

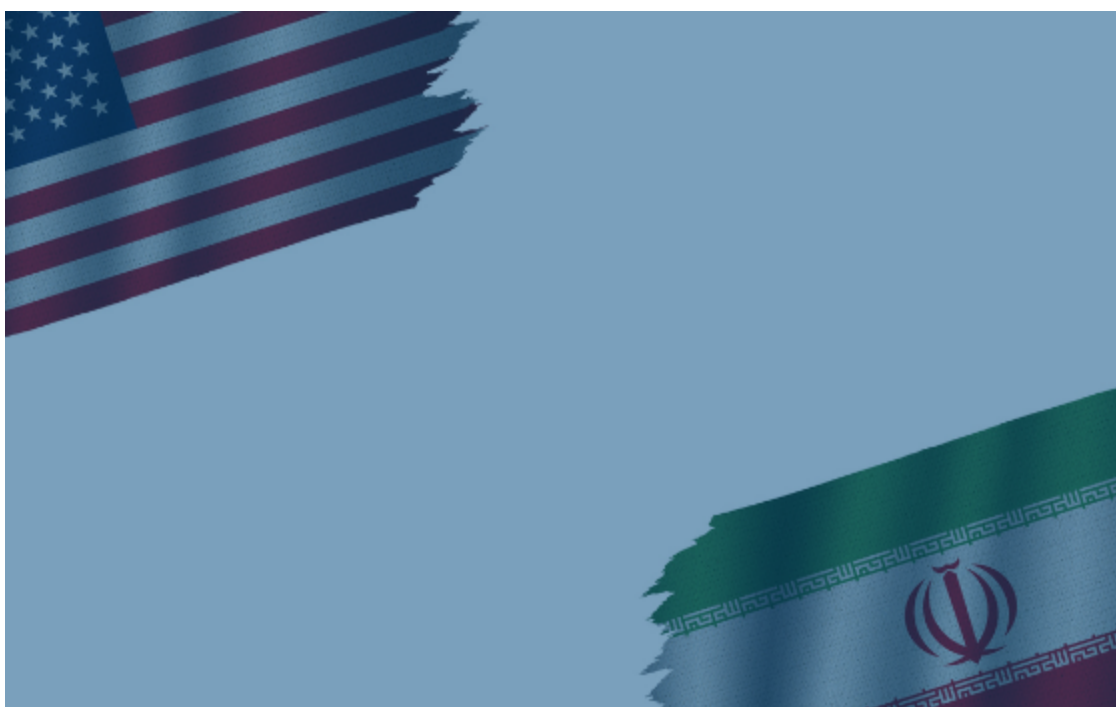
IRAN

1400 BRIEF

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BEYOND THE HEADLINES

ایران



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

16/08 – 22/08

SUMMARY



The diplomatic dance between Washington and Tehran is continuing, with the latter ratcheting up its “nuclear escalation” strategy with progress being made on its controversial enrichment of uranium metal and the former sending mixed messages regarding an accommodation with Iran. The U.S. is still waiting for Iran to return to the Vienna talks. After the Taliban recapturing power in neighboring Afghanistan, Tehran sees great opportunities in fostering its “Look to the East” geopolitical orientation and demonstrate its usefulness to Russia and China, who may have stopped their rejection of Iran joining the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, at least according to Tehran. Domestically, Iran sees a record death from COVID-19, with signs that the Supreme Leader may pave the way for the import of Western vaccines to provide the Raisi administration with a first success – despite doubts over the feasibility of such a plan. Socio-economically, a top Iranian official said that the number of Iranians living under the poverty line has more than doubled over the last five years, now encompassing one-third of Iranians.

