



# ASIA MAIOR

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## **Asia in 2022: The impact of the Russia-Ukraine war on local crises**

**Edited by**  
**Michelguglielmo Torri**  
**Filippo Boni**  
**Diego Maiorano**

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A large, intricate mandala pattern in a light orange color, located in the bottom right corner of the page. It features complex, symmetrical geometric and organic shapes, resembling a stylized flower or a traditional Indian mandala.

CENTRO STUDI PER I POPOLI EXTRA-EUROPEI “CESARE BONACOSSA” - UNIVERSITÀ DI PAVIA

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The Journal of the Italian think tank on Asia founded by Giorgio Borsa in 1989  
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# IRAN 2022: DOMESTIC CHALLENGES TO STATE LEGITIMACY AND ISOLATION IN THE GLOBAL ARENA

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*The Islamic Republic of Iran has faced severe domestic and international challenges that have progressively brought the country to the brink of global isolation. The ongoing impasse over nuclear negotiations, due largely to contentious demands from the Iranian side, has only served to exacerbate the negative effects of international sanctions on ordinary Iranian citizens. Likewise, Iran's controversial position in regard to the Russian war in Ukraine has increased its isolation on the international stage and resulted in greater domestic economic hardship. Against this background, significant popular protests, led predominantly by Iranian youths, erupted in the autumn of 2022 and continued for over three months. The nature of these protests offers valuable insights into the weakening legitimacy of the country's establishment, in which prominent political slogans and new forms of societal mobilization have revealed the profound gap that exists between the state's historic institutions and the younger segments of Iran's population.*

KEYWORDS – Popular protests; women's rights; nuclear impasse; international isolation; Iran-Russia alignment

## 1. Introduction

August 2022 marked a full calendar year since President Ebrahim Raisi assumed executive power in the Islamic Republic of Iran. In this time, Raisi has failed to fulfil the promises of economic relief and to win the fight against poverty, which were cornerstones of his electoral campaign. Prolonged economic difficulties and intersectional social grievances are symptoms of the progressively worsening crisis of state legitimacy in Iran, which can be traced back to as early as 2009. The Iranian population has faced severe financial difficulties, such as rising prices on basic goods, economic stagnation, and high levels of inflation. The poverty rate has also risen significantly across different sections of society, impoverishing both the middle classes and low-income households. As a consequence, waves of popular protests led by workers from various sectors erupted in many parts of the country throughout the year, in response to economic mismanagement and low or delayed salaries.

However, following the suspicious death of a twenty-two-year-old Kurdish woman, Masha Jina Amini, widespread political demonstrations soon re-

placed these economically driven rallies. Young girls, high-school pupils, and university students vocally criticized the Islamic Republic (and the very foundations upon which it stands), and physically attacked and vandalized its symbols and political icons. The resulting violence and heavy-handed response by Iranian police forces, which resulted in a massive number of arrests, did not manage to weaken the momentum behind these protests, but did underline the state's uncompromising attitude toward this popular outcry.

Meanwhile, the outbreak of the Russian war in Ukraine imposed further hardship on Iran's already suffering economy while simultaneously altering Iran's relationship with both Moscow and the West. Though declaring itself to be a neutral spectator to the conflict, Iran has controversially supported the Russian military effort by manufacturing and supplying drones to Moscow. These actions have only contributed to the country's increasing isolation on the global stage, and further protracted the enduring standoff over nuclear negotiations. In both March and August, all parties appeared close to reaching a new deal; but this prospect has diminished due to internal tensions in Iran, the worsening human rights situation involving the protestors within the country, and the support given by the Iranian military to Russia in the on-going conflict with Ukraine.

Of the above, this article focuses predominantly on the popular protests that broke out in the autumn of 2022, examining their roots and developments, as well as their significance in terms of socio-political stability. It also investigates the enduring effects of international sanctions together with the outbreak of the war in Ukraine on the Iranian economy. Finally, it looks at the long-standing impasse over the nuclear agreement through an exploration of its different phases and general development, while also highlighting the «look to the East» policy that has led to a realignment of Iran-Russia relations in order to offset Western sanctions and international isolation.

## 2. *Domestic policy*

The most important socio-political development of this year has undoubtedly been the spread of a new wave of popular protests that have served to highlight wider societal disenchantment with the Iranian system. In contrast to the last three years, during which financial difficulties and criticism over economic mismanagement were the predominant drivers of public dissatisfaction and worker-led demonstrations, older, long-standing complaints have been given fresh voice in new forms of activism, which emerged with the 2022 streets protests. Anti-government rallies spread all throughout the country, in both urban centres and peripheral provinces, while the political elite's block response was to put down the protests by use of extreme force. Though there have been a few dissenting voices from the reformist movement criticizing the brutal crackdown on protestors, this does not yet



appear to have triggered a substantial rethink on how best to deal with these demonstrations. The *eslahtalaban* (reformists) represent a political movement that since its foundation in the mid-Nineties has been inclined to liberalize social spaces, foster a gradual democratization of the political system, and reduce autocratic deviancies of political power. Leading and prominent figures are the former President of the republic Mohammad Khatami (1997-2005), ousted from political debate but still influent behind the scene, Mostafa Tajzadeh, Abdollah Ramezanzadeh, Hassan Khomeini, Abolfazl Shakouri-Rad, and Azar Mansouri. Firstly, what is clearly evident from these protests is the growing gap between established state institutions and wider Iranian society, especially in regard to the younger segments of its population, who are no longer willing to tolerate restrictions on individual liberties. Secondly, as of end of December, there does not appear to be any political group capable of engaging with or delivering upon the demands of the general population. In particular, reformists are no longer perceived as agents of gradual change within the country, nor as representatives of different segments of Iranian society, particularly when it comes to the youth, women, and ethnic minorities. The reformist front – or what remains of it after decades of marginalization by the judiciary and other nonelective bodies – sits outside of any decisive political institutions capable of enacting change. Only 20 out of 270 seats in the parliament were allocated to reformists in the 2020 elections. As the reformist front currently appears vulnerable, unstructured, and incapable of offering any real opposition within the system or stimulating political debate, the Islamic Republic has effectively lost its only main interlocutor with the country's bright and educated youth.

