



Spotlight on Iran



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Highlights of the week

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"Syria, the First Line of Resistance" conference in Tehran: "Sword of Damocles doctrine is Syria's trump card against the West"

Last Thursday, July 12, Cyber Hezbollah held its ninth conference in Tehran, titled “Syria, the First Line of Resistance”. Cyber Hezbollah is an organization that was established in the summer of 2011 by supporters of the Iranian regime who operated in cyberspace against the reformist opposition during the riots of 2009. The organization’s first conference was convened in August 2011. A memorandum of opinion released by the organization shortly after it was established listed its goals and objectives, which include bringing together regime supporters who are active in cyberspace, organizing courses and training for the activists, holding meetings to acquaint the activists with tactics of cyber warfare, and mobilizing the activists for online activities. Since its establishment, the organization has provided a supportive environment for philosophical and cultural discourse between figures considered close to the radical right wing bloc and regime supporters.

Cyber Hezbollah's ninth conference, held in the presence of Hamed Hassan, the Syrian ambassador to Iran, was dedicated to the current developments in Syria, with its participants expressing the Iranian regime's continuing support for President Bashar Assad and his government.

Speaking at the conference, Hojjat-ol-Eslam Mohammad Hassan Akhtari, Iran's former ambassador in Damascus and chairman of the international Ahlulbayt Association, addressed the developments in the Arab world, saying that the enemies of Islam are concerned about the "Islamic awakening" in the region and are attempting to hold back the progress of the Islamic movements in various ways, which include hitting the front of Islamic resistance against Israel, whose center is in Syria. He stressed that Syria has always been at the forefront of the resistance against Israel and, with the cooperation of Iran, sided with Hezbollah and Palestine.

Akhtari said that the developments in Syria are completely different than those that have taken place in Egypt, Tunisia, Bahrain, and Libya these past two years. The resistance movements in those countries were popular, while the developments in Syria cannot be considered as the manifestation of a popular movement. What is more, in other Arab countries there were oppressive regimes that cooperated with Western powers, the same powers that are now cooperating with each other to topple the regime in Syria. He noted that the Syrian government presented to the foreign diplomats photographic evidence of the crimes committed by regime opponents against Syrian civilians, but that the Western media are trying to portray a distorted and diametrically opposed view of reality.

Akhtari strongly condemned the authorities of Saudi Arabia and Qatar, saying that the rulers of these two countries, who had never held elections or upheld the rights of their citizens, are in no position to call for reforms or elections in Syria. He also voiced criticism against the government of Turkey, saying that the Turkish people should know that the policy pursued by the authorities of their country does not serve the interests of the citizens of Syria and Turkey (www.snn.ir, July 12).

The keynote speech of the conference was delivered by Dr. Hassan Abbasi, the head of Iran's Doctrinal Analysis Center for Security Without Borders, affiliated with the Revolutionary Guards. Abbasi is considered one of the major theoreticians of the radical wing in the conservative camp and the Revolutionary Guards.



Abbasi noted that the West has taken the developments in the Arab world to reflect a third wave of “Islamic awakening” in the Middle East. The first wave was the Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979, the second was the rise of the Islamic movements in Lebanon and Palestine, and the third wave is taking place in Arab countries right now. It is believed in the West that the Islamic awakening needs to be brought under control before it spreads to Western countries, too.

The United States and Israel argue that the developments taking place in the region are not a manifestation of an anti-Zionist, anti-American phenomenon, but rather an uprising against the oppression which, as they say, is taking place in Syria and elsewhere. According to Abbasi, however, the developments in Syria are not a popular revolution where citizens take to the streets, but rather a terrorist activity conducted by Al-Qaeda operatives against the Syrian regime—the very operatives who have done nothing in the past several years to help Hezbollah or Hamas in their struggle against Israel.

