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SUMMARY



As we approach the final weeks of the Rouhani administration, the first vice president revealed that they thought China, Russia and India would help Iran against Donald Trump's "maximum pressure" policy, but the Islamic Republic ended up without such support. Internationally, amid a stalemate in the Vienna talks toward reviving the Iran nuclear deal, President Rouhani made clear that Tehran's key centers of power did not allow him to complete the mission of the revival, hence this will be up to the succeeding Raisi administration. Domestically, water shortages brought about new protests in Iran where people in more than 10 cities in Khuzestan province took to the streets, while the strike of oil industries workers is still continuing, now in more than 100 companies – with both developments potentially having security implications as they are mostly taking place in Iran's oil-rich province Khuzestan. Moreover, a poll in Iran revealed that despite official propaganda more than one-fourth of Iranians don't believe they will ever get their coronavirus vaccine due to lacking supplies.

VICE-PRESIDENT JAHANGIRI ON THE FAILURE OF IRAN'S "LOOK TO EAST" IN THE TRUMP ERA

This week, Iran's first vice president Eshaq Jahangiri revealed important facts about the relationship between Iran and "Eastern" great-powers. He said: "We did not think that even India would not buy oil from Iran, and even Russia, and some neighbouring countries [Iraq] where we sacrificed our youth for the independence of their country did so, too [i.e. not help the Islamic Republic against U.S. sanctions], and we were alone in this economic war." Jahangiri stressed that China and Russia told Iran that due to their national interests they cannot do anything against the U.S. pressure on Iran. In September 2020, President Rouhani had stated that even those countries that are Iran's friends did not help, but he failed to mention the names of the countries at that time.

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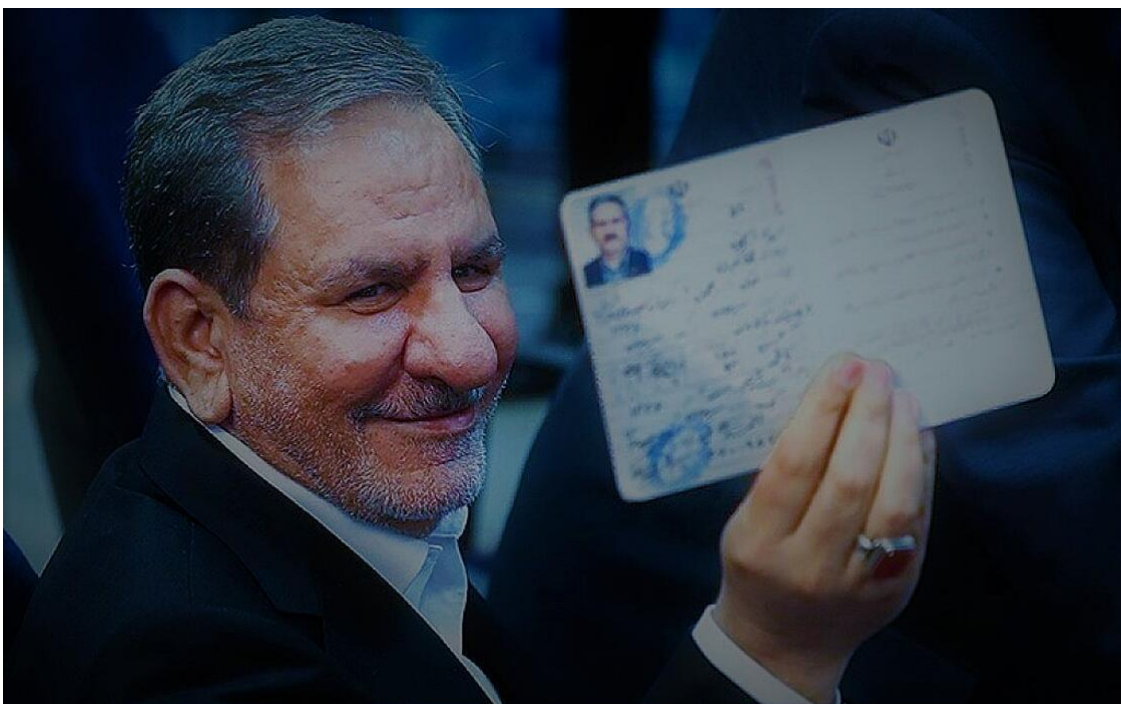
Over the last two decades, a "look to the East" geopolitical orientation has been a key priority in Iran's foreign policy, where the Islamic Republic has put an emphasis on boosting ties with China, Russia and even India, also as a way to guard itself against the immense pressure of U.S. extraterritorial sanctions, especially in times when Europe did de facto join the latter. The outcome of Iran's "look to the East" strategy has clearly fallen greatly behind Tehran's expectations, as these Eastern great-powers did not provide any benefits for Iran – neither during Obama's nor Trump's crippling sanctions regimes – and instead succumbed to U.S. sanctions and/or opportunistically benefited from Iran's weakness in such a context, politically and economically.

