



IRAN IN FOCUS

A Monthly Brief

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SUMMARY

In its second issue, Iran in Focus covers key domestic and international events over February and March 2022. It specifically looks at Iran unveiling a new solid-fuel missile; a hotly-debated leak about top-level IRGC corruption; how on the occasion of the 43rd anniversary of the “Islamic Revolution,” an IRGC daily has discussed its core demand of social justice; the Iranian President’s visit to Qatar; resurfaced speculations about the contents of the 25-year Iranian-Chinese deal; Iranian oil exports rising; and the bumpy final phase of the Vienna talks over the revival of the Iran nuclear deal. Further readings on the impact of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine on the JCPOA talks as well as Iranian reactions and concerns (both at the state and society levels) are attached to this edition.

Military: Iran unveils new solid-fuel missile

In early February, Iran unveiled a new ballistic missile with solid fuel, claiming a range of 1,450 km that would put Israel and U.S. military bases in reach. It is called “Kheybar Shekan”. Tehran claims it is a high-accuracy missile that can defeat missile shield systems. Although it is too early to state the accuracy of such claims, it is suggested that its solid-fuel system makes it quite potent. IRGC Aerospace Force Commander Amir-Ali Hajizadeh has [said](#) that the new missile has practically reduced the preparation and firing time to one-sixth. Moreover, he [said](#) that Iran will soon unveil a new “strategic” missile it has already manufactured but has kept away from the public. Mehr, a state-controlled news agency, has [written](#) that “IRGC missile technology was completed”, while the chief of Iran’s armed forces, Maj.-Gen. Mohammad Bagheri, stressed that “we will continue on the path of growth, development, and excellence for our missile power, in terms of both quantity and quality.” In 2019, IRGC top commander, Maj.-Gen. Hossein Salami, had [stated](#) that “we will never stop increasing the defense capabilities and we will not retreat because it is among our redlines and therefore, the issue of defense capabilities is not negotiable, modifiable, stoppable, and controllable.” Meanwhile, it should be noted that on Feb. 7 Maj.-Gen. Bagheri [announced](#) that “if the U.S. lifts the sanctions [as a result of the Vienna talks], we will be one of the biggest exporters of weapons in the world.” He also claimed that Iran’s military capabilities and equipment have even surpassed those of European countries. Also, Iran, the official daily of the Raisi administration, pointed out that the new missiles are a message to the Vienna talks, [saying](#) that the U.S. attempts to compel Iran by suggesting a “meaningless deadline” for an unacceptable agreement, yet the testing of missiles shows that Tehran is in a strong standing and grants it the upper hand in those negotiations.

Beyond the Headlines

[Observers reckon](#) that this missile represents a significant development, as solid-propellant motors (which the new missile uses) would promise much longer ranges and even orbit reach for Iran’s space and ballistic-missile programs. Tellingly, the new missile’s unveiling came almost a week after Iran’s National Space Technology Day, which commemorates the 2009 launch of its first satellite (“Omid”) into the orbit aboard an Iranian-made liquid-fuel “Safir” rocket (ever since replaced by the larger “Simorgh”). However, at least five Iranians attempts since 2016 to place a satellite into orbit have failed. As such, Iran is believed not to have fully mastered its liquid-fuel space launch vehicles (SLVs). Meanwhile, solid-propellant rockets are seen the better option to place a heavy satellite into so-called sun-synchronous orbit, at 1,000 km and best suited for producing spy-reconnaissance imagery. While solid-propellant rockets have been

developed by the IRGC's space arm, the liquid-fuel missiles have been developed by the Ministry of Defense, which will receive a whopping increase in funding as foreseen by the upcoming first annual budget of the Raisi administration.

In a larger context, since the 2003 invasion of Iraq that created a new space for Iran to expand its footprint beyond its borders, boosting military power has been the focal point of Iranian foreign policy-makers' interests. Furthermore, after the Arab Spring and the war in Syria, this focus has been amplified. In this context, missiles play a crucial role to empower Tehran's standing in the Middle East. While Iran cannot import advanced weapons due to the sanctions, homemade missiles together with its Middle East proxies are seen as the two key pillars of both regime security and power projection. For the Islamic Republic, missiles are much more important in comparison to the nuclear program, because Iran's advancing missile arsenal has enabled it to manage a confrontation with the U.S. In this vein, "deterrence" is one of the most repeated keywords in Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei's speeches, and missiles – even more than Iran's proxies – are the central part underpinning this strategy. Crucially, Iran also provided a great number of missiles to its allied non-state actors in the region, including Hezbollah which is now believed to be able to circumvent Israel's air defenses. Therefore, as Maj.-Gen. Bagheri has acknowledged, if the U.S. lifts the sanctions, Iran can enhance its deterrence policy by exporting more missiles. In other words, Tehran's allies may significantly benefit from the revival of the JCPOA.