Abbasi said that, over the years, the Western imperialism and Britain gave rise to three schools of thought in the Middle East: the Ahmadiyya in Pakistan, from which the author Salman Rushdie emerged; the Baha’i faith in Iran; and the Wahhabiyya in the Arabian Peninsula. These schools of thought have the support of Western countries, and it is small wonder, therefore, that the Wahhabists do not work against the “Zionist regime” but rather put all of their forces and efforts against Syria. He noted that, when the popular uprisings in the region began, the United States gave Turkey and Saudi Arabia the mission of holding back their expansion. Turkey worked with countries in the region to spread the Turkish model. While the leaders of Turkey portray the Turkish

model as an Islamic one, the only thing Islamic about it is that their wives wear veils—in practice, it is an “American Islam”.

Abbasi stressed that Israel has a vested interest in taking action to topple the Syrian regime, saying that this is the consequence of Israel losing its hold on its southern border following the revolution in Egypt. Israel is looking for a way out of the isolation it has found itself in by transferring its defense center from its southern border to Turkey, which still cooperates with it. The problem is that Syria lies between Turkey and Israel; consequently, Israel is interested in stepping up the pressure on Syria so that it can regain the strategic depth it has lost in the south and, at the same time, eliminate the problem of resistance in Lebanon.

It was Abbasi's assessment that the West can't launch a military action in Syria as it did in Libya. First, the Syrian regime is a closely-knit unit and the Syrian security apparatuses operate with the kind of coordination that did not exist in Libya. Second, any foreign intervention in Syria will provoke a strong reaction from Syria, the Lebanese resistance, and the Islamic resistance in Gaza against Israel. According to Abbasi, Israel is held hostage by Syria, and any attack on Syria by NATO will lead to a rocket attack on the strategic centers in Israel. Abbasi added that the international conditions are one more factor that makes a Western military initiative against Syria impossible. The coming elections in the United States, the economic crisis in the West, the weakness of Saudi Arabia, and Russia's adamant opposition to a military attack on Syria make it impossible for the West to conduct a military operation. Syria's trump card against the West is based on the Sword of Damocles doctrine, Abbasi said. The West knows that, in case it makes any attempt to launch a military action against Syria, Israel will be dealt a retaliatory blow with a sword whose edges are Syria and the Islamic resistance in Palestine and Lebanon. This doctrine, therefore, has the power to deter the West from a military action against Syria (www.snn.ir, July 13).

Meanwhile, this week top Iranian officials have once again stressed their support for a political solution to the crisis in Syria and their opposition to foreign military intervention. Foreign Minister Ali-Akbar Salehi announced that Tehran is willing to host talks between the Syrian government and opposition representatives, emphasizing that Iran supports a domestic Syrian solution to the political crisis in that country (Mehr, July 15). Speaking at a press conference held on Monday, July 16, Salehi said that Iran has already established connections with broad swathes of the Syrian opposition and is currently in the process of holding consultations with it (Mehr, July 16).

In response to the mediation proposal brought up by Foreign Minister Salehi, Mohammad Ali Sobhani, Iran's former ambassador in Beirut, praised the initiative, and argued that the reevaluation of Iran's stance on the developments in Syria is a correct course of action that serves the national interests of the Islamic republic. An article written by Sobhani and published in the reformist daily Shargh said that Iran can't remain indifferent over the developments in Syria, and that both warring sides in Syria have some degree of responsibility for the situation. While the support shown by the Syrian regime for the front of resistance against Israel is commendable, it does not absolve it of all responsibility for the bloodshed in Syria. The Iran-Syria alliance against Israel can't serve as a reason for Iran to avoid criticizing the inappropriate policy pursued by Syria, since good relations between governments do not justify disregard for people's rights. Iran can play a meaningful role as a mediator, and its mediation proposal should be welcome, Sobhani wrote (Shargh, July 16).

