



Spotlight on Iran

November 26 – December 10, 2017

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Overview

- ▶ Iran avoided issuing any official reaction to the strikes on the Iranian base in the area of the village of al-Kiswah south of Damascus, which took place on December 2 and have been attributed to Israel. The absence of an Iranian response demonstrates Iran's effort to conceal any evidence to its aim of establishing a long-term military presence in Syria, an intention Iran has previously denied. Meanwhile, Iranian Foreign Minister, Mohammad Javad Zarif, proclaimed that Iran is not obligated to adhere to the de-escalation agreement concerning southern Syria, which was concluded between the United States and Russia.
- ▶ Israeli sources reported that the October 2017 visit of the chief of staff of the Iranian Armed Forces to Syria was unsuccessful. According to these reports, Syria refused to agree to the Iranian list of demands, which included leasing a naval base for 50 years, establishing air force bases and granting concessions for phosphate mining. Meanwhile, the vice president of Iran's Chamber of Commerce announced that Syria is placing obstacles to the import of goods from Iran and prefers to import products from Turkey. These reports are possibly an indication to the challenges facing Iran when attempting to establish itself as a powerful player in Syria in the post-Islamic State era.
- ▶ Recently, several commentaries were published in Iranian media outlets that provide further evidence about the discord between Iran and Russia regarding Syria and the Iranian distrust of Russia's intentions within the negotiations process concerning the end of the war.
- ▶ In Iraq too, Iran is acting to cement its influence in the era following the collapse of the Islamic State. Last week, the Secretary of the Iranian Supreme National Security Council, Ali Shamkhani, met with the head of the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq and warned against disbanding the Shi'ite militias in Iraq. Iran strives to maintain its influence in the political and security arena in Iraq by guaranteeing the independent status of the Shi'ite militias, some of which are supported by Iran, even after the disintegration of the Islamic State in Iraq.

- ▶ Iran cast the blame on Saudi Arabia for the collapse of the alliance between the Houthi rebels in Yemen and former Yemeni President, Ali Abdullah Saleh, who was killed last week by the Houthis. In response to Saleh's execution, the commander of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) declared that his death has put an end to "the coup attempts in Yemen against Ansar Allah [the Houthis]." Iranian media lauded the announcement made by the Houthis on December 3 that they had fired a cruise missile against a nuclear power plant in Abu Dhabi.
- ▶ Iran condemned the decision made by the President of the United States, Donald Trump, to declare Jerusalem as Israel's capital, and called for a resumption of the armed struggle against Israel.

General Information

- ▶ The Commander of the IRGC, Mohammad Ali Jafari, stated during a conference of commanders of the IRGC Basij forces, that the activity of about 100,000 fighters in the popular militias, which were established in recent years in Syria and Iraq in accordance with the Basij model, are a realization of the guidance of the leader of the Islamic Revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini, to establish "a global Islamic Basij." Jafari mentioned that the Basij's priceless experience was transferred to other countries in the region, since the Basij is a model for resistance against "the arrogance" (a label for the West, led by the United States). Jafari quoted Khomeini who had proclaimed that "an ideological war" knows no borders (Mehr, November 26).



The Commander of the IRGC, Mohammad Ali Jafari (Mehr, November 26 2017).

Iranian Involvement in Syria

- ▶ Tehran avoided issuing any official response to the reports that Israel bombed an Iranian base near the village of al-Kiswah south of Damascus on December 2. On November 10, the BBC reported, based on “a Western intelligence official” that Iran began constructing a permanent base near the village. The BBC reported that the satellite images of the site indicate that construction work there commenced during 2017. The absence of an Iranian response demonstrates Iran’s effort to conceal any evidence to its goal of establishing a long-term military foothold in Syria, an intention Iran has previously denied. For example, the Deputy Commander of the IRGC, Rasoul Sanaei-Rad, declared in March 2017 that Iran is not interested in establishing a naval base on the shores of the Mediterranean and repeated Iran’s official position that its presence in Syria is limited to that of advisers alone (Tasnim, March 12, 2017).
- ▶ During a visit to Italy, the Iranian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mohammad Javad Zarif, stated that Iran is not obligated to abide by the de-escalation agreement concerning southern Syria, which was concluded between the United States and Russia. He maintained that the United States and Russia cannot decide for Iran, whose presence in Syria is based on a request of the Syrian government, and in any case, Russia did not ask Iran to do anything (with regards to its presence in southern Syria). He added that the goal of the United States is to remove Iran from Syria, but the only ones who can exit from the region are those who entered it uninvited (Fars, November 30).
- ▶ Ali-Akbar Velayati, the Adviser on International Affairs to the Iranian Supreme Leader stated in a conference in Tehran that the Americans are interested of keeping the city of Raqqa under their control. He claimed that the Americans know that they will have to leave this city the same way they have been forced to retreat from Albu Kamal (Fars, December 3).

