

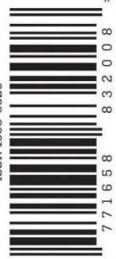
MONTHLY REPORT

Iran Case File

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Your window on Iran from inside and abroad

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

During January 2025, Iran witnessed numerous developments across the political, economic, military, social and ideological fields. Iran's relations with the Arab world and the broader international community were also marked by complex interactions that are expected to shape its foreign relations in the coming period.

Internally, on the political level, Donald Trump's victory in the US presidential election in November 2024 and his return to the White House on January 20, 2025 sparked divergent reactions within Iran. Some called for engaging in negotiations with Trump to alleviate the crises that have plagued Iran due to US sanctions imposed since his withdrawal from the nuclear agreement during his first term. Others, however, rejected the idea of negotiating with Trump, arguing that he is unreliable and prone to using negotiations as a tool for coercion rather than genuine diplomacy.

Economically, the purchasing power of Iranians has significantly eroded over the past decade, driven by severe inflation, currency devaluation, sanctions, subsidy reductions and tax increases. This decline has had profound negative effects on Iranian society, including changes in consumption patterns, the shrinking of the middle class, heightened psychological stress and increased social issues such as poverty, addiction, divorce and brain drain.

Militarily, recent Iranian-Israeli confrontations have raised concerns for Tehran, particularly after several Iranian military facilities were bombed by Israel, rendering them inoperative. In response, Iran has taken measures to address the vulnerabilities exposed by these attacks. In this context, Iran announced the acquisition of Su-35 fighter jets from Russia and conducted a series of military exercises in January 2025 as part of its preparations to counter perceived threats.

On the social level, school dropout rates in Iran have escalated from a concerning trend to a widespread social phenomenon due to deteriorating living conditions. Economic difficulties have forced many families to withdraw their children from school, either due to financial constraints

or the necessity of child labor to support the household. Additionally, the perceived lack of employment opportunities for educated individuals has diminished the value of academic achievement. Although the Iranian government has implemented measures to curb school dropout rates, it faces significant challenges, particularly due to limited financial resources.

From an ideological standpoint, discussions surrounding the potential succession of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei intensified after Western media speculated that preparations were underway for his son, Mojtaba Khamenei, to assume the leadership. Viewed as foreign interference, these reports angered many Iranians. Close associates of Khamenei denied these claims, citing his opposition to close family members holding political office. However, internal indicators suggest that Mojtaba has a strategic advantage due to his deep ties with Iran's ruling institutions and interest groups as well as religious endorsements from the hawza regarding his political and theological qualifications.

Beyond Iran's borders, the marjaya in Najaf has sought to leverage the current geopolitical climate to pressure Iran-backed militias into limiting their activities and ensuring that weapons remain under state control. The objective is to prevent the further destabilization of Iraq through international and regional interventions. However, pro-Iran militias are unlikely to comply, nor is Iran expected to relinquish its influence, considering that Iraq remains its last stronghold abroad following the decimation of Hezbollah and the fall of the Assad regime.

Iran's foreign relations with Arab and regional actors were marked by key developments in January 2025. With regard to Iraq-Iran relations, tensions arose over US and Israeli demands for Iraq to monopolize military power by dismantling the militias. While Iraq's government, led by the Iran-aligned Coordination Framework, has considered the possibility of partially

dissolving the militias, it remains unwilling to disband the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) which enjoys legal and sectarian legitimacy. Analysts argue that dissolving the militias without addressing the PMF would not ensure state control over military power but would instead enable the PMF to expand its influence over the Iraqi army. Some propose the full dissolution of the PMF and the integration of its members into the regular armed forces.

Regarding Syria-Iran relations, Iran faces a politically complex situation in Syria following the appointment of Ahmed al-Sharaa as the new president of Syria. Sharaa has signaled his intent to strengthen ties with regional and international actors while sidelining Iran and minimizing its prior influence in Syria.

In terms of Iran's interactions with major global powers, US-Iran relations have entered a new phase with Trump's return to the White House. Both sides appear to be exploring diplomatic avenues as the Trump administration has yet to unveil its comprehensive strategy toward Iran. Meanwhile, Iran has sent mixed signals, indicating a willingness to negotiate while maintaining a defensive posture.

Russia-Iran relations remain strong, as evidenced by the comprehensive strategic partnership agreement between Moscow and Tehran, which spans political, military and economic cooperation. While the agreement consolidates their growing ties, it does not include a joint defense clause, indicating that neither country is obligated to support the other in the event of war. Furthermore, while the agreement expresses ambitions for expanded economic cooperation, significant challenges remain that could hinder its practical implementation. Consequently, despite its importance, the agreement primarily reflects the highest possible level of coordination achievable between Iran and Russia in the current geopolitical climate.

DEVELOPMENTS IN IRAN'S INTERNAL AFFAIRS

During January 2025, Iran experienced numerous developments across political, economic, military, social and ideological spheres. The most significant of these can be distilled as follows:

- Iranian Reactions to Calls for Negotiations With the Trump Administration
- Developments Related to Iranian Purchasing Power and Its Impact on Society
- Iran Receives SU-35 Fighters Amid Military Drills
- An Upsurge in School Dropouts in Iran
- The Supreme Leader's Troubled Succession and the Dilemma of Iraq's PMF

Iranian Reactions to Calls for Negotiations With the Trump Administration

Donald Trump's victory in the US presidential election and return to the White House has invoked mixed reactions in Iran. While some fear he will reinstate the maximum pressure policy from his first term, which continues to affect Iran's economy and citizens' lives, others are hopeful that his return could create an opportunity for negotiating contentious issues, particularly the nuclear file. This file explores the differing positions and perspectives of those who are for and against negotiations with the Trump administration.

First: The Rationale for Opposing Negotiations With the US Administration

Trump has taken a contradictory and ambiguous stance on Iran and has yet to clarify his approach for the future. His statements before and after winning the presidency have ranged from expressing a desire to reach a new agreement with Tehran on its nuclear program to threatening to propose that Israel attack Iranian nuclear facilities, and more recently, emphasizing that "it would be good to solve the problems related to Iran without Israel attacking its nuclear facilities."⁽¹⁾

The "hardliners," who are distrustful of Trump, are launching intense attacks against those advocating for negotiations with the United States, particularly concerning the nuclear program. Their rejection is based on a series of actions and policies Trump enacted during his first term, including his withdrawal from the 2015 nuclear agreement between Iran and the six major powers, the harsh sanctions he imposed on Iran in 2018 and the assassination of Qassem Soleimani in early January 2020.

