

Iran's Domestic Troubles

Impacts on Tehran's External Relations

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“An oriental wise man always used to ask the divinity in his prayers to be so kind as to spare him from living in an interesting era. As we are not wise, the divinity has not spared us, and we are living in an interesting era. In any case, our era forces us to take an interest in it. The writers of today know this. If they speak up, they are criticized and attacked. If they become modest and keep silent, they are vociferously blamed for their silence.”

– Albert Camus, lecture given at the University of Uppsala, December 1957

Two recent events have further heightened scrutiny in Iran's descent into domestic turbulence, which is now approaching its five-month anniversary. The first was a fatal act of terror against the embassy of Azerbaijan in the Islamic Republic of Iran committed on the morning of 27 January 2023; the second, a drone strike against Iranian state facilities in Isfahan, took place nearly two days later, late in the night of 28 January 2023.

Indeed, since mid-September 2022, Iran has been facing the largest nationwide unrest in its contemporary history. Begun in reaction to the death of 22-year-old Mahsa Amini, who had been detained for wearing the obligatory hijab in public incorrectly, the protests turned into mass clashes between demonstrators and state forces (police, paramilitary, and sometimes even the military), resulting in (so far) hundreds of dead and injured (with untold numbers detailed or arrested).

This period of turbulence, which has spread to virtually every corner of Iran, is reflected not only in the execution of Tehran's domestic policy, but in that of its foreign policy as well. Iran's multifaceted foreign activity has become even more complex and

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unpredictable—this has ranged from contradictions with the Arab world to an entangled game in the South Caucasus, starting with Azerbaijan.

Under these circumstances, Baku has had to be even more careful and attentive to the actions of its southern neighbor than usual. But this does not mean that the Azerbaijani side has abandoned the pursuit of its interests or bend to the will of Iran—quite the contrary, as will be discussed below.

The Current Situation in Iran

It is important to note that mass, even nationwide, demonstrations have been a common phenomenon inside Iran in recent years. For example, in late 2017 to early 2018, an untold number of its citizens took to the streets of different cities in protest against increases in food prices. Those demonstrations were brutally suppressed: according to various sources, 20 to 25 people were killed, and about 5,000 Iranians were detained.

However, for the first time since 1979, popular unrest is now directed precisely against the pillars of the current political regime in the Islamic Republic (this is one reason why some analysts have argued that the present turmoil constitutes perhaps the most serious crisis of legitimacy in the history of the present regime). The backbone of the demonstrations are women, who from the very beginning of the protests have been burning their hijabs in the squares and shaving their heads in public, chanting: “Woman. Life. Freedom.” This slogan has become the hallmark of the current tumults.

Students have not played such an important role in protests in Iran since the period surrounding the events of the Iranian Revolution itself. They have taken over entire university campuses and, for example, demanded the abolition of separate education for young men and women. Thus, for example, on 18 October 2022, students at Allameh Tabataba’i University in Tehran jeered and drove away government spokesperson Ali Bahadori-Jahromi, who tried to enter into a dialogue with them.

By and large, the current mass uproar clearly points to the serious generational gap that has grown in both scale and scope Iran in recent times. Numerous songs and slogans that have flooded Twitter and other social networks clearly emphasize that a large number of Iranian young people are disinclined to keep adhering to the strict religious tenets that are imposed by law in the Islamic Republic. In recent years, online survey results produced by the Group for Analyzing and Measuring Attitudes in Iran (GAMAAN) and a co-founder of the Abdorrahman Boroumand Center for Human Rights in Iran (both are EU-based non-governmental organizations) have also noted a dramatic decrease in religiosity amongst the population.

Formally, the catalyst for the protest was the so-called “hijab and chastity” decree that emboldened the morality squads. This order was initiated by Iranian President Ebrahim

Raisi in July 2021—that is, right after his election to this position. (Guided by this law, Iranian law enforcement officers detained 22-year-old Mahsa Amini on 13 September 2022, who died three days later after being tortured. As noted above, this is the incident triggered the mass protests.)