Cracks in the Iranian-Syrian-Russian Axis

- ▶ Israeli sources reported that the October 2017 visit to Syria by the Chief of Staff of the Iranian Armed Forces, Mohammad Hossein Bagheri, proved unfruitful. According to the report, the Syrian regime refused to positively respond to the list of demands presented by Iran, including leasing a naval base for 50 years, establishing air force bases and granting concession for phosphate mining. Syria did not flatly reject Iran’s requests, but President

Assad was careful not to fully give into Iranian demands, possibly due to fears that fully complying with Iran's demands may lead to an escalation versus Israel (Avi Issacharoff's report for Walla! News, November 28)

► In an interview to the Iranian News Agency ILNA (November 24), the Vice President of Iran's Chamber of Commerce, Hossein Selahvarzi, stated that Syria is placing restrictions on the import of goods from Iran. He reported that despite the agreements concluded between the two countries and the billions of dollars in credit Iran granted to the Syrian regime, Damascus is restricting the import of Iranian goods to the country and prefers to import goods from Turkey.

► These reports about Syrian regime reticence concerning Iran's efforts to increase its military and economic clout in Syria, indicate, according to our assessment, the challenges facing Iran when attempting to establish itself as a powerful player in the Arab world. It should be mentioned that in Iraq too, Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi has adopted an independent line vis-à-vis Tehran and is pursuing a policy predicated on the desire to avoid becoming an "Iranian puppet."

► Meanwhile, commentary recently published in Iranian media outlets provide further evidence to Iran's distrust of Russia's intentions in the era following the disintegration of the Islamic State.

► An article published on the website "Iranian Diplomacy" argued that in the post-Islamic State era in the Middle East, a tacit agreement between Russia and the United States emerged, which created a balance between regional powers. According to the author of the article, the political commentator Sadegh Maleki, none of the global superpowers will allow a single regional power to control the Middle East. Despite the disagreements between Washington and Moscow, they will not permit changes to occur, which would lead to a disturbance in the strategic balance in the Middle East, although the two superpowers do not have total control over the countries of the region. The author argued that this state of affairs manifests in the negotiations over the sale of strategic weapons systems between Russia and two of Iran's regional rivals, Turkey and Saudi Arabia. According to him, Russia returned to the Middle East to realize its own goals and interests, especially vis-à-vis the United States (Iranian Diplomacy, November 25)

► A commentary published last week on the Alef website (December 5) discussed the possibilities of increasing Iran's influence in Syria, and labeled Russia as "the most

formidable opponent to Iran in the new Syria.” According to the author, Iran should act through diplomatic channels to ensure its “cultural and media” influence in Syria in the era following the collapse of the Islamic State.

► It should be mentioned that in an interview to Iranian television (November 21), the Secretary of the Iranian Supreme National Security Council, Ali Shamkhani, rejected the assessments that IS’ defeat may lead to rifts between Iran and Russia regarding the negotiations’ process. He emphasized, however, that Russia’s involvement in Syria began only in 2015, while Iran and the “Resistance Axis” have been active in Syria since the start of the crisis in January 2011. We assess that the disagreements between Iran and Russia, which emerged in parallel to continuous strategic cooperation between the two nations, are a result of the desire of Moscow and Tehran to increase their clout and even gain hegemony in Syria, and due to conflicting approaches to relations with countries in the region, including Israel. These disagreements may exacerbate and even rise to the surface as the negotiations concerning the end of the war in Syria progress, and the fate of President Assad is decided, as the continuation of his rule is perceived by Tehran to be of the utmost importance.

