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Track 1.5 on Iran and Nuclear Diplomacy: Workshop Report and Recommendations

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Key takeaways from the meeting

- Iran's leadership appears still to be interested in future talks with the US over its nuclear programme. While the IRGC generally opposed the JCPOA, they may be open to a new agreement. However, Iran will broadly want to maintain the progress it has made in its nuclear capabilities since it stopped complying with the JCPOA (after the US withdrawal). For key Western countries, this is unacceptable, so there is a wide gap in the starting positions for negotiations.
- Meanwhile Iran is stacking up bargaining chips to give itself more negotiating power – a risky process as these bargaining chips can themselves be seen as escalatory behaviour, whether they are advances in nuclear capabilities, the stronger role of Iran's allied network of non-state armed groups (which is driven in part by the war in Gaza and by developments in their home countries, not only by decisions taken in Tehran), or state hostage-taking.
- When it comes to nuclear diplomacy with Iran, the key player is the US. However, Europe can play a role in encouraging the US and Iran to engage in effective diplomacy; in passing messages and supporting track two contacts; and in working with regional countries to encourage regional dialogue and détente, which will in turn reduce nuclear risks.
- Europe can also help to reinforce the importance of the wider multilateral non-proliferation regime, including as an argument for why China and Russia should be supporters rather than spoilers if a revived or new nuclear agreement is on the cards. P5+1 cooperation is much harder today, but it is not necessarily the case that Russia or China would spoil renewed nuclear diplomacy with Iran.
- While the role and cohesion of the E3 is particularly important, smaller neutral states can also play a role, including through support of track 1.5 and track 2 initiatives.
- It is easy to assume that there will be no serious movement on US-Iran diplomacy until after the 2024 presidential election. Yet certain factors are likely to apply to any US administration – whether it is led by Biden or Trump – including the desire to prevent a region-wide war.
- The political context for nuclear diplomacy has generally deteriorated since the JCPOA was negotiated: the non-proliferation regime faces wider strains and the P5 are deeply divided, while the number of issues of contention between Iran and Western countries has multiplied (in the region, in Iran's internal repression, and with Iran becoming a weapons supplier to Russia).
- However, one area where there has been progress has been in Iran's relations with its Gulf Arab neighbours. A process of dialogue and détente, particularly between Iran and Saudi Arabia, has survived October 7th, the Gaza war and the

growing violence in the region. Saudi Arabia and the UAE remain suspicious of Iran and relations could fracture again over the role of Iran-backed armed groups such as the Houthis, but there are at least diplomatic channels for the regional countries to try to de-escalate tensions.

- Regional dialogue will not substitute for US-Iran dialogue, but it could potentially help reinforce the need for it - especially if Saudi Arabia is willing to use its influence with the next US president to support nuclear diplomacy with Iran (as well as seeking more US security guarantees and its own civilian nuclear capabilities).
- Regional dialogue could also be leveraged to create incentives that could reinforce a wider international understanding with Iran – for example through economic cooperation projects with Gulf Arab countries (if US sanctions can be eased) and through civilian nuclear cooperation projects.
- Further ideas can be found in Barbara Slavin's How To Prevent A Nuclear Crisis With Iran: <https://www.stimson.org/2024/how-to-prevent-a-nuclear-crisis-with-iran/>
- Since October 7th and the Gaza war both the US and Iran have signalled they want to avoid a direct confrontation or an all-out regional war. If these positions are sustained (which is by no means certain), this experience could potentially help to establish some basis of confidence in future negotiations, especially under a second Biden administration.
- Nonetheless, the situation will remain risky and fragile. There is no diplomatic or political path in sight to resolve the conflict between Iran and its network on one hand, and Israel on the other, and there will continue to be a view among some in Israel that Israel may need military action to remove the threats on its borders, primarily from Hizbollah (to pre-empt the risks of a future attack against Israel). Even when a ceasefire is achieved in Gaza, it is likely that Israeli-Palestinian violence will continue.
- *NB: the growing crisis in the region may be changing this "wait and see" attitude, especially as speculation has grown about Israel possibly attacking Iranian nuclear sites and since Iranian officials have said they would reconsider their stance on their nuclear programme if that happened.*

Recommendations for European countries:

- Reinforce international calls for restraint and de-escalation in the Middle East: "enough is enough".
- Emphasise that the current direction of travel in the region is dangerous even if escalation can be temporarily halted. There is a need not just to manage the symptoms, but to address the underlying conflicts in the region, and to return

to diplomacy with Iran to resolve the outstanding issues of its nuclear programme.

