



Spotlight on Iran

January 7– January 21, 2018

Author: Dr. Raz Zimmt

Overview

- ▶ **The intention of the United States to establish a military force, comprised of its allies the Syrian Democratic Forces,** to police the Turkish and Iraqi borders, has been met with withering criticism by Tehran. Iran, which wishes to expel the United States from the region, or at least minimize its influence in Syria and Iraq, sees the creation of the military force as a plan intended to establish long-term American presence in Syria. This force is perceived as an attempt to stymie Iranian efforts to entrench its influence in Syria in the post-Islamic State era and to prevent the Assad regime from regaining direct control over all of Syria's territory.
- ▶ **The fissures between Iran, Turkey and Russia over the settlement of the war in Syria are increasingly apparent:** Turkey's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mevlüt Cavuşoğlu, cast the blame on Iran and Russia for the Assad regime's violations of the de-escalation agreement in the northwestern Idlib governorate. Meanwhile, the Iranian newspaper "Kayhan" published a trenchant editorial concerning Russia's political plans for Syria's future. The commentary stated that Iran, the Syrian government and Hezbollah cannot agree to a plan that includes demands for amending the Syrian constitution, changing the political structure in the regime from a presidential system to a parliamentary one, and the establishment of federalism in Syria, which may lead to a bloody and long-lasting civil war.
- ▶ **Iran is showing greater interest in Iraq, as the Iraqi political arena shifts gears ahead of the upcoming general elections, set to be held in May 2018.** Iraqi media reported last week that the Commander of the Qods Force of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), Qasem Soleimani, visited Baghdad and held meetings with the Iraqi Prime Minister, Haider al-Abadi, and senior Iraqi Shi'ite militia leaders, in an effort to forge an agreement between them ahead of the elections. The report was published against the backdrop of advanced talks between the Iraqi prime minister and the leaders of several

militias about the possibility of forming a joint coalition between them ahead of the elections.

- ▶ A New report published by the United Nation determined that Iran sent missiles and unmanned aerial vehicles to the Houthi rebels in Yemen, thus violation the weapons embargo placed by the UN. Iran has been categorically denying such weapon transfers to the Houthis.
- ▶ The Iranian Supreme Leader Khamenei used a conference of parliamentarians from Muslim country to reiterate, once again, the importance of the Palestinian question. In his speech, Khamenei proclaimed that the matter of Palestine is “of the utmost importance” for the Muslim world. He argued that one must not think that continuing the struggle against Israel is fruitless and blamed the countries of the region that cooperate with Israel, chief among them Saudi Arabia, of betrayal.

General Information

- ▶ The Head of the Office of the Supreme Leader, Mohammad Mohammadi Golpayegani, proclaimed that if Iran had not fought in Syria and Gaza, it would have had to fight in the streets of Terhan (parsine, January 10). Golpayegani made those statements in response to the criticism voiced during the recent wave of protests in Iran with regards to the massive investments of the Iranian regime beyond its border, and its ongoing support for Syria, Iraqi militias and terrorist organizations instead of solving economic and societal problems facing Iran’s citizenry.

Iranian Involvement in Syria

- ▶ Iran lambasted the American announcement about its intention to establish a 30,000-strong force that will operate along the border with Turkey and Iraq, which will be comprised of its allies, the Syrian Democratic Forces, dominated by the Kurdish YPD militia. The Spokesman of the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Bahram Qasemi, asserted that the American announcement is blatant meddling in Syria’s internal affairs, which will exacerbate the crisis in the country, increase instability and lead to an intensification of battles raging in the country. He called on the United States to alter its policy in the region, remove its forces from Syria as soon as possible and allow Syrian citizens to decide for themselves their fate and future (yjc.ir, January 16).

- ▶ Turkey’s Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mevlüt Cavuşoğlu, called on Iran and Russia to fulfil their responsibility and prevent violations of the de-escalation agreement in Syria by Assad regime forces in the northwestern Idlib governorate. He mentioned that these violations can not happen without Iranian and Russian support. In an interview to the Anadolu Agency (January 10), Cavuşoğlu stated that Turkey intends to host a summit of foreign ministers concerning the Syrian question following the summit that will be held in the city of Sochi at the end of January. The Iranian Ambassador to Turkey, Mohammad Ebrahim Taherianfard, denied reports that he had been summoned for a démarche by the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs due to the de-escalation violations in Idlib (IRIB, January 10).
- ▶ On January 14, Iranian Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs for Arab and Africa, Jaber Ansari, spoke on the phone with the Syrian Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, Faysal Meqdad, and discussed with him the latest developments in Syria. The two also talked about the negotiations process involving Iran, Russia and Turkey, over the final settlement in Syria, ahead of the summit on the matter, which is set to be held at the end of the month in Sochi, Russia (Fars, January 14).
- ▶ On January 15, the Iranian President, Hassan Rouhani, met with the Speaker of the Syrian Parliament, Hammouda Sabbagh, who visited Tehran. Rouhani warned against “new plots” on the United States in Syria, intended to harm Syria’s territorial integrity and security. Rouhani emphasized the need to bolster ties between the two countries, and declared that Iran will continue to stand by the Syrian government and people (President’s website, January 16).



