

AUTUMN 2022

Iran in Focus

SERIES REPORT



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This report is part of Friends of Europe's Peace, Security & Defence programme. All sections from the 'Introduction' to the 'Recommendations' are written by Negar Mortazavi, Host of the Iran Podcast and 2017 MENA Young Leader, bringing together the views of scholars, policymakers, civil society representatives, and senior defence and security stakeholders. The annex constitutes a compendium of summaries of the debates, roundtable discussions, focus groups and articles that comprised the first iteration of the Iran in Focus programme, which ran from June 2021 through July 2022.

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The Peace, Security & Defence programme is supported by the United States government.



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About the Iran in Focus programme

Friends of Europe's Iran in Focus programme **aims to identify new approaches to diplomatic relations with Iran**. Based on strategic thinking and mutual interests, it strives to establish an understanding of the domestic politics and recent developments in international relations that jointly underpin the country's political decision-making. The programme **probes weighty subject matters through a series of conversations, debates and written analyses**, engaging experts on Iran, policymakers, diplomats, international organisations, civil society and the private sector for a well-rounded, diverse set of opinions and culminating in concrete conclusions and recommendations.

To this end, by taking a wider perspective on security and focusing on the role of women, the state of civil society and the human rights situation in the country, the programme brings **a fresh and informed perspective on diplomatic engagement that empowers domestic activism**.

Amplifying a varied range of voices, the programme **examines the challenges and opportunities of civic movements and organisations in Iran**. Priorities include women's rights and political participation, freedom of speech and of the media, the humanitarian considerations of international sanctions, and the role of international actors in Iran, all with a grounding in today's shifting political context.

The Iran in Focus programme as a whole engages with these overlapping themes, promotes new and diverse opinions, and provides a coherent and progressive reconfiguration of diplomatic relations with Iran.



Tehran CityScape ©daniyal62

Introduction

Launched in 2021, Friends of Europe has completed a year-long programme with a focus on Iran. The Iran in Focus programme examined the country's domestic affairs, state of the civil society and rights movements, relations with its neighbours in the Middle East, diplomatic engagement with the West and, particularly, nuclear negotiations with the P5+1 (China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, the United States and Germany).

The programme included expert roundtables, panel discussions and #CriticalThinking pieces that looked at **the political direction that Iran is heading in the near and longer-term future, the country's relationship with its neighbours and with major powers in the East and the West, and Europe's key role in facilitating peaceful diplomatic engagement between Tehran and Washington.** It brought together a wide range of academics, journalists, analysts and activists from across Europe and around the world to help understand one of the most discussed, yet frequently misunderstood, countries in the world. The goal was to identify fresh and informed approaches to relations with Iran.

This report reviews the key discussions of the programme, highlights important comments from top experts involved and makes recommendations for next steps with a particular focus on what Europe can do.



Washington DC, January 4, 2020. Anti-war demonstrators gathered at The White House in a National Day of Action to protest Trump's escalation of conflict with Iran. ©Susan Melkisetian

Pursuing international diplomacy through domestic means

NUCLEAR DIPLOMACY

In a debate focusing on the ongoing nuclear negotiations between Iran and world powers in Vienna, **experts discussed how Europe can play a pivotal role in bringing the US and Iran back to the negotiating table** and facilitate talks to revive the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). The nuclear deal was a momentous foreign policy achievement of the Obama-Biden administration that former president Donald Trump tried to unravel by unilaterally pulling the US out of the agreement in 2018 and re-imposing hard economic sanctions on Iran.

“The beginning of the Biden[-Harris] administration coincided with the pro-diplomacy camp in Tehran for about six months – but negotiations didn’t start [until four months into the Biden presidency] and a ‘golden window of opportunity’ was missed,” a participant noted. Then, nuclear talks hit the presidential election season in June 2021. Following the narrow election of the new hardline president, Ebrahim Raisi, the Iranian side imposed its own delay in negotiations and failed to make a fast agreement with Washington.

“ Nuclear experts argue that the JCPOA is still the best way to ensure Iran’s nuclear programme stays within the previously agreed limits of a civilian programme

Considering the impasse, **Europe could still play a key role in keeping diplomacy alive between the two sides**, especially under the new administration in Washington. “European voices matter to President Biden, and he believes in alliances,” said Jon Wolfsthal, Senior Advisor at Global Zero and former senior director for arms control and non-proliferation at the US National Security Council. The European Union has been especially instrumental in helping bridge the gaps between Iran and the US.

Eldar Mamedov, Political Advisor for the Socialists & Democrats Group in the Foreign Affairs Committee of the European Parliament, argued that “from the European perspective, there is no convincing alternative to the JCPOA.” **This historic deal was the best way to limit Iran’s nuclear programme**, monitor its nuclear activities regularly, and ensure that the programme remains civilian and does not turn into a nuclear weapons programme.

After Donald Trump pulled the US out of the nuclear deal, Iran pushed the limits of the programme and increased its enriched Uranium stockpile, worrying the United Nations (UN) nuclear watchdog – the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) – and top nuclear experts. **The ‘maximum pressure’ policy of the Trump era, which included increased economic sanctions and pressure on Iran, backfired and resulted in Iran ever expanding its nuclear programme.** Now, nuclear experts argue that the JCPOA is still the best way to ensure Iran’s nuclear programme stays within the previously agreed limits of a civilian programme.

“ The door never fully closed on diplomacy, particularly with the help of Europe

But while **Tehran and Washington have been in periods of impasse** and stalemates of talks continued over the course of many months, with delays on both sides, the door never fully closed on diplomacy, particularly with the help of Europe.

In a #CriticalThinking piece, Mamedov also wrote that Europe's long-term engagement with Iran has too often been scuttled by “recalcitrant domestic actors in the US, Iran and some of its Middle Eastern neighbours. The Russian aggression [against] Ukraine, however, proved that European strategic autonomy, understood as the EU's ability to make independent political choices and back them up with action, is no longer a luxury, but a necessity. Building a functional relationship with a key Middle Eastern state like Iran is certainly part of filling it with substance.”

“The EU plays a crucial role in building bridges between the US and Iran. It is the only Western interlocutor that Iran trusts, as has been borne out by the facilitator role that the EU has had in bringing Washington and Tehran together to revive the nuclear deal. Yet the EU is also in a delicate position as the **EU is also the ally of the United States**, and can no more ignore Iran's nuclear activities and destabilising regional behaviour than its other Western and Middle East partners,” warned Jamie Shea, Senior Fellow at Friends of Europe and former deputy assistant secretary general at NATO. “So how the EU manages this difficult balancing act – bringing Tehran out of the cold while putting pressure on it at the same time – will be one of the toughest challenges for the EU's effectiveness as a foreign policy actor,” he added.

After the election of a new hardline president in Iran and a change of direction in the country's foreign policy towards the West, Barbara Slavin, Director of the Atlantic Council's Future of Iran initiative, believed that the **multilateral discussions around Afghanistan could provide another opening and platform for US-Iranian dialogue**.

SANCTIONS

Economic sanctions have long been used as an alternative to war, favoured by many Western policymakers who want to put pressure on adversary states but avoid military engagement and armed conflict. Over the past four decades, Iran has been one of the main targets of economic sanctions from the West, mainly from the US but also Europe and the UN. Sanctions are used with the stated goal of preventing Iran's nuclear advances, limiting its missile capabilities, blocking arms sales to the country and forcing Iranian leaders to change their policies.

Sanctions have been extremely effective in putting pressure on the Iranian economy, targeting every major industry in the country, with severe impacts on the everyday lives of most Iranians. Although policymakers have tried to minimise the humanitarian impacts of these broad sanctions, the exemptions have not been enough. The experience of Iran under sanctions suggests that a broader definition of humanitarian impacts is needed to reflect the true harms of sanctions on ordinary Iranians.

“Sanctions – particularly those that target finance and other economically-important sectors – are designed to cause significant economic pain in order to pressure an

uncooperative government to change its behaviour and to raise costs of actions found to be in breach of international norms. But any sanctions programme that causes significant contraction to a country's economy will also have an impact on ordinary people," wrote Erica Moret, Senior Researcher at the Geneva Graduate Institute, and Esfandiyar Batmanghelidj, Founder and CEO of Bourse & Bazaar Foundation.

Moret and Batmanghelidj have found that "major sanctions programmes often induce high rates of inflation in the target country, both by creating pressure on the national currency and government budgets, but also by interrupting the normal functioning of supply chains, including those dealing in exempted goods, such as medicines, medical devices, vaccines, food and agricultural products."

"For now, US and European policymakers are unlikely to radically alter their approach towards the humanitarian harms of sanctions. As the focus falls on tightening the sanctions vice grip on Russia, humanitarian concerns risk falling by the wayside. But starting to understand the humanitarian harms of sanctions in more holistic terms means giving voice to millions of people living in Iran and other sanctioned jurisdictions, whose lives have been dramatically changed by economic measures imposed from afar," Moret and Batmanghelidj concluded.

