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Related Categories: Cybersecurity and Cyberwarfare; Democracy and Governance; Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; Global Health; Iran; Israel
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IRAN NAVIGATES THE VACCINE LANDSCAPE
Iranian officials are attempting to navigate harsh, clerically-imposed restrictions on how the Islamic Republic can combat the coronavirus. Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei has formally banned the importation of U.S. and British vaccines, terming them to be "completely untrustworthy." This has left the Iranian government without recourse to either the Pfizer or Moderna treatments - which rank as the world's most advanced for combatting the current pandemic. However, Iranian officials are now actively searching for workarounds to the clerical edict.

To this end, Iran's top epidemiologist confirmed in late January that the country may soon import its first batch of COVID-19 vaccines from AstraZeneca - relying on AstraZeneca's origins as a "Swedish company" to circumvent the clerical ban. (The pharmaceutical firm is now headquartered in the UK, and researchers developed its vaccine at Oxford University) At the same time, Iranian authorities have formally approved the coronavirus treatment developed by Russia. According to Iranian officials, the country plans to both import and begin domestic production of the Russian vaccine, known as Sputnik V, in coming months. (*Bloomberg*, January 25, 2021; Reuters , January 26, 2021)

ISRAEL'S PLAN B, BACK ON THE TABLE?
Israeli officials are increasingly worried over what they view as the Biden administration's rush to reengage with Iran - a move they fear could have catastrophic consequences for regional stability. In early February, the Israeli government took the unprecedented step of publicly releasing an assessment by the country's military intelligence branch that estimated that Iran was "at least" two years away from nuclear capacity, thereby signalling to Washington that there was no urgency for new talks with Tehran.

At the same time, Israeli officials also appear to be once again mulling the possibility of a unilateral military strike against Iran's nuclear program - something that was once considered a real possibility. In late January, Aviv Kohavi, the Chief of Staff of the Israel Defense Forces, disclosed that he had directed the country's military to draw up fresh plans for military targeting of Iran's nuclear facilities and sites. Subsequently, in mid-February, Israeli Ambassador to the UN and the U.S. Gilad Erdan suggested that his government may not end up coordinating its policy toward Iran with the United States, fanning further speculation of a possible Israeli unilateral option. (*Times of Israel*, January 26, 2021; *Jerusalem Post*, February 9, 2021; Reuters, February 16, 2021)

THE COST OF CRYPTOCURRENCY
Recent blackouts in Tehran, Mashad, and Tabriz are being blamed on a novel culprit: cryptocurrency mining. Over the past three years, the incredibly lucrative - and energy intensive - industry has drawn massive investment from Chinese and Turkish entities, as well as from the Iranians themselves. That wave of investment drove Iran's global market share of Bitcoin mining up to 8% in 2020. In turn, the Iranians have utilized their newfound, and unregulated, cryptocurrency wealth as a method for circumventing U.S. and multilateral sanctions. However, the rapid expansion of the practice is having domestic effects, as it taxes an already-stressed energy grid and expands blackouts in cities across the Islamic Republic, leading Iranian authorities to crack down on the practice. (*Arab News*, January 19, 2021)

IRAN BLOCKS SIGNAL
Officials in Iran are taking aim at yet another social messaging application - the encrypted messenger Signal. Although the app was temporarily blocked by the regime during periods of intense use, coinciding with protests in 2016, 2017, and 2018, the ban on the software may become permanent. The reason for the new restriction is a shift in user habits toward Signal, which was prompted by rival app WhatsApp's recent update to its terms of service and resulting privacy concerns. Iranian citizens interested in pursuing use of Signal will now be forced to access the app by running their devices through VPNs, which are formally outlawed in the Islamic Republic. (*Al-Jazeera*, January 26, 2021)