Such a scenario seems to contrast with some European officials' claims over the ramifications of restoring the 2015 nuclear deal. For instance, Germany's new Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock, who visited Israel in February, has [said](#) "I am convinced that a full restoration of the JCPOA will secure the whole area, including Israel." In fact, as numerous IRGC-affiliated news websites have stated, the 1,450 km range of the new missile is intended to reach Israel. The distance between Iran and Israel is about 1,000 km.

Iranian officials believe the Islamic Republic is surrounded by various external threats, which forces them to maintain a strategy that could be called forward defense. Therefore, Tehran has heavily invested in its missiles program and is likely to expand it after a revival of the JCPOA. It remains to be seen how the West would react to Iran's activities in the future. However, there is little attention paid to the regional security ramifications of a revived JCPOA by both the U.S. and the EU. Rather the latter are driven by the alarmism that Iran's "nuclear escalation" has fueled, prompting them to solely focus on the nuclear issue to the detriment of Iran's regional policies and ballistic missile program, which may end up consequential.

Economy: Leaked audio file about IRGC corruption

The IRGC's top brass is believed to be implicated in heavy cases of corruption involving billions of dollars. This was brought to light after a leaked [50-minute audio](#) file, exclusively published by Prague-based Persian service of Radio Free Europe/Raio Liberty Radio Farda in the latter half of February. The audio consists of a secret conversation between the then IRGC Commander Mohammad-Ali Jafari and his Economic Affairs Deputy Sadegh Zolghadr in 2018 about corruption involving IRGC's Qods Force and Tehran municipality.

The corruption case dates back to the time when Mohammad-Bagher Ghalibaf, the current Parliament speaker and a former IRGC commander, served as Tehran mayor, with the audio file suggesting that he himself, the late IRGC-Qods Force Commander Qassem Soleimani, the then Deputy Coordinator of the IRGC Jamalodin Aberoumand, and the Chief of the IRGC's intelligence organization Hossein Ta'eb were directly involved in big corruption cases, which concerns the embezzlement of 80,000 billion rials (i.e. ca. 3\$ billion at the time) between the Tehran municipality and Yas Holding Company, an IRGC-controlled firm. [In the recording](#), Zolghadr says Supreme Leader Khamenei had ordered 90% of the money earned by Yas Holding to be used to finance the IRGC's expeditionary Qods Force and the remaining 10% to go to the IRGC for its general needs. However, despite the funds' stated benefactors, the embezzled money disappeared between the municipality and the IRGC company. Two years after its establishment, Yas Holding was dissolved (2018) after some of its officials were arrested and later sentenced to long jail terms and repayment of the vast sums embezzled.

IRGC-affiliated news agency Fars claimed it had verified the audio file, [saying](#) that although the Yas Holding case dates back to the early 2010s and offenders were prosecuted and convicted, it later became a pretext for some individuals to misuse it with the aim of destroying the reputation of officials and pillars of the Islamic Republic. It also claimed that subsequent scrutiny also revealed that many of the initial allegations made in this conversation (as per audio file) were inaccurate. Khamenei also reacted to the leaked file, [stating](#) that "leveling accusations against the Parliament, the Guardian Council, Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps, and the dear Martyr Lt. General Soleimani are examples of their mud-slinging."

Beyond the Headlines

In the 1990s, after the end of the war against Iraq, when Ali-Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani took over Iran's presidency, he started to involve the IRGC in Iran's economy. This process was intensified when Ahmadinejad assumed the presidency in 2005, and continued with former President Rouhani who allowed the expansion of the IRGC's footprint in the economy between 2013 and 2021. Also, this military-cum-economic giant has become a main conduit for the Islamic Republic to circumvent sanctions. In fact, the restrictions resulting from sanctions have served as justification for Iranian officials toward economically empowering the IRGC. Meanwhile, in the Islamic Republic, armed forces are not accountable to some organizations, such as the parliament. Such immunity has extended to the economy, where the IRGC pursues financial goals. All of this facilitates corruption, as the case of Yas Holding demonstrates. Also, any effort to shed light on the economic activities of the IRGC is branded by the regime as acting against the national security, thanks to the IRGC's prominent role in the security structure of the Islamic Republic.

