



Spotlight on Iran

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Author: Dr. Raz Zimmt

Overview

- ▶ Against the backdrop of European efforts to place limitations on Iran's ballistic missile program and curtail its regional influence so as to prevent the collapse of the nuclear agreement, Iran continues to emphasize its refusal to negotiate over these matters. In a speech in Tehran, the Supreme Leader Khamenei declared that Iran's regional policies are not up for discussion and that the United States and European countries do not have any right to conduct negotiations with Iran concerning its presence in the Middle East.
- ▶ In parallel with the ongoing campaign in eastern Ghouta, Iran continues to deliberate with Turkey, Russia and the Syrian regime as part of the negotiations concerning the settlement of the war in Syria. On March 7, the Iranian and Turkish presidents conducted a phone call in which they discussed developments in Syria, and in particular in eastern Ghouta. In early March, the deputy Iranian minister of foreign affairs arrived for a visit in Damascus to discuss with senior Syrian officials the negotiations in Astana and Sochi. On Friday, March 16, the foreign ministers of Iran, Russia, and Turkey held talks in the Kazakh capital Astana to discuss the situation in Syria. In a joint statement after the meeting, the ministers reaffirmed the three countries' commitment to Syria's sovereignty and territorial integrity. Next month, the presidents of Iran, Russia and Turkey are slated to meet in Istanbul to discuss the situation in Syria.
- ▶ Meanwhile, senior Iranian officials continue to publicly demand an end to the American presence in Syria. The senior adviser on military affairs to the Supreme Leader called on the Syrian Army to act to compel American forces to leave the Euphrates Valley to protect their country's territorial integrity.
- ▶ A speech of Hezbollah Secretary General, Hassan Nasrallah, which was published on an Iranian website, caused a controversy last week due to the total devotion to the Iranian Supreme Leader expressed by Nasrallah. In his speech, Nasrallah proclaimed that Hezbollah's commitment to the Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist trumps its commitment to

the Lebanese constitution. Following criticism in Lebanon of Nasrallah's speech and a public denial by Hezbollah, the report was removed from the Iranian website. Despite this, we assess that this is an authentic speech that is reflective of Hezbollah's commitment to Iran, a relationship that has only deepened in recent years in light of the military campaign in Syria and the continuous support from Iran to the organization.

► Iran is intensifying its efforts to secure its position in the reconstruction efforts in Iraq, especially in light of the repeated attempted by Saudi Arabia to expand its foothold in Iraq in the post-Islamic State era. In early March, the Iranian vice president visited Baghdad and met with senior Iraqi officials, including Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi, and called for integrating Iranian firms in Iraq's economy. The Iranian official also expressed his country's willingness to offer Iraq a three billion dollar credit line, which could be used to contract Iranian firms in the reconstruction effort in Iraq.

General Information

► During a speech in Tehran, the Supreme Leader of Iran, Ali Khamenei, declared that Iran's regional policies are not up for debate. He argued that while the United States maintains a presence all over the world, it dares to raise objections regarding Iran's presence in the region. Khamenei asserted that Iran does not need American permission to maintain its presence in the region, and that this issue should be discussed with the countries of the region and not the United States. According to him, Iran would be willing to negotiate with the United States only if Iran was interested in establishing a presence inside the United States itself. He added that European countries as well do not have a right to negotiate with Iran concerning its regional presence, because this is none of their business. This is a region that belongs to Iran and not to Europe, Khamenei declared (the website of the Supreme Leader, March 8).

► The Commander of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRCG), Mohammad Ali Jafari, discussed in a speech in front of a meeting of the Assembly of Experts the accomplishments of Iran and the "Resistance Front" over the past year. Jafari proclaimed that 2017 was a year of defeats for ISIS and the takfiri organizations, the opponents of the Islamic Republic, in Iraq and in Syria. He added that this defeat is the greatest victory of the "Islamic Resistance Front" in the region. He asserted that the success of the resistance in the region manifested in

downing of the Israeli F-16 jet in the unmanned aerial vehicle incident in northern Israel, which he defined as “a great defeat for the occupying Zionist regime.”

► The commander of the IRGC stated that all the challenges and external threats against the Islamic Revolution have been turned into extraordinary opportunities: ISIS’ emergence has led to the establishment of the Iraqi militias (the “Popular Mobilization Forces”) and the popular militias in Syria, which operate according to the model of the Iranian popular militia, the basij. These popular forces, according to Jafari, turned the threats and plots of the enemies into opportunities (Tasnim, March 13).



The Commander of the IRGC in a speech in front of the Assembly of Experts (Tasnim, March 13 2018).

Iranian Involvement in Syria and Lebanon

► On March 7, Iranian President, Hassan Rouhani, conducted a phone call with his Turkish counterpart, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, and discussed with him developments in Syria, and in particular, in eastern Ghouta. Turkish media reported that the two presidents agreed to accelerate the efforts to implement a ceasefire in the area to allow the transfer of humanitarian assistance to civilians in the besieged suburbs of Damascus. Meanwhile, the Russian news agency TASS reported (March 6) that the presidents of Russian, Iran and Turkey will meet in Istanbul in April to discuss the situation in Syria.

► On March 4, the Iranian Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, Hossein Jaber Ansari, arrived in Damascus for a visit and met with senior Syrian officials, chief among them, President Assad. In the meetings, the two sides discussed developments in Syria and the ongoing negotiations processes concerning the end of the war in Syria in Astana and Sochi (IRNA, March 4).