- If US and European diplomacy can de-escalate the current crisis, it may be positive ground for future nuclear diplomacy. It could possibly also be a foundation for future efforts to explore whether there could be a de facto détente of some kind between Iran and Israel.
- Support and explore ideas for a regional peace conference following a Gaza ceasefire, and for arms control and non-proliferation to be on the agenda.
- Find opportunities to convene the P3 along with other smaller European states with a particular interest in nuclear diplomacy or diplomacy with Iran?

In the US,

- Encourage any efforts to make progress between Iran and the US ahead of the next election.
- If Biden is re-elected, use Ireland's voice to reinforce the need for the Iran nuclear file to remain a priority.
- Explore ways to engage with some of those that might be likely to staff a second Trump administration.

With the wider Middle East,

- The role of Saudi Arabia and other Arab states can also be important now that Iran has established a dialogue and détente with Saudi Arabia and UAE. MBS could be someone who could help persuade a future president Trump to try nuclear diplomacy with Iran or reinstate some version of the JCPOA.
- In the Middle East, engage with regional states on the question of whether and how they can develop their regional security arrangements, and what support or ideas they might want from Ireland, the EU, OSCE or UN. Regional leaders have been working on dialogue and détente for some time before October 7th and are aware that there is a deficit of regional security architecture that needs to be addressed. Advocate for arms control and nuclear non-proliferation to be an important part of the agenda

On global arms control and non-proliferation:

- It should be a priority to reinforce the normative value of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), given live concerns that the taboo on nuclear testing could be broken, potentially by Russia or Iran. The CTBTO holdout states are almost all in the Middle East.

- CTBT ratification could be considered as a confidence-building measure among regional states, potentially as part of their efforts to develop regional security arrangements.
- The work being done by Norway, Belgium, and others on the humanitarian and environmental consequences of nuclear weapons is not widely known in the Middle East region. These discussions could be extended to include Middle Eastern scholars and to be publicised more widely in the region.

Longer term:

- Encourage any regional security arrangements to include track 1, track 1.5 or track 2 dialogues on arms control including nuclear non-proliferation.
- Educate younger-generation experts and thought leaders on the importance of, reasons for, and ways to ensure nuclear non-proliferation.
- Work with the EU and UN to support education in the history and value of arms control and disarmament, including the NPT.
- Advocate for conflict resolution efforts to move beyond crisis management and seek to address the underlying causes of violence and instability in the Middle East.

Iranian perspectives

The impression given by Iranian participants was that Iran anticipates there will be further opportunities for a diplomatic agreement with the US in the future. “Some would like to settle the situation whether through the JCPOA or a new deal... Diplomacy brings Iran manoeuvrability and prestige.” It was said that “Iran considers itself a standby nuclear state” but does not have the political desire to weaponise its nuclear programme, especially as it has other means of exerting power. Instead the nuclear programme was a “continuation of diplomacy”¹.

Some of its behaviour can therefore be interpreted as an attempt to stack up bargaining chips for a future negotiation. However, this is a risky process. Its bargaining chips can themselves be seen as escalatory – such as advances in its nuclear programme, its relations with its increasingly active network of non-state armed groups (which Iranian participants sometimes described as its “deterrence network”) and the de facto practice of state hostage-taking.

Iran, the JCPOA and the US

Moreover, Iran has not been internally united over whether the JCPOA was desirable in the first place. The IRGC had opposed the JCPOA from the first place, and also opposed the efforts to restore it. They did not want to lose the strategic asset of having uranium enriched to 60%. However, the IRGC was not necessarily against a new nuclear deal. Rather, it was argued that the IRGC’s preference was for the “mutual understanding” that was reached with the US in 2023 to pave the way for a “longer, stronger” follow-on agreement (with no snapback mechanism and with Iran retaining 60% enriched uranium), instead of a return to the JCPOA. It was also said that the issues relating to IAEA investigations into historic allegations of a clandestine nuclear programme were in the remit of the National Security Council, not the Atomic Energy Organisation of Iran.

