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Mohsen-Kamran Vahedi Eyvazi*

Iran: The look East policy amid isolation and decay

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Abstract:

This piece has addressed the causes of the decline of the Islamic Republic of Iran, especially after the reimposition of the sanctions in 2018. This has brought other consequences, such as the increase in public dissatisfaction and protests, and on the other hand the efforts of the regime to preserve its structure and ideals.

The growing challenges that occur at the same time during the tensions with the West, push Iran towards the eastern powers. From this point of view, we can mention the great agreements between Iran and China, and Tehran's proximity to Moscow in the middle of the war in Ukraine. However, it does not seem that these measures can be a definitive solution to save Iran from isolation and serious multidimensional challenges.

Keywords:

Iran, Islamic Republic, sanctions, protests, Ukraine, Europe, Russia, China

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Introduction

The situation in the Islamic Republic of Iran does not even resemble what it was in previous years; it is increasingly facing internal and external challenges. International isolation and civil discontent with the regime of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei are at unprecedented levels. While international pressures keep and intensify, relatively moderate figures have dropped out of a "homogeneous" and "unanimous" State. Public scepticism about the oasis of "reformism" is more evident and the puzzle of the nuclear agreement also called the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (or JCPOA)¹ has remained unresolved. All the circumstances prove that the Islamic Republic faces an unknown horizon that persuades it to act with the few cards it currently possesses.

Unsurprisingly, nuclear talks with the United States under President Joe Biden and other powers in Europe have so far failed, which has meant maintaining the sanctions reimposed in 2018. The international pressures have increased after the sale of drones to Russia during its invasion of Ukraine and also for the violent repression against protesters in Iran. In parallel, relations between Iran and European states have also been significantly degraded in the past year. Considering the conditions that the Islamic Republic is facing, we see that it is accelerating the shift of the strategic balance to the East, especially towards China and Russia.

The current outlook of the politics of the Islamic Republic

Throughout the Leader and Dictator Ali Khamenei since 1990, the regime's top institutions² occasionally granted the green light to relatively more moderate figures (also known as "reformists") to expedite their dialogue with the West. This has been inconsistent and unsettled in the context of the Islamic Republic. Due to the rigidity of the Deep State's macropolitics, the State failed to demonstrate flexibility in the face of the complex geopolitical situation and the continuous tensions with the United States, which

¹ The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) was signed between Iran and the United States, France, the United Kingdom, Russia, China plus Germany and the EU (5+1+EU) in June 2015. The mentioned deal was seriously weakened after the withdrawal of the United States under former President Donald Trump in May 2018.

² This refers to a set of institutions and factors that make up the Deep State in Iran; such as Ali Khamenei's office, the Council of Guardians of the Constitution and the intelligence of the Islamic Revolution Guard. See: <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2019/9/5/there-is-no-hope-for-political-reform-led-by-iranian-moderates>

is why the Islamic Republic was shrunk again³.

Elections candidacy manipulation has a long history in the Islamic Republic, the most notorious being in 2009 when Mirhossein Mousavi was ousted in favour of the rise of Mahmud Ahmadinejad. Although the situation in Iran and the world is not the same as in 2009, the rise of Ebrahim Raisi to the head of the Executive Branch in 2021 is a sign of the further contraction of the system. The choice of the former prosecutor accused of the executions of political prisoners in the 1980s, apart from lacking the necessary skills even compared to previous presidents, had no meaning other than the good eyes of Khamenei, the Islamic Revolution Guard and the hardliners as a whole, to promote a subordinate who wouldn't cause a "headache" during the big challenges to come.

It should be noted that in the case of the "Islamic Republic" -and assuming the mentioned paradoxical term- and the thoughts of its leaders, we observe a mixture of policies with ideology, which makes it tough to provide a coherent analysis of it. In addition, the institutional parallelization (simultaneity) in formulating and implementing foreign policy creates ambiguities when analysing the behaviour of the Islamic Republic of Iran. As Hamidreza Azizi, an analyst in International Relations, points out, "*Since the establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1979, the administration and its Ministry of Foreign Affairs have never been as irrelevant in the process of formulating and implementing Iran's foreign policy as they are today. This is, in fact, the result of a trend that began about four years ago, in which the role of the administration in foreign policy has diminished in favour of parallel institutions*"⁴.

