

# IRAN

## 1400 BRIEF

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BEYOND THE HEADLINES

ایران



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## SUMMARY



This week, protests over water shortage continued in Iran's oil-rich Khuzestan, with Amnesty International reporting that at least eight young people were killed, probably at the hands of security forces. The Iranian authorities promised to solve the problem in the upcoming days, while this ecological crisis has been at least 20 years in the making. Internationally, domestic disputes between the Rouhani administration and key centres of power in the Islamic republic have intensified regarding the revival of the nuclear deal, while the U.S. still is waiting for the Islamic Republic's decision to continue the Vienna talks. Moreover, Iran opened its first oil terminal in Jask on the Gulf of Oman to bypass the Strait of Hormuz to export its oil, amid doubts over its operationality. Widely criticized among Iranians, famous Iranian director Asghar Farhadi who won The Grand Prix of the 2021 Cannes Film Festival refrained from using this prime international podium to voice support for protesters in Khuzestan.

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## **KHUZESTAN PROTESTS CONTINUE, WITH SOLIDARITY RALLIES ELSEWHERE**

Water scarcity is continuing to plague the oil-rich Khuzestan province in Iran's south-west. Protests are also continuing as a sign of defiance and mistrust over officials' claim to soon provide a solution to the problem. In solidarity with the Khuzestan protests, smaller protests took place in other parts of the country. Social-media footage has shown scenes in several cities, including in Isfahan, Tabriz, and in the Tehran metro where people (many of them young women) chanting "Down with the Islamic Republic" and down with the institution of Supreme Leader.

According to [Amnesty International \(AI\)](#), at least eight people have been killed during the protests, all of them in their 20s and 30s. Several others have been hospitalized and suffer from a critical condition as a result of gunshot wounds. Condemning the state's lethal repression, Diana Eltahawy, AI's Deputy Director for the Middle East and North Africa, stated: "Using live ammunition against unarmed protesters posing

no imminent threat to life is a horrifying violation of the authorities' obligation to protect human life."

Initially, protests were kicked off by a water shortage crisis affecting farmlands and inhabitants, with slogans chanted such as "We want water" or "I am thirsty", yet with protests continued amid a crackdown, chants escalated into anti-regime ones, with slogans such "Death to the Islamic Republic" and "Death to the dictator". Social-media hashtags in Persian, such as #KhuzestanIsThirsty and #KhuzestanHasNoWater, have been widely used to direct attention toward the crisis and the protests that have been scantily covered by global media.

The regime's response to the protests heavily relies on repression and delegitimization of protesters. In Khuzestan, the Internet was shut down, amid fears that this should facilitate a lethal crackdown – as seen during the November 2019 nationwide uprising during which arguably more than 1,000 protesters were deliberately killed by security forces amid a one-week near-total Internet shutdown in large parts of the country. Also, to defy the spreading of protests, a heavy security presence was established in Tehran.

State media have accused "opportunists" and "rioters" for shooting at protesters. Regime officials have pursued the dual strategy of paying lip service to the legitimacy of the protests while de facto engaging in de-legitimizing them as they have seemingly been infiltrated, if not directed, by rogue, "anti-revolutionary" forces. Along these lines, [on 22 July, President Rouhani said](#) in a TV speech that the people of Khuzestan "have the right to speak, express themselves, protest and even take to the streets within the framework of the regulations", adding that "If there is a problem, I ask the people of Khuzestan to solve it legally." Yet, Rouhani also said "It is possible that a malicious person could take advantage of the situation, come in the middle of it all and use a gun, shoot and kill one of our dear citizens." Lipservice was also paid by [Supreme Leader Khamenei who admitted](#) that "The people showed their displeasure [...] but we cannot really blame the people and their issues must be taken care of."

In this context, the members of the Iranian Parliament's Committee for National Security and Foreign Policy (a body that is largely viewed as obedient toward the Supreme Leader) aim to visit Khuzestan to prepare a report.

Indicating the possible direction of the planned report, a committee member [said](#) that "There is no doubt that our enemies are always opportunistically seeking to exploit [Iran's protests]."

## **BEYOND** *the* **HEADLINES**

The enduring water and ecological crisis in Khuzestan province have long been in the making. With experts suggesting that the crisis is clearly homemade and not primarily related to climate change or deprivations through U.S. sanctions, the re-emerging crisis above all showcases the dysfunction by successive administrations, from that of Khatami to Ahmadinejad and Rouhani.