CIVIL SOCIETY

The JCPOA is often discussed from nuclear and security, as well as economic and trade, perspectives. **But not much is said about how a potential agreement may impact Iran's domestic politics, civil society and various social rights movements.** A range of Iranian experts, both inside and outside the country, shared their insights on the impacts of a nuclear deal on Iran's domestic socio-political future, specifically concerning four key areas: human rights, women's rights, political reforms and the struggle for democracy.

"If the JCPOA renewal delivers sanction relief, it will at least lead to some improvement of the economic and social rights of Iranians," said Mani Mostofi, an Iranian-American human rights lawyer and Director of the Miaan Group based in New York. He contended that **the JCPOA was realistically never going to lead directly to much-needed civil and political rights gains.** Still, Mostofi believes that diplomacy did give birth to new opportunities "like an EU-Iran bilateral dialogue on human rights in Iran". However, those opportunities evaporated after Trump shredded the JCPOA and effectively undercut any leverage the EU or European states might have to influence Iran's human rights behaviour.

Iranian civil society leaders and activists have learned from experience over the past few decades that **when the country's economy improves, citizens and activists can reach beyond their daily struggles for basic needs**, allowing more time and space to pursue social and political freedoms. The women's movement is no exception to this rule. "As we witnessed during the reform era, the women's movement grew a lot. But later on, when the economy worsened, the women's movement was weakened like other civic movements. Another negative impact of economic sanctions is the intensification of the security environment in Iran, which is to the advantage of conservative forces in the country and to the detriment of civil movements, such as the women's movement," said Parastoo Sarmadi, a women's rights activist based in Tehran.

“ Europe needs to support civil society and human rights without endangering activists on the ground

After the blow inflicted on the JCPOA by the US withdrawal, “many activists inside Iran lost all hope in diplomatic solutions, international bodies, and the agreements and treaties they offer,” wrote a social researcher in Tehran whose name is withheld for safety reasons. “The new generation of activists, particularly those belonging to leftist groups, reflect the sentiments of a society that is tired of being deceived and disappointed by deals that can be revoked on a whim. Their calls mirror the actions of countless people taking to the streets in small and big towns alike, demanding economic equality and decent living conditions.”

Sussan Tahmasebi, leading women’s rights advocate and Director at FEMENA, provided a sobering picture of how civil society has been under repression for many years in Iran and highlighted that **non-governmental organisations are often isolated from global support**. “We need to ensure that human rights are centre stage with respect to the West’s relationship with Iran and that the government is held accountable on these issues,” she said. At the same time, Europe needs to support civil society and human rights without endangering activists on the ground. Tahmasebi also recommended that Europe consider humanitarian relief to Iran when it comes to dealing with migrants from Afghanistan, and civil society needs to be part of the negotiations.

Back in 2015, the JCPOA was widely celebrated by Iranian democrats and civil society activists. The reason was that the lifting of economic sanctions and more engagement with the world brought the prospect of creating better internal social conditions conducive to democratisation. “It is difficult to fight for democracy on an empty stomach. Unemployment exacerbates this problem. The threat of war with the US further undermines the prospects for democratic mobilisation and struggle,” said Nader Hashemi, a political science professor and Director of the Center for Middle East Studies at Denver University. He shared what many other civil society activists inside the country have long been saying: **a more conducive international context that removes sanctions and the threat of war from the country will benefit Iranian democratic forces**.

Conclusion

With nuclear negotiations at a critical juncture and the possibility of an agreement being so close, **Europe can try to build on existing diplomatic platforms to expand dialogues with Iran on other issues of contention**, while also trying to find common ground and areas of mutual interest to foster a positive working relationship with Iran.

The Trump era in the US proved how even successful diplomacy between Iran and the US can be fragile. Europe's ability to keep diplomacy alive during the years of tension and setting the stage for renewed talks under the Biden administration showed that **Europe needs to strengthen independent ties with Iran while continuing to serve as a bridge between Tehran and Washington**.

The Iranian civil society has been under pressure both from domestic repression imposed by the state and external pressure from economic sanctions. **Europe should engage with civil society and activists through dialogue to understand their conditions and help support their cause**.

The experience of Iran sanctions proves that “a broader definition of ‘humanitarian impacts’ is needed to reflect the true harms of sanctions on ordinary Iranians”, as suggested by Moret and Batmanghelidj, “especially given that many of the world's broadest sanctions regimes are imposed on countries already suffering from acute or prolonged humanitarian crises”, now combined with the COVID-19 pandemic and climate change.



Azadi Tower ©David Sandoz

Recommendations

- Europe should **continue facilitating diplomacy between Iran and the US on the nuclear issue and beyond**. EU officials can play a unique role in bridging the gaps between Tehran and Washington especially when the two sides are at a stalemate.
- Europe should build on the momentum of the nuclear talks and **expand diplomacy with Iran in other areas that concern the region**, including Iran's regional policy across the Middle East, the continued detention of Western nationals, and the state of civil society and human rights, in order to help resolve more issues that are of interest to Europe, the US and their allies in the Middle East.
- Europe should **manage a balancing act when building bridges between the US and Iran** to not ignore Iran's nuclear advances and regional policies that other Western allies and Middle Eastern partners oppose. The challenge is to bring Tehran out of the cold while also putting pressure on it simultaneously.
- Europe should **establish stronger humanitarian harm assessments** to examine the negative impacts of sanctions on the Iranian society and ensure that economic sanctions do not impact the trade of food and medicine or hinder humanitarian assistance to vulnerable Iranians.
- Europe should **work on building a long-term and functional relationship with Iran**, which is a major Middle Eastern power with a large and vibrant society that yearns for more ties with the West. There are many areas of common interest that can bring the two sides together and open avenues for stronger engagement on issues of contention.
- Europe should **support and engage the Iranian civil society while also taking precautions to not endanger activists on the ground**. Human rights, women's rights, minority rights, as well as the right to a decent living and economic access, are all equally crucial.

Annex: programme activities

Debates, roundtable discussions, focus groups and articles comprised the first iteration of the Iran in Focus programme, which ran from June 2021 through July 2022. These activities are summarised below and informed the basis of this report's conclusions and recommendations.

IRANIAN ELECTIONS UNDER THE MICROSCOPE

#CriticalThinkingLive

16 June 2021

MODERATOR

Negar Mortazavi, Host of the Iran Podcast and 2017 MENA Young Leader

SPEAKERS

Azadeh Zamirirad, Deputy Head of the Africa and Middle East Division at the German Institute for International and Security Affairs

Rouzbeh Parsi, Head of the Middle East and North Africa Programme at the Swedish Institute of International Affairs and Director of the European Iran Research Group

Iran's 2021 presidential election could potentially define the next eight to ten years of domestic policy and external relations. In the lead-up to the vote on 18 June 2021, **the balance of power looked set to shift towards the hardliner conservatives**, a result that could make diplomatic efforts more difficult. However, the fluctuating spectrum of electoral developments in Iran means that the final two weeks ahead of the election are crucial.

It was against this backdrop that Friends of Europe kicked-off its Iran in Focus series, assessing the electoral state of play, the significance of the pending results and their likely impact on the nuclear issue, regional policy, human rights and civil society.

"Iranian elections have never been fair or free, but they've always been competitive at least among the political factions in the system," noted Mortazavi, who pointed to this election's significance due to mass disqualification, voter apathy and criticisms of the electoral process. Notably, **undecided voters comprise a significant portion of the population**.

"These elections are much bigger than just the presidency," responded Zamirirad, "This is about [...] potentially shaping the destiny of this republic for decades to come."

“Voter participation, to some degree, legitimises the system

Mortazavi noted that hardliner Ebrahim Raisi is “believed, at least by [a] considerable number of Iranians, to be the shoo-in candidate for this election.” However, Parsi reminded that “there’s always the competitive element in this very intense election cycle, which is very short.” The question remains whether enough people will vote in a country that suffers from unprecedented voter apathy. One critical aspect to consider, compared to previous elections, is social media: a key tool to mobilise voters in today’s landscape.

When asked about the election’s potential impact on Iran’s domestic political scene, Zamirad was doubtful that civil society would flourish or human and women’s rights would top the presidential agenda, regardless of the electoral outcome. “Women teachers, laborers, labour right workers and human rights defenders... a lot of people will still be active, but I think even under a [Abdolnaser] Hemmati presidency, it will be quite difficult for them, due to the systemic obstacles that are still in place, to see substantial progress anytime soon.”

Mortazavi questioned whether there is an alternative to the sense of hopelessness and frustration or the limited opportunity to fight or resist the system from within. Voter participation, to some degree, legitimises the system, argued Parsi, but “it’s then better to, at least, try and sway the little you can”.