IRAN STEPS UP “NUCLEAR ESCALATION” STRATEGY WHILE WASHINGTON CONTEMPLATES ABOUT ALTERNATIVE BEYOND THE JCPOA

This week, Iran stepped up its “nuclear escalation” strategy amid the prolonged break in the Vienna negotiations over the JCPOA revival. The International Atomic Energy Agency [released](#) a statement that “On 14 August 2021, the Agency verified [...] that Iran had used 257 g of uranium enriched up to 20% U-235 in the form of UF₄ (uranium tetrafluoride) to produce 200 g of uranium metal-enriched up to 20% U-235.” In response, U.S. State Department spokesperson Ned Price said “Iran has no credible need to produce uranium metal, which has direct relevance to nuclear

weapons development.” The Agency also said that this was step three in a four-step plan by Tehran, with the final step including the production of a reactor fuel plate.

Also, the EU-3 (i.e. France, the UK, and Germany), which are also signatories to the JCPOA, reacted to the 16 August IAEA report to member-states by [stressing](#) that “Iran must halt all activities in violation of the JCPOA without delay. We urge Iran to return to the negotiations in Vienna as soon as possible with a view to bringing them to a swift, successful conclusion.” In addition, according to the IAEA, Iran also has significantly increased its production capacity of uranium enriched to 60%, which Tehran describes as being in accordance with the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and having peaceful goals. Meanwhile, Foreign Ministry spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh reiterated Iran’s long-standing position that its “nuclear escalation” strategy is reversible in case of “full and verifiable” U.S. sanctions relief by [stating](#): “If the other parties return to their obligations under the nuclear accord and Washington fully and verifiably lifts its unilateral and illegal sanctions [...] all of Iran’s mitigation and countermeasures will be reversible.”

Moreover, in sign of defiance against Western pressure and Israel, on 21 August, Iran’s [Defense Ministry said](#) it was expanding its defense efforts beyond the country’s borders. On the occasion of the Defense Industries Day, the ministry said in a statement that “Our country has an important role to play in strengthening the resistance front and expanding the radius of defense of national security beyond the borders of the country, adding that Tehran plans include “strengthening the defensive force and constantly updating the ability to deal with the threats of our enemies.” It added: “We will not hesitate to strengthen our military capabilities, including the missile program designed solely for defense purposes.”

On its part, the White House Iran envoy Robert Malley, in an [exclusive interview with Politico](#), (a) expressed doubts over the success of the JCPOA negotiations with Iran, while (b) openly contemplating about alternatives: (a) Malley said “It’s just one big question mark” and rejoining the JCPOA “is not something that we can fully control” that he blamed on lacking engagement from Tehran. He also said there are uncertainties over what Iran will and will not do. Yet, he expressed cautious optimism, stating that “we are prepared to resume the talks, which we wouldn’t do if we didn’t think [a deal] was possible” and explain that after all both Washington and Tehran under President Raisi want to return to the JCPOA. (b) However, Malley also said that his team is already planning for a contingency plan if the JCPOA cannot be resurrected: (1) The [AA](#)

U.S. and Iran sign a completely separate deal that would have different parameters than the JCPOA – in other words, including non-nuclear issues. (2) The U.S., in coordination with European allies, imposing a set of punitive measures. Malley, however, didn’t provide further details.

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Since Joe Biden took office in January, Iran has been successful in buying more time to increase its bargaining leverage toward the White House, through inter alia a “nuclear escalation” strategy. In the last two months, Iran has withdrawn from the Vienna talks, suggesting that this was due to the “transition of power” to the Raisi administration. During this time, Tehran expanded its nuclear capabilities as the new report of the IAEA has shown. “Nuclear escalation” is in fact a strategy that the Islamic Republic had already tested during the Obama era, resulting in the 2015 nuclear deal that saw considerable benefits for Tehran. Then, Iran had increased the number of centrifuges spinning and engaged in a 20% enriched uranium (a qualitative threshold toward weaponization) to compel the then-U.S. administration toward a deal, which later proved to financially boost its regional policy and missile program. With Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, the IRGC’s “soft face,” likely to become the next Iranian foreign minister, the “nuclear escalation” strategy is poised to continue, if not intensify, while the Raisi administration will – very much like Supreme Leader Khamenei – pretend that Tehran does not depend on the revival of the JCPOA, a move intended to provoke further concessions from Washington. In this vein, Zohreh Elahian, member of the Iranian Parliament’s National Security and Foreign Policy Committee, has stated that “Unfortunately, the negotiations in the Rouhani administration continued without result and we will definitely not see this approach in the new administration.” Moreover, the so-called reformist/moderate camp warns that the new hardline administration may push the Vienna negotiations into a dead-end. Shargh, the leading reformist daily, has written that “There is a possibility that the JCPOA will neither be revived nor collapse, but [remain] in the same situation as in the years when Saeed Jalili was Iran’s chief negotiator [under the Ahmadinejad administration]. Long and erosive negotiations will continue without progress.”