Despite such past experience that Iran's "look to the East" strategy has largely been a futile endeavour, Jahangiri's recent remarks about Tehran being surprised about the lack of support by those Eastern great-powers is a forceful reminder how the country's top officials still fail to understand the realities of the international system in which the U.S. still assumes the top position amid inaccurate claims of a fully-fledged multipolar order now in place. In other words, for Tehran to reap the full benefits of its "look to the East" outlook, it needs to markedly reduce tensions with the U.S. and concomitantly the latter's extraterritorial sanctions regime that is keeping Eastern great-powers to continue business as usual with Tehran.

Notwithstanding these realities, it is instructive to note Iran doesn't show much willingness to solve the remaining issues with the U.S., especially regarding its nuclear and missiles programmes as well as its support of militia groups in the

Middle East. Yet, Tehran still aspires to considerably expanding ties with the East. For instance, Iran and China signed a 25-year deal, referred to as a “strategic partnership”, earlier this year. Upon the visit of China’s Foreign Minister in Tehran for signing the agreement, Iran’s Foreign Minister Javad Zarif called China “[a friend for hard times](#)”. In his part, President Rouhani [said](#): “Tehran and Beijing have very good relations, and the common standpoints of the two countries in international affairs are evidence of the desirable level of the relationship.” However, only three weeks before his administration leaving office, Rouhani’s Vice-President Jahangiri has now de facto rejected such claims.

Notwithstanding, Kazem Jalali, Iran’s Ambassador to Russia, has recently [announced](#) that Tehran is preparing a 20-year accord with Russia in economic, political, military and security realms. He stressed that the agreement is based on Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei’s insistence. Arman Meli, an Iranian daily, in an article on Jahangiri’s remarks and the planned 20-year accord with Russia, it [states](#) that it has been “no surprise that Russia did not fulfil its commitment in the Trump era because it historically did the same” – a reference to the above-mentioned recent experiences with Russian behaviour toward Iran amid U.S. sanctions. The article then demanded that Iranian officials ought to publish details of any agreement with Russia. In fact, details of the 25-year deal with Russia have not been made public, despite leaks of some draft texts. It seems the Islamic Republic cannot concede that “the East” without “the West” is not able to satisfy Tehran’s interests. In this, although Jahangiri has confessed that none of the Eastern countries helped Iran under U.S. unilateral sanctions, the authorities still have a strong tendency to overlook the realities of the international system as well as past experiences and instead continue their impractical “look to the East” strategy.