As these contradictions have become more apparent in recent years, debate arose in the Islamic Republic over the delimitation of diplomacy and field (military influence) in the Islamic Republic. The reformist faction used to emphasize adopting a balanced strategy with both eastern powers (especially China) and the West to allow Iran to involve in the international value chain. While the principalists (also called ultra-conservatives) blame the "permissive" and "Westernist" vision of the more moderate figures and emphasize the idea that "*the performance of diplomacy is largely focused on exercising the authority of*

³ FATHOLLAH-NEJAD. Ali, NAENI. Ali, [What explains the decline of Iran's moderates? It's not Trump], <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2020/06/15/what-explains-the-decline-of-irans-moderates-its-not-trump> , 15 June 2020

⁴ AZIZI. Hamidreza, Iran Looking East: A Shifting Balance of Power in Tehran's Foreign Policy, <https://www.ispionline.it/en/pubblicazione/iran-looking-east-shifting-balance-power-tehrans-foreign-policy-30863> , 15 Junio 2021

*the field force or military force... which has the overlap on diplomacy in foreign policy*⁵. From the point of view of the ultra-conservatives who traditionally have a predominant weight in the system, security and resilience to preserve "revolutionary values" should be the base of the political system, and other areas such as cooperation or the economy are also defined under the same concepts.

The use of de facto power tools, such as military influence and the use of proxy warfare, has played a fundamental role in shaping foreign-regional policy and its consequences. One of the causes of the geopolitical confrontations in the Middle East must be found in the sonorous hybrid war between Iran and Israel. The Jewish state in this sense has benefited from Islamic Republic policy; it has had the opportunity to successfully expand its influence in Western Asia, the Persian Gulf region and the Caucasian area, forming an alliance with a number of states to "stretch the boundaries" around Iran's geographic areas⁶. Israel also maintains a close strategic relationship with Russia, which tries to keep Iran under its influence radar and at the same time opposes that country's acquisition of nuclear weapons.

It is assumed that for the hard lines that hold the helm of the State, a retreat from its principles and from the "anti-imperialist struggle" (especially what they call the fight against the United States-Israel axis) would result in an ideological and systemic collapse⁷. This phenomenon prevents a tangible reform in the State. Despite being accompanied by some conjunctural relaxations, they have not helped to resolve sustainably the crises in relation to international society. Based on this challenge, Iran has been reinforcing its policy of targeting the East, which may also be largely affected by US sanctions. Faced with the need to implement security measures due to the great challenges to come, the institutions of the upper hand of the regime facilitated a government that has a greater affinity with the core of the system⁸.

⁵ [Why is the military field approach more important than diplomacy in Iran?], <http://irdiplomacy.ir/fa/news/2002432/است-از-دیپلماسی-ایران-است> , 11 May 2021

⁶ By signing the Abraham treaty, Israel normalised its ties with Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates in 2020. In addition, Israel has expanded its strategic relationship with the government of Baku, Azerbaijan which is currently in a tense situation with Tehran. See: <https://www.mei.edu/publications/azerbaijan-and-israels-encirclement-iran> , 5 October 2021

⁷ We also see it in issues like hejab protocols for women being imposed as a symbol of socio-political identity.

⁸ The presidential elections held in June 2021 were held with a historically low turnout of less than 50 per cent, including 13 per cent invalid or null votes. The reason was the lack of public confidence in the legitimacy of the elections and their role in fundamental changes.

The look East policy⁹

One of the great external challenges for the Islamic Republic has been finding important and reliable strategic allies. By considering this, on a theoretical level, Iran would achieve some level of geostrategic importance in the midst of crisis and isolation. The nuclear file and geopolitical disturbances have led Iran to seek possible political and economic allies among the Eastern powers.