However, a tightening grip on Iranian public life and public morality were not the only reasons why many thousands of Iranians took to the streets at the risk of being killed by police or sentenced to death. (So far, according to U.S.-based non-governmental organization Human Rights Activists in Iran, more than 500 protesters have been killed, about 20,000 have been arrested, more than 100 of these have been sentenced to death, and at least 4 have already been executed.)

Over the past 10 years, Iran has been experiencing severe economic difficulties: according to the World Bank, GDP per capita in the country exceeded \$8,000 in 2012. By 2020, it has dropped to less than \$3,000. In this regard, many citizens of the Islamic Republic had high hopes for the resumption of talks to restart the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) on the Iranian nuclear program, which began in April 2021. However, by autumn 2022—a couple of weeks *before* the protests began, it is important to note—it became clear that the JCPOA negotiations had stalled: “The whole process is in danger,” noted EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell at the time, who was always thought to be a fount of optimism throughout the resumed process.

The Vague Future of the Nuclear Deal

By June 2022, according to statements by Iranian and other negotiators, the updated text of the JCPOA was almost 90 percent complete. The main remaining obstacles consisted of Tehran’s demands on Washington. One of these was secure a guarantee that America would be unable to pull out yet again from a deal, in the event of the election of a president hostile to its continuing implementation. Furthermore, Tehran insisted that Washington remove its designation of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) as a terrorist group.

Right around that same time—on 8 June 2022, to be precise—the Board of Governors of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) adopted a resolution condemning Iran for refusing to provide information on the origin of the radioactive traces found at its nuclear facilities. The access of IAEA inspectors to undeclared nuclear facilities to investigate the origin of uranium particles also became one of the key conditions for the restoration of the Iranian nuclear deal.

Nevertheless, on 7 September 2022, the IAEA indicted that Iranian authorities had not yet provided an explanation for the origin of uranium particles at three undeclared nuclear sites. In the same period, the IAEA also made it clear that Iran had enriched

56 kilograms of uranium to 60 percent purity—enough to make a bomb, if refined to weapons grade.

It is against such a backdrop that the mass protests began in September 2022, which made Tehran’s position even more uncompromising. The Iranian authorities apparently believe that a demonstration of intransigence in negotiations with the great powers will result in greater domestic support.

Ironically, the resumption of the JCPOA’s implementation (in the unlikely event this actually happens), could also benefit the authorities: despite any concessions to Western partners the regime would have to make, the easing of sanctions and the resulting improvement in the country’s economic situation would almost certainly be hailed by Iranians (as it was in 2015, when the JCPOA had been agreed and began to be implemented).

But the hardline Iranian leadership has taken several steps that have made any further negotiations in Vienna impossible—certainly for now. A case in point was Tehran’s 8 December 2022 announcement of the first execution of one of its citizens convicted for participating in the ongoing protests. The reaction of those Western countries traditionally concerned with the state of human rights in Iran followed immediately. “We will hold the Iranian regime accountable for the brutal violence it’s committing against its own people,” stated U.S. National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan on the same day as the execution. Later, U.S. President Joe Biden himself admitted, in a moment of candor caught on tape, that the Iran nuclear deal was effectually “dead,” before adding that the U.S. would not formally announce this.

But the Iranian authorities did not stop there, either. On 14 January 2023, Tehran said that Alireza Akbari, an Iranian national who also holds British citizenship yet had served as Iran’s Deputy Defense Minister, had been sentenced to death on charges of being a British spy. Following his execution, the *Sunday Telegraph* leaked that the UK was reconsidering its support for the JCPOA, dealing yet another blow to any chance of reviving the accord in the time ahead.

