



# Spotlight on Iran

## January 21 – February 4, 2018

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### Overview

- ▶ Tehran is clearly concerned about the intention of the United States administration to maintain an American armed force in the region in the day after the final defeat of the Islamic State. The Adviser on Foreign Affairs to the Supreme Leader, Ali-Akbar Velayati, declared during a conference in Tehran that **Iranian forces must remain in Iraq and Syria to prevent Iran's enemies, led by the United States, from realizing their plan to partition the countries of the region.** He denounced the U.S. military presence in the region and stressed Iran's willingness to assist the Syrian government in combating American forces. In parallel, the Senior Military Adviser to the Supreme Leader, Yahya Rahim Safavi, **called to form a regional coalition between Iran, Iraq, Pakistan, Russia and Syria to jointly act against the United States and its allies in the region.** These statements follow an announcement by the Pentagon on its intention to train a 30,000-strong force made up of members of the Syrian Democratic Forces, which will operate along the borders with Turkey and Iraq.
- ▶ The statement made by the Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, following his meeting with the Russian President Putin about Iran's activities in Syria and Lebanon gained widespread coverage in Iranian media. Iranian officials, however, avoided issuing formal responses to the prime minister's statement, who discussed with the Russian president Iran's effort to entrench its military presence in Syria and construct manufacturing plants for the assembly of precision-guided missiles in Lebanon.
- ▶ **Iran responded with relative restraint to Turkey's military campaign against the Kurdish militia, the YPG, in Efrin, northern Syria** ("Operation Olive Branch"). The spokesman of the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs called for an immediate cessation of the Turkish offensive and the Iranian chief of staff conducted a phone call with his Turkish counterpart, emphasizing the need to preserve the territorial integrity, independence and sovereignty of Syria. The Chairman of the Majlis Committee for Foreign Policy and National Security, Alaeddin Boroujerdi, on the other hand, declared that Turkey's actions in Efrin are a response to the American effort to partition Syria and establish a Kurdish force that will

operate under American patronage in northern Syria. It appears that despite Iran's apprehension regarding the violation of Syrian sovereignty by Turkey, it sees positive aspects in the Turkish military action against the Kurdish force in northern Syria, in particular as this offensive stoked tension between Turkey and the United States.

► Meanwhile, Iran is persisting with its efforts to grow its religious influence in Syria and Lebanon. In late January, the senior hardline cleric, Ebrahim Raisi, the Custodian of the Imam Reza Foundation in the city of Mashhad, conducted a visit to Syria and Lebanon. During the visit, the cleric discussed expanding cooperation between Iran and Syria, met with the secretary general of Hezbollah and even toured the border with Israel accompanied by Hezbollah members.

► For the first time since the independence referendum in the Kurdish region in northern Iraq, the Prime Minister of the Kurdish Regional Government, Nechirvan Barzani, visited Tehran and met with senior Iranian regime officials, including, notably, President Rouhani and the Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council, Ali Shamkhani.

## General Information

► Ali-Akbar Velayati, the Advisor on Foreign Affairs to the Supreme Leader, stated in a conference in Tehran that Iranian forces must remain in Iraq and Syria to protect "Islamic unity." He asserted that if Iran does not maintain its presence there, no country would be able to secure the stability of the region. Velayati stated that Iran's policy is aimed at preventing its enemies from implementing their plot to partition the countries of the region, including Iran itself. If Iran does not defend itself beyond its borders and if Iraqi Kurdistan were to gain independence, Israeli forces would have reached Iran's borders. Velayati lambasted the American military presence in the region and emphasized Iran's willingness to assist the Syrian government and fight the American forces stationed on its territory. He insisted that despite the defeat of the imperialists in Syria, Iran can not sit idly by, since the situation in Syria, Lebanon and Palestine is sensitive and requires perpetual vigilance and a continuous Iranian presence (Fars, January 22, 2018).

► Yahya Rahim Safavi, the Senior Military Advisor to the Iranian Supreme Leader, stated in an interview that Iran should establish a regional coalition with Iraq, Pakistan, Russia and Syria to work jointly against the United States and its regional allies. He mentioned the 2,000-3,000 American soldiers currently operating in the region and warned that the United States

wishes to exploit its military presence to create discord in the region and incite against Iran. Safavi insisted that the disagreements between Turkey and the United States are merely tactical, and that Turkey is in contact with all the players in the region to improve its bargaining position in the talks concerning the settlement of the war in Syria and to secure its economic interests (Tasnim, January 23, 2018).



**Yahya Rahim Safavi (Tasnim, January 23, 2018)**

## Iranian Involvement in Syria and Lebanon

- ▶ Iranian media reported (January 30), based on media reports in Israel, on the statement by the Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, following his meeting with the Russian President Vladimir Putin, regarding Iranian activities in Syria and Lebanon. After the meeting concluded, Netanyahu reported that he spoke with the Russian president about Iran's efforts to entrench its military foothold in Syria and declared that Israel is acting to thwart this entrenchment. Netanyahu also spoke with President Putin about Iran's efforts to establish factories for the manufacture of precision-guided missiles in Lebanon. Senior Iranian officials avoided responding to the prime minister's statement.
- ▶ A fighter in the Basij wing of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), Gholamreza Langari, was killed at the end of January in the Deir Ezzor region in Syria.