“Give Morsi a chance”: Iranian press reactions to Egyptian president's visit to Saudi Arabia

While some Iranian press outlets expressed reservations over Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi's visit to Saudi Arabia this week, others urged caution. It was Morsi's first official visit to another country after being sworn in as president. Prior to the visit, Egypt had denied reports which appeared in the Iranian press according to which Morsi intended to take an official visit to Tehran. Earlier this week the Iranian media reported that President Ahmadinejad and President Morsi will soon meet in Ethiopia at the Organization of African Unity conference, which began in Addis Ababa this week, and that Mojtaba Samareh-Hashemi, Ahmadinejad's top advisor, is expected to fly to Egypt soon to extend an official invitation to President Morsi to take part in the Non-Aligned Movement conference which will be held in Tehran in late August.

The daily Jomhuri-ye Eslami, which in recent weeks has expressed doubt over the new Egyptian regime's commitment to the principles of the Egyptian revolution, strongly criticized Morsi's visit to Riyadh this week, expressing hope that the visit does not mean that there has been a strategic change in the policy of the Muslim Brotherhood now that the organization has come to power. An editorial published by the daily said that Morsi's visit to Saudi Arabia shows that the new president and the Muslim Brotherhood have once again backed down from their previous position, having already recognized the decision made by the Cairo Supreme Court to disband the

parliament. The Egyptian president's trip to Saudi Arabia and his meeting with King Abdullah, one of the enemies of the Egyptian revolution, is both a retreat and a betrayal, and it gives the revolutionaries one more reason to be concerned, the article said. The question is whether this is a tactical retreat to which Morsi was forced to agree, or a strategic change in the policy of the Muslim Brotherhood.

The daily argued that, whenever Morsi backs down from his position, he hurts himself, the Muslim Brotherhood, and the revolution, however he may try to justify his actions. There is no question that Morsi is facing enormous difficulties in managing state affairs, particularly the economic crisis and the dire poverty. Egypt needs external economic aid from the West and the Persian Gulf states, and the refusal of the United States and Europe to provide it with such aid explains Morsi's trip to Saudi Arabia. However, not every action taken by Morsi to contend with the economic crisis can be justified. His trip to Riyadh was humiliating even for him, since the king of Saudi Arabia was an ally of President Mubarak and was known for his unequivocal views against the Egyptian revolution. His visit, considered a betrayal by Egypt's revolutionaries, can be counted as an achievement for the rulers of Riyadh, who need to earn every bit of legitimacy in the face of the growing popular protest in their country.

Jomhuri-ye Eslami warned that, even if the current policy pursued by the Muslim Brotherhood may have some short-term benefits for that organization, in the long term it may have severe consequences and it jeopardizes the interests of the Egyptian people. The Egyptians launched the revolution to eliminate the influence of the previous regime, to have the peace treaties with Israel revoked, and to break Egypt's dependence on other countries in the Middle East and elsewhere in the world. So far, the Muslim Brotherhood has done nothing to implement the demands of the revolution. While Morsi has won the support of the overwhelming majority of the Egyptian revolutionaries, unfortunately he is not taking advantage of this support to achieve the objectives of the revolution. This may weaken the spirit of the revolution, serve the interests of the old regime's supporters who have the backing of foreign and regional powers, and jeopardize the revolution. One must hope, the daily concluded, that Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood's recent retreats from their position are the result of temporary interests, and that in the future they will take action aimed at achieving the objectives of the revolution (Jomhuri-ye Eslami, July 15).

On the other hand, the dailies Mardom Salari and Siyasat-e Rooz showed more understanding for President Morsi's needs, which were reflected in his recent visit to

Riyadh. Mardom Salari said that, based on the interviews and speeches given by Morsi, it can be concluded that he is an intelligent president who is well aware of the needs of his country and the reality in which he operates. He knows that he has to take the status of Egypt's military leaders into consideration, he is aware of the fact that less than half of all Egyptian citizens supported him in the second round of elections, and he is following a cautious approach.

The daily said that the new president can't be expected to show support for Iran's positions this early in his term. No country puts the national interests of other countries before its own interests, and it would be a severe mistake to think that other countries need to be on the same page as Iran and agree with it on all issues. The president of Egypt acts in accordance with the needs of his country and government, and Iran shouldn't take offense that some of his statements do not express support for it, since there is no room for sentiments in policy management. Iran's dealings with Egypt need to be based on the recognition that it is a large, influential country. Given its status in the Arab world, it is only natural that Morsi has chosen Saudi Arabia as the destination of his first official visit, even though Egypt should know that Iran will eventually have more influence than Saudi Arabia on the international scene—if not today, then tomorrow. Iran needs to approach Egypt calmly, gradually, and thoughtfully, showing respect rather than exerting pressure (Mardom Salari, July 15).

