

IRAN

1400 BRIEF

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BEYOND THE HEADLINES

ایران



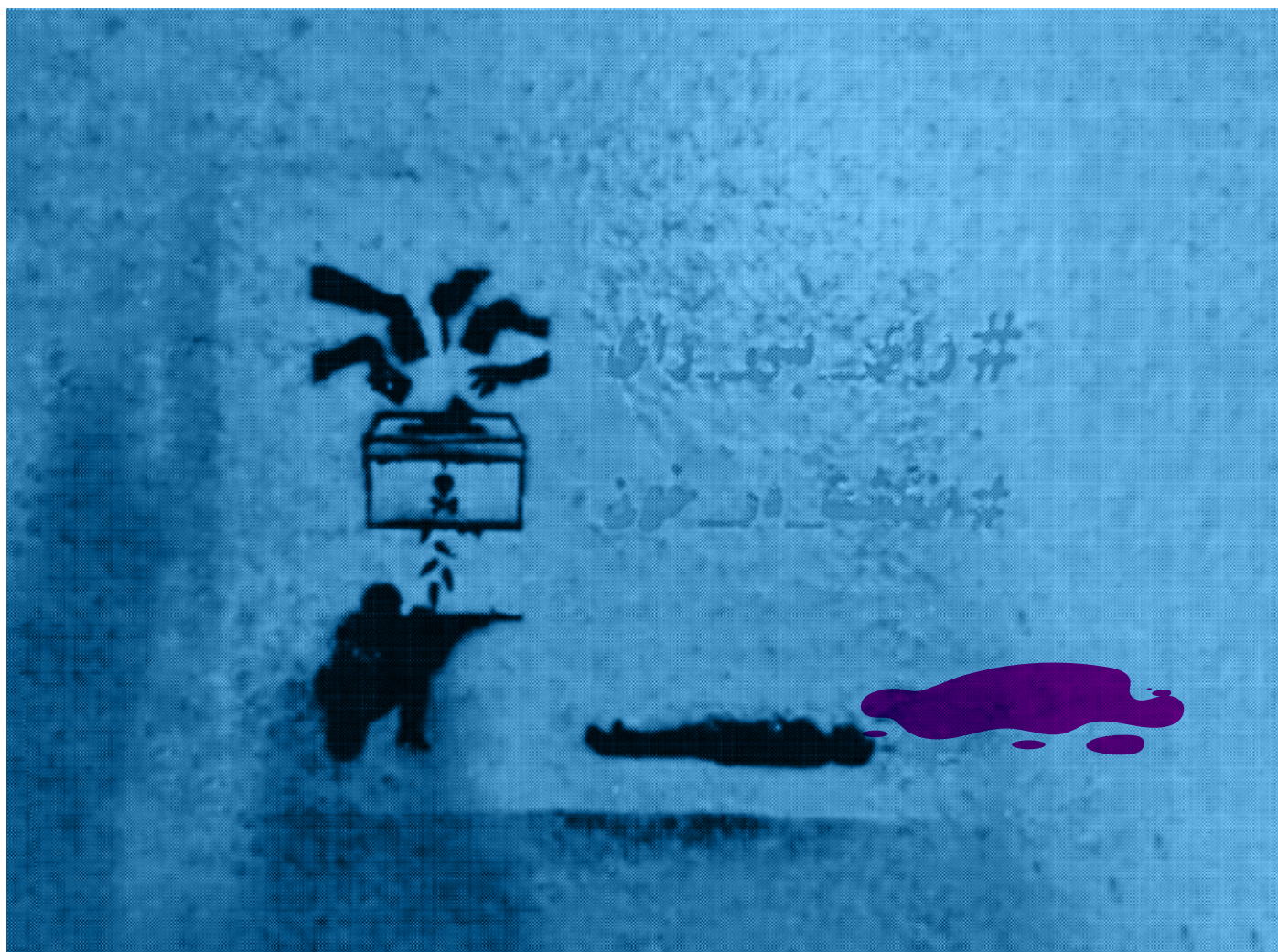
FRIEDRICH NAUMANN
STIFTUNG Für die Freiheit.
Middle East and North Africa

