



Spotlight on Iran

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Overview

- ▶ On January 12, the Iranian minister of transportation arrived for a three-day visit to Syria, during which he met senior regime officials, chief among them President Assad, and discussed expanding trade and economic ties between the two countries. During the visit, the sides agreed to establish a joint Iranian-Syrian bank and to create a free trade zone between the two countries. Meanwhile, the Iranian ambassador to Damascus met with the Syrian minister of the economy and with the governor of Lattakia province and discussed economic cooperation between the two nations. The talks concerning economic cooperation between Iran and Syria reflect an ongoing Iranian effort to bolster economic ties between the two countries due to difficulties and impediments in the implementation of agreements concerning the expansion of economic cooperation, which have been signed in recent years.
- ▶ In recent days, the Commander of the Qods Force of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), Esmail Qa'ani, visited Iraq and met with the heads of Iraqi parliamentary blocs. The visit was intended to coordinate the positions of the Shia parties concerning the ongoing government formation talks in Iraq.
- ▶ An Iranian economic delegation led by the chairman of Iran's Chamber of Commerce arrived for a visit in Iraq to discuss expanding cooperation between the two countries in the spheres of trade, industry, mining and agriculture.
- ▶ The security adviser to the Iranian supreme leader and Iranian media outlets expressed support for the strikes carried out by the Houthi rebels in Yemen on the night of January 17 against the United Arab Emirates. The statements did not include an admission of Iranian involvement in the attack.
- ▶ During his visit to Qatar, the Iranian minister of foreign affairs met with the Head of Hamas' Politburo, Ismail Haniyeh, and stressed Iran's unyielding support for the Palestinians.

► A high-ranking delegation of Afghan officials, led by the foreign minister of the Taliban government, visited Iran for the first time since the Taliban completed the takeover of Afghanistan. The delegation met with senior Iranian officials, chief among them the Iranian minister of foreign affairs, and held talks with senior Afghan opposition leaders who are based in Iran. The visit of the delegation reflects an Iranian effort to maintain dialogue with the Taliban and to try to mediate between the Taliban and the Afghan opposition, in an effort to form a broadly representative government in Kabul. Despite the visit, no change has occurred in the position of the Iranian regime, which refuses to officially recognize the Taliban government.

Iranian Involvement in Syria

► On January 12, the Iranian Minister of Transportation and Urban Development, Rostam Ghasemi, arrived for a three-day visit in Damascus, during which he met senior Syrian officials, chief among them President Bashar al-Assad, the Syrian prime minister, and the ministers of foreign affairs, economy, transportation, labor and housing, as well as the governor of Syria's Central Bank. Ghasemi discussed with the Syrian officials expanding trade and economic ties between the two countries. Upon his arrival in Damascus, the Iranian minister, who chairs the Joint Iranian-Syrian Supreme Economic Committee, proclaimed that the end of the war in Syria is the start of a new era in the economic ties between Iran and Syria (ISNA, January 12). In a TV interview he conducted during his visit to Syria, Ghasemi mentioned a decision to form a joint committee that will ensure the implementation of agreements signed by Iran and Syria that have not yet been realized. Ghasemi added that during his meeting with the governor of Syria's Central Bank, they agreed to establish a joint Iranian-Syrian bank and to allow Iranian banks to set up branches in Syria. Finally, in his meeting with the Syrian minister of transportation, the two sides agreed to establish a free trade zone shared by both countries (Mashregh News, January 13).



The meeting of the Iranian minister of transportation with Syrian President Assad. Source: Fars, January 12

► On January 16, the Iranian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Hossein Amir Abdollahian, met with the UN Special Envoy to Syria, Geir Pederson, and stressed Iran's support for the envoy's effort to bring peace and stability to Syria. Abdollahian argued that the illegal presence of the American forces and Israeli airstrikes are destabilizing the process seeking to end the war. The Iranian minister of foreign affairs also stated that without solving the issues of Syrian refugees and sanctions imposed on Syria, it would be impossible to advance a solution to the crisis in the country (ILNA, January 16).