Although the formulation of the "look to the East" doctrine goes back to the tensions with the West in the 2000s over controversial nuclear and geopolitical issues, it was implemented after the verbal support of Khamenei during the US "maximum pressure" policies since President Trump came to power in 2018.

Among the emerging eastern powers, specifically China and Russia, and occasionally India, have been presented as options for Iran as "allies" considering their positions in the international structure¹⁰. At the same time, strategic relations with China and India have not been spared from the "maximum pressure" effect. Since 2005, Iran has continued to move towards full membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), which is expected to finalise official membership in April 2023¹¹. However, under an economic blockade, Iran will not benefit from becoming an exclusive geo-economic and geo-strategic ally of Beijing. As Umud Shokri, a foreign policy consultant quotes, "*While representing a major symbolic step, finalizing Iranian membership in the Shanghai Pact is not a panacea for the country's current political, economic, and security challenges*"¹².

Beijing currently maintains important commercial interactions with Western powers and at the same time expands relations with prominent players in the region such as Saudi Arabia¹³, which is why it is simplistic to consider it as a guaranteed safeguard for the Islamic Republic. Despite the fact that China was the main country that has been buying crude from Iran in a non-transparent manner since 2019, part of this purchase is being made in exchange for the goods exported to Iran. It must be borne in mind that due to the

⁹ In the Spanish edition of the essay, I called it: *Política de la mirada hacia el Este*

¹⁰ [The look East policy and Iran], <https://csr.ir/fa/news/64> سیاست‌نگاه‌ی هم‌شرقی و ایران, 16 August 2016

¹¹ SHOKRI. Umud, Iran and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, <https://carnegiendowment.org/sada/88427> , 16 November 2022

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Saudi Arabia can 'bridge the gap' between the U.S. and China, finance minister says, <https://www.cnbc.com/2023/01/16/saudi-arabia-can-bridge-the-gap-between-the-us-and-china-finance-minister-says.html> , 16 January 2023

blockade imposed by the FATF¹⁴ - beyond the US sanctions - China is committed to complying with international standards.

With the failure of the nuclear negotiations, the Joe Biden administration is to resume the failed mission of former President Donald Trump to fully restrain the export of Iranian crude oil to China¹⁵. What is evident is that two years after the signing of the 25-year strategic plan between Iran and China, there are no optimistic prospects for its realization. The value of Chinese investment in Iran during 2022 is estimated to have fallen to US\$185 million, well below the US\$400 billion promised in the joint strategic plan. For this reason, it can be said that strategic relations with China will also depend on the lifting of sanctions. This obstruction is a broader escalation in its relationship with India, which sees geostrategic proximity with Iran as essential. Indian refineries have chosen to suspend the importation of petroleum products, and there are serious doubts about the continuation of Indian investment in the industrial zones and seaports of the country¹⁶ at the risk of facing secondary sanctions.

At the regional level, in the last year, Iran has lost some levels of interactions that traditionally allowed it to acquire foreign currency. Afghanistan after the Taliban Islamists came to power, and Iraq, are two examples of this regard. In the West Asia region, the waning of Iran's influence in Iraq is gradual and decisive. Baghdad wants to recover its economy, increasing the export of crude oil and the flow of foreign investment from Europe, China and the countries of the Persian Gulf region. With the Vienna talks failing, Washington is trying to pressure Iraq to cut ties with Iran and refrain from paying foreign exchange for Iranian electricity exports. At the same time, a number of European companies are increasing their investments in Iraq's energy complexes to reduce Iraq's dependence on imported Iranian gas and electricity^{17 18}.