On Iran’s foreign policy, **Zamirad noted that nearly all candidates support the Iran deal:** “There is, I believe, some misperception or some fear that if a hardliner is elected that would essentially mean the end of the nuclear agreement.” Europeans and Americans will need to pursue or uphold any progress “regardless of whether there is a moderate or hardline president in place.”

However, Mortazavi cited Raisi’s controversial past and commented: “It will be difficult for a diplomatic path with the West once he becomes president.”

Parsi described the West’s approach to JCPOA negotiations and compliance as “a huge misconception of how policy is made in Tehran,” suggesting that **any decision in this regard is not made by a single president but rather by the “continuity” of a system.** “The bottom line is, more or less, going to be the same regardless of who is the president,” concluded Parsi.

NEGOTIATING THE NUCLEAR DEAL

Policy Insight

21 September 2021

MODERATORS

Jamie Shea, Senior Fellow at Friends of Europe

SPEAKERS

Eldar Mamedov, Political Advisor for the Socialists & Democrats Group in the Foreign Affairs Committee of the European Parliament

Negar Mortazavi, Host of The Iran Podcast and 2017 MENA Young Leader

Sussan Tahmasebi, Director at FEMENA

Jon Wolfsthal, Senior Advisor at Global Zero and former senior director for arms control and non-proliferation at the United States National Security Council

The EU could play a potentially pivotal role in bringing the US and Iran back to the table when it comes to the JCPOA, most debate speakers agreed.

The discussion took place three months after the Iranian presidential vote, which saw hardliner Ebrahim Raisi narrowly elected, and three years after the Trump administration pulled out of the JCPOA and introduced economic sanctions.

“European voices matter to President Biden, and he believes in alliances,” said Wolfsthal. “If Europe believes that both parties should go back to the table, then that needs to be communicated clearly [...] Similarly, Europe must communicate to Tehran that its future economic relationship with Europe depends on Iran’s nuclear-free future.”

Most speakers agreed that **the prospects for such a rapprochement between the US and Iran remain unlikely**, given that the hardliners who currently control the parliament in Tehran are consolidating power.

“**There is no convincing alternative to the JCPOA**

“The nuclear deal is on life support,” said Mortazavi. “Many hoped that Biden would prioritise a deal early on in his presidency, and this would have been a golden opportunity, but this a polarising issue in Washington and the political capital wasn’t spent.”

“Now they’ve hit a roadblock, and the path will be harder from now on,” she stated, adding that **Iran will now likely take a more hardline direction away from the West** and towards Russia and China, while reminding participants that most Iranian presidents govern for two terms.

Tahmasebi provided a sobering picture of how civil society has been under repression for many years in Iran and highlighted that non-governmental organisations are often isolated from global support. This situation is not likely to change for the foreseeable future.

“We need to ensure that human rights are centre stage with respect to the West’s relationship with Iran and that the government is held accountable on these issues,” she implored. “At the same time, **we need to support civil society and human rights** without endangering activists on the ground.”

Tahmasebi also recommended that Europe should consider humanitarian relief to Iran when it comes to dealing with migrants from Afghanistan and reinforced that civil society needs to be part of the negotiations.

“From the European perspective, there is no convincing alternative to the JCPOA,” said Mamedov. Whilst emphasising that, aside from the nuclear issue, **bilateral relations between the EU and Iran are “not promising”**, he indicated that discussions around Afghanistan could be an opportunity for engagement.

This latter point was picked up by one of the participants, Barbara Slavin of the Atlantic Council, who said that the **multilateral discussions around Afghanistan could be another format for the US-Iranian dialogue**, and that in her view, the Iranian government will come back to the talks. She agreed, however, that the situation within the country remains bleak.

GLOBAL EUROPE: DISCUSSING EUROPEAN AWARENESS AND ATTITUDES TOWARDS IRAN

Focus Group Series
Winter 2022

MODERATOR

Debating Europe

Debating Europe, the online citizens platform launched in partnership with Friends of Europe, ran a series of online focus groups and canvassed the opinions of young Europeans (aged 18-35) recruited from its Facebook and Twitter communities. **Participants expressed their opinions on Europe's role in the world, including in Iran**, during a series of one-hour Zoom discussions. The focus group series was gender-balanced and geographically diverse, involving participants from across the EU.

The results of the focus groups are analysed and distilled below, capturing the impressions of the moderators and presenting select opinions and recommendations from participants. For the purposes of this report, we will particularly focus on discussion related to Iran, although the context of the invasion of Ukraine, which was launched at the beginning of the focus group series and dominated debate, was important.

“ The nuclear programme was rarely mentioned directly

In general, **awareness of the Iran nuclear negotiations was very low**. Some participants had a high level of knowledge (e.g., being able to refer to the JCPOA) but this was the exception. **Participants were much more confident talking about Europe's relationship with Russia, the US and China** than with Iran. Similarly, they were less confident speaking about Europe's relationship with India, African and Latin American countries.

When prompted to discuss Iran, the nuclear programme was rarely mentioned directly. Instead, **discussion around Iran often brought up the challenges of energy geopolitics and sanctions**. For example, Iran was often included with Venezuela and Saudi Arabia as oil-producing countries that the EU, US and UK were trying to convince to increase production so as to replace Russian oil. A few participants thought this was “hypocrisy”, as they felt Iran, Venezuela and Saudi Arabia were also human rights abusers and little different to Russia, so diplomatic overtures had little to do with values and everything to do with geopolitics.

“ Martina felt the EU showed resilience in not giving up with negotiations. Thanks to its ‘neutrality’, she thought that the EU can act as a good moderator

Most groups agreed on a lack of clear EU foreign policy, especially towards the US and China. When participants had a higher level of awareness about Iran (which was the minority), they tended to feel there was a clearer EU policy towards the country – which showcases the **EU's potential ability to play a global peacekeeping and mediation role**. Most participants supported the EU's aspiration of becoming a global “peacekeeper” by 2030 but were broadly sceptical that this “dream” would actually be realised.

When asked specifically whether the EU has a clear foreign policy towards Iran, one participant, Julia, answered: “It's got quiet around the Iran deal lately”, which she finds interesting as the EU was so keen on supporting the Iran deal. She thinks that domestic conditions in Iran have not changed since the deal came into force but that the geopolitical conditions around it have changed, particularly the position of the US with the change in administration from Trump to Biden.

Yordan, another participant in the same group as Julia, perceived it as a difficult moment when the US withdrew from the JCPOA as he said it had taken “ten years of diplomatic effort” to reach that agreement. In his view, the EU was really eager to maintain the agreement, and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), after ratification of agreement, had always certified that Tehran was obeying the rules. Yordan was not clear about the current state of negotiations, but he said he imagined that Iranian negotiators have a hard time knowing the Biden administration could be replaced by another Trump or “Trump-ist” administration in 2025. He saw what he called a “nitty-gritty moment” right now as diplomacy – which he supports – is back, yet the Iranian government consists of more hardliners now.

Martina, in the same group, expressed high satisfaction about the EU's foreign policy towards Iran, referring to Mogherini's efforts to push for a nuclear deal during her mandate as EU foreign policy commissioner. Even if the US “abandoned the deal”, Martina felt the EU showed resilience in not giving up with negotiations. Thanks to its “neutrality”, she thought that the EU can act as a good moderator, which the US cannot. Antonia agreed with Martina and thinks that this is the case also because of the EU's “limited economic interests” in the area (note: whether or not this is the case, this was Antonia's impression). **Anastasia added that the EU's policy towards Iran is a good example of its desired role as global peacekeeper.**

“ She stated [...] and that democracy marked a pressing issue in the Middle East that would impact the EU's actions

Other groups, however, had much lower levels of awareness about the Iran deal. In one group, **participants were visibly surprised to be talking about Iran**; instead, they had expected to talk about “great powers” such as Russia, China and the US. However, one participant in this group, Fotios, then reminded the others that Iran's history needs to be kept in mind. He argued that Iran was close to being a “Western-like” country “back in the day”.

He then returned to talking about “great powers”, arguing he saw China as a big economic player, which led him to state that Europe should become more independent,

mentioning the example of microchips. He made sure the issues of human rights abuses did not go unmentioned in his elaboration, explicitly addressing the treatment of Uighurs.

In the same group as Fotios, Ariadna said that, regarding Iran, she was aware of the nuclear deal, without commenting any further. However, she did add more broadly that she found Europe's role outside the EU to be interesting. She said she has many friends from Africa, especially Morocco, which makes her feel like Europe has a "white saviour syndrome". When it came to China, she perceived Beijing's relationship with Brussels as very complex. Economically, Ariadna said, Europe must stay close to China and thus cannot address human rights concerns too openly.