### 2.1. *Waves of popular protests: roots and significance*

During his eighteen months in office, President Ebrahim Raisi has not been able to quiet societal discontent, and over the course of the last year Iran has witnessed several waves of major popular protests. Although public spaces for peaceful dissent have been consistently reduced over the past three years ['Iran events of 2021' 2022], several groups within Iranian society have continued to express their dissatisfaction: on the one hand, due to economic mismanagement, the high cost of living, low and/or delayed salaries; and, on the other, because of the constant restrictions on social and individual liberties. From January to May, economic problems were the major trigger for sporadic and uncoordinated demonstrations, which resulted not only in workers, teachers, industry labourers, and health personal taking to the street, but also pensioners, members of low-income households, unemployed youths, and ethically marginalised groups. Major demonstrations broke out in the urban centres of Ahwaz, Arak, Kermanshah, Hamedan, and Sanandaj. The main slogans typically on display criticized the high cost of living and job insecurity, but also water scarcity and government failure to adjust wages and pensions to offset the higher costs of basic goods ['Teacher demonstrations' 2022]. As well

as demanding better working conditions and higher pensions, the protests were also a way to criticize the government's record on various other issues, such as reducing poverty and the failure to deliver on promises made during the electoral campaign ['Pensioners rally in Iran' 2022].

In May, following the government's decision to revoke subsidies on imported goods, like wheat, basic foods, and medicine, protests erupted in several cities in the provinces of Khuzestan and Chaharmahal and Bakhtiari ['One killed as price' 2022]. After a few days, other provinces also witnessed demonstrations, included Ardabil, Esfahan, Gilan, Khorasan-e Razavi, Kohgiluyeh and Boyer-Ahmad, Lorestan, Tehran, and Yazd. According to a report published by Amnesty International, Iranian security forces cracked down on the protestors ['Iran: they are shooting' 2022]. Demands for better economic conditions, higher salaries, and increased pensions in face of rising prices and the cost of living crisis, were also combined with slogans confronting the political elite, including some targeting the Supreme Leader himself behind the chorus *margh bar dictatoh* («death to the dictator») ['Fazeli' 2022]. This chant was not a new one in the context of popular uprisings in Iran. It was also a recurring refrain in the 1978-79 revolutionary movement – at that time being used to target the Shah. The resurfacing of this slogan in May 2022 spoke to a broader sense of social frustration that was no longer confined solely to economic hardship but also to political disillusionment. At the end of the month, other protests erupted in the city of Abadan due to the deadly collapse of the Metropoli building. This disaster was responsible for 34 deaths and triggered angry demonstrations throughout the province. The protestors' complaints centred on corruption and professional negligence, as the building's construction did not meet compliance standards and ultimately resulted in a structural failure [Berg 2022]. Anti-government sentiment and slogans characterized these marches, which were violently put down by the police ['Iranian police fire shots' 2022]. As a consequence, the country's labour minister, Hojatollah Abdolmaleki, resigned ['Iranian labour minister resigns' 2022].

All these public gatherings were usually spontaneous and leaderless, mainly localized in controversial provinces, such as Iranian Kurdistan and the oil-rich Khuzestan, and lacking any real political support. Despite the heavy state repression, they were never completely subdued and always ready to break out once more. Indeed, social discontent erupted again in mid-September after a twenty-two-year-old Kurdish woman, Mahsa Jina Amini,<sup>1</sup> died in suspicious circumstances while under the custody of the

1. Jina indicates the Kurdish nature of the girl's name. However, in the Islamic Republic, ethnic minorities are obliged to choose a Persian name to register their children. It is important to underline the Kurdish connotations of the name, as protests also erupted in Iranian Kurdistan and demonstrators have been frequently using a slogan of the Kurdish resistance at their rallies. Behind the protests for women's rights, a significant component of this movement is the additional struggle of Kurdish minorities.

Iranian morality police (*Gasht-e ershad*).<sup>2</sup> This young woman was visiting the capital with her family when she was arrested on September 13 for wearing what was perceived to be an «improper headscarf», which was allegedly not compliant with the latest government regulations.

At the beginning of 2022, Iran's Headquarters for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice sent a 119-page document to government offices and agencies outlining new regulations concerning the dress code for women. The *Hijab and Chastity Project*, as this directive has been named, was intended to tighten control on women's clothing by imposing further restrictions on their individual choices ostensibly with the aim of «cleansing society of the pollution caused by nonconformance with Islamic dress codes» ['Chastity and hijab project' 2022]. After this document had been made public, some women walked the streets without any headscarf as an act of individual resistance to protest against the new regulation. Behind the symbolic issue of the *hijab*, also known as the Islamic veil, Iranian women have long opposed discriminatory laws, gender segregation, partial exclusion from the job market ['Unemployment with basic education', 2022; 'Unemployment rate for male' 2021], and the reduction of their individual liberties since the very foundation of the Islamic Republic and its juridical system.<sup>3</sup> Those deemed as *bad-hijabi* (a women wearing an improper veil) were frequently assaulted by the morality police, and in some cases even arrested. For example, the young writer Sepideh Rashnoo was arrested on July 16 for protesting about the mandatory veil on public transport in Tehran. Two weeks later, she appeared on national television and read out an allegedly forced confession ['TV «confession» of Iranian anti-hijab' 2022]. During the summer, owing to the release of these new regulations, further acts of individual resistance, such as women walking in streets without the *hijab*, were widespread. It is important to acknowledge, however, that such public acts of resistance against state control over women's bodies and their choices have deep and profound roots. They are in fact the continuum of decades' worth of struggles and campaigns headed up by Iranian feminists and social activists [Mohammadi 2007]. What has occurred in the autumn of 2022 can be seen as a new form of mobilization based upon old, unresolved grievances.

