



Spotlight on Iran

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Overview

- ▶ The Supreme Leader of Iran, Ali Khamenei, used his annual speech on the occasion of the Iranian New Year (Nowruz) to justify, once again, Iran's regional involvement. Khamenei emphasized that Iran does not meddle in the internal affairs of countries of the region, and that its presence in Syria and Iraq is based on the requests of their legitimate governments. He added that Iran's involvement in the region is intended to foil the United States' plot in the region, which aims to distract the people of the region from the struggle against Israel.
- ▶ The growing dissatisfaction in Iran due to the obstacles placed by Baghdad and Damascus, which are frustrating Tehran's efforts to cement its economic influence in those countries, has now manifested in Friday sermons as well. The Friday prayers leader in Mashhad declared that it is unacceptable that Iran will not be given its appropriate share in reconstruction contracts in Iraq and Syria, after its fighters helped those countries to free themselves from ISIS, while countries that assisted ISIS are being given a share in the economies of Iraq and Syria.
- ▶ Tehran continues to apprehensively monitor the improvement in relations between Iraq and Saudi Arabia against the backdrop of the looming visit of the Saudi crown prince to Baghdad. The hardline website Mashregh News warned that Saudi Arabia and the United States are working to increase their influence in the Shi'ite region of Iraq ahead of the elections set to be held in the country in May 2018. Meanwhile, on the occasion of the Iranian New Year and ahead of the elections slated to be held in Iraq, the Iranian Ambassador to Baghdad, Iraj Masjedi, met with representatives of Shi'ite groups and militias, among them Sheikh Akram al-Kaabi, the leader of Harakat al-Nujaba' (the Movement of the Noble Ones), a Shi'ite Iraqi militia that operates under the guidance of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) in Iraq and Syria.
- ▶ The improvement in relations between Iran and Hamas: The Head of Hamas' Political Bureau, Mousa Abu Marzuq, stated in an interview that the relationship between Hamas and Iran is similar to its state prior to the outbreak of the civil war in Syria, which led to a crisis in

the relationship between the movement and Tehran. He argued that no one has the right to criticize Hamas for its relations with Iran when its resources are stretched thin.

General Information

► In his regular speech marking the Iranian New Year (Nowruz), the Supreme Leader of Iran, Ali Khamenei, addressed Iran's involvement in the Middle East. Khamenei rebuffed the criticism about Iran's presence in Syria and Iraq and stated that its military presence is based on the requests of the legitimate governments and the people of those countries. He declared that Iran did not force its presence on those countries and that it has no intention to meddle in their internal affairs. "They asked for assistance, and we provided assistance," said Khamenei. The Supreme Leader of Iran added that his country foiled the American plot in the region, which aims to deflect the attention of people of the region from the "Zionist regime" by supporting groups such as ISIS (Fars, March 21, 2018).



The Supreme Leader of Iran in a speech in the city of Mashhad on the occasion of the Nowruz (the website of the Supreme Leader, March 21, 2018)

► The Friday prayers leader in Mashhad, Ayatollah Ahmad Alamolhoda, criticized the Iraqi and Syrian authorities for not allowing Iran to play a more central role in rebuilding the economies of the two war-torn countries. In a Friday sermon delivered on March 23, the senior cleric stated that it's painful to see that when Iraq and Syria needed Iran to free themselves from the terrorists, Iranian fighters came to their defense. But now, he added, when those two countries should serve as markets for Iranian companies, Iran is not granted

any role in the reconstruction of those countries, while those that have assisted ISIS do enjoy a share in the markets in Syria and Iraq (ILNA, March 23, 2018).

► In recent months, senior Iranian officials have voiced their dissatisfaction about the challenges Iran is encountering in its effort to increase its economic influence in Syria and Iraq. In November 2017, the Vice President of Iran's Chamber of Commerce, Hossein Selahvarzi, stated that Syria is placing limitations on import of goods from Iran. He mentioned that despite the agreements signed between the two countries, and the billions of dollars in credit lines that were granted by Tehran to Damascus, Syria has placed restrictions on the import of Iranian products into the country and instead prefers to import goods from Turkey (ILNA, November 24, 2017). In December 2017, the head of the Iranian-Iraqi Chamber of Commerce, Yahya al-Eshaq, claimed that Iraq adopted a discriminatory policy toward Iranian businessmen who wish to export their products to Iraq, as opposed to Iraq's welcoming of Turkish and Saudi businessmen (Tasnim, December 6, 2017).

Iranian Involvement in Syria

► On March 19, Amir Abdollahian, the Advisor on International Affairs to the Speaker of the Majlis, met with the Syrian Ambassador to Tehran, Adnan Mahmoud, and discussed with him political and regional affairs. Abdollahian stated during the meeting that there is a need to find a political solution to the crisis in Syria and the region, but that the struggle against terrorism requires confrontation and not negotiations. He claimed that the United States' and Saudi Arabia's support for "terrorists groups and gunmen" in eastern Ghouta harmful to the political process. Ambassador Mahmoud thanked Abdollahian for the support and assistance Iran is providing to Syria, and offered a detailed update on the current military and political state of affairs in Syria (ISNA, March 19, 2018).