As long as instability persists in Iran, it is clear that the talks in Vienna will be on pause—at this point, this may simply be a euphemism. Another term of this sort may be found in the statement made by Rafael Grossi, Director General of the IAEA, on 12 January 2023: “there is an impasse, the negotiations have broken down.”

Iran and Saudi Arabia: Balancing on the Brink

Tehran’s deep contradictions with most of the Arab states are rooted in a basic tenet of the 1979 Iranian Revolution—i.e., the new regime’s proclamation of a “policy of exporting the Islamic Revolution.” Over time, Iran has toned down its rhetoric (at least

towards most of the Arab world) and played down the foregoing policy without ever having renounced it fully. Nevertheless, confrontation and the struggle for geopolitical influence with its regional Arab counterparts have always remained on Tehran's agenda.

One of the key markers in this matter has consisted in playing on the Shia-Sunni division within Islam, with Iran portraying itself as the leader of the minority Shia sect (the Arab world and the Islamic world more broadly are both overwhelmingly Sunni).

Saudi Arabia has been, probably, Iran's staunchest opponent in the Middle East in recent years. Tehran and Riyadh have clashed from time to time, mainly indirectly through proxy wars in third countries or in an ongoing "shadow war" characterized by clandestine or influence operations conducted on each other's soil or against each other's resources.

Tensions spiked between the two neighboring countries after Tehran got involved in Syria's civil war in 2011 and subsequent increase of its network of proxy forces in the region. In this context, the main difference between the two is that, unlike Tehran, Riyadh does not have loyal nonstate allies and proxies that can advance its interests in the region. Iran, on the other hand, has Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Houthi movement in Yemen, Al-Hashd Al-Shaabi (or the Popular Mobilization Forces) in Iraq, and even Hamas in the Gaza Strip.

Be that as it may, Riyadh and Tehran cut ties in 2016, but officials from the two countries have held five rounds of direct talks, hosted by Iraq since April 2021. No diplomatic breakthroughs have been achieved, however.

Along with this, the Arab Gulf states are concerned about Iran's nuclear and ballistic missile programs as well as its network of regional proxies; but are prone to contain tensions as they focus on economic issues.

Tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia, which at times have come close to an open military confrontation, began to escalate again around the beginning of November 2022—the peak of the mass protests in the Islamic Republic. During this period, the *Wall Street Journal* reported that Saudi Arabia had shared intelligence with the United States warning of an imminent attack from Iran on targets in the kingdom, putting the American military and others in the Middle East on an elevated state of alert.

Tehran denied all such accusations, and armed conflict was avoided. However, it is obvious that this escalation was beneficial to the Iranian authorities: it helped distract popular attention from domestic tumults by mobilizing a significant part of the population against an external threat.

By the end of 2022, the contradictions between Tehran and Riyadh had been largely brought back down from a boil to the standard level of a simmer. Moreover, the Iranian

Foreign Ministry spokesman Nasser Kanaani said on 26 December 2022 that Iran and Saudi Arabia appear to have the political will to take a new step towards repairing bilateral relations.

Yet, there is no doubt that the Iranian regime continues to have the capability to turn the heat back up: at any moment, it can again play the “Saudi card” and initiate a new crisis in the Middle East.

Iran and Israel: A New Page of Confrontation

Undoubtedly, the return of Benjamin Netanyahu to power in Israel makes Iran’s foreign policy activity in the Middle East even more acute. The formation at the end of December 2022 of what media reports call the “most right-wing cabinet in the country’s history,” has caused concern in the Arab world—although nothing like it would have in past decades.

Against this backdrop, Itamar Ben-Gvir, Israel’s new Minister of National Security, chose to visit the Temple Mount in Jerusalem—the holiest site in Judaism that also contains two early Islamic shrines built right on top of the location of where it is said the First and then the Second Jewish Temple had stood. Arab states decried his 3 January 2023 visit and Netanyahu had to cancel a planned visit to the UAE after Abu Dhabi described Ben-Gvir’s action as a “serious and provocative violation.”