¹⁴ International Financial Action Task Force (FATF) has included Iran on its financial transaction blacklist. See: <https://www.fatf-gafi.org/en/publications/High-risk-and-other-monitored-jurisdictions/Call-for-action-october-2022.html>

¹⁵ US to Boost Pressure on China to Stop Importing Iran Oil, Envoy Says, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2023-01-23/us-to-press-china-harder-to-stop-importing-iran-oil-envoy-says>, 23 Jan 2023

¹⁶ [Trip of the Iranian delegation to India to determine the operation of the investment agreement in Chabahar <https://www.tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1401/09/29/2824407> - سفر هیئت ایرانی به هند برای تعیین تکلیف قرارداد بندر چابهار سرمایه‌گذاری در چابهار], 22 December 2022

¹⁷ French President: Iraq should stop depending on Iran, <https://shafaq.com/en/Iraq-News/French-President-Iraq-should-stop-depending-on-Iran>, 23 December 2022

¹⁸ FERNÁNDEZ. Enrique, France and Iraq reach a global strategic corporate alliance <https://atalayar.com/en/content/france-and-iraq-reach-global-strategic-corporate-alliance>, 27 January 2023

Looking at the previous examples, it is clear that Iran's "look East" policy will not be able to succeed under international sanctions. The difficulty of finding a strategic ally in the midst of isolation has made the Islamic Republic come closer this time to Moscow, which today is also subject to international sanctions.

Relations between Tehran and Moscow are being tightened

Political and military ties with Russia have been strengthened in the face of the obstruction of the negotiations in Vienna and the Russian invasion of Ukraine starting in 2022. In particular, both are subject to international sanctions and try to help each other. With the selection of Ebrahim Raisi, the Islamic Republic's policies have become more pro-Russian for the protection and survival of the regime.

During the last rounds of the Vienna negotiations in 2022, Iran's diplomatic system has shown passivity and weaknesses in favour of Russian interests. Russia, despite being part of the negotiation between Iran and P4+1 and having officially declared the need to reach a deal, but Moscow would not benefit from the lifting of the economic and oil embargo on Iran. Caught under sanctions, the Islamic Republic would be turned into a Russian playing card against the West, as well as hindering its entry into Europe's energy market in the face of war in Ukraine and the global energy crisis. Furthermore, according to a Russian official, the isolation of Iran would be a prime opportunity to invest in that country's energy sectors¹⁹. Instead, the Islamic Republic would benefit from Russian protection in international organisations and from external threats, especially from the US-European coalition in geopolitical, nuclear and human rights issues.

In Iran, there is a common belief, even among former officials, that the country is stuck in a quagmire by adopting the wrong strategy of selling drones to Russia, serving Moscow's interests but not the Iranian people^{20 21}. Like many other policies of the Islamic Republic, there is a duality and parallelism in the foreign affairs system; Foreign Minister Hossein Amirabdollahian has claimed that the Islamic Republic opposes Russia's forced

¹⁹ [A Russian official welcomed Iran's nuclear sanctions; "This is a 40 billion dollar opportunity for Moscow"], <https://www.bbc.com/persian/iran-63353669> , 21 October 2022

²⁰ [Iran has entered the Ukraine quagmire], <http://irdiplomacy.ir/fa/news/2016973/>- اوکر این - شده است , 10 Jan 2023

²¹ [The Russians Got Trapped In The Ukraine Swamp And They Want To Trap Iran Too] <https://eslahatnews.com/> روسها در باتلاق اوکراین گیر افتادند - میخوانند - ایران را - هم بکشاند , 29 March 2022

annexation of Crimea, Luhansk and Donetsk, while arms cooperation with Russia sheds light on Tehran's genuine position²². *"While the Islamic Republic is careful not to explicitly condemn Russia's military intervention in Ukraine, its choices and actions have left little doubt as to its real support for Moscow"*²³.

Both Iran and Russia largely export mineral goods and materials, undermining any "trade alliance". Taking into account the isolation situation, one perspective is that Iran and Russia are learning how to dodge external pressures and economic sanctions against both countries²⁴, but in this case, there would be no symmetry in conditions and benefits. Russia benefits from involving the Islamic Republic in the Ukraine conflict and perpetuating the isolation of a weakened and Moscow-dependent Iran, but on the other hand, it has benefited from Iran's withdrawal from commodity markets, occupying the place of that country as an exporter of some of these raw materials to other markets²⁵.