14/06 – 20/06

SUMMARY

Last week, Iran's presidential election was held and, as widely expected, Ebrahim Raisi clearly won with about 18 million votes. More importantly, for the first time after the 1979 revolution, voter turnout reached below 50%. Thus, a social media campaign toward boycotting the election was successful. The reformist/moderate camp was the big loser of the election as its candidate obtained merely about 2.5 million votes, while the spoiled votes counted more than 3.7 million. The result of the election has brought about a debate in the U.S. of whether Washington should hurry to rejoin the nuclear deal before mid-August when

President Rouhani will leave power. It also raises a question in how far the U.S. returning to the JCPOA will empower hardliners who can invest the deal's economic benefits into their own agenda, including expansive Middle East policies and Iran's missiles program. Moreover, two Iranian navy ships believed to be heading to Venezuela carrying weapons for Caracas, changed their course to the Mediterranean Sea. U.S. officials claimed that it has been achieved due to diplomatic campaign of the West, while it may also be because of Tehran's unwillingness to provoke Washington at a time when it needs vital relief from U.S. sanctions.



PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

48.8%

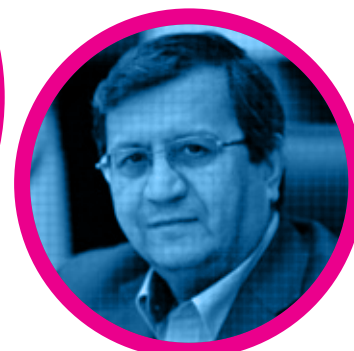
PARTICIPATION RATE

59,310,307

Eligible Voters

28,933,004

Actively Voted



Last week, the victory of Ebrahim Raisi concluded Iran's presidential election that experienced the lowest voter turnout since the establishment of the Islamic Republic over four decades ago. ON 19 June, the day after the election, Interior Minister Abdolreza Rahmani-Fazli **announced**: "Based on the aggregation of the results of the presidential election ballot boxes, out of a total of 59,310,307 eligible voters, 28,933,004 votes were obtained", i.e. 48.8% of eligible voters participated in the election. He stated that Ebrahim Raisi was elected with 17,926,345 votes, Mohsen Rezaei received 3,412,712 votes, Abdolnaser Hemmati 2,427,201 votes, and Amir-Hossein Ghazizadeh-Hashemi 999,718 votes. The Interior Minister also said that 3,726,870 had cast a spilt (or void) vote.

As indicated previously, Raisi, the current chief justice of Iran, had the full support of the Islamic Republic's centers of power and religious strata of society. After his victory, Raisi **released** a statement in which he promised to create "an active, revolutionary, and anti-corruption administration." Despite the unprecedented low voter turnout, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei **thanked** the Iranian people for their participation in the election, claiming that the efforts had failed to dissuade the Iranian people to cast a vote.

EBRAHIM RAISI

17,926,345 Votes

MOHSEN REZAEI

3,412,712 Votes

ABDOLNASER HEMMATI

2,427,201 Votes

AMIR-HOSSEIN GHAZIZADEH-HASHEMI

999,718 Votes

VOID

3,726,870 Votes

BEYOND
the
HEADLINES

It had been expected that most Iranians would refuse to vote in the election, as in the last quarter of a century they had experienced reformist (Khatami 1997–2005), hardline (Ahmadinejad 2005–2013), and moderate (Rouhani 2013–2021) administrations but none of them have been successful to keep their promises. Such a situation brought about a paradigm shift in the minds of many Iranians, if not most, that the current system does not work in their favour regardless of who is the president. In fact, this presidential election was repeating the fiasco for the regime of the last parliamentary election in February 2020 with also a historically low voter turnout (around 40%). Therefore, it is now established that the Iranian people do not see the ballot box as a means to push for change or reform.