On the other hand, Netanyahu has always been perceived as an advocate of rapprochement between Israel and much of the Arab world. After all, it was Netanyahu who signed Abraham Accords, which in 2020 helped Israel to establish formal relations with Bahrain, Morocco, Sudan, and the UAE. It would seem to follow that, notwithstanding this recent tactical setback, Israel will continue developing contacts and relations with the aforementioned Arab states as well as others. The 2 February 2023 high-level visit to Sudan by Israel’s foreign minister Eli Cohen is a case in point.

As for Iran, Netanyahu has expressly indicated that Israel intends to increase pressure on Iran, which it perceives as an existential threat. “We will prevent the strengthening of Iran in Syria. First of all, we will wage an uncompromising fight against Iran’s intention to develop a nuclear arsenal, using various professional approaches, speaking openly to the world community,” Netanyahu said on 4 January 2023.

In turn, Tehran is likely to use this situation to try to consolidate its population against what it identifies as the “common enemy” and the leader of the Islamic Revolution, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, started calling the “little Satan” In addition, one should expect Iran’s more active posture in the Arab direction, where the Islamic Republic can certainly play on longstanding Arab-Israeli contradictions, positioning itself as a “defender of the interests of Muslims around the world.”

Iran and China: Testing Ties in the Transitional Period

A new era in relations between Tehran and Beijing began in March 2021, marked by the signing of the Iran-China 25-year Cooperation Program, which includes provisions for the increase of Chinese investment in the Iranian economy in exchange for a heavily discounted supply of oil from Iran.

To date, Beijing remains the largest importer of Iranian oil. According to the Vortexa Analytics, an energy and shipping analytics platform, in mid-2022 China's average Iranian imports—all supplied to independent refiners or commercial storage firms—was about 500,000 bpd per month.

Since the West has exhausted its ability to influence Iran through sanctions, China remains the only state in the world that can really influence Tehran's behavior.

The real concern expressed by the Iranian regime was due to the first state visit of a Chinese president to Saudi Arabia in six years, which took place in early December 2022. Among other things, the Chinese leader took part in a summit of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). The resulting joint statement included provisions regarding Iran's nuclear program, as well as three islands (Abu Musa, Greater Tunb, and Lesser Tunb) in the Persian Gulf, whose ownership is disputed between the UAE and Iran. Tehran, which has controlled these territories since 1971, was concerned that Beijing had, in fact, signed a document that called into question the territorial integrity of Iran.

As a result, on 11 December 2022, the Chinese ambassador in Tehran was summoned to the Iranian Foreign Ministry. In turn, Beijing stressed that China respects the country's territorial integrity and that Xi Jinping's visit to Saudi Arabia was necessary to help establish peace and security in the region.

Obviously, Iran, which has been under sanctions for many years, is not interested in worsening relations with its main economic ally, China. In addition, Tehran apparently has a rather limited capability to put any meaningful pressure on Beijing.

In this regard, China should still be seen as the main actor in terms of the prospects for exerting foreign policy and economic pressure on Iran. Some Western countries, as well as the GCC states, are likely to use their respective partnerships with Beijing to solicit Chinese help in influencing Tehran's behavior.

Iran, for its part, is unlikely to escalate with China. Still, the higher the level of discontent and mass protests inside the country, the greater the likelihood that Tehran's behavior (even towards Beijing) will increase in unpredictability.

Azerbaijan and Iran: Unpredictable Neighborhood

Throughout almost all of 2022, Azerbaijani-Iranian relations developed very rapidly—in light of more recent developments, this is sometimes forgotten. For example, on 4 June 2022, Azerbaijani Economy Minister Mikayil Jabbarov and Iranian Oil Minister Javad Owji signed a memorandum of understanding on doubling the quantity of oil swaps, from 1.5 bcm to 3 bcm. Only two weeks later, on 18 June 2022, Owji announced an agreement between Tehran and Baku on the establishment of a joint commission for the development of hydrocarbon fields located in the Caspian Sea.

