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IRAN IN FOCUS

WINTER 2022/2023

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ABSTRACT

The Winter 2022/2023 issue of the Iran in Focus brief examines the historical protests in Iran calling for regime change, which the leadership regards as a serious threat. It also examines the state of the JCPOA, Iran–Russia relations in the shadow of the war on Ukraine, and Tehran becoming a Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) member at last.

REVOLUTIONARY PROCESS: LEAK REVEALS MAJOR REGIME CONCERNS

Ever since mid-September 2022, the Islamic Republic has been facing its most serious challenge, engulfing the country in a revolutionary process that [arguably started with the 2017/18 nationwide protests](#) when, for the first time, the lower classes – hitherto considered as the regime’s social base – took to the streets with revolutionary slogans. Now, with the protests taking place after the tragic death of 22-year old Mahsa Jina Amini in police custody, the missing link of previous protest waves is now resuming; an intersectional dimension involving various social classes. With this “revolutionary episode” – as characterized by prominent scholar of social movements and protests in the Middle East Asef Bayat – already lasting three months, the hacktivist group Black Reward revealed a highly incisive secret report prepared by the IRGC-affiliated Fars News Agency (FNA) in late November.

The leak contains 200 gigabytes of data, including a classified video footage and audio files. Crucially, it demonstrates the grave concerns shared by top regime officials over the protests calling for regime change along with some regime strategies to counter them. For instance, the revelations show that at least [10%](#) of the population (i.e. over 8 million people) are ready to take to the streets against the Islamic Republic. According to the only official estimate by the Minister of Interior, as of early November, 45,000 people took part at the protests’ height with 18,000 of them at universities. Independent estimates, however, and based on the ratio of people arrested by authorities in single cities per official announcements, claim a much higher number of 600,000–700,000 protesters. In comparison, the last major nationwide uprising of November 2019 led by the lower classes and the “middle-class poor” assembled 200,000 protesters. [An audio file of a conversation between top IRGC officials](#) signals their worries about the sheer extent of the protests, including the avant-garde role of women in the protests and the powerful symbol of taking off their state-imposed hijab, stressing the latter’s danger of creating a domino effect, as well as support by Iranian celebrities, and the regime’s utter failure in the “media war.”

Another important part of the FNA report is devoted to protests in Sistan and Baluchistan province, located in the geostrategically sensitive southeast of the country and home to a Sunni majority. After a regime massacre that took place there earlier in the protests, killing around 100 worshippers following Friday Prayer, the most influential Iranian Sunni cleric and also Friday Prayer Imam Molavi Abdolhamid Ismaeelzah raised his voice against Iranian authorities including Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, suggesting that a referendum ought to take place.

The leaked document makes it clear that Khamenei has stressed on the idea that “Molavi Abdolhamid should not be arrested, he should be dishonored.” Protesters in the capital city of Zahedan, home to the nation’s Sunni community, have chanted “death to Khamenei,” while carrying placards, displaying various slogans such as “Iran! Baluchistan and Kurdistan will not leave your back” and “we fight for Iran, not against Iran.” At the same time, Hassan Rahimpour Azghadi, a member of Iran’s Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution who has a close relationship with the center of power, noted that the ongoing protests should be perceived as “an alarm before death.”

BEYOND THE HEADLINES

Indeed, there are various groups at the forefront of these revolutionary protests: women, the youth, students, and ethnic minorities. Regarding the latter’s significance, Baloch and Kurdish people, residing in the Eastern and Southwestern borders of the country respectively, have been on the front line since the start of the uprising. This gave rise to the narrative propagated by the state that protesters are driven by ambitions of ethnic separatism. However, protesters in these cities insist that they are fighting to “take Iran back,” stressing that there are no intentions of separation. Part of the reason for the little inclination for separatism is the idea of Iran as a multi-ethnic nation state, despite discrimination stemming from the model of governance in the Islamic Republic, leading all ethnic groups to identify themselves as Iranian first. In this vein, they have been successful to thwart the regime’s efforts in labeling the protests as separatist movements. Furthermore, Persian content on social media demonstrates that Iranians are now more united than ever. They believe that under the Islamic Republic there is no classification of minority and majority, rather a division between the people and the regime.

THE JCPOA SAGA: SIGNAL OF WEAKNESS FROM WASHINGTON TO TEHRAN

In early December, the Biden Administration's Special Envoy for Iran Robert Malley [claimed](#) that "sanctions are not the answers" to cope with threats that are emerging from Iran, adding that if sanctions "had been the answer, then Iran would not be advancing its nuclear program." In response to a possible death of the 2015 nuclear deal, Malley argued that "it's a technical question more than a political one." He also contemplated about the rationale behind restoring the JCPOA, when stating that "when our nuclear experts will tell us that the nonproliferation benefits of the deal don't warrant the sanctions relief that we would be offering." Additionally, he noted that the deal will be dead at that point. Meanwhile, the head of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) [said](#) that "we don't seem to be seeing eye-to-eye with Iran over their obligations to the IAEA [...] We need to put our relationship back on track."