Khuzestan is known as an oil-rich province but it also has abundant water resources as it harbours five large rivers. Since the Khatami administration who took office in 1997, the authorities decided to build dams in Khuzestan to transfer water to Iran's

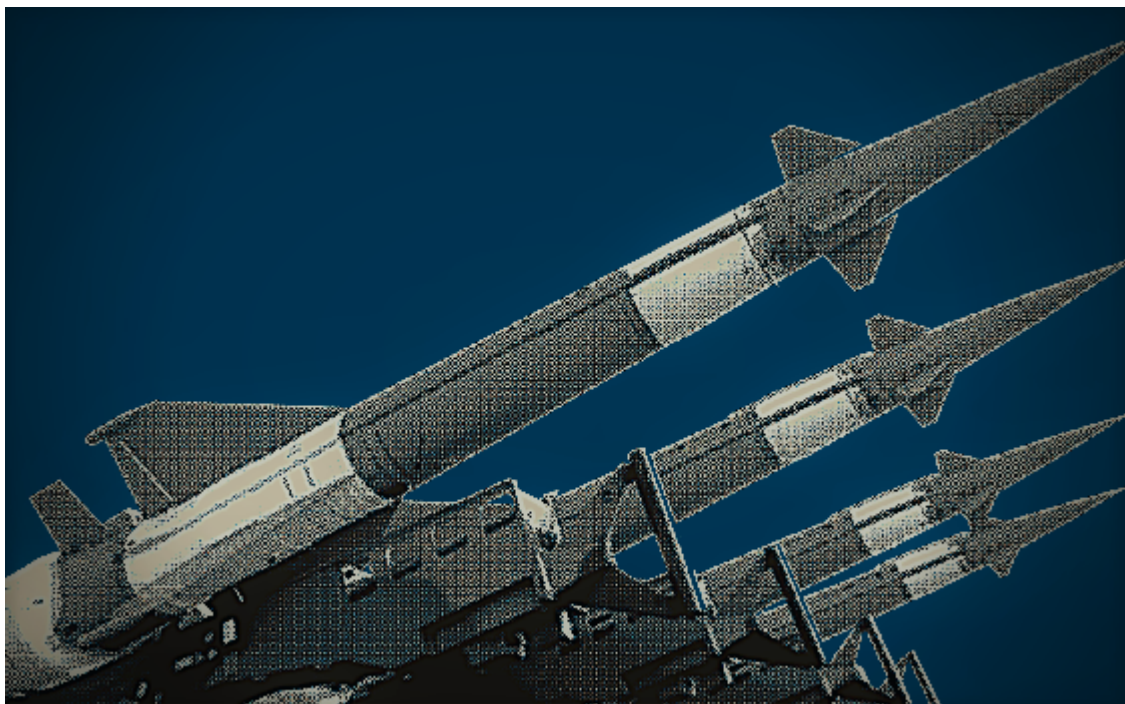
more arid central plateau for use in high-consumption industries run by regime-affiliated entities. In other words, we have rather witnessed a management crisis of water resources. The Ahmadinejad and Rouhani administrations continued these inadequate policies, while failing to invest in the water distribution network. Today, more than 700 villages do not have access to water and their supplies must be provided by water tanks. President-elect Ebrahim Raisi, who will inherit this deep-rooted crisis, has [said](#): “To solve the problems of Khuzestan, we will not procrastinate even for a day. If special attention had been paid to the province during these years, we would not have witnessed the accumulation of various issues and problems in the province today.” However, there is little indication that Raisi will make good on these promises and not to further primarily rely on repression and continue a policy of neglect.

Indeed, the Khuzestan protests are not only a result of a water crisis, as they have to be understood as a result of the combined “triple crisis” of the Islamic Republic, an ecological, socio-economic and political one, hence the rapid politicization of the protests. This combination of crisis that is extraordinarily virulent in Khuzestan province, which acts as a de facto burning glass for this “triple crisis”, has already been on display during the Dey protests at the turn of the year 2017/18 where the province was a hotbed of protests. Hitherto unknown towns such as Izeh are again today the site of protests.

Moreover, the solidarity protests in Persian-majority and Azeri parts (e.g. Tabriz) of Iran with Khuzestan that has a strong Arab-Iranian ethnic community may suggest that the ethnic gap as one dividing the country between Persian-majority provinces on one hand and border provinces with sizable ethnic minorities may be exaggerated. This development may also be one of the signs of an emerging trend of resistance among Iranians, with a heavy dose of civil disobedience, as witnessed by the presidential election boycott, the oil workers’ strikes and now the protests with the epicentre in Khuzestan. Only an alliance between various social forces and classes can become a serious threat to regime survival, something Tehran officials are aware of, as a result of which they have usually deployed “divide-and-conquer” discourses.

