



Spotlight on Iran

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Overview

- ▶ The decision of United States' (U.S.) President Donald Trump to withdraw American forces from Syria was met in Iran with surprise and satisfaction by most senior officials and commentators. The U.S. withdrawal from Syria was presented by Iran a manifestation of the defeat of U.S. strategy in the region, and particularly in Syria, and as another achievement of the "Resistance Front" led by the Islamic Republic. The drawdown is perceived by Iran as a propaganda victory that serves its interests as an actor that has, for years, attempted to reduce U.S. presence in the region. The pullout provides Iran with an opportunity to cement its influence in Syria and greater room to maneuver there. However, Tehran's ability to exploit the opportunities that emerged for its entrenchment in Syria, particularly in the military sphere, depend on additional factors and the Iranian regime's assessment regarding the opportunities and risks involved.
- ▶ The news of the U.S. withdrawal reverberated in Iraq as well, where the Iranian ambassador declared that his country ended its military presence in Iraq and removed all of its advisers, unlike the United States, which continues to maintain a military presence in Iraq. In another statement, Masjedi proclaimed that Iran's friendship with Iraq is not limited to the Shi'ite community and militias alone, but that it maintains good relations with all groups and sects in Iraq. The context of the statements of the Iranian ambassador is the growing criticism in Iraq about Iran's meddling in the country, which may increase following the U.S. drawdown in the region.
- ▶ In late December, a delegation of Hamas' political bloc in the Palestinian parliament, headed by the senior Hamas leader Mahmoud al-Zahar, visited Tehran and met with senior regime officials who used the opportunity to express Iran's commitment to continue to provide support to the Palestinians. The Senior Adviser of the Supreme Leader of Iran, Ali-Akbar Velayati, called in his meeting with the delegation for continued Palestinian Resistance until their final victory.

Iranian Involvement in Syria

► The decision of U.S. President Donald Trump to withdraw American forces from Syria was met in Iran with surprise and satisfaction by most senior officials and commentators. The U.S. withdrawal from Syria was presented by Iran a manifestation of the defeat of U.S. strategy in the region, and particularly in Syria, and as another achievement of the “Resistance Front” led by the Islamic Republic. In response to Trump’s declaration, the spokesman of the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated that the U.S. presence in Syria was “illogical” in the first place and only caused instability in the region (IRNA, December 22). The head of the Judiciary Branch, Ayatollah Sadeq Larijani, argued that U.S. forces are “fleeing” Syria. He added that despite the claims of the United States, ISIS was not defeated thanks to American forces, but due to the resistance of the people and the government in Syria, with the support of Iran and the “Resistance Axis.” (Tasnim, December 24). Most commentators in Iranian media presented Trump’s decision as American acknowledgment of the failure of the Middle East policy it has adopted in recent years.



On the right: “Another sign of the sinking of the American superpower” (Tasnim, December 23, 2018). On the left: the exit of U.S. forces from Syria and concern of Israel and ISIS (Telegram channel @fars_plus, December 22, 2018)

► The American withdrawal is perceived by Iran as a propaganda victory that serves its interests as an actor that has for years attempted to reduce U.S. presence in the region. The drawdown provides Iran with an opportunity to cement its influence in Syria and greater room to maneuver there. However, Tehran’s ability to exploit the opportunities that emerged for its entrenchment in Syria, particularly in the military sphere, depend on additional factors and the Iranian regime’s assessment regarding the opportunities and risks involved. We

assess that at least in the short-term, Iran will continue to maintain a careful policy that entails largely relying on foreign Shi'ite fighters and local Syrian forces to entrench its hold in Syria, in line with Iran's preferred strategy of utilizing proxies, local and regional alike.¹

► On December 18, the foreign ministers of Russia, Iran and Turkey met in Geneva with the United Nations' (UN) Special Envoy to Syria, Staffan de Mistura, and reached an agreement stipulating that the Syrian constitutional committee will meet for the first time early in 2019. The ministers failed to reach an agreement regarding the composition of the committee. The three foreign ministers stressed that the work of the constitutional committee should be facilitated through cooperation with Syrian actors and the UN special envoy. The ministers expressed hope for the launch of an intra-Syrian process based on the decisions of the Syrian National Dialogue held in Sochi, and UN Security Council resolution 2254, which set a roadmap for peace in Syria and negotiations between the Assad regime and the opposition (Reuters, Fars, December 18).

