



# Spotlight on Iran

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## Overview

- ▶ The protests that erupted in Iran in late December brought to the surface, once again, the internal public criticism surrounding the immense investments of the Iranian regime outside of its borders. As part of the protests, many Iranian citizens demonstrated against the regime's policy, which in their view, prioritizes support for the Syrian regime and the "resistance front" over solving the economic and social problems afflicting Iran's citizenry. Protesters have been documented chanting against the Supreme Leader and even setting fire to posters of Khamenei and the Commander of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps' (IRGC) Qods Force, Qasem Soleimani. The domestic criticism against Iran's regional involvement is not new, especially regarding the heavy price Iran has paid in recent years to finance its military activities in Syria and Iraq. However, the effect of this criticism on decision-makers in Tehran is extremely limited, and we assess that it is unlikely at this time that it will yield a change in Iran's efforts to continue cementing its influence in the region, as this policy is perceived by the regime as a vital national interest.
- ▶ Following the failure of the referendum initiative in Iraqi Kurdistan, Iran is moving to restore normality in its activities in northern Iraq. At the end of December, Qasem Soleimani met with the Iraqi Kurdish leader Masoud Barzani and the two border crossings between Iran and Iraqi Kurdistan, which were shut down three months ago at the request of the Iraqi government, were re-opened last week.
- ▶ In the Palestinian arena, Iran is increasing its support for Hamas. The leader of Hamas in the Gaza Strip, Yahya al-Sinwar reported that in a phone conversation he had with Qasem Soleimani following Trump's declaration on Jerusalem, the commander of the Qods Force expressed his willingness to provide Hamas with all the resources necessary for continuing the Palestinian struggle.

## Criticism of Iran's Regional Policy in the Iranian Protests

► As part of the ongoing protests in Iran, many Iranian took to the streets against the regime's policy, which in their view, prioritizes massive investments outside of Iran (and especially in Syria, Lebanon and the Palestinian arena) over solving the financial and societal hardships faced by Iranian citizens. The protests, which erupted on December 28 in the city of Mashhad with demands for improving economic living conditions, gradually spread to other cities, including Tehran and protesters began voicing their opposition the regime and in particular the Supreme Leader Khamenei. During the protests, chants could be heard against the foreign policy of the Iranian regime ("stop sending money to Syria. Think about us," "No to Gaza, No to Lebanon, we will sacrifice our lives for Iran," etc.) and posters of the Supreme Leader and the commander of the Qods Force, Qasem Soleimani, were set on fire.



**Protesters in Shiraz set fire to Soleimani's poster  
(Twitter, December 30, 2017)**

► The calls against Iran's entanglements beyond its border are not new and reflect authentic popular criticism among the Iranian public regarding the heavy financial price Iran has paid for its military involvement in Syria and Iraq, and its continued support for the Syrian regime and terrorist organizations. In recent years, intellectuals and political activists, mostly associated with the reformist movement in Iran, voiced growing criticism of Iran's continuous support for the Assad regime, Hezbollah and Palestinian organizations. One of the detractors of Iran's foreign policy, who has gained prominence over the past year, is the political

reformist activist Mostafa Tajzadeh who argued that preserving Assad in power has become, in the eyes of the Iranian regime, more important than safeguarding Iranian provinces. The former Mayor of Terhan, Gholam-Hossein Karbaschi, argued in a controversial speech that it is possible to empower Shi'ite communities in the region without transferring money to them, selling weapons and carrying out killings (Tasnim, May 1, 2017).

► The domestic criticism against Iran's regional policy does not have a tangible effect on the decision-making process in Tehran regarding this matter. This criticism is unlikely to stymie Iran's drive to cement its influence in the region, which is perceived by the regime as a critical national interest. It is hard to estimate how widespread is the public support for such critiques among the Iranian public. It should be mentioned that Iran's activities in the Arab sphere are largely based on proxies, and the number of Iranians killed in Syria and Iraq is decreasing. Iran's financial investment in supporting the Assad regime and terror organization does take a heavy financial toll (we assess in the sum of several billion dollars per year), but it is relatively small when comparing this cost to the overall Iranian state budget (estimated to be over 200 billion dollars per annum).