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## JCPOA NEGOTIATIONS





This week, Ali Rabii, the Rouhani administration's spokesman, [said](#) the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC) had concluded that the draft for an agreement to be reached in Vienna over the revival of the JCPOA didn't comply with the law ratified by Iran's Parliament late last year. He added the "main part of the negotiations" over restoring the Iran nuclear deal had been concluded "as far as the authority given to the government allowed including an understanding on lifting the bulk of sanctions." With the the incoming Raisi administration, the nuclear file's handling will be handed over from the Foreign Ministry to the SNSC – a key élite body on national security and foreign policy.

Meanwhile, reiterating previous claims of other centres of power undermining his administration's efforts to lift sanctions, [President Rouhani said](#): "We did our best to lift the sanctions, and if the parliamentary law had not stopped us, we would have lifted the sanctions almost in March." On the other hand, Keyvan Khosravi, the spokesman of the SNSC, [denied](#) the remarks of the administration and said: "Contrary to what was said, the committee examined many important issues about which the talks in Vienna did not reach a result due to the thuggish stance of the U.S. side, and the European sides in some cases, [and] clearly it is meaningless to speak of compatibility or incompatibility of something that does not exist." While Iran has stopped the Vienna talks amid uncertainty over Iranian and U.S. willingness to abide by the other side's key demands and a transition of power to President-elect Ebrahim Raisi in early August, the Biden administration has [repeated](#) that "We stand ready to return to Vienna to complete work on a mutual return to the JCPOA once Iran has made the necessary decisions."

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Iranian authorities are still confident that the Biden administration is unlikely to put much pressure on Iran amid Washington's repeated vows to aim to rejoin the deal. Therefore, Tehran wants to take advantage of its "maximum resistance" strategy – of which "nuclear escalation" is a central component – that it has pursued as response to Trump's "maximum pressure" campaign by achieving maximum benefit from the White House under the presidency of Joe Biden. Rahman Ghahremanpour, a political analyst, [told](#) ISNA (Iranian Students' News Agency) that Iran aims to expand its nuclear program to get more concession and a delay of one to two months in the negotiations would be an instrument in reaching this goal. Meanwhile, 204 MPs released a statement in which they [stressed](#) that "We [Iran] will only return to our nuclear commitments when the sanctions are completely lifted and [the effect of it] verified." The statement thus reflects Tehran's key demand from Washington that all U.S.-led sanctions would be lifted in a permanent fashion, and that Iran can again gain access to the international banking and financial systems, export oil and access its frozen assets abroad. Yet, it is unlikely that the U.S. would satisfy these demands in full, especially when Tehran rejects to concede on controversial non-nuclear issues, such as its ballistic missile programme and regional policies.

Indeed, the main leverage the U.S. has vis-à-vis Iran is through sanctions. In this vein, a U.S. official contemplated about this when stating to [Reuters](#) that "If we are in a world in which the prospect of an imminent return to the JCPOA seems to be vanishing, then

that posture will have to adjust.” In this vein, the White House is considering to crack down on Iranian oil sales to China, as a way to send a signal to Iran not to delay the revival of the deal. This year, Beijing’s imports of Iranian crude have averaged 400,000–650,000 barrels per day (bpd) on a monthly basis, with volumes this May, however, spiking to almost 1 million bpd.

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## JASK OIL TERMINAL AT GULF OF OMAN OPENED