2. The *Gasht-e Ershad* is a section of the Law Enforcement Command of the Islamic Republic of Iran (i.e., the police force). It was founded in 2005 with the aim of patrolling the streets to ensure adherence to Islamic codes. The main targets were women, particularly in relation to their use of the veil. The morality police has an infamous reputation for arbitrary arrests, intimidation, and physical assaults on women.

3. The female unemployment rate in 2021 reached 19%, but it should be noted that according to a report published in 2020 by the Statistical Center of Iran, female participation in labour force is around 15%. Women (also the educated ones) are excluded from the job market due to social and political barriers and their rate of unemployment is higher when compared with men. The male unemployment rate in 2021 was estimated at 9%.

## 2.2. *Women led demonstrations*

Mahsa Jina Amini died in a coma three days after her arrest while in police custody. The authorities claimed that she suffered from poor health conditions and had suddenly passed away due to an unexpected heart attack. To corroborate this version of events and to deny responsibilities, incomplete and fragmented video footage of her detention was circulated, while the Amini family themselves rejected these official claims and denied that she had any previous health issues. According to her parents, Mahsa Jina was brutally assaulted by police officers, as images of her last moments in hospital show signs of injuries and abuse on her body. President Raisi called the family to express his condolences, but no further measures were taken to investigate what happened in police headquarters. On September 17, demonstrations expressing solidarity with Mahsa Jina Amini spread throughout the country, beginning in Saqqez, her Kurdish city of origin. More than 150 cities and small towns witnessed public gatherings, and there were scenes of young women cutting their hair and burning their headscarves [Gritten 2022]. While street demonstrations are by no means a new method of expressing dissent, these protests immediately stood out in terms of the varied level of social participation, the style of mobilization on display, and their clear resonance both domestically and amongst the international community.

Firstly, these protests attracted and brought together a rather heterogeneous social group, predominantly led by young women between the ages of 15 and 25. Young girls were at the forefront of these street demonstrations, but they were also joined and supported by men and women of different generations, across various social groups, and from distinct ethnic backgrounds. As such, one of the real novelties of this wave of protests has been its intersectionality. Protestors gathered behind the powerful slogan *zan, zendeghi, azadi* («women, life, freedom»), which has fast become the rallying call characterizing this period of unrest [Bajalan 2022]. This motto has its origins in the Kurdish resistance movement (*jin, jîyan, azadi*) and was first used by Kurdish women in the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). It is important to underline this specifically Kurdish angle, as the 2022 women-led protests in Iran also gave voice to the struggle of ethnic minorities within the country. Therefore, while the solidarity expressed to Mahsa Jina Amini provided a platform to reflect upon the state's continuing violation of women's rights, these protests also broadened to include wider ethnic unrest against state discrimination. Ethnic minorities, especially Kurds and Baluchi, took to the streets to express their wider frustration at decades of political and social inequity. In the case of the Kurds, in particular, their struggle against the central power in Iran is deep-rooted, as evidenced by the fact that half of the prisoners held in Iranian jails are Kurds [Ghaderi & Goner 2022].

Back on the streets, young girls demanded their rights to self-determination and bodily autonomy. They challenged the role imposed upon

woman by the state, criticizing the patriarchal hierarchy within Iranian politics, state-violence, decades of socio-political discrimination, and the humiliating treatment carried out at the hands of the morality police. These demands were also immediately supported by young men, who took part in this wider mobilization because state recognition of women's rights was considered an indispensable and fundamental step towards the recognition of broader individual rights and freedoms. Therefore, women's demands, which in Iran have their origins in decades' worth of women's activism, have now assumed a more universal character. However, these protestors were not asking for minor reforms or gradual changes, but rather for a comprehensive political transformation. Anti-government slogans such as «down with the Islamic Republic» or «down with dictatorship» would resonate for weeks. Thousands of videos circulated on social media and were reported on international broadcasts [‘The rallying cries’ 2022].

Secondly, with regard to the style and characteristics of these widespread mobilizations, streets, schools, and universities have been the key spaces of dissent. Young women occupied secondary schools, refused to attend lectures, took off their veils in class while standing in front of pictures of ayatollah Khomeini. University students organised sit-ins across several campuses [‘Iranian Students Launch Sit-in’ 2022]. Meanwhile, symbolic places and notable icons of the revolution were attacked or vandalized. Khomeini's own house was set on fire nine weeks after the eruption of the protests [Plummer 2022]; and public posters of the Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, were also set on fire. Like previous demonstrations, these protests were spontaneous, not organised and lacked any obvious leadership; however, they ultimately facilitated collective acts of civil disobedience. If the absence of real leadership has limited the ability of the protest movement to transform itself into a transversal and structurally inclusive political movement, it has also enabled it to remain strongly resilient in the face of state intimidation, as the authorities have struggled to identify or make an example of any visible political figureheads.

