



Spotlight on Iran

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Overview

- ▶ While Iran continues to downplay its involvement in the ongoing campaign in eastern Ghouta on the outskirts of Damascus, the Chief of Staff of the Iranian Armed Forces, Mohammad Bagheri, emphasized that “the cleansing of the Damascus suburbs controlled by the terrorists” will continue. Meanwhile, the Adviser to the Speaker of the Majlis, Hossein Amir Abdollahian, accused Israel of supporting Jabhat al-Nusra’s activities in eastern Ghouta in an effort to destabilize Syria. In a harshly worded statement, Abdollahian proclaimed that without a doubt, Iran has a plan to realize the vision of the Supreme Leader of Iran to ensure Israel will not exist within 25 years, but this plan can not be publicized in the media.
- ▶ In another manifestation of Iran’s desire to bolster its economic hold on Syria in the post-Islamic State era, the Senior Military Adviser to the Supreme Leader, Yahya Rahim Safavi, declared that Syria is ready to compensate Iran for its substantial investments in the military campaign by allowing Iran to capitalize on the oil, gas and phosphate reserves within Syria’s borders. Iranian commentators, however, estimated that due to Syria’s dire financial situation, Iran will struggle to find economic opportunities there that could compensate it for its military expenditures.
- ▶ In Iraq, where preparations are underway for the general election in May of this year, Iran continues to pursue its efforts to establish ties with various political and social groups in the country. The Iranian ambassador to Baghdad met with senior Kurdish officials in northern Iraq, and in Tehran, senior Iranian regime officials met with a delegation of leaders of Sunni tribes from Iraq.

General Information

- ▶ The Special Adviser to the Chairman of the Majlis on International Affairs, Hossein Amir Abdollahian, addressed regional developments during a press conference. He alleged that Israel is trying to realize its goals in the region in the post-ISIS era by collaborating with

Saudi Arabia and the United States. He accused Israel of supporting terrorists in Iraq and Syria and claimed that the “Zionist regime” is supporting Jabhat al-Nusra’s activity in eastern Ghouta in an effort to destabilize Syria. Abdollahian stated that Iran and its allies, who won the war on terror, will not allow “the Zionist regime” to accomplish its goal, and that the leaders of the Resistance, and even parts of the Palestine Liberation Organization, have come to the realization that continuing down the path of resistance and struggle against Israel is the only strategy that will allow the Palestinian to secure their rights. According to him, if Iran does not defend its national security near Israel’s borders, the Zionists will come to Tehran to assassinate Iranian scientists and citizens. He added that Iran clearly has a plan to destroy Israel within 25 years, in accordance with the vision of Supreme Leader Khamenei, but this plan can not be publicized in the media.



Hossein Amir Abdollahian (Fars, February 27 2018).

- ▶ When discussing the United States’ policy in the region, Abdollahian claimed that America’s strategy is to create instability so as to enfeeble the countries of the region and empower “the Zionist regime.” The adviser to the chairman of the Majlis also rejected the allegations regarding Iranian transfers of missiles to the Houthi rebels in Yemen and cast the blame on Saudi Arabia for the persistent instability in the war-torn country (Fars, February 27).
- ▶ The Deputy Commander of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) for Health and Medical Affairs, Ahmad Abdollahi, stated that the IRGC dispatched doctors and medical equipment to Syria and Iraq to treat the injured fighters of the “Resistance Front.” He mentioned that the IRGC also established medical centers and field hospitals in Syria and Iraq to provide medical services for the wounded (Tasnim, February 26).

Iranian Involvement in Syria

► A senior IRGC officer, Mostafa Zahedi Bidgali, was killed on February 18 in Syria. Bidgali, a veteran of the Iran-Iraq War, was previously injured in Syria two years ago (Fars, February 19).



The IRGC officer killed in Syria (Fars, February 19 2018).

► Mohammad Bagheri, the Chief of Staff of the Iranian Armed Forces, stated that Iran and Russia made amendments to the United Nation’s Security Council resolution passed on February 24 that called for a general ceasefire across Syria for 30 days. The inserted amendments, according to his, ensured that the resolution would not apply to combat against the main terrorist groups, including Jabhat al-Nusra. Bagheri claimed that similarly to past instances, those who oppose peace and security in Syria proposed a ceasefire when they realized that the Syrian Army is determined to cleanse Damascus’ suburbs of the terrorists. He emphasized that Iran and Syria are committed to the ceasefire, but that the cleansing of the suburbs of Damascus controlled by the “terrorists” (meaning, eastern Ghouta), will continue apace (Tasnim, February 25).