## General Information

► On January 2, Iran's President, Hassan Rouhani, said in a phone conversation with the French President, Emmanuel Macron, that Iran's presence in Iraq and in Syria is in accordance with the official requests of the governments of the two countries and its goal is to combat terrorism. He asserted that it is clear to everyone today that Iran's efforts and its assistance led to the eradication of ISIS in the region (Fars, January 2, 2018).

## Iranian Involvement in Iraq

► Kurdish media outlets reported (December 28), that the Commander of the Qods Force, Qasem Soleimani, and the former Iranian Ambassador to Baghdad, Hassan Danaeifar, recently met in northern Iraq with the Kurdish Iraqi leader Masoud Barzani. No information was provided about the content of the meeting. On the eve of the independence referendum carried out in the Kurdish region in northern Iraq in September 2017, Iran applied heavy pressure on the Kurdistan Regional Government to avoid holding it. Iran's involvement in northern Iraq regarding the referendum reached a peak in October 2017, against the backdrop of the escalation between the Iraqi government and the Kurds in the city of Kirkuk.

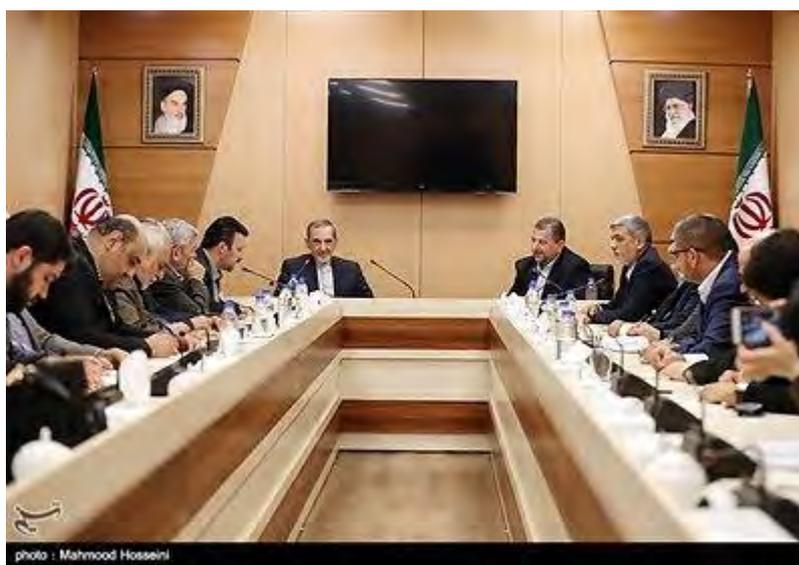
This escalation resulted in the takeover of the Iraqi military over the city, the retreat of the Kurds and the collapse of the referendum initiative.

► The Iranian consulate in Erbil in northern Iraq announced the re-opening of the two border crossings between Iran and Iraqi Kurdistan, which were closed three months ago at the request of the Iraqi government, in response to the referendum initiative in the Kurdish region. The Iranian Labor News Agency (ILNA) reported (January 2) that the decision to re-open the crossings was reached following talks between the Iranian and Iraqi governments.

## Iranian Involvement in the Palestinian Arena

► The leader of Hamas in the Gaza Strip, Yahya al-Sinwar, reported that in the conversation he had on December 11 with the commander of the IRGC's Qods Force following Trump's declaration regarding Jerusalem, Qasem Soleimani expressed willingness to allocate to Hamas all the necessary resources for the struggle for Jerusalem, and emphasized to Sinwar that the IRGC and Qods Force stand by the Palestinian people (Fars, December 25, 2017).

► The Deputy Leader of Hamas, Saleh al-'Arouri, stated that Iran is the only country that provides Hamas with military support and also publicizes it. In an interview to the al-Quds TV network, al-'Arouri stated that Iran's support for Hamas never stopped and that the relationship between Hamas and Hezbollah is excellent (Tasnim, December 31, 2017).



**A Hamas delegation meets with Ali-Akbar Velayati, the Foreign Affairs Adviser to the Supreme Leader in Tehran in October 2017 (Tasnim, October 21, 2017)**

► The Secretary General of Hezbollah, Hassan Nasrallah, declared in an interview to the al-Mayadin network (January 4), that Iran is proud of the direct support it provides to the

Palestinian factions. He mentioned that Iran supports the families (of fallen fighters) in Palestine and will continue to do so. According to him, Hezbollah does not play the role of coordinator in the financial support that Iran provides to the Palestinian organizations. He refused to provide information about the size of the support Iran provides to Hezbollah.