Thirdly, both the domestic and international response to the Iranian protests has underlined the universality of women's rights issues, whose recognition is of interest not only to (Iranian) women but to all human beings. Peaceful parades were organised in European and North American capitals and cities; and the various campaigns that circulated on social media were also aimed to show solidarity and understanding with the Iranian youth. Prominent public figures within Iranian society – famous movie directors and actors, such as Ashgar Farhadi, Rakhshan Bani-Etemad, and Tanareh Alidoosti – spoke out loudly through their social media channels against state repression. Iranian athletes participating in international competitions made symbolic gestures in support of the protestors. In October, the rock climber Elnaz Rekabi removed her headscarf while competing in a contest in Seoul – though once back in Iran she was forced to make a tel-

evized apology [Gritten 2022]. The Iranian football team refused to sing the national anthem before their first match at the FIFA World Cup in Doha [Arun 2022]. Yet despite all these expressions of solidarity, the aggressive response to the protests by the police and military forces did not abate, nor was the Iranian *nezam* persuaded to introduce any sorts of reform.

Despite widespread participation in these protests, the majority of the Iranian population did not take part. In some places, merchants were forced to close their shops, mainly to avoid further damages to their properties; workers, especially those in the vital petrochemical sector, though somewhat timidly declaring their support of the protests, have not followed up with any significant mobilization of their own [Batmanghelidj & Kalp 2022]. The majority of people still appear very cautious, perhaps frightened by the possibility of a resulting power vacuum, or because they do not consider the youth movement to be strong enough to genuinely force a change in the system.

When the protests erupted in Iran, President Raisi was speaking at the General Assembly of the United Nations in New York, delivering a speech on Iran's mission to fight injustice [United Nations 2022]. A few days later, he warned the protestors, stating that «chaos will not be accepted» [Gritten 2022]. In early October, Ali Khamenei made his first statement on the protests during a graduation ceremony for police officers. The Supreme Leader accused the United States (US) and Israel of plotting against the Iranian republic by spreading sedition and by infiltrating the protest movement with their own spies [‘Imam Khamenei’ 2022]. This familiar narrative of accusing external forces and enemies of spreading chaos within the country was used to both direct and justify the state's response to events. First, the authorities refused any compromise with the people on the streets, who were condemned as agents of the *doshman* (enemies) [‘The enemy's plan failed’ 2022]. Second, all demonstrations would continue to be purged by extreme force. National television focused upon the damages caused during the unrest, such as burned mosques, attacks on ambulances, and the disruption of public transport. On this basis, the *nezam* authorized the police and security forces to take all necessary measures to suppress the protests, from the use of pellet guns and tear gas to public executions [Shams 2022].<sup>4</sup>

On November 24, the United Nations Human Rights Council approved the formation of an independent international fact-finding mission to investigate the alleged human rights violations in the Islamic Republic of Iran [United Nations Human Rights 2022]. At the end of November, the Iran Human Rights association claimed that there had been at least 488 deaths, including 40 children and 29 women. Most of the victims were

4. On December 12, two twenty-three-year-old men, Mohsen Shekari and Majidreza Rahnavard, who were participating in the demonstrations in Iran, were reportedly executed by public hanging. At the beginning of the new year, two other men, Mohammad Mehdi Karami and Seyed Mohammad Hosseini, were also hanged. These executions occurred after unfair trials based upon forced confessions.

recorded in the provinces of Sistan Baluchistan and Kurdistan ['Iran Protests' 2022]. This data clearly demonstrates the harsh nature of the repression, particularly within ethnic minority provinces. The Oslo-based Human Rights Watch reported that an estimate of more than 18,000 people had been arrested ['Iran: Death Sentences' 2022]. This number could feasibly be higher and is difficult to verify.

Despite several prominent internal voices speaking out against the crackdown on protesters, such as former President Mohammad Khatami, former Vice President Eshaq Jahangiri ['People's voice' 2022], or the Supreme Leader's own niece, Farideh Moradkhani, who was later sentenced to three years in prison for her comments, the Iranian state has not shown any signs of reconsidering its approach. The violent repression has continued for a period of over three months and, to date, it is difficult to foresee any possible change or developments.

### *3. Economy and the financial situation*

By 2022, the Iranian economy had not shown any significant signs of improvement; and, in fact, several domestic and external factors threatened to contribute to its worsening. While nuclear negotiations had long remained at a standstill, the Iranian economy continued to suffer profoundly from the secondary sanctions that had been reimposed by the Trump administration in 2018. President Ebrahim Raisi made little improvements and implemented some highly contested reforms in order to mediate the rising costs of imported commodities. Raisi's attempts to revive the economy, by reversing inflation and fighting corruption and tax evasion, did not achieve any effective results.

#### *3.1 Economic challenges and fragile reforms*

Looking at macroeconomic trends, there were some improvements in the first quarter of the year, such as the reduction of the unemployment rate, which has been estimated at 8.9% – a positive figure compared to December 2021, when it was around 9.6%. However, this rate has continued to fluctuate and, in July, increased to 9.2% ['Iran Unemployment Rate' 2022 (a)]. The unemployment rate for women is consistently higher than that of men. According to the Statistical Centre of Iran, in June 2022, the rate of women who were unemployed at the age of 15 or over was reportedly 16% ['Iran Unemployment Rate (b)']. A serious concern also arises from the youth unemployment rate, which rose to 23.6%, in February 2022, from 22.1% in the final quarter of 2021.