The daily *Siyasat-e Rooz* also called on the Iranian authorities to recognize the special circumstances in which the new Egyptian president is currently operating. An article titled "Give Morsi a chance", published on July 13, said that Morsi's presidency is being put under a microscope due to Egypt's significance, its historical relationship with the West and Israel, and the enormous impact of the developments in Egypt on the Arab world.

So far, Morsi has conducted himself in a reasonable, intelligent manner, and is trying to project an image different than the one painted by his opponents. For example, he made what was for him a rather risky decision to convene the Egyptian parliament, while recognizing the decision of the Supreme Court to disband the parliament. As far as Morsi is concerned, it was a first step to restricting the power of Egypt's military leaders. His decision to go to Saudi Arabia on an official visit despite the criticism voiced by some of Egypt's revolutionaries was also carefully calculated. Its aim was to derail plans to prohibit him from leaving Egypt, and thus reduce the sensitivity that can be expected to surround his future visits, particularly his visit to Tehran.

Those in charge of Iran's foreign policy and media must take caution not to adopt stances that will increase the political limitations facing Morsi, and let him operate without pressure and complete the Islamist circle in the region. Those who do not take into consideration the internal and external conditions in Egypt could make things more complicated for Morsi. He needs to be given the possibility of pursuing a policy that will take into account the sensitive conditions prevailing in his country, calmly strengthen his relationship with the Muslim world, and increase the despair in Israel.

Surge in price of chicken continues, Iranians line up to purchase chicken at government-controlled prices ahead of Ramadan

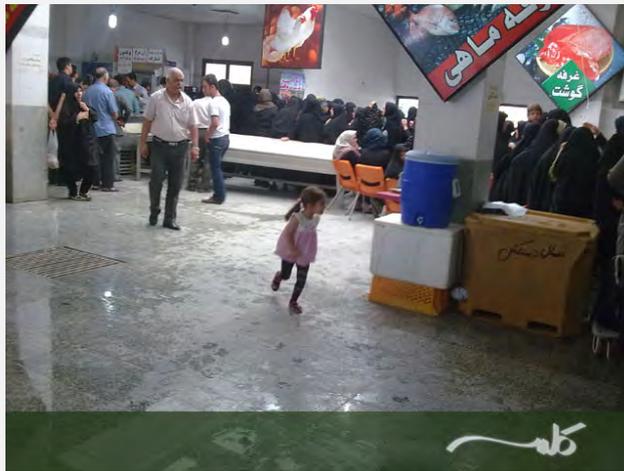
The ongoing surge in the price of chicken continues to dominate Iran's economic agenda. Earlier this week, one kilogram (2.2 lbs.) of chicken was selling for a record 8,000 tomans (about 4.5 dollars at the unofficial exchange rate) in some of the provinces. In Tehran, one kilogram of chicken was selling for 7,000 tomans.

Increase in the price of chicken during the last 10 years (ISNA, July 15)

Year	Average price (in rials)	Maximum price	Minimum price
1382 (2003 – 2004)	15064	16400	13000
1383 (2004 – 2005)	17032	20000	14900
1384 (2005 – 2006)	14811	16800	12800
1385 (2006 – 2007)	16979	18500	15300
1386 (2007 – 2008)	19958	24500	16500
1387 (2008 – 2009)	26015	28000	21900
1388 (2009 – 2010)	26906	29000	23200
1389 (2010 – 2011)	32313	35000	31000
1390 (2011 – 2012)	34596	37000	24100
1391 (2012 – 2013)	29562	66000	50000

As a consequence of the surging prices, long lines form in front of distribution centers where chickens are sold at government-controlled prices: 4,700 tomans per kilogram. The Iranian media reported this week that the lines are becoming longer by the day as

demand for chicken grows ahead of the month of Ramadan. Mehr News Agency reported that, following the increase in the price of red meat, chicken has become the sole source of protein for almost all Iranians who earn an average income, and now that, too, has become out of reach for many of them. A chicken vendor said in an interview given to Mehr that demand for chicken at government-controlled prices often exceeds supply. He noted that chickens are sold at the price set by the government between 8 and 10 in the morning, and that people start waiting in line as early as 7 in the morning (Mehr, July 16).