The points made about China by other participants prompted Mariavittoria to add that she felt the Belt and Road Initiative was a crucial point but said she had neither thorough knowledge nor any opinion on Iran specifically. This also held true for Myrto in the same group, who added that she found the situation with China to be complicated, "but somehow, Europe is either China's friend or foe." Probably being friends would be better, she ended.

Marilù said she doesn't know much but considered relations with not just Iran but the Middle East in general as "really, really important". She stated it would be complicated for the EU to act with a single voice, as opposed to individual member states taking different positions, and that democracy marked a pressing issue in the Middle East that would impact the EU's actions. She added that she understood that the EU is not "so determined" (i.e., impactful) in its actions in the Middle East because of this.

“ Discussions around Iran were often framed in terms of sanctions

This feeling of Europe not having a "determined" approach was backed up by other participants in other focus groups. For example, Valentina said the EU had no clear policy towards Iran, neither did the US. **In general, she stated, a common vision was lacking in the EU as nation states follow their national objectives instead of a common EU approach.** She added the situation in Iran has been forgotten since the media is not focusing on it at the moment. Anne, meanwhile, did not see a strong foreign policy towards Iran either, claiming "we do mostly what the US does" and "we let them [Iran] be, as long as they don't bother us." She believed that Iran would be ignored by the media at the moment because no Iranian refugees are coming to Europe.

Discussions around Iran were often framed in terms of sanctions. In one group, Michael shared the sentiment that the West will do whatever it takes to get oil and gas, adding that the same approach is being taken with Venezuela. Anthony agreed and went even further than Michael: "I think the US is doing that already." Sur, in the same group, believes that "small countries" will need to pick a side in the Ukraine-Russia conflict, although he thinks China is so big that it can afford to stay neutral.

In another group, Márk said the EU tried hard to reach the nuclear deal with Iran during the Obama administration. **He hoped the deal will come back in place and that the EU can "pacify" the region.** Vassili was of another opinion: "Let them do what they want to do. Why do we try to change that?" He argued in favour of ignoring Iran

“as long as they don’t step out of their own area. It’s their country, let them do what they want.” Joao, in the same group, added: “I do agree with what Vassili is saying about Iran and the issue of trying to externally change countries. I must reaffirm the slippery slope that we enter here, and historically, revolutions fail when they are not initiated by a sincere wish for change...”

Participants were asked if they have thoughts specifically on energy relations with Iran, namely skyrocketing prices on gas and oil, an EU phased oil embargo against Russia and the lifting of sanctions on Iran’s nuclear programme. In response, Daniela said she was aware that solutions to rising energy prices will be tough to find in the short term and will definitely involve difficult compromises. She elaborated on what she meant with reference to the German discourse on both the coal and nuclear phase-out, stating she was worried about alternatives to renewable energies like fracked gas from the US. One participant, Anthony, framed the issue as a question to policymakers: “Why would you lift the sanctions on Venezuela and Iran whereas you put sanctions on Russia? **Isn’t that a double standard?**”

RELATIONS WITH IRAN: A TEST FOR EU STRATEGIC AUTONOMY

#CriticalThinking

11 April 2022

AUTHOR

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Until recently, the European agenda on Iran was entirely centred on the revival of the nuclear agreement, known as the JCPOA. It had been left on life support since the unilateral decision of the former US president Donald Trump to withdraw from the agreement in 2018. However, **Russia's aggression against Ukraine introduced new variables that require a strategic review of the EU's relations with Iran.** Although restoring the JCPOA is still a core priority, the EU should look beyond the nuclear file and provide incentives to Iran to pursue a balanced foreign policy to the furthest extent possible and avoid pushing it to a tighter embrace of Moscow.

Overall, **the Islamic Republic of Iran has adopted a position that is broadly sympathetic with the Russian narrative.** Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei, Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian and President Ebrahim Raisi, as well as the bulk of the conservative press, attributed responsibility for the war to 'NATO's provocations and expansionism'.

That should not be surprising. **There is a strong anti-Western component in the thinking of Iranian conservatives or hardliners,** now controlling all vestiges of power in the Islamic Republic. Like their 'Eurasianist' or 'sovereignist' counterparts in Russia, for years they were propagating the notions of an inexorable 'Western decline' and an ascending alternative world order, led by Russia and China, in which Iran – in their view – could truly find its place. In an official parlance, these notions translated into a 'turn to the East' foreign policy announced by the Raisi administration.

“ Reluctance to fully back the Russian side also reflects Tehran's drive to preserve some room for manoeuvre or strategic autonomy in its foreign policy

However, a careful reading of the Iranian position reveals a more nuanced picture. Rather than support Russia, like Syria, Belarus or North Korea, Iran abstained in the United Nations General Assembly vote on the resolution condemning Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Iran did not recognise Crimea as part of the Russian Federation nor did it recognise the independence of the so-called 'people's republics' of Luhansk and Donetsk. While being in close touch with Moscow, Amir-Abdollahian also spoke with his Ukrainian counterpart, Dmytro Kuleba, who afterwards declared that Iran was against the war. **The same statements of the Iranian leaders that blamed the US and NATO for the situation also emphasised the need for an urgent ceasefire and a political solution.**

Such a stance is partly explained by Iran's fear of separatism within its own borders, embodied in the activities of the Kurdish, Baluch and Ahwazi Arab secessionist groups. However, reluctance to fully back the Russian side also reflects Tehran's drive to preserve some room for manoeuvre or strategic autonomy in its foreign policy.

Iran's engagement in talks on the JCPOA's revival is strong evidence of this. That a conservative government would negotiate in earnest with the Western powers, though not directly with the US, was not a foregone conclusion. **Many prominent members of the Raisi team, in fact, were outspoken critics of the original JCPOA – including the current chief negotiator, Ali Bagheri Kani.**

“ It reacted with poorly concealed irritation when Russia [...] threw the JCPOA talks in jeopardy by demanding that sanctions do not affect its trade with Iran

It took seven months – since Raisi assumed power in August 2021 – to reach the threshold of a deal; this is actually a rather short period, despite regular warnings from the Western participants that the ‘time for an agreement was running out’. To pursue the restoration of the JCPOA was a strategic decision by the system, blessed by Ayatollah Khamenei. Despite all the ‘resistance’ rhetoric, **the Islamic Republic's establishment understands the value of lifting American sanctions and unshackling the Iranian economy.** That's why it reacted with poorly concealed irritation when Russia, following the introduction of the Western sanctions for its invasion of Ukraine, threw the JCPOA talks in jeopardy by demanding that sanctions do not affect its trade with Iran.

Iran won't necessarily turn its back on Russia completely. In fact, conservatives see in the new sanctions against Russia, some of which strikingly resemble those imposed against Iran earlier, a new opportunity to deepen the cooperation between the two countries.

There is also, however, a realpolitik consideration. The Biden administration cannot provide Iran with the guarantees that a restored JCPOA would survive a US return to Republican power, possibly as early as 2024. **Republican heavyweights have made it abundantly clear that they have no intention whatsoever of honouring whatever agreement Biden may come to with the Iranians.**

In these circumstances, it is prudent for Tehran to keep from antagonising Moscow. If in 2024, or later, the US reneged from the agreement again, at least Iran will be covered by Russia in the UN Security Council. Not unlike other Middle Eastern states, including US partners such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), **Iran – in its own way – is hedging against wild oscillations in US foreign policy depending on which party is in power domestically.**

“ The Russian aggression in Ukraine [...] has proved that European strategic autonomy [...] is no longer a luxury, but a necessity

This is where the EU should step in. The Islamic Republic is not going to turn into a pro-Western state anytime soon. However, **the EU could use the space opened by Iran's balancing act to encourage its strategic autonomy and multi-vector tendencies**, as opposed to one-sided alignment with Russia. In practical terms, that means, first and foremost, to learn from the failed experience of the original JCPOA when the EU was unable to muster sufficient political will and clout to ensure its survival. Assuming the deal is restored, a major test of European strategic autonomy would be its ability to deliver economic dividends to Iran, independent of the electoral cycles in the US.

Furthermore, the JCPOA should not be seen as a one-off deal, but rather embedded in a broader strategy of engagement with Iran. Elements of such a broader strategy were envisaged in the 2016 joint statement by the then-high representative for EU foreign policy, Federica Mogherini, and Iran's former foreign minister, Javad Zarif. Although much in the world and region has changed since, there are aspects of that communication that are even more valid today.

For instance, Russian aggression in Ukraine made the diversification of energy supplies a critical issue for the future of the European economy and way of life. **Iran, with its abundant oil and gas reserves, could certainly become an actor in efforts to wean Europe off its excessive dependence on the Russian hydrocarbons.** A renewed relationship would also provide a platform to discuss other issues in the region, such as building on recent de-escalation moves between Saudi Arabia and Iran, or addressing the human rights situation.