On the U.S. side, Malley’s above-mentioned statements suggest (a) that Washington’s priority remains revitalizing the JCPOA, yet concerns are mounting regarding its feasibility, which is blamed on Tehran’s unwillingness to concede, including its “nuclear escalation” strategy; and (b) that the U.S. is already planning for alternatives that would either involve a bilateral deal with Iran beyond the confines of the JCPOA or increasing transatlantic pressure (probably via sanctions) on Tehran. In brief, given the vast scope of possibilities fielded by Malley – ranging from JCPOA revival to escalating pressure on Iran in tandem with the EU-3 –, such confusion may also be intended to increase pressure on Tehran so that the latter would seek the best or least bad option available to it, i.e. returning to the JCPOA.

TALIBAN RULED AFGHANISTAN OPENING THE DOOR FOR IRAN TO

FINALLY JOIN THE SCO?

After the Taliban recapturing power in Afghanistan, while many countries have decided to close their embassies there, “The embassy of the Islamic Republic of Iran in Kabul is fully open and active. Iran's consulate general in Herat is also open and active,” [said](#) the Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh. On 16 August, President Ebrahim Raisi spoke of the “military failure” of the U.S. in Afghanistan, and its withdrawal of forces offered an opportunity to create lasting peace in the war-ravaged neighboring country. On the other hand, on 18 August, Iran closed its border to Afghanistan, as thousands of Afghans seek to flee the country following the Taliban’s takeover. Hossein Qasemi, the director of the Iranian Interior Ministry’s office for border affairs, [said](#) that authorities instructed Iran’s three provinces that border Afghanistan to deny Afghan nationals entry into Iran because of recent developments in the country and “coronavirus restrictions.”

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Iran’s state-controlled media continue to promote the image of a reformed “Taliban 2.0”. Although Iran has hosted more than two million Afghan refugees in the last decades, this time around, Tehran believes the Taliban can bring security for the people of Afghanistan, and hence people should not flee their country. State-controlled media propagate that Afghanistan will be safer without the presence of U.S. troops there. In fact, for the Islamic Republic what is more important is the failure of the U.S. in its immediate neighborhood. Beyond that, the Taliban are presented as an opportunity for Tehran to expand their influence in Afghanistan in cooperation with Russia and China. In this vein, on 18 August, in Raisi’s first telephone call with his Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping since taking office, the Iranian President [stated](#) that “the Islamic Republic of Iran is ready to cooperate with China in establishing security, stability, and peace in Afghanistan and contributing to development, progress and prosperity for the people of the country.” In fact, Tehran views the withdrawal of the U.S. from Afghanistan as paving the way for it to pursue its desire to build a strategic alliance with China and Russia. In the meantime, it seems Iran has received new positive signals from the two Eastern great powers regarding its long-standing desire to join the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) as a permanent member. On August 11, Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC) Ali Shamkhani [announced](#) that “Fortunately, the political obstacles to Iran's membership in the Shanghai agreement have been removed and Iran’s membership will be finalized through technical formalities.” Iran became an SCO observer member in 2005, but after that Tehran’s request for permanent membership has been on hold. Currently, a Taliban-ruled Afghanistan, Tehran hopes, will usher in a new era for the Islamic Republic to change the balance of power in the region to its favor by enhancing its ties with the East, as Tehran did it in Syria with regard to Russia.

