



Palestine: **Still Muslim World's Priority**



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Contents

Cover Story

Palestine should be pivot of unity for Islamic world	3
Intl. boycott of Israel only viable way to advance Palestinian cause	7
Israel bound to perish sooner or later	9
Israel a Jewish State, not democracy	9
Iran's anti-Zionism political rhetoric still loud	12
Trump helps Israeli regime expand "Jewish Only" settlements	13

Politics

Anti-Saudi Trump; will it work?	16
Challenges of new UN chief	18
Pakistan largely losing strategic importance for US	19
'Great men of history never die'	21

Economy

Silence best strategy of Airbus on ambiguities of Iran Air deal	25
Iran regaining OPEC's market share	26
Two sides of Tehran-Washington oil ties	28
Iran in catbird seat thanks to US-Qatar gas rivalry	29
Iran makes leap to seize fresh export markets	30
Iran's steel market in 'New Normal' era	32
New chapter in Iran-Russia trade ties	36

Culture

Iraqi theater scene wading steadfastly through hardships	40
Japanese dance group 'Siro-A' lights up Iranian stage at 35 th FITF	42
Flamenco giant 'Duquende' gets terrific applause at Fajr Music Fest.	44
Fado star Zambujo displays pronounced show at Fajr Music Fest.	45
Iran, Italy join hands in reviving Beethoven on stage	46
High-profile session addresses environmental pollution	47
Oshornakouh; a safe refuge for Persian Leopard	49

Dossier

Astana meeting; is peace negotiable?	51
US to abandon Assad ouster under Trump	52
Turkey more reliable than US for Syria talks	54
Trump cannot afford to shut out Iran if he wants to defeat ISIL	56
US young generation seek Russia-Iran in circle of friendship	58
200 days of siege in Bahrain amid global indifference	61
Al Khalifa regime bribes HR organizations into silence	63
Support for Al-Khalifa, Western strategy to project power in Persian Gulf	64
Bahrain regime to be tougher in 2017 realizing its fail	66
US, UK, Saudi Arabia behind Bahrain brutality	68



News in Vision

69

The 6th International Conference on Palestinian Intifada was opened with the speech of Leader of Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Khamenei on February 21, 2017 in Tehran.

Ayatollah Khamenei opened his speech by marking the martyrdom anniversary of African American Muslim leader Malcolm X and asked the participants to recite Surah Fatihah from Holy Quran for the blessing of his soul.

Here is the full script of the address by Leader of the Islamic Revolution Grand Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei:

In the Name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful

All praise is due to Allah, the Lord of the Worlds, and Allah's peace and greetings be upon the Master of All Peoples, Muhammad al-Mustafa, and upon his immaculate household and chosen companions

Allah the All-Wise said in the Manifest Book [The Holy Quran]: "So be not weary, nor fall into despair for you shall have the upper hand if you are believers" [The Holy Quran, 3: 139]. And says the Mightiest of Speakers: "Be not weary crying for peace, while you have the upper hand and Allah is with you and never will He put you in loss for your deeds" [The Holy Quran, 47: 35].

In the beginning, I deem it necessary to welcome all you dear guests, the honorable heads of Islamic organizations, the leaders of various Palestinian groups, the intellectuals, scholars and outstanding personalities of the world of Islam and other personalities who fight for freedom. I welcome you for your presence in this valuable conference.

The sorrowful story of Palestine and the excruciating sadness felt because of the oppression against this patient, enduring and resistant nation, truly distresses any individual who seeks freedom, truth and justice and it thrusts an agonizing pain and suffering upon one's heart.

The history of Palestine is full of ups and downs, marked by the cruel occupation of that region, the rendering of millions of individuals homeless, and the courageous resistance of those heroic people. An intelligent quest in history shows that no people in any era of history have ever been subject to such pain, suffering and cruelty. It has never been

Ayat. Khamenei: **Palestine should be pivot of unity for Islamic world**



witnessed that a country is completely occupied in a supra-regional plot, that a people are driven away from their home and their country and that another group of people from remote areas in the world are brought there in order to replace that nation. It has never been witnessed that a real entity is ignored and that a fake entity takes its place.

But this is another dirty page in history which will be closed with the permission and assistance of Allah the Exalted, just like other dirty pages in history: "Falsehood is bound to perish" [The Holy Quran, 17: 81] and He says: "My servants the righteous shall inherit the earth" [The Holy Quran, 21: 105].

Your conference is being held under one of the most difficult circumstances in the world and in the region. These days, our region - which has always supported the people of Palestine in their fight against a global plot - is undergoing numerous upheavals and crises. The existing crises in several Islamic countries in the region have caused the support for the issue of Palestine and the holy ideal of Quds' freedom to be undermined. Attention to the result of these crises helps us to understand which powers benefit from the existence of these crises.

Those who created the Zionist regime

in the region with the purpose of hampering the stability, solidity and progress of the region through imposing a long-term conflict are behind the seditions that exist in the present time as well. These are seditions that have culminated in the capabilities of regional nations being used to foil one another because of engagement in futile and meaningless conflicts.

When all these capabilities are ruined, the ground will be prepared for strengthening the usurping Zionist regime on a daily basis. Amid all these, we are witness to the endeavors of well-intentioned and wise personalities in the Islamic Ummah. They are diligently trying to resolve these differences. But unfortunately, the complicated plots of the enemy have managed to impose civil wars on nations by benefiting from the negligence of some governments. These plots have managed to pit nations against one another and to counter the effect of the endeavors that well-intentioned personalities in the Islamic Ummah have made.

What is significant in this regard is the effort to weaken the position of the issue of Palestine and to give it the lowest priority. Despite the differences that exist among Islamic countries - some of these differences are natural, some orig-

inate from the enemy's plot and the rest are because of negligence – the issue of Palestine can and should be the pivot of unity for all Islamic countries. One of the achievements of this valuable conference is announcing the first priority of the world of Islam and freedom fighters all over the world, which is the issue of Palestine and the creation of an atmosphere of harmony and unanimity with the purpose of achieving the lofty goal of supporting the people of Palestine and their truthful and justice-oriented fight.

The significance of offering political support to the people of Palestine should never be neglected. This issue has a special priority in today's world. Even if Muslim and freedom-seeking nations have different viewpoints and opinions, they can gather together with one goal which is Palestine and the necessity to liberate it. With the emergence of signs of the collapse in the Zionist regime and the weakness that has dominated its main allies – in particular the United States of America – it is witnessed that the global environment is gradually moving towards confronting the hostile, illegal and inhuman activities of the Zionist regime. Of course, the global community and regional countries have not yet managed to carry out their responsibilities towards this humanitarian matter.

Suppressing the people of Palestine in a brutal manner, arresting numerous individuals, looting and murdering people, occupying the lands that belong to the Palestinian nation and building settlements in them, making an effort to change the appearance and identity of the Holy City of Quds, Masjid al-Aqsa and other holy Islamic and Christian places, violating the basic rights of citizens and many other abuses continue to exist. These acts enjoy the all-out support of the United States of America and some other western governments and unfortunately, they do not receive a proper response from the world.

The people of Palestine are proud that Allah the Exalted has given them a great favor by helping them to shoulder the great responsibility of defending this Holy Land and Masjid al-Aqsa. The people of Palestine have no option other than keeping the flames of fighting alight by relying on Allah the Exalted and by relying on their innate capabilities, as they have genuinely done so until today. The intifada that has begun for the third time

in the occupied lands, is subject to more suppression than the previous two, but it is still moving forward in a bright and hopeful manner. And by Allah's permission, we will see that this intifada will begin a very important chapter in the history of fighting and that it will inflict another defeat on that usurping regime.

From the beginning, this cancerous tumor has been developing in several phases until it turned into the current disaster. The cure for this tumor should be developed in phases as well. Until today, several intifadas and a constant and continuous resistance have managed to achieve very important phased goals. The Palestinian intifada continues to gallop forward in a thunderous manner so that it can achieve its other goals until the complete liberation of Palestine.

The great people of Palestine – who shoulder the heavy burden of confronting global Zionism and its bullying supporters – have given an opportunity to all claimants to put their claims to the test and they have done so in a patient yet vigorous and solid manner. The day when "compromise proposals" were brought up seriously with the false excuse of realism and the necessity to accept minimum rights in order to prevent those rights from being violated, the people of Palestine and all those orientations which were already aware of the inaccuracy of that viewpoint gave it an opportunity. Of course, from the beginning, the Islamic Republic of Iran insisted on the incorrectness of compromise strategies and warned of their harmful effects and heavy damages. The opportunity that was given to the compromise procedure brought about destructive effects on the path of resistance and the fighting of the Palestinian nation, but the only benefit that it had was to prove the inaccuracy of the so-called "realism" outlook in practice.

Fundamentally the Zionist regime was formed in a way that it could not avoid seeking dominance, suppressing others and violating the true rights of the Palestinians. This is because its entity and identity are dependent on the gradual destruction of the identity and entity of Palestine. The illegitimate entity of the Zionist regime will continue to exist only if it is founded on the ruins of Palestine's identity and entity. That is why protecting Palestinian identity and guarding all the symbols of this truthful and natural

identity is a necessity and a holy jihad.

As long as the name and memory of Palestine and the bright flames of the all-out resistance of that nation are preserved, it is not possible for the foundations of that usurping regime to be strengthened. The problem with "compromise" is not only that it legitimizes a usurping regime by violating the rights of a nation – of course, this is a grave and unforgivable mistake in itself – rather the problem is that it is completely at odds with the current condition of Palestine and that it does not take into account the expansionist, oppressive and greedy characteristics of the Zionists. However, by grasping their opportunities, these people have managed to prove the inaccuracy of those who support compromise. As a result of this, a kind of national consensus has emerged about the correct methods of fighting for asserting the true rights of the Palestinian nation.

Now, the people of Palestine have experienced two different paradigms in the past three decades of their history and they have understood the proportion of those two paradigms in relation to their conditions. The paradigm of heroic and continuous resistance and holy intifada stands against the compromise paradigm. The first paradigm has brought about great achievements for that nation. It is not without reason that these days we witness that the Resistance is being attacked and that intifada is being questioned by notorious centers.