Iranian participants suggested that diplomacy is possible regardless of who wins the US elections (despite grievances with Trump over the assassination of Qasim Suleimani). They indicated that the Trump and Biden administrations have not been that different in terms of the outcomes for Iran: Iran was still under sanctions, and Biden had not returned to the JCPOA. Although the “mutual understanding” had been reached in 2023, the US had [in response to October 7th] gone back on its commitment to allow Iran to access US\$6bn of frozen assets² which gave more credence to those who had always argued “you can’t trust the Americans”. [This

¹ In March 2024 the US Office of the Director of National Intelligence’s annual report on Iran found that Iran is not currently undertaking the activities needed to produce a testable nuclear weapon and that the country “uses its nuclear program to build negotiating leverage and respond to perceived international pressure.”

[https://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2024/mar/11/2024-us-intelligence-report-](https://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2024/mar/11/2024-us-intelligence-report-iran#:~:text=On%20March%2011%2C%202024%2C%20the,and%20a%20nuclear%20energy%20plant.)

[iran#:~:text=On%20March%2011%2C%202024%2C%20the,and%20a%20nuclear%20energy%20plant.](https://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2024/mar/11/2024-us-intelligence-report-iran#:~:text=On%20March%2011%2C%202024%2C%20the,and%20a%20nuclear%20energy%20plant.)

² The US\$6bn was held in an account managed by Qatar, who were reportedly told not to let Iran access the money after October 7th because of Iran’s links with Hamas. However Iran was able to receive some electricity payments from Iraq without US objections, seen by some as a quid pro quo.

example again illustrates the difficulty of compartmentalisation when other tracks are going backwards.]

Iranian participants reinforced a longstanding Iranian message that Iran wants to compartmentalise diplomacy into different tracks: nuclear issues with the US and potentially the rest of the P5; regional issues with regional players. “Nuclear issues are a great power issue,” it was said. “Iran will not negotiate on regional issues with Western powers – the balance has shifted in favour of non-state actors since the Gaza war and Iran is taking advantage of that”. However, Iranian participants also wanted to emphasise that Iran did not want to escalate the Gaza war, saying that the Supreme Leader was well aware of the potential for Prime Minister Netanyahu to try to “trap” the US and Iran into a war, and that Khamenei had “wisely contained factions [inside Iran] who would like to extend the war”. They also noted that the potential for regional radicalisation stemming from the Gaza war would not benefit any country.

The state of relations with the US is strategically paramount for Iran because of the US’s economic and military power. “The US is the one that can really harm us.” Recent experience has demonstrated the ability of US sanctions to sharply limit Iran’s economy, and the U.S. has the potential to attack Iran militarily - hence, so much of Iran’s “deterrence network” is directed towards US assets in the region. “Iran’s problem is with the US rather than Israel because of the US’s superior power. Only a US attack on Iran’s mainland could push Iran to weaponisation – this would be the real red line.”

Iran’s views of Europe, Russia and China

In one participant’s view, “Europe and Russia are strategically irrelevant” compared with the US. The experience with the JCPOA after 2018 indicated Europe’s inability to deliver economic results for Iran with US sanctions still in place. However, another suggested that if there is a revival of nuclear diplomacy, Europe would have an important role to play in “bridging between the US, Russia and China” on nuclear issues. Moreover, the ability of the EU and individual European countries to speak directly to Iran is important when the US and Iran have no official diplomatic relations. European participants noted that some European countries have de facto contacts not only with the foreign ministry but also with the IRGC in countries where they have a significant representation in Iranian embassies, such as Iraq. Meanwhile, Iranian participants noted that smaller European countries outside the E3 could play an important role, such as Italy, Greece or Ireland.

Russia and China also have less to offer than the U.S., according to the participants. Iran’s bilateral relations with each of these countries include a fair amount of mistrust, although they are increasingly important to Iran’s economic and security strategy. Russia is benefitting from the US being “distracted” in the Middle East. However, that does not necessarily mean it will be a spoiler in any future nuclear diplomacy – that would depend on how this diplomacy is configured.