The meeting between the adviser to the chairman of the Majlis with the Syrian ambassador to Tehran (icana.ir, March 19, 2018)

Iranian Involvement in Iraq and Yemen

- ▶ Tehran continues to monitor with a sense of unease the ongoing improvement in relations between Iraq and Saudi Arabia, although Iranian officials and commentators are trying to downplay the importance of this trend and emphasize Iraq's right to set an independent foreign policy.
- ▶ The website Iranian Diplomacy published (March 20, 2018) a commentary ahead of the upcoming visit to Iraq of the Saudi Crown Prince, Mohammad bin Salman. The commentator on Middle Eastern affairs, Hamid Kazemi, argued in the editorial that the visit of the Saudi crown prince is another manifestation of Saudi Arabia's ongoing efforts to expand the political and economic cooperation with Baghdad to weaken Iran and its influence in Iraq. He mentioned, however, that the visit should not be perceived as a threat to Iran in Iraq, because despite the improvement in its relations with Iraq, Saudi Arabia can not alter the political order of Iraq and turn the Shi'ites of Iraq into allies.
- ▶ A change in Saudi Arabia's policy vis-à-vis Iraq, the construction of a football stadium with Saudi financing in Iraq, or a visit of the crown prince to Baghdad can not alter the identity of Iraq's citizens, as long as Saudi Arabia persists with its hostile policy toward the Shi'ite inside Saudi Arabia, in Bahrain and in Yemen. Only a real and deep shift in Saudi Arabia's treatment of the Shi'ite can alter the way the Shi'ite community in Iraq perceives Saudi Arabia, the author argued. Under current conditions, the relations between Iraq and Saudi Arabia will continue to be limited to economic cooperation alone.

- ▶ At the end of the article, the commentator emphasized that Iraq is an independent country that is entitled to formulate its foreign policy in accordance with its national interests. According to Kazemi, Iran is not preventing the improvement in relations between Iraq and Saudi Arabia, despite Iran's robust relationship with Baghdad and the rift between Tehran and Riyadh.
- ▶ The hardline website Mashregh News also addressed Saudi Arabia's efforts to expand its influence in Iraq. In a commentary published on the website (March 23, 2018), it was argued that Saudi Arabia and the United States are working to expand their infiltration into Iraqi cities holy to the Shi'ites. As an example for this alleged plot, the website mentioned the unprecedented visit to Kerbala province that the American ambassador to Iraq undertook several months ago, which was intended to promote American involvement in economic development projects in the province. The Americans and Saudis, the article claimed, are trying to entrench their influence in the Shi'ite regions too with the goal of affecting the upcoming general elections in Iraq, scheduled for May 2018. According to Mashregh News, Israel also strives to expand its presence in Iraq with the support of the United States and Saudi Arabia.



A meeting between Supreme Leader Khamenei and al-Abadi, the Prime Minister of Iraq (the website of the Supreme Leader, June 21, 2017)

- ▶ Over the past year, relations between Iraq and Saudi Arabia improved significantly. This improvement was evident in visits to Baghdad by senior Saudi officials, including the minister of foreign affairs and the chief of staff of the Saudi armed forces, as well as Saudi efforts to expand the role of Saudi firms in Iraq's reconstruction. In August 2017, the 'Ar'ar border crossing between Iraq and Saudi Arabia was reopened for the first time in 27 years. Iran sees

the betterment of relationship between the two countries as further evidence of Saudi Arabia's intention – with American encouragement – to bolster its influence in Iraq at Iran's expense.

► At the end of March, Iran's Ambassador to Iraq, Iraj Masjedi, met with Sheikh Akram al-Kaabi, the leader of the Iraqi Shi'ite militia, Harakat al-Nujaba' (the Movement of the Noble Ones). In the meeting, held on the occasion of the Iranian New Year, Masjedi expressed his appreciation to Harakat al-Nujaba' and proclaimed that the militia is a source of pride for the Iraqis and Iranians alike. During the meeting, the two discussed military developments in the regions, plans to "eliminate ISIS' holdovers" in Iraq and the activities of "terrorist groups in Syria" (the website of Harakat al-Nubaja', March 26, 2018). The Movement of the Noble Ones was established in 2013 by Akram al-Kaabi and operates under the guidance of the IRGC's Qods Force. The militia also enjoys the assistance of Lebanese Hezbollah, with whom al-Kaabi has maintained close ties for years.



**The meeting between the Iranian ambassador to Iraq with Sheikh Akram al-Kaabi
(the website of Harakat al-Nujaba', March 26, 2018)**

► Meanwhile, Ambassador Masjedi announced that Tehran will respect the vote of the Iraqi people in the upcoming general elections in the country set for May 12, and will continue to support any government that will come to power through the elections. In a conference at the city of Najaf, Masjedi asserted that Iran supports free elections in Iraq that will lead to the establishment of a strong government in the country (IRNA, March 25, 2018).

► Riyadh blamed Iran for the launch of seven missiles on March 25 by the Houthi rebels in Yemen against Saudi Arabia. In a letter to the UN Security Council, Saudi Arabia called to hold Iran accountable for supplying the Houthis in Yemen with ballistic missiles. The Spokesman of the Saudi-led Coalition, Turki al-Malki, warned that Saudi Arabia reserves the right to respond against Iran “at the appropriate time and place.” During a press conference, the spokesman presented debris of missiles launched against Saudi Arabia, as well as missiles intercepted by the coalition before reaching Yemen, as proof of Iranian involvement in supplying the Houthi rebels with missiles (Reuters, March 26, 2018; Fars, March 27, 2018).

Iranian Involvement in the Palestinian Arena

► The Head of Hamas’ Political Bureau, Musa Abu Marzuq, stated in an interview to the al-Hiwar TV channel that the organization and Iran rebuilt their relationship after years of tensions, which erupted as a result of the disagreements between them surrounding the civil war in Syria. Abu Marzuq defined the relationship between Hamas and Iran as “great,” and mentioned that they are similar to the state of affairs prior to the crisis in Syria. He added that Iran responds favorably to appeals by Hamas, while other countries rebuff them. Therefore, no one has the right to criticize Hamas (regarding its relationship with Iran), when the organization’s resources are so strained, he argued (Fars, March 17, 2018).