



Spotlight on Iran

December 10- December 24, 2017

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Overview

- ▶ Against the backdrop of the defeat of the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq, Iranian officials continue to highlight Tehran's success in utilizing the campaign, carried out against the organization over the past years, to increase Iran's regional influence. The commander of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) declared last week that all the conspiracies hatched by the United States, Israel and Saudi Arabia in the region have been foiled, and that victory is near in Yemen as well.
- ▶ Meanwhile, there are increasing calls in Iran to exploit the country's growing political and military clout to increase its economic influence in the region. A commentary published on an Iranian website argued that Iran's participation in the rehabilitation of Syria and Iraq's economies may provide Iran with new economic opportunities and help its economic growth. The commander of the IRGC's construction corporation, "Khatam al-Anbiya" declared that his organization is ready to take part in rebuilding Syria's economy.
- ▶ In the battlefield, the military campaign continues to exact a cost from the IRGC fighters operating in Syria. Two IRGC cadres were killed in mid-December in the area of Deir Ezzor. In light of the negotiations concerning a final settlement in Syria, the Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council, Ali Shamkhani, declared that Iran's military presence in Syria will persist until the eradication of all terror groups in the country. The spokesman of the Majlis' National Security and Foreign Policy Committee emphasized too that "the resistance front" must maintain constant alertness, as the threat posed by terrorist groups operating in Syria, among them ISIS, is yet to be eradicated.
- ▶ In the Iraqi arena, Iran is working to thwart any effort to undermine the standing of the Shi'ite militias supported by it. Last week, the Iranian ambassador to Iraq declared that the Iraqi militias operating as part of the Popular Mobilization Committee ("al-Hashd al-Sha'abi") are an institution essential for preserving security in the country. His statement followed the declaration of Iraq's most senior Shi'ite cleric, Ali Sistani, calling for the incorporation of the Iraqi militias into Iraq's security forces, and the announcements of several Shi'ite militia

leaders about their intention to subsume the militias under the control of the Iraqi armed forces. We assess that the general elections in Iraq scheduled for May 2018 and the calls in the Iraqi political arena to disband the militias and place them under the control of the Iraqi military pose a challenge to Iran, which wishes to preserve its influence in Iraq, including through the militias it supports. However, the willingness of all Iraqi militias, especially ones loyal to Iran, to disarm and agree to incorporate their fighters into the Iraqi military, is highly in doubt.

► Iran categorically denied the allegations made of the American Ambassador to the United Nations, Nikki Haley, regarding the supply of Iranian weapons to the Houthi rebels in Yemen. On December 14, Haley presented remains of Iranian weapons, including fragments of a short-range ballistic missile, which were provided to the Houthis. Iran labeled Haley's presentation as a "fabrication" and claimed that the United States is attempting to cover up for the war crimes Saudi Arabia is carrying out in Yemen with American support.

► President Trump's declaration of recognizing Jerusalem as Israel's capital provided Iran with another opportunity to highlight its support for the Palestinians and call for a resumption of Palestinian armed resistance against Israel. On December 11, the Commander of the Qods Force of the IRGC, Qasem Soleimani, spoke with senior officials in the armed wing of Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad in Gaza and expressed Iran's willingness to support them in any possible way. In parallel, the president of Iran spoke with the Head of Hamas' Political Bureau, Ismail Haniyeh, and emphasized to him Iran's support for the Palestinians.

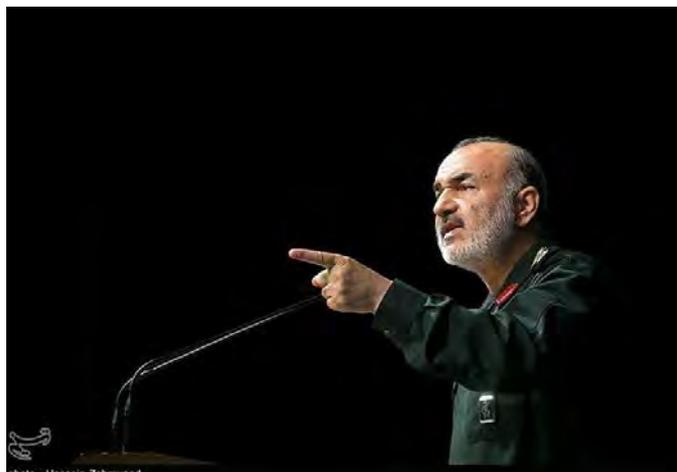
General Information

► The Commander of the IRGC, Mohammad Ali Jafari, stated in a conference in Tehran that the Islamic Revolution is increasing its influence in the region and the world. He added that time has come now to stabilize these victories, which were achieved by the "resistance front" in the region over the past twenty years. He claimed that all the conspiracies hatched by the Americans, Israelis, the Saudis and certain other regional countries have been foiled, and that victory in Yemen is near as well. Jafari stated that the central threats facing Iran today are not security threats, but "soft" economic, political, cultural and societal challenges (Tasnim, December 14).