The enemy is not expected to act otherwise because he is completely aware of the correctness and fruitfulness of this path. However, we sometimes witness that some of those orientations and even countries which seemingly advocate the issue of Palestine but which are trying to divert the true path of those people in reality, attack the Resistance. Their claim is that in its decade-long life, the Resistance has not yet managed to help Palestine achieve its freedom and therefore, this method needs to be reconsidered.

In response, we say that although the Resistance has not yet managed to achieve its ultimate goal – the complete freedom of Palestine – it has managed to keep the issue of Palestine alive. We should ask in what condition we would be now if the Resistance did not exist. The most important achievement of the Resistance is creating a major barrier in the way of Zionist projects. The Resist- ➔



ance's success lies in imposing a war of attrition on the enemy. In other words, it has managed to defeat the main plan of the Zionist regime, namely dominating the whole region.

In this process, the essence of the Resistance and the soldiers who engaged in resistance from the beginning against the establishment of the Zionist regime and who held up the flag of resistance and conveyed it to future generations by laying down their lives- should be praised and commemorated.

The role of the Resistance in post-occupation eras is no secret to anyone and without a doubt, the victory of the Resistance in the 1973 war cannot be ignored although it was a narrow victory. Since 1982, the burden of the Resistance fell practically on the people inside Palestine, but the Islamic Resistance of Lebanon - Hezbollah - turned to help the Palestinians in the path of their fight. If the Resistance had not brought the Zionist regime to its knees, we would now be witness to its transgressions against other regional countries – from Egypt to Jordan, from Iraq, the Persian Gulf region to other areas.

This achievement is very important, but it is not the only achievement that the Resistance has made. The liberation of southern Lebanon and Gaza is the attainment of two important phased goals in the process of Palestine's liberation. This has helped reverse the process of the geographical expansion of the Zionist regime.

Since the early 1980, not only has the Zionist regime not been able to transgress against new lands, but it has also

begun to retreat. This retreat began with its humiliating withdrawal from southern Lebanon and it continued with another humiliating withdrawal from Gaza. No one can deny the major and determining role of the Resistance in the first intifada. In the second intifada as well, the role of the Resistance was fundamental and outstanding. This was an intifada which eventually forced the Zionist regime to leave Gaza. The 33-day war in Lebanon, and the 22-day, 8-day and 51-day wars in Gaza were all shining pages in the performance sheet of the Resistance. Those wars are a source of pride for all regional nations, for the world of Islam and for all freedom fighters in the world.

In the 33-day war, all the ways to help the Lebanese nation and the valiant and resistant soldiers of Hezbollah had been blocked, but by Allah's favor and with reliance on a great force comprised of the resistant people of Lebanon, the Zionist regime and its main ally – the United States of America – suffered a humiliating defeat as a result of which they will not dare attack that region anymore. The continuous resistance attempts made by Gaza – which has now turned into an invincible fortress – showed in the course of several wars that this regime is too weak to resist the willpower of a nation.

The main hero during Gaza wars is the courageous and resistant nation which continues to defend this fortress with reliance on the power of faith despite enduring many years of economic siege. It is necessary to commemorate all groups involved in the Palestinian Resistance- including Sarayah al-Quds from Islamic Jihad, Kataeb al-Izz ad-Din al-Qassam

from Hamas, Kataeb al-Shuhada al-Aqsa from Fath and Kataeb Abu Ali Mustafa from the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine- all of which played valuable roles in these wars.

Dear guests!

The dangers originating from the presence of the Zionist regime should never be ignored! Therefore, the Resistance should benefit from all the necessary tools for continuing its duty. On this path, all regional nations and governments and all freedom seekers in the world should meet the main needs of this resistant nation. The main pivot of the Resistance is the steadfastness and endurance of the Palestinian people who have raised courageous and resistant children. Meeting the needs of the Palestinian people and Palestinian resistance is an important and vital responsibility which should be carried out by all of us.

In doing so, we should not ignore the basic needs of the Resistance in the West Bank because the West Bank shoulders the main burden of the suppressed intifada. By learning from its past, the Palestinian Resistance should pay attention to this important point: the Resistance and Palestine are too lofty and valuable to get involved in the differences between Islamic and Arab countries or the domestic, ethnic and denominational differences that exist in different countries. The Palestinians, particularly Resistance groups, should appreciate the value of their precious positions and they should avoid entering into these differences. Islamic and Arab countries and all Islamic and national orientations should be at the service of the Palestinian ideal.

Supporting the Resistance is the responsibility of all of us. No one has the right to have special expectations of them in return for assistance. The only condition for assistance is that such assistance is expended on strengthening the people of Palestine and the structure of the Resistance. Commitment to the idea of steadfastness in the face of the enemy and to the Resistance in all its dimensions guarantees the continuation of this assistance.

Our position on the Resistance is a fundamental position, one which has nothing to do with any particular group. We are with every group that is steadfast on this path and every group that abandons this path has drifted away from us. The depth of our relationship with groups ➡

involved in the Islamic Resistance is only dependent on the level of their commitment to the principle of the Resistance.

Another point that should be raised is the existence of some differences between various Palestinian groups. The existence of differences of opinion is natural and understandable due to the diversity of tastes among these organizations and as long as these differences are confined to this, they will lead to increasing cooperation and depth in the fight of the Palestinian people. However, the problem begins when these differences culminate in skirmishes and – God forbid – serious conflicts.

If this happens, these various orientations will practically step into a path that the common enemy of all of them wants. They do so by foiling one another's powers and capabilities. The management of disagreements and differences of opinion is a skill that should be utilized by all main orientations. They should formulate their various fighting plans in a way that those plans only pressure the enemy and help the cause to be strengthened. National unity on the basis of a jihadi plan is a national necessity for Palestine. It is expected that all orientations try to achieve this unity in line with the requests of all the people of Palestine.

These days, the Resistance is wrestling with another plot as well which is the effort of some so-called friends to divert the resistance and intifada of the people of Palestine from its course and to sell it to the enemies of the Palestinian nation in their secret transactions with them. However, the Resistance is so intelligent that it will not fall into this trap. One of the reasons for this is that the people of Palestine are the true leaders of fighting and of the Resistance, and past experiences show that by gaining an accurate understanding of the conditions, they prevent these deviations. God forbid, if one of the Resistance orientations falls into this trap, they [the people] can reproduce that need as they have done so in the past. If a group puts down the flag of Resistance, another group will undoubtedly emerge from the heart of the people of Palestine to hold it up again.

Without a doubt, in this conference, you honorable participants will only attend to Palestine which has been subject to lack of proper and necessary attention in the past few years. Undoubtedly, the existing crises in every part of the region and the Islamic Ummah deserve attention, but what has caused this gathering to be held is the issue of Palestine. This conference can be a model for all Muslims and regional

nations to gradually harness their differences by relying on their common points and to prepare the ground by resolving each and every one of those differences, for the increasing reinforcement of the Muhammadi (God's greetings be upon him) Ummah.

Lastly, I deem it necessary to once more thank all you honorable guests for your valuable presence. Also, I would like to thank the esteemed Speaker of the Islamic Consultative Majlis and his colleagues in the tenth Majlis for the efforts that they made to organize this conference.

I ask God the Benevolent to help all you succeed in serving the issue of Palestine as the most important issue in the world of Islam and as the pivot of unity for all Muslims and all liberated individuals in the world.

God's greetings and mercy be upon the lofty souls of all martyrs, particularly upon the honorable martyrs of resistance in the face of the Zionist regime, upon all sincere soldiers of the Resistance front and upon the immaculate soul of the founder of the Islamic Republic who paid the upmost attention to the issue of Palestine.

May you be successful and victorious.

Greetings be upon you and Allah's mercy and blessings |



Intl. boycott of Israel only viable way to advance Palestinian cause

Interview by: Marjohn Sheikhi

In an exclusive interview with MNA, American political analyst Conn Hallinan stressed the effectiveness of a successful international boycott that would isolate Israel and move the Palestinian agenda forward.

Tehran hosted for two days the 6th International Conference on Palestinian Intifada on 21-22 February, 2017. Over 500 foreign guests representing 80 countries attended the event, with speeches from high-ranking officials such as Lebanese, Omani, and Malaysian parliament speakers in support of the Palestinian cause that has been regrettably pushed to the margins by the regional and international community in the past few years.

Palestine has gone through three Intifadas (Palestinian uprisings against the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza) already. The first, known as Rock Intifada, dates back to 1987, which was driven by harsh economic, political, social and security pressures imposed by the Israeli regime on Palestine and was triggered after an Israeli truck driver ran over a group of Palestinian workers on December 9, 1987 in Gaza and caused Palestinians' anger and frustration at their dire situation to erupt. The first Intifada lasted for six years before it resulted in the Oslo accord.

The second Intifada, known as Al-Aqsa Intifada, began in 2000 after he then Israeli Minister of Settlement, Ariel Sharon, trespassed the al-Aqsa Mosque compound and declared the Oslo accord as over. The second Intifada which drew in support of Arab and Islamic states for the Palestinian cause continued until 2005 when Israel retreated from the Gaza Strip.

The third Intifada, known as Quds Intifada, erupted in October 2015 and has continued to date. Palestinians became exceedingly concerned as their cause was marginalized in the chaos after ISIL and as Arab states started to normalize relations with Israel. Meanwhile, the Israeli regime continued to expand set-



tlements on the West Bank, intensified the siege on Gaza, and gained further support from the West for its policies. The situation started to look bleak and despairing for Palestinians who were in great need of putting their cause back on the forefront of international agenda. Tehran's conference in support of Palestine's resistance against Israeli occupation was an attempt to make the Palestinian cause relevant again.

On this occasion, Mehr News Agency reached out to Conn M. Hallinan, a columnist for Foreign Policy In Focus, who is of the firm opinion that the two-state solution in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process is already a lost cause and the only viable way to hold Israel back from its aggressive moves against Palestine and advance the Palestinian agenda is a "successful international boycott" that would isolate and damage Israel.

The following is Mehr News' exclusive interview with Mr. Hallinan who shared his views with us on the Palestinian situation, the unpredictability of Trump's foreign policy, and the need for an international boycotting campaign against Israel as the only way that could prevent the regime's advancing occupation and political and economic pressures against Palestinians:

♦ **What is your take on last Wednesday's joint press conference of US President**

Donald Trump and Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu? Where exactly does Donald Trump stand on Israel-Palestine conflict?

