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Iran's Domestic Woes in Light of U.S. Pressure

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Brief Analysis

Though the recent normalization deal between Israel and several Arab states certainly poses a new challenge to Iran, it is the unique combination of the past year's events that is pushing the Islamic Republic towards an existential crisis.

Even without the recent signing of a normalization deal between the UAE, Israel, and Bahrain, the dynamics of the contentious relationship between the United States and Iran are growing more severe, and Iran is facing significant challenges to its strategic success in the region. The country is still adjusting in the wake of the United States' assassination of Quds Force leader Qasem Soleimani early this year, which represents one of the biggest security challenges facing Iran in recent times. The scale of the theater of strategic operations in which Soleimani moved, the volume of military dossiers he oversaw, and the number of armed groups and militias he directed indicate his past importance to Iranian strategic efforts. Soleimani has therefore left Ismail Qaani (nicknamed General al-Shami), the new head of the Quds Force, with big shoes to fill.

Qaani has faced difficult security conditions in the recent past, and he needs to maintain Iran's strategic successes—especially in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and Lebanon—with the same capability that Soleimani possessed. This kind of success is becoming increasingly important to Qaani as Iran struggles internally with the coronavirus pandemic and economic and trade sanctions. In addition, the peace agreements between the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain with Israel on one hand and the peace talks between the Taliban and the Afghan government on the other have constituted a viable American strategy to surround Iran with a “peace belt” containing Iran within its borders. At least until the end of the Trump presidency, Qaani believes protecting the Iranian strategic project is supremely important in the face of these hostile developments.

The road ahead for Iranian foreign policy is fraught with difficulties. As Iran continues to pursue influence abroad, especially among Shia populations in Arab states, the United States has striven to dampen that influence and coerce Iran into changing its expansionist behavior. The United States has employed developments like normalization between Israel and Gulf Arab states to check Iranian access to its strategic interests in Yemen, the Persian Gulf, and the Mediterranean. Iran hopes to maintain access to the Shia communities in the Gulf that connect its various points of strategic interest around the region, but normalization treaties throw Iranian influence in the Gulf region into question. Iran likewise faces difficulties in Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq, where U.S. sanctions on Iranian allies and protests against Iranian proxies indicate Iran's slipping leverage.

Inside Iran in Crisis

These struggles abroad only serve to further highlight Iran's significant domestic challenges. The issues of succession, leadership, and the historical legitimacy of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) plague the Iranian political system and represent a source of enduring concern for Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. Iranian conservatives' success in dominating the Iranian Shura Council in the February 2020 elections and the military changes Khamenei has made in the IRGC have not achieved domestic stability, especially since the Iranian street has now begun to interact enthusiastically with any international effort to topple the ruling regime in Tehran.

As such, Iran looks ahead to its upcoming June 2021 presidential elections with great anticipation. It is likely that the nature of Iran's next president will depend greatly on the results of the U.S. presidential elections in a few weeks. Much of the discussion around the Iranian presidential candidates centers around three figures: Ali Bagheri Kani, Ali Shamkhani, and Parviz Fattah. Ali Bagheri Kani is a Khamenei associate and former diplomat. [Ali Shamkhani is the current secretary of the Supreme National Security Council and served as minister of defense under former Iranian President Mohammad Khatami. Shamkhani, who is originally from Ahwaz,](#) was active in anti-monarchy activity during 1979 Islamic Revolution. Parviz Fattah is an IRGC member and former head of the Mostazafan Foundation, one of Iran's parastate ideological charitable institutions known as *bonyads*. Despite talk of the possibility of Ibrahim Raisi running in the upcoming presidential elections, he may be aspiring to the position of Supreme Leader, thus leaving him uninterested in the presidency.

Parallel to the candidates of the conservative movement, the reformist movement is also pushing its candidates to run in the upcoming presidential elections. Though their chances of success are slim, they are counting on the electoral success of Joseph Biden in the United States. The most prominent reformist candidate is Muhammad Reza Aref, who previously withdrew from the eleventh presidential elections in favor of Hassan Rouhani and seems eager to try his luck in the coming elections. Aref [previously chaired the Policy Council in the reformist movement.](#)

Another notable reformist candidate is Ali Larijani, the former [speaker of the Shura Council](#) and a previous [chief negotiator](#) on issues pertinent to national security, such as the Iranian nuclear program. Larijani used to hold the position of the [Minister of Industry and Mines](#) in the Khatami government. Finally, there is Ishaq Jehangir, the [first vice president](#) in the Rouhani government.