The possibility of acquiring new military and technological goods is also the reason why Iran leans towards China and Russia since these are among the few countries in the world that, in this field, far from the globalization process, aim to achieve maximum self-sufficiency in the military industry²⁶. Some military experts assume that while the Islamic Republic often claims some military might, it faces serious weaknesses²⁷. Due to the exhaustion of the air fleet in Iran after passing decades, the authorities of the Islamic Republic have requested the acquisition of some Russian military equipment, including the Russian Sukhoi-35 combat aircraft²⁸.

Key points about the protests in Iran: causes and consequences

Iran faces acute economic and social hurdles, which implies the unleashing of waves of

²² [Amir Abdollahian: We do not recognise the annexation of Crimea, Luhansk and Donetsk to Russia.], <https://www.bbc.com/persian/articles/c88p9mg3p4ko> , 20 Jan 2023

²³ PAHLAVI. Pierre, The Origins And Foundations Of Iran's "Look East" Policy, <https://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/the-origins-and-foundations-of-irans-look-east-policy> , 04 October 2022

²⁴ MOTEVALLI. Golnar, TIRONE. Jonathan, Russia and Iran are building a trade route that defies sanctions, <https://www.bloomberg.com/graphics/2022-russia-iran-trade-corridor/#xj4y7vzkg>, 21 December 2022

²⁵ NAGRAJ. Aarti, Iran looks for options as the rial tanks and a foreign currency crunch bites, <https://www.thenationalnews.com/business/economy/2023/01/27/iran-looks-for-options-as-the-rial-tanks-and-a-foreign-currency-crunch-bites> , 27 Jan 2023

²⁶ MATTHEWS. Ron, The Political Economy of Defence, Cambridge University Press, 2019: page 13

²⁷ MOHAMADI. Hamed, [The Islamic Republic is immersed in military illusions and real crises], <https://www.dw.com/fa-ir/جمهوری-اسلامی-غرق-در-توهمات-نظامی-و-بحر-انهای-واقعی/a-64647196> , 08 Feb 2023

²⁸ [Iran confirms acquisition of 24 Sukhoi Su-35 jet fighters from Russia], <http://galaxiamilitar.es/iran-confirma-la-adquisicion-de-24-cazas-sukhoi-su-35-de-rusia> , 16 Jan 2023

protests in Iran. The recent protests that took place on the eve of tensions with the West could also affect the country's foreign relations.

In September 2022, the assassination of Mahsa Amini, a citizen of the Iranian Kurdistan province at the hands of the regime's "morality police", sparked strong protests in the country and the world. Although the spark of the social unrest initiated due to the systematic violation of the rights of citizens, especially women, however, the roots of this iceberg must be sought in a deep multidimensional political, social and economic crisis.

The indication of these revolts is that a large part of the population does not see an institutional solution to improve governance and living conditions. While urban riots were not enough to change the regime, a poll released in February 2023 estimates that 81% of Iranians would be in favour of fundamental changes²⁹. The reason for the public discontent derives from an accumulated and multidimensional crisis that has been affected by sanctions and isolation. Mohsen Renani, a university professor in Iran, has warned in a manuscript that the Islamic Republic has gone through three of the four stages of collapse; with falling efficiency, competence, and symbols being the first three stages, and as a result, it is at the last and fourth stage: the collapse of structures³⁰. While these challenges are perceptible to the eye, the State continues to adopt rigid social measures³¹ to control the young population and continue to preserve the ideology of the current political structure. The obsession with a social issue such as "hejab" and manipulating it as a political instrument (in addition to instrumentalizing it as a religious-cultural norm) demonstrates the fragility of this structure.