It is hard to figure out exactly what Trump's foreign policy is going to be like. He started off threatening China, pledging to dump the nuclear pact with Iran, and applauding the potential breakup of the European Union. He has since modified those stands, although his hostility to Iran is worrisome. Trump says he backs the two state solution, but then so does Netanyahu and we know he doesn't. The Israeli prime minister says what he does because he knows that is what the rest of the world wants, and what a majority of Americans support. But it is all smoke and mirrors. The problem with Trump is that he is deeply ignorant on foreign policy and has the attention span of a gnat. Trump is impossible to figure out because he just shoots his mouth off. But while I don't think Trump is going to abandon the two-state solution, I also don't think that he will push the Israelis on it.

♦ **How probable or improbable is a two-state solution in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process? Can this really help the Palestinian issue, and if not what are other alternatives that could?**

The two-state solution is deeply damaged, maybe fatally. The settlements →



have cut up the West Bank into a series of cantons – more like Bantustans in the old apartheid South Africa – and I just can't envision how such a state could exist independently. The problem is that if it doesn't happen, then the Palestinians will continue to live under military occupation. The Israelis are moving toward a one-state solution that would mean one of two things: either the expulsion of the Palestinians to Jordan, or an openly apartheid regime with the Palestinians as second-class citizens. My own feeling is that there should be a viable Palestinian state, which will require removing many of the settlements, a divided Jerusalem, and some kind of compensation (which the international community can help with). Or one secular one state. The latter may be best, but I am not convinced that the Palestinians want to live with the Israelis. The occupation has – is – brutal.

◆ **There is this growing concern among Palestinians that Trump's administration is going to endorse Israeli settlement program and the move of US embassy to Jerusalem. How would the embassy relocation impact the situation for Palestine, Israel and the US?**

If the Palestinians lose Jerusalem, they lose 60 percent of their economy and that is a killer. Trump has made mild – very, very mild – protests about the settlements and doesn't seem to be in a hurry to move the embassy. If he does, Israel and the US will find themselves isolated internationally, and the Israelis do fear that. A successful international boycott would severely damage Israel.

The Europeans have already dealt Tel Aviv some serious blows. But again, if Jerusalem is not split between the two parties there is no possibility of a viable Palestinian state.

◆ **Why Palestine is no longer the foremost issue of the Muslim community? How come certain Arab countries are not supportive of the Palestinian cause and instead seek to normalize relations with Israel?**

Part of the problem is that the US has successfully destroyed Libya and Iraq, and smashed up Syria. The only really independent voice in the Middle East these days is Iran, and to a certain extent, Turkey (although Turkey shares much of the responsibility for the Syrian war). The [Persian] Gulf monarchs are looking nervously over their shoulders at their own people. Saudi Arabia is a mess economically and it is in the middle of a disastrous intervention in Yemen. The US and Israel are their natural allies, since the last thing either wants are independent voices in the Middle East. I have never thought this was about religion, but rather religion as a metaphor for power and control. The attacks on the Shias may take the form of religious strife, but it is really aimed at keeping Iraq and Syria divided and Iran marginalized. Egypt depends upon Saudi Arabia to keep it afloat, so it will support whatever the Saudis do, except something really stupid, like invading Yemen. The Egyptians are too smart to get involved in that debacle, plus they tried that in the 1970s and found out what every common sense person knows, that

there are two places you don't want to invade: Yemen and Afghanistan.

I would also point out that most Arab countries did very little for the Palestinians besides make speeches.

◆ **Tehran is hosting a two-day international conference on Palestine in a show of solidarity with the oppressed nation in the face of Israel occupation. How do you assess the overall impact of such events on improving Palestine's situation?**

The most effective way to move the Palestinian agenda forward is through international pressure, in particular the boycott campaign. Israel should be treated the same way South Africa was and isolated internationally.

◆ **Meanwhile, Paris recently hosted a Peace Conference on Palestine on Jan. 15, where top official representations from 70 countries attended expect for representatives from the Israeli government and the Palestinian Authority. The conference was slammed by Netanyahu as futile while Palestine welcomed the multilateral approach. How do you evaluate the impact of this conference especially in the light of the EU's apparent friction with Trump's various stances?**

The EU is very important here. Europe has supported the Israeli occupation through weapons sales, economic aid, and trade. The EU is the largest trade group on the planet with the greatest Gross Domestic Product production in the world. If the EU follows through and takes on Israel's violation of international law, that could make a major difference. So my view is that every international action makes a difference.

Conn Hallinan is a Foreign Policy In Focus columnist living in Berkeley, California. He holds a PhD in Anthropology from the University of California, Berkeley. He oversaw the journalism program at the University of California at Santa Cruz for 23 years, and won the UCSC Alumni Association's Distinguished Teaching Award, as well as UCSC's Innovations in Teaching Award, and Excellence in Teaching Award. He was also a college provost at UCSC, and retired in 2004. He is a winner of a Project Censored "Real News Award" |

Syrian Parl. Speaker:

Israel bound to perish sooner or later

Hadiya Khalaf Abbas, Speaker of the People's Council of Syria, told Mehr News that the Israeli regime will perish sooner or later because of their usurpation of Palestinians' rights and occupation of their territories.

Speaker of the People's Council of Syria Hadiya Khalaf Abbas made the remark in response to a question by Mehr News correspondent on the sidelines of the 6th International Conference on Palestinian Intifada currently underway in Tehran with representatives of 80 countries in attendance.

She also voiced the appreciation of Syrian people for Iran's unsparing and generous supports to Syria in fighting terrorism, adding "without doubt, if it

were not for Iran's support, the resistance of Syrian nation would have not resulted in victory."

The Syrian parliament speaker touched upon her country's cooperation with the Islamic Republic in combating Takfiri terrorism in Syria, adding "this cooperation and support have yielded very good results and the crisis in Syria has moved toward a more manageable state both politically and military wise."

Highlighting the need for further expansion of Tehran-Damascus relations, she maintained that Syria attaches great importance to all-out cooperation with Iran.

She further deemed the holding of Tehran's conference in support of Palestinian Intifada of high importance considering



the current dire situation of Palestinian people, adding "the conference can have very good impact in support of the Palestinian cause, especially under the current situation where Arab and Western countries are trying to make the world forget about the issue of Palestine."

Israel a Jewish State, not democracy



Interview by: Vandad Alvandipour

A University of East London professor and an avid anti-Zionist has said with Trump in the White House, prospects of the Palestinians will be more and more slim for recognition of their rights by Israelis.

Professor Haim Bresheeth draws a pessimistic image, as he himself admits but painfully holds it as reality, of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict where the Zionist extreme right-wingers had effectively blocked road to a hopeful situation and a viable solution to the conflict; he believes that Trump ad-

ministration will definitely take side with the Jewish state bolstered by the Knesset in Tel Aviv who would not be satisfied with less than expelling all Palestinians from the West Bank.

Bresheeth implicates famous Jewish tycoon Sheldon Adelson in the Jewish settlement case where he actively supported financially the building of illegal houses in Palestinian territories; the transfer of capital to Al-Quds, especially eastern part of what UN designate as an international zone, will be a blow to international convention no other US president had ever dared to defy:

◆ **Trump has declared that the US embassy in Tel Aviv will be transferred to Jerusalem. What are the reasons of this transfer, and what would be its message?**

Trump's policy on Israel/Palestine is crafted by his son-in-law, Jared Kushner, an orthodox Jew and a strong supporter of the illegal settlements in the West Bank. Kushner has paid much towards the settlements both personally and through the Trump organization. The second source of influence

on Trump is the Jewish billionaire Sheldon Adelson, who made his fortune in the casino business like the Trump family. Adelson is the richest and most generous supporter of the illegal settlements, as well as the owner of the Israeli free paper Hayom, which is the main supporter of Netanyahu and the extreme right in Israel. Trump lacks any knowledge or understanding of the conflict of Israel/Palestine, does not know or care about it being a colonial conflict, and like any white supremacist Islamophobe supports the colonialists against the indigenous people, not to mention that his hostility to Arabs and Muslims makes the Palestinians automatic enemies in his limited and narrow view of the world.

By moving the embassy to Jerusalem Al-Quds, a move which no US president has agreed to since the 1948 Nakba, Trump will be striking massive blow against the UN, and its understanding that Jerusalem Al-Quds, not to mention East Jerusalem, are both illegally occupied by Israel. The Resolution 181 of November 1947, which has partitioned Palestine into two states, ➔

has left Jerusalem as an international zone protected by the UN, hence Israel's occupation of it is illegal, and so is moving embassies into it. By moving the embassy to Jerusalem Al-Quds, Trump will be in fact saying that he rejects the judgement of the international community through the UN, as well as the rights of the Palestinians altogether. In fact, this move is the support of Pax Israeliana, an arrangement depending on Israeli and US guns, and on a final rejection of any national rights for Palestine. No US President has done anything like that.

◆ **How would this Transfer affect the US relations with Islamic countries?**

As every Muslim knows, Jerusalem Al-Quds and the Al Aqsa Mosque are the third most holy place for Muslims, after Mecca and Medina. By moving the embassy to Jerusalem, Trump, an enemy of Islam and the Arabs, will in effect be annulling the rights of Muslims and Christians in the city. This is likely to cause a huge problem in the Middle East for the US, with demonstrations and much hostility towards the US and

Israel. Indeed, even such corrupt regimes such as Saudi Arabia and Al Sisi's Egypt, who are closely associated with the US and Israel, will find it difficult if not impossible to control popular anger in their countries. Such a move could bring about widespread protests which may lead to changing the power-balance in the Middle East.

◆ **Israel claims to be a democratic state, at the same time it emphasizes on Jewish identity and its foundation is based on occupation. What do you think about this contradiction?**

Of course, Israel is not now, nor has it ever been a democratic state. Israel is no longer defining itself as democracy - this description was removed by the Knesset almost three years ago - it now describes itself as a Jewish State, which is obviously undemocratic. Any country which is claiming to be based on single religion as its identity cannot by definition be democratic, if it has substantial minorities of people from different religions. Israel has never behaved as democracy, ever since its inception in 1948 - the Arab Palestin-

ians were NEVER treated equally, and lived under a military government until 1966. Even after the abolition of the Military Government, the Palestinians in Israel, almost 22% of the population, have never enjoyed equality as citizens, and this is now truer than ever. In the last few years, tens of new laws passed by the Knesset, have removed most of the rights from the Palestinian citizens of Israel, and even removed the Arabic language as an official language of Israel. The Palestinians in the rest of Palestine are still living under a brutal military occupation, with no civil or political rights whatsoever. Marx has once said: "a nation which oppresses another nation, cannot itself be free." This is very true about Israel, which is not even democratic towards Jews, with racism and hatred towards Mizrahi Jews (Jews from the Arab world and Iran) and towards Black Jews from Ethiopia. If for the Palestinians Israel is an Apartheid state, it is also undemocratic towards many of its Jewish citizens.