Middle East conflict

Iranian interlocutors said Iran is taking advantage of the conflict in the region to strengthen its position and to engage in regional diplomacy. Conversely, it is not seeking to destroy the deterrent power of Israel “which would be unrealistic” and that “Iran knows its strategic constraints”.

However, a US participant noted Iran had done “a remarkably bad job” of conveying to Israel any sense that Iran does not pose it an existential threat. A conclusion that could be drawn from this is that if Iran is serious about this message, it needs to convey it first and foremost to Israel. Iran’s rejection of Israel also means it has been unable to play a role as a mediator in the Gaza war.

What could a future nuclear agreement look like?

An Iranian participant said that for Iran a Gaza ceasefire would be a prerequisite to reaching an understanding with the US. Such an understanding should include enabling Iran to sell [some of] its oil. It was also suggested that JCPOA sunset clauses could be extended by five years, IAEA snap inspections could be increased, and there could be an agreement to reduce centrifuges and uranium stockpiles.

In previous rounds of talks Iran sought guarantees that the U.S. would not pull out of any new deal, something that was not possible without a binding treaty (in turn not feasible to get through Congress). Iranian interlocutors emphasised that the interest now is in **detering** a future US president from pulling out of an agreement, rather than finding a way to legally or politically **bind** them to it.

US views

Just as Iran seems to be anticipating that more diplomacy with the US would be in its interest, the US has interests in talking to Iran. It has a number of issues of contention with Iran which cannot easily be solved and which don't seem to have a clear military solution. The US is not anticipating that the Iranian regime will collapse, although the succession to Khamenei may present a vulnerability.

Biden

The Biden administration has generally been willing to continue diplomacy with Iran (and indeed arms control diplomacy with Russia). This has sometimes become a toxic issue in domestic politics – particularly where sanctions relief is involved, as this becomes spun as “funding terrorism”. However, since October 7, the US and Iran have made repeated efforts to signal to each other that they are seeking to avoid a full-scale war in the region. This could potentially provide some ground for renewed diplomacy, especially after a Gaza ceasefire³.

A US participant said that Biden was interested in engaging and reducing tensions even if it is not possible to resolve underlying issues – consistent with a “conflict management” approach to the wider region. Biden had underestimated the Rouhani government. Perhaps he was now too hopeful about the Raisi one. Raisi was heavily focused on a strategy to build alternative great-power relations with Russia and China. It could be argued that Iran had been remarkably successful in rebuffing Biden and pursuing relations with Russia and China instead. It gave the impression that the leadership was wedded to a strategy of confrontation and seemed more motivated by the failures of its adversaries than its own success. Israel was getting “a black eye” in Gaza, but does that actually help Iran? Is there any way to unpick this dependence on confrontation?

Another US participant said Biden's goal had shifted from getting a nuclear deal, which was initially one of his top priorities, to simply containing the issue. In this view, from a US standpoint, the 2023 understanding with Iran was primarily about ensuring US troops would not get killed. It was not clear to US observers what Iran's strategic goal now was. It should not necessarily be assumed that a second-term Biden would prioritise a nuclear agreement with Iran with so many other things on his plate, the participant said.

Trump

If Trump regained the presidency, it is likely some key figures from the previous administration would come back - some with long-held and very entrenched views about Iran in favour of “maximum pressure” and against diplomacy. Nonetheless,

³ This workshop took place before the April escalation that brought Israel and Iran into more direct confrontation than has been seen in the past. During this period the US signalled very clearly that it did not want to be pulled into a war with Iran.

Trump himself is less ideological and more unpredictable. He is genuinely interested in making deals and in being seen as a man who can pull off diplomatic successes. It is no joke that he would love a Nobel prize, to paraphrase one participant. He might, therefore, be more open to diplomacy than his advisors.

It was also noted that the “Trump team” were not necessarily opposed to Gulf-Iran dialogue. They would prefer to unite the Arab states of the Gulf around a “maximum pressure” policy towards Iran, but as long as Iran’s economy was squeezed, they would not object to Gulf countries talking to Iran. Meanwhile, the Gulf countries could use their own voice in Washington – if they wanted to – to persuade Trump that there was a deal to be made with Iran.