Kalemeh, a website affiliated with the reformist opposition, also reported long lines at the distribution centers, as well as complaints from many Iranians over the continuing increase in the price of chicken. Many of them were frustrated at having to spend many hours waiting in line to purchase chicken at government-controlled prices. Many of them claimed that, even after waiting in line for hours, they had to buy chicken at a price considerably higher than that set by the government. One Iranian man said that, even though he had been standing in line from 5 AM and it was already 9 AM, he was still waiting for the sale of chicken to begin. Another person strongly criticized the government and wondered whether nuclear energy is more important than the livelihood of the citizens. He noted that, if the authorities cared as much for the situation of the citizens as they do for uranium, the country and the citizens would not be in such a bad situation. Yet another Iranian spoke about the government-controlled price of chicken, arguing that 4,700 tomans per kilogram isn't cheap either and that "the citizens are being made fun of" (Kalemeh, July 15).



In recent days, commentators, merchants, and politicians have discussed the reasons behind the increase in the price of chicken, saying that, by and large, it is the consequence of insufficient control by the government and the sharp increase in the price of chicken feed. Mohammad Yousefi, the head of Iran's Union of Poultry Farmers, said that the increase in the price of chicken stems from the ongoing increase in the price of soybean meal, which is used as feed for chickens (Mehr, July 16).

This week Majles member Nader Ghazipour accused a businessman in charge of importing livestock feed of responsibility for the price increases. He noted that the increase in the price of chicken has nothing to do with the economic sanctions imposed on Iran, and that it is rather the result of a monopoly exercised by one businessman who deliberately delays the import of chicken feed into the country to drive up prices. He called on the authorities to take action against this individual, whom he referred to as "Iran's meat sultan", and prevent businessmen who seek to turn a profit from doing as they please. Ghazipour demanded that the Ministry of Agriculture take responsibility for the import of chicken feed and distribute it freely to chicken farmers (Fararu, July 15). In response to the remarks made by the Majles member, the Tabnak website called on politicians to stop concerning themselves with "exposing" corrupt businessmen and holding pointless parliament meetings, and start taking real measures to curb the increase in prices (Tabnak, July 16). This week the president of Tehran's Azad University proclaimed Tuesday, July 17, as a "chicken-free day". He called on Iranians to refrain from buying chicken on that day in protest of the increasing prices, saying that it would be a show of support for the government and the citizens

and a demonstration of opposition to profiteers who are trying to earn excessive profits (ISNA, July 16).

Esma'il Ahmadi-Moghaddam, the chief of Iran's internal security forces, criticized Iran Broadcasting this week for continuing to broadcast movies on national television where Iranians can be seen eating chicken. Speaking at a conference of internal security forces chiefs, Ahmadi-Moghaddam said that these movies encourage the poor to take up arms against the rich. He noted that such movies are the shop window of society, and airing them may encourage people who see the social gaps they portray to take a knife and stab the rich. He said that Iran Broadcasting should avoid showing what is beyond the reach of many Iranian citizens (Asr-e Iran, July 14).

Religion students not spared by inflation crisis

The impact of the ongoing price increases has not spared the religion students in Iran. Last weekend the Mashregh website published an article dealing with the growing distress of the religious seminary students in the city of Qom in the face of the worsening economic conditions and the wave of price increases in the past several months. The economic distress is particularly evident among those religion students who do not work and dedicate most of their time to religious studies.

