



Spotlight on Iran¹

January 15 – 29, 2017

Editor: Dr. Raz Zimmt



Main Points

- ✓ The Astana talks on the future of Syria ended on January 24, 2017. Iran, Russia and Turkey agreed to establish a joint mechanism to oversee the Syrian ceasefire. They issued a statement at the end of the talks stressing their countries' commitment to preserving Syria's territorial integrity, continuing the joint struggle against ISIS and the Fateh al-Sham Front, and reinforcing the ceasefire. A delegation headed by Hossein Jaber Ansari, Iranian deputy foreign minister, and Brigadier General Mohammad Reza Fallahzadeh, represented Iran at the talks.
- ✓ On the eve of the talks in Astana, Iran, Russia and Turkey carried out intensive consultations. Imad Khamis, the Syrian prime minister, paid a visit to Tehran, and Ali Shamkhani, the secretary of the Supreme Council for National Security, paid a visit to Damascus. In addition, there were telephone consultations between senior Iranian and Russian officials. During Khamis' visit to Tehran, the two countries signed agreements for cooperation in agriculture, energy and communications.
- ✓ A spokesman for the Iranian foreign ministry denied claims made at the UN by the Israeli ambassador that Iran was using commercial Mahan Air flights to transfer weapons to Hezbollah in Syria and Lebanon. He claimed Hezbollah did not need Iranian arms because it supplied all of its own needs.
- ✓ Ali-Akbar Velayati, advisor to the Iranian supreme leader for international affairs, met in Tehran with a delegation of the Yazidi minority in Iraq. He told them Iran would continue supporting Iraq in the war against ISIS and that Iran was serious about its support of Iraq's territorial integrity.
- ✓ Iran strongly condemned Bahrain's execution of three Shi'ite political prisoners who were convicted in 2015 of attacking its security forces. Interviewed by an Egyptian newspaper, Khalid bin Ahmed al-Khalifa, the Bahraini foreign minister, said Iran presented the number one threat to the Gulf countries' security.
- ✓ Hossein Amir Abdollahian, international affairs advisor to the speaker of the Majlis (the Iranian parliament), met in Tehran with Khaled Qaddoumi, Hamas representative in Iran, and assured him that Iran's support for the Palestinians was the focus of Iranian policy.

¹ Spotlight on Iran is an Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center bulletin illuminating Iran's activities to establish its influence in the Middle East and beyond. It is based on reports in the Iranian media and written for the ITIC by Dr. Raz Zimmt, an expert on Iran's politics, society, foreign policy and social networks.

General Information

■ The first international conference for an Iranian-Arab cultural dialogue was held in the Iranian city of Qom on January 22-23, 2017. It was attended by fifteen representatives from Jordan, Iraq, Algeria, Syria, Oman, Kuwait, Lebanon, Tunisian and Bahrain. According to Hojjat-ul-Islam Najaf Lakzaei, head of the Research Center for Islamic Sciences and Culture, the conference was held to promote cultural and scientific cooperation between Iran and the Arab world.



The first international conference for an Iranian-Arab cultural dialogue (ABNA, January 22, 2017).

Iranian Intervention in Syria and Lebanon

■ On January 23-24, 2017, talks about the future of Syria were held in Astana, the capital of Kazakhstan. A delegation headed by Hossein Jaber Ansari, deputy foreign minister for Arab-African affairs, represented Iran. Upon arrival in Kazakhstan, Ansari said the talks would be overseen by Iran, Russia and Turkey, and that their objective was to stabilize the ceasefire in Syria and promote serious talks for a political resolution to end the fighting between the Syrian government and the armed groups. He said he hoped the talks in Astana would pave the way for a quick end to the Syrian crisis. He said Iran's position had always been that the crisis had to be resolved by political, not military means, and that Syria's territorial integrity had to be preserved and its national sovereignty had to be honored (Fars, January 21, 2017).