The experience shows that any attempt at long-term engagement with Iran is fraught with political complexities. Too often such efforts were scuttled by recalcitrant domestic actors in the US, Iran and some of its Middle Eastern neighbours. The Russian aggression in Ukraine, however, has proved that European strategic autonomy, understood as the EU's ability to make independent political choices and back them up with action, is no longer a luxury, but a necessity. **Building a functional relationship with a key Middle Eastern state like Iran is certainly part of filling it with substance.**



Federica Mogherini during a meeting with Mohammad Javad Zarif, Iranian Minister for Foreign Affairs, in Tehran, 29 October 2016.

HOW A NUCLEAR DEAL WILL HELP IRAN'S CIVIL SOCIETY

#CriticalThinking

20 April 2022

AUTHOR

Negar Mortazavi, Host of The Iran Podcast and 2017 MENA Young Leader

It's been over a year since Joe Biden entered the White House and one of his campaign's key promises was to revive the landmark 2015 Iran nuclear deal known as the JCPOA. That agreement was a momentous foreign policy achievement of the Obama-Biden administration that former president Donald Trump tried to unravel by unilaterally pulling the US out of the agreement in 2018.

Today, after months of indirect yet intense diplomacy between Tehran and Washington, **the two sides seem close to reaching an agreement to revive the 2015 deal and return to its full compliance.** That means the US will lift various sanctions against Iran, and Iran will scale back its nuclear programme to the limits agreed in 2015.

The JCPOA is often discussed from nuclear and security, as well as economic and trade, perspectives. **But not much is said about how a potential agreement may impact Iran's domestic politics, civil society and various social rights movements.** I spoke to a range of Iranian experts, both inside and outside the country, to examine the impacts of a nuclear deal on Iran's domestic socio-political future, specifically concerning four key areas: human rights, women's rights, political reforms and the struggle for democracy.

Mani Mostofi is an Iranian-American human rights lawyer and Director of the Miaan Group based in New York. He spoke to me about former US president Donald Trump's policy of "maximum pressure" and economic sanctions and their impacts on human rights in Iran. Mostofi also talked about how the revival of the JCPOA and sanctions relief can have positive impacts on the Iranian civil society and the rights of Iranians.

“ **The larger and more powerful the middle class becomes, the stronger civil society becomes**

“If the JCPOA renewal delivers sanction relief, it will at least lead to some improvement of the economic and social rights of Iranians,” Mostofi told me, adding that the JCPOA was realistically never going to lead directly to much-needed civil and political rights gains. Still, Mostofi believes that diplomacy did give birth to new opportunities “like an EU-Iran bilateral dialogue on human rights in Iran”. **But those opportunities evaporated after Trump shredded the JCPOA and effectively undercut any leverage the EU or European states might have to influence Iran's human rights behaviour.**

“So, both in the areas of civil political rights and economic social rights, the maximum pressure status quo is not going to help. Diplomacy is not a cure-all. Iran is a largely stubborn human rights abuser, and efforts aimed at accountability, like [the] UN Special

Rapporteur, need to continue. Nonetheless, **unless the US and Europe can also build leverage and move Iran away from its current trajectory towards Russia and China, I am not sure the international community will have any real chance of impacting the desperate human rights situation in the medium term,**" Mostofi told me.

Next, the women's struggles for equal rights in Iran has been driven by economic empowerment and increasing the power of the middle class, who have democratic and liberal aspirations. "The larger and more powerful the middle class becomes, the stronger civil society becomes. And a powerful civil society can more effectively defend the interests and rights of its citizens, and pursue its civic demands," said Parastoo Sarmadi, a women's rights activist based in Tehran, Iran. Sarmadi has been involved with Iran's reform movement and the women's rights movement for many years. I spoke to her about the impacts of sanctions relief on Iran's civil society in general, and on the women's movement in particular.

"We have learned from our experience in the last three decades that when the economic situation improves, people can move beyond daily struggles for basic needs and will pursue various social and political demands. And the women's movement is no exception to this rule," Sarmadi argued. "As we witnessed during the reform era, the women's movement grew a lot. But later on **when the economy worsened, the women's movement was weakened like other civic movements.** Another negative impact of economic sanctions is the intensification of the security environment in Iran, which is to the advantage of conservative forces in the country and to the detriment of civil movements, such as the women's movement," she added.

“ If the middle class shrinks, peaceful civil movements will be replaced by violent protests and riots

What these rights movements have in common is an appetite for social justice and equality in Iran, but the movements need to be backed up by strong economic and policy reform.

Azar Mansoori is leader of the Union of Islamic Iran People Party, Iran's largest reformist political party. She has been a member of the party since its inception and eventually became the first woman to lead the group. She spoke to me about the deal's impacts on Iran's domestic politics and the future of reform and democracy in the country:

"Basically, any action and policy that leads to balance in Iran's foreign policy will first help Iran's crisis-stricken economy. The reality is that without engagement and exchange with the world and the necessary balance in this area, all of our economic indicators will be impacted – inflation, budget deficit, economic growth, gross domestic product, [and so on]. Also the continuation of sanctions is dangerous because in addition to isolating Iran and threatening the country's existence, economic and social crises will also increase. In fact, **as poverty grows, the Iranian middle class will shrink every day and the aspirations of the civil society, democracy-seeking groups, women's rights activists and human rights defenders will be reduced** to basic economic demands that we have recently witnessed."

Monsoori continued: "The reform of governance in Iran is dependent on the

political participation and demands of the middle class. If the middle class shrinks, peaceful civil movements will be replaced by violent protests and riots, which lead to bloody crackdowns by authoritarian forces and further closing of the political space, eventually blocking the path for peaceful civil activism. This situation not only threatens our national interests, it is also dangerous for civil society. **Normalising relations with the world, both with the East and the West, will help Iran's economic crisis in the short term, and in the long term it will benefit democracy and development in Iran.** In the end, Iran's diverse and plural society is more interested in becoming more similar to South Korea than North Korea."

“**The Islamic Republic has grown more brutal and repressive in recent years**

Lastly, **a key component of the political reform in Iran has been a century-long effort to achieve participatory democracy in the country and empower all citizens to take part in decision-making for their future.** Nader Hashemi is a political science professor and Director of the Center for Middle East Studies at Denver University. He has studied and researched Middle East politics, and democratic and human rights struggles in non-Western societies. I spoke to him about the impacts of the JCPOA on the future of Iran's democracy movement.

"The JCPOA was widely celebrated by Iranian democrats and civil society activists in 2015. This is because the lifting of sanctions and global engagement held the prospect of creating better internal social conditions conducive to democratisation. It is difficult to fight for democracy on an empty stomach. Unemployment exacerbates this problem. The threat of war with the US further undermines the prospects for democratic mobilisation and struggle," Hashemi told me.

"There are no guarantees that a return to the JCPOA will immediately revive the struggle for democracy in Iran. The Islamic Republic has grown more brutal and repressive in recent years. One fact that cannot be denied is that **crippling sanctions have hurt the average citizen while strengthening Iranian hardliners both economically and ideologically.** Nonetheless, there is deep discontent within Iran and a strong desire for political change," Hashemi said, adding that this has been openly acknowledged by senior Iranian leadership on many occasions. "A more conducive international context that removes sanctions and the threat of war will benefit Iranian democratic forces. Time is not on the side of the regime; it is on the side of those forces that desire democracy and human rights," Hashemi explained.

It is clear that a nuclear agreement with Iran and the lifting of sanctions will have far wider implications than limiting the country's nuclear programme. Policymakers and diplomats should consider the deal's positive impacts on Iran's social and political space.

UNVEILING IRAN'S NEW POLICY FOR THE MIDDLE EAST: REGIONAL POWER GAMES?

Roundtable
20 April 2022

MODERATORS

Negar Mortazavi, Host of the Iran Podcast and 2017 MENA Young Leader

Dharmendra Kanani, Chief Operating Officer and Chief Spokesperson at Friends of Europe

Where does Iran see its future? Is it looking towards the West or more towards China and Russia for strategic partners? How can Iran, the US and the EU be brought back to the negotiating table? And what are Iran's nuclear ambitions? These were some of the questions addressed by an audience of invited experts and decision-makers at the online roundtable, held under the Chatham House Rule.

In recent years, **Iran has sought to position itself as a key political, economic and cultural player in the Middle East and across the wider Muslim world.** The new hardline conservative President Ebrahim Raisi, elected last year, wishes to pursue closer cooperation with Iran's neighbours without compromising its own vested interests in the region.

Despite the sanctions currently placed upon the country, Iran has developed a coping mechanism and strengthened its ties with China and Russia. However, it has not walked away from the so-called Iran deal, despite the US withdrawal in 2018. Russia's invasion of Ukraine has complicated the geopolitical picture and brought pressure upon Iran's alliances – although Tehran has not yet condemned Russia's actions.