In parallel, a lot has been achieved in the area of customs facilitation between Azerbaijan, Iran, and Russia within the framework of the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) project. According to preliminary estimates, the total investment in the construction of the Qazvin-Resht (Iran)-Astara (Iran)-Astara (Azerbaijan) section is around \$500 million. The commodity market of the INSTC is estimated at the level of 25-26 million tons per year. A key segment of INSTC remains to be completed: as noted by Vali Kaleji in the Fall 2022 edition of *Baku Dialogues*, the “connection [still] needs to be complemented with the 164-kilometer-long Rasht-Astara railway inside Iran itself.” There was an expectation that it could be completed by the end of 2023. However, the beginning of the mass protests in Iran has resulted in a deterioration of relations between Baku and Tehran.

One of its many fallouts has been a delay in completing construction on this section of the railway within the framework of INSTC by Iran. However, despite Tehran’s protraction, Baku has stuck to the implementation of the INSTC. As Azerbaijan’s Foreign Minister Jeyhun Bayramov said on 5 December 2022: “without waiting for final agreements, Azerbaijan is implementing this project on its territory. Both the railway track and the entire infrastructure are being built here. And in 2023, on our territory, it will be brought to the border with Armenia.” Moscow is also in favor of fully implementing the INSTC as soon as possible. During his visit to Baku on 18 November 2022, Russia’s Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin indicated that Moscow intends “to increase the volume of traffic along this corridor to 15 million tons per year by 2030.”

By and large, the deterioration in Baku-Tehran relations was caused by Iranian moves: as President Ilham Aliyev put it during remarks delivered at ADA University on 25 November 2022, “everything happening between Iran and Azerbaijan now was not generated by us. We are only responding and will [continue to] respond to any anti-Azerbaijani steps, whether in words or actions.”

Aliyev was referring to several unfriendly steps taken by Iran in the previous month. One of these was the conduct of first-of-its-kind military exercises by the IRGC near the liberated portion of Azerbaijan’s border with Iran. Another was Tehran’s decision to solemnly open a consulate (ahead of schedule) in the Armenian city of Kapan—located just north of the proposed route of the Zangezur Corridor and less than 5 kilometers

from the city's closest border point with Azerbaijan. During his speech at the opening ceremony, Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian stressed that Tehran considers "Armenia's security as Iranian security." This statement sounds a lot like an affirmation of a relationship between close allies.

Baku's response was proportionate—perhaps even less than what could be called proportionate, given the circumstances. On 14 November 2022, the State Security Service of Azerbaijan announced the exposure of a spy network established in the country by Iranian special services, which included the arrest of five individuals. In addition, at the beginning of December 2022, joint Azerbaijani-Turkish military exercises were held in Baku as well as in the Astara, Jabrayil, and Imishli regions.

Perhaps the timing of Azerbaijan's announcement of the intention to open an embassy in Israel can also be interpreted as a response to Iranian provocations—on 18 November 2022, Azerbaijan's parliament unanimously voted to take this step, in parallel with opening a representative office to the Palestinian Authority in Ramallah. It is widely surmised that the lack of an Azerbaijani embassy in Tel Aviv was to some extent indicative of Baku's willingness to make reasonable accommodations to Tehran's sensitivities. However, the unpredictable behavior of the Iranian side required decisive action from Azerbaijan in order to maintain the balance of power in the region.

It is noteworthy that Iran actually did not react to Azerbaijan's direct yet reasonable (given the circumstances) step. Noteworthy is the statement made on 20 November 2022 by Ali Akbar Velayati, Senior Adviser to Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, that Tehran and Baku have a lot in common. He also stressed that Iran "has never intended to invade the Republic of Azerbaijan."