In retrospect, the Islamic Republic encountered a low voter turnout in 1993 when Ali-Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani was elected in an election with a 50% turnout. However, the emergence of the reformist camp in 1997 has served as an instrument to encourage people to vote. Accordingly, voter turnout in the 1997, 2001, 2005, 2009, 2013, and 2017 presidential elections was 80, 67, 62, 85, 72, and 73%, respectively. In all the mentioned years, officials created a polarized space to prepare the ground for Iranians to choose a “lesser” (i.e. a reformist or moderate) among two “evils”. However, the failure of the Rouhani administration to keep its economic, political, and social promises made clear the Iranian people lose any remaining trust toward the above. This collapsing confidence was reflected in the 2017/2018 nationwide protests when people began chanting “Reformist, hardliner, the game is now over.”

The voter turnout is interwoven with the legitimacy of the Islamic Republic, as its officials have frequently emphasized it. Only two days before the June 18 election, the Supreme Leader [gave a speech](#) in which he stressed that non-participation of people in the election means that they would distance themselves from the Islamic Republic. Instead, he urged Iranians to vote to buy reputation for the system. However, this request was refused by the majority of people on election day. Although the turnout was put at 48% officially, many Iranians doubt that figure given the Islamic Republic’s track record of manipulating or engineering such figures. Rather, it is speculated that the real turnout has been around 30%, also given the video footage about largely empty voting stations circulated on social media.

Moreover, the most important loser of the election was the reformist/moderate camp. Their candidate Abdolnaser Hemmati received about 2.5 million votes, which is even less than the spoiled votes (3.7 million). Although this camp claimed that it had lost because its prominent candidates were disqualified by the Guardian Council, it should not be forgotten that when in 2013, Hashemi-Rafsanjani, the best-known candidate of the moderates or reformists, was disqualified, they were successful to bring people to vote for the then largely unknown Hassan Rouhani. Therefore, the reformist/moderates camp did not lose to the Guardian Council’s decision in favor of hardliners, it rather did so because it had already lost its reputation and credibility among many Iranians. Echoing this, Shargh, the best-known reformist daily, [has written](#) that “The Reform camp has neglected its social capital all these years and its relationship with its audience has been barraged. This meant that some reformists thought that their advocates are soldiers who will accept all orders whenever the godfathers [leaders of reform] wished, they would vote for reformism without any reason, and it was forgotten that they were the people; The same people who once voted for Khatami because of the social discourse of reform.”

Another aspect of the June 18 election is the unity of the Iranian people who became successful to show civil disobedience. The [election boycott](#) in a society where traditional culture is still an important factor and the state commands tremendous capability to propagate its narrative due to its monopolization of media, is a real accomplishment. In this vein, the social networks have played a significant role in connecting the Iranian people to achieve a political goal. Twitter and Telegram were especially key, and in the last weeks Iranians campaigned to convince each other from abstaining to vote. The election boycott was also encouraged by opposition groups outside of Iran who have thus raised their reputation among many inside Iran.

Last but not least, Raisi’s victory may turn out consequential for the future for state-society relations. In the last eight years, whenever the Iranian people had complained about their economic problems, the hardline-controlled centers of power responded that their choice in the election [i.e. Hassan Rouhani] has been a wrong one and thus people themselves were to blame. For instance, General Jafari, former commander-in-chief of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) from 2007 to 2019, has recently [said](#) that “People are frustrated, which is partly their fault because they did not vote for the correct person in the last eight years.” As Raisi has a close relationship with the Supreme Leader and the IRGC, if his administration fails to fulfill the demands of the people, the powers that be will not be able to justify their failure, blaming it onto Iranians’ “wrong choice.”



“However, the failure of the Rouhani administration to keep its economic, political, and social promises made clear the Iranian people lose any remaining trust toward the above..”

JCPOA TALKS



“With the victory of Raisi in Iran’s election, the question has resurfaced over the modalities of Iran and the U.S. reaching an agreement to revive the JCPOA.”