The indicators show that, with the current administration, the social, climatic-environmental, economic, energy³², water stress³³, among others, are heading towards a gradual decline. The fragility of the internal situation in Iran will have repercussions at

²⁹ Survey report "Attitude of Iranians towards national protests: https://gamaan.org/fa/2023/02/04/protests_survey_persian , 04 Feb 2023

³⁰ [Mohsen Renani: The Islamic Republic is in the fourth and final stage of decline]: <https://iranwire.com/fa/news-1/113938-محسن-رنانی-جمهوری-اسلامی-در-چهارمین-و-آخرین-مرحله-سقوط-است> , 18 Feb 2023

³¹ For example, we can mention the blocking and censorship of the Internet utilising the Chinese technology. According to World Bank data, the percentage of Internet users in Iran in 2021 was 78.6% of the population (ranked among the top 20 countries in the world), which use to frequently use anti-censorship tools to bypass censorship.

³² As an example, we can indicate the gas shortage during the winter of 2022-2023 due to the lack of investment. Iran is the second country with the largest proven gas reserves in the world. See: <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2023-01-19/iran-gas-crisis-adds-to-protests-in-a-heart-of-raisi-s-power-base>

³³ Nugent. Ciara, Iran's Water Crisis Will Make It Harder for the Regime to Regain Control, <https://time.com/6239669/iran-protests-water-crisis> , 08 Dic 2022

the international level; it is enough to consider the example that the dark environmental-climatic horizon will be a reason for the increase in migrations in the future³⁴.

Recent internal events may leave clues about external relations. First, it has made it clear that the ultraconservative, plenipotentiary, authoritarian core is incapable of reform and has no intention of backing down to avoid an ideological vacuum. This can transcend their positions and negotiations on different issues. Second, social instability can increase the possibility of geopolitical tensions. Thirdly, instead of providing effective and concrete solutions, the Islamic Republic resorts to greater securitization and attributes instability to external factors and causes, which has led to the arrest of several individuals in Iran accused of "espionage"³⁵. These circumstances raise tensions with Europe and the United States.

The scale of pressures on Iran; the role of Europe

During the tenure of former US President Donald Trump, the confrontation between Iran and the United States reached its highest level in the last four decades. The inclusion of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps on the State Department and OFAC terrorist list and the subsequent death of General Qasem Soleimani was a turning point in this matter. However, this turmoil on Iraqi soil did not have a significant impact on political relations with Europe for several reasons. First, transatlantic relations had been affected under former President Trump, which pushed the EU to take some initiatives of its own and deviate from the aggressive policies of former President Trump. Secondly, Iran (after an internal pact between the factions) maintained a proactive relationship with the E3 (the group of Germany, France and the United Kingdom) and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to continue limiting the degree of uranium enrichment. Thirdly, at that time the strengthening of relations with Russia during a geopolitical threat against Europe was not underway.

These three factors faded later, especially from 2022, which coincides with the mandate of the new American president Joe Biden, and in Iran Ebrahim Raisi under the leadership

³⁴ KEYNOUSH. Banafsheh, Iran's growing climate migration crisis, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/irans-growing-climate-migration-crisis>, 30 Jan 2023

³⁵ During the protests since September 2022, several European citizens or dual-nationals traveling through Iran were detained.

of Ali Khamenei. The prediction of a return to the JCPOA after Joe Biden's arrival in the White House did not materialise, largely because the Islamic Republic has been reluctant to make any further concessions in its regional policies. Some obstacles compared to 2015 were the designation of the Islamic Revolution Guard on the terrorist list and the demand for a more rigid verification of nuclear safeguards.³⁶, which leads the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to demand more transparency on possible facilities secret nuclear. Albeit Hasan Rouhani's relatively moderate cabinet once emphasized the most imminent solution to the nuclear issue amid global complications, internal disputes between state factions prevented the signing new accord in 2021 ^{37 38}.

Although the nuclear issue remained unresolved to be dealt with by the National Security Council and new advisers and negotiators, in practice a government with apparently unanimous faces chose to resist changes in the regime's general policies and fuel the expansion of tensions with the West.

In Iran, the year of 2022 was marked by the failure of nuclear negotiations (in which Russia played a role), military cooperation with Russia, and rebellions against the regime. EU sanctions packages against senior officials linked to drone development and human rights abuses³⁹ are an important sign of deteriorating relations. Likewise, in January 2023, with the motivation and request of the opposition in Europe, the European Parliament approved by majority vote the plan to declare as terrorist the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps⁴⁰, which would enter into force a once approved by the Council of Europe. A similar plan has been proposed within United Kingdom.