In March, the government announced an increase of around 57% in the monthly minimum wage for workers, in response to several public pro-

tests [‘Iran: Labor Protests’ 2022]. The minimum wage per month was set at 5.679 million tomans (about 203 US dollars). This manoeuvre, however, would cause a significant increase in operating costs and consequently led to many companies reducing their overall number of contractors, or opting for more informal employment relationships with their workers (i.e., hiring on a non-contractual basis), as a means to offset the additional costs. This is against the backdrop of an already precarious workforce situation. It is estimated that more than 90% of Iran’s workforce is on short-term contracts, with no guarantees over contract renewal, no protections or access to benefits, and under the risk of being fired for no reason at any time [‘The Beating Heart’ 2022].

Poverty has remained widespread across various social groups; it is estimated that around 60% of the country’s population lives either at or below the poverty line [Kozhanov 2022]. Absolute poverty stands at 18.4%, which equates to one in five Iranians living in absolute poverty [‘Autopsy of unrest’ 2022]. These figures reveal the failure of the incumbent government to win the war against poverty, which was one of the main promises and slogans of Raisi’s electoral campaign.

Another significant economic issue relates to the rate of inflation, which has more than doubled since Raisi took office. Inflation grew considerably from January 2022, when it was estimated at 35.9%, reaching 54% by July [‘Inflation Rate’ 2022]. This negative trend would mainly impact the lower strata of Iranian society, while also reducing the purchasing power of the impoverished middle classes. The effects of inflation increased the prices of basic goods, food, and housing. In April, food prices were 40% higher than in the same period in 2021 [‘Explainer: Raisi’s First Year’ 2022]. The following month, the government lifted import subsidies for essential goods, provoking an increase in food prices by 82% compared to the previous year [Soghom 2022]. The price of rice, milk, meat, and cooking oil more than doubled, while foreign goods were more and more difficult to find. The cost of eggs and red meat increased by 53% in just one year [‘How Much Did The Price’ 2022]. A further contributing factor was the significant drop of the Rial, the Iranian currency, that has fallen more than 40% against the dollar since August 2021 [Shahla 2022]. Due to the rampant inflation, domestic mismanagement, and the ongoing effects of international sanctions, the pharmaceutical sector also increased the cost of its wares. Drugs were difficult to acquire, especially those for rare diseases or special treatments that were usually imported [‘Iran: How Corruption’ 2022].

In May, President Raisi announced that electronic coupons would be issued to help stabilize prices and enable people to buy limited amounts of bread at a subsidized cost [‘Iran’s Raisi’ 2022]. The «economic surgery», which was the name given to the plan for economic reform, included a review of subsidies and the discontinuation of the lower exchange rate



used for the import of essential goods, such as food [Khajehpour 2022]. As mentioned above, public criticism soon emerged over these manoeuvres, which had resulted in a price increase for imported goods and had accelerated inflation [Kozhanov 2022]. This latter also had a deleterious effect on the cooperation between the industrial and banking sectors. Due to rising inflation and rising production costs, small and medium industries needed more capital and, as such, were looking to secure loans, whereas the banks were unable to provide sufficient financing to these industries as a result of inflation. The banks' limited balance sheet led to a general reduction of resources across the banking network, as well as the imposition of an interest rate cap. It is estimated that 92% of the requests for loans from small and medium-sized enterprises have gone unanswered ['The Great Thirst' 2022].

President Ebrahim Raisi based his electoral campaign and domestic discourses on economic recovery, but during his eighteen months in office the economic and financial situation did not present any signs of improvement. Moreover, the "resistance economy", which has been the typical response by the conservative camp to circumvent international sanctions, has shown its limitations. For instance, achieving self-sufficiency in staple foods – a desired held by the Supreme Leader and specifically referenced in his inaugural New Year's address in March ['Nowruz speech' 2022] – presented several difficulties. Iran relies on food imports and there are still several major barriers to achieving full self-sufficiency in food production. The issue of water shortages in several provinces is becoming a fundamental threat, not just in terms of changes to various ecosystems, but for all human-related activities. Agriculture provides for 90% of domestic food demand, but it also consumes 92% of available fresh water resources ['Analysis: Warnings' 2022]. Diminishing rainfall, due to rising temperatures, desertification, and old-fashioned and unsustainable irrigation systems, has adversely impacted on the availability of water and hence on domestic production [Mesgaran *et al.* 2017]. Boosting national cultivation runs the risk of further endangering water supplies in vulnerable provinces.

Trade relations with China, Iran's biggest commercial partner, were still ongoing in 2022, but the second part of the year witnessed a major contraction. According to Bourse and Bazaar foundation, Beijing continued to purchase Iranian oil despite sanctions; however, the overall trade between Iran and China witnessed a contraction, which fell to a monthly total of \$1.04 billion, the lowest level since February 2022. The Chinese import from the middle eastern country trended downward in the autumn, dropping to a 24-month-low of \$365 million ['China-Iran Trade Report' 2022]. Other Chinese imports from Iran also declined, with a fall of 30% from July to September, settling at \$673 million ['China-Iran Trade Report' 2022]. These data are not confirmed by official sources as they need time to get processed and will be release during 2023.

#### 4. *Foreign policy*

Iranian foreign policy in 2022 has been affected by the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the ensuing war. This event has not only forced a change in Iran's positioning within the global arena, but also added further uncertainty over the long-standing nuclear negotiations. In this regard, despite several meetings and an intention to keep these talks alive, mutual disagreements between Iran and the US have effectively led to a standstill. While some conditions from the Iranian side have been considered «unacceptable» by the US, Tehran has also continued to develop its enrichment program, provoking severe criticism from the IAEA.