► A commentary published in the hardline Iranian daily Farhikhtegan (December 19) complained that Iran is unable to utilize its military achievements in Syria to make economic gains as well. The article argued that Iran's successes in the battlefield has not been translated to economic achievements, while Iran's rivals, chiefly Turkey, are expanding their presence in the Syrian market.

► According to data published by the paper, over the past decade, Turkey significantly expanded its economic activity in Syria, at Iran's expense. Iranian exports to Syria, excluding oil, dropped in the past decade from \$377 million annually to \$172 million per year, while Turkey significantly expanded its imports to Syria, becoming the single largest exporter to Syria, with over \$1.3 billion in exports annually. While Iran's market share in Syria is estimated to be about 3% only, Turkey's share in the Syrian market rose from 9% in 2010 to 24% in 2017. In Iraq, the situation is different and Iranian exports to Iraq, excluding oil, grew in the past decade from \$2.8 billion annually to \$6.4 billion per year.

► This is not the first time criticism has been raised in Iran about Damascus' discouragement of Iranian economic activity within Syria. In November 2017, the Deputy Head of the Iranian Chamber of Commerce, Hossein Selahvardi, reported that Syria is placing restrictions on

¹ For more, see Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center publication, "Iranian Responses to Trump's Statement and Initial Assessment of the Statement's Effect on Iranian Policy in Syria," December 26, 2018. Accessible online: <https://www.terrorism-info.org.il/en/iranian-responses-trumps-statement-initial-assessment-statements-effect-iranian-policy-syria-dr-raz-zimmt/>

import of goods from Iran. He commented that despite agreements signed between the two countries and a billion-dollar credit line provided by Iran to the Syrian regime, Damascus has placed limitations on import of Iranian products to the country and instead prefers to import goods from Turkey (ILNA, November 24, 2017). In March 2018, the Friday prayers Imam in Mashhad, Ayatollah Ahmad Alamolhoda, criticized the fact that Iran is not playing a more central role in the reconstruction of the Syrian and Iraqi economies. In the Friday sermon given on March 23, 2018, the senior cleric stated that it is painful to see that when Iraq and Syria needed Iran to be freed of terrorism, Iranian fighters came to their defense, but now that both countries are supposed to serve as markets for Iranian goods, Iran does not get any share of their markets, while countries that assisted ISIS do get such a share (ILNA, March 23, 2018).

Iranian Involvement in Iraq

► The Spokesman of the Shi'ite Iraqi militia, Harakat Nujaba' (Movement of the Noble Ones), Hashem al-Mousawi, declared in an interview to the Tasnim news agency (December 14) that the liberation of Palestine and Jerusalem is the top priority for the movement, and that his organization is ready for a confrontation with Israel. He asserted that the war against ISIS was preparation for a bigger war and that his organization will never allow for the region's countries to be partitioned while Israel lives in peace. Referring to threats made by Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, against Lebanese Hezbollah, al-Mousawi stated that in the event of a war against Hezbollah, the Lebanese group will not remain on its own and that Harakat Nujaba' will stand by it.

► He added that the countries that normalized their relations with Israel are not countries but merely American bases. Al-Mousawi added that as long as the United States, Saudi Arabia and Israel continue to plot in the region, the war against them will continue as well, until victory, which will be achieved with God's help and the support of Iran and Hezbollah. Al-Mousawi asserted (even before the announcement by President Trump on the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Syria) that the presence of American soldiers will not last for long, because the U.S. strives to achieve political aims in Syria and is incapable of maintaining its forces in Syria for the long haul. He emphasized the opposition of the Iraqi parliament to the presence of American soldiers in Iraq, adding that there is no need for this presence.