The Commander of the IRGC, Jafari (Tasnim, December 14, 2017)

- ▶ The Deputy Commander of the IRGC, Hossein Salami, declared during a conference in Tehran that Israel is no longer perceived by Iranian strategy as a threat and that Hezbollah, which is part of the “resistance front”, is favorably positioned in the balance of power vis-à-vis Israel. Salami stated that any new war that erupts in the region will pose a threat to the survival of the “Zionist regime”, which illustrates the contraction in American power in the balance opposite Iran, and the decreasing ability of the United States to protect Israel. He proclaimed that the eradication of the “Zionist regime” would be the main antecedent for achieving security and stability in the region.
- ▶ Salami later addressed the weakness of the United States, and stated that during the struggle against the “terrorist groups” in the region, which has lasted for six years, the United States abstained, for the first time, from direct military intervention, and instead relies on proxies and supported the terrorists with all its might. Despite the large military budget at its disposal, the struggle ended in a victory for the “resistance front”, thanks to the “popular forces” that foiled the enemy’s efforts in Syria and Iraq (Tasmin, December 11).



**Deputy Commander of the IRGC, Hossein Salami
(Tasnim, December 11, 2017)**

- ▶ A commentary published on the Iranian website Asr-e Iran (December 15), called on Iran to focus on cementing its economic influence in Syria and Iraq in the post-Islamic State era. The article stated that the reconstruction of the two countries following the end of the war provides Iran with new economic opportunities that may assist Iran's economic growth. Iran's national interests necessitate translating its political and military influence into economic gains, the author argued.
- ▶ The opinion article emphasized that Iran's participation in rebuilding Syria and Iraq's economies does not necessitate direct military presence there. In Iraq, the piece argued, the popular militias should be encouraged to merge into the framework of Iraq's armed forces to bolster Iraq's security. In Syria, the situation is more complicated, as the Syrian army and popular militias are still unable to handle the security challenges on their own, and hence Iran's military presence is essential until the eradication of the terrorist groups and securing of a political solution. However, a permanent military foothold is not a strategic goal in itself, and the duration of the armed presence should be determined based on Iran's strategic goals.
- ▶ Iran cannot perform the role of a regional power if it is mired in a severe economic crisis, concluded the article. The solutions for the economic crisis are mostly internal, but Iran can also utilize opportunities beyond its borders to improve its economy, while leveraging its regional influence.
- ▶ Several commentaries were published in Iranian media recently that called on the Iranian leadership to intensify the efforts to become involved in the economic rehabilitation of Iraq and Syria following the end of the campaign against the Islamic State. Senior Iranian officials,

including President Rouhani, also called for expanding Iranian economic activity in Iraq and Syria. We assess that the end of the campaign against the Islamic State compels Iran to reexamine its modes of operation in the region, which have thus far been centered in the military arena. Iran is likely to intensify its efforts to bolster its influence in the region through “soft power” in the economic, religious and cultural spheres.

Iranian Involvement in Syria

- ▶ An officer with the IRGC’s special forces Saber Division, and Medhi Imani, a fighter with the IRGC, were killed in combat in the region of Deir Ezzor in mid-December.



**IRGC officer who was killed in Syria
(Tasnim, December 13, 2017)**

- ▶ The Secretary of the Iranian Supreme National Security Council, Ali Shamkhani, declared at a conference in Kurdistan province, that according to the request of the legitimate government in Syria, Iranian presence and advisory assistance in Syria will persist until the eradication of all terrorist groups in that country. He stressed that the claims by Israel and other countries in the region will have no effect on Iran’s decisions concerning its national interests and the security of the region (Mehr, December 18).
- ▶ The Spokesman of the Majlis’ National Security and Foreign Policy Committee, Seyyed Hossein Naqavi-Hosseini, stated in an interview that the withdrawal of the Russian forces from Syria compels the “resistance front” to maintain full readiness regarding potential threats from terror groups, including ISIS, especially since the state-sponsors of terrorism, the United States, Israel and Saudi Arabia, may put into action “a new plot” at any moment.