◆ **Some say that there is no one →**



in Labor Party to compete with Netanyahu. What is your opinion?

The Labor Party has changed its name to the 'Zionist Camp' few years ago, to mark the fact that it has nothing to do with the left. Even before that time, the Labor Party, as the strongest and most dominant political power in Israel, was the political power which had carried out the Nakba, was responsible to the ethnic cleansing of over 750,000 Palestinians from their homes and for not allowing them to return after the end of the war. Peres and Ben-Gurion have together arranged the tripartite attack on Egypt in 1956, together with the colonialist powers of Britain and France, and were also responsible for the 1967 war. After that war, they were responsible for the illegal settlements which started to be built immediately after the war ended. They were also responsible for the racist apartheid policies of the Histadrut, which supported different pay for the same jobs for Jews and Arabs. Now that they lost power and are out of government, they sometimes would like us to believe that it was the right-wing in Israel which is responsible for much of these crimes, but any historical account reveals that there was no great difference between left and right when it comes to the Palestine question. Thus, whether they put another candidate against Netanyahu, the policies will not change, as the whole Israeli society has moved strongly to the right and has become extremely nationalistic and xenophobic. At the moment, its leaders, Herzog and Livni, are perceived as Netanyahu-lite, and thus are unlikely to attract much electoral support, in the likely case of fresh elections, if Netanyahu is charged with corruption in the next couple of months, which looks almost certain.

◆ **It seems that Trump will support Netanyahu and Israel (more than did Obama.) Considering this, is there any possibility that Israel takes a more violent stance against Palestinians?**

There is no doubt in my mind that the closeness between Trump and Netanyahu - the same billionaire (Sheldon



Adelson) is supporting both, for example - is very dangerous for the Palestinians. Israel has had a long-established plan to further ethnic cleansing of Palestinians, by using regional local tense situation to launch mass expulsion of Palestinians across the river Jordan. As there was never a president in the US which was as supportive as Trump of Israeli war crimes, it is very likely that this plan will be realized during his tenure. Indeed, another political platform shared by Trump and Netanyahu is their hostility towards and wish to attack Iran; such an attack is likely to destabilize the whole Middle East, and to give Israel the chance to enact massive expulsion of Palestinians with the support of the US. This makes this new closeness between both regimes even more dangerous to region and world peace.

◆ **A procedure for peace between Israel and Palestine has been proposed by France. How do you see France proposal future following Trumps grasp on power?**

Unfortunately, France, like the rest of the EU, has not done anything since 1967 to assist a just peace in Palestine. This panicky attempt by Paris to save something before a Trump takeover was just that - a useless attempt to be politically correct, and to suggest a political move which will be supported by Arab and Muslim countries - as well as by its own Muslim population, which is now living under the threat of a fascist president being elected in few months.

This French proposal is actually a failure even before it was made - it offers the Palestinians very little, and to the Israelis it offers less than control over the whole of Palestine - something the current Israeli government, and its racialized xenophobic public will not for a moment consider seriously. The only just peace for both sides has to be forced on Israel, like the end of Apartheid was forced upon South Africa. The only power capable of so doing is the US, and it will not do so - it actually does the opposite; thus, no peace moves in the current power balance can be effective or serious - these are symbolic voices which are undertaken for internal and external political reasons, and not really for resolving the colonial conflict in Palestine. This may sound very negative or pessimistic, but unfortunately, it is the real situation right now. The most likely result of such imbalanced power relations in the Middle East is a further erosion of the life and rights of the Palestinians. Only massive change in public opinion, and a strong BDS campaign against Israel Apartheid and its atrocities can change this; one hopes that this will happen over the next few years. Without such campaign, the situation will only further deteriorate.

***Professor Haim Bresheeth** is a filmmaker, photographer and a film studies scholar, retired from the University of East London, where he worked since early 2002. He now teaches at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) |*

Iran's anti-Zionism political rhetoric still loud

Interview by: Mohammad Mazhari

Tehran hosted, in recent days, The International Conference on Palestine Intfada in solidarity with the people of Palestine.

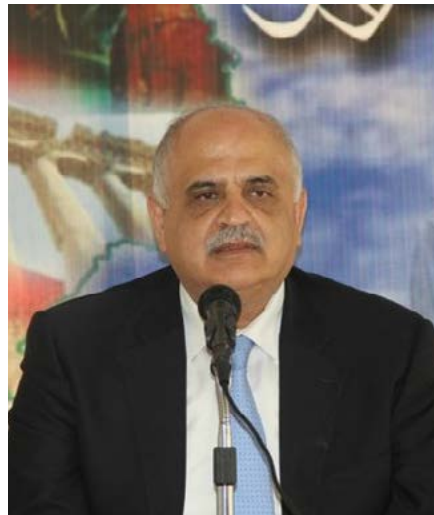
In conjunction with tightening measures against Palestinians by Israel and Trump's decision to move US Embassy to Jerusalem, hundreds of foreign guests, including senior Palestinian leaders from Hamas and Jihad movements and officials of Muslim nations, came together in the two-day event to discuss solutions for Palestine issue. MNA asked Elias Farhat, the former head of Lebanon's army's Staff and Command College about the event and its possible implications for the future of Intifada:

◆What is the importance of Palestine issue for Arab and Islamic nations? Why should the world support Palestinian people?

The Palestinian question is the central concern of the Arab and Islamic world. It is a just and fair cause about a people who were driven from their homeland by force and replaced by settlers brought from many parts of the world under questionable religious pretexts. The state of Israel was created on the Palestinian land. More important, Israel occupies Islamic and Christian holy shrines in Jerusalem which is a great insult for 1,3 billion Muslims all over the world. Supporting the Palestinian people is a moral, religious and national duty for all Arabs and Muslims

◆Do you think the solution of two states will be surefire and can it return the peace to middle east?

Ever since the UN General Assembly resolution 194 ,1947 and UN security council resolutions 242 and 338, the solution of two states was adopted in the diplomatic track but never implemented. This solution ignores the right of return for people who were driven out from so called 1948 Pal-



estinian land. Nevertheless, the Oslo agreements have made the promised Palestinian state so fragile and given a green light for the Israelis to build settlements in the occupied West bank and Gaza, thus complicating the two state solution. Recently Netanyahu presented his proposal: A Jewish state. This has blown up both the one state (restricted on the Jews) and two states solutions. It is hard to implement either of them, so, peace in the region is still far of being achieved.

◆How do you evaluate approach of new American administration toward Palestinian people and their rights?

President Trump during his campaign expressed his support for Israel, he talked a lot about peace in the middle east but did not clarify his ideas. After being elected he announced his decision to appoint his son-in-law Jared Kushner an adviser, and assigned him the task of making peace between Israel and the Palestinians.

When he received Israeli prime minister Netanyahu in the white house, president Trump took a crucial decision declaring that he will not abide by the two state solution and he will support any solution both sides agree upon. This indicates that Trump is not serious in looking for any solution, instead he has chosen a supporter of settlements,

Friedman, as an ambassador to Israel. It is expected that he will continue supporting Israel, and will obstruct any attempt to bring just and comprehensive peace to the region which guarantees the rights of the Palestinian people. It is unlikely that we will see Trump moving towards peace in Palestine.

◆What will be the reaction of Arabic and Islamic countries if Trump moves the US embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem?

If Trump moves the US embassy to East Jerusalem, he would violate UNSC anti settlement resolution 2334 which considers Israeli settlements illegitimate and calls for ceasing the building of settlements. The US embassy would hence be considered illegal because it will be built on Palestinian land. Unfortunately, some Arab countries have diplomatic ties with Israel, others have relations through secret channels, so it is difficult to see a brave position taken by Arab and Muslim countries. However, the Arab and Muslim masses will oppose and protest the compliance of their political regimes.

◆How do you see the impact of regional struggles between some Arabic countries on Palestinian issue and weakening of Palestine position and importance in the world?

Palestinian people were left without support of their brother Arab and Moslem countries in facing the Israeli aggression. They were forced to halt their resistance against the Israeli occupation and encouraged to negotiate their occupier. Unfortunately, this lead to lose more land, sovereignty and freedom. Iran is the only country which supported all the Palestinian people and its armed resistance. Iran political rhetoric is still loud and condemns Israeli aggressions and violations to human rights and international law. Iran and its allies and friends seize any opportunity to disclose all Israeli crimes and show them to the international public.

Trump helps Israeli regime expand “Jewish Only” settlements

Interview by: Lachin Rezaian

Canadian Human Rights Attorney Edward Corrigan denounced US embassy's move to Jerusalem, saying it will in the short term embolden the Zionists in Israel to steal more Palestinian land and expand the “Jewish Only” settlements.

Corrigan asserted that today more than 130 countries, and the Vatican, now officially recognize the State of Palestine. “Increased awareness in progressive and liberal Jewish circles has caused more and more Jews to also speak out in support of the Palestinians,” he noted.

Hailing the International Conference in support of “Palestinian Intifada” held in Iran, Canadian attorney said it can marshal support from the World Muslim community to support the Palestinians and to strongly oppose US President Trump’s proposal to move the US Embassy in Israel to Jerusalem.

Israel has always sought an alliance with non-Arab countries in the Middle East namely Turkey, and Iran under the Shah and also with Ethiopia to strengthen its military position against the Arabs, Corrigan noted in an exclusive interview with Mehr News Agency:

◆ **What are the outcomes and advantages of International Conference in support of “Palestinian Intifada” held in Iran?**

Hopefully the conference can marshal support from the World Muslim community to support the Palestinians and to strongly oppose US President Trump’s proposal to move the US Embassy in Israel to Jerusalem. Trump is breaking with a long-standing American policy of keeping their Embassy in Tel Aviv until the final



status of Jerusalem is decided in negotiations between the Palestinians and the Israelis. However, words and diplomatic measures will not do there has to be real economic and political pressure put on the Trump Administration to stop this Embassy move.