While Iran’s presidential election have cast a shadow on the Vienna talks on reviving the nuclear deal, with the result of the election it seems the two sides can reach a common point in the upcoming weeks. On June 20, upon the end of the sixth round of negotiations in Vienna, the Iranian top negotiator Abbas Araghchi [said](#) that “We are now in a situation that we think almost all the agreement documents are ready.” “Of the main issues that remained disputed, some have been resolved and some remain, but it has taken on a very precise form and it is quite clear what the dimensions of these disputes are,” he added. Meanwhile, the U.S. made clear that regardless of the result of Iran’s election, they will be [committed](#) to reaching an agreement with Iran. On the other hand, “[There will be no choice](#) [now] but to go back and prepare attack plans for Iran’s nuclear program. This will require budgets and the reallocation of resources,” an unnamed senior Israeli source was quoted by Israeli TV.

BEYOND the HEADLINES

With the victory of Raisi in Iran’s election, the question has resurfaced over the modalities of Iran and the U.S. reaching an agreement to revive the JCPOA. In one of the televised debates between presidential contenders, Raisi had said he would back to the JCPOA if it was “in the people’s interest.” This surprised those who had forgotten that in the previous presidential election in 2017 when he had lost to Hassan Rouhani, Raisi [said](#) he regarded the conclusion of the JCPOA as a “national decision.” Meanwhile, it seems Washington is eager to rejoin the deal before mid-August when President Rouhani will leave power. A [U.S. official reportedly](#) said that it would be “concerning” if talks dragged on into early August when Iran’s presidential transition is due to take place. “If we don’t have a deal before a new government is formed, I think that would raise serious questions about how achievable it’s going to be,” the official said. Furthermore, the June 20 New York Times front-page article tellingly entitled “[Iran Election Could Speed Nuclear Deal](#)” states that that “The next six weeks before a new government takes office in Tehran may be a unique window for clinching an agreement that Iran’s leadership has been delaying.” Yet, rushing to merely receive the Obama-era

JCPOA perhaps with some extension of the sunset clauses regarding Iranian nuclear activities is almost certainly to trigger opposition from U.S. Republicans and Israel. Mark Dubowitz, chief executive of the Foundation for Defense of Democracies – a think-tank close to the latter – [tweeted](#) that “What’s remarkable is @USEnvoyIran @Rob_Malley is giving up on everything and he still can’t get a deal. And this is the team that will negotiate ‘longer and stronger’ ???” In fact, the Iranians not only disagree with extending the scope of an agreement with the U.S. to non-nuclear issues, but they are also demanding a written assurance from the U.S. that no next U.S. administration will scrap it and reimpose sanctions (as Trump did), which was commented by a senior U.S. official as “a reasonable-sounding demand” but one “that no real democracy can make.” Most importantly, reviving the JCPOA before the start of the new administration in Iran raises the question that after the U.S. lifts sanctions against Tehran, what leverage will be left for the Biden administration to enter into talks with Tehran over the latter’s regional policies and missile programme – two areas where Iran would almost surely invest after a revival of the JCPOA.

