strategic Mindset of Shiite Politicians

The preceding data reveals a fact that may have become entrenched in the strategic mindset of Iraqi Shiite politicians. Meaning that the sectarian determinant has become the most prominent determinant in setting plans and tools and orientations toward resolving Iraq's issues. For when the time comes to resolve a dilemma, Shiite alliances choose to abstain from resolution in accordance with the concepts of a civil state and collective identity. This in turn underscores the importance of the following question: Do the ongoing efforts

taking place under the Coordination Framework in Iraq to establish a Shiite identity indicate the fact that the Iranian project in Iraq is advancing toward the next stage of implementation? In other words, is Iran preparing to create models similar to the Guardianship of the Jurist after its success in establishing its dominance in the sectarian, political, and military fields in Iraq? Finally, what cost will other countries incur from confronting such a scenario?

Conclusion

It is likely that the Parliament, in light of several factors, will vote in support of amending the personal status law in spite of the objections of many Iraqi popular, civil and women's rights groups to the law that abolishes the comprehensive civil character in favor of a sectarian character. The first of these factors is the Coordination Framework, which maintains the largest parliamentary bloc, thus, it has the capability to amend the law. The second factor relates to the indirect support of the Najaf seminary to amend the law. The third, however, is represented by the previous experiences of the Parliament in approving similar draft laws related to establishing a Shiite identity.

Countries and peoples become victims of regimes ruled by a component that works in favor of a specific sect, not for the sake of the homeland, or citizens in general. The dilemmas that plague the civil state in Iraq along with the poor living conditions

that citizens endure despite Iraq's enormous resources and capabilities, gives a clear example of the crisis that has emerged as a result of sectarian control over the government since 2003. The data also reveals that giving up the political scene for the Shiite component without effective competition at the political level has

resulted in this component's steady achievement of its goals aimed at imposing an exclusively Shiite identity on Iraq. This being said, the lack of political engagement in the upcoming electoral battles will further expedite the Shiite component's aim of establishing a Shiite identity for Iraq.

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IRAN'S RELATIONS WITH INTERNATIONAL POWERS

In the realm of interactions with international powers, US-Iran relations were affected by a series of events, including Iranian threats to Israel in response to the assassination of Ismail Haniyeh, and US moves to address these threats amid concerns about the expansion of the conflict. Additionally, the ongoing complexities surrounding Iran's nuclear program added further tension. Developments in US-Iran dynamics over the past month of August are also analysed.

The United States and Iran Reach a Critical Juncture

Driven by multiple factors, US-Iran dynamics have reached a critical point. These factors include the regional tensions expected in response to Iran's promises of retaliation after the assassination of Hamas Political Bureau Chief Ismail Haniyeh in Tehran, as well as Iran's nuclear program, which has become a source of increasing concern for Washington and the West. Additionally, the contradictory policies and orientations of the governments of the two countries, including US sanctions and threats further distance them from achieving any significant breakthrough. This file for August 2024 sheds light on the most important developments and their impact on the course of relations.

First: Escalation After the Assassination of Haniyeh in Iran

Tensions heightened between Washington and Tehran after Israel assassinated Haniyeh in Tehran. In response, Iran declared that it would not let this attack on its sovereignty go unanswered. However, Iran has yet to respond, and the primary reason for this delay, or perhaps even the decision to forgo retaliation, seems to be the US deterrent message conveyed to Iran. This message came through both diplomatic and military channels: the US redeployed military forces by sending a second aircraft carrier to the region, deployed naval destroyers capable of shooting down ballistic missiles,

and positioned a squadron of highly advanced F-22 aircraft as well as a nuclear-powered guided missile submarine, and other military assets. Additionally, diplomatic efforts were made to mobilize allies such as the UK, France, Germany and Italy, calling on Iran to stand down and avoid attacking Israel or its allies.