◆ **How do you evaluate Trump’s position and possible actions regarding the two-state solution? What would the situation (Israel-Palestine conflicts) go in Trump’s term?**

US President Trump when he recently met with Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu said that he would support either a “One State” or a “Two State” solution to the Israeli-Palestinian problem. This statement broke with a long-standing American position of at least giving lip service to the “Two State” solution. For Netanyahu this gives him a “green light” for further expansion of “Jewish Only” settlements in the West Bank and to support right-wing Zionist efforts to drive more Palestinians from their homeland.

The irony is that many Palestinians realize that the presence of more than 500,000 Jewish settlers in the West Bank, who can vote in Israel’s elections, means that the Two-State solution is dead. Almost no Israeli Jewish Party can afford to alienate these

hard line right-wing Jewish nationalists who live in illegal settlements and have invested billions of dollars in expanding the Jewish presence in the occupied West Bank. The 2.5 million Palestinians who live in the West Bank cannot vote in the “Jewish State’s” elections. The Palestinians are almost powerless and live under a brutal military occupation.

This harsh reality is that Trump, perhaps without knowing it, highlighted the need for a “One State” solution where all residents have equal rights.

Current Israel President Reuven Rivlin strongly opposed a law, recently passed by the Knesset which allows private Palestinian land to be expropriated in order to retroactively legalize illegal Jewish settlements. The passage of the so-called “Regularization Law” could, according to Rivlin, cause Israel “to look like an apartheid state.”

Rivlin has come out in favour of “One State” option with equal rights for all of its citizens. He knows that the alternative is a fully entrenched Jewish Apartheid State or a Jewish state that has ethnically cleansed most non-Jews from its territory. Rivlin knows that the World will not tolerate either of these options.

◆ **Why does Trump seek to move US Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem? Does he want to establish a political base in Jerusalem? What are the political incentives behind it?**

Trump is by nature a political bully. He is also catering to the well-organized Christian Zionist movement in the United States and who supported him in the US election. Trump is also attempting to get right-wing Jewish Zionists in the United States to support him. This move will in the short term embolden the Zionists in Israel to steal more Palestinian land and ex- ➔



pand the “Jewish Only” settlements. It will be much more difficult for the Palestinians living under Israeli occupation.

♦ **What is your evaluation about Turkey’s conference on Palestinian issue on February 25-26 and due to the friendly ties between Turkey and Israel, will it be useful to Palestinians politically? What are the outcomes of Turkey-Israel ties for oppressed Palestinians?**

The Turkish conference can only help the Palestinians. Most Turks are supportive of the Palestinian cause and even Turkey’s President Erdogan is sympathetic. When Israel attacked the Turkish boat that was bringing food and medical supplies to Gaza and killed a number of Turkish citizens there was genuine outrage in Turkey.

Israel has, however, always sought an alliance with non-Arab countries in the Middle East namely Turkey, and Iran under the Shah and also with Ethiopia. Israel has sought these strategic alliances with non-Arab re-

gional states to strengthen its military position against the Arabs. It remains to be seen if Turkey’s Muslim identity will prevail over its so-called perceived benefits of a strategic alliance with Israel. It is here that the Muslim World can reach out to the Muslims of Turkey.

♦ **Why Palestinian issue is not only the issue of Muslim World anymore but expanded to the whole world?**

More and more people are expressing their support for the Palestinians. More than 130 countries, and the Vatican, now officially recognize the State of Palestine. As awareness of Israel’s violation of Palestinian civil and political rights and its Apartheid like policies becomes known it is difficult not to be sympathetic to the Palestinians. Increased awareness in progressive and liberal Jewish circles has caused more and more Jews to also speak out in support of the Palestinians.

In a strange sort of way Netanyahu and the other right-wing Jewish Zionist extremists, who have come

to dominate the politics of the “Jewish State,” are so extreme that even many European states are showing increased support for the Palestinians. The Zionist extremists are the Palestinians best friend in terms of promoting their cause. However, the West has still not overcome their guilt over past terrible treatment of Jews in Europe and the Zionists exploit this guilt to great effect. Times are, however, changing and the current generation see’s what Israel is doing to the Palestinians today and are not burdened so much by guilt from the past.

Edward C. Corrigan holds a B.A. in History and a Master’s Degree in Political Science from the University of Western Ontario. He also has a Law Degree from the University of Windsor and was called to the Bar of the Law Society of Upper Canada in 1992. His academic area of expertise is the Middle East and he has published many articles in academic publications including *Middle East Policy*, *Middle East International*, *Outlook* and *Z Magazine* |



Politics

Anti-Saudi Trump; will it work?



By: Parnaz Talebi

Trump's recent executive order on US entry ban excludes countries like Saudi Arabia despite his anti-Saudi remarks.

"The defense of Saudi Arabia is vital to the defense of the United States," Roosevelt has said back in 1943. The United States and Saudi Arabia have been allies enjoying solid ties since 1945, the time when the vitality of such an oil resource became clear for the then US President Franklin Roosevelt.

Jimmy Carter's policy, "Carter Doctrine", which took effect on 1980, fortified the ties further. "Let our position be absolutely clear: An attempt by any outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States of America, and such an assault will be repelled by any means necessary, including military force," was the key conclusion of Carter's State of Union Address on January 1980 that set the ground for policies deterring Soviet Union's influence in the Middle East and defending US' national interests in the region.

The tradition has been persistent throughout the history during terms of different presidents yet an exception emerged during the 2016 presidential election campaigns; Donald Trump.

Trump started his anti-Saudi campaign by calling the kingdom "big, big trouble" when he announced his candidacy for

the Presidential nomination. Later he announced that he would consider stopping US oil purchase from the Saudis and also other Arab allies during his campaign as the Republican's front-runner. He made the comments in an interview with New York Times back in March 2016 on his foreign policy. In response to a question about whether, if elected president, he would halt oil purchases from US allies unless they provided on-the-ground forces against ISIL, Trump said "probably yes."

"We're not being reimbursed for the kind of tremendous service that we're performing by protecting various countries. Now Saudi Arabia's one of them," Trump has noted. Trump even went further saying that Saudi Arabia owes its existence to US and its unwavering protection "If Saudi Arabia was without the cloak of American protection, I don't think it would be around."

Maybe at first many believe that this is again one of his strange remarks during the campaign but surprisingly this was not the last time. Trump continued the tradition during the campaign in his major speeches. Trump continuously underlined that his policy regarding US' Arab allies particularly Saudi Arabia would be different. On August, Trump had an interview with NBC during which he said he is "not a big fan of the kingdom." "The primary reason we're with Saudi Arabia is because we need the oil," Trump said. "Now we don't need the oil so much, and if we let our people really go, we wouldn't need

the oil at all and we could let everybody else fight it out," Trump said. Trump also criticized Saudi Arabia's intervention in Yemen and said that the kingdom would soon need help "Saudi Arabia is going to be in big trouble pretty soon and they're going to need help, because if you look at Yemen and you look at that border, you don't have to be an expert to know that is one long border, and they're not going in for Yemen, they're going in for the oil, they're going in for Saudi Arabia, so Saudi Arabia is going to need help," Trump said in the same interview.

Trump's anti-Saudi remarks can even be traced in presidential debates. "We defend Japan, we defend Germany, we defend South Korea, we defend Saudi Arabia, we defend countries. They do not pay us. But they should be paying us, because we are providing tremendous service and we're losing a fortune. That's why we're losing—we're losing—we lose on everything. I say, who makes these—we lose on everything," Trump said in first presidential debate with Hilary Clinton. In the same debate Trump underlined that these countries either have to defend themselves or pay for the services they receive from the United States. Trump even touched upon the human rights issues in Saudi Arabia during the third debate "these are people that kill women and treat women horribly. And yet you take their money; why don't you give back the money that you've taken from certain countries that treat certain

groups of people so horribly? Why don't you give back the money?" Trump said to Hillary Clinton criticizing her for receiving money from Saudi Arabia.

Persian Gulf Arab states, largely Saudi Arabia as the leader of the coalition against Syrian government and Yemen, are really concerned about Trump's approach against terrorism and his will for cooperation with Syria and Russia. The cooperation would have tragic results for Arab states that have invested heavily in opposition groups to topple down President Bashar Assad, the idea Trump doesn't support. He has also made it clear that he wouldn't help financially the opposition groups despite the Obama's government.

JASTA is another concern for Saudi Arabia. The Justice against Sponsors of Terrorism Act, enacted during last days of Obama's term, allows Americans to sue Saudi Arabia and its officials for alleged complicity in the 9/11 attacks. For sure the real intention behind JASTA was not terrorism and suing Saudis, which would have dire consequences for Washington-Riyadh strategic ties; JASTA was approved to be used as a leverage to impose pressure on Saudi Arabia to grant more privileges to US in the region and also let Americans confiscate Saudi assets invested in US.

Riyadh reacted to US' developments, JASTA and election of Trump as president, by suspending its investment in US to rethink its financial strategy toward Wash-

ington. Sources also announced Saudi Arabia would reconsider its initial public offering (IPO) of the Saudi largest state-owned oil company Saudi Aramco on New York Stock Exchange.

Trump's anti-Saudi remarks also could be interpreted in the same concept. His stance against the Saudi Arabia caused greater concern for the kingdom when it became clear that he would run the Arab country's powerful ally for the next four years. Trump closed a number of companies associated with Saudi Arabia before his inauguration as the US president, reportedly to "avoid potential conflicts of interests" after taking the office.

Trump started his presidency with signing an executive order on banning nationals of 7 countries including Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria and Yemen. The act does not enlist countries like Saudi Arabia yet Trump announced in an interview with ABC News that citizens of countries like Afghanistan, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia would face extreme vetting; "We are excluding certain countries. But for other countries, we're gonna have extreme vetting. It's going to be very hard to come in. Right now it's very easy to come in. It's gonna be very, very hard. I don't want terror in this country," Trump said.