Those religion students who work during their studies are able to afford a lifestyle similar to that of average Iranian citizens. They may purchase an apartment after several years and manage to earn an income that is sufficient to cover their basic needs, even if they do have to give up some of their future plans. On the other hand, religion students who spend most of their time studying at the religious seminaries are experiencing economic distress that is becoming more and more severe. They receive a monthly allowance in the sum of 25 – 30 thousand tomans (about 13 – 16 dollars), have no other income or apartment of their own, and are forced to rent an apartment like many other young Iranians. These religion students, some of whom have one or two children, are severely affected by the inflation, particularly due to the increasing rent prices in the city of Qom. Some apartment owners, who face economic difficulties of their own, have recently decided to raise the rent, making it more than many youngsters can afford. Many of them are forced to sell the gold jewelry given to their wives on their wedding day, or seek loans from banks without necessarily having a way of repaying them. These students have trouble purchasing even basic food supplies. Some of them, who used to consume no more than 2 – 3 kg of meat per year, have

been forced to give up eating meat completely, which also negatively affects their wives and children. In light of the escalating economic distress, religion students are forced to find part-time jobs to survive. Some religion students who have a car have become taxi drivers in their spare time, and some of them do so without the knowledge of their families.

The Mashregh website noted that signs of the growing economic distress experienced by the religion students can be witnessed in statements made by some top clerics, who criticized the price increases and expressed their concern over the worsening economic situation. These statements reflect the opinions of only part of the clerics, since others prefer voicing their opinions in private, away from the public. The price increases have become the main topic of everyday conversation for religion students, who bring up the issue whenever they meet. The religion students are concerned both with the impact of the price increases on all Iranians and the growing public frustration, as well as with the impact the price increases have on their own lives. It is not clear, Mashregh said, how the religion students can succeed in their studies given the severe economic difficulties that they are facing. While many of them lead simple lifestyles and have already become used to handling the difficulties, there is only so much they can do to cope with the ongoing distress, and their families can only go on for so much longer in these conditions (Mashregh, July 12). The city of Qom is currently home to some 50 thousand religion students.



In addition to the growing distress that they are facing, the clerics and religion students are more than ever encountering the same kind of economic difficulties experienced by ordinary Iranians. Hawzah News, a news agency affiliated with the religious establishment in the city of Qom, interviewed a number of clerics and religion students in the religious seminaries of Qom about the numerous complaints they hear from citizens as a result of the worsening economic situation and the price increases.

Hojjat-ol-Eslam Qassem Hassanzadeh, a cleric who has been living in the city of Qom for more than 20 years, said that many Iranians bring their complaints and criticisms to the clerics, particularly the prayer leaders in mosques, in light of the escalation in the unemployment and inflation crisis. He noted that, in a reality where products become more expensive by the day, one of the most important missions facing the clerics is to forward the people's complaints to government officials and politicians, and ask them to find a solution to the inflation problem as soon as possible.

Seyyed Ahmad Hosseini, a fifth-year religion student, said that the complaints voiced by Iranians about the price increases in recent days have significantly increased compared to the past. He said that, in recent weeks, the prices of some products and foods have increased by a sharp 40 to 60 percent, and that many families are having difficulties purchasing even the most basic food supplies with the cash benefits they receive from the government. Sa'id Rahmani, an eight-year religion student, also spoke about the worsening economic situation, and said that only few families are not concerned about the increasing unemployment among the educated young people or the wave of price increases (www.hawzanews.com, June 30).

At the same time, the Union of Religious Book Publishers released an announcement this week saying that the increase in the price of paper severely limits their ability to publish new books on religion and copies of the Quran. In their announcement, the publishers said that the price of paper has increased by nearly 40 percent in recent months, which threatens to put publishers of religious books out of business. They called on the authorities to extend assistance to the book publishers, saying that such assistance would be especially welcome now that the month of Ramadan is just around the corner, which offers an opportunity to publish particularly large numbers of religious books (Mehr, July 13).

Pictures of the week: mosques cleaned up ahead of month of Ramadan