Second: Diplomatic Moves for De-escalation

In what is seen as a green light from Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, for the Pezeshkian government to resume indirect negotiations with the United States over the Iranian nuclear program during a meeting with the newly formed government, Khamenei stated, "There is no harm in dealing with the enemy." The United States, however, responded cautiously. The US State Department said that Washington "will judge Iranian leadership by its actions, not its words." This could offer Pezeshkian an opportunity to explore diplomatic avenues, with the assistance of Mohammad Javad Zarif, who played a key role in the 2015 nuclear agreement and the lifting of sanctions on Iran. However, despite Khamenei's remarks, Iran seems to be moving in the opposite direction. In August 2024, the Director of the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran Mohammad Eslami announced plans to complete and operate two new nuclear plants.⁽¹⁾ Furthermore, the latest quarterly report from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) confirmed that Iran's stock-

pile of highly enriched uranium (60% purity) had reached 164.7 kilograms. This complicates future negotiations, despite the Pezeshkian government's desire to push for understanding with the West.⁽²⁾

Third: Ongoing Pressures and Sanctions

Washington continues to apply pressure on Tehran. In this context, US Republican Senator Lindsey Graham proposed new legislation to impose tariffs on countries purchasing crude oil or petroleum products from Iran. This move aims to restrict Iranian oil exports, especially since estimates indicate that Iranian exports reached 1.4 million barrels per day by the end of 2023. The United States sees this as encouraging Iran to challenge it regionally and avoid engagement in nuclear negotiations. Washington also updated its sanctions program on Iran, as shown in the table below, detailing sanctions imposed during July and August 2024.

Fourth: Bleak Outlook on Imminent Negotiations

The issues related to the United States are interconnected, and escalating regional tensions reduce the chances of returning to the negotiating table regarding the nuclear agreement. Despite the green light given to the Pezeshkian government, Khamenei, who has always controlled the negotiations with the United States from behind the scenes, left the door slightly open by warning that

the United States cannot be trusted. These statements, however, seem ineffective, especially given the dominance of the “hardliners” over state institutions and their clear influence on the formation of the Pezeshkian government. Even Pezeshkian himself has attempted to appease the “hardliners” while trying internationally to balance openness to negotiations with continuing the policy of heading East and strengthening relations with Russia and China.

It is important to note the technical and realistic challenges that prevent the revival of the nuclear agreement, making the achievement of a new deal a complex issue that could take time. These challenges include the sunset clauses — some of which have expired — granting Iran strategic advantages that raise US concerns, and Iran's nuclear advancements in recent years. The US electoral race adds further complexity, with the Biden administration fearing that any understanding with Iran could negatively impact the Democratic Party's chances, especially for candidate Kamala Harris. At the same time, Iran fears a potential Trump return to the White House, which could bring an end to the relative leniency of Biden's term and revive the maximum pressure strategy. This may explain Iran's alleged attempts to interfere in the election process by infiltrating the campaigns of candidates and their representatives.⁽³⁾

| US Sanctions and Pressures on Iran and Related Entities During July/August 2024 | |
|--|---|
| Date | Procedure |
| July 12 | The US Department of State imposed sanctions on Hakiman Shargh Research Company for its involvement in Iran's chemical weapons research and development activities. |
| July 31 | Sanctions were imposed on a Houthi procurement network consisting of two individuals and four entities in China and Yemen for their involvement in supplying weapons, military equipment, and dual-use items to the Iran-backed Houthis. |
| August 7 | Additionally, the US State Department's Rewards for Justice Program announced a reward of up to \$10 million for information on six Iranian military officials linked to the hacker group Cyber Avengers. These individuals are senior officials in the IRGC's Cyber Command and lead destructive cyber activities against critical US infrastructure. |
| August 14 | US authorities arrested Jeffrey Chance Nader, an Iranian American citizen, on charges of masterminding an illegal smuggling operation of warplane parts to Iran. An indictment was later issued against him and his associates for conspiring to illegally purchase and export four types of US-made aircraft parts to Iran. |
| August 15 | Lastly, the United States imposed additional sanctions targeting the Houthi and Hezbollah trade networks, as Washington increases pressure on Tehran and Iran-backed groups. The US Treasury Department stated it targeted companies, individuals, and vessels involved in shipping Iranian goods, including oil and liquefied petroleum gas, to Yemen and the UAE on behalf of a financial official within the Houthi network. |

Source: Prepared by Rasanah's Regional and International Studies Unit

Conclusion

Iran's repeated announcements of openness to negotiations with the United States appear to be a tactic aimed at gaining time to enhance its nuclear expertise and reduce its nuclear breakout time, while avoiding direct confrontation. These incomplete steps, signalling a willingness to engage in dialogue, create an impression of good faith through limited agreements on monitoring programs, with the possibility of renegeing at

any moment. This strategy has left the West divided on how to deal with Iran's nuclear program, which seems to be gaining ground over time and could eventually lead to the establishment of a new nuclear reality in the Middle East. The current turbulence at the international and regional levels give Iran greater room for maneuver, enhancing its ambitions to gain influence and mitigate the risks to its national security and political system.

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