In this regard, Kayhan newspaper sharply criticized those calling for negotiations, stating that "Trump's statements and executive orders in the first

hours of his presidency proved that he has not changed and cannot be dealt with, because he is a blackmailer who does not abide by any agreement, but rather seeks to blackmail even his closest allies."⁽²⁾

Some have tried to explain Trump's desire to reach a new agreement with Iran, not as a result of his unwillingness to escalate against Iran, but rather as "his reaching the conclusion that Iran cannot be brought to its knees by threats, war, pressure, or sanctions, and that the expectations of former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and former national security advisor that Iran would step down if it was subjected to economic sanctions were wrong."⁽³⁾

Even the "hardliners" within the Pezeshkian government reject the idea of negotiating with the Trump administration, including Intelligence Minister Ismail Khatib, who believes that "the Americans have not adhered to their previous agreements with Iran, and in the coming period they will intensify their pressure to force Iran to negotiate, so the only way for Iran is to continue with the policy and strategy of resistance."⁽⁴⁾

Second: The Rationale for Supporting Negotiations With the US Administration

Since assuming office in May 2024, Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian has consistently expressed his desire to resolve the nuclear crisis through diplomacy. Less than a week before Trump's second term began, Pezeshkian publicly declared Iran's readiness to engage in equal negotiations with the United States. This move was motivated by concerns over Trump's potential return to his maximum pressure strategy and the possibility of further tightening sanctions on Iran. Despite these concerns, many voices within the Iranian government have called for reducing tensions with the United States through diplomatic means, especially since Trump had not made any

overtly escalatory decisions against Iran at that point. Trump's stance seemed relatively measured, as he emphasized his desire for Iran to be a prosperous nation with great potential, noting that while Iran cannot possess nuclear weapons, he hoped to reach a new nuclear agreement with Tehran and avoid military strikes on Iran's nuclear facilities.⁽⁵⁾

In a significant development, the United States broke from its longstanding tradition of defending human rights and, for the first time, refrained from criticizing Iran's human rights record during the 48th Universal Periodic Review meeting at the United Nations Human Rights Council in Geneva. The United States has consistently accused Iran of human rights violations since 2010. Therefore, the current US stance of refraining from condemnation of Iran's human right violations has led human rights activists to accuse the new US administration of showing indifference to the widespread human rights issues in Iran. This shift was seen by supporters of negotiations with the Trump administration as a US signal of readiness to engage in dialogue and reach an understanding with Iran.

Another factor that supporters of negotiations with the United States point to is Trump's dismissal of his former envoy to Iran Brian Hook after reappointing him in November 2024 to lead the transition team at the US State Department. Trump explained the dismissal by stating that Hook disagreed with his vision. Additionally, Trump publicly criticized former National Security Advisor John Bolton, calling him a "warmonger," signaling that Bolton's services would not be used in his second term. Former Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif stated that Trump's 2018 decision to withdraw from the Iranian nuclear agreement was influenced by hawkish figures in his first administration such as Bolton and Hook. Furthermore, the US Department of Defense appointed former CIA analyst Mi-

chael DiMino as the head of policy, and he has expressed opposition to regime change with foreign support and advocates for a more cautious approach to the Middle East. Proponents of negotiations see these changes and appointments as signs of a potential shift in US foreign policy toward Iran.⁽⁶⁾

Therefore, supporters of negotiations with the United States interpret Trump's statements and his adoption of a new approach, distancing himself from hostile positions against Tehran, as positive signals. These developments encourage Iranian state officials to engage in serious and productive negotiations with the US administration with the hope that such discussions will lead to an agreement on the nuclear program, ultimately alleviating the suffering of the Iranian people.

As for the arguments put forward by the "hardliners" who reject negotiations with the United States, many have been countered, including by Mohammad Bagheri Benabi, a representative and member of the Economic Committee in the Iranian Parliament. He argued that "negotiations will be in Iran's interest, and even Qassem Soleimani had conducted direct negotiations with the United States during its invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan to protect Iran's national interests." Benabi continued, "Iran has engaged in multiple negotiations over the 45 years of the regime's existence, and the pretext that the Americans evade their commitments is no longer a valid reason to avoid this national responsibility."⁽⁷⁾

Despite the "hardliners" opposition to negotiations, Khamenei made statements on January 28, 2025, which were interpreted as tacit approval for the Pezeshkian government to pursue negotiations with the Trump administration. In his remarks, Khamenei stated, "Behind the diplomatic smiles, there are hidden enmities and grudges." He added, "We need to open our eyes and be careful about the people we encounter, deal with,

and talk to.” Khamenei continued, “When one knows the other side, he may make a deal because he knows what to do, so we need to understand and know the other side.”⁽⁸⁾

These implicit signals of approval reveal that Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei is in a serious predicament, particularly considering the threats posed by continued Iranian intransigence over the nuclear program to the future of the Iranian leadership, Trump’s return to the White House and Israeli threats to target Iranian nuclear sites. Additionally, there are escalating calls for changes in both domestic and foreign policies, alongside the growing desire of the Iranian public to engage in negotiations to end the severe economic suffering caused by US sanctions. Thus, Khamenei’s tacit approval of negotiations may serve as a preemptive step aimed at sending positive signals to the US administration, potentially influencing any escalatory actions Trump may consider against Tehran. This move could also be an effort to prevent Trump from quickly reverting to the maximum pressure policy that defined his earlier term. Domestically, Khamenei’s actions may be aimed at preventing internal instability, especially amid official and popular anticipation regarding the Iranian establishment’s approach to the negotiations.

Conclusion

The Pezeshkian government’s desire to negotiate with the US administration faces strong resistance from the “hard-liners,” and while there has been some implicit approval from Khamenei, it appears that the Trump administration is still awaiting concrete actions from the Iranian side. If the current divisions between those opposing and supporting negotiations persist, it is quite possible that Trump may revert to his maximum pressure policy. This strategy, which seeks to apply the highest possible pressure on Iran, aims to compel Tehran to accept ne-

gotiations to resolve key issues between the two countries, including the ongoing nuclear crisis.

Developments Related to Iranian Purchasing Power and Its Impact on Society

Purchasing power measures how many goods and services a household can buy with its disposable income in its own currency, effectively reflecting living standards. This metric is chiefly influenced by inflation — when prices rise, the real value of income falls, reducing purchasing power. Exchange rates also play a significant role; a weaker national currency makes imported goods and locally produced items with foreign components more expensive. Additionally, wage levels, political and economic stability and government policies on subsidies and taxes further impact this purchasing capability.

The Economic File examines changes in Iranian purchasing power over the past decade, exploring the trends, the causes behind these shifts and their broader effects on society.

First: Fluctuations in Purchasing Power Over the Past Decade

The evolution of purchasing power in Iran is starkly illustrated by comparing what an average worker could afford then and now. In 2014, a monthly income of around 845,000 tomans (roughly \$264 at the time) allowed an Iranian worker to purchase about 81% of the “Bahar Azadi” gold coin — a coin weighing approximately 8 grams and valued at just over 1 million tomans. Fast forward 10 years to the end of 2024, and the average worker’s income had nominally risen to about 11 million tomans (approximately \$157). However, despite this significant increase in income figures, the same earnings could now only buy 18% of the gold coin, which had soared in price to over 60 million tomans (around \$857).⁽⁹⁾

Labor activist Alireza Khorami says that the minimum wage that allows a worker to manage basic living expenses in a small city should not be less than 30 million tomans per month (about \$430).

The previous comparison shows a sharp decline in the purchasing power of income over 10 years, from the possibility of obtaining 81% of the gold coin to only 18% of its value. Therefore, we can say that in order for Iranian purchasing power to remain as it was 10 years ago without declining, that workers must receive an income equivalent to 81% of the value of the current gold currency, which is about 49 million tomans (\$700), or about 4.5 times more than the current income.

Second: Factors Contributing to Reduced Purchasing Power

Over the past decade, Iranians have experienced a significant decline in purchasing power due to several key factors.

First, annual inflation has surged dramatically, rising from approximately 7% in 2016 to 35% in 2019 and reaching 46% in 2022. Inflation remains high, exceeding 30% and potentially reaching 50% for essential goods such as food, housing and beverages. This prolonged period of

inflation has eroded the value of the Iranian currency and strained household budgets.

Second, the Iranian toman has suffered a sharp depreciation against foreign currencies, particularly the US dollar. In 2014, the exchange rate stood at around 3,200 tomans per dollar, but by late 2018, it had climbed to 14,000 tomans. The rate continued to rise, reaching 58,000 tomans in 2023 and fluctuating between 60,000 and 70,000 tomans in 2024 before surpassing 84,000 tomans in early 2025. In total, the Iranian currency has lost over 97% of its value in just a decade.