**Gholamreza Langari who was killed in Syria  
(Defa News, January 26, 2018)**

- ▶ The Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister, Hossein Jaber Ansari, represented Iran in the Syrian National Dialogue Congress held on January 30 in Sochi, Russia. The congress was held under Russian, Iranian and Turkish sponsorship. Prior to arriving in Sochi, Ansari visited Damascus and met with the Syrian President, Bashar Assad. The two discussed the Turkish operation in northern Syria (“Operation Olive Branch”). Upon arrival in Russia, Ansari met with the Special Envoy of the Russian President on Syria, Alexander Laverentiev (Mehr, January 29, 2018).
- ▶ The Spokesman of the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Bahram Qasemi, called for an immediate cessation of the Turkish offensive against the Kurdish YPG militia in Efrin, northern Syria. Qasemi warned that the crisis in north-western Syria may embolden terrorist organizations in the region, adding that Iran expects Turkey to remain committed to the political settlement process in Syria and play a constructive role in ending the crisis. He mentioned that Iran holds regular consultations with Turkey regarding developments in Syria (Tasmin, January 22, 2018). On January 21, the Chief of Staff of the Iranian Armed Forces, Mohammad Bagheri, held a phone call with his Turkish counterpart, Hulusi Akar, and discussed the Turkish offensive against the Kurds in northern Syria. Bagheri emphasized that the territorial integrity, independence and sovereignty of Syria must be preserved and called on Turkey to clarify that it has no intention to seize Syrian lands. He argued that the United States and its allies must not be allowed to exploit the situation to further their goals in Syria (Sepah News, January 21). The Chairman of the Majlis Committee for Foreign Policy and National Security, Alaeddin Boroujerdi, declared that Turkey’s actions in Efrin are a response

to the American effort to break Syria apart and establish a Kurdish force that will operate under American patronage in northern Syria. He emphasized Iran's support for the territorial integrity of Syria and Iraq (Mehr, January 28, 2018).

► On January 21, the reformist daily "Ghanoon" published a scathing commentary against the Syrian President, Bashar Assad, accusing him of prioritizing Russian firms over Iranian ones in the process of post-war reconstruction. The article argued that despite the enormous investment and high death toll among IRGC fighters in the military campaign in Syria, President Assad is not allowing Iran to promote its economic investments in Syria. The author argued that despite the willingness expressed by senior government officials, chief among them President Rouhani, to help reconstruct Syria following the end of the campaign against the Islamic State, President Assad is ignoring the national economic interests of Iran in Syria and prefers Russia over Iran when it comes to the reconstruction efforts of his country's economy.

► On January 25, the hardline cleric Ebrahim Raisi, arrived for a visit in Syria and Lebanon. Raisi, who was a contender in the last presidential elections in Iran against the sitting President Rouhani, heads the Imam Reza Foundation in the city of Mashhad. This powerful foundation controls large religious endowments, significant assets and a sizeable budget. During his visit, Raisi met with the Representative of the Iranian Supreme Leader to Syria, Ayatollah Abolfazl Tabatabaei, toured the gravesite of Sayyidah Zaynab in Damascus and discussed expanding cooperation in the religious sphere between Iran and Syria (Tasnim, January 26). During his visit to Lebanon, Raisi met senior Lebanese figures including Secretary General of Hezbollah, Hassan Nasrallah, the Speaker of the Lebanese Parliament, Nabih Berri. Raisi also conducted a tour along the border with Israel in the company of Hezbollah members (Fars, January 28, 2018).



**Raisi tours the Israel-Lebanon border (Raisi's Twitter account, January 30, 2018)**

► Raisi's visit to Syria and Lebanon is further testament to Iran's effort to develop its religious and cultural activities in the region. Over the past year, Iran has been involved in the reconstruction of Shi'ite holy sites that were damaged during the civil war, most importantly, the gravesite of the Sayyidah Zaynab in Damascus. Iran sees the expansion of its religious and cultural activities in the region as a central tool for entrenching its influence in the region. Recently, Ali-Akbar Velayati, the Adviser on Foreign Affairs to the Supreme Leader, who also serves as the Chairman of the Board of Governors of the "Azad University," a network of private universities and colleges in Iran, met with the Syrian president and the two agreed to establish branches of the university across Syria.

## Iranian Involvement in Iraq

► On January 21, the Prime Minister of the Kurdish Regional Government, Nechirvan Barzani, visited Tehran – for the first time since the independence referendum was held in the Kurdish region - and met with senior Iranian regime officials. In his meeting with Barzani, President Rouhani stated that all effort must be made to further relations between Iran and Iraq. He asserted that stability and security are necessary conditions for development and prosperity, and that no one must be allowed to undermine the stability and security of the countries of the region. Rouhani added that all tribes and ethnic groups in the region, including the Kurds of Iraq, need to realize their legitimate rights within the framework of the constitution and territorial integrity of their respective countries (Maher, January 21, 2018).



**The Rouhani-Barzani meeting (website of the presidency, January 21, 2018)**

► In a meeting with the Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council, Ali Shamkhani, the two discussed developments in Iraq and the region. Shamkhani insisted that Iran will not tolerate a situation under which “anti-revolutionary” groups use territory controlled by the Kurds in northern Iraq to infiltrate Iran, carry out terror attacks, and then return to northern Iraq and claim responsibility for their operations through Kurdish media. Shamkhani called the independence referendum in the Kurdish region is a “strategic mistake,” that caused grave economic and political harm and damaged the security of residents of Iraqi Kurdistan and the countries of the region. He stated that Iran is ready to help advance the political negotiations between the central government in Baghdad and the Kurdistan Regional Government. Nechirvan mentioned the historic cooperation between Iran and Iraqi Kurdistan and added that the Kurdish region is proud of its friendly relations with the Islamic Republic (Fars, January 21, 2018).