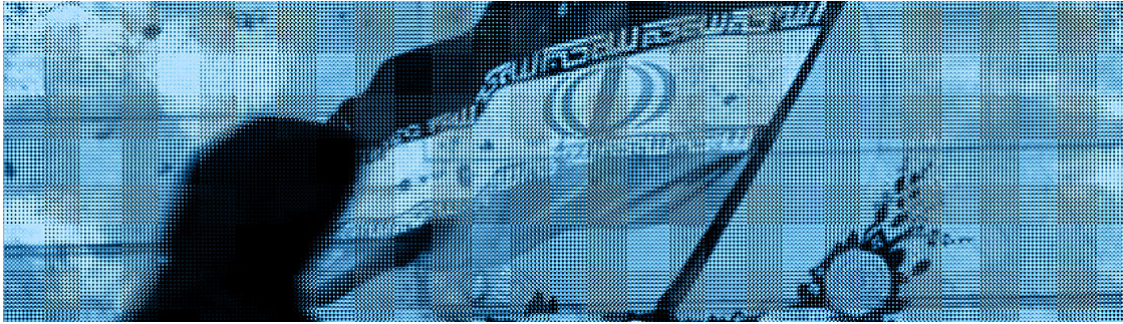
This week Iran [opened](#) its first oil terminal in Jask along the Gulf of Oman, aiming to reduce Iran’s dependence on the Strait of Hormuz for exporting oil. With the construction of a 1,000-kilometer pipeline from Goreh in the west of Bushehr Province to Jask on the Oman Sea, Iran, in addition to bringing its oil closer to export markets, has the opportunity to increase export security by bypassing the Strait of Hormuz. President Rouhani said in a televised speech that “This is a strategic move and an important step for Iran. It will secure the continuation of our oil exports. [...] It shows the failure of Washington’s sanctions on Iran.” Iran has [spent](#) \$2 billion on the project and in the first phase, the terminal has the capacity to transport 300,000 barrels of oil per day. Iran’s Oil Minister Bijan Zanganeh [said](#) that 20 reservoirs with a total volume of 10 million barrels of crude oil are being stored at the Jask terminal.

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It is speculated that the announcement about the Jask terminal’s operationalization has been pre-mature and hence meant to send a signal of defiance to the U.S. and others. Generally, this new terminal may well bring economic and security benefits for the Islamic Republic, as Iran would possess a terminal to export oil for the first time from the Gulf of Oman, thus circumventing the Strait of Hormuz. As a result, Iran’s export capacity would be increased and diversified, while reducing operational and security risks. One of the advantages of the Jask oil transfer terminal is that it will shorten the return route of the country’s oil customers to about a thousand nautical miles. In fact, whenever over the past few decades tensions between Iran and the U.S. have increased, Tehran threatened to block the Strait of Hormuz if the country’s interests, especially its ability to export its own oil amid U.S. sanctions. When the Trump administration announced its policy to eliminate Iranian oil from the world market and reduce Iran’s exports to zero, Tehran implicitly repeated its claim of blocking the Strait of Hormuz, through which a large portion of globally traded oil runs. Yet, the Islamic Republic never implemented this threat, not least because Tehran itself is using the strait for its oil exports and would therefore shoot itself into the foot if it were to block it.

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# PROTESTING ASGHAR FARHADI'S CANNES SILENCE



Asghar Farhadi, famous Iranian film director and screenwriter, [won](#) The Grand Prix of the 2021 Cannes Film Festival in France for his new film “A Hero.” The two-time Oscar winner Farhadi faced criticism by Iranians on Twitter who had expected from him to use the podium in Cannes to voice support for the ongoing protests in Khuzestan. Also, in an interview, Farhadi said that “Iran is a country where there is no right to freedom of expression and thought”, but later denied his remarks and called the translation incorrect. Also, another remark by Farhadi has been criticized. At the press conference in Cannes for the movie “A Hero”, a reporter [asked](#) him how much he had paid attention to the previous works of actors and actresses when choosing them for his films. This question concerns the fact that some actors Iran are involved in film projects funded by Iranian intelligence or security institutions. Farhadi replied by saying that he did not care about the past role of his colleagues and was only paying attention to their acting performance. To protest Farhadi’s complacency, Iranian users registered on the IMDB website, which is one of the most important online information sources in the world of cinema, to give “A Hero” low marks, which led to a drop in the film’s score. As a result, IMDB [disabled](#) the possibility of rating the film.

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Over the last years, particularly after the nationwide protests in 2018 and 2019, Iranian celebrities have frequently faced criticism by the Iranian people. Historically, Iranians have come to expect from their “national heroes”, chief among them filmmakers with international appeal, to become the voice of public opinion, yet many of them have refused to do so. Many Iranians believe that the reasons for such reluctance is the celebrities’ concern about their security as well as their aim not to endanger their economic benefits in the Islamic Republic. Against this backdrop, many of them have adopted a contradictory dual-track approach of trying to keep their credibility both with the people and the state.

However, as the mood on social media among Iranians demonstrates, such an approach has been unsuccessful, as many users do criticize them quite seriously. Asghar Farhadi was the latest case in point, as many Iranians have been disappointed that he missed such a great opportunity at most famous film festival in the world at Cannes to use his global reputation to speak in defense of the Iranian people.



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