COVID-19 DEATHS AT ALL-TIME HIGH AMID GROWING PRESSURE FROM BELOW



Amid the pandemic's fifth wave hitting Iran, the COVID-19 death rate has reached a new official daily record of almost 650. The real number is probably at least twice as high. Meanwhile, the vaccination speed remains very slow, with about 21 million doses injected and only five million people fully vaccinated in a country with about 85 million populations. *Iran International*, a Persian-language TV station headquartered in London, has [reported](#) that they have gotten access to a classified letter in which the health officials have said the death rate among vaccinated people in Iran is dozens of times higher than the average world. Iran has mainly imported Sinopharm, a Chinese vaccine, which apparently [offers](#) poor protection for the above 60-year-olds. Meanwhile, Iran's security forces [arrested](#) five lawyers and a civil rights activist, believing the group was detained during a meeting on taking legal action against authorities for mismanagement of the pandemic and delay in mass vaccination. Saeed Dehghan, an Iranian lawyer, said that these "Arrests before filing a lawsuit is an indication of an increasing fear of [people's] demand for justice."

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Due to the huge number of infections with COVID-19 and the death toll rising, the importance of vaccination has once again attracted the attention of Iranian society. Many believe the state has not even attempted to provide them with internationally tested vaccines. In January, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei

had explicitly announced that the administration must not import vaccines from the US, UK, and even France. Yet, state-controlled media are currently engaged in constructing a narrative according to which Khamenei was not an opponent of foreign vaccines. However, in recent days, some Iranians who lost their family members to the deadly virus posted videos in which they blame the Supreme Leader as responsible for the deaths of their family members due to his import ban of tested vaccines. In fact, amid mounting societal criticism toward the regime's handling of the pandemic, for the first time, the head of Iran's Food and Drug Administration (FDA) Mohammad-Reza Shanehsaz [said](#) that a permit has been issued to import Pfizer and Moderna vaccines made outside the United States. *Arman Melli*, an Iranian daily, [published](#) a piece in which the author criticized the government, writing "if you wanted to import the American brands, why now? When many people are suffering from the fifth wave of the coronavirus!" In 16 August TV address, Khamenei called for swift, decisive action to contain the pandemic, stressing that vaccines should be imported "in any possible way". All this indicates that Khamenei is trying to put Raisi in a position to portray himself as the saviour from the pandemic by allowing the import of Western vaccines after all. However, it is unclear if this plan will fully materialize. Meanwhile, *Asr-e Iran*, a news website, criticized the authorities over a delay in procuring vaccines, for investing hope in Russia and China regarding the supply of millions of doses that they had ultimately failed to deliver, for hiding the real COVID-19 death toll, and for allowing Muharram mourning ceremonies (a religious ceremony among Shia in which many people come together for lamentation).

IMAM KHOMEINI AID COMMITTEE: ONE-THIRD OF IRANIANS BELOW THE POVERTY LINE

High levels of poverty remain a key challenge for the Islamic Republic. Morteza Bakhtiari, the director of the Imam Khomeini Aid Committee, the largest state charitable organization, [said](#) that 33% of the population lives below the poverty line, while in 2016 that number stood at 15%, i.e. the rate has ever since more doubled.

Each family needs at least 100 million rials (ca. \$360) per month to be able to afford basic needs.

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Iran's economy still suffers from the ongoing enmity with the United States. While Iranians' socio-economic condition constantly worsens, the **AAAAA**

authorities cynically demand self-restraint in a sign of adhering the regime's official line of "resistance". For instance, Ali-Akbar Velayati, senior adviser to the Supreme Leader for international affairs, **said** the Iranian people should learn from Yemenis who stand against the sanctions and threats amid Saudi Arabia's invasion of their country. Moreover, the socio-economic crisis remains a top security threat, as protests driven by it and quickly turning into political opposition toward the regime, have been happening within shorter intervals. While the above statement suggests that Iran's authorities are well aware of the evolution and dept of this socio-economic crisis, it is unclear if the regime will be able to provide improvements in this regard, especially as long as enmity with Washington and concomitant U.S. extra-territorial sanctions remain in place.

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