European viewpoints

The JCPOA

Europe has stood by the idea that the priority should be to return to the JCPOA, given its international legitimacy. However, this is increasingly hard to envisage as the situation moves further and further from the starting point of the JCPOA. One participant noted the JCPOA was predicated on Iran's nuclear programme "moving from point A to point B – but it is now very far from point A". Iran has advanced uranium enrichment to 60% and has acquired new technical know-how. Meanwhile, there has been a long interruption to monitoring and verification mechanisms, which means the IAEA has lost its continuity of knowledge, which will remain a problem even if a new agreement is reached. The JCPOA would at the very least need to be adapted, especially regarding the sunsets.

The wider political context for diplomacy is also very different than it was in the mid-2010s when the JCPOA was negotiated. JCPOA was built on an approach of compartmentalisation, whereby the nuclear issue was handled separately from other issues of concern with Iran (regional issues, missiles and human rights). It was founded on a strong consensus among the P5+1. If a window of opportunity arises after the next US election, it will require consensus-building both between the E3 and the E3+3, it was said.

Compartmentalisation

In terms of compartmentalisation, European countries took the view from 2004 onwards that the nuclear issue should be prioritised, since all the other issues Europe has with Iran would be worsened if Iran obtained a nuclear weapon. The idea was not to ignore the other issues but to handle them in separate tracks that would be made easier by the progress on the nuclear file. "The JCPOA was meant to be the floor, not the ceiling," in the words of one European participant. For example, the E3 plus Italy had held talks with Iran on de-escalating the conflict in Yemen, but these had collapsed when the US withdrew from the JCPOA; this was not the only example.

Compartmentalisation is now in question, both in the US and in Europe. It has become much harder since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, and since Iran became a supplier of military drones to Russia for use in the invasion. However, the negotiations to restore the JCPOA initially continued after the Russian invasion. Iran had initially responded positively to European proposals but then came back asking for more. Since mid-2022 the focus of international diplomacy has shifted to how to limit escalation until after the next US election, and maintaining the role of the IAEA. The "women, life, freedom" protests in the second half of 2022 and the subsequent crackdown on protestors also spurred Iranian diaspora groups to mobilise against international engagement with Iran, which made European political leaders less willing to be seen engaging. But by this time, they had already lost faith that the Iranian leadership genuinely wanted to revive the agreement.

Iran's own actions hardly help create a positive atmosphere for diplomacy, a European participant noted. For instance, the prisoner release agreed with the US was timed to coincide with the one-year anniversary of the death of Mahsa Amini, sending a symbolic message to protestors that the rest of the world no longer cared.

Middle East conflict

Despite decades of EU diplomacy over the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, EU states have been divided over the Gaza conflict, epitomised by EU member states taking three different positions in the first UNGA vote on a Gaza ceasefire. They have reiterated their support for a two-state solution, and over time, there has been a growing consensus that a ceasefire is needed.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict will most likely continue in the foreseeable future, with negative consequences for regional security, although it may move to a period of lower intensity. Over time, Saudi Arabia will want to normalise its relations with both Israel and Iran, although the former would depend on plausible progress towards a Palestinian state.

However, it was suggested by a participant that a renewed political process would be more likely to yield a "one and a half state solution" at best, with greater security and dignity for the Palestinians but not full statehood. The role of Hamas in Palestinian politics will be a particularly divisive issue and there will be a need for track two contacts, given that multiple governments do not regard the group as an acceptable interlocutor.

The crisis in the region has focused some attention on the need to address the underlying and long-term conflicts there. There are likely to be more international initiatives to come. Europe can play a role in helping to ensure that non-proliferation and arms control are issues on the agenda, and to emphasise that these are key elements of multilateralism and international law, rather than an area where Iran or the Middle East are being singled out for different treatment.

Nuclear proliferation in global context

In July, the world's disarmament diplomats will convene in Geneva for the Preparatory Committee for the 2026 Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) Review Conference (PrepCom). At last year's PrepCom, there was no agreement among countries on a conference outcome document. Instead, the chair made some of the outcomes public in a document comprising "Reflections of the Chair" – one level below a "Summary of the Chair". It was noted that Iran had been one of the driving factors in the failure to come up with a consensus at the PrepCom⁴.