In practical terms, the value of the Iranian toman has drastically diminished. An item that could be bought for 1 toman in 2014 would require 26 tomans to purchase in 2025.

A third major factor is the impact of US sanctions, which have played a direct role in the depreciation of Iran's currency and the surge in inflation. Reimposed at the end of 2018, these sanctions have severely affected the Iranian economy, leading to the collapse of oil exports — the country's primary source of foreign currency — along with the withdrawal of foreign companies and investments,

Figure 1: Exchange Rate of the US Dollar Against the Iranian Toman (2017–2024).



Source: Bonbast

disruptions in trade, shortages of production inputs and rising prices in local markets. According to the Secretary-General of the Supreme Council for the Cultural Revolution Muhammad Ali al-Amili, Iran has lost approximately \$1.2 trillion due to sanctions since 2012.⁽¹⁰⁾

A fourth factor is the reduction of subsidies and the increase in taxes, which emerged as a consequence of sanctions imposed after 2018. With government revenues dwindling due to restrictions on oil exports and tax collection, the resulting budget deficit forced the Rouhani and Raisi administrations to implement austerity measures. These included lifting subsidies on foreign currency used for importing essential goods and medicine, cutting fuel and electricity subsidies and raising taxes and government fees to boost state revenues. These measures have further contributed to rising prices in recent years.

Third: Impacts on Iranian Society

1. Shifts in Consumption Patterns: Rising prices have forced many Iranians to adjust their spending habits, particularly in food consumption, by reducing quantities and opting for lower-cost alternatives. According to recent data from the Central Bank of Iran, rice consumption has dropped from approximately 120 kilograms per person in 2014 to 100 kilograms in 2023. Similarly, per capita consumption of livestock meat has declined from 41 kilograms to 32 kilograms. To compensate, Iranians have increasingly turned to poultry and processed meat, with demand rising by 20% and 33%, respectively, over the past decade.

2. A Shrinking Middle Class: The middle class, which serves as the foundation of any developing society, is essential for economic and social stability. However, in Iran, it has been shrinking at an annual rate of 11%, according to a report by the Iranian newspaper Hammihan.⁽¹¹⁾ This de-

cline poses a significant challenge to societal stability and economic growth.

3. Increased Stress and Psychological Strain: The inability to meet basic needs and the necessity for many to take on multiple jobs have heightened stress levels across Iranian society. A report from the Central Bank of Iran noted a 22% rise in foreign cigarette consumption over the past 10 years, reflecting growing psychological pressure.

4. Rising Social and Economic Issues: Economic hardships have been linked to an increase in problems such as divorce, addiction, suicide, unemployment and poverty. Official statistics indicate that suicide rates in Iran have surged by more than 40% over the past decade,⁽¹²⁾ while youth unemployment exceeds 30%. In 2023, Tehran registered a record number of divorces, with Iranian experts attributing the trend to financial difficulties. Meanwhile, marriage rates have declined by 45% over the past 12 years⁽¹³⁾ and unofficial estimates suggest that nearly two-thirds of Iranians may now be living below the poverty line.

5. Increased Emigration and Brain Drain: The rising cost of living and difficult economic conditions have driven many skilled professionals — especially in education, healthcare and engineering — to emigrate to the United States and Europe. This ongoing loss of human capital is estimated to cost Iran at least \$50 billion annually.⁽¹⁴⁾

6. Demographic Challenges: Iran's population growth rate has sharply declined, dropping from 3.9% in 1990 and 2.3% in 2015 to just 0.7% in 2024.⁽¹⁵⁾ This trend raises serious concerns about the future of the country's workforce and its potential long-term impact on the Iranian economy.

Conclusion

Over the past decade, Iranians have experienced a sharp decline in purchasing power, resulting in significant societal

challenges. These include shifts in consumption habits, the shrinking of the middle class, rising psychological stress and an increase in social and economic issues such as divorce, addiction and poverty. Additionally, the country has witnessed a growing brain drain and demographic concerns that threaten long-term economic stability. The sustained inflation, depreciation of the local currency, reimposition of US sanctions in 2018, higher taxes and subsidy reductions have been the primary drivers of this decline. As most of these factors persist, Iran is likely to face continued erosion of purchasing power and its accompanying negative effects on society.

Iran Receives SU-35 Fighters Amid Military Drills

In response to recent tensions with Israel, the Iranian armed forces have taken significant steps to address vulnerabilities in their air defense capabilities. By 2025, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) conducted air defense exercises and showcased advanced ballistic and anti-ship missiles. Iran also announced the receipt of Russian-made Su-35 fighter jets, which are expected to enhance its air defense and combat capabilities.

First: After US and Israeli Threats, Iran Conducts Military Drills

In preparation for the arrival of US President Donald Trump in the White House, Iran adopted a bold and resolute approach by launching large-scale military exercises “Eqtedar” and “Torbat Jam.” These drills primarily focused on strengthening the country’s air defense capabilities, with particular emphasis on the Western and Northern Commands tasked with safeguarding critical sites such as the Natanz, Fordow and Khondab nuclear facilities. “We are fully prepared to confront these threats and defend our country’s sovereignty, and all US assets and interests in the region remain within our

operational reach,”⁽¹⁶⁾ said the Commander of the Iranian Army’s Ground Forces Brigadier General Kioumars Heydari. The drill also focused on the “comprehensive defense of the Natanz site against various aerial threats under difficult electronic warfare conditions.”⁽¹⁷⁾ The military systems involved in the drill included armed drones such as the Ababil-3, Ababil-4 and Ababil-5; and anti-drone systems such as the Akhgar miniguns and twin 35mm Samavat cannons, similar to the German Skynex system made by Rheinmetall. Likely a result of the unexpected impact of the Russia-Ukraine war, where Germany has been a vital arms contributor, the Iranian version of the Skynex air defense system is set to feature a 57 millimeter cannon, a departure from the original 35 millimeter weapon. Rheinmetall’s short-range air defense system separates airspace surveillance from effects, supports multiple sensors and weapons, and deploys high-energy lasers alongside bursts of munitions — something Iran will never be able to replicate.⁽¹⁸⁾

In addition to increasing its military budget, Tehran announced in January that it would hold about 10 to 30 land, air and sea maneuvers, double that of 2024. Iran also released new videos a few days before the war games showcasing an underground missile city used to launch the Waad-Haq-1 and -2 missiles.⁽¹⁹⁾

The maneuvers also showcased Iran’s versatile and expanding missile arsenal, most notably the Fateh-360, Fajr-4, Fajr-5 and Fajr-5C multiple launch missiles, the Almas-1 precision-guided missile, the Dehlavieh anti-tank guided missile, the Dezful and D-9, designed for low-altitude interception, and the medium-range Khordad-3 missile.

Iran also unveiled a new medium-range ballistic missile with a length of 16 meters, a maximum range of 1,700 kilometers, a diameter of 1.25 meters and an accuracy of 70 meters.

President Masoud Pezeshkian noted that “this (military) advance will continue, not with the intention of aggression against any country, but with the aim of preventing any country from daring to violate our lands.”⁽²⁰⁾

One of the anti-ship missiles unveiled, the Ghadr-380, is also claimed to have radar-evading and anti-jamming capabilities.⁽²¹⁾ The Houthis appear to have versions of the same missile called the Quds Z-0 and Sayyad. The IRGC Navy also claims to have fielded two other anti-ship missiles, the Ghadr-360 with a range of 750 kilometers and the Ghadr-474 with a range of 2,000 kilometers.