BEYOND THE HEADLINES

Despite many Western capitals starting to understand that anti-regime protests have a [new quality](#) this time around, there is still confusion concerning how to deal with Iran's nuclear challenge. On January 14, 2022, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken [noted](#) that there are only "a few weeks left" to save the 2015 Iran nuclear deal before Tehran's advancements would become too difficult to reverse. Despite a significantly advanced program in Iran and more than 20kg of 60% enriched uranium, Malley declared that according to U.S. nuclear experts, there is still time to reach a deal. This raises the question of how the Biden Administration could reach such disparate conclusions about the nuclear "point of no return" within one single year. However, Malley's statement can indeed be accurate. According to a current assessment of a former IAEA advisor provided to the author, Iran is likely to exaggerate its nuclear capabilities, not least as a way to pressure the West into concessions.

More importantly, while Malley acknowledged that the Islamic Republic demands maximum concessions, he also claims that sanctions will not work to stop Iran. This raises the question of what options will be left to the Biden Administration, military strikes or endless waiting and accepting a "nuclear Iran" down the line? There is no sign that this administration has the will to start a war with the Islamic Republic, hence, Malley is sending a signal that Washington finds itself in a deadlock and that it has to wait for Tehran. This is the scenario favored by the Iranian authorities, in order to push their nuclear program forward without feeling real pressure.

IRAN AND ISRAEL: SIGN OF MORE ESCALATION?

In early November, two Iranian fuel trucks were destroyed by a drone attack on the Syrian side of the border with Iraq. At first, Iranian media claimed that the U.S. was behind the air strike, which was later denied. A senior U.S. official said “it is not [us]” but he did confirm that there have been airstrikes in that area. Meanwhile, it was reported that “Israel was behind the strikes, leaving 10 people dead, including an unknown number of Iranians.” It appears that tensions between Iran and Israel are intensifying, with Benjamin Netanyahu back in power. On Israel’s part, Defense Minister Benny Gantz alleged that his country is well-prepared for bombing Iran. On Iran’s part, Gen. Amir-Ali Hajizadeh, commander of the Aerospace Force of the IRGC, said that “we must be ready for war including hybrid warfare.” He also claimed that Iran has built hypersonic missiles, adding that it “could maneuver both inside and outside the atmosphere.” Notwithstanding, the IRGC has provided no evidence to support its allegations. Moreover, hypersonic weapons are among the latest technology being developed by the U.S., China and Russia.

BEYOND THE HEADLINES

These developments can be discussed on two levels.

First, Israel has become the number one force against Iran’s nuclear program over the last two decades. While the West seems to be unable or unwilling to deal harshly with Iran, it remains to be seen how Tel Aviv could tackle the “nuclear challenge.” Although Netanyahu would increase tensions between the two sides, a full-fledged war is unlikely to emerge given its uncalculated risks for both sides. Instead, Israel will likely continue to destroy Iranian infrastructure in the region, mainly Syria, and sabotage nuclear facilities inside Iran.

Second, the IRGC’s claim of possessing hypersonic missiles is questionable. Traditionally, the IRGC shows off new missiles with tests, having them covered by state-controlled media. Indeed, the test of such a missile would be a big victory for Tehran and a turning point for Iran’s military capabilities. In other words, if the Islamic Republic had hypersonic weapons this time, it would have displayed its achievements, also as a way to deal with the current domestic crisis. Instead, it seems Iranian officials only intended to impact international media with such claims, in order to redirect the flow of information about the protests in Iran.

WARNING ABOUT RELATIONS WITH RUSSIA FROM INSIDE IRAN

Amid Iran's decision to transfer drones to Russia, critics raised their voices, warning that Moscow could sacrifice Tehran for its global ambitions. In early November, referring to the "negative role" of Russia in the nuclear talks, Hamid Abutalebi, political deputy of the President's Office during the Rouhani Administration, [said](#) that the Kremlin has widened the gap between Iran and the West with the issue of drones, by implicating Iran to a top international security issue. Furthermore, the reformist daily *Etemad* has [warned](#) that the war in Ukraine "is turning against Iran," highlighting that amid domestic protests, the footprint of the Islamic Republic in Ukraine may possibly provoke an "international decision" against Tehran. In addition, Hossein Alaei, a retired IRGC General, [noted](#) that Russia aims "to take Iran's foreign policy hostage" by involving Tehran in the war in Ukraine. Alaei, advised that Iran should keep itself away from the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

BEYOND THE HEADLINES

There is evidence that the nature of the relationship between the Kremlin and the Islamic Republic is creating additional crises for Iran. However, Tehran's center of power is oblivious about such a prospect. Iranian officials have their own narratives, pushing them to improve ties with Russia as much as possible. For instance, in late October President Raisi [reiterated](#) that "a new chapter has come for emerging powers," implying the rise of a new world order in which Eastern powers, including Iran, play a major role in shaping the future. More importantly, Iran has approached Russia to build a shield against Western pressure and other security threats.