The Sabbagh-Rouhani meeting (the president’s website, January 16 2018).

- ▶ On January 15, Sabbagh met with the Secretary of the Iranian Supreme National Security Council, Ali Shamkhani, and discussed with him developments in Syria and increasing cooperation between the two countries. Shamkhani emphasized the need to persevere with the political settlement process so as to bolster the sovereignty of the Syrian government and extend its control over all of Syria's territory. Shamkhani asserted that any transfer of Syrian land to terrorist groups or an occupation of Syrian territory by foreign forces is in opposition to Syria's interests and poses a threat to the countries of the region. Shamkhani also mentioned the need to expand cooperation between the two countries, in particular in the spheres of the economy and trade. He asserted that the return of security to Syria creates an opportunity to develop the country, and that Iran is ready to provide Syria with the assistance and advice necessary for this process (Fars, January 15).
- ▶ An editorial published in the hardline Iranian daily "Kayhan" (January 14), criticizes Russia's political plan for Syria's future. In the article, titled "Syria, it's time to wake up," the political commentator, Sa'dollah Zare'i, argued that the plan presented by Russia as part of the Astana talks is problematic and requires amendments before Iran, the Syrian government and Hezbollah can agree to it. Zare'i wrote that the plan includes three central components: amendment of the Syrian constitution, changing the political structure of the regime from a presidential one to a parliamentary-federal system, and the establishment of a transitional government comprised of the Syrian government and its opponents. The article argued that from Iran's point of view, no country has the right to make decisions for another nation, and thus, the fact that Russia proposed its plan is problematic, and this plan can only be granted legitimacy if the Syrian government agrees to adopt it as a basis for negotiations about the future of the country. The article also argued that establishing a federal system in Syria is a dangerous idea, as it will lead to a bloody and prolonged civil war, fueled by some of Syria's neighbors and foreign powers.
- ▶ The article in "Kayhan" is one in a series of commentaries published over the past several months in Iranian media that have adopted a critical line toward Russia. The position espoused by these editorials reflects Iranian suspicions with regards to Russia's intentions in Syria, which are not necessarily aligned with Iran's interests. Iran, unlike Russia, sees the preservation of the Assad regime's rule and its expansion over all of Syria's territory as a national interest of the utmost importance.

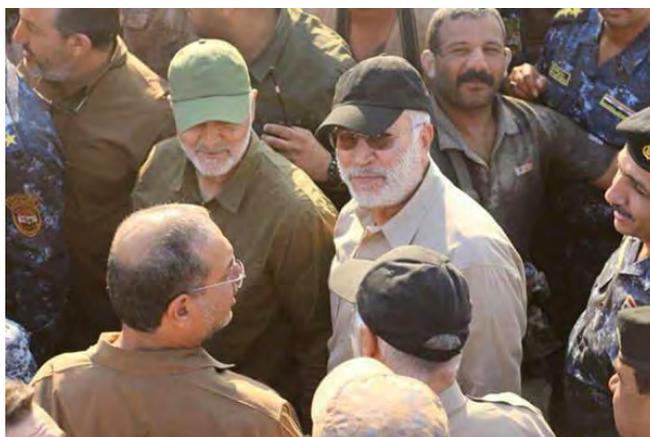
► Ali-Akbar Velayati, the Adviser on International Affairs to the Iranian Supreme Leader, who also serves as the Chairman of the Board of the “Azad University,” a network of private universities and colleges in Iran, reported that Syria’s President, Bashar al-Assad, instructed to establish branches of the Iranian network across Syria (Fars, January 16). In November 2017 Velayati visited Syria and discussed with President Assad expanding cooperation between the two countries in the spheres of economy and education, including a proposal to establish branches of the “Azad University” in Syria.

Iranian Involvement in Iraq and Yemen

► Iranian media is showing increasing interest in the preparations of the Iraqi political arena to the upcoming general elections in Iraq scheduled for May 2018. In a commentary published last week in the hardline daily Khorasan (January 14) under the title “Why is America concerned about a possible victory of the popular Shi’ite militias in the election?” the author argued that the political organizing of the Shi’ite militias in Iraq ahead of the election is increasing American fears about the growth of Iranian influence in the Iraqi political arena. “The meaning of the presence of the militias in parliament and in the government is an increase Iran’s influence and improvement of Iran’s [ability to execute its] policies in Iraq,” the article claimed. The editorial also argued that turning the Shi’ite militias into a political actor and their presence at decision-making foci will pose a challenge to the international and regional efforts to dismantle this armed force. This process of turning the militias into a political force will also lead to the establishment of a current opposing the American goals in Iraq and bolster the ties between Iraq and Syria in the political and military spheres, the article argued.