In any case, it is widely known across Iran that the IRGC is heavily involved in economic corruption. This episode is thus only cementing this perception, which further tarnishes the image of the organization that likes to portray itself as purely driven by noble interests to protect the holy "Islamic Revolution" and is therefore not interested in filling its own pockets.

Economy: Oil exports have reached 1 million bpd

Amid the debate on the revival of the JCPOA, Iran is benefiting from an undermined “maximum pressure” by the Biden administration. In December 2021, Iranian oil exports have reached one million barrels per day for the first time in the last three years. “We wouldn’t expect to see 1 million bpd consistently until there is a change in the political landscape,” the CEO of Petro-Logistics cautioned, referring to a possible revival of the JCPOA and the concomitant lifting of sanctions on Iran’s oil exports. In early January, the CEO of the National Iranian Oil Company (NIOC) stated that during the Raisi administration, the export of crude oil and gas condensate had well increased. Mohsen Khojasteh-Mehr added that he cannot provide accurate numbers but explained that the situation has improved. He added that Iran plans to return oil production capacity to pre-sanctions levels by the end of March, which marks the beginning of the Iranian year.

Beyond the Headlines

Being able to export more oil during the last year has provided Iran with enough confidence to demand more concessions from the U.S. in the Vienna talks. In mid-January, President Raisi emphasized that “our oil sales have increased so much that we no longer have to worry, and the proceeds are returning to the country.” China has been the major buyer of Iranian oil, yet doing so with a considerable discount, which is – in tandem with oil sales via intermediaries and through black channels – probably why the NIOC’s CEO declined to give any concrete numbers.

However, the Islamic Republic is satisfied with the current agreement with Beijing. Tehran is keen to expand its relations with China, boasting that its “look to the East” strategy can thwart U.S. pressure. While between 2018 and 2020, Iranian officials had acknowledged that the Islamic Republic has not faced such a level of pressure – by way of Trump’s “maximum pressure” campaign – in its four-decade history, the story has significantly changed since January 2021. Since then, Tehran has advanced its missile and nuclear programs with more speed, its oil is again being exported to China, and has set preconditions for a successful outcome of the Vienna JCPOA talks (i.e. demanding guarantees on its longevity).

Socio-Economy: With the “Islamic Revolution” at 43, IRGC daily reviews revolution’s demand for social justice

February witnessed the 43rd anniversary of the 1979 revolution, which led to the creation of the Islamic Republic of Iran. In this context, the IRGC-affiliated daily *Javan* [wrote](#) a piece about social justice in the Islamic Republic, warning that this key revolutionary demand has not been achieved yet and that it would therefore pose a risk to the regime. *Javan* interviewed two “experts” to discuss why improving social justice has faced challenges under the Islamic Republic. On the one hand, Majid Abhari, a sociologist, claimed that the Iran–Iraq War and U.S. sanctions are the factors that have hampered the improvement of social justice in Iran. On the other hand, Bijan Abdi, who is referred to as an “economic expert,” says that “justice will not be achieved until the thinking of economic liberalism is reformed.” He thus put the blame on “pro-Western officials” of the Islamic Republic – a reference by Iran’s hardliners to the rivaling reformist or moderate camp – saying that all their efforts were dedicated to joining globalization led by Washington. Meanwhile, Iran’s judiciary chief Gholam-Hossein Mohseni-Ejei [warned](#) that “if people see that social justice is declining and deteriorating, our remarks will not have a real impact on people.”

Beyond the Headlines

The socio-economic gap has dramatically widened in Iran, with the middle class gradually hollowed-out, leaving Iran’s society increasingly concentrated around two social classes: the lower class and the upper class. The former constitutes the majority of Iranians (officially one-third live in poverty, while in reality a clear majority does), while the latter group are those with close relationships with the regime. In the last four decades, whenever the Iranian authorities acknowledged any shortcoming, they blamed the West or so-called Iranian pro-Western officials. The same has now been done regarding the issue of social justice, as the *Javan* report shows. Iran’s centers of power have routinely refused to accept responsibility for any of the nation’s ills.