Second: Tehran Takes Delivery of SU-35 Fighter Jets From Moscow

After a two-year wait, Iran has confirmed the acquisition of an unspecified number of Russian-made Sukhoi-35 4++ generation fighter jets. At the time of writing this report, no image of the fighter jet in the colors and logo of the Iranian Air Force has been released.

“Whenever necessary, we make military purchases to strengthen our air, ground, and naval forces... We also accelerate the production of military equipment,” said Deputy Coordinator of Khatam al-Anbiya Central Headquarters Ali Shadmani while confirming the delivery of the aircraft.⁽²²⁾

Last year, Iran received two Yak-130 trainer aircraft, marking the start of deliveries of 16 to 24 or more. Iran aspires to produce the Russian trainer aircraft as well as advanced fighters under license, like India, but no details are available confirming such a deal. Tehran’s military-civilian industrial complex cannot support such a technological achievement, despite the lifting of sanctions on dual-use technologies.

Conclusion

Iran’s war-ready posture will become the new normal in 2025 as tensions with Is-

rael and disagreements with the United States over its nuclear program escalate. Tehran’s drive to expand its military arsenal, particularly air and naval capabilities, may remain hampered by Washington’s pressure on potential suppliers, limited financial flexibility and Russia’s ongoing war in Ukraine.

An Upsurge in School Dropouts in Iran

Iranian media outlets have been actively reporting on the growing crisis of school dropouts, prompting activists to launch campaigns urging greater attention to education. The phenomenon, driven by demographic, economic, social and political factors, has become a major challenge for the Pezeshkian administration. Addressing this issue requires significant efforts, given its far-reaching impact on Iranian society in both the short and long term. This file examines the scale and causes of student dropouts in Iran’s schools and the government’s measures to curb the problem.

First: Factors Contributing to School Dropouts in Iran

Estimates of school dropout rates in Iran vary. The minister of education in the Pezeshkian government reported that 790,000 students have left school,⁽²³⁾ while Farshad Ebrahimpour, a member of the Iranian Parliament’s Education Committee, stated that 2 million children⁽²⁴⁾ are out of school. The highest dropout rates have been recorded in Sistan and Balochistan, Khorasan Razavi, Tehran, Khuzestan and West Azerbaijan.⁽²⁵⁾ These figures reflect the country’s development disparities and poverty distribution.

Educational expert Adel Barkam highlights the various forms of school dropout in Iran.⁽²⁶⁾ Some students lack identification documents while others are registered in the system for statistical purposes without attending classes. Even those who enroll may receive substandard education, which is another form of drop-

out. The crisis has led to 30% of students failing to complete their studies, a rise in crime and hundreds of children working on the streets, engaging in theft and drug abuse. It has also worsened the misery index,⁽²⁷⁾ posing social, security, political, health and economic challenges.

The recent surge in Iran's school dropout rate can be attributed to the following factors:

1. Financial problems: Due to financial pressures, poverty or difficult economic conditions, families may be unable to provide the necessary conditions for education, compelling children to work. Some may also be discouraged by the high unemployment rate among educated individuals, which frustrates them and drives them to drop out of school.

2. Cultural problems: In some urban and rural areas, the lack of a culture of education persists, with a prevailing belief in the futility of study. This mindset influences parents to convince their children to drop out, especially in villages, urging them to work and help the family. In the case of girls, they may be married off and encouraged to start a family,⁽²⁸⁾ with education often being denied under the pretext of mixed classes.⁽²⁹⁾

3. Personal problems: These are related to the aspirations and ideals of the Iranian youth yearning for financial independence through work. Additionally, young people are affected by psychological trauma wrought by violence and family pressure.⁽³⁰⁾

4. Educational problems: These include issues with the educational system, such as a shortage of teachers, dilapidated infrastructure,⁽³¹⁾ complicated registration processes due to migration and family transfers,⁽³²⁾ the lack of birth certificates for children born outside of marriage or in temporary marriages, cases where one parent is addicted to drugs or involved in drug dealing⁽³³⁾ as well as the distance of schools from rural areas and the lack of free student transportation.⁽³⁴⁾

Second: Government Efforts to Reduce School Dropouts

The Iranian government has implemented measures to address the issue of school dropouts. The Attorney General's Office confirmed that any action, including threats, persuasion or encouragement, leading a child or teenager to run away from home or drop out of school is criminalized by law.⁽³⁵⁾ The deputy for cultural affairs at the Relief Committee reported that, through cooperation with private educational institutions, 3,500 out of 6,000 dropout students⁽³⁶⁾ have been reinstated in school. Additionally, the My Kind Colleague project was established to support disadvantaged students and prevent school dropouts.⁽³⁷⁾ Furthermore, the "Back to School" campaign, initiated by the DJ Kala Mehr platform, an e-commerce platform by the well-known DJ Kala Group in Iran, also aims to address this issue. The DJ Kala Mehr platform acts as a mediator between civil society organizations and millions of Iranian citizens, marking a new form of cooperation between the digital economy and NGOs through project-based social responsibility. The campaign successfully distributed over 1,700 school bags filled with stationery to 2,000 families in need, providing crucial support for students' educational needs in a short time. By initiating and implementing this campaign, DJ Kala Mehr contributed significantly to the long-term plans of civil institutions, ensuring faster outreach to children across Iran. The long-term goal is to prevent students facing difficulties from dropping out of school.⁽³⁸⁾ Additionally, the Ministry of Interior took charge of school services this year, launching the National SPND (Student Transportation Monitoring System) to organize, manage and supervise student transportation as well as to monitor the fleet of transportation companies.

Conclusion

The government's efforts to reduce the rising school dropout rate hinge on accurately identifying its causes and implementing effective solutions. These efforts include collecting dropout statistics, improving education quality, particularly in remote and rural areas, addressing obstacles to the educational process, enhancing educational infrastructure, expanding school capacities nationwide, ensuring sufficient and qualified teachers and fulfilling commitments outlined in the 2025 Planning and Budget Organization. A key objective is to increase the education budget. However, achieving these goals requires substantial financial resources, posing a challenge due to ongoing economic difficulties and external crises, particularly US sanctions.

The Supreme Leader's Troubled Succession and the Dilemma of Iraq's PMF

As the Iranian ruling elite plans for the post-Khamenei era, both local and Western reports indicate that the government is focusing public attention on minor, populist issues to distract from more pressing concerns. These distractions include topics such as the law on chastity and hijab, the criminalization of pet ownership, and other issues that have been raised recently and over the past few months. These attempts at deflection come at a time when Iran's influence abroad is weakening, compounded by public discontent that has led Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei to repeatedly assert that the blood spilled in Syria "was not in vain." While officials have claimed that Syria will once again be part of the resistance axis, the situation is far more complex. The Iranian dilemma is no longer confined to Syria alone, as Iran's influence in Iraq is now also facing significant decline, a trend we will continue to shed light on in this report.