This leaves Iran at something of a crossroads. **Will the country continue to look East and North to its new partners in Beijing and Moscow, or will it look West and seek a return to the negotiating table?** Or will it continue to tread a tightrope between the two, whilst looking to build its regional power base?

“The deal now survives “on life support” between Iran and Europe

Against this complex backdrop, a fundamental issue is the status of the so-called Iran deal – the JCPOA, which trades sanctions relief for curbs on Iran's nuclear ambitions – agreed in 2015 between Iran and the P5+1 (the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council – China, France, Russia, the UK and the US – plus Germany) together with the EU.

In 2018, former US president Donald Trump withdrew from the JCPOA, and the deal now survives “on life support” between Iran and Europe. **In his election campaign, President Biden pledged that the US would re-join the JCPOA** – but, as yet, has not done so. Blocking progress is Iran's demand for the Islamic Revolutionary Guard

Corps (IRGC) to be removed from the US Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTO) list. It is clear that there remains a mutual distrust, which was only heightened by the killing of Iran's General Qasem Soleimani by a US drone strike in 2020, viewed by some as an 'illegal assassination' in violation of international law. At the time, Iran listed a number of US officials it considered responsible. The Biden administration is seeking assurances that Iran will not retaliate.

Consequently, the overriding feeling is that **the stalemate has led to a missed opportunity**. "The beginning of the Biden administration coincided with the pro-diplomacy camp in Tehran for about six months – but negotiations didn't start and that 'golden window of opportunity' was missed." Meanwhile, Iran continues to develop its nuclear capabilities by enriching Uranium above limits agreed in the deal.

“ Sometimes the advantage can lie in not facing additional disadvantages

Reviving the deal is understood to be in Iran's best interests, due to the variety of economic, political and diplomatic options that it brings to the country. This includes reaching new markets with its oil, particularly as countries are currently seeking to diversify their supply away from Russia.

"The JCPOA is the lynchpin. **We have to get back into the old deal to move forward**; otherwise, the situation will deteriorate further." Without it, Iran will have to continue building alliances with "the bad crowd". There was a common view among participants that Iran would do well to distance itself from Russia.

One reason that the original JCPOA failed, it was suggested, is that there was no immediate impetus to build upon it and put efforts into regional de-escalation and stabilisation. **The JCPOA represents a soft pathway, through regulation and monitoring, to establishing a more cooperative and integrated Iran** that is not in conflict with others in the region, rather than a more aggressive approach, such as containment and potentially regime change, which for some may still be on the table.

Another proposed view was to consider what Iran would have to lose from the failure of the JCPOA, not least sustained sanctions. "Sometimes the advantage can lie in not facing additional disadvantages."

“ For Iran, looking East makes a lot of sense

In spite of this, **Iran may continue to look elsewhere for strategic partnerships**. What would the country gain from turning its back on those who have supported it, for example, throughout the COVID-19 crisis or economically in sustaining oil prices? "Iran has been able to reach an equilibrium under sanctions [...] It has developed a lot of coping mechanisms and will continue to do so, whether it returns to the JCPOA or not." Iraq is now, for example, a major export market for Iran. Iran also sells its oil to China and is invested in maintaining that relationship.

Whereas **Iran previously had little choice but to look to the West and the US**, which set the ‘world order’, to be part of the international community, this may now be changing. “For Iran, looking East makes a lot of sense.”

“ This last year of indirect negotiations, despite the best efforts of Europe, as well as well-intended efforts by both the US and Iran, has been a trust-depleting exercise

The original JCPOA had many flaws, and no one ever expected it to solve all problems between Iran and the international community, but it built confidence and trust. A common view was that the deal was certainly better than nothing.

So, it is viewed with some surprise and disappointment that **the Biden administration has engaged with the process so slowly**. Both reformists and hardliners in Iran are said to be wondering why a year has passed and no one seems to want to take responsibility.

“This last year of indirect negotiations, despite the best efforts of Europe, as well as well-intended efforts by both the US and Iran, has been a trust-depleting exercise.”

This was in part due to mismatched expectations. **Iran expected a swift US return to the existing deal**. Indeed, the US Democratic Party made a commitment in its 2020 electoral platform to do so. However, in early 2021, the White House felt that tricky foreign policy decisions would take political capital away from newly-elected President Biden at a time when he needed it most domestically.

The US also held diplomatic talks with Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Israel to reduce their opposition to the JCPOA – and took advice not to rush the process – perhaps also believing that a longer and stronger deal could be quickly drawn up before formally re-joining. **This appeared to suggest that the deal was neither a priority for Biden nor that Tehran anticipated a re-negotiation first**. “It was perceived as an effort to use Trump’s sanctions to re-negotiate a deal, to get a longer and stronger deal, and as a result, the position was not particularly different from that of Trump.”

With the process now at a stalemate, a further complication is that Iran refuses to meet with the US face-to-face until they re-join the JCPOA. Understandably, **it is “very difficult to build trust when you can’t speak to the other side directly”**.

“ The EU can also play an effective role in the wider region

Meanwhile, the geopolitical balance is shifting. Previously, it was clear that Iran needed a relationship with the West. It was felt, however, that the deadlock in recent years has only been of benefit to China. Other countries, too, have moved on. It was noted that the UK, now no longer an EU member, is focusing on building alliances with the Gulf States and Israel, where it feels there is greater economic benefit and opportunity for influence.

Opinions were divided on whether Europe still had a role to play. On the one hand, some felt that Europe had nothing new to offer to the process right now, particularly since it had refused to work with China and Russia after the US withdrawal from the JCPOA. Europe had, in some eyes, consequently lost Iran's trust. There was also felt to be little energy or capacity from the European side at present, with "JCPOA fatigue" cited in Europe's capitals and the stalemate seen essentially as a US-Iran issue.

In contrast, others argued that Europe is being proactive behind the scenes with all participants and efforts fully focused on the deal's revival and return to its full implementation. In practice, **it is clearly not in Europe's interest for the JCPOA to fall apart**. The deal at least limits one country's potential nuclear capability, at a time when the EU is trying to prevent a proliferation crisis with a nuclear power on its own borders.

At the same time, **Europe should adopt a broader approach and aim attention beyond the nuclear deal**, however important that may be. The recently adopted seven-year programme to strengthen EU-Iran relations focuses bilateral efforts on climate change, growth and jobs, as well as cross-border issues like migration and drugs, among other key concerns.

Moreover, the EU can also play an effective role in the wider region. **The EU is in dialogue with Iran on matters of stability and security in the Gulf and Middle East region**, as well as in Afghanistan. The forthcoming EU Joint Communication on the Partnership with the Gulf can help progress these endeavours.

“ Many civil society activists are very fearful of both striking a deal – and of not striking a deal

The impact upon Iranian citizens and civil society should not be forgotten, it was warned.

The ongoing state of conflict in the country is used by the regime to suppress civil society, all the more so since Raisi came to power. There is also great unease about Iran's growing reliance on China and Russia, with heightened human rights and security concerns.

Many civil society activists warned against a US exit from the JCPOA and want to see their return to alleviate the economic pressure and impact of sanctions upon citizens. **The isolation of the Iranian government has had the knock-on effect of also isolating civil society and the Iranian people.**

Nonetheless, there is feeling that **human rights concerns have been neglected by the international community**. Renewed engagement with Iran, adopting an economic focus, therefore may not bring about any improvements concerning human rights, freedom of expression or civil society issues. "Many civil society activists are very fearful of both striking a deal – and of not striking a deal."

Concerns remain about Iran's engagement in the wider region and reconciliation with its neighbours too. As authoritarian regimes, it is felt that **improved regional relations will only lead to further and collective repression of citizens** even more so than now.

“ It is not in Europe’s interest for the JCPOA to fall apart

Looking to the future, the wide-ranging discussion hinted at the feeling that we are reaching a tipping point. Whilst confidence may be currently low, with neither positive momentum, nor escalation, at least **diplomatic channels are still open and efforts have not failed entirely.**

“Neither side is escalating but neither side is walking away. Maybe that is the best outcome for now.”

The potential disadvantages of a non-agreement should not be forgotten. It is not just about what the West can gain, but also what Iran would have to lose. Sanctions relief cannot be simply symbolic and must have substance. It is vital also to avoid allowing competing powers from the East or North to take advantage of the situation, and Iran has been seen to shift its alliances quickly in the past.

“Iran sees that Biden [...] doesn’t want a conflict with Iran, but there is a stalemate when it comes to the nuclear deal.” Nevertheless, **there was hope that the deal could be re-energised** – though, if not under Biden, then when and by whom? It was agreed that any kind of deal would at least put Iran and the US back in the room together and start re-building trust. The critical next step would be for creative ideas to build on that.

