

# IRAN

## 1400 BRIEF

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BEYOND THE HEADLINES

ایران



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

**26/07 – 01/08**

## SUMMARY



This week, deflecting his own responsibilities, President Rouhani engaged in defending the performance of his administration by blaming external factors – namely, the U.S. and Tehran's key centers of power – for its failure in crucial areas. Internationally, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei reiterated his insistence that Iran could not trust the West regarding the revival of the nuclear deal and the lifting of U.S. sanctions. Weighing on the country's security and stability, protests with anti-regime slogans have continued in different provinces, where people even took advantage of a rally for the celebration of the championship of a football club to chant political slogans. Moreover, Iran's hardline-dominated Parliament made a decision to restrict Iranians' access to the worldwide web has obtained more critical attention in the country.

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## PRESIDENT ROUHANI'S FINAL DAYS: BLAMING EXTERNAL FACTORS FOR HIS ADMINISTRATION'S FAILURE

This week, President Rouhani invested much time and energy to defend the performance of his administration in its last days. Virtually all across the board, his administration's performance has been described as very poor. Now, Rouhani has claimed that his administration has done its best to help the Iranian people, that it has been successful in different areas such as the COVID-19 vaccinations, giving cash subsidies to people and increasing the retirement pension. While Iranians have significantly suffered from inflation and recession, Rouhani made the claim that if "economic war" (i.e. Trump's "maximum pressure" sanctions) and coronavirus pandemic had not existed, Iran would have had a better economic situation, including a much stronger currency against the U.S. dollar. He also stated that he wished to accomplish several goals but it was not possible as the administration is not the only actor in decision-making.

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In 2013, when the Iranian people were disappointed by the performance of the Ahmadinejad presidency, Hassan Rouhani had presented himself – with the support of the establishment’s reformist wing – himself as an anti-thesis to his predecessor that was seen as incompetent and too confrontational. He promised to bring détente with the West, prosperity for Iranians, improvement of human and civil rights, and increasing the role of women in his administration. At the end, President Rouhani failed to achieve any of these goals. Now, when asked about why his administration was unsuccessful to solve the disputes with the West, Rouhani replies by blaming other, mightier centers of powers in the Islamic Republic. When asked about his administration’s failure to solve the economic problems plaguing Iranians, he resorts to blaming Washington’s enmity toward Tehran.

While Iran’s currency has dramatically dropped against the U.S. dollar, reaching the exchange rate of 250,000 rials, Rouhani claims that in the absence of Trump’s “maximum pressure”, that rate would merely be at around 50,000 rials.

Such claims by regime officials that routinely resort to whole blame external factors, or exaggerate them, for their own failings is being met with much rejection from society. In response to Rouhani’s latter claim, Iranians on social media joked that if the Islamic Republic had not emerged, the U.S. dollar exchange rate would have stood at 100 rials – which was the rate before the creation of the Islamic Republic in 1979.

Such claims by Rouhani to blame external factors for his administration’s failure to deliver on its core campaign promises are highly problematic as (a) a key regime insider, his background in key positions of the system (not least, him being Khamenei’s representative in the Supreme National Security Council for two decades), he knows perfectly well the weight and influence of the Islamic Republic’s key corridors of power; (b) it is precisely this background that had predestined him to identify ways to make good on his campaign promises, yet he failed to do so; (c) the Janus-faced nature of Iran’s foreign policy as a matter of cross-factional élite consensus belies his claim that he was somehow unaware of the Supreme Leader and the IRGC’s policy priorities, namely in pushing for an expansive regional agenda that ultimately helped undermine the saliency of the JCPOA; (d) his economic policy visions have been heavily influenced by a neoliberal economic orthodoxy while heavily relying on the JCPOA’s economic dividends (who, after all, did not trickle down onto average Iranians but mainly enriched the regime élites) and was hence inept to address the pressing socio-economic challenges that were clearly on the horizon when he assumed office, which also paved the ground for the emergence of the most radical and widespread anti-regime protests in the history of the Islamic Republic.