■ After arriving in Astana on January 21, 2017, the Iranian delegation met with the Russian delegation, headed by Alexander Lavrentiev, President Putin's envoy to the Middle East, and with the Turkish delegation headed by the deputy Turkish foreign minister (Fars, January 21, 2017). On January 24, 2017, Iran's Mehr news agency

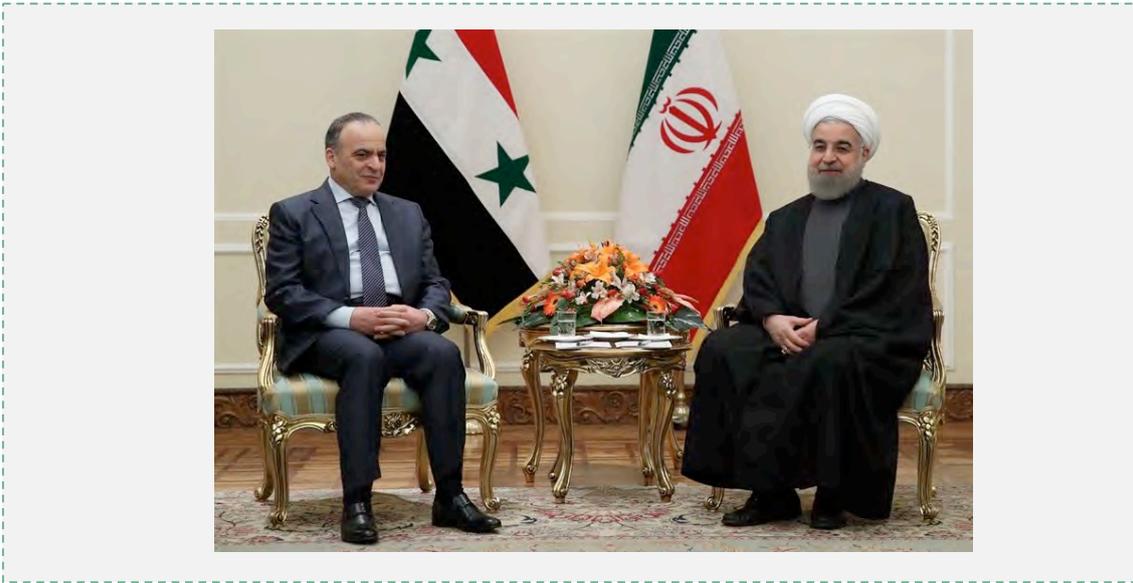
reported that Brigadier General Mohammad Reza Fallahzadeh, a senior officer in the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), had also been a member of the delegation. He was a senior Iranian advisor to Syria, and in April 2016 was wounded and transferred to Iran for medical treatment.



The Iranian delegation at the talks in Astana (Mehr, January 24, 2017).

- Following the Astana talks, Iran, Russia and Turkey decided to establish a joint mechanism to oversee the ceasefire in Syria. The details will be decided in talks to be held at a later date. After the meeting an announcement was issued stating that Iran, Russia and Turkey stressed their commitment to preserving Syria's territorial integrity, continuing their joint struggle against ISIS and the Fateh al-Sham Front, reinforcing the ceasefire agreement and transferring humanitarian aid to Syria (Fars, January 24, 2017).
- The hardline daily Kayhan called the talks in Astana "a victory for the resistance axis" both on the battlefield and in the diplomatic arena. It was the result of the "liberation of Aleppo" and the failed efforts of the terrorists and their international and regional supporters. According to an editorial published on January 24, 2017, the absence of the United States and the Arab countries, especially Saudi Arabia, from the talks indicated that the countries supporting terrorism were isolated. The talks at Astana, claimed the editorial, proved once again that Iran had a beneficial regional presence.
- On the eve of the talks in Astana, Iran, Syria and Russia held intensive consultations. On January 16, 2017, Imad Khamis, Syrian prime minister, arrived in Tehran to meet with senior Iranian officials, including Iranian President Rouhani.

Rouhani told him that "the liberation of Aleppo and the calling of a ceasefire" were two important steps on the road to bringing peace to Syria. He said the liberation of Aleppo was a message to the world that the citizens of Syria could defend themselves from terrorists, and that groups of terrorists and their supporters would never achieve their goals. He repeated Iran's commitment to continue its support of Syria, saying that if the terrorists and their supporters had won, it would have endangered the entire Middle East.