In line with such assumptions about the nature of Irano-Russian ties, it does not come as a surprise that the White House [noted](#) signs of Kremlin advising the Islamic Republic for coping with current protests. Iranian officials have frequently said that while Western countries are meddling in the domestic politics of the Islamic Republic, Russia and China respect the model of governance in Iran. As long as Iranian authorities perceive Russia as a shield against existential threats, they will not listen to critics – both inside and outside of the country – regarding its ties with Moscow. It should be recalled that the Kremlin helped both Syria's Assad and Venezuela's Maduro to stay in power, which is certainly defining Iranian leaders' perceptions and calculations.

IRAN BECOMING AN SCO MEMBER

In September 2022, Iran signed a Memorandum of Obligations to become a permanent member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), ratified by the Iranian Parliament in late November. Iran's Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian noted that "by signing the document for full membership of the SCO, now Iran has entered a new stage of various economic, commercial, transit and energy cooperation." During the SCO summit in Samarkand, Uzbekistan, President Raisi met with his Russian and Chinese counterparts. Vladimir Putin told Raisi that "we are finalizing a new major Russian-Iranian treaty that will elevate our relations to the level of strategic partnership," adding that a large Russian business delegation of around 80 companies will travel to Iran. Also, Raisi stated that "our [Iran-Russia] relations are not ordinary; they are strategic." Iran's president attempted to downplay the effects of U.S. sanctions, asserting that unlike what Washington thinks, sanctions cannot impair states' "willpower and forward movement," adding that "I believe that they are miscalculating; this is a mistake." Furthermore, in the meeting with the Chinese president, Raisi stated that "Iran is firmly committed to strengthening cooperation with China," claiming that Iran's SCO membership is capable of enhancing the cooperation between Tehran and Beijing at all levels. He appreciated "China's position of upholding fairness and justice in international affairs." On the other hand, President Xi underscored that China supports Iran in safeguarding its sovereignty and national dignity, and that it will work with Tehran to uphold the principle of non-interference in states' internal affairs and the common interests of developing countries.

BEYOND THE HEADLINES

The political situation has significantly changed for the Islamic Republic during the last two years. Under President Trump, Iran suffered significantly from the campaign of "maximum pressure." External threats rose with a de facto coalition between the U.S., Israel, and Saudi Arabia. During that time, Tehran lost its most important war strategist General Soleimani. The country also experienced two nationwide protests in 2017/18 and 2019 against the entire system of the Islamic Republic. Besides, given Trump's "maximum pressure," China severely reduced its oil imports from Iran.

Today, both foreign and domestic threats have decreased, very much facilitated by U.S. “maximum pressure” unofficially undermined by the Biden Administration, along with China increasingly buying oil from Iran. Iranian authorities thus aim to seize the opportunity offered by the Biden Administration, improving their “look to the East” posture and preparing for tougher times ahead under a potential Republican president in the White House after 2024. Tehran also hopes to benefit from recent global developments, such as the Russian invasion of Ukraine or the possible crisis over Taiwan.

Nonetheless, the question arises of whether Russia and China can strategically help the Islamic Republic to build a shield against its domestic and foreign threats. As an example, the 25-year accord between Iran and China, signed in March 2021, could shed some light in this regard. Despite massive propaganda by Iranian officials regarding the agreement, the latter has not yielded any considerable economic benefits for Iran since the deal’s signing – despite speculations that Beijing could end up investing more than \$400 billion in Iran. As a case in point, according to official October 2022 statistics, the reported foreign direct investment in Iran’s industry, mining, and trade sectors declined by 87% in the first six months of this Iranian calendar year (starting in March 2022). During this six-month period, [Afghanistan](#) has been the leading investor with \$149 million in investments, with China ranking second with \$75.5 million.

This suggests that if the U.S. enforces its sanctions, the “look to the East” will remain at an abstract level, with no fundamental changes on the ground. Although China has increased its oil imports from Iran, this is not the outcome of Tehran’s “look to the East” or of the 25-year agreement with Beijing, but rather of the unwillingness of the Biden Administration to enforce Trump’s “maximum pressure” extra-territorial sanctions regime against Iran.

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