First: Mojtaba as a Potential Successor to the Supreme Leader

The Washington Post reported on Supreme Leader Khamenei's health and preparations for his son, Mojtaba Khamenei, to succeed him, following a secret decision by the "clerics."⁽³⁹⁾ In response, Iranian media outlets "close to the regime" denied these "rumors and allegations," stating that the future leader is not chosen by clerics but by a council of figures elected by the Iranian people every eight years.⁽⁴⁰⁾ Iranian officials also emphasized that Khamenei's previous statements and actions reflect his opposition to his sons entering politics, let alone succeeding him. Supporting this, Ayatollah Mahmoud Mohammadi Araghi, a member of the Assembly of Experts, affirmed that Khamenei rejected a request from several assembly members to consider one of his sons for future leadership roles. The newspaper then cited its sources, claiming that "Ayatollah Khamenei remains firm in his opposition to any of his sons succeeding him, and the Assembly of Experts respects that." It is important to note that the message relayed by the newspaper was part of the establishment's efforts to counter Western reports and reassure the domestic public. What stands out, however, is how the Iranian media ties the cohesion of the Iranian state, along with its various factions and nationalities, to Khamenei's leadership, presence and intellect. This narrative, in fact, undermines and diminishes Iran, as it implies that the country's unity hinges solely on the leadership of one individual. Iranian officials further claim that the Western media's focus on Khamenei's son is aimed at undermining Khamenei's succession process and distorting the state.

In March of 2023, a dispute emerged within Iran's hawza regarding Mojtaba Khamenei. Some within the hawza argued that, as an Iranian citizen and a

cleric with the necessary political and religious qualifications, Mojtaba had the right to run for the position of supreme leader, just like any other candidate. This discussion was fueled when cleric Sadegh Mohammadi, alongside Ayatollah Mousavi Jazayeri, a member of the Assembly of Experts, suggested the possibility of Mojtaba succeeding his father.⁽⁴¹⁾

There are clear Iranian intentions regarding Mojtaba's potential succession to his father, which cannot be overlooked. Equally significant are the interests of various factions, including interest groups, ruling elites and influential institutions such as the IRGC, the military and religious establishments. These groups are keen on preserving their own interests and maintaining the status quo, ensuring that no fundamental changes disrupt the structure of state institutions or their interconnected and complex networks of influence.

Second: Sistani and Countering Iran's Proxies

After a prolonged silence, Ayatollah Sistani, the highest-ranking Shiite marja and the most influential figure in the Shiite world, made statements that sparked significant controversy within the entire Shiite community, not just in Najaf or Iraq. His remarks seemed to serve as a public effort to limit Iranian influence in Iraq, aiming to reduce his own power and authority within the Shiite community while capitalizing on the weakening of the Iranian project in the region.

During his meeting with the special envoy of the secretary-general of the United Nations in Iraq, Sistani made statements that conveyed several key messages, the most significant of which were: learning from past experiences, preventing foreign interference, enforcing the rule of law and strengthening the state's authority. Sistani identified the major challenges facing Iraq, urging that "Iraqis — especially the conscious elites — should learn

lessons from their past experiences, do their utmost to overcome failures, and work diligently to create a better future for their country, one in which everyone enjoys security, stability, progress, and prosperity."⁽⁴²⁾ It appears that Sistani is concerned about Iraq becoming a battleground for regional conflicts and aims to keep the Iraqi state distant from such disputes. This concern is highlighted by his assertion that achieving this goal is only possible "with the preparation of scientific and practical plans to manage the country based on the principles of competence and integrity in assuming positions of responsibility, preventing foreign interference in all its forms, enforcing the rule of law, restricting arms to the state, and combating corruption at all levels." He specifically emphasized preventing foreign interference, which clearly refers to Iranian involvement, given Iran's significant influence in Iraqi affairs. However, he expressed doubt about the feasibility of achieving this in the near future, acknowledging the long road ahead for Iraq to reach these objectives.

Regarding the implications and contexts of these statements, it seems that Sistani is fully aware of the critical moment that both the region and Najaf are currently experiencing. The post-Sistani phase is already being discussed, and the war in Lebanon (prior to the ceasefire agreement between Hezbollah and Israel) extended to Iraq and involved some Iraqi factions. The absence of the late President Raisi, once considered the strongest candidate to succeed the supreme leader as Khamenei has reached his 85th year, signals a critical shift. With Iranian influence shrinking and being curtailed, Shiite actors are becoming more alert to the radical transformations likely to impact the entire scene after the post-Sistani and post-Khamenei eras.

As a result, Sistani is attempting to influence the dynamics of the region, aware of his significant weight among the

Shiite community and his considerable standing in the region. He seeks to counterbalance Iran's influence, given his reference, popularity and influence within the Shiite world. However, the reality is far more complex. If Sistani, despite his influence, has not been able to induce a radical change in the region over the past years, it is unlikely that his successors will be able to do so unless domestic and regional conditions shift in their favor. While Najaf is currently weakened due to the armed factions loyal to Iran that support Wilayat al-Faqih tipping the scales in Iran's favor and pushing forward its agenda, Iran itself is experiencing significant weakness. The fragility of its ruling establishment, the advanced age of its leadership, the rebellion of post-revolutionary generations against the revolutionary doctrine and recent setbacks all contribute to its inability to influence the post-Sistani scene or openly interfere in Najaf as it once did.

Conclusion

There appears to be an Iranian determination to plan for the post-Khamenei era, with Mojtaba being groomed as a potential successor to his father. This effort includes gaining the support of senior leaders in security and military institutions as well as securing the approval of influ-

ential clerics. This trajectory seems more likely, especially after the sudden death of Ebrahim Raisi, which has further solidified Mojtaba's position, potentially even before or after Khamenei's death. This is part of a broader strategy to ensure a smooth transition and avoid any popular or partisan opposition that could complicate the situation and lead to instability.

At the level of Najaf, Sistani's repeated statements regarding the confinement of weapons to official state institutions and the enforcement of the rule of law continue to resonate. However, the armed factions have not responded to his calls, as they do not view him as a source of emulation. Instead, they follow the supreme leader in Iran and obey his orders. Despite this, Sistani's continued appeals serve as a message that absolves him of the corruption that is widespread in some agencies and institutions, aiming to protect his reputation among his followers and popular base. Simultaneously, his calls are an effort to exert continuous pressure on Tehran by competing with it in Iraqi affairs. He seeks to affirm that the religious reference in Najaf holds precedence over Qom and the supreme leader, emphasizing that Najaf is the primary religious institution in Iraq due to its longstanding historical significance.

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IRAN-ARAB INTERACTIONS

Iran's relations with certain Arab and regional countries have undergone significant developments. In Iraq, following Iran's major losses in Syria and Lebanon — where Israel has successfully reconfigured the regional power balance — focus is expected to shift toward pro-Iran militias in Iraq. Both Tel Aviv and Washington are increasing pressure on the Iraqi government to centralize military authority within the Iraqi army and disband these militias. Regarding Syria, Iran now faces a highly complex situation following the fall of the Assad regime. The new Syrian administration has begun forging relationships and aligning its interests with regional and global powers without considering Iran's previous role and influence.

These developments will be analyzed through the following two focal points:

- Iraqi Positions on US Demands to Dissolve Iran-backed Militias
- The Future of Iranian Influence Under the New Syrian Administration

Iraqi Positions on US Demands to Dissolve Iran-backed Militias

Against the backdrop of the major losses suffered by Iran in Syria and Lebanon, and with Israel drawing a new deterrence equation that has put Iran on the defensive, attention is now turning toward the pro-Iran militias in Iraq in order to weaken them. Washington and Tel Aviv are intensifying their pressure on the Baghdad government to control the proliferation of weapons by dissolving the uncontrolled militias, especially Kata'ib Hezbollah, Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba and the Sayyid al-Shuhada Brigades, to avoid US-Israeli retaliation. This raises several questions about the position of the Iraqi government, alliances and militias regarding the demands for dissolution. What is Iran's role in engineering the scene to deflect attention from the controversial Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF)? How will the process of dissolving the militias in Iraq be undertaken?