It is useful to underline that Azerbaijan's announcement with respect to the opening of an embassy in Tel Aviv came on the heels of important steps in the normalization of relations between Israel and Türkiye. In October 2022, Türkiye appointed an ambassador to Israel after failing to do so for several years—with Israel reciprocating almost immediately.

Iran and the Zangezur Corridor: Attempts to Play Along with Yerevan

In the aforementioned ADA University speech, Aliyev said that "Iran itself should be interested in regional connectivity projects. Because these projects are not against anyone. They are for the benefit [of the whole region]." This applies particularly to Azerbaijan's understanding of the benefits to all from the activation of the Zangezur Corridor in accordance with the terms of the 10 November 2022 tripartite statement that brought the Second Karabakh War to an end.

“It could be a win-win situation for every country because a part of this railroad will eventually enter Iran through the city of Julfa, where there is a railroad connection between Iran and the Azerbaijani exclave of Nakhchivan. And Armenia will also be engaged, so Armenia will eventually have a railroad connection with Iran, which they don’t have now. It will never have [one directly] because the geography of the Armenia-Iran border and the need to build tunnels will bring the cost of this railroad to a minimum of \$3 to \$5 billion,” Aliyev indicated on the same occasion.

However, in recent months Tehran has shown an open reluctance to lend its support to the Zangezur Corridor project. Thus, on 15 January 2023, an article appeared on the website of *Mehr*, an Iranian semi-official news agency, in which local expert Shoaib Bahman wrote about the unprofitability of the Zangezur Corridor for Tehran. He went so far as to claim, falsely, that Azerbaijan “wants to forcibly occupy parts of Armenia’s Syunik province near the Iranian border and the Aras River.”

By inclining rather obviously in favor of Armenia, Bahman explained, the Iranian government seems to want to demonstrate that its posture furthers its objective of counterbalancing the Turkish-Azerbaijani alliance in the South Caucasus.

Nevertheless, the prospects for a possible fully-fledged alliance between Tehran and Yerevan are slim. One of the reasons is that Iran and Armenia have very different views on the composition of players involved in the Armenia-Azerbaijan negotiation process, as well as substantive matters.

For instance, from the get-go, Iran has insisted that moderators, facilitators, and monitoring missions should be regional, not external—in other words, no EU or U.S. participation. Thus, Yerevan’s successful campaign to bring in a two-year EU civilian monitoring mission has not been well-received in Tehran (or Moscow). Certainly, Iran would not subscribe to the sentiment expressed by Armenian Foreign Minister Ararat Mirzoyan’s Tweet “very much” welcoming “the EU’s decision to send a fully-fledged civilian mission to Armenia. We will readily cooperate with the mission and support its activities. This mission will contribute to the peace, stability, and security of the region.” Armenia’s flirtation with the United States is also not something Iran has greeted with enthusiasm. The ill-fated visit of then-Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives Nancy Pelosi visited Yerevan in September 2022 was a case in point.

In addition, Iran does not yet have potentially strategic economic projects in the works with Armenia as it does with Azerbaijan, although the level of trade in both cases is approximately equal. By the end of 2022, the trade turnover between Baku and Tehran was \$533.11 million, between Tehran and Yerevan was \$560 million. Given the GDPs and populations of the two countries, Iranian participation in the Armenian economy can be seen as being comparatively more consequential. But this may change, *if* Baku

and Tehran can come to the right sort of understanding (right now, however, this does not seem to be in the cards).

Along with this, in 2022 Iran and Armenia enhanced their energy cooperation through the establishment of an enhanced gas-for-electricity barter arrangement. However, as Ahmad Humbatov noted in his 1 December 2022 *IDD Analytical Policy Brief*, “a significant expansion of energy ties [between Tehran and Yerevan] in the future seems to be limited by the Russian factor, which has taken various effective countermeasures.”