**The Iranian Chief of Staff, Mohammad Bagheri
(Tasnim, February 25 2018).**

- ▶ The Spokesperson for the Iranian Parliament's National Security and Foreign Policy Committee, Hossein Naqavi Hosseini, denied in an interview to the Russian news agency “Sputnik” (February 28) the “Fox News” report alleging that Iran established a new military base 12 kilometers from Damascus. According to this report, Iran completed the construction of hangers in this base, which is operated by the IRGC’s Qods Force; the hangers are to be used to house short- and medium-range missiles. Hosseini argued that reports on the matter are intended to justify the accusations lobbed by the United States and Israel against Iran.
- ▶ On February 20, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani held a phone call with his Turkish counterpart, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, and discussed the situation in Syria with him. Rouhani reiterated to Erdoğan the need to respect the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Syria and to restore, as quickly as possible, stability and security in the country by achieving progress in the final settlement negotiations between Iran, Russia and Turkey in Astana and Sochi (Mehr, February 20).
- ▶ Yahya Rahim Safavi, the Senior Military Adviser to the Supreme Leader of Iran, claimed that Damascus is willing to compensate Iran for its sizeable investments in the military campaign in Syria, by allowing Iran to benefit from the oil and gas fields as well as phosphate mines within its territory. He estimated the cost of Syria’s reconstruction following the civil war will amount to between 300 to 400 billion dollars and mentioned that Iran can take part in rebuilding Syria, along with other countries.
- ▶ In a speech he gave at a conference in Tehran focusing on developments in Syria, Safavi assessed that the region of western Asia will become an arena of contestation between world powers, including the United States, Russia and the European Union, and that in the

near future, China and India will join this struggle as well. He alleged that the United States strives to partition Syria and Iraq by weakening Iran, whose geostrategic position improved in recent years vis-à-vis Saudi Arabia and Turkey. He also asserted that the United States wishes to prevent the establishment of a strategic corridor stretching from Iran through Iraq and Syria to the Mediterranean (Tasnim, February 17)

► In response to Safavi's statement, the Iranian commentator on international affairs, Fereydoun Majlesi, assessed in an opinion article published in the Iranian daily Aftab-e Yazd (February 19) that phosphate mining in Syria can not be used as a source of revenue by Iran, which could compensate Iran's significant investments in Syria, since this natural resource has lost its global economic significance. Another commentator, Ali Bigdeli, also assessed that due to Syria's grave economic state, it would not be able to compensate Iran for its expenditures or provide the necessary conditions for investments in its economy.

► Safavi's statement is one of multiple statements by senior Iranian officials in recent months that have called for Iranian participation in the reconstruction efforts in Syria, so as to cover Iran's significant expenditures stemming from its participation in the military campaign in the country. During his visit to Damascus in October 2017, the Chief of Staff of the Iranian Armed Forces, Mohammad Hossein Bagheri, conveyed a list of Iranian requests to President Assad, which included concessions for phosphate mining in Syria.

Iranian Involvement in Iraq

► On February 17, Ali-Akbar Velayati, the Adviser on Foreign Affairs to the Supreme Leader, met in Baghdad with the Iraqi Deputy Prime Minister, Nouri al-Maliki, and declared that the "Resistance Front" must prevent the gradual American entrenchment in the Euphrates Valley. He claimed that the Americans are trying to establish a new foothold in Iraq and that the Resistance Front will not allow NATO to establish a redoubt in western Asia (Tasnim, February 17).



**The Velayati- al-Maliki meeting
(ISNA, February 17 2018).**

- ▶ The Iranian Ambassador to Baghdad, Iraj Masjedi, stated that Tehran is continuing to pursue the efforts to improve relations between the central government in Baghdad and the Kurdish region in northern Iraq. In a meeting he held in Sulaymaniyah in northern Iraq with Mala Bakhtiar, the Head of the Political Bureau of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan party, and with the former Iraqi Deputy Prime Minister, Barham Salih, Masjedi stressed that the Islamic Republic is a friend of the entire Iraqi people, including the Kurds, Arabs, Shi'ites and Sunnis. He added that Iran is interested in the maintenance of constructive relations between the Kurdish region and Baghdad (ISNA, February 24).
- ▶ A delegation of leaders of Sunni tribes from Iraq visited Tehran at the end of February and met with senior Iranian officials. At the end of a meeting with the members of the delegation, the Senior Adviser to the Supreme Leader, Ali-Akbar Velayati, stated that he discussed the cooperation between Iran and Iraq with the tribal chiefs. He asserted that the United States wished to harm the relationship between the two countries (ISNA, February 26).



**Velayati's meeting with the Sunni tribal leaders from Iraq
(ISNA, February 26 2018).**

► During its visit to Tehran, the Iraqi delegation also met with the Special Adviser to the Speaker of the Majlis, Hossein Amir Abdollahian, who commended the role played by Iraq's tribes in the campaign against ISIS. He emphasized Iran's support for Iraq's territorial integrity and unity and warned about Israel's alleged attempts to cause strife between the Shi'ite and Sunni communities in Iraq (Tasnim, February 25).