##### 4.1 *The nuclear negotiation*

Since April 2021, Vienna has hosted the negotiations between the P4+1 (UK, France, Russia, China, and Germany) and Iran, who have collectively sought to revive the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). Iran has refused to engage in direct talks with the US, despite the latter's crucial role in directing the outcome of any such negotiations. In March, the parties appeared very close to reaching an agreement, as confirmed by Joseph Borrell, the High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, who stated on his Twitter account: «A pause in [the] Vienna Talks is needed, due to external factors. A final text is essentially ready and on the table. As coordinator, I will, with my team, continue to be in touch with all JCPOA participants and the U.S. to overcome the current situation and to close the agreement» [Josep Borrell Frontelles' 2022]. However, some remaining disagreements and the eruption of the war in Ukraine have affected any positive outcomes from these talks.

There are a number of reasons why the possibility of reaching an agreement in March never materialized. Firstly, the Russian invasion of Ukraine shifted international attention and concerns back to the European continent, creating new strategic priorities for all parties involved in the negotiations. In mid-March, the Iranian minister of foreign affairs, Hossein Amirabdollahian, met with his counterpart in Moscow. In light of the pause in talks, Sergei Lavrov vowed to promptly resume negotiations, and insisted that Russian military operations in Ukraine would not have hampered any potential nuclear deal [Hafezi *et al.* 2022]. Regardless, due to the war in Ukraine, new priorities for the European countries involved with the negotiations took precedence over securing a new agreement with Iran.

Secondly, disagreements between the US and Iran still remained over a variety of issues, and these were unable to be resolved. The Islamic Republic has always sought guarantees that a future US administration would not suddenly reverse any previously agreed deal (as the Trump administration had done in May 2018 by unilaterally withdrawing from the JCPOA). However, this request has been rejected by current US President

Joe Biden, who cannot legally bind his potential successors to any treaties signed by their predecessors in office. This remained a major stumbling block in all phases of the negotiations. Another unsolved issue was Tehran's demand that the US remove the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corp from their list of foreign terrorist organizations [US Department of State 2022 (a)]. These disagreements led to a two-month breakdown in negotiations until Enrique Mora, the European Union envoy coordinating talks with Iran, visited Tehran in early May to launch fresh discussions. Borrell, commenting on Mora's trip to Tehran, said that they hoped to «relaunch the work between the parties» [European Union External Action 2022] and reopen the door for negotiations.

Another key problem and concern for the P4+1 was related to the problematic investigations of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) into traces of uranium discovered at various undeclared sites in Iran. The IAEA has estimated that Iran's stockpiles of enriched uranium have grown to more than eighteen times the limit originally set by the JCPOA. Iran has continued to enrich uranium beyond the 3.67% threshold set out in the 2015 deal, increasing their stocks of highly enriched uranium (HEU) at both the 20% and 60% level ['Iran's enriched uranium' 2022]. As Tehran displayed no willingness to engage in a cooperative approach nor to provide convincing and technically sustainable proof of its peaceful nuclear activities, on June 8, the IAEA adopted a resolution urging Iran to cooperate with the Agency [IAEA 2022(a)], in order to «fulfil its legal obligations and, without delay, take up the Director General's offer of further engagement to clarify and resolve all outstanding safeguards issues» [IAEA 2022(b)]. Shortly afterward, Iran informed the Agency that it would remove the 27 surveillance cameras which, under the terms of the JCPOA, had been installed across Iranian nuclear facilities to monitor all nuclear-related activities [IAEA 2022c].

In the summer, the «final text» drafted by the EU brought some cause for optimism, and the relevant parties were once again sounding positive that a new agreement was close [Motamedi 2022]. The Iranian negotiation team also expressed confidence that the deal was finally near to being revived, but some of its demands were still being rejected [Hashem & Hagedorn 2022]. In late August, President Raisi stated that he stood ready to restore the nuclear deal but only if the IAEA would close their investigation into the alleged traces of uranium discovered at those undeclared sites in Iran [Motamedi 2022]. More specifically, however, Iran continued to call for the removal of international sanctions and sought other guarantees from the US, conditions that the Biden administration was not willing to satisfy ['MP: Iran has other options' 2022].

With the eruption of popular protests in Iran in mid-September, the nuclear talks remained in deadlock. The US State Department spokesman, Ned Price, declared that the revival of the deal was «*not our focus right now*»

[US Department of State 2022b]. While pressures on the US continued to come from Israel, a long-standing opponent of the revival of any agreement with Iran [Stein 2022], the Islamic Republic has found itself engaged on several fronts: responding to the domestic protests, continuing the tug-of-war with the IAEA over the acquisition of advanced centrifuges [Murphy 2022], and realigning its relationship with Russia in the shadow of the ongoing conflict in Ukraine.

In November, while the Iranian Foreign Minister Amirabdollahian was declaring his intention to send a delegation to Vienna to «resolve remaining issues» [‘Iran to send team’ 2022], Tehran announced that it had begun enriching uranium to 60% at its Fordow facility – in a defiant response to an IAEA resolution that advocated more transparency and for further investigation into Iran’s activities by the Agency. At this point, any possibility of reviving the nuclear deal appeared remote, and by no means a priority for the relevant parties. Both the Biden administration and the other European countries were far more concerned about the conflict in Ukraine and with the worsening human rights violations in Iran. On December 14, Iran was ousted from the United Nations women’s group. Despite several rounds of negotiations during the year and a handful of near-breakthroughs, the nuclear talks have not shown any signs of progress or improvement; and though the door for further discussion remains open, as it currently stands, any hopes of reviving the JCPOA appear slim.