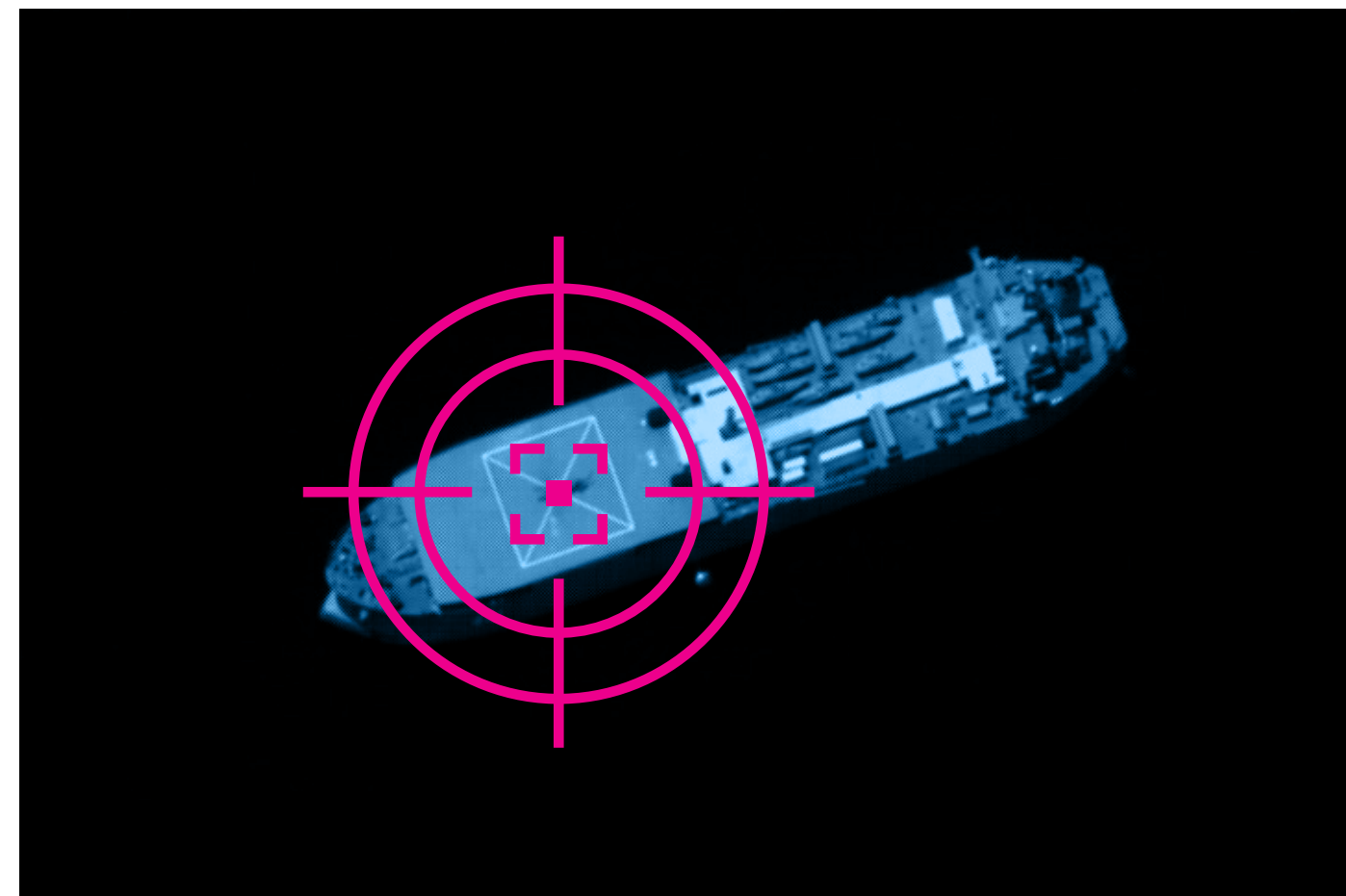
IRANIAN NAVY SHIPS, VENEZUELA. AND THE U.S.



An Atlantic voyage by two Iranian navy ships has become another bone of contention between Iran and the U.S. [As reported](#), the ships were believed to be originally heading toward Venezuela, but changed course early this week and are now steaming to the west coast of Africa. U.S. officials believe the course change indicates that a diplomatic campaign to urge governments in the Western Hemisphere to turn away the Iranian ships was successful. Before that, Pentagon spokesperson John Kirby [noted](#) that Venezuela purchased weapons from Iran over one year ago and warned that a new delivery “would be a provocative act and a threat to our partners in this hemisphere.” He warned that the U.S. reserves the right “to take appropriate measures — in concert with our partners — to deter the delivery or transit of such weapons.” After the Iranian ships changed course, U.S. defense sources [said](#) they suspected a clandestine arms transfer had been planned, with the course changed several times already. Now, it’s speculated that the Iranian ships are heading for the Mediterranean, to sail off Syria, or north toward Russia.

Venezuela has always been a bargaining leverage for Tehran against Washington. Also, the Islamic Republic aims to take advantage of economic relations with Caracas. In the autumn and winter of 2020, when Venezuela faced a fuel crisis, Iranian ships came to their aid, and Tehran exported gasoline amid sanctions. Yahya Rahim-Safavi, a top IRGC officer who is Khamenei’s advisor in military affairs, told [Mehr News Agency](#) on 27 September 2020: “We gave gasoline to Venezuela and received gold bullion and we brought the gold with airplanes to Iran to prevent any incident during transit.” This time around, it seems Iran was trying to export weapons to Venezuela, but as Tehran needs to revive the JCPOA to rescue its economy, it is possible that therefore Tehran conceded, changing the course of its navy ships. The Venezuelan “socialist” government began close relations with Iran in the 2000s during the Ahmadinejad-Chávez era when oil prices were skyrocketing, and this relationship then deepened during the Rouhani-Maduro presidencies.