In any case, despite all the obstacles and challenges, Azerbaijan is consistently implementing the Zangezur Corridor project: “40 percent of the works on the railway line and 70 percent on the highway have been completed in the section of the Zangezur Corridor on the territory of Azerbaijan. All works are expected to be completed in 2024, leading to the establishment of a new transport corridor,” Aliyev said on 14 December 2022.

Tough Choices, Hard Times

Objectively, it seems more likely than not that Iran will ultimately have little choice but to (grudgingly) accept the implementation of the Zangezur Corridor project sooner or later—and perhaps even to make the necessary arrangements to benefit from it. Its economic circumstances are dire enough—it can hardly afford to be left out of yet another regional economic integration initiative. Reasonable accommodations could be made to address Tehran’s concerns and interests, but only to a degree. But at the end of the day, Iran is simply not powerful enough to counter Azerbaijan and Russia in implementing the Zangezur Corridor if Baku and Moscow decide to move forward together on the project. Again, to quote from Aliyev’s remarks at ADA University on 25 November 2022: “Actually, we have discussions on the Zangezur Corridor with Russia, not with Armenia, because Armenia is a satellite country. It’s a dependent country. Its independence is very symbolic, and we will not waste time negotiating with them. We are negotiating with Russia. [...] I don’t think Armenia will be able to block this project.”

On the other hand, as long as the present protests go on, the Islamic Republic will continue to resemble a powder keg. As a result, turbulence and a more-than-usual level of unpredictability in the conduct of its foreign policy will continue.

For instance, on 11 January 2023, the Iraqi ambassador in Tehran was summoned to the country’s Foreign Ministry due to disagreements over the name of the Persian Gulf. The dissatisfaction of the Iranian side was caused by a football tournament held in the Iraqi city of Basra called the Arabian Gulf Cup.

Of significantly greater seriousness was the deadly terrorist attack against the Azerbaijani embassy in Tehran that took place on the morning of 27 January 2023, as

noted above. The Iranian reaction to this attack has been interpreted by Azerbaijan as a signal that Tehran has chosen to aggravate relations with Baku to an even higher degree. The negligence of Iranian law enforcement officers during this terrorist attack, as well as some subsequent actions by agents of the state (e.g., the arrested assailant was allowed by the authorities to give a television interview) caused Baku to reconsider the scope of its diplomatic presence in Iran. This resulted in the evacuation of all the embassy's diplomatic and support staff (the work of the consulate general in Tabriz still continues, however).

All in all, despite all the pressure from the Iranian side and the unpredictability of Tehran's behavior, Baku has chosen to respond decisively. Thus, on 1 February 2023 Azerbaijan's State Security Service made raids into a "pro-Iran network" operating in the country. As a result, 39 people were detained on charges of engaging in subversive activities on behalf of the Islamic Republic. At the same time, however, Baku has continued to be strongly committed to the implementation of major joint economic projects such as INSTC, as noted above. A reaffirmation of this commitment in the days and weeks to come may come to be interpreted as a bellwether—a sign of the times.

When it comes to forecasting Iranian behavior in the near future, tactical vacillations are to be expected. A constant, even-keeled course is unlikely. Certainly, in the short term, Tehran's foreign activity in all areas will be characterized by a high degree of unpredictability, especially in relation to its immediate environment, including the South Caucasus.

A case in point: just a few days ago, Iran was yet again accused of deception by the IAEA. On 1 February 2023, the UN's nuclear watchdog said its inspectors found a modification to an interconnection between two clusters of centrifuges that was substantially different than what Iran had declared to the Agency. This undeclared change to uranium enriching equipment at its Fordow plant was, according to IAEA chief Rafael Grossi, "inconsistent with Iran's obligations" under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and undermined the IAEA's ability to "implement effective safeguards measures" at the Fordow site. Iran's spokesman for the Atomic Energy Association of Iran Behrouz Kamalvandi was quoted as saying that the IAEA report was based on a mistake made by an IAEA inspector, and that the matter had been resolved. Perhaps it has. But the underlying issue certainly has not.