Few days later, Trump and Saudi Arabia's King Salman had a telephone call during which they agreed to support safe zones in Syria and Yemen, according to White House statement. They had also agreed on strengthening joint efforts to

fight against ISIL. "The president requested, and the King agreed, to support safe zones in Syria and Yemen," the statement said. The statement also said Saudi king has invited Trump "to lead a Middle East effort to defeat terrorism and to help build a new future, economically and socially," for Saudi Arabia and the region.

Promising financial supports and funding for creating safe zones in Syria and Yemen indicates Saudi Arabia is well concerned about Trump's policies and try to bribe him into closer ties. The idea of creating safe zones in Syria was raised during Obama administration, but went off the table when Pentagon estimated it to cost some \$1 billion each month.

The deal clearly indicates what new strategic ties would mean for US and Saudi Arabia. Obviously Washington and Riyadh will remain closest allies and that would be simplistic to imagine the break up of the 70-year relations under acts like JASTA or a president like Trump. Saudi Arabia needs US for security reasons and its support regardless of all Saudis' crimes in the region. US, on the other hand, is heavily dependent on geopolitical and strategic position of Saudi Arabia in Middle East, its oil and economy and its support for the Zionist regime. Latest developments, well-organized by the United States, would result in more privileged Washington who would use every single opportunity to threaten the kingdom and make it compensate for it, thus moving forward its own national interests in the region |



Challenges of new UN chief

By: Mina Ahmadi

Antonio Guterres was recently handed over the helm of the United Nations as one of the toughest diplomatic jobs in the world while the world community, in the face of many challenges today, hope the new chief of the global body to settle world problems more properly.

Guterres, 67, was Prime Minister of Portugal from 1995 to 2002, and the UN High Commissioner for Refugees from June 2005 to December 2015. He has become the world's top diplomat on 1 January 2017 and would assume that position for the next five years.

Undoubtedly, Guterres is inheriting several most complicated challenges to peace and security that the world faces, including the war in Syria, Europe migrant crisis, Africa mistrust to UN and climate change.

As per the Article 98 of the UN Charter, the secretary general as head of the UN Secretariat shall act as the chief administrative officer 'in all meetings of the General Assembly, of the Security Council, of the Economic and Social Council and the Trusteeship Council, and shall perform other functions as are entrusted to him by these organs'.

Rules-based International Order

In his first address to the 15-member council since taking office on January 1, Guterres stressed that "the United Nations was established to prevent war by binding us in a rules-based international order."

New United Nations secretary-general has urged the Security Council to take more action to prevent conflicts instead of just responding to them, as he pledged to build the world body's mediation capacity.

He added too many opportunities to prevent conflicts had been lost due to mistrust among states and concerns over national sovereignty.

"Such concerns are understandable, in a world where power is unequal and principles have sometimes been applied selectively. Indeed, prevention should never be used to serve other political goals," he told the council.



"On the contrary, prevention is best served by strong sovereign states, acting for the good of their people," he said.

Guterres also asked the council to make greater use of Chapter 6 of the UN Charter, which allows the body to investigate and recommend procedures to resolve disputes that could eventually endanger international peace and security.

He outlined steps he was taking to build the United Nations' prevention capabilities, which he described as "fragmented".

Sprawling Bureaucracy

On Dec 12, 2016, Guterres was sworn in as Secretary-General of the United Nations, becoming the ninth UN chief in the body's 71-year history.

Guterres addressed the 193 member nations, saying the world body must work to simplify, decentralize and make more flexible its sprawling bureaucracy, Thehindu.com wrote.

"The United Nations needs to be nimble, efficient and effective. It must focus more on delivery and less on process, more on people and less on bureaucracy."

Syria Conflict 'Top Priority'

Guterres says he will make ending Syria's civil war his top priority.

"I believe it is the international community's first priority to be able to end this conflict," he told the BBC.

Guterres said the world now faced a dangerous moment, with even countries far from warzones threatened by

acts of terrorism.

He called the drive to end armed conflict "a battle for values".

Mideast Crises

Following his election, Guterres had vowed to work as a "convener" and "bridge-builder" to help find solutions to the world's rising challenges.

At the moment, with the political and military vast crises in the Middle East, and the dire situation causing a variety of irreparable consequences to the international community, the role the United Nations can assume to achieve a general consensus among world countries and its rapid reaction against future crises tend to be in the spotlight more than ever.

Europe Migrant Crisis

The Europe migrant crisis and the big wave of the war refugees leaving their homes in the Middle East to find a safe haven in Europe and the terrible conditions these refugees face in the temporary camps they are sheltered in are another problems need to be properly addressed.

It is expected that Guterres by relying on his experiences as a former UN High Commissioner for Refugees find a more efficient solution to the global problem.

Time for Reform

The same helplessness and at times disunity has marked the UN's response ➡

to the civil war that ravaged South Sudan for three years. A US initiative to impose an arms embargo failed, winning only seven votes from the 15 countries that sit on the Security Council.

The approximately 13,000 peacekeepers deployed in the country have been criticized for failing to protect the civilians crowding UN bases.

Elsewhere on the continent, accusations of rape have permanently tarnished the reputation of UN peacekeepers in the Central African Republic.

Guterres has acknowledged the criticism, saying "it is time for the United Nations to recognize its shortcomings and to reform the way it works."

Presently, however, Guterres needs to do something to overcome the mistrust shaped in the African countries towards the United Nations and its activities there. There are several reports suggesting that some UN aid workers and peacekeepers have abused women and children in exchange for providing them with food and drinking water.

Unfortunately, many such crimes have been left unpunished and the secretary general needs to followed up the cases.

Climate Change Dilemma

Under Ban Ki-moon, representatives of 195 UN member states adopted the Paris agreement within the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change.

The major agreement sets out a global action plan to put the world on track to avoid dangerous climate change by limiting global warming to well below 2°C.

According to Guterres, the landmark agreements such as the Paris Climate Agreement "lay out a clear strategy for action."

Moving forward, the United Nations should focus on "implementation, implementation, implementation," he stressed.

Guterres put the spotlight on "global mega-trends," and says it is crucial the international community understands them. "We live in times of multiple, evolving and mutually-reinforcing shifts."

The dynamics of "geopolitical, demographic, climatic, technological, social and economic nature, enhance threats and opportunities on an unprecedented scale," he says.

Guterres points out that "climate change affects economies and peoples, their lands, oceans and seas," identifying it as a source of conflict in the world |

Political analyst:

Pakistan largely losing strategic importance for US



Interview by: Vahid Pourtajrischi

An international relations analyst has believed Pakistan has largely lost importance for the US with the latter possibly coming to a sort of détente with Shia Iran and with Afghanistan now not a field for the US to play politics.

Vahid Pourtajrischi of Mehr News International Service asked Mr. Kedar Keskar, an international relations analyst and an expert of Asian affairs about Pakistan's position in the Asia in interplay between the US and China. He cast doubt on the authenticity of the claim made by the Sunni countries members of the Saudi Arabia's Islamic Military Alliance (IMA) to fight terrorism as major members are Saudi allies which had been fostering notorious terrorist groups; however, Mr. Keskar believes that it was better than anything else that would never happen as a Muslim response to terrorism as a novelty in the region.

Keskar also envisioned a grim future for Iran-Pakistan's much-vaunted Peace Pipeline largely because there had been a state of indecision in implementation of major projects in Pakistan, regardless of the government, either military or civilian, in-

cumbent. Pakistan was largely under the influence of foreign powers especially big brother Saudi Arabia and thus the Peace Pipeline was largely delayed by the Pakistani side and garnered Iran's reprimands and displeasure, he believed. Keskar also said that Iran would not join IMA spearheaded by Saudi Arabia since the majority of the members had been Saudi allies and hostile to Iranian presence in the region including in Yemen, Syria, and Iraq, among other things.

♦ **Pakistan has claimed recently that it will stop implementing Iran-Pakistan gas pipeline known as Peace Pipeline until full easing of US sanctions against Iran. India on the other hand, seeks to join Iran-Oman-India new pipeline project instead of the Peace Pipeline. How do you evaluate the future of Iran-Pakistan pipeline?**

The future of Iran-Pakistan pipeline seems bleak for number of reasons. The first and very crucial factor is lack of quick decision-making and implementation on the part of Pakistan. The deadline to complete the project was December 2014, which is already lapsed. Iran has conveyed its displeasure to Pakistan for number of times over the issue of delay. The Pakistani establishment blames the so- ➔

called 'external factors' as the real culprits. It has some credible base too. But that can't be blamed solely. Be it current Nawaz Sharif regime or Yousuf Raza Gilani's tenure or any other civilian or military rule, lack of quick decision-making and implementation has remained the hallmark of Pakistani Government.

The next major reason is that Pakistan's foreign policy is basically dictated by some big powers. Pakistan has no freedom of setting its own foreign policy. Earlier US and now China guides Pakistan in key issues. Similarly, Pakistan is heavily dependent on Saudi Arabia for financial aid and Wahabi Sunni mentorship. It is said that Saudi Arabia successfully pressurized Pakistan to delay and decay the Peace Pipeline with Iran and increased its own fuel supply to Pakistan. Isn't it self-explanatory that India, which has developed strong ties with the US, could still manage to ink Chabahar port development project and undersea pipeline project with Iran soon after the nuclear deal Iran hit with world powers, but Pakistan, who is still the stooge of the US, could not do the same? It means that full removal of economic sanctions cannot be the real issue. Iran is now rapidly participating in global financial mainstream and the world is recognizing it. It will be better for Pakistan to understand this trend as well, especially because it is facing acute financial crisis. The other major issue that hinders the pipeline is the security concerns because of terrorists in Pakistan.

◆ **US State Department Spokesman Mark Toner has addressed Pakistan as the safe haven of terrorists, while Islamabad has always remained as one of the main US allies in the region. Could we assume Toner's words as a turn in US-Pakistan relations?**

Mark Toner called Pakistan as the 'safe haven of terrorists' on the background of the reports of disappearance of several Pakistani bloggers and activists. From last 30 years India is facing the wrath of Pak-sponsored terrorism. Western world started to take it seriously only after 9/11. But their approach regarding terrorists was selective in number of cases. It is beyond doubt that Pakistan has become a 'terror hub.' Existence of various terror groups such as Lashkar-e-Tyaba, Jaish-e-Muhammad, Taliban, Al Qaida,

ISIS, etc., on the soil of Pakistan challenges the economic development of Pakistan and the peace in the region. Pakistan is a country that possesses nuclear weapons which makes the situation more dangerous. It will be a nightmare for any peace-loving country if terrorists take control of a nuclear weapon.