First: Iraqi Government Efforts to Dissolve the Militias

All indications suggest that the Iraqi government is responding positively to demands to dissolve the militias to avoid possible US-Israeli strikes that could turn Iraq into an arena for settling scores, especially with the commencement of the Trump administration in the United States. Therefore, significant efforts have been undertaken to convince the militias to dissolve. Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shia' al-Sudani met with the leaders of the Coordination Framework and the militias to discuss ways to hand over weapons to the army. He then visited Tehran in January 2025 to convince its decision-makers of the necessity of supporting the Iraqi government in dissolving the unruly militias.

Iraq's Foreign Minister Fuad Hussein also stated in an interview with Asharq Al-Awsat newspaper on January 18, 2025, that Sudani informed the Iranians that

the issue of dissolving the militias is an internal matter to be decided by the Iraqis. The Iraqi government is exploring various ideas to dismantle the militias, including convincing them to hand over their weapons and transitioning toward a political settlement, encouraging them to merge into the PMF,⁽¹⁾ or forcing them to withdraw from the political and military scene entirely. On January 21, 2025, Sudani reiterated his position that his government is working to integrate the armed factions within legal and institutional frameworks to build a new Iraq based on its cultural heritage,⁽²⁾ indicating a move toward dissolving the militias at the very least. However, the government's position appears to align with Iran's stance on preserving the PMF. The prime minister clearly confirmed on December 22, 2024, his government's categorical rejection of any pressures seeking to dissolve the PMF, considering it an official body that has integrated into the national army with parliamentary approval.⁽³⁾ Observers link this official narrative to the government's affiliation with the Coordination Framework, the main sponsor of militia influence in Iraq for over two decades. This suggests an attempt by the government to circumvent US and Israeli pressures to prevent Iraq from being dragged into conflicts that would further exhaust and destabilize the country.

Second: Positions of Alliances and Armed Militias

A. The Coordination Framework, which includes prominent political alliances loyal to Iran, such as the State of Law Alliance and the Fatah Alliance, has reportedly accepted the dissolution of the three militias (Kata'ib Hezbollah, Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba and the Sayyid al-Shuhada Brigades). Media reports indicate that its leaders have been negotiating with the militia leaders. Former parliamentarian Izzat al-Shabandar who has close ties to the militias shed

light on discussions among Coordination Framework leaders on the necessity of dissolving the three militias. He stated that the decision had been made and that understandings between Sudani and the militia leaders were progressing.⁽⁴⁾ This aligns with statements by Wael al-Rikabi, a member of the State of Law Coalition, who mentioned the imminent handover of all armed factions' weapons to the government to avoid devastating Israeli strikes like those suffered by Lebanese Hezbollah.⁽⁵⁾ However, some leaders of the Coordination Framework, such as Nouri al-Maliki and Hadi al-Amiri, are pressuring the government to end the US presence in Iraq as a way to persuade and motivate the militias to disarm. Observers suggest that the Coordination Framework remains the biggest obstacle to any proposal to dissolve the PMF, as it represents their primary military influence. All Coordination Framework leaders consider it a red line, citing its legal status as an official body that has defended Iraqi security alongside the army against terrorist organizations, according to statements by Issam al-Kriti and Saad al-Saadi on January 21, 2025,⁽⁶⁾ who emphasized that no religious authority has issued a fatwa to dismantle the PMF.

B. The Sadr Movement has long demanded the disarmament of weapons by militias. On November 18, 2021, Muqtada al-Sadr called on parliamentary alliances possessing militias to dissolve them. On November 19, 2021, he announced the dissolution of the Promised Day Brigade, a unit formed from the elite forces of the Mahdi Army (Saraya al-Salam), as an initiative to encourage Coordination Framework alliances to dissolve their militias. On January 6, 2025, following Israeli threats to strike militias in Iraq, Sadr renewed his call to confine weapons to the army. However, a question remains: will Sadr also dissolve the nine brigades under his control?⁽⁷⁾ Regarding the PMF, his stance aligns with the Coordination

Framework, recognizing its legal status and central role in Iraq, as Sadr commands three brigades within the PMF.

C. The three militias, according to many sources, have rejected any dissolution attempts.⁽⁸⁾ This may be a negotiating tactic to secure political gains. On January 20, 2025, Ali al-Asadi, head of the Political Bureau of Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba, criticized the government's efforts to dissolve the militias, stating they would not disarm.⁽⁹⁾ Firas al-Yasser, a member of the Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba Political Bureau, linked the withdrawal of US forces to militia disarmament. Sayyid al-Shuhada Brigades Spokesperson Kazem al-Fartousi argued that it is unreasonable to expect opponents to disarm while facing threats. The militias' refusal to dissolve aligns with their vested interests, including influence, financial benefits from illicit trade, border control and dominance in strategic areas such as Basra, Diyala, Nineveh, Baghdad and border regions. Consequently, a political campaign to weaken Sudani's re-election prospects is expected, risking his chances for a second term.

Third: Iran's Role in Diverting Attention From the PMF

Iran is shaping Iraq's response to the uncontrolled weapons issue. During Quds Force Commander Ismail Qaani's visit to Iraq on January 7, 2025, he proposed that Sudani fully integrate thousands of PMF fighters into the army and abandon the current PMF structure. Currently, the PMF is financially and militarily dependent on the army but it has administrative independence.⁽¹⁰⁾

Iran's Supreme Leader Khamenei, in his meeting with Sudani on January 8, 2025, emphasized the importance of preserving the PMF, "The Popular Mobilization Forces are a key element of Iraq's power, and efforts must be made to preserve and strengthen them ... evidence indicates that the United States attempts

to establish and expand its presence in Iraq, which must be seriously addressed.”⁽¹¹⁾ Iranian officials, such as Ibrahim Azizi of the National Security and Foreign Policy Committee, have linked dissolving the PMF to the resurgence of terrorist organizations in the region. Iran’s objective appears to be retaining the PMF by integrating it into the army, making it indistinguishable from regular forces while ensuring its continued loyalty to Tehran.

Conclusion

Iran is strategically maneuvering to preserve the PMF by diverting attention toward the dissolution of smaller militias. The anticipated outcome is the partial or total dissolution of selected militias to avoid US pressure while strengthening the PMF. This approach allows Iran to maintain its influence in Iraq by ensuring that PMF fighters merge into the army, ultimately solidifying the PMF as a parallel force to Iraq’s national military.

The Future of Iranian Influence Under the New Syrian Administration

After the fall of Bashar al-Assad’s regime on December 8, 2024, and Ahmed al-Sharaa taking over the reins of power in Syria, Iran finds itself facing a highly complex political landscape. The new administration aims to shape Syria’s future by aligning its interests with regional and international stakeholders while distancing itself from Iran. This file outlines the trends of the new Syrian administration following Sharaa’s installation as president and examines Iran’s position regarding the future of its relationship with Syria amid these strategic shifts.

First: The New Syrian Administration and Its Priorities

On January 29, 2025, the factions of the Military Operations Administration announced the appointment of Sharaa —

head of the General Military Command — as president of Syria, granting him the authority to represent the state in international forums. This decision was followed by several significant measures that defined a new transitional phase, distinct from the previous two months after Assad’s fall. These measures included the cancellation of the 2012 Constitution, the dissolution of all military and civilian factions and their integration into state institutions.

During his inauguration, Sharaa delivered balanced messages to regional and international actors, carefully addressing each party’s concerns without displaying overt bias toward either the Russian or Western camps. His priority appears to be fostering strong relations with the West to ease international sanctions, end political isolation and create favorable conditions for reconstruction. These moves indicate Syria’s intent to diversify its international and regional relations, steering away from the policy of alignment with the Russian-Iranian axis previously pursued by the Assad regime. This axis contributed to Syria’s geographical and political fragmentation, turning it into a regional and international security concern.