Meanwhile, social justice is also heavily interwoven with the Islamic Republic’s political economy. According to the [newly released](#) Transparency International’s [Corruption Perceptions Index for 2021](#), Iran remains one of the most corrupt countries, even in the Middle East. Iran holds its 150th rank out of 180 countries in terms of the degree of corruption – and is on par with Guinea, Guatemala, and Tajikistan. In fact, the Islamic Republic’s ruling class that monopolizes both political and economic power is heavily corrupt. Therefore, even in the advent of a revitalized JCPOA and the lifting of most sanctions, deepened economic engagement with Iran and the inflow of much-needed

investment will be heavily hampered by corruption and Iran's FATF blacklisting, which are likely to remain alienating factors for business investments. What is rather clear, however, is that there is no will among Iranian authorities to put an end to the corruption many of them benefit from. Rather the fight against corruption, which has become a popular message by politicians of all stripes, has been part of inter-factional rivalries and therefore little substantial. Moreover, the [two nationwide protests in 2018 and 2019](#) were a sign that the Iranian people are heavily suffering from the lack of social justice. During the demonstrations, the lower classes had played a major role. As a result, the socio-economic rather than macro-economic effects of a revitalized JCPOA will be significant for the stability of the Islamic Republic. Currently, due to deepening socio-economic misery and an official inflation rate at 40%, Iran witnesses social protests almost on a daily basis – staged by functionaries, workers, teachers, nurses, bus drivers, judges and even prison guards.

Moreover, despite Javan's routine blaming of the "usual suspects," it is important to note that IRGC-affiliated entities, much better than the reformist camp, look at how the "social question" could threaten regime stability. During those two nationwide upheavals, it was also IRGC-related media that presented the soberest picture to explain the explosion of popular rage against the regime found across Iran's official media landscape.

Regional: President Raisi visits Doha

Just a few days before Russia's invasion of Ukraine, President Raisi [visited](#) Qatar with the aim to enhance his administration's relations with Iran's neighbors. The trip was organized also in view of the 6th summit of the Gas Exporting Countries Forum (GECF) that took place in Doha. While explaining that he is seeking change in regional relations [Raisi said](#), "We have today expanded our cooperation in the fields of economy, energy, infrastructure, culture, and food security." He added that "Fourteen agreements were signed, which should be pursued and implemented by my colleagues in the administration." Raisi also expressed Iran's goal in expanding "Iran's share of the region's economy and trade."

Meanwhile, the Islamic Republic has expressed its openness to engage in dialogue with GCC countries, particularly Saudi Arabia, while Qatar is trying to play the role of a mediator between the two sides. Commenting on Raisi's trip, Iran's former ambassador to Doha Abdollah Sohrabi [remarked](#) that "cultural and social proximity between Iran and Persian Gulf Arab states coupled with long-term ties have always been an opportunity to cement ties."

However, during his visit to Qatar, Raisi [tweeted](#) in Persian a statement lambasting Saudi Arabia as a supporter of terrorism and stressing Tehran's hugely controversial "axis of resistance" policies throughout West Asia: "Iran has proved its brotherhood to the nations of the region during difficult times and today is the winner of two battles against Takfiri terrorism and the fight against American maximum pressure. Developments in the region have clearly shown that only resistance can work."

Beyond the Headlines

Since Raisi took office in August 2021, the new administration has emphasized Iran's aim to expand its ties with its neighbors in order to promote economic growth and political stability across the Persian Gulf, instead of relying on the West and a revival of the 2015 nuclear deal. Among GCC countries, Tehran has made efforts to improve its ties with Doha (with whom it shares the world's largest gas field), while Qatar tries to keep its independence despite [the end](#) of the [Saudi- and UAE-imposed blockade against it](#). Sandwiched between rivaling Saudi and Iranian interests, Doha seeks to ensure stability and peace, thus leading it to offer mediation on this front and on U.S.–Iran relations.

Furthermore, by deepening its relations with Qatar, Iran hopes to prevent the emergence of a united GCC policy towards Tehran.

Meanwhile, a central paradox in the Islamic Republic's neighborhood policy remains to focus on improving ties with Iran's Arab neighbors, while also promoting the continuation of Tehran's resistance policy that is seen as a major security threat to the same countries. As long as the Islamic Republic insists on expanding its regional power under the banner of "resistance," this approach is likely to very much hamper, if not block, the normalization of the relations between Tehran and GCC countries.