He mentioned that the reasons for the withdrawal of Russian forces from Syria is still unclear, and it is not certain whether Russia intends to remove all its forces from Syria or just some of them, and whether the withdrawal was coordinated with the “resistance axis” (Iran, Syria and Hezbollah). (Jam-e Jam TV, December 12)

► Abdollah Abdollahi, the Commander of the IRGC’s construction corporation, Khatam al-Anbiya, stated in a press conference that his organization is ready to take part in rebuilding Syria (Tasnim, December 13). The Khatam al-Anbiya corporation constitutes the spearhead of the IRGC’s economic activities. The organization retains about 5,000 firms and contractors and over 150,000 employees. The corporation’s work focuses on the fields of energy (developing gas and oil fields, establishing refineries, laying down oil and gas pipelines, etc.) and on development engineering (building ports, tunnels, roads, railways, dams, water pipelines, tunnels and drainage systems, as well as projects in the mining industry).

Iranian Involvement in Iraq and Yemen

► Iran’s Ambassador to Iraq, Iraj Masjedi, argued in an interview to the Iranian television network in the English language, Press TV (December 16), that the Iraqi militias operating as part of the Popular Mobilization Committee (al-Hashd al-Sha’abi), are a legitimate organization recognized by the Iraqi government and parliament. He asserted that the militias are an organization crucial for preserving the country’s security and deterring future threats against Iraq. Masjedi stated that the militias belong to the Iraqi people and their government, and protect the territorial integrity of Iraq. When addressing the continuation of Iranian support to Iraq’s campaign against terrorism, Masjedi averred that the presence of Iranian advisers in Iraq in the post-Islamic State era depends on the situation and Baghdad’s wishes.



**Iran's ambassador to Iraq with fighters of the Iraqi Shi'ite militia "Al-Nujabaa"
(Rasa News, October 1, 2017)**

► Masjedi's comments followed a statement by the most senior Shi'ite cleric in Iraq, Ayatollah Ali Sistani, who called on the Shi'ite militias to merge into the Iraqi security forces under the control of the Iraqi government. Prior to this, Qais al-Khazali, the founder and commander of the Iraqi Shi'ite militia "Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq", which operates under Iranian guidance, stated that he intends to disband the militia and merge its fighters into the Iraqi army, under the command of Iraq's Prime Minister, Haider al-Abadi. The militia "The Peace Brigades" under the leadership of the Shi'ite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr also announced its dissolution and enlistment of its fighters to the Iraqi army. In early December, the Secretary of the Iranian Supreme National Security Council, Ali Shamkhani, warned during a meeting with the leader of the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq and Deputy Speaker of Parliament, Sheikh Humam Hamoudi, against disbanding the Shi'ite militias in Iraq. He 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 this "conspiracy." (ISNA, December 4).

► Yahya Rahim Safavi, the Senior Military Adviser to the Supreme Leader of Iran, expressed concern about the outcome of the general elections in Iraq, set for May 2018. In a conference in Tehran, Safavi warned that the undermining of the Shi'ite majority in parliament and the government may pose problems for Iran, especially in light of Iraq becoming a significant oil producer (ISNA, December 19).

- ▶ On December 14, the American Ambassador to the UN, Nikki Haley, presented remainders of Iranian weapons that were provided to the Houthis in Yemen, as evidence that Iran is violating the weapons embargo placed on the Houthi rebels, as well as the UN resolutions prohibiting Iran from selling weapons without prior approval.
- ▶ The fragments of the weapons, which were presented in a base near Washington D.C., included parts from a short-range “Qiam-1” missile, which according to the Pentagon, was launched toward the airport in Riyadh last month, and a “Shark-33”, an unmanned naval vehicle utilized in remote attacks (Reuters, December 14). On December 19, the Houthi rebels launched another missile toward Riyadh. According to Saudi media, there were no casualties or damage to property. According to media outlets associated with the Houthi rebels, the missile was of the “Burqan” variety and was aimed at a meeting of senior Saudi officials in a Riyadh palace.
- ▶ In response to Haley’s presentation, the Iranian delegation to the UN claimed that the American allegations are fabrications, irresponsible, provocative and destructive, intended to cover up the war crimes Saudi Arabia is perpetrating in Yemen, in cooperation with the United States. The Iranian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mohammad Javad Zarif, took to Twitter to claim that the United States is trying to divert attention away from its responsibility for the ongoing war in Yemen. While Iran has been calling for a ceasefire in Yemen from its inception, the United States is providing its allies with weapons used to killed civilians, tweeted Zarif. A spokesman for the Houthis also rebuffed the American allegations and claimed that they were intended to divert international attention away from the American decision to recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel (Reuters, December 15).
- ▶ The Spokesman of the IRGC, Ramazan Sharif, stated in response to Haley’s charges that it is a known fact that the origins of the missiles in Yemen are former Soviet Union countries and North Korea, while Saudi Arabia, which has been bombing innocent civilians in Yemen for the past three years, is receiving all the weaponry at its disposal from the Unites States and Europe (Tasnim, December 17).