Iranian Involvement in Iraq

► During meeting the leader of the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq and Deputy Speaker of Parliament, Sheikh Humam Hamoudi, the Secretary of the Iranian Supreme National Security Council, Ali Shamkhani, warned against disbanding the Shi’ite militias in Iraq. Shamkhani labeled the demand of the French President, Emmanuel Macron, to disband the militias, a joint “conspiracy” of western countries and Israel, which aims to bring back instability and terrorism to the region, and he called upon the Iraqi leadership to fight against this “conspiracy.” Shamkhani mentioned that the security campaign against ISIS, as well as the struggle against it in the cultural and religious realms must continue. He added that eradicating the roots of ISIS’ thinking, which is supported by some countries of the region, requires a continuous struggle. Sheikh Hamoudi thanked Iran for its support to Iraq in its struggle against ISIS and stated that if it was not for the popular resistance forces in Iraq, ISIS terrorists would now be present in the heart of Paris (ISNA, December 4).



The Shamkhani-Hamoudi meeting in Tehran (ISNA, December 4 2017).

► The Chairman of the Iranian-Iraqi Chamber of Trade, Yahya Al-Eshaq, stated that the time has come to renew the trade relations between Tehran and Iraqi Kurdistan in light of the improvement in the situation in northern Iraq after the failure of the independence referendum endeavor of the Kurdish region. He mentioned that the borders between Iran and Iraqi Kurdistan are gradually re-opening, the situation is going back to normal and Iranian businessmen can return to the region. Al-Eshaq added that the second half of the previous Iranian year (March 21 - September 21, 2017) witnessed a 6% rise in Iranian exports to Iraq. He mentioned that Iraq is the second largest export market of Iranian goods after China (Fars, December 5). However, he stated in an interview to the “Tasnim” News Agency (December 6) that Iraq had adopted a discriminatory policy toward Iranian businessmen who wish to export goods to Iraq, compared to the treatment of businesspeople from Turkey and Saudi Arabia.

Iranian Responses to Developments in Yemen

► Clashes erupted in early December in Yemen between the Houthi rebels (supported by Iran) and the forces of former Yemeni President, Ali Abdullah Saleh, who was executed by the Houthis last week. Iran blamed Saudi Arabia for being responsible for the collapse of the alliance between Saleh and the Houthis. On his personal Twitter account, the Adviser on Foreign Affairs to the Chairman of the Majlis, Amir Abdollahian, tweeted that Riyadh’s “new game” in Sanaa’ is doomed and that the Ansar Allah movement (which represents the Houthis) and its allies are an important and influential part of the “resistance” and the political solution to the crisis in Yemen.

- ▶ The Spokesman of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Bahram Qasemi, called on all political and social groups in Yemen to maintain their national unity in the face of the “foreign aggression” and settle their internal differences through dialog to prevent Yemen’s enemies from exploiting these fissures (Tasnim, December 3).
- ▶ In response to Saleh’s assassination, the Commander of the IRGC, Mohammad Ali Jafari, stated that the plot against the Houthis was "nipped in the bud" following the death of the former president. Jafari lambasted Saudi Arabia, claiming that it is acting on behalf of the United States and Israel to sow the seeds of division and instability among the countries of the region (ISNA, December 5).
- ▶ Ali-Akbar Velayati, the Adviser on Foreign Affairs to the Supreme Leader, declared that Saleh paid the price for his actions in accordance with the decision of the Yemeni people. He asserted that the Yemeni people foiled the plot hatched by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, a conspiracy that allowed Saleh to betray the Yemeni fighters. Velayati averred that the Yemeni people will emerge victorious, as did the people of Syria, Iraq and Lebanon (Fars, December 5).
- ▶ Iranian media lauded the announcement of Yemen’s Houthis on December 3, claiming they had fired a cruise missile against a nuclear reactor in the United Arab Emirates. A commentary published in the hardline “Kayhan” newspaper (December 4) praised the Houthis for the missile launch against Abu Dhabi, which is a member of the Saudi-led coalition against Yemen. The article also applauded the “purification of the revolution in Yemen from internal subversive elements,” which operated under the patronage of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates to undermine the unity of the rebels in Yemen by creating fissures between former President Saleh and the Houthis. The Fars News Agency also praised the missile launch versus the United Arab Emirates and assessed that the missile launch complicated the balance of power in Yemen for the Saudi-led coalition (Fars, December 4).