JCPOA REVIVAL



The envisaged revival of the nuclear deal between Iran and global powers is still the most important international issue related to the Islamic Republic. This week, President Rouhani revealed that the centre of power in Iran – a reference to the Supreme Leader and potentially the IRGC – has not allowed the administration to restore the JCPOA. In comments shown on state TV, Rouhani [referred](#) to the December legislation of Iran's hardline-dominated Parliament that demanded from the administration to deepen Iran's "nuclear escalation" strategy, saying that it had "snatched the opportunity [to bring about a revived JCPOA] from the hands" of the government. "Four, five, six months of opportunities have been lost, which we sorely regret", he said, while adding that "we hope that the thirteenth administration [i.e. that of incoming President Raisi] can complete the work [of the JCPOA's revival]." According to media [reports](#), "Iran has almost tripled its stockpile of uranium enriched to 60% to 8.9 kilograms (19.6 pounds) from 2.4 kilograms verified by international inspectors in a June report", while Rouhani claimed that "We can also produce 90% uranium if needed" – a sign that that "nuclear escalation" is foremost an cross-factional élite consensus, while there are also domestic factional rivalries playing out here as well. Meanwhile, two unnamed Iranian officials told [Bloomberg](#) that Tehran is unwilling to restart Vienna talks until after its new president Ebrahim Raisi takes office in early August. On the other hand, U.S. State Department spokesman Ned Price stressed that [the White House will continue talks](#) with Iran and other world powers to rejoin the deal, although Iran's "nuclear escalation" policy will have "a bearing on our view of ultimately returning to the JCPOA." However, in a favourable signal to Tehran, "I think all the [alternatives are worse for us](#)", a senior U.S. official told Reuters on condition of anonymity.

BEYOND
the
HEADLINES

The recent remarks of President Rouhani made clear that domestic factional rivalry in the Islamic Republic has cast a shadow on restoring the JCPOA. In the last weeks, there was no movement from the Iranian side toward the revival of the deal under the Rouhani presidency. It seems that the Supreme Leader fears that the revival of the JCPOA may constitute a credit for Rouhani's political future. From mid-August, with the presidency of Raisi, a new era will emerge in Iran, where we may see a conversion of standpoints among all relevant centres of powers. Mojtab Zolnori, an Iranian MP who had set fire on a copy of JCPOA documents in the parliament in 2018 in opposition to Rouhani's policies in that regard, has recently said the Raisi administration will be committed to a revived deal and there was no intention to reject the JCPOA. His statements demonstrate that the nuclear deal has never been an accomplishment of the so-called moderate camp (as suggested in many parts of the West) and that instead was a grand policy based on the Islamic Republic's interests for survival. However, the most important obstacle in the future talks is that Iran still perceives that the Biden administration is eager to rejoin the deal. Hence, such an Iranian reading is fuel for the upcoming hardliner administration to intensify the current "nuclear escalation" strategy to increase Iran's leverage in order to obtain more concessions from Washington. U.S. remarks such those by the unnamed official quoted by Reuters that the U.S. has no option but to rejoin the deal are much desirable signals for Tehran that there is still more chance to compel the Biden administration to provide more benefits for Iran.

“The Raisi administration will be committed to a revived deal and there was no intention to reject the JCPOA” Mojtab Zolnori, an Iranian MP

WATER SHORTAGE IN KHUZESTAN AND PROTESTS



A few days after the power outage in some parts of Iran, water shortage is casting the next dark cloud over many Iranians' lives – and also constitute a security challenge for the Islamic Republic. People took the streets in several cities in oil-producing Khuzestan province, [shouting](#) “We want water”, “Water is my right” and “My life for Karun”. Karun is a major river in southwestern Iran and a symbol of life for the local people. According to local officials, based on a call on social media, demonstrators came out to the streets. According to media reports, in some places security forces resorted to firing toward demonstrators, using tear gas. Meanwhile, the state news agency IRNA quoted Omid Sabripour, a local official of the city of Shadegan in Khuzestan province, as [saying](#) “a number of Shadegan's people had gathered to protest water shortages due to the drought, during which opportunists and rioters shot dead one of the demonstrators.” He said the person had been killed by a stray bullet fired into the air. Gholamhossein Mohseni-Ejei, the newly appointed Chief Justice of Iran, [issued an order](#) to immediately follow up on solving the water problem in Khuzestan, and in this regard, a senior judicial and executive delegation left for this province to investigate the problem.