► Meanwhile, Iraqi media sources (Twitter, January 13) reported that the Commander of the IRGC’s Qods Force, Qasem Soleimani, visited Baghdad on January 13 and held meetings with the Iraqi Prime Minister, Haider al-Abadi; with the commander of the “Badr” militia, Hadi al-Amiri; and with the Deputy Commander of the Popular Mobilization Committees, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, in order to forge and agreement between these factions ahead of the elections. The report, which has not been confirmed by Iranian sources, was published in parallel to ongoing advanced talks between the Iraqi prime minister and the major Iraqi Shi’ite militias, including the Badr militia, Asaeb al-Haqq and

the al-Nujaba' Movement, concerning the establishment of a joint bloc ahead of the general elections.



Qasem Soleimani with Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis (Mehr, May 27, 2016).

► In a lecture delivered at a conference focused on Iran-Iraq relations, the Iranian Ambassador to Iraq, Iraj Masjedi, expounded on Iranian activities in Iraq following the defeat of the Islamic State. The ambassador devoted most of his lecture to the Iranian effort to expand its economic activities in Iraq following the end of the campaign against the Islamic State. Masjedi stated that Iran is the second most important economic partner of Iraq (following China). However, Iran is displeased with the current breadth of relations between the two countries in various spheres and would like to expand them. He mentioned that the Iranian embassy in Baghdad established an economic committee whose role is to assist public and private companies as well as Iranian investors who wish to work in Iraq. According to Masjedi, Iraq needs investments in the transportation and tourism sectors, as well as reconstruction assistance in some of the provinces affected by the war against ISIS, and that Iran can assist Iraq in these fields.



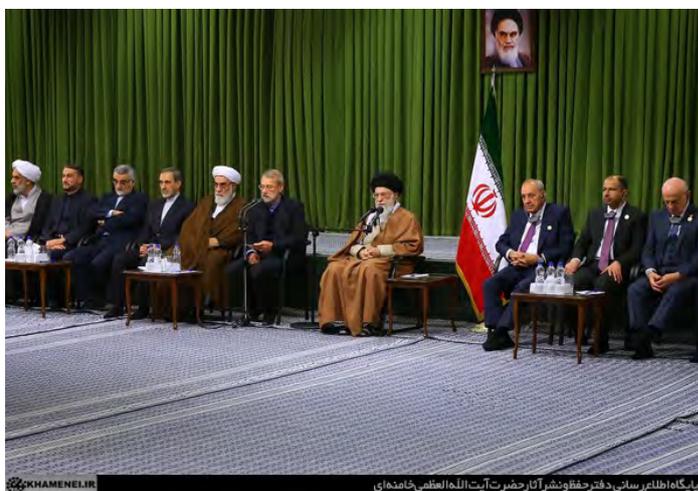
Iran's Ambassador to Iraq, Iraj Masjedi (Fars, January 13 2018).

- ▶ Masjedi stated that the presence of the Iranian military advisers in Iraq, headed by the Commander of the IRGC's Qods Force, will be reduced following the downfall of the Islamic State. However, the military and security cooperation that Iran maintains with the Iraqi ministry of defense, the police and the popular militias, will persist. He asserted that the popular Iraqi militias must be preserved as a force that can guarantee Iraq's security in the future.
- ▶ When referring to the relationship between Iraq and the United States and Saudi Arabia, Masjedi stated that Iraq is an independent country that acts according to its interests and Iraq's relationships with other countries should not detract from its relationship with Iran. He mentioned that Tehran is trying to improve the relationship between the Baghdad government and the Kurdish Regional Government in northern Iraq, to solve the disagreements between them in a way that safeguards the interests of both the central government and those of the Kurdish region (Fars, January 13).
- ▶ A new report published by the United Nations determined that Iran transferred missiles and unmanned aerial vehicles to the Houthi rebels in Yemen, thus violating the weapons embargo placed by the United Nations. UN experts carried out an inspection in Yemen in November and December 2017 and examined fragments of missiles fired by the Houthis in Yemen. According to the report, the team identified remains of missiles and military unmanned aerial vehicles originating from Iran, which reached Yemen after the imposition of the weapons embargo by the United Nations Security Council on the Houthis in 2015. Thus, UN investigators came to a conclusion that Iran is in violation of article 14 of UN Security Council resolution 2216, since it did not take steps to stop the provision, sale or

transfer – directly or indirectly – of missiles and unmanned aerial vehicles to the Houthis in Yemen (AP, January 13).

Iranian Involvement in the Palestinian Arena

► In a speech in front of parliamentarians from Muslim countries who gathered in Tehran on January 16, the Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, averred that the Palestinian question is of the utmost importance to the Muslim world and that the defense of Palestine is the responsibility of all Muslims. He insisted that the thinking that the struggle against “the Zionist regime” is fruitless must be rejected, asserting that this struggle will eventually be victorious. There was a time when the Zionists adopted the slogan “from the Nile to the Euphrates,” while now they are forced to establish walls to protect themselves, he argued. Khamenei also accused the countries of the region that cooperate with Israel, led by Saudi Arabia, of treason. Khamenei added that the American decision to recognize Jerusalem as Israel’s capital is a “big mistake” destined to fail (Fars, January 16).



**Khamenei’s speech in front of Muslim parliamentarians
(the website of the Supreme Leader, January 16 2018).**