#### *4.2 The «Look to the East» policy and Iran-Russia relations in light of the Ukraine war*

One of the core pillars of Ebrahim Raisi’s foreign policy is his «Look to the East» strategy, which aims to strengthen commercial, military, and security ties with countries like Russia and China. This policy is not necessarily new, but its pursual has often been alternated with attempts at rapprochement with the West – the latter typically having been urged by pragmatic/reformist governments. Since 1991, Iran and Russia strengthened their strategic partnership and found ground for common cooperation in several fields. After President Donald Trump introduced his «maximum pressure» campaign against Iran, the Islamic Republic turned again its attention to the East in order to consolidate its commercial and security partnerships and to circumvent or nullify the effects of international sanctions. Raisi reiterated the strategic importance of «looking East» throughout his first presidential term, during which the continuing impasse over nuclear negotiations remained a critical factor. In January, the president declared himself ready to finalize a 20-year partnership with Russia [‘President in a group of economic’ 2022]. This long-term cooperation agreement would look to benefit Iran by expanding its ties with neighbouring and regional countries, with the aim of neutralizing the impact of sanctions, but also to help consolidate regional relations via agreements with Eurasian forums and organizations

boasting Russian membership [Noori 2022]. However, the Russian invasion of Ukraine profoundly altered these mutual relations and, as a result, Iran's position on the global stage.

In March, the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei blamed the West and particularly the US for the crisis, implying that the Russian military campaign was an understandable response to NATO's threatening activities along the Ukrainian border with Russia ['Iran supports ending the war' 2022]. But to avoid further escalation (and also not to entirely alienate the West during the ongoing nuclear talks), the Iranian government declared their support for «the preservation of the territorial integrity and national sovereignty of all countries» [Government of the Islamic Republic 2022]. Despite the rhetoric, however, the Islamic Republic soon took a clear side in the war; and while this may have consolidated Iran's relationship with Moscow, it has also accelerated its own international isolation.

The Ukraine crisis not only deeply affected the Iranian economy but also the country's positioning in the global arena. Tehran aimed to consolidate its commercial and financial ties with Russia, while the latter sought to learn from and capitalize upon Iran's long experience in resisting international sanctions. The closer relationship between Iran and Russia can be considered a clear strategic necessity, rather than an alliance of friendship; this holds true despite the fact that, at the outset of the conflict, Iran found itself directly competing with Russia on oil prices. In response to Western sanctions and reduced demand from Europe, Moscow redirected the bulk of its oil exports to Asia (and at a discount price). In the summer, Iran tried to remain competitive by raising their own exports to China and by offering Beijing a further discount on the oil price.

In July, Ali Saleh-Abadi, the governor of the Central Bank of Iran, visited Moscow and met with Alexander Novak, the deputy prime minister, and Maxim Reshetnikov, the minister of economic development. During this visit, they discussed the expansion of investments and further monetary and banking cooperation, in order to develop an exchange system as an alternative to the use of the dollar ['Tehran, Moscow agree' 2022]. Economic ties were also discussed by President Vladimir Putin, during his official visit to Tehran in July, when he met with Ebrahim Raisi and Ali Khamenei. This visit was meant to strengthen bilateral relations and to consider ways to eliminate the use of the dollar in trade between the two countries. Among the other issues that were discussed was the operationalization of the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC), a multimodal transportation route connecting India, the Persian Gulf, and the Caspian Sea via Iran, from where it then connects to Saint Petersburg and Northern Europe via Russia. The INSTC was not only meant to increase commercial volume between Iran and Russia, but also to offer an alternative route to the road and rail corridor which facilitates Turkey's connection to Azerbaijan and Central Asia [Tavsan 2021]. In addition, Tehran and Moscow also finalized

their cooperation over both rail and maritime routes concerning the Caspian Sea ['Russia's 1st rail transit' 2022].

The most controversial aspect of the Iran-Russia alliance has been the support given by the Iranian military to Moscow in the Ukraine war. According to American sources, by as early as the summer a Russian delegation had conducted several visits to an airfield in central Iran to evaluate and explore the possibility of acquiring Iranian drones [Madhani & Gambrell 2022]. Since then, Moscow is alleged to have purchased a large number of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs, or drones) that were manufactured in Iran. This could be part of a deeper military partnership between Moscow and Tehran, which prospects are difficult to estimate at date. Sources close to Al Jazeera revealed that the Islamic Republic delivered around 2,400 drones (Mohajer-6s and Shahid 131s/136s) to Russia, which have subsequently been deployed in Ukraine [Varghese 2022]. These drones are typically cheaply produced and mainly used for long-distance attacks, enabling Russia to hit far-ranged targets in central Ukraine from their bases in Crimea [Knights & Almeida 2022]. There, Iran sent specialist trainers to teach the Russian military how to use the drones. Tehran has been severely criticized by the international community for providing this military support to Russia. Despite initial denials, the Iranian Foreign Minister Amirabdollahian finally confirmed that drones were sold to Russia, but claimed this had happened in the months prior to the invasion ['Iran confirms drones' 2022]. In December, the US imposed sanctions on three Russian entities connected to «Moscow's growing military relationship with Tehran» [US Department of State 2022c].

In building up this perceived «anti-Western axis», Moscow and Tehran further bolstered their economic and military alignment at the expense of international isolation. Due to the war, Russia was obliged to consolidate its relations with countries that remained outside of the Western sphere, such as Iran [Divsallar 2022]. Likewise, the Islamic Republic hastened to sign beneficial commercial agreements in order to revive its faltering economy. Above all, however, military and security cooperation was at the core of Moscow and Tehran's closer relationship.