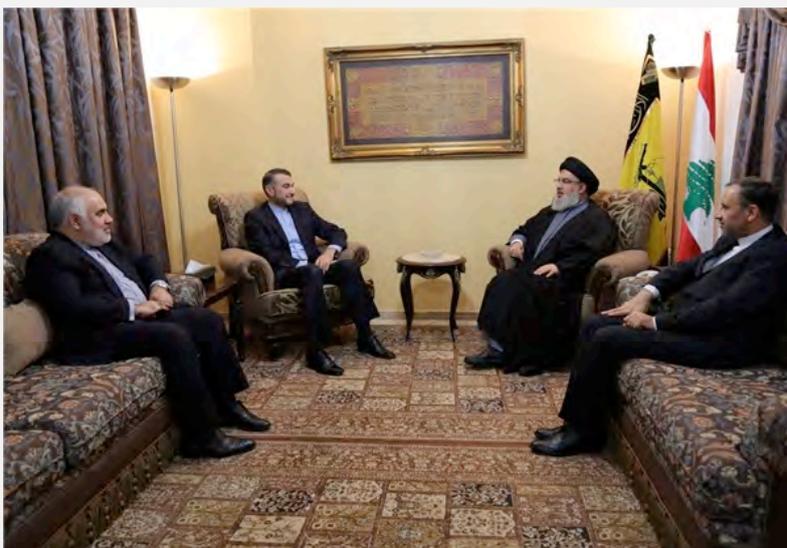


Khamis (left) meets with Rouhani (Tasnim, January 18, 2017).

- At a joint press conference held after the meeting, Eshaq Jahangiri, first Iranian vice president, said the victories in Syria were won by virtue of the firm stance of the Syrian people and its army, and thanks to Iranian-Syrian cooperation. He said that consultations between Tehran and Damascus had to be increased to preserve the military and political achievements and to rebuild Syria (Fars, January 17, 2017). During the visit five agreements were signed for bilateral cooperation in the fields in agriculture, mining, energy and communications, including a cellphone network Iran would set up in Syria (Tasnim, January 17, 2017).

- The previous week Ali Shamkhani, the secretary of the Supreme Council for National Security, paid a visit to Damascus (Fars, January 16, 2017). Senior Russian and Iranian officials also consulted by telephone. On January 16, 2017, Shamkhani spoke on the phone to Nikolay Patrushev, the secretary of the Russian security council. They discussed political, security and military developments in Syria after the ceasefire went into effect. In addition, Mohammad Javad Zarif spoke to Sergey Lavrov, the Russian foreign minister (Elaph, January 17, 2017).

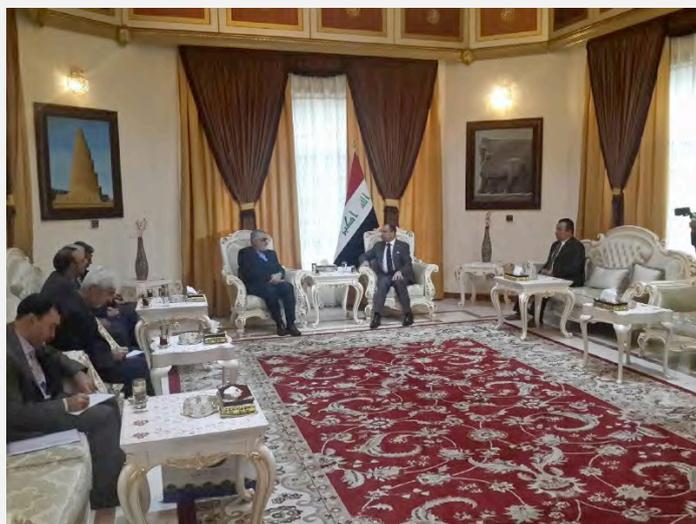
- In preparation for the talks in Astana, Iran expressed clear and strong opposition to US participation. Foreign minister Mohammad Javad Zarif stated that Iran opposed the presence of the United States at the talks and that no invitation had been sent. Ali-Akbar Velayati, advisor to the Iranian supreme leader for international affairs, also said Iran strongly opposed American participation in the peace talks.
- After meeting with Syrian prime minister Khamis, Velayati said the talks at Astana had been made possible by the victory of the Syrian government and its supporters. It was likely, he said, that the terrorists and their supporters, especially the United States, having been defeated, would want to exploit the political arena. Shamkhani said the United States would play no role whatsoever in the Astana talks. He said that because of Iran's objections, the Americans had not been sent an invitation to the talks (Tasnim News and ISNA, January 17 and 18, 2017).
- Bahram Qasemi, spokesman for the Iranian foreign ministry, denied the claims made by Danny Danon, the Israeli ambassador to the UN, that Iran was using commercial Mahan Air flights to send weapons to Hezbollah in Syria and Lebanon. Qasemi claimed Hezbollah did not need Iranian arms because it manufactured all the arms and equipment it needed by itself. He said Hezbollah was a legitimate Lebanese political organization which had its own financial resources, equipment and arms, and could supply all its needs alone (Fars, January 23, 2017). During the past year Mahan Air, a private airline based in Tehran which has links to the IRGC, has flown from Iran to Syria hundreds of times, routinely delivering weapons for the Syrian regime and Hezbollah, according to Western intelligence sources.
- Last week Hossein Amir Abdollahian, international affairs advisor to the speaker of the Majlis, paid a visit to Lebanon and Syria, during which he met with senior Lebanese and Syrian officials, among them Syrian president Assad and Hassan Nasrallah, secretary general of Hezbollah. He consulted with them about developments in Syria, Lebanon and the Middle East (Fars, January 24, 2017).