The meeting between the Iranian minister of foreign affairs with the UN special envoy to Syria. Source: ILNA, January 16

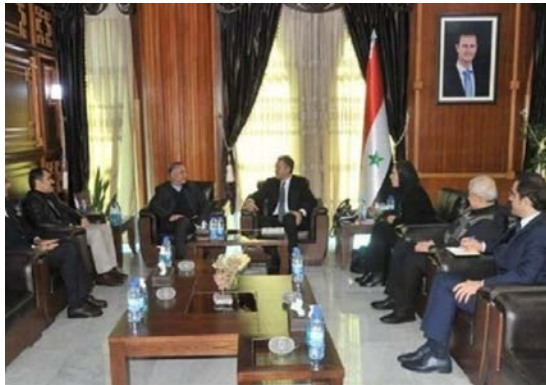
► On January 8, the Iranian Ambassador to Syria, Mehdi Sobhani, met with the Syrian Minister of the Economy, Samer al-Khalil, and discussed ways to expand cooperation between the two countries in the economic sphere, and particularly trade, industry and agriculture. The two sides also discussed how to remove barriers hindering the expansion of economic activity between the two countries (Fars, January 8). On January 12, the Iranian ambassador met with Buthaina Sha'aban, the Media and Political Adviser to President Assad. The two officials discussed cooperation between the two countries in the spheres of communications and

information technology. Sobhani invited Sha'aban to visit Tehran and she expressed hope to travel to Iran at when an appropriate opportunity presents itself (ISNA, January 12).



The meeting between the Iranian ambassador to Damascus with the Syrian minister of the economy. Source: Fars, January 8

► On January 16, the Iranian Ambassador to Syria, Mehdi Sobhani, met with the Governor of Lattakia Province, Amer Ismail Hilal, and discussed expanding economic cooperation between Iranian businesses and Lattakia governorate. The governor stressed the need to utilize Iran's expertise in various spheres, including waste recycling and the fruit industry. He added that Syria's leadership wishes to bolster economic ties and cooperation with Iranian firms, and expressed interest in facilitating joint projects with Iran, particularly in the sphere of electricity production in the governorate (Tasnim, January 16).



The meeting between the Iranian ambassador to Damascus and the governor of Lattakia. Source: Tasnim, January 16

Iranian Involvement in Iraq and Yemen

Iraq

► Iraqi sources reported that on January 8, the Commander of the IRGC's Qods Force, Esmail Qa'ani, made an unplanned visit to Iraq, and met with the commanders of pro-Iranian militias and the heads of the Shia, Sunni and Kurdish blocs in the Iraqi parliament (SAMA, January 8). According to these reports, whose reliability is unclear, Qa'ani's visit was intended to coordinate positions with the commanders of the militias and parliamentary blocs ahead of the convening of the Iraqi Parliament on January 9, as part of the government formation process. On January 16, social media accounts published photos of Qa'ani during a visit to the gravesite in Najaf of Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, the former Deputy Commander of the pro-Iranian militias in Iraq, who was killed alongside Qasem Soleimani in January 2020. On January 17, Iranian media confirmed the reports by Iraqi media about Qa'ani's visit to Iraq in recent days. According to this report, Qa'ani met with the heads of the Shia parties in the Iraqi parliament. At the same time, Baghdad al-Youm reported (January 17) that a day earlier, Qa'ani met with the leader of the Sadrist Movement, Muqtada al-Sadr, and discussed Iranian efforts to unify the position of the Shia parties as part of the government formation process.



Qa'ani during a visit to Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis' gravesite in Najaf. Source: Twitter account affiliated with the commander of the Qods Force, January 16.

► The Iraqi newspaper al-Sabah reported (January 9) that Iran is willing to mediate and bring together the various political forces in Iraq to reach a national understanding concerning the formation of the new government. An Iranian source speaking to the paper remarked that Iran sees great importance in achieving national consensus in Iraq, without foreign interference, and advises the political forces in Iraq to respect the constitution and bolster the political

process, to protect Iraq's territorial integrity and sovereignty. The source added that Iran will cooperate with any Iraqi government that forms and will seek to ensure the interests of both countries.

► On January 17, an Iranian economic delegation led by the Director of Iran's Chamber of Commerce, Gholam-Hossein Shafei, arrived for a three-day visit in Iraq to discuss expanding cooperation between the two countries in the spheres of trade, industry, mining and agriculture. The delegation, which was comprised of 40 participants from Iran's Chamber of Commerce and private sector Iranian firms, was invited to Iran by the director of Iraq's Union of Chambers of Commerce. During the visit, the director of Iran's Chamber of Commerce met with senior Iraqi government officials and prominent personalities in the economic sphere, including the minister of trade and transportation, the chairman of Iraq's Investment Organization, and chairmen of Iraq's unions of trade, industry and agriculture. In addition, the delegation took part in a conference in Baghdad that focused on identifying economic opportunities in both countries, and in two trade conferences in Najaf and Karbala (ILNA, January 16).