Another aspect that highlighted Raisi's «looking East» policy was the signing of the Memorandum of Obligations, which saw Iran become a permanent member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) on September 15 at the end of the SCO summit held in Samarkand ['Iran signs memorandum' 2022]. Russia played an important role in sponsoring the Iranian membership, especially after the Ukraine war. The Iranian full membership of the SCO would further strengthen Iran-Russia relations, in time when Moscow is keen to keep closer its best allies for its regional and international goals. Established in 2001, the SCO is a Central Asian intergovernmental organization focused on regional security, cooperation, and development. By 2021, the eight permanent members (China, Russia,

Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, India, and Pakistan) had accepted Iran's application for full membership. The Islamic Republic had previously held observer status for thirteen years. Joining the SCO was considered by the Iranian elite as an important step toward strengthening multilateral relations with neighbouring states and making the country a pivotal player as both an energy supplier and as a major transit hub for commercial trade between Central Asia and Europe. This latter ambition is perhaps more of a long-term strategy due to the current lack of modern railways or road networks, as well as any significant maritime access to Iranian ports. Moreover, Central Asian relations are not necessarily as smooth as they may seem. Many SCO members compete with one another across several sectors [Hunter 2021]. For instance, China and India are both competing over investment in the Iranian port of Chabahar, which is located in a valuable geostrategic area and could serve as a prominent commercial hub for the wider region.

With the aim of expanding trade, attracting foreign investment and contributing to the regional security and stability Iran has sought to bolster its relationship with Central Asian countries, as well as with Russia and China, the leading members of the SCO, since the early 2000s. This need appears even more urgent in light of the more recent international sanctions against Tehran, even though it may take years before Iran could start benefitting from this formal membership. For now, any immediate benefits are somewhat limited and further obstacles, such as the persistence of international sanctions that might limit SOC members to trade with Iran to avoid US financial repercussions, will inevitably need to be negotiated. But also, Iran's failure to join the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) is a serious obstacle for monetary and banking trade. However, full Iranian membership of the SCO has certainly served a symbolic purpose, being portrayed as a significant diplomatic victory for Raisi during his presidency.

In January, the 25-year comprehensive cooperation agreement between Iran and China entered its implementation phase. This long-term deal was signed in March 2021 with the aim of establishing mutual cooperation across all commercial, security, and military sectors. As another component of the «look to the East» policy, this agreement was intended to consolidate both economic and security ties with China, Iran's major trading partner. However, as alluded to previously, results in trade have proven to be quite modest. One aspect that might explain this trend is China's interest in ameliorating relations with countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). President Xi Jinping visited Riyadh on December 9 and met with GCC leaders. During the summit, the parties released a joint statement vowing to continue their strategic dialogue, to build cooperation and mutual support; but they also underlined the need to resolve issues over Iran's nuclear programme [Saudi Press Agency 2022]. China's strategy in the Middle East appears to have shifted. On one hand, China has exposed

its ambition to consolidate its relations with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates; yet, on the other, China has also revealed its intention not to rely solely upon Iran. Due to the impasse over the nuclear talks, Beijing has been experiencing difficulties in preserving strong commercial relations with Iran or launching any significant investments in the country.

## 5. Conclusion

The year under review in this essay – 2022 – has not necessarily been an exceptional year, but it has seen certain trends that were already well underway in Iran be amplified, both in terms of domestic and foreign policy. This paper has sought to present and trace some new trajectories, particularly in terms of how the Iranian elite are attempting to preserve their power, and the costs Iran seems willing to incur in order to fortify both its regional and international position.

The eruption of popular protests, primarily led by young women, was a clear demonstration of festering popular dissent – and not only within female circles. The protests that followed the death of Mahsa Jina Amini clearly spoke to a weakening of the so-called «social contract» and highlighted the deep ruptures that have come to exist between the state establishment and Iran's general population, as the former struggles to reform itself, and the latter appears increasingly detached from the country's historic institutions and societal models. The protests – by no means a new phenomenon in the history of the Islamic Republic – have involved different segments of Iranian society, continuing in the same vein as other previous apolitical and uncoordinated grassroot movements. The novelty here was the visibility of a new form of radicalism, both from the protesters and in the response of the authorities. Whereas young women challenged and contested laws and customs through individual and collective forms of rebellion and civil disobedience, the authorities responded with brute force, attempting to suppress the demonstrations by means of extreme violence.

Iranian foreign policy has been greatly influenced by Iran's decision to support the Russian military effort in Ukraine. Iran-Russia rapprochement has come at the cost of additional international sanctions for the Islamic Republic, adding yet further stress to the country's economy. Many voices within the *nezam* have objected to the idea of tying themselves too closely to Russia or China, two powers that have a track record of pursuing their own regional and international agendas, which are not always in line with those of the Iranians. Iran also sought to forge relationships with powers sitting outside the Western sphere, as can be seen by their request to join the BRICS countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa), in a bid to explore alternative markets to Western ones.



In light of these domestic and international challenges, the nuclear talks have remained at a standstill. At the end of 2022, President Biden effectively suggested that any prospective deal over the JCPOA was 'dead' ['Video shows Biden' 2022]. Though this remark was given in an unofficial capacity - an offhand comment made while meeting with his supporters - it did imply that no major progress had been achieved. Officially, the Iranian negotiation team has frequently declared its readiness to strike a new deal; however, the lack of transparency over the alleged uranium discovered at undeclared sites in Iran, coupled with the ongoing crisis in Ukraine (with Iran having abandoned its neutrality by supplying drones to Moscow), has inevitably led to any revival of the JCPOA dropping down the priority list.

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