BEYOND the HEADLINES





AUTHOR

Dr. Ali Fathollah-Nejad (Ph.D. SOAS) is a German-Iranian political scientist with a focus on Iran, the Middle East, the post-unipolar world order, and right-wing populism in Europe. He is the author of the much-acclaimed *Iran in an Emerging New World Order: From Ahmadinejad to Rouhani* (Palgrave Macmillan's Studies in Iranian Politics, May 2021) and of the *Iran 1400 Brief: Beyond the Headlines* weekly newsletter (Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom's Middle East and North Africa program). Based in Berlin, he is a Non-Resident Senior Research Fellow at the Afro-Middle East Centre (AMEC), South Africa's think-tank specialized on the Middle East, as well as affiliated researcher with *Centre d'Études de la Coopération Internationale et du Développement (CECID)* at *Université libre de Bruxelles (ULB)* as well as *Freie Universität (FU) Berlin's Center for Middle Eastern and North African Politics*. In 2020, he published two monographs: *The*

Islamic Republic of Iran Four Decades On: The 2017/18 Protests Amid a Triple Crisis (Brookings Analysis Paper) and *The Politics of Culture in Times of Rapprochement: European Cultural and Academic Exchange with Iran (2015–16)* (Wissenschaftsverlag WeltTrends).

Ali holds a Ph.D. in International Relations from the Department of Development Studies at SOAS (School of Oriental and African Studies) University of London and was a *post-doctoral Associate* with the Harvard Kennedy School's Iran Project. Also, he had been the in-house Iran expert at the Brookings Institution's Middle East center in Doha (BDC, 2017–20) and the German Council on Foreign Relations (DGAP, 2015–18).

He has taught globalization and development in the Middle East, contemporary Iran, the Arab Revolts and great-power politics at the University of Tübingen (as

Senior Lecturer in Middle East and Comparative Politics), in the Ph.D. program of Qatar University's Gulf Studies Center, at FU Berlin's Center for Middle Eastern and North African Politics, the University of Westminster, SOAS etc. Due to COVID-19, his Visiting Professorship at the Centre for International Studies of the University of Economics in Prague is postponed.

His about 200 analytical pieces in English, German, and French have been translated into a dozen languages. A frequent speaker at academic conferences and political forums, he regularly contributes to leading international media outlets in English, German, and French. Ali is fluent in German, French, English, and Persian, and reads Dutch.

<https://www.fathollah-nejad.eu/>





اتحاد جماهیر شوروی

U. S. S. R.

TURKEY

ترکیه

CASPIAN SEA

دریای مازندران

عراق

TEHRAN

ISFAHAN

AHWAZ

SHIRAZ

KUWAIT

عربستان سعودی
SAUDI ARABIA

نمایش علامات

LEGEND

- 1. SOIL WITH NO OR SLIGHT LIMITATIONS
1. No important problem except locally
- 2. SOIL WITH SLIGHT TO MODERATE LIMITATIONS
2. Limitations due to moderate deficit of water and undulating relief
- 3. SOILS WITH MODERATE TO SEVERE LIMITATIONS
3. Limitations due to moderate to strong deficit of water or shallow depth
- 4. SOILS WITH SEVERE TO VERY SEVERE LIMITATIONS
4. Limitations due to dissected relief, shallow depth and severe deficit of water
- 5. SOILS WITH ALMOST NO POTENTIALITY
5. Sand dunes
- 5. Solonchaks, salt marshes, saliferous and gypsiferous marls



Lake

SCALE 1: 2,500,000

freiheit.org/mena

PREPARED BY M. L. DEWAN AND J. FAMOURI
THE WORLD SOIL RESOURCES OFFICE
LAND AND WATER DEVELOPMENT DIVISION - FAO