Yemen

► In an interview to the Russian channel RT (January 18), the Security Adviser to the Supreme Leader of Iran, Hossein Dehghan, commented on the attack carried out by the Houthi rebels in Yemen against the United Arab Emirates on the night of January 17. He argued that not everything that occurs in Yemen is related to Iranian influence, but that it is the will of the Yemeni people to struggle against the Coalition forces led by Saudi Arabia, which occupy and attack their country. He added that the Yemeni people have the legal right to defend their sovereignty after they were denied the right to live in dignity. The hardline daily Kayhan also expressed support for the Houthi attack on Abu Dhabi. A commentary published on January 18, a day after the strike, argued that "the revolutionaries in Yemen" had warned the UAE several times that their patience is running low in with the ongoing involvement of the Emirates in the war in Yemen. The UAE ignored those warning and kept assisting the Saudis who are fighting the Houthis in the Marib and Shabwa provinces.

Iranian Involvement in the Palestinian Arena

► On January 11, during his visit to Qatar, the Iranian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Hossein Amir Abdollahian, met with the Head of Hamas' Politburo, Ismail Haniyeh. In the meeting, which

was held in the Iranian embassy in Doha, Abdollahian stressed Iran’s support for the Palestinian people and for “the resistance against the occupation.” The Iranian minister of foreign affairs condemned “the crimes of the Zionist entity” against the Palestinians, which are backed by the West, according to him. Hanniyeh thanked Abdollahian for Iran’s support for the struggle of the Palestinian people, and called for an Islamic, Arab and international mobilization against Zionism (Tasnim, January 11).



The meeting of the Iranian minister of foreign affairs with the head of Hamas’ Politburo. Source: Tasnim, January 11

Iranian Involvement in Afghanistan

► On January 8, an Afghan delegation led by the Taliban’s Minister of Foreign Affairs, Amir Khan Muttaqi, arrived for a visit in Tehran to discuss politics, economics, transportation and the matter of Afghan refugees in Iran. Additionally, during its visit to Iran, the delegation met with senior Afghan opposition leaders, Ahmed Mas’oud and Ibrahim Khan. At the end of a meeting with Iran’s Minister of Foreign Affairs, Hossein-Amir Abdollahian, the deputy spokesman of the Taliban’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, reported that the talks were fruitful and positive and focused on economic and security matters. The Iranian minister of foreign affairs claimed in the meeting that one of the core principles of the American foreign policy in the region is fomenting discord between Afghanistan and its neighbors. He asserted that history attests to the closeness of Iran and Afghanistan, and that the struggles of the Afghan people have proven that no foreign power can occupy its land and control it. Abdollahian called for the formation a broad representative government in Afghanistan and stressed that Iran will continue providing humanitarian assistance to the people of Afghanistan (ISNA; Tasnim, January 9).



The meeting of the Taliban delegation with the Iranian minister of foreign affairs. Source: Tasnim, January 9

► Addressing the visit of the Taliban delegation to Tehran, the website Nour News, which is associated with the Iranian Supreme National Security Council published an article (January 10) stating that Iran's position is that its ties to the Taliban do not represent an official recognition of the Taliban government in Afghanistan. Instead, the engagement with the Taliban represents Iranian effort to mediate between the various Afghan groups, with whom Iran maintains contact, for the purpose of establishing a broad government. Additionally, Iran can not ignore the role the Taliban is playing in maintaining stability and security along the Afghan-Iranian border, and in ensuring the interests of its neighbors. Iran is also striving to improve the economic situation in Afghanistan, for the benefit of the Afghan people, by continuing to supply humanitarian assistance, and by bolstering economic ties between the two countries. The Chairman of the Islamic Brotherhood Council of Afghanistan, Molavi Habibollah Hessam, wrote on his Twitter account (January 10) that the visit of the Taliban delegation to Tehran did not yield any results.

► Meanwhile, the website Asr-e Iran reported (January 8) that the Iranian government handed the Afghan embassy in Tehran over to the hands of the Taliban, and that the former Afghan ambassador to Tehran departed to a European country. The Spokesman of the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Saeed Khatibzadeh, denied the report about handing over the embassy to the Taliban, and insisted that the Afghan embassy in Tehran – like all other foreign embassies – operates based on the 1961 Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations, and that it is impossible to operate in violation of the Convention (ISNA, January 9).