Abdollahian (second from left) meets with Nasrallah (Fars, January 24, 2017).

Iranian Intervention in Iraq and the Gulf

■ On January 14, 2017, Alaeddin Boroujerdi, chairman of the Majlis committee for national security and foreign policy, arrived in Baghdad for a two-day visit. While there he met with Salim al-Jabouri, speaker of the Iraqi parliament, to discuss developments in Iraq and the future of the country after the defeat of ISIS. They also discussed increasing bilateral relations and regional cooperation (Mehr, January 15, 2017).



**Boroujerdi (left) meets with al-Jabouri
(Website of the Iranian broadcasting authority, January 15, 2017).**

■ At his weekly press conference, Bahram Qasemi, spokesman for the Iranian foreign ministry, said the ministry could not confirm reports that Iran intended to appoint Iraj Masjedi, senior advisor to the commander of the IRGC's Qods Force, as Iran's new ambassador to Iraq. He said the foreign ministry would announce the name of the new

ambassador to Baghdad after his appointment had been confirmed (IRNA, January 23, 2017).

■ On January 24, 2017, Ali-Akbar Velayati, advisor to the Iranian supreme leader for international affairs, met in Tehran with Yazidi-minority members of the Iraqi parliament and cultural figures. He told them that Iran would continue to support Iraq in its war against ISIS and that Iran was serious about its support for preserving Iraq's territorial integrity. The Yazidi delegation requested that Iran use its connections with the various political forces in Iraq to help the Yazidis and hasten the release of Yazidis abducted by ISIS (IRNA, January 24, 2017).

■ According to Majid Samadi, commander of the Iranian border police, during the past ten months 1.2 million Iraqi civilians entered Iran through the border crossings between the two countries. He said more Iraqis had entered Iran than any other group of foreign nationals (ISNA, January 22, 2017).

■ Iran condemned Bahrain's execution of three Shi'ite political prisoners who were convicted in 2015 of attacking Bahraini security forces in 2014. Bahram Qasemi, spokesman for the Iranian foreign ministry, said the trial of the three had been unfair. He said executing them proved again that Bahrain had no interest in a peaceful resolution of the country's crisis. He added that the Bahraini authorities had closed the avenue of dialogue with the opposition by imposing limitations, exerting pressure and suppressing opponents of the regime (IRNA, January 15, 2017). Hossein Amir Abdollahian, international affairs advisor to the speaker of the Majlis, also condemned the executions. He said Iran did not meddle in Bahrain's internal affairs, but supported the legitimate demands of the citizens of Bahrain that were compatible with UN human rights conventions (Mehr, January 15, 2017).

■ Khalid bin Ahmed al-Khalifa, the Bahraini foreign minister, said that today the member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) were facing many complex threats, but Iran was the number one threat to their security. Interviewed by the Egyptian newspaper al-Masri al-Youm, he said the Arab League had established a permanent committee of Bahrain, Egypt, the UAE and Saudi Arabia to fight Iran's meddling in the Arab states. He said if Iran did not stop meddling in the countries' internal affairs, the GCC would, with its friends, take collective political, economic, commercial, cultural and media action against it (Asr-e Iran, January 21, 2017).

Iranian Intervention in the Palestinian Arena

■ Hossein Amir Abdollahian, international affairs advisor to the speaker of the Majlis, meeting with Khaled Qaddoumi, Hamas representative in Iran, said support for the Palestinians was at the center of Iranian policy and that Iran would continue helping the Palestinian people realize their rights. Abdollahian, who is also secretary general of an international committee to defend Palestine, said Jerusalem was the top priority for Muslims and that Iran was prepared to support a conference of the committee to defend Palestine (Fars, January 22, 2017).



Abdollahian (left) and Qaddoumi (icana.ir, January 22, 2017)