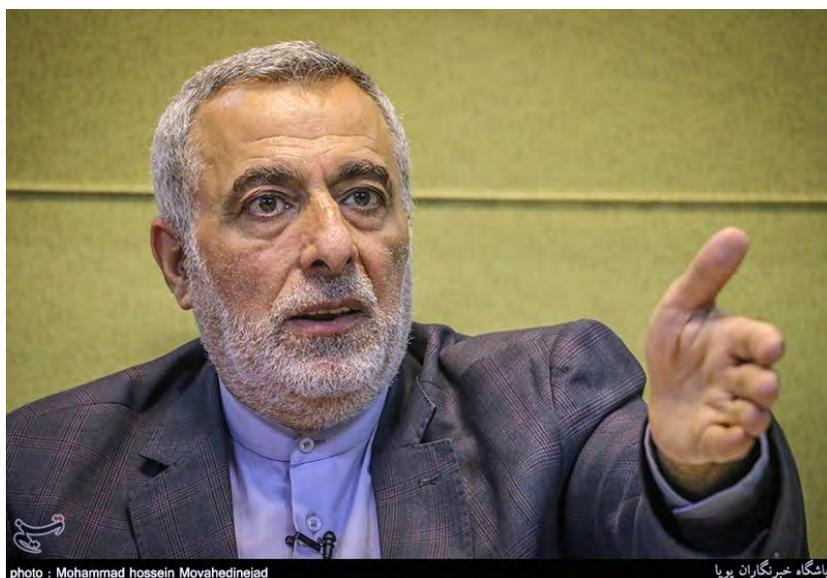
Iranian Involvement in the Palestinian Arena

- ▶ On December 11, The Commander of the IRGC’s Qods Force, Qasem Soleimani, spoke on the phone with the commanders of Hamas’ Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades and the commanders of Saraya al-Quds of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad in Gaza and expressed Iran’s

willingness to support them in any possible way. Soleimani emphasized the readiness of all the groups of the “resistance front” in the region to protect the al-Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem (Tasnim, December 11).

► On December 12, the President of Iran, Hassan Rouhani, spoke on the phone with the Head of Hamas’ Political Bureau, Ismail Haniyeh, following Trump’s declaration on Jerusalem. Rouhani stated that Iran will continue to stand by the Palestinian people, as it has done in the past. Rouhani asserted that the Palestinian people and Muslim nation will, through their unity and resistance, foil the “American-Zionist plan”, which proved, according to him, that the United States and the “Zionist regime” are not interested in recognizing the rights of the Palestinian people (ISNA, December 11).

► An Adviser to the Iranian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Hossein Sheikholeslam, called for the establishment of an Islamic army to defend Jerusalem. At a conference in Terhan, Sheikholeslam argued that the countries of Islam, which have proven their ability in the fight against terrorism in the Middle East, should enlist the enormous popular forces at their disposal to eradicate “the regime occupying Jerusalem.” He called on Muslim countries to establish a special force that will defend Jerusalem, similarly to the Qods Force, which operates as part of the IRGC. The adviser to the minister of foreign affairs called on the Commander of the Qods Force, Qasem Soleimani, to speed up the timeframe required for Israel’s annihilation from 25 years, as predicted by the Supreme Leader of Iran, to just 20 years (Tasnim, December 11).



**The Adviser to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Hossein Sheikholeslam
(Tasnim, December 11, 2017)**

► The temporary leader of Tehran's Friday prayers, Kazem Sedighi, called to arm the Palestinians so they can persist in their armed resistance and third intifada against Israel. In his Friday sermon, Sedighi pronounced that the campaign against ISIS in Iraq and Syria has entrenched Iran's political and military influence in the region, and that the Islamic militias established in the region can now be utilized in the struggle to eradicate Israel (Fars, December 15).