- ▶ On Friday, March 16, the foreign ministers of Iran, Russia, and Turkey held talks in the Kazakh capital Astana to discuss the situation in Syria. In a joint statement after the meeting, they reaffirmed the three countries' commitment to Syria's sovereignty and territorial integrity (Tasnim, March 16).
- ▶ During a conference held at the Golestan province, the Senior Military Adviser to the Supreme Leader, Yahya Rahim Safavi, called on the Syrian Army to remove American forces from the Euphrates Valley. He stated that U.S. activities in Syria are not based on a United Nations Security Council resolution, and are therefore illegal, and one would hope that the government, army and popular forces of Syria will evict the Americans from the Euphrates Valley and protect the territorial integrity of their country. Safavi condemned Turkey's operation in Syria and stated that both the United States and Turkey are violating Syria's national sovereignty (Mehr, March 4).



Yahya Rahim Safavi, the Senior Military Adviser to the Supreme Leader (Mehr, March 4 2018).

- ▶ On March 4, a photo showing the Commander of the IRGC's Qods Force, Qasem Soleimani, alongside Secretary General of Hezbollah, Hassan Nasrallah, was published online. Iranians on social media and Iranian websites reported that this is a recent photo from a meeting between the two men, but the time and location of the meeting were not mentioned.



**The Nasrallah-Soleimani meeting
(Qasem Soleimani's Instagram account, March 4 2018).**

- ▶ On March 12, the Iranian news site Farda News published the full transcript of a speech delivered by Hezbollah Secretary General, Hassan Nasrallah, in front of Iranian nationals residing in Lebanon. In the speech, which was given on March 10, 2018, according to the website, the Hezbollah secretary general declared that his organization is completely committed to the Iranian Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, and that the commitment to Khamenei supersedes the organization's commitment to the Lebanese constitution. Nasrallah stated that the organization is obligated to execute not only Khamenei's instructions, but also his suggestions and ideas. According to Nasrallah, Hezbollah's Shura Council avoids any actions that Khamenei would find displeasing.
- ▶ Nasrallah recounted that when the former Egyptian President, Mohammad Morsi, was toppled in a coup in 2013, he reacted to it with joy, as he was displeased with Morsi's policies. When the Iranian Leader Khamenei was informed about it, he was displeased with Nasrallah's reaction, arguing that there is no reason to celebrate the fall of the Muslim Brotherhood, despite their wrong-headed policies. Following this, Nasrallah apologized to Khamenei and asked for his forgiveness.
- ▶ Nasrallah added that Hezbollah became a global force due to its adherence to the principle of the Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist (Velayet-e Faqih), which is even stronger than the commitment of many Iranians to this doctrine. He stated that despite the internal disagreements in Iran, all the political currents in the Islamic Republic have supported Hezbollah over the years. He added that Iran discusses and consults with Hezbollah on

regional matters and provides the organization with money, weapons and other supplies, but it does not dictate to Hezbollah how to act. Nasrallah proclaimed that Hezbollah is proud of its commitment to Iran and its leader, and if it were not for Iran, the Shi'ite communities in Lebanon, Syria and Iraq would have been wiped out by ISIS (Farda News, March 12).



Iranian Supreme Leader Khamenei with Hezbollah Secretary General Nasrallah (Tasnim, November 12, 2014).

► Following the publication of the speech, Hezbollah issued a statement claiming that the news report published on the Iranian website is completely unfounded. The denial was issued after the publication aroused criticism against Nasrallah among opponents of Hezbollah in Lebanon. Shortly afterwards, the website Farda News removed the report and issued an apology for publishing it. However, we assess that this is an authentic speech that is reflective of Hezbollah's commitment to Iran, which has only deepened in recent years in light of the military campaign in Syria and the continuous support from Iran to the organization, which has allowed Hezbollah to bolster its capabilities.

Iranian Involvement in Iraq

► On March 7, the First Vice President of Iran, Eshaq Jahangiri, arrived for a visit in Iraq at the helm of a delegation made up of political and business leaders from Iran. During the visit, Jahangiri expressed Iran's desire to participate in the reconstruction of Iraq. In his meeting with the Iraqi Prime Minister, Haider al-Abadi, the vice president called to bolster the economic ties between the two countries. He also expressed willingness to provide Iraq with a credit line in the sum of three billion dollars, which could be used to contract Iranian firms for reconstruction-related projects and services. He mentioned, however, that some of the private Iranian firms operating in Iraq are yet to receive payment for their services and that

this is an issue that must be resolved so that the companies could expand their involvement in the rebuilding of Iraq. Jahangiri also remarked on the need to develop the railroad between the two countries to allow them to establish a continuous land route from China and central Asia to the Mediterranean Sea (Asr-e Iran, March 7).



The meeting between Vice President Jahangiri and Iraqi Prime Minister al-Abadi (Fars, March 7 2018).

► It should be mentioned that Jahangiri recently appointed the former Iranian Ambassador to Baghdad, Hassan Danaeifar, as his adviser on “expanding ties with Iraq and Syria” (Noandish.com, February 24). Danaeifar previously served as a senior officer in the IRGC. Jahangiri’s visit to Iraq is another indication of Iran’s intentions to continue pursuing its efforts to bolster its economic influence in Iraq on the day following the campaign against the Islamic State organization.