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## JCPOA NEGOTIATIONS: SUPREME



# LEADER URGES NOT TO TRUST WEST



With the lapse of time in regard to the revival of the JCPOA, the four-decade hostility between the Islamic Republic and the U.S. still cast a shadow on the prospect of reaching a deal in Vienna. This week, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei told President Rouhani and his cabinet that this administration would leave behind a lesson for the future, [stating that](#) “The national affairs of the country should never become contingent on the cooperation of Westerners because this will definitely lead to failure. Whenever you made your affairs contingent on Westerners’ cooperation, you failed and whenever you moved forward and showed initiative without trusting Westerners, you succeeded. If you take a look at the performance of the 11th and 12th [Rouhani] administrations, this is how it is.” A few hours after this meeting, Khamenei’s official website published an interview with Kazem Gharibabadi, Iran’s ambassador to the International Atomic Energy Agency, who [said](#) that the U.S. does not want to lift its sanctions against 500 Iranian entities and refuses to rescind Trump’s executive order designating the IRGC as a ‘foreign terrorist organization’. He added that the U.S. aims to add further negotiations on Iran’s missiles programme and its Middle East policies. Meanwhile, on July 29, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken said the negotiating process with Iran could not go on indefinitely, adding that “the ball remains in Iran’s court.”

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Considering these remarks from Tehran and Washington, it is clear that the revival of the JCPOA will not be as easy and swift as Presidents Rouhani and Biden had suggested. Although Rouhani had frequently claimed that both sides had reached a common point in the Vienna talks, the current standoff suggests that his pronouncements were only wishful thinking and self-serving political statements.

Indeed, still a wide gap between Tehran and Washington seems to persist in important areas. While Raisi said he is eager to see the JCPOA's revival, the recent remarks of the Supreme Leader may suggest that the incoming administration will not hurry to revive the JCPOA. Yet, his remarks can also be seen as a tactical tool to increase Western willingness to engage Iran. In Tehran, permanent sanctions relief is the key goal. In Washington, the Biden administration finds itself in a quasi-dead-end as it can neither accept all the requests of the Islamic Republic in terms of dramatic and permanent sanctions relief nor return to Trump's "maximum pressure" that it continues to portray as a dismal failure. Therefore, it may still take some time until a solution to the current Iran–U.S. standoff in Vienna can be reached, very much depending on the extent of sanctions relief and on how far Iran's controversial non-nuclear issues are included.

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## IRAN PROTESTS SPREADING BEYOND KHUZESTAN

Although with the shutdown of the Internet in Khuzestan province the protests in this oil-rich region have significantly decreased, protests have emerged in other cities like Tabriz, Karaj, Tehran and Isfahan, in solidarity with Khuzestan but also following power cuts. Protesters chanted "We don't want the Islamic Republic," "May your soul rest in peace, Reza Shah" – a reference to the monarch who launched the country's modernization in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and pushed back against the power of the clergy. Meanwhile, responding to public criticism over the authorities' handling of the protests, Ghasem Saedi, a hardline MP from Khuzestan province, claimed that "The young men who were killed came to the streets for peaceful protests but they were targeted by unknown people", adding that "The [Supreme] National Security Council is planning to offer compensation because they are saddened about the killing of the people." However, such claims and promises must be seen as populist measures given public criticism.

Also, in the centre of Tehran people took to the streets, chanting "Death to the dictator" and "Neither for Gaza nor Lebanon, I sacrifice my life only for Iran", the latter slogan being a critique of the Islamic Republic's regional policy. U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken said the protests reflected "people's deep frustration with the failure of government to meet their basic needs, including water, mismanagement of



the economy.” The U.S. government also released a statement that read that “[We support the rights of Iranians](#) to peacefully assemble and express themselves, without fear of violence and detention by security forces. We are also monitoring reports of internet slowdowns in the region.”