**The effect of the assassination of the former Yemeni president on Saudi Arabia
(Fars, December 5 2017).**

Iranian Involvement in the Palestinian Arena

► The Spokesman of the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Bahram Qasemi, published a statement on the occasion of “The International Day of Solidarity with the Palestinian People,” marked on November 29 (the day of the UN decision to partition mandatory Palestine), which proclaimed that the Iranian people will never cease to support the Palestinian people despite the “conspiracies of the Zionist” to divert attention from the aspirations of the Palestinian people. Qasemi asserted in his statement that Palestine’s history over the past 70 years has proven that resistance is the only strategy for struggling against the “occupying enemy,” ending the crimes of the Zionists, liberating the occupied lands and returning the Palestinian refugees to their homeland (Fars, November 29).

Iranian Responses to President Trump’s Statement on Jerusalem

► Iran excoriated President Trump’s statement declaring Jerusalem to be Israel’s capital. The Iranian Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei argued that this decision is a sign of Washington’s failure in the region. In a speech on the holy day celebrating the birth of Prophet Muhammad, Khamenei stated that the decision to declare Jerusalem as the capital of “occupied Palestine” stems from the United States’ failure and impotence. According to Khamenei, the American hands are tied on the issue of Palestine and they are incapable of advancing their goals. He declared that Palestine will be liberated, and the Palestinian people will be victorious (Fars, December 6).

- ▶ President Rouhani labeled the decision “dangerous and provocative.” In a phone call with Turkish President Erdoğan, Rouhani stated that all Muslim countries must stand together against the American decision. Rouhani also praised the initiative of the Turkish president to hold an extraordinary summit of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation to discuss the matter (Tasnim, December 6).
- ▶ The Adviser on International Affairs to the Supreme Leader, Ali-Akbar Velayati, asserted that the decision on Jerusalem was made by an unstable man who is unaware of political and historical matters, and in complete disregard of the total and historic rights of the Palestinian people. He stated that Trump must know that Jerusalem will forever belong to the Palestinian, and that the decision cannot change historical facts. He added that the decision incites violence, repression and instability in the region, and is intended to protect Israel’s interests (Fars, December 6).
- ▶ The Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council of Iran, Ali Shamkhani, declared that Jerusalem will remain an undivided part of Palestine and warned that the “Zionist regime” and the United States will be responsible for any blow to stability and security that may occur as a result of the decision (Fars, December 6).
- ▶ The Spokesman of Iran’s Armed Forces, Masoud Jazayeri, declared that the continuation of the Palestinian people’s struggle against the “cancerous tumor” (Israel) shows that the occupiers will never live in peace and that they will have no choice but to leave the land or be annihilated. He asserted that the wrong assessment made by the leaders of the United States and Israel, namely that conditions in the region will allow them to realize their long-term goals with regards to Palestine, will lead to their failure as has occurred in Iraq, Syria and Yemen. Jazayeri added that the weaponry arsenal of the “Zionist regime” will belong to the Palestinians in the near future (Tasnim, December 7).
- ▶ The Chief of Staff of the Iranian Armed Forces, Mohammad Bagheri, proclaimed that Trump’s decision is a herald for a new intifada against the Zionists. In a special statement issued by Bagheri he asserted that Muslims around the world will never agree to separate Jerusalem from the world of Islam, and that the unity of the Muslim world will hasten the elimination of the “Zionist regime.” He called on the leaders of the Muslim world to fight against the “new conspiracies” of the United States and Israel against Jerusalem and Palestine (Tasnim, December 7).

- ▶ On December 8, following Friday prayers, mass rallies took place across Iran to protest President Trump's declaration.



Protest in the city of Mashad against Trump's declaration (Fars, December 8 2017).