**The Spokesman of Harakat al-Nujaba, Hashem al-Mousawi
(Tasnim, December 14, 2018)**

► Harakat al-Nujaba (the Movement of the Noble Ones) is an Iraqi Shi'ite militia established in 2013 by Sheikh Akram al-Kaabi. This Sheikh has maintained a close relationship to Iran since his days of leading unrelenting guerilla attacks against U.S. forces during their large-scale presence in Iraq. The movement, which operates in Syria as well, is effectively controlled by the Qods Force of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC). The movement also receives assistance from Lebanese Hezbollah, with which Sheikh al-Kaabi has maintained close relations for many years. The assistance provided by Iran and Hezbollah to Harakat al-Nujaba' has made it into one of the most powerful and important Shi'ite militias in Iraq. In return for the special assistance provided to the group, it is used to carry out strategic tasks on behalf of Iran, for example: securing the Iraq-Syria border, protecting the Iraqi section of the smuggling route from Baghdad to Damascus, and even involvement in the conflict with Israel, as was evident in the establishment of the "Division for the Liberation of the Golan," announced by Sheikh al-Kaabi in March 2017.

► On December 22, the Iranian Ambassador to Iraq, Iraj Masjedi, met with Iraqi activist and journalist and asserted that Iran's friendship with Iraq is not limited to the Shi'ite community and Shi'ite militias alone. In the gathering, held in the Iranian embassy in Baghdad, Masjedi stated that some groups that oppose the friendship and brotherhood between Iran and Iraq claim that Iran only supports the Shi'ite, but these is not the case. Iran's policy is to establish and promote good relations and close cooperation with all groups and sects in Iraq, and therefore Iran maintains good ties with the Shi'ite, Sunni, Kurds and all other sects and minorities in Iraq. Masjedi asserted that Iran wishes for Iraq to be independent, secure and unified and for the two countries to maintain good neighborly relations. He added that many

Shi'ite and Kurdish leaders lived in Iran during Saddam Hussein's reign, and therefore it is only natural that those individuals would have an affinity to Iran, but this does not mean that Iran has close relations with the Shi'ite and Kurds alone. He remarked that the Americans meddle in all affairs in Iraq and later accuse Iran of meddling in the country. Masjedi insisted that Iraq is an independent country and that Iran respects the decisions of its government (ycj.ir, December 22).



The meeting between the Iranian ambassador to Iraq and Iraqi activists (ycj.ir, December 22, 2018)

► In a meeting with Iraqi journalists, the Iranian Ambassador to Iraq, Iraj Masjedi, asserted that Iran no longer maintains any military presence in Iraq, including the presence of advisors. He stated that the Iranian advisors, who worked in cooperation with the Iraqi government to assist it in the campaign against ISIS, have left Iraq and returned to Iran after the announcement of the organization's defeat. He criticized the United States for continuing to maintain a military presence in Iraq even after ISIS' defeat (Fars, December 25).

Iranian Involvement in the Palestinian Arena

► In late December, a delegation of the Hamas bloc in the Palestinian parliament, headed by the senior Hamas official Mahmoud al-Zahar, visited Iran and met with senior regime officials. The Speaker of the Majlis, Ali Larijani, emphasized in his meeting with the delegation Iran's support to the Palestinians, adding that support the Palestinian people is the obligation of any honorable person. He called to expose the crimes of the "Zionist regime" before the entire the world to increase the support in Palestinian values, and expressed hope that all the countries in the region and the world will back the Palestinians. The head of the delegation,

Mahmoud al-Zahar, thanked Larijani for Iran's support to the Palestinians and invited him to visit the Gaza Strip (ICANA.IR, December 22). During its visit to Tehran, the delegation also met with Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mohammad Javad Zarif, with the Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council, Ali Shamkhani and with the Senior Adviser to the Supreme Leader, Ali-Akbar Velayati, who declared that the only path to foiling the conspiracies of the enemies and the Zionists is Resistance. He called on the Palestinian to continue resisting until their final victory (Mehr, December 23).



The meeting between Ali Larijani and the Palestinian delegation headed by Mahmoud al-Zahar (ICANA.IR, December 22, 2018)

► The Spokesman of Hamas, Sami Abu Zuhri, declared that Iran did not ask and will not ask the organization to normalize its relations with the Syrian regime. He insisted that Hamas will not allow any side to impose its positions on the group. He added that Hamas is willing to accept assistance from any side, but without offering a political payback in return (Nedaa Suriya, December 21).