For Europe, the message is that we are capable of doing more. It is not in Europe’s interest for the JCPOA to fall apart. The Ukraine conflict has shown that Europe can get its act together, efficiently and effectively when there is political will.

The role for the EU will perhaps be to act as a mediator to help Washington and Tehran find a compromise. At the very least, pressure should be exerted upon the Biden administration to feel a greater sense of urgency and make a deal possible. Continued dialogue can only help bring people to the table, both in Iran and in the wider Middle East and Gulf region.

THE IRANIAN MISMATCH BETWEEN THE POLITICAL ELITE AND YOUTH: WHY YOUNG PEOPLE ARE LEAVING THE COUNTRY

#CriticalThinking

13 May 2022

AUTHOR

Lena Loch, Programme Assistant at Friends of Europe

Although slightly older than those of neighbouring states, **Iran's population is rather young with a median age of 32 as of 2020. In 1995, Iran's median age was 18.6 and increased rapidly over the last seven years.** While factors like the high reception of refugees and a decreasing birth rate influence this increase, an important contributing aspect is the high rate of emigration that results from the mismatch regarding values, income and living conditions between Iran's old political elite and its youth.

The Iranian government did not have the best image among the population already before President Ebrahim Raisi was elected in June last year. Youth especially put a lot of hope in Hassan Rouhani, Raisi's predecessor, but they felt that **he did not live up to his promises.** Meanwhile, the reinstated sanctions after Donald Trump's withdrawal from the nuclear deal left many in a **state of frustration and political disenchantment.**

Less than half of Iran's registered voters cast their ballot in 2021, in large part to express aversion to the regime. **Corruption and the wide age gap between the leaders and those they are supposed to represent have caused discontent for years,** and the population's perception has not improved since Raisi took power.

“ In 2021, around 3.5mn young people were enrolled in university

On top of that, **Iran's population faces several domestic issues.** The weak economy and global isolation, resulting from the far-reaching sanctions imposed on Iran, coupled with droughts and poor water management, high (absolute) poverty and unemployment rates, as well as increasing crime rates, led to protests that mobilised large amounts of people in the country of 85mn inhabitants.

Two worlds are clashing in Iran: those who have or are close to power versus those who do not have connections to power. Wealthy versus economically struggling. Distance from versus rapprochement with the West. Strong ideological influences on domestic and foreign policy versus a clearer separation of religion and the state. **And, for a large part, old versus young.**

The way in which Raisi's ideological approach to politics impacts Iran's younger population becomes especially evident when looking at universities. This part of society is highly educated, particularly in urban areas and compared to neighbouring states. In 2021, around 3.5mn young people were enrolled in university. However, this number could now decrease.

“ Iran has failed to adapt to global economic and domestic social changes

Iran is currently in its so-called ‘third cultural revolution’, according to the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. **Professors and students are systematically removed and expelled** if they obstruct the Islamization of universities, as outlined in the Document of Islamic University adopted in 2013 and now implemented by Raisi’s regime. At the same time, a newly established **quota system ensures that most university spots are reserved for those with close ties to trusted regime followers**. By appointing ministers who share the same ideology, Raisi ensures that the Islamization project is enforced by the entire regime. Some of these ministers are former members of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), a powerful paramilitary organisation.

For students who have obtained a place at university, there are **insufficient job opportunities that match their level of education**. Iran has failed to adapt to global economic and domestic social changes. According to the Middle East Institute, more than 2mn students left school in 2020. With these current policies, not only is the quality of education at stake, but **Iran risks increasing the emigration of professors and students** that do not condone the Islamization of universities, **and losing the highly educated people that it has already invested in**. Young people have and continue to search for creative ways to make the best out of the economically difficult situation but feel that the country stagnates.

Additionally, there is the aspect of gender. In recent years, more and more women attend university. Currently, more than 60% of the students at the University of Isfahan are female – **after graduation, however, women are often encouraged to stay at home instead of entering the workforce**.

“ What will actually change life for the better, however, is a recovering and adapting economy and the decreasing Islamization of education

But Iran’s (female) youth has access to role models other than those put forward by old, male politicians. **Social media has become a defining medium for young generations just as everywhere else in the world**. Its spillover effects have been and are multifaceted: less traditional clothing, easier and anonymous criticism, and the spread of news from around the world. Given the critical economic and political situation, as well as the information that is still accessible online, **Iran is witnessing a decline in marriages and childbirth, an increase in divorces and a rise in postponed marriages until couples find better jobs outside of the country**. Social media thereby holds great power in prompting people to question what they have long been told – but it can also portray a false reality.

RichKidsofTehran (RKOT), an Instagram page with more than 510k followers, celebrates the luxurious lifestyle of young, rich Iranians. Excessive consumption, alcohol and naked skin: the page portrays the opposite of reality for most Iranian citizens and of what is preached by the government. A 2021 study by Ehsan Shahghasemi, Assistant Professor at the University of Tehran, concluded that **what seems like a small**

revolution is really more of the opposite. Wealth most often comes with close ties to the regime and pages like RKOT present a distraction from actual living conditions, creating a **dreamlike public narrative of what Iran could be like for young people.**

What will actually change life for the better, however, is a recovering and adapting economy and the decreasing Islamization of education. Combined, **both would lead to highly educated people whose knowledge can be actively used for progress.** The heavy sanctions currently imposed on Iran of course limit economic change. A renewed JCPOA poses the chance to change that – if all parties involved can find an agreement. Raisi's regime needs to realise that their reality is not only different from the one of the majority of Iran's population but that their situation over the long-term will only improve if the regime changes its vision for Iran's future.

An addendum by the author was added to this article on 28 June 2022, following additional input from an Iranian researcher on the topic of this article.

It is important to highlight that not all of the aforementioned trends are new. After the Iran-Iraq War, the government adopted non-liberal policies and it can be argued that every leader and government thereafter followed the same path, just in different paces. An Iranian researcher therefore raised the question: are leaders really important? **The described disenchantment with politics** – a process that is not exclusive to the Iranian youth – **is the result of many people answering this question with a “no”.**

Slow or stagnant change over the long term is also caused by some political figures, and consequently their ideas, maintaining power for decades. An example is Ali Khamenei, Iran's current supreme leader. Taking the previously mentioned aspect of gender, for example: although women make up a large part of Iranian students in universities, the country is far from reaching gender equality. Khamenei himself believes in the country's widespread notion of gender segregation and contends that gender equality as aspired by Western states harms the societal role of women. His example shows that **although elected presidents might have different visions for Iran, decade-long processes and structural issues limit the possibilities for change.**

This does not mean that no improvements in Iran have been made in recent decades. Data gathered by UN Women in 2021 shows a decline in women being married before the age of 18, fewer pregnancies among women aged between 15 and 19, as well as improved healthcare, compared to 2011. In 2016, the share of women in leadership positions was 17.3%, more than five times higher than in 1976. In the same time frame, the rate of girls that were deprived of education decreased from 38.6% to 3%.

“ Without more drastic structural changes, even a change in approach by Raisi will most likely not lead to any substantial long-term improvements for Iran's youth

On the other hand, domestic violence, child marriage, abuse of women political prisoners and the general lack of equal rights for women are long-existing problems listed by the Center for Human Rights in Iran. **Representation in both the government and other leadership positions remains problematic.**

It should be reinforced that **there is a necessity for Raisi's regime to realise the differences between their reality and the one of the majority of Iran's citizens**, especially regarding the current JCPOA negotiations. Without more drastic structural changes, even a change in approach by Raisi will most likely not lead to any substantial long-term improvements for Iran's youth. The struggle lies in the fact that **change from within the government is unlikely or slow and almost impossible from the outside**. Activists, especially women activists, risk imprisonment for fighting for their rights and structural changes.

Addressing and changing these and other domestic issues, particularly those of an economic nature – instead of concentrating on military efforts – is a critical first step for progress in both the economic situation on a national level and the living conditions for the Iranian society. **The international community must ensure that the improvement of human rights and structural issues is part of every deal with Iran.**



Iranian youth resting at the Si-o-se Pol bridge in Isfahan ©Marc Röhlig

YOUNG IRANIAN ACTIVISTS, DEMOCRACY BUILDING AND THE LEGACY OF A FAILED CIVIL SOCIETY

#CriticalThinking

30 June 2022

AUTHOR

The identity of this article's author has been kept anonymous to ensure the safety and security of the individual.

Civil society was a hybrid and ambiguous concept at the time of Mohammad Khatami's landslide election to the Iranian presidency in 1997. During his term, numerous scholars took it upon themselves to come up with a working definition for this trendy buzzword, ranging from 'the State's right hand' to 'the State's ultimate alternative'. Nonetheless, **conservatives' incessant attempts to put an end to Khatami's reforms**, be it in the form of shutting down progressive press or jailing and eliminating prominent figures, **left the project of defining an Islamic civil society in limbo.**

Even in its heyday, **it is undeniable that civil society in Iran was fragile and deficient.** However, despite the turbulent political sphere, it managed to raise, guide and educate a generation of young activists who were well aware of the chimera that it was facing and the roundabout methods necessary for organising and putting forward demands.