Though conservative elements seem likely to win at present, it is still quite possible that the 2020 U.S. elections will directly affect Iranian presidential candidates. In the event that Donald Trump wins a second term, Iran will likely see four more years of escalation with the United States under potentially increased economic sanctions and greater political pressure. In the event that Joseph Biden wins the presidency, there may be new ground for dialogue between the two countries, an opportunity that seems possible given Biden's rhetoric during his presidential campaign.

The initiation of talks under a Biden presidency, however, will also depend on the nature of Biden's advisors and other U.S. government officials. In this context, [Iranian officials have repeatedly claimed](#) that the American elections will not alter U.S. behavior towards Iran in a significant way. Tensions are likely to persist as long as the

issue of U.S.-Iranian relations extends beyond their specific relationship to include matters of security and stability in the broader Middle East, matters in which the Gulf states and Israel share a great deal of concern.

Aside from the U.S. elections, the identity of Iran's future president may be all the more important given the uncertain fate of Iran's broader political structure. The position of *vali-e faqih* (guardian jurist) may face existential elimination once Khamenei no longer serves as Supreme Leader. If popular and regional pressures continue to escalate, Iran may lose its *vilayet-e faqih* (guardianship of the Islamic jurists), or leadership council, and the powers of the Supreme Leader may be transferred to a hardline, revolutionary president of the republic. Khamenei has been unable to fix the lack of worthy leadership that has afflicted Iran's religious political institution since the assassination of Soleimani. Soleimani was likely slated as either the IRGC commander or the president of the republic, as Khamenei wished, but his assassination scattered Khamenei's options, and Qaani remains unable to win Khamenei's absolute confidence.

To add further pressure, the Iranian street has grown active in oppositionist activity. The Iranian people currently suffer from extreme economic, social, and health challenges, products of the Iranian government's failure to combat the negative effects of the Coronavirus pandemic and U.S. sanctions. In a scene that's all too familiar in modern Iranian history, Iranians have taken to the streets to demand change. And the Iranian government has exposed its nervousness regarding these protests by executing Iranian wrestler Navid Afkari for his participation in the earlier 2018 protests and by forming neighborhood strike groups to stop the intense demonstrations.

What is the United States waiting for?

Given Iran's domestic and foreign predicaments, the moment seems ripe for a new U.S.-Iranian deal. A recent tweet posted by Ayatollah Khamenei sparked speculation in Iranian opposition media regarding the possibility of Tehran's return to a policy of "flexibility" towards Washington. The flexibility discussed by Khamenei reflects, in turn, the weakness that has afflicted the Iranian regime after Soleimani's death. Prior to Khamenei's tweet, Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammed Javad Zarif sent a letter to the Secretary-General of the United Nations, Antonio Guterres, declaring Iran's readiness to engage in "any level of talks in order to ensure that the terms of the nuclear agreement were fully implemented."

The United States is therefore waiting for Iran's request to come back to the negotiating table. On September 15—during two separate meetings with the UAE's Foreign Minister and the Israeli Prime Minister, and prior to the White House ceremony where the UAE and Bahrain signed the peace agreement with Israel—President Trump declared his willingness to make a deal with Iran if he won a second term. During an appearance alongside UAE Foreign Minister Abdullah bin Zayed, Trump said, "We'll see what happens with Iran, I'd say right after the election, within a period of a week, maybe a month...you'll have Iran coming back and saying let's get this whole thing worked out," adding that "Iran is suffering...I think they want to make a deal but they'd rather deal with Sleepy Joe Biden than me...because, you know, we're going to make a deal, and I'm going to make a very fair deal."

If the United States succeeds in steepening economic, political, and military pressure against Iran, the world may see a new deal, especially if the peace agreements with Israel result in expanded security partnerships between Israel and the Gulf states with Israeli forces stationed opposite Iranian coasts. Iran would then lose the geographic advantage it acquired in Syria and Lebanon, or even in the Bab al-Mandeb Strait. The United States could then devote itself to confronting the rise of China in Asia and Russia in the Middle East while operating in a framework that ensures a regional Middle Eastern environment capable of stability and development. The upcoming U.S. presidential elections will determine the nature of U.S. engagement with Iran to a large extent. Even so, while Iran awaits the results of this election with great anticipation, views in the Iranian street indicate that Iran's problems are primarily internal, and there is little that the U.S. elections may change for the Islamic Republic.

According to Ahmad Mousavi, a merchant in Tehran, "there is no difference in the Iranians' public opinion regarding the orientations of the Republicans and Democrats towards Iran, they both have a hostile approach to the administration of Tehran." He added that Iran's primary problem is inherently internal and that Washington's policy towards Iran will not change with the results of the elections. The U.S. sanctions and policies have significantly impacted the economic situation in Iran. Therefore, the Iranian street believes that Tehran should take more effective steps to solve domestic economic and social problems, rather than seeking chaos and lost adventures in conflict with the United States. ❖



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