As far as the turn in US-Pakistan relations is concerned, this process of change has begun way back but with slow pace. US has lost its interest in Afghanistan and has got involved in Syria-Iraq on one hand and in South China Sea on the other. Hence Pakistan has lost any strategic significance to US.

It's not that there is shift in US policy towards Pakistan only. Long-standing American ally Saudi Arabia is also now getting close to China. The warm handshake of the US and Iran, and various other decisions of the US are viewed by Saudi Arabia as a challenge to Sunni supremacy. China's ambitious One Belt, One Road (OBOR) strategic outline and its increasing engagement in Middle East make it a strong contender to act as Saudi Arabia's next security guarantor. It's not surprising that security cooperation between Saudi and China is increasing rapidly as Chinese arms sales to Saudi Arabia reached worth around \$700mn from 2008 to 2011.

It can be observed that China and Sunni countries such as Saudi Arabia and Pakistan are coming closer, whereas the US and Shia Iran are trying to sort out their differences. I strongly believe that this process will not stop even under Trump administration, as Trump and Putin are friends and as Trump is openly anti-China and anti-Saudi.

◆ **Rahil Sharif has accepted to command Islamic Military Alliance just if Iran joins this alliance. It is too difficult for Saudi Arabia to accept this condition. Will Riyadh accept this condition?**

Minister of Defense and Deputy-Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia Mohammad Bin Salman Al Saud announced the creation of Islamic Military Alliance (IMA) on 15th December 2015. Pakistan's former Army Chief Gen. (now retd.) Rahil Sharif has been declared as Commander-in-chief of IMA. The IMA's stated objective is to fight against terrorism. Pakistan and Saudi Arabia are famous for their covert support to some of the notorious terror groups. On this

background, these two nations are trying to display their anti-terror commitment. This is as funny and dubious as that of Xi Jinping championing globalization in Davos.

It's already high time now for a fight against terrorism by Islamic nations themselves. This alliance can be considered as an act of better late than never. But expecting too much from this alliance will be a strategic innocence. Pakistan is trying to convince Iran that the 39-nation alliance is not targeting Tehran. Though the said objective is anti-terrorism, how can one neglect the fact that most of the members are Saudi allies? And how can one believe in the words of the perpetrators of the terrorism. Similarly the challenge of the terrorism is so grave and widespread throughout Middle-East that it is hardly possible to deploy the proposed IMA troops on every battlefield. In such case, it will be necessary to prioritize the missions and there will be differences of opinions on this issue. Saudi Arabia will clearly try to dominate the proceedings and the list of priority with the help of its own financial clout. How can any organization that excludes Shia Iran be considered as a truly accommodative, all-encompassing Islamic organization? But Saudi has up till now kept Iran away from IMA.

Pakistani defense analyst Lt. Gen. (retd.) Amjad Shoaib has claimed that Rahil Sharif has agreed to be the Commander-in-chief on three conditions: 1. Include Iran in alliance to give it an image of Muslim's alliance instead of sectarian alliance. 2. He will not work under anyone's command. 3. He sought mandate to work for the unity of the Muslim countries. It seems highly unlikely that Saudi Arabia will accept his any of the three conditions. Either Rahil Sharif will have to accept the post without any pre-condition or else Riyadh will find some new guy as the head of IMA. Even if Saudi Arabia decides to include Iran in IMA, it's up to Iran to finalize whether to accept the invitation or not. Under IMA, Sharing the responsibilities and managing the burden will generate new tensions in the region. There can't be two swords in one sheath.

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'Great men of history never die'

By: Lachin Rezaian

Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani was an influential Iranian politician since the 1979 Islamic Revolution enjoying a white track record in foreign policy and improving Iran's relations with the world.

Ayatollah Rasanjani passed away at the age of 82 on Sunday due to a heart attack in Tehran's Tajrish hospital, a big blow to the Iranian nation and Revolution's followers.

The death of Iran's first-generation Revolutionary, known for his great role in founding the Islamic Revolution as a longtime companion of Imam Khomeini (PBUH) shed light on his previous measures as a president, Parliament speaker, member of Council of Islamic Revolution, Leader representative in Supreme Defense Council (SDC) in Iraq war, Deputy Commander-in-Chief and president of the Assembly of Experts in different stages of his life.

He was known for his great contributions to the Islamic Revolution, improving Iranian economy, foreign policy and broken ties with the international community, especially the regional states, at different points, when he was Iranian president (1989 to 1997), chair of the Assembly of Experts or the Expediency Council.

He kept his high-profile role even after his presidency as a key consultant for the Leader and other officials in running the country and making important decisions.

He was a close friend to the Leader of Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Khomeini who he said in his emotional condolence message for Rafsanjani's loss, that "with the passing of Hashemi, there is no other person I know of with whom I share the long and common experiences of the highs and lows of these historic times."

"With the passing of Hashemi, there is no other person I know of with whom I share the long and common experiences of the highs and lows of these historic times," says Ayatollah Khomeini. Ayatollah Khomeini called him an "old friend" who was a helpful companion in the



years of the Islamic struggle.

Rafsanjani was born on 25 August 1934 in the village of Bahreman near the Persian city of Rafsanjan in Kerman province. He studied theology in the city of Qom with Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini (PBUH), whose close follower he became.

Rafsanjani survived two assassination attempts, one only months after the revolution, when he was shot in the stomach by gunmen who broke into his house claiming to hold a clandestine message. During the attack, his wife jumped in front to shield him from the attack. Neither were seriously wounded.

After the incident, Ayatollah Khomeini said in announcing that Rafsanjani had survived, "great men of history do not die."

The second attempt occurred in February 1994, when a lone gunman fired at him as he was speaking to mark the 15th anniversary of the Revolution. Unhurt and unshaken, Rafsanjani calmed a crowd of thousands and continued his speech.

Pre-Revolution roles

He was one of the opponents of Shah's regime and contributed a great deal of his youth to fighting against the Shah and representing Imam Khomeini, during which he was arrested for 7 times from 1960 until 1979 and was in jail for four years and 5 months in total, guilty

of activities against Pahlavi regime.

Post-Revolution roles

During his lifetime, Rafsanjani tried making Iran a hub for international business activities by introducing various economic reforms.

Iraq-imposed war era

Rafsanjani played a very important role during the eight years of the Iraq-imposed war, while serving as the acting commander-in-chief of the armed forces.

When he was the Second-in-Command of Iran's Joint Chiefs of Staff in the last year of Iran-Iraq war, he played an important role in ending war. Three years ago, speaking among reporters Hashemi said "I recommended Imam Khomeini to adopt United Nations Security Council Resolution 598; without signing the Resolution, Tabriz, Tehran and Isfahan were subject to chemical attacks with French and Russian aircrafts leaving thousands of casualties.

"After Iraq invaded Kuwait, some of the officials asked for supporting Saddam Hussein; we did not support Saddam and even accepted Kuwaiti refugees; the world trusted us and sanctions were broken," he told reporters.

Following the deteriorations in foreign relations during the war, Rafsanjani made great contributions to rebuilding ties with Europe, Arab states, and neigh- ➔

boring countries, especially the ones in Central Asia and the Caucasus.

Presidency

One year after war, he was elected as Iran's fourth president in 1989. Ayatollah Hashemi Rafsanjani despite the devastation of post-war adopted constructive decisions, including improvements in foreign ties, nuclear power, and economic reforms.

Foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran spent its most important phase during the presidency of Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani. On one hand, the Iraq-imposed war had been ended and on the other hand the world was on the brink of profound change; the end of the Cold War and the beginning of a new era in global politics where the era of ideological competition was finished, formed the two main themes of the fundamentals of practical change in the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran in post-war era.

Rafsanjani underlined the detente in his foreign policy and due to the requirements resulting from living in an international interconnected system, realistic approaches gradually appeared in Iranian foreign policy.

He adopted an economy-first policy, supporting a privatization policy against more state-owned economic tendencies

in the Islamic Republic.

The presence of Seyed Mohsen Nourbakhsh at the head of the Ministry of Economy, Bijan Namdar Zanganeh in the Ministry of Energy, Nematzadeh in the Ministry of Industry, Aghazadeh in the Ministry of Petroleum, Kalantari in the Ministry of Agriculture, Mahlouji in the Ministry of Mines, Nejad Hosseinian in heavy industry and Vahhaji in Minsitrey of Commerce, gave an economic flavor to Rafsanjani's first cabinet.

His first term faced with a situation of severe budget deficit close to 50%, during which Rafsanjani could turn the budget crisis to the balanced status during his eight-year tenure. On the other hand, the combination of budget and government spending was changed in favor of plans and development costs, which launched major construction projects in the eight years of his presidency.

The relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran gradually started to improve after the end of the Iran-Iraq war in 1988. In 1989, Iranian President Hashemi Rafsanjani stated that Iran and Saudi Arabia were holding indirect talks to improve their relations.