Security: Resurfaced report about China sending 5,000 security forces to Iran hotly debated

While the details of the 25-year accord between Iran and China are still classified, and officials from both countries are unwilling to release the agreement, there have been myriad speculations circulated across Iranian media in regards to the deal's contents and ramifications. In mid-February, Iran's media resurfaced a September 2019 report from the UK-based *Petroleum Economist* (no more available online but taken up by non-Iranian media in the same month). The British outlet had reportedly cited an unnamed senior source closely connected to Iran's Ministry of Petroleum (MOP), saying Beijing would send 5,000 security forces to Iran to protect its multi-billion investments (allegedly amounting to \$280 billion) in Iran's oil, gas, and petrochemical sector), the transit of such Iranian exports to China (including through the Persian Gulf) as well as its citizens who will work in these projects.

Since 2019, numerous rumors have circulated across Iranian media and social media about the deal's provisions regarding Iranian offers and concessions in return for a Chinese investment of \$400 billion over the course of 25 years. An alleged plan to lease Iran's Gulf island of Kish to China has been circulating in Iranian media and social media since 2019.

The rumor has generated outrage among figures from the country's economic community at a meeting of private-sector business leaders at the Tehran Chamber of Commerce, Industries, Mines, and Agriculture. For instance, the head of the chamber's Energy and Environment Committee said: "Certain rumors cause concerns over the implementation of this deal. For instance, it's circulating that Chinese companies will not have to bid to get oil and gas projects, or that 5,000 Chinese security forces are going to come to Iran for the protection of Chinese staff, or that they will be granted the right to delay payments for two years." He added that while investment is needed, it would be important to know about the developmental consequences of China's presence in Iran's energy and infrastructure sectors: "Unfortunately, these issues have not emerged during Iranian officials' negotiations with the Chinese side." Moreover, the head of the chamber's Money and Investment Committee said that the secretive nature of the cooperation deal with China would raise concerns. She added that the Chamber had requested various Iranian authorities to provide information about the deal

but has so far not received any response. Meanwhile, *Eghtesad News*, a specialized economic website, took up this issue, urging officials to be accountable for these “insulting news” and asked “are 5,000 Chinese security forces really supposed to come to Iran?” It wrote that the constitution stipulates that any foreign agreement must be approved by the parliament, demanding the parliament to review the 25-year agreement between Iran and China, and determine its various dimensions.

In response, the Ministry of Petroleum released a statement refuting gossips about the presence of 5,000 Chinese security forces.

Beyond the Headlines

The 25-year deal between Tehran and Beijing has raised a lot of questions across Iranian society and the country’s business community. The agreement was signed in March 2021 but both countries have been refusing to report the details since then. Also, after a year, no contract has been signed under the agreement, even though Iranian officials claim the deal has helped Iran to receive Chinese COVID-19 vaccines and, more recently, revitalized Chinese oil imports from Iran. Yet, both aspects are probably not linked to the 25-year accord.

While there is no on -ground impact of the deal yet, many Iranians are worried that it poses a risk to the country’s independence and resources. One of the most important drivers for the deal is the perception of the Islamic Republic of China as a shield against pressure from the West, particularly the U.S. This has driven Iran to accept unbalanced arrangement with Beijing, which many Iranians are aware of and concerned about. For instance, Iranian officials would allow Chinese firms to gain lucrative projects exclusively in order to win the heart of the Communist Party and provide the Islamic Republic with political support in the international community. As the details of the 25-year agreement are not released, rumors are likely to be stoked further in the future, as the past performance of Iranian authorities pushes people to expect all eventualities, including the presence of Chinese security forces in Iran and a wholesale sell-out of Iranian resources for the purpose of regime security and stability. Under such circumstances, it remains to be seen how the two governments will officially react to this intense Iranian domestic criticism and be able to further their goals enshrined in the agreement.

International: The bumpy final phase of the JCPOA talks

Despite U.S. insistence that time is running out to revive the JCPOA, suggesting a late February deadline, it is still unclear how long this alleged final round of talks would effectively last. “This session is the critical one, we are genuinely in the very final stretch,” a senior U.S. administration official said. “Nothing with Iran is ever a straight line, but we are getting to a decisive moment,” a second one stated. Meanwhile, it has been [reported](#) that the Biden administration will have to change its approach after February so as to launch aggressive efforts to prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon.