The One Million Signature for the Repeal of Discriminatory Laws campaign, which arose in 2006 during Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's presidency, was one of the most successful movements after the 1979 revolution and is recognised as one of the fruits of this era. Modelled after a similar Moroccan initiative, **the One Million Signature campaign aspired to change existing laws regarding women and prepare the ground for the ratification of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discriminations Against Women (CEDAW).** At the same time, although the 2009 Green Movement attracted citizens from all walks of life, it is not an overestimation to assume that its core proponents were the middle-class, technology-savvy youth who believed achieving democracy within the existing political framework was possible even in the face of rubber bullets and tear gas.

“ Today's youth inherited nothing but the debris of civil society

In comparison, **those born in the 1990s and thereafter have fuzzy memories, if any, of this 'golden era' of makeshift civil freedoms.** Due to the state of security, strengthened by sanctions and international isolation, today's youth inherited nothing but the debris of civil society: NGOs with low capacities to survive on their own and reduced to their charity functions with the majority of their network-building attempts deemed as security threats, and a handful of human rights groups, activist networks and professional unions pronounced illegal. In a nutshell, branches with no trunks.

Iranian society has long lived under the double threat of sanctions and mismanagement. As time passes, the impacts of this situation become clearer. Hope

was injected into Iranian society after the JCPOA was adopted in 2015. According to the World Health Organization, the death rate due to self-harm in Iran increased from 5.9 per 100,000 to 6.1 between 2011 and 2014; however, just one year after the temporary lifting of sanctions in 2016, the figure returned to 5.9.

The loss of hope was palpable after the US unilaterally pulled out of the JCPOA agreement in 2018. **The void was filled by a general sense of disappointment in a society** that now had to make do with a decaying environment, restrictions on civil freedoms, high inflation and unemployment rates, and the increasing pressure of neoliberal policies that created serious inequality in various areas, including health, education and living conditions.

“ The current generation of young activists is not willing or able to abide by the prudent ways of its predecessors

Given the circumstances in which the current generation was politicised, its course of action is understandable. **Enthusiasm for change is on par with reluctance to learn from the experience of those deemed as the failed generation**, duped by a façade of change and responsible for compromises that led to the current situation. Consequently, the current generation of young activists is not willing or able to abide by the prudent ways of its predecessors.

Today's young activists are often criticised for being atomised, short-sighted and reactionary, lacking theoretical and practical knowledge, and disregarding of the international climate. However, it should be understood that **after the failure of the JCPOA, many lost all hope in diplomatic solutions, international bodies, and the agreements and treaties they offer**. The new generation of activists, particularly those belonging to leftist groups, reflect the sentiments of a society that is tired of being deceived and disappointed by deals that can be revoked on a whim. Their calls mirror the actions of countless people taking to the streets in small and big towns alike, demanding economic equality and decent living conditions.

Resolving the current situation and changing public attitude calls for even more capable organisers, stronger networks and innovative strategies. Yet, **it is lamentable that as the protests escalate, the gap between the old and new generation of activists grows wider**. I am not here to fan the fire of old against new. On the contrary, I am here to propose a truce, wondering whether **the combination of the old generation's knowledge and experience in organising and negotiating mixed with the new generation's zeal can finally bring democracy and stability back to a society on the brink of bankruptcy and collapse**.

WHY ALL SANCTIONS REGIMES, INCLUDING IRAN, SHOULD INCLUDE 'HUMANITARIAN HARM' ASSESSMENTS

#CriticalThinking

14 July 2022

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When policymakers think about the humanitarian impacts of sanctions, they tend to focus on the specific questions of whether they constrict trade in food and medicine or hinder humanitarian assistance to vulnerable communities. Policymakers seek to protect these activities by creating exemptions and granting licences to make clear that companies are permitted to sell essential goods to buyers in sanctioned countries, and that non-governmental organisations can carry out their work in line with international humanitarian law, even if sanctioned entities, including government actors, are involved. **So long as humanitarian trade and assistance continues in some form, policymakers are generally satisfied that humanitarian harms have been mitigated.**

But the experience of Iran under sanctions suggests that **a broader definition of 'humanitarian impacts' is needed to reflect the true harms of sanctions on ordinary people.** Defining the humanitarian harms of sanctions is an urgent task when considering that "more than 800 million people live in countries under a U.S. sanctions program or that have a major national-level political group sanctioned—12% of the population of the developing world," as cited in Noema Magazine. The matter is made all the more urgent given that many of the world's broadest sanctions regimes are now imposed on countries already suffering from acute or prolonged humanitarian crises, such as those against targets in Syria, Venezuela, North Korea, Cuba and Afghanistan.

Sanctions – particularly those that target finance and other economically-important sectors – are designed to cause significant economic pain in order to pressure an uncooperative government to change its behaviour and to raise costs of actions found to be in breach of international norms. But **any sanctions programme that causes significant contraction to a country's economy will also have an impact on ordinary people.** Our research has found that major sanctions programmes often induce high rates of inflation in the target country, both by creating pressure on the national currency and government budgets, but also by interrupting the normal functioning of supply chains, including those dealing in exempted goods, such as medicines, medical devices, vaccines, food and agricultural products.

“ Within the broader picture of diminished social welfare, vulnerable groups [...] are least able to shield themselves from the economic fallout

As prices for even basic goods – such as food and medicine – rise, household welfare is diminished. In the most serious cases, families can be plunged into hunger and individuals with serious medical conditions may no longer be able to afford vital medication. In countries like Iran, **food and medicine remain available, giving the impression that sanctions are not having acute humanitarian impacts. But that does not mean that food and medicine remain affordable**, particularly as real incomes fall, purchasing power decreases, and millions of households fall below the poverty line. Within the broader picture of diminished social welfare, vulnerable groups, including women, children, the elderly and refugees, are least able to shield themselves from the economic fallout.

Systemic impacts, such as pressure on a country's healthcare system and the effect of budgetary constraints on infrastructure investments essential for development, should also be considered as part of humanitarian harms. **Policymakers are likely to balk at the suggestion that the humane use of sanctions would require limiting these kinds of systemic impacts** – as the purpose of sanctions is often to hamper economic development and to deny states resources to engage in problematic activities, such as the funding of weapons programmes or the financing of terrorism.

But when sanctions are imposed on a target country for many years – Iran has now spent nearly a decade under major US secondary sanctions – **the cumulative impact on public services and critical infrastructure can lead to unique vulnerabilities**. This matters because states serve multiple functions. Aside from funding its own defence, the state is also responsible for the maintenance of public services and the welfare system. Therefore, even if the intended aim of sanctions is to weaken the target government, there are unavoidable impacts on the ability of state institutions to deliver public goods, such as healthcare, or support vital activities, such as agriculture, that form the foundations for social welfare and resilience in the country. This makes the country more vulnerable to crises.

In Iran, sanctions complicated the response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The country has also faced challenges accessing vaccines and related goods to address the virus. Iran's response to other, slower-moving crises, has also been hampered. For example, alongside government mismanagement, sanctions have compromised Iran's ability to deal with its acute water crisis by preventing the acquisition of key technologies.

“ For now, US and European policymakers are unlikely to radically alter their approach towards the humanitarian harms of sanctions

An added problem is that of financial sector de-risking and wider private sector over-compliance with sanctions, leading to financial exclusion and difficulties accessing essential goods and services. As our research has shown, **many banks now have complete blanket bans on servicing any types of trade to Iran**, including exempted goods. In turn, many companies dealing in vital goods – be it in technology, shipping or insurance – have also withdrawn from Iran, alongside other 'high-risk' jurisdictions. This is due to the serious, and growing, hurdles characterised by the risk of billion-dollar fines, cumbersome compliance requirements and reputational risks.

Overall, the impact of sanctions on government budgets or investment attraction cannot be considered a humanitarian harm in the short run, particularly in cases where hard-hitting sanctions are imposed for short durations; however, in the long run, they do begin to impinge on the wellbeing of ordinary people, as these impacts prevent the maintenance of a certain level of welfare support by the state. This highlights **the urgent need for humanitarian and public health specialists to form part of any sanctions planning process**, and for their design to account for long-term economic damage.

For now, US and European policymakers are unlikely to radically alter their approach towards the humanitarian harms of sanctions. As the focus falls on tightening the sanctions vice grip on Russia, **humanitarian concerns risk falling by the wayside**. But starting to understand the humanitarian harms of sanctions in more holistic terms means giving voice to millions of people living in Iran and other sanctioned jurisdictions, whose lives have been dramatically changed by economic measures imposed from afar.