While there is often a consensus among members of the European Union and politicians to increase pressure on Iran together with the United States, on the other hand, at the moment, the goal is to change Tehran's behaviour for greater efficiency in the negotiations. The aforementioned proposal is not expected to be implemented at the

³⁶ SIDDIQUI. Sabena, Will Iran look east if nuclear deal talks fail?, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/05/will-iran-look-east-if-nuclear-deal-talks-fail> , 14 May 2022

³⁷ [Hasan Rouhani: reaching the JCPOA was possible one year before], <https://www.radiofarda.com/a/iran-s-former-president-rouhani-says-jcpoa-revival-possible-last-year/31840025.html> , 08 May 2022

³⁸What is preventing the revival of the Iran nuclear deal?, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/iran-nuclear-deal-preventing-revival>, 27 Jan 2023

³⁹ Iran: EU adopts further restrictive measures against human rights violations, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2023/01/23/iran-eu-adopts-further-restrictive-measures-against-human-rights-violations>, 23 Jan 2023

⁴⁰ Parliament calls for more sanctions against Iranian regime, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20230113IPR66652/parliament-calls-for-more-sanctions-against-iranian-regime>, 19 Jan 2023

European Council, but it can be used as leverage in future negotiations with Tehran. According to Josep Borrell, the Spanish diplomat and high representative of the EU for foreign affairs, "*a judicial sentence would be needed to implement this measure*"⁴¹. In addition, the European Union and the United States share this vision that dialogue is the best alternative to prevent the Islamic Republic of Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons⁴²⁴³. As the issues for a so-called negotiation increase and become more and more complex, it will be difficult to forecast the achievement of JCPOA 2.0 in 2023.

Conclusions

This opinion piece analysed the challenges that the Islamic Republic of Iran is facing, such as increasing international pressures and a gradual march towards multidimensional decline. These circumstances have pushed it towards the eastern powers, particularly China and Russia. In this direction, one can visualise the intensification of its relationship with Russia and take all measures with the idea of preventing the collapse of the regime. However, the double-edged sword may be counterproductive; the consensus against Iran is a repercussion of it.

At the moment there is no evidence that there will be a change in the macro policies of the Islamic Republic as long as its political structure is not reformed and remains as the current model. The harsh and increasing sanctions have also been a key factor in the production of the socioeconomic crisis and the cause of a greater delegitimization of the system and social dissatisfaction. Faced with these challenges, the dominant hard-liners have seen no other solution than to resort to repressive means to preserve the status quo.

Despite all the circumstances, the West does not appear to have considered the possibility of regime collapse or regime change in Iran imminent. In the near future, we will probably see the European Union coordinating with the United States to increase

⁴¹ [Borrell points out that a judicial sentence is needed to declare the Revolutionary Guard as terrorist], <https://atalayar.com/content/borrell-senala-que-hace-falta-una-sentencia-judicial-para-declarar-como-terrorista-la>, 23 Jan 2023

⁴² Foreign Affairs Council: Press remarks by High Representative Josep Borrell after the meeting, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/foreign-affairs-council-press-remarks-high-representative-josep-borrell-after-meeting-3_en, 12 Dic 2022

⁴³ HICKEY, Samuel, Can an interim deal break the Iran nuclear impasse?, <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/2023/02/07/can-an-interim-deal-break-the-iran-nuclear-impasse>, 07 Feb 2023

political pressure on Iran. One of the scenarios is an increase in tensions and geopolitical instability, in its worst sub-scenario a clash in which Israel and Iran will be on two sides of the conflict. Another scenario is that the coalition of the United States and the European Union maintains the dialogue window with the Islamic Republic, which, although it does not lead to favourable solutions, prevents Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons and keeps tensions under control.

*Mohsen-Kamran Vahedi
Eyvazi**

*Analyst on Iran affairs, its foreign policy
and international political economy*