However, in Iran, there is very little belief that the Biden administration can or will adopt an aggressive posture. Esmail Kosari, an IRGC general and MP, has [said](#) that the current Vienna talks are different from 2015, claiming that now Tehran has the upper hand and the U.S. ought to fall in line. He reiterated that the U.S. must lift sanctions and provide the Islamic Republic with a guarantee that it never withdraws from the JCPOA in the future. Meanwhile, President Raisi has once again stressed that his administration is not relying on the talks with the West. He [suggested](#) that “a look to the West has brought about an unbalance in the country” and said that Iran should rely on its national capacities and forging ties with its neighbors, concluding “We hope in God, and we never hope in Vienna and New York.”

On the U.S. part, the increasing chance of an agreement between the two sides has provoked criticism, with the chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee Bob Menendez raising concerns toward the revival of the deal by the Biden administration. On Republicans’ part, 33 senators [sent a letter](#) to Biden calling on his administration to put a renewed JCPOA to a vote in the U.S. Congress as a treaty. The Republican senators warned that any agreement not approved by Congress would “likely be torn up in the early days of the next presidential administration,” which, indeed, is Iran’s worst-case scenario.

While it has been speculated that Iran and the West are close to reach an agreement for restoring the 2015 nuclear deal, important issues remain unresolved. Meanwhile, in a revealing statement he made on 25 February, the head of Atomic Energy Organization of Iran (AEOI), Mohammad Eslami, [claimed](#) that “[uranium] enrichment [...] continues with a maximum ceiling of 60%, which led Westerners to rush to negotiations, and it will continue with the lifting of sanctions at both 20% and 5%.” (a) This contrasts with what has been reported as a possible Iranian concession toward reviving the JCPOA, as the latter stipulates Iranian uranium enrichment at 3.67%. Eslami’s remark raised doubts over prospects of a comprised deal to be reached. (b) His remarks have revealed that it was in fact Iran’s “nuclear escalation” that fueled Western alarmism, which led to calls

to seek a revival of the JCPOA as soon as possible.

Moreover, Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett [said](#) the result of the Vienna talks “is shorter and weaker than the previous one,” leading to speculation that this would prompt Israel to continue, if not intensify, its own measures of sabotaging Iran’s nuclear program even after a JCPOA revival.

On Iran’s part, authorities are still calling for a guarantee that a U.S. withdrawal from the deal will never occur in the future. In this vein, Iran’s Parliament [released a statement](#), asking President Raisi not agree on the revival of the deal without a guarantee from Washington. The statement calls upon the administration that the “America must not withdraw from the deal again,” adding that “America and other members of the deal must be committed not to activate the trigger mechanism,” a reference to JCPOA parties’ ability to reinstate sanctions in case of Iranian non-compliance to its obligations under the deal. Nevertheless, it seems Iranian top officials have realized that the Biden administration has no authority to offer Iran a guarantee, attempting to find another way.

Meanwhile, the [SNSC on February 26 held a meeting](#) on the ongoing eighth round of the Vienna talks, in which the prominent issue discussed was reportedly “the process of sanctions removal”, with no further details released. On February 22, Secretary-General Ali Shamkhani [tweeted](#) that “Peaceful capability of #Iran’s nuclear program must always remain like the sword of Damocles; i.e. above the heads of violators and a real guarantee for the fulfillment of their obligations. After US withdrawal from #JCPOA in 2018, it became better to use this inherent guarantee more effectively.” This statement indirectly confirms Tehran’s key strategy to leverage “nuclear escalation” to further its interests, and also its effort to have this option even after the deal’s revival, hence the calls to gain the right to enrich above 60% (i.e. a crucial step before weapons-grade levels) in case of a future U.S. withdrawal from the deal.

Beyond the Headlines

Despite recent optimism regarding the revival of the JCPOA, contradictory statements continue to complicate the puzzle of how the key antagonists can solve their contention in the envisaged compliance-versus-compliance scheme – and even within the arguably smaller framework exclusively focused on Iran’s nuclear program, and not on its regional policies and ballistic missiles. More importantly, the recent remarks of the head of the AEOI are of note and put into question both sides’ optimism about the expectation of the revival of the JCPOA in the near future. Iran’s decision to step up its demands can be traced to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which may have triggered the Iranian side to demand more concessions from the West. Meanwhile, Heshmatollah Falahat-Pishe, a former two-time Iranian MP and member of the Parliament’s National

Security and Foreign Policy Committee, [noted](#) that “with the start of the war in Ukraine, Russia will use all other leverage, including the nuclear talks in Vienna, in order to achieve a balance with the West.” He added “All of Ulyanov’s tweets that hint an agreement would soon be reached in Vienna were false”, in reference to the Russian chief negotiator in the talks.