There are a variety of pressures on the NPT, which have been building for some time because of a lack of progress on the disarmament pillar of the treaty and have been exacerbated by Russia's invasion of Ukraine and its use of nuclear threats there. There is a clear international taboo on nuclear threats, but there have been some divisions over whether Russia's threats are uniquely reprehensible or whether all nuclear-armed states use implicit threats. Non-proliferation norms have been questioned by narratives claiming that Ukraine would be better off if it had nuclear weapons, and live discussions in countries that are under the U.S. security umbrella about whether they should seek to obtain their own nuclear weapons.

It was said that it is now quite easy to imagine a cascade of nuclear weapons in the Middle East or in Asia. North Korea has moved from being a latent nuclear weapons power to a non-NPT nuclear weapons state. If the Iran nuclear issue is not contained or resolved, it would easily have a domino effect on others in the region, potentially leading to a Middle East with multiple nuclear-armed states. In the meantime, many Middle East countries are holding out against agreeing to Additional Protocols with the IAEA, which would strengthen nuclear safeguards. However, Saudi Arabia may come closer to this as it negotiates a possible civilian nuclear power agreement with the US.

There will also be intensive discussions about nuclear safety and security because of the situation at the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant in Ukrainian territory occupied by Russia. The situation of having a nuclear power plant occupied in a war zone, while its regulator is on the other side of the front line, presents major questions about the safety of nuclear energy production – at a time when African and Middle Eastern interest in nuclear energy is growing, while Western countries are often more negative about it. The ensuing debates are likely to dominate much of the discussion at the PrepCom.

The fact that the NPT endorses the right of all countries to the peaceful uses of nuclear technology had been a key reason for many countries in the "global south" to sign on to the treaty in the first place, often in the early years of their independence. If they see their rights to nuclear energy being questioned, at the same time as the nuclear-armed states continue to expand their own arsenals, they are increasingly

⁴ Some of the final arguments around the chair's summary, including Iranian objections, can be found here: <https://reachingcriticalwill.org/disarmament-fora/npt/2023/nir/16968-npt-news-in-review-vol-18-no-6>

likely to see the core bargain of the NPT as being put into question. It was noted that Iran is a strong supporter of the inalienable right to pursue nuclear energy, which is described in Article IV of the NPT⁵ and that it is aligned with a number of important non-Western powers on this, including South Africa.

The Comprehensive Nuclear-Test Ban Treaty continues to provide a well-functioning verification and monitoring regime. However, if Russia withdraws (after de-ratifying the Treaty), there could be a cascade of withdrawals challenging the future of the Treaty.

Overall, it was said, it is a very negative environment for nuclear arms control – but it was also said that in times of crisis, it is important to think ahead about how a very bad situation could be a platform for something better to emerge. How can new ideas and formats be brought into the discussions? Track two and track 1.5 spaces were discussing ideas about a more cooperative approach to nuclear in the Middle East. The European experience with Euratom after World War Two was worth bearing in mind. It was also noted that there is a new wave of scientific work being done on the humanitarian and environmental consequences of nuclear weapons. Could more Middle East experts be brought into these discussions?

For some states that have the potential to obtain nuclear weapons, like South Korea and Japan, incentives against proliferation include security guarantees and integration into the global economy. Iran is obviously in a very different position because of the wider problems in its relations with the international community.

An Iranian participant noted that Iranian students were sympathetic to the writings of Kenneth Waltz on nuclear weapons, and that Iran has perhaps thousands of students with degrees in nuclear engineering and naïve views about international relations. [Behzad?] Soltani was like this: a scientist who put too much importance on the number of centrifuges Iran should have.

At the same time, the Treaty for the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons has gained ground especially among the countries of the so-called “global south” which Iran often regards as part of its natural political constituency. It was noted that Iran voted in favour of the UN adopting the TPNW and has consistently voted in favour of the annual UNGA resolution expressing support for it⁶. Bearing in mind that it’s widely believed that China has helped to restrain Putin’s nuclear threats, it may be worth exploring how non-Western countries could similarly influence Iran on a normative level, to help dissuade it from making a move to weaponisation.

⁵ <https://disarmament.unoda.org/wmd/nuclear/npt/text/>

⁶ Also noted here:

<https://banmonitor.org/profiles/iran#:~:text=Iran%20voted%20in%20favour%20of,the%20Treaty%2C%20including%20in%202022.>



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