The new Syrian administration’s steps reflect a broader strategy to disentangle Syria from its dependency on Iran while fostering strategic partnerships with Arab and Western nations to counter Iranian influence, which has long destabilized regional and international security. Notably, the government has swiftly taken diplomatic and security measures, including restricting the entry of Iranian citizens and goods into Syria.⁽¹²⁾ This shift was further underscored by a major Arab regional international meeting held in Riyadh on January 12, 2025, to discuss Syria’s future — an event marked by Iran’s conspicuous absence.

Second: Iran's Position on the Appointment of Sharaa

With Sharaa assuming power during the transitional period and his intent to reposition Syria in the global arena,⁽¹³⁾ Iran is increasingly concerned about the future of its relationship with Damascus. The evolving power dynamics in Syria, combined with the inevitable decline in Iranian influence following Assad's fall, have left Tehran in a precarious position.⁽¹⁴⁾

Despite official Iranian statements expressing acceptance of Sharaa's presidency and asserting that Iranian influence will remain unaffected, underlying concerns are evident in remarks by key figures. General Behrouz Ethbatabi, a senior commander in the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), described the developments in Syria as a severe setback for Iran.⁽¹⁵⁾ Consequently, Iran has sought to regain some influence by coordinating

with local militias opposed to Syria's new leadership.⁽¹⁶⁾

Conclusion

As Syria enters a new political phase under Sharaa, the new administration faces significant challenges in balancing regional and international interests. While Damascus strives to rebuild relations with the West and Arab nations to achieve political and economic stability, Iran remains wary of these shifts, which could undermine its longstanding influence in Syria. Despite the new government's efforts to limit foreign interference, Tehran still possesses leverage to reorganize its presence within the Syrian landscape. Ultimately, the future of Syria-Iran relations will depend on the new Syrian leadership's ability to consolidate its sovereignty and establish balanced strategic partnerships that prioritize national interests over external allegiances.

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IRAN'S RELATIONS WITH INTERNATIONAL POWERS

In terms of Iran's interactions with global powers, Trump's return to the White House has sparked significant debate within Iran, particularly concerning the future of US-Iran relations, given the intense pressure Trump applied on Iran during his first presidential term. As for Russia-Iran relations, after months of delays, the two countries recently signed a comprehensive strategic partnership agreement amid internal disagreements within Iran regarding the agreement's potential benefits and feasibility. Iran's interactions with the United States and Russia are examined through the following two key discussions:

- US-Iran Relations After Trump's Return
- The Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Agreement Between Russia and Iran: Challenges and Prospects

US-Iran Relations After Trump's Return

Donald Trump's return to the White House has caused a great deal of controversy within Iran given his previous strategy of imposing maximum pressure on the Iranian government, which threatened its survival. A team led by President Pezeshkian, supported by the supreme leader, believes in the importance of diplomacy, dialogue and resolving problems by addressing differences with Washington, while another team insists on Iran's traditional approach of strategic patience and confrontation. Despite the caution, it seems that interactions within Iran, as well as with the United States and its European allies, will shape the internal consensus in Iran regarding its relationship with the United States in the next stage.

First: Trump's Return and the Position on Iran

While Trump has only been in power for a few days, the outlines of his administration's strategy toward Iran are not yet clear. However, despite his threats, there are many indications that Trump himself wants to reach an agreement by settling differences. Based on his statements before taking office, Trump is not interested in regime change but instead seeks a deal to prevent Iran from developing a nuclear weapon or threatening US interests in the region. He does not appear eager to use force or fully adopt Israel's stance on Iran, yet his actions remain unpredictable. Moreover, members of the Trump administration hold significant hostility toward Iran and do not rule out returning to the policy of maximum pressure — perhaps even escalating to the military option if Iran does not submit to Trump's conditions. For example, Trump's nominee for CIA director warned about Iran's nuclear progress during his confirmation hearing, US Secretary of State Marco Rubio raised concerns about Iran's growing influence in Venezuela

and drone threats across the hemisphere, and Trump's envoy to Ukraine Keith Kellogg stated during an Iranian opposition conference in Paris that the world must return to a policy of "maximum pressure" to transform Iran into a more democratic state. Thus, the four years of Trump's presidency will be of great importance to Iran, especially considering the system's declining legitimacy, the deteriorating economic situation, severe blows to the "Axis of Resistance" and Iran's waning regional influence. However, the Trump administration does not have much time to formulate a clear policy toward Iran as it inherits a situation that Trump himself shaped during his first term. After withdrawing from the nuclear agreement in 2018, Iran responded by reducing its nuclear commitments in reaction to the maximum sanctions he imposed. According to the latest report by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), Iran currently possesses approximately 200 kilograms of uranium enriched to a purity of up to 60% — close to the 90% required for nuclear weapons production — potentially inclining some factions within the system to pursue a nuclear weapon as a deterrent against Trump.⁽¹⁾ Additionally, the effectiveness of the maximum sanctions policy Trump relied on during his first term has diminished. Under Biden, Iran was freed from some of the restrictions of this policy, particularly concerning the resurgence of its oil exports. China, engaged in strategic competition with the United States, remains Iran's primary oil customer, and both Beijing and Tehran have likely developed effective mechanisms to circumvent US sanctions. Consequently, Trump's efforts to reinstate maximum pressure may not yield the same results as before. Furthermore, Russia has strong incentives to support Tehran both diplomatically and economically, given Iran's military assistance in Ukraine and the newly established strategic partnership between the two coun-

tries. This partnership is driven primarily by a mutual interest in undermining and bypassing US sanctions as well as strengthening Iran's military capabilities by providing it with Su-35 fighter jets which could significantly impact regional strategic balances.

Second: Controversy Within Iran Regarding Relations With Trump

Trump's return to the White House represents a major challenge for the Iranian government, particularly following its recent setbacks, including its diminishing regional influence and increased attacks within its borders — developments that Trump has interpreted as signs of Iran's weakness. Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei responded to Trump's statements with an implicit warning, "This delusional dreamer announced that Iran has become weak. The future will show who has become weak."⁽²⁾ President Pezeshkian echoed a similar sentiment, "Those in the United States and Europe who believe that Iran is at its weakest can keep dreaming." Trump's return has unsettled the Iranian leadership and reignited debate over the country's approach toward the United States in the coming period. Several viewpoints have emerged. One camp, represented by President Pezeshkian and his team, argues that dialogue and diplomacy with Trump should not be dismissed outright. This faction believes that opening negotiations with the United States could help Iran avoid a direct confrontation and safeguard both national interests and the system's long-term survival. They see nuclear negotiations as a crucial lever to prevent the return of maximum pressure on Iran. Pezeshkian has emphasized that Iran is, in principle, open to dialogue with the new Trump administration.⁽³⁾ Conversely, a "hardliner" group advocates a return to the policy of resistance and preparation for the difficulties Trump may impose on Iran. This group emphasizes steadfastness,

defiance and strategic patience. They argue that Trump was responsible for the assassination of Qassem Soleimani and that engaging in dialogue with him would constitute a betrayal of the revolution's principles. This faction's opposition was evident in their reaction to former Foreign Minister Javad Zarif's remarks at the World Economic Forum in Davos. "Hardliner" media outlets launched a fierce campaign against him, alongside political maneuvers to remove him from his position. The "hardliners'" opposition to negotiations stems from several factors, including their ideological commitment to revolutionary principles, deep-seated distrust of the United States, skepticism about Trump's willingness to honor any agreements and fears that opening dialogue could lead to greater pressure rather than relief. Additionally, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), which is aligned with this faction, worries that its economic, political and military influence could be compromised by potential US-Iranian agreements.