In other words, Tehran expected that Russia would complicate the Vienna talks and influence its end result. Iran may welcome such a delay as it hopes to thereby improve its bargaining leverage toward the West. Such an approach would be based upon Iranian officials’ belief that the U.S. is under pressure at this moment, which provides a good opportunity for Tehran to step up. (For more on this, see the More Insights section below.)

Furthermore, Iranian media and pro-regime social-media users have started to refer to Ukraine giving up its huge nuclear arsenal in 1994, in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union, and Kyiv thus losing its deterrence. This may encourage Iranian authorities to contemplate about developing nuclear weapons even more strongly as the best deterrence tool. Although, the latter would require a strategic decision from Tehran’s top leadership, Iran’s new-found insistence on maintaining high enrichment could be read as having the option for “going nuclear” in the future.

The Biden administration has failed to put U.S. foreign policy onto a bipartisan footing (i.e. supported by both Democrats and Republicans), instead it has mirrored the Trump administration’s behavior under opposite signs. The current U.S. officials have frequently claimed that Trump’s “maximum pressure” has been a maximum failure. They also have been eager to rejoin the 2015 deal, which they perceive as a landmark legacy of the Obama–Biden era. In fact, such a posture has emboldened the Islamic Republic, which encourages Iranian power centers to impose more pressure on the West, by for example unveiling new missiles or pursuing Iran’s destabilizing activities in the Middle East.

While the Biden administration warns that in absence of an agreement it will change its behavior toward adopting an aggressive approach, there are serious questions whether it can do so and what its options may be. In fact, an aggressive alternative would mean that the U.S. would return to Trump’s “maximum pressure,” while the Biden administration has frequently undermined it by both words and deeds. Also, such a return would be a failure for Biden who had claimed that he can reach a longer and stronger agreement with Tehran. There appears Biden would not afford such political costs in order to resuscitate a maximum pressure policy. The other aggressive choice would be military action against Iranian nuclear facilities, which given more important U.S. pre-occupations, the continuing rejection from U.S. public opinion as well as the uncertainty of success in pushing back Iran’s nuclear advances is highly unlikely. At best, the U.S. may support more forceful Israeli actions of sabotage and perhaps minor kinetic action.

As a result, it seems Iranian officials are correct in their assessment that President Biden has no choice but to take a reactive approach to Tehran.

Therefore, for Tehran, the Vienna talks are not a mere process for restoring the JCPOA, they are an opportunity for the Islamic Republic to propagate the narrative that Iran finally defeated the U.S. Therefore, Tehran is unlikely to agree to the revival of the agreement unless Iranian officials gain important concessions from Washington to later show that the U.S. had conceded to Iran's requests. Also, it allows Iranian officials to empower their allies in the Middle East, proving to them that U.S. power is in decline and that the time has come for "revolutionary" movements to expand their influence across the region. It could also help the Islamic Republic to improve its standing in regional dialogues with the UAE and Saudi Arabia, while Iran's standing against Israel may also be emboldened. Even though the West sees the Vienna talks as a solution to Iran's nuclear proliferation challenge, the Islamic Republic views the negotiations as part of a greater game.

More Insights

Articles about the factors behind a soon-to-expect JCPOA revival, how Russia's invasion of Ukraine may impact it, Iranian reactions and concerns, and the nature of Tehran's relations with Moscow:

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TV Interviews

[Could the Conflict in Ukraine Help Iran Get a Better Nuclear Deal?](#), TRT World, »Strait Talk«, March 22.

[How close is the JCPOA to be revived?](#), TRT World, »NewsHour«, Feb. 17.

Audio Interview

[Foreign Policy Under the Ayatollahs \[1h05\] | Pt. 20., »The Contemporary History of Iran« series | Roqe Media, Feb. 25 {excerpt with Persian subtitles on Iran's "look East" with like-minded autocracies}](#).

Media Commentary

Yeghia Tashjian, [The Impact of the Crisis in Ukraine on the Regional Order in the Middle East](#), The Armenian Weekly, March 16.

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