BEYOND
the
HEADLINES

This year, Iran has been facing an “unprecedented drought”, according to President Rouhani. In fact, compared to the previous year, precipitation has been 52% lower this year. However, this is not the first time that the people in Khuzestan encounter water scarcity. In June 2020, when the country had experienced a rainy year, Khuzestan and even some other provinces had the same problem as they have now. Then, President Rouhani ordered his Minister of Energy to take necessary actions as soon as possible to solve the problem of drinking water in Khuzestan. However, regardless of drought seasons, it should be mentioned that between 20% and 40% [depends on the condition of different regions] of water loss in Iran is due to the deterioration of the water supply network. There is no investment in such systems, which is creating problems in the provision of water. Over the last few years, the water crisis has severely affected Khuzestan and other provinces.

More importantly, the lack of water, like other shortages, can pose a security risk as the emergence of new protests are showing. In the last four years, the lower classes have been the major driving forces behind protests in Iran, as they suffer from mounting economic pressures and the insufficient provision of basic necessities. While ranchers and farmers lose their sources of income as a result of water shortage, there are other economic-security concerns in Khuzestan and several other provinces. Since 21 June, thousands of workers of more than 100 companies in the oil industries have gone on strike, demanding better working conditions, including higher wages. On 15 July, the contract workers of Jahanpars Mehran Company in Ilam province blocked the road to the oil company. They have recently written a letter to President-elect Raisi and asked him to solve their problems. In fact, Raisi will face tremendous challenges in nearly all policy areas. In this vein, Ebrahim Nekoo, a former Iranian MP, has said: “The first challenge that the next president will face is the expectations that have been formed in society. Mr. Raisi will face a serious challenge if he fails to send positive responses to society in the very early stages [of his administration taking over] that he is serious about solving their problems.” Therefore, the explosive nature of economic challenges with security dimensions is arguably the most important domestic issue for the Islamic Republic in the near future.

LOW PUBLIC TRUST IN VACCINATION PROGRAM

Amid the official propaganda for Iranian vaccines, the recent polls by ISPA, the best-known polling institute in Iran, shows that 26% of Iranians believe that it will never be their turn to get their coronavirus vaccine. Meanwhile, the daily Vatan-e Emrouz has reported that “The death toll from the coronavirus in the country is on the rise. According to health officials, the Delta variant, which is widespread in the country these days, has affected people of all ages, so that children’s hospitals in Tehran are

full of children infected with the virus.” Nevertheless, the authorities’ counter-factual claims and promises are continuing unabated.

On 17 July, President Rouhani [said](#) that “Ten million doses of the vaccine will be delivered and injected over the next one to two weeks, and by the end of this administration [i.e. early August], the promise of vaccinating all people 65 years and older and those with underlying diseases will be fulfilled.” Moreover, amid speculations that Barakat, an Iranian vaccine, has faced problems in the production line, Mohammad Mokhber, the head of the Execution of Imam Khomeini’s Order, whose organizations has developed the Barakat vaccine, has [announced](#) that “by the end of September, we will produce at least 50 million doses of Iran Barakat vaccines.”

The fact that a quarter of Iranians have no hope of getting vaccinated demonstrates that the gap between the official discourse and people’s perception could not be wider. In recent weeks, Saeed Namaki, the Health Minister of the Rouhani administration, had [said](#) that “not only will we not have a shortage of vaccines in the upcoming months, but that we will pave the way to export and donate our vaccines to people around the world. [...] And this is one of the pure honours for the Islamic Republic.” This week, he also [claimed](#) that “Most people are satisfied with the speed of the corona vaccination.” In Iran, about seven million doses have been injected while it is more than 62 million doses in Turkey, Iran’s neighbour. ISNA (Iranian Students News Agency) [writes](#) that despite the countless promises regarding vaccination, Iran still is in the early stage of the proclaimed vaccination schedules. Javan, a daily affiliated to the IRGC, stressed that “[None of the promises](#) have been fulfilled and this issue has caused that five months after the start of vaccination against the coronavirus in the country, only about 2% of our population is vaccinated”, adding that Iran is thus lagging far behind his regional neighbours when it comes to public vaccination!” As a result, with the introduction of the much more contagious Delta variant of COVID-19, there are very grim prospects that Iran would be able to exit the public health crisis anytime soon, which has also important economic costs.

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