Conclusion

Trump's return poses a significant challenge to the Iranian government, yet several variables could complicate his policy approach, including Iran's evolving relationships with the Gulf states, developments in its nuclear program and its strategic ties with China and Russia. Despite this, Trump still possesses multiple tools and options. Although strong opposition exists within Iran's "hardliner" faction against diplomacy, the supreme leader has cautiously signaled conditional approval for engaging in talks, shaping Iran's strategy even before Trump officially assumed office on January 20, 2025. Tehran has taken early steps in this direction by initiating dialogue with European parties to address contentious issues, aiming to weaken Western unity against Iran and exploit potential divisions between Europe and the Trump administra-

tion, as it did during Trump's first term. Furthermore, Iran has engaged with the IAEA, offering to halt uranium enrichment at 60%. Reports have also suggested that Iran's representative to the United Nations met with Elon Musk — a businessman with close ties to Trump — after Trump's election victory. While diplomacy currently appears to be Iran's preferred course, it remains uncertain whether the system has fundamentally altered its negotiating approach. Key questions remain: Will negotiations continue through indirect channels, or will there be a breakthrough in direct engagement? Will Iran genuinely seek a settlement of its disputes with the United States, or will it merely seek to weather Trump's presidency through delay tactics and diplomatic maneuvering without making significant concessions?

The Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Agreement Between Russia and Iran: Challenges and Prospects

On January 17, 2025, in the Russian capital Moscow Russian President Vladimir Putin and his Iranian counterpart Masoud Pezeshkian signed a comprehensive strategic agreement between the two countries. Opinions and assessments vary regarding the extent of progress in their relationship and cooperation following the signing of this agreement. Some view it as a historic step for both countries and the beginning of a broad partnership across multiple sectors. Others argue that the agreement does not introduce anything fundamentally new to the relationship and is merely a continuation of the partnerships established over the past years, without a breakthrough or noticeable difference. In the following file, we will examine the areas covered by this agreement, its significance for both countries and the challenges it faces.

First: Areas of Partnership and Their Importance

The agreement comprises 47 articles and is valid for 20 years, covering political, economic, military and cultural fields. Both countries hope it will pave the way for a new phase in their bilateral relations. The agreement gains its significance from the fact that it provides a framework for Russia-Iran relations in the coming years. It also comes at a critical time, as both countries have been facing severe sanctions for years, along with diminishing influence in Syria, the depletion of Russian resources due to its nearly three-year-long war against Ukraine and the return of Trump to the US presidency. Meanwhile, Iran faces serious regional and domestic challenges, including a worsening economic situation and existential threats to its political system. The significance of this agreement can be highlighted through the following points:

1. Enhancing Political Cooperation:

The agreement underscores the alignment between Russia and Iran on numerous political issues, particularly on the global stage. A key unifying factor between them is their shared opposition to the West — especially the United States — as they both face coercive policies and economic sanctions. Geopolitical cooperation between the two countries in the region has led to a broad consensus, which in turn facilitated the signing of this historic agreement.

2. Economic and Trade Cooperation:

This partnership comes at a time when both Russia and Iran are grappling with economic sanctions that hinder their trade activities. The economic aspect of the agreement is a crucial component for both parties, as they have agreed to conduct all future transactions and partnerships using their respective national currencies. These moves limit reliance on the US dollar and other Western currencies, creating scope for trade despite

the sanctions imposed on both nations. During the signing ceremony, President Putin mentioned the transfer of Russian gas to Iran and hinted at the possibility of further cooperation in the oil sector,⁽⁴⁾ which would provide economic benefits to Russia and help mitigate its financial crisis. Additionally, the agreement emphasizes the completion and strategic importance of the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) project, which would enhance trade between the two countries. The establishment of a trade corridor linking Asia and Europe would further improve Russia and Iran's commercial relations with regional countries.

3. Military and Security Cooperation: Military and security cooperation constitutes one of the agreement's core aspects. Putin referenced Russia's collaboration with Iran in nuclear energy, stating, "We have a major project in nuclear energy, and we are currently discussing the possibility of building additional units."⁽⁵⁾ This initiative would strengthen ties between the two nations while enhancing Iran's regional position through its growing number of nuclear reactors. Furthermore, the agreement includes provisions for military cooperation and training programs aimed at bolstering internal security and stability in both countries. However, it does not introduce any groundbreaking changes, as it mainly reaffirms previous agreements and joint stances on international and regional issues. Notably, the agreement does not include a mutual defense clause in case of an attack on either country — unlike the recent security pact between Russia and North Korea. Instead, it stipulates that neither country will assist a country which attacks the other. This means that Russia is not committed to military intervention should Iran face an external attack, and Iran is not prepared to send forces to support Russia in its war against Ukraine, unlike North Korea.

Second: Challenges to the Partnership

Despite the agreement's significance in strengthening cooperation, several challenges may hinder its success:

1. Internal Challenges: Russia faces difficulties that could undermine the agreement's effectiveness, particularly due to its prolonged war with Ukraine and the impact of Western sanctions. These economic constraints may limit the benefits Iran hopes to gain from the partnership. Additionally, Russia remains wary of Iran's nuclear ambitions and is unlikely to provide significant support that could enhance Tehran's regional dominance, especially given conflicting interests in the post-Soviet sphere. Iran's lack of technical and technological advancements also reduces the agreement's effectiveness, particularly in the context of global competition in these fields. On Iran's side, "hardliner" factions within the religious establishment remain skeptical of the agreement. Some argue that Iran should adhere to its longstanding principle of "neither East nor West," maintaining independence from major powers, including Russia. Skeptics point to past failed partnerships such as the unsuccessful "oil-for-goods" deal with Russia in 2014 and the underwhelming results of Iran's strategic partnership agreement with China. Consequently, internal pressures in Iran may lead to disruptions or even the failure of the partnership with Russia.

2. External Challenges: The agreement between two influential regional powers inevitably draws the attention of neighboring and global actors. Strengthened defense and security ties with Iran may alarm the Gulf states, and Moscow cannot afford to jeopardize its broader interests with these states. Western powers are also likely to take countermeasures to hinder the agreement's economic, trade and geopolitical effectiveness as part of their broader efforts to enforce sanctions. Moreover, Iran has recently shown open-

ness to dialogue with the West and may seek to resolve its nuclear disputes with the United States. This raises concerns in Moscow about Tehran's reliability, as seen after the 2015 nuclear deal when Iran pivoted toward engagement with the West, sidelining China and Russia. A similar scenario could once again weaken Russian-Iranian cooperation.

Conclusion

The Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Agreement between Russia and Iran marks a significant milestone in their bilateral relations, reinforcing the progress made over the past years and highlighting their common interests. It has the potential to pave the way for deeper strategic cooperation across multiple

sectors. However, numerous challenges may hinder the agreement's effectiveness, and in the foreseeable future, the relationship between the two countries is unlikely to undergo a dramatic transformation as a result of this deal. Both nations still operate based on their individual strategic calculations, preventing them from reaching a full-fledged alliance. Currently, their shared hostility toward the West and the challenges they face due to Western sanctions remain the primary drivers of their partnership. Nevertheless, any developments — such as a potential Iran-West nuclear settlement or further Russian-Iranian understandings regarding Ukraine — could significantly impact the viability and effectiveness of this agreement.

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