



Iran Democracy Monitor No. 217

May 21, 2021 **Cody Retherford, Ilan I. Berman**

Related Categories: Arms Control and Proliferation; Democracy and Governance; Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; Islamic Extremism; Iran

IRAN'S WMD QUEST CONTINUES...

The Iranian regime's WMD aspirations are alive and well, it seems. In recent weeks, European intelligence agencies have gone public with intelligence assessments that confirm that the Islamic Republic continues to seek materials relating to weapons of mass destruction abroad. For instance, the Dutch General Intelligence and Security Service disclosed last month that, in 2020, it had investigated multiple clandestine proliferation networks - including those connected with Iran - that had "tried to obtain the knowledge and materials to develop weapons of mass destruction." "Multiple acquisition attempts have been frustrated by the intervention of the services," the report said.

Nor is the Dutch report an anomaly. In recent weeks, the security and intelligence services of both Sweden and Germany have also reported that Iranian networks are operating across Europe, attempting to acquire knowledge and technology for weapons of mass destruction. The disclosures, which contradict Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei's recent assertion that his government was not interested in nuclear weapons, come amid renewed efforts by the United States to negotiate Iran's reentry into the nuclear deal with the West struck during the Obama administration. (*Jerusalem Post*, May 5, 2021)

...AS CONGRESSIONAL REPUBLICANS TAKE A STAND...

In mid-April, Congressional opponents of the Biden administration's outreach to Iran went public with a new legislative initiative. Known as the *Maximum Pressure Act*, the bill - which was spearheaded by the Republican Study Committee (RSC) of the U.S. House of Representatives - seeks to enshrine the Trump administration's "maximum pressure" policy against Iran, and in particular former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's now-famous twelve prerequisites for a normalization of relations with Tehran. But it also goes further, focusing on issues such as Iran's human rights abuses as new points of potential leverage vis-à-vis the Islamic Republic. It also seeks to reclaim Congressional prerogatives relating to Iran policy, making it more difficult for the Biden administration (or a successor) to unilaterally roll back sanctions on the Iranian regime without a green-light from Capitol Hill. The legislative initiative garnered significant support from House Republicans, racking up some 90 co-sponsors as well as the endorsement of Pompeo himself, who appeared and spoke at the formal unveiling of the Act on April 21st. Notably, however, the measure was announced without support from Congressional Democrats, giving it little chance of being passed into law. (*The Hill*, April 21, 2021; *Washington Post*, April 21, 2021)

...AND THE BIDEN ADMINISTRATION OFFERS A SWEETENER

Meanwhile, as part of its efforts to restart diplomatic engagement with Tehran, the Biden administration is considering unblocking some \$1 billion in previously-sequestered funds and making them available to the Iranian regime for "humanitarian" purposes. The offer, which was communicated to Iranian officials in early May as part of ongoing (albeit quiet) contacts between Washington and Tehran, is designed as a confidence-building measure to incentivize the Islamic Republic to return to the negotiating table. Notably, the aid - if it is disbursed in the near future by the White House - would run counter to pledges by Administration officials to Congress not to offer the Iranian regime sanctions relief before the latter takes meaningful steps to return to compliance with the 2015 nuclear deal known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action. (*Jerusalem Post*, May 7, 2021)

A SAUDI-IRANIAN ENTENTE?

The Middle East's most powerful geopolitical rivals appear to be flirting with normalization. Validating recent rumors, the foreign ministries of Saudi Arabia and Iran have openly confirmed that the two countries are pursuing efforts to reduce tensions. However, Saudi officials have been quick to stress that these diplomatic contacts are still nascent, and a durable understanding between Riyadh and Tehran remains far off. "We hope they prove successful, but it is too early, and premature, to reach any definitive conclusions," Rayed Krimly, the head of policy planning for the Saudi Foreign Ministry, has told reporters. "Our evaluation will be based on verifiable deeds, and not proclamations."

Nevertheless, the discussions could lead to a significant reconfiguration of the *status quo* - and quiet arrangements that could serve to benefit both parties. According to regional sources, the Iranian regime has offered to scale back attacks on the Kingdom on the part of Yemen's Houthi rebels, which it supports, in exchange for Riyadh's assistance in helping the Islamic Republic to sell its oil abroad, including in contravention to U.S. sanctions. (Reuters, May 7, 2021; *Middle East Eye*, May 13, 2021)