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Over the last years, Iranians have significantly suffered from the country’s political and economic crises. Now, they are willing to show their discontent with the authorities at any opportunity. For instance, on July 30, when Persepolis, the most popular football club in Iran, became the champion of the Iranian League for the fifth consecutive time, its fans celebrated the championship in the streets. In Tehran, they also took the opportunity to chant political slogans, such as “death to the dictator.” These types of protests have recently risen in Iran and people strive to demonstrate their political and economic dissatisfaction wherever they can, as some passengers did last week in the Tehran metro when waiting for the train.

Iran’s authorities try to suppress the protests instead of looking and providing for real solutions. This has led to the accumulation of dissatisfactions that nurture protests, and will do so in the future. Many Iranian officials are aware of the acuteness of the domestic situation. For instance, Ahmad Alirezabeygi, a retired police officer and a hardline MP, has [said](#) “We came across some destructive slogans [against the political structure of the Islamic Republic of Iran]. In general, the protests are dangerous for the whole of the system [the Islamic Republic] and they endanger the authority of the country. Also, these protests will lead to a bad reflection from Iran in the international media, which is worth considering.” Therefore, one of the most important challenges of the Raisi administration will be whether it will be able to offer a proper response to people’s multiple grievances, especially their dismal socio-economic conditions.

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## TOWARD COMPLETING THE NATIONAL INFORMATION NETWORK



This week, the Islamic Republic's parliament [has taken step toward imposing restrictions](#) on Iranians' access to the worldwide Internet. In a closed session, MPs approved a proposal to delegate a vote on a controversial bill that could practically cut users off from the world. While this plan has led to a strong rejection by public opinion, General Mohammad-Reza Naghdi, a senior official in the IRGC, [wrote](#) on July 30 to members of parliament, urging them to end the "shameful situation" of "the hegemony of foreigners over Iranian cyberspace." Since the 2017/18 nationwide protests, the Iranian authorities have been emphasizing that Iran ought to create a National Information Network (NIN), given the importance of foreign-based media critical of the regime for Iranians and the use of social media to organize protests. For instance, they have massively invested in promoting "made in Iran" social-media apps. Yet, recent survey results from ISPA, the best-known polling institute that has a close relationship with the government, has [demonstrated](#) that 71% of the participants use WhatsApp, 53% Instagram and 40% Telegram, with only 8% of them using Soroush, an Iranian social media app, on their smartphone.

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One cannot exaggerate the importance of the Internet and particularly social media in the life of Iranians. This has also provided people to create their own business online, [with a massive 300% increase in online transactions](#) since the outbreak of COVID-19. Instagram and Telegram are the two favorite options for young Iranians seeking to create their own business. While most Iranians cannot trust the security of domestic social-media alternatives, Internet-based business owners worry that they may lose their income as a result of that new parliamentary bill.

As alluded to, [since the 2017/18 nationwide protests in over 100 cities of Iran](#), the authorities have resurfaced their desire to restrict access to social media. At that time, they blocked Telegram, the most popular app among Iranians, hoping that people will then opt to choose local alternatives. However, Iranians replaced Telegram by WhatsApp, which further emboldened the ambition of the Islamic

Republic to establish a National Information Network (NIN) to cut access to the global Internet.

Meanwhile, the reformist/moderate camp tries to blame the hardline-majority Parliament for the agenda of restricting the Internet, thus indirectly putting the onus on people who refused to participate in the recent elections and to cast a vote for their candidates. However, it was also the Rouhani administration that significantly helped providing the infrastructure of the NIN, with its officials [stressing](#) that 80% of the national network are ready. Indeed, the Rouhani administration was the first executor of this project in November 2019 when the Iranians were [taking to the streets](#) to protest against the overnight tripling of the price of gasoline. The global internet was shut down at that time for at least a week (and in some regions up to three weeks) during which security forces engaged in the killing of more than 1,000 in only half a week. Thus, in other words, today's hardline parliament is aiming to complete the mission of the moderate Rouhani administration in restricting the Internet.

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