After domestic, regional and international developments in 1999, Tehran and Riyadh went from divergence to the detente, coexistence and cooperation during the presidency of Hashemi Raf-

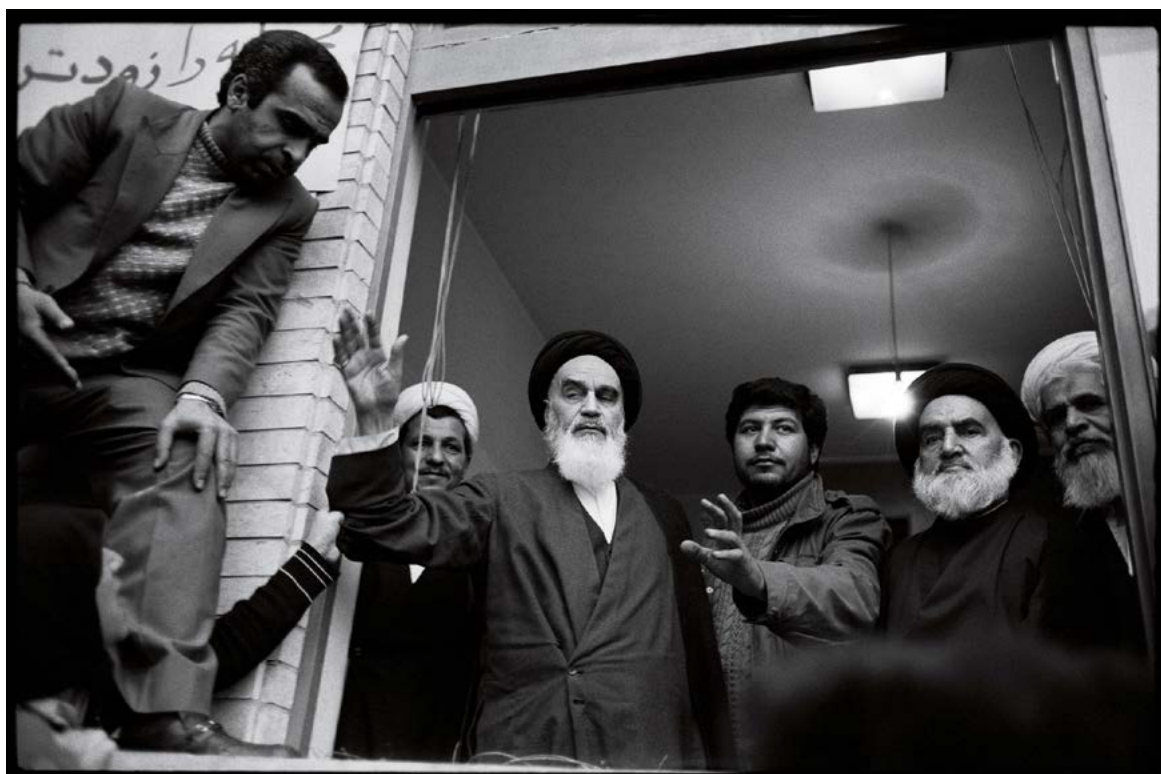
sanjani.

During Iraq-imposed war against Iran, Saudi authorities pledged \$25 billion of aid to the Iraqi government of Saddam Hussein, recognizing their worries that revolutionary Iran was a far greater threat to its survival and the stability of the region. Saudi officials also encouraged other Arab states, including Bahrain, Kuwait and Qatar to follow the same policy towards Iran.

The already strained relationship between the two countries further deteriorated when Saudi security forces clashed with Hajj pilgrims, among them Iranian demonstrators, on 31 July 1987 which led to the death of 400 pilgrims out of which two thirds had Iranian nationality. Following the incident, Saudi administration instituted a ban on all Hajj rituals and in 1988 cut its diplomatic relations with Iran.

Iran's support for Kuwait during Iraq-Kuwait war in 1990, improved its ties with Saudi Arabia. During the war, relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia were defrosted considerably and the official ties were restored in 1991, during which the Saudi authorities resumed issuing Hajj visas to Iranian nationals.

Iran's logical position in Iraq-Kuwait conflict was welcomed by Europeans. Some European foreign ministers paid visit to Iran to express their appreciation ➡





for Iran's efforts for relaxation of tensions in the region.

Due to the new conditions in the region, the Europeans sought expansion of relations with Iran, as an important country in the region.

In December 1992, European Union leaders in the Edinburgh statement declared interest in dialogue with Iran and called for negotiations between the two sides, which was welcomed by the Islamic Republic.

During his tenure as a president, Rafsanjani attempted to separate political issues from economic ones, resuming trade with the US regardless of the absence of diplomatic relationships between Iran and the United States. Hashemi Rafsanjani believed that Iran could not trust the United States to resume political relations between the two countries.

Although Rafsanjani was seen by Washington as a potential ice breaker, his views were far from solidly pro-Western and displayed conflicted positions.

In an interview with Al-moonir, Rafsanjani said the path before Iran and the US is not as straightforward as that of Iran and other Western countries. Because from even before the Revolution up until now, there has always been the image in Iran that America is behind every impediment and obstruction against Iran. However, it seems that the Americans want to somewhat distance themselves from the past, and this is something that must be proven in action.

"In my view, the bottom line has al-

ways been that America must somehow make amends for the past and vindicate itself in the minds of the people of Iran," he noted.

Ayatollah Hashemi believed US government must notice past mistakes and adopt a fair and respectful policy in order to compensate for its measures, adding Iran's ties with the US requires compensation for past and taking new steps towards relations with Iran based on mutual respect.

His role in developing Iran's nuclear power is also highly regarded since he oversaw key developments in Iran's nuclear program by negotiating deals with Russia to build an energy-producing reactor in Bushehr, which finally went into service in 2011 after long delays.

Post-presidency

After leaving office as a president, the cleric managed to remain within Iran's ruling theocracy through different roles.

In 2005, he tried to return to presidency, however his attempts failed after the victory of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. The incident did not distance him from presidential arena. During Ahmadinejad's 2009 re-election campaign, Rafsanjani became a vocal critic of his policies.

He criticized the economic policies of the government of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, saying his policies would "jeopardize the Islamic Republic."

Rafsanjani's ideas were brought back to life when Hassan Rouhani was elected president in 2013 and began a policy of engagement with the US and other

world powers.

Rafsanjani expressed his support for President Rouhani who attempted for resolution of Iran's nuclear program that lifted most sanctions on Iran.

As a political shield that defended the interests of the country on the international stage and contributed to its stability in the region, Ayatollah Rafsanjani was also a supporter of Iran's nuclear program.

Iran's nuclear program, unsolved for a long time leading to imposing western sanctions against the country, was settled through the helpful recommendations of Rafsanjani by a team headed by President Hassan Rouhani.

They made every effort at the time of negotiations for the Iranian nuclear program, which helped resolving it in a peaceful manner. The result of these efforts was the signing of the nuclear agreement.

In 2007, Rafsanjani reiterated that the use of weapons of mass destruction was not part of the Islamic Republic culture.

He was one of the few key figures who insisted on the resolution of Iran's nuclear program through peaceful talks with the world, through which he sought to prove Iran would not use its nuclear achievements in the military industries.

Signing the nuclear deal, known as JCPOA, paved the way for Iran's return to the global arena, inducing investment in oil and gas sectors and developing talks for development of energy projects that would hopefully solve economic problems in the country. Iran seized the opportunities created in the post-sanctions era and developed its ties with the world countries.

Rafsanjani always praised the Leader's support for nuclear talks, saying "Leader of the Islamic Revolution was the one who initiated activities for resolution of nuclear issue to ward off potential dangers against the people and Revolution even before the new government of President Hassan Rouhani assumed power."

After all efforts in the path of development and improving Iran's international image, Ayatollah Rafsanjani passed away in peace on Sunday, leaving his legacy to the present and next generation.

May his soul rest in peace, Amen |



Economy

Airbus regional director:

Silence best strategy of Airbus on ambiguities of Iran Air deal

*Interview by Zohreh Alami,
Hamid Reza Gholamzadeh*

Despite the need for compensation payment to Iran in case sanctions are reapplied, Airbus Middle East Regional Director Fouad Attar uses silence as the best tactic in the face of present uncertainties in Airbus-Iran Air contract.

With almost one year after implementation of the nuclear deal between Iran and the 5+1 group of countries and promises made by Iranian officials that restrictions on various economic sectors have been removed, the first out of one hundred Airbus aircraft is slated to land in Iran tomorrow on Thursday January 12. The airplane, which is of Airbus A321 type, will leave Hamburg Airport for Toulouse Blagnac Airport and will depart France tomorrow before arriving at Tehran's Mehrabad International Airport at 14:30.

Piecemeal delivery of aircraft to Iran begins as of tomorrow while the delay in issuance of OFAC license casted doubts to achieving a final agreement between the two parties for several times. According to the preliminary schedule, eight Airbus planes were to be delivered to Iran in 2016 though the process was postponed to 2017 and the first aircraft is arriving in Tehran only half-way through January 2017.

Nevertheless, Airbus enjoys better conditions than Boeing for sales of aircraft to Iran since a larger number of Airbus airplanes have received necessary finances as well as that the French company has agreed to undertake financing of 19 aircraft.

If truth be told, 42 out of 100 Airbus aircraft and only 5 out of Boeing airplanes have received financial resources and estimations reveal that the Airbus contract will enjoys a smoother implementation than that of Boeing.

The significance of delivery methods for 100 Airbus products, financing issues



and required warranties for repayment of installments not to mention arrival of the first Airbus A321 all paved the way for an exclusive interview with Fouad Attar, Managing Director of Airbus Middle East in a bid to shed light on certain details of the deal which, so far, have not received media coverage.

Fouad Attar, in his interview with Mehr New Agency, stressed that his companies contract with Iran had become finalized. The official however left a number of questions unanswered using a sparkling wittiness and on the account that the provisions of the contract were 'confidential'. One of the questions that remained unresolved pertained to venues for paying compensation to Iran in case International sanctions against Iran were reapplied.

◆The deal predicted delivery of 8 passenger planes by the end of 2016; however, no such delivery became realized; apart from OFAC permissions, what other problems would be at work?

Now that OFAC licenses have been granted to us and that we have signed a firm contract with Iran air, consequently we will now start preparing for delivery. We are looking forward to deliver Iran Air's first aircraft on 11 January 2017.

◆How Iran would receive 100 remaining planes by 2024; when would Iran receive the first of the planes?

We are pleased to announce that a

delivery ceremony for the first Aircraft is now planned for 11 January 2017. More details to come in due course.

◆Which financial institutions and banks will finance the purchase deal?

These financial details are customer confidential.

◆Iran and Airbus have reportedly signed an MoU which allows Iran to receive license from Airbus to develop some specific spare parts. Would you elaborate more on this?

In parallel of initial commitment signed in January 2016 in Paris, we have also signed with Iran's Minister of Roads and Urban Development, a comprehensive co-operation agreement as part of the country's modernization of its civil aviation sector, to support the development of air navigation services (ATM), airport and aircraft operations, regulatory harmonization, technical and academic training, maintenance, repair and industrial cooperation.

◆What will be the mechanism for payment and other liabilities Iran has to Airbus?

Payment mechanism is the same as for all our customers, in full compliances with applicable laws & regulations including with the JCPOA (Joint Comprehensive Plan Of Action).

◆What guarantees and measures have been considered to prevent any delay or lack of payments?

We do not discuss or comment on contractual details.

◆What sort of additional services would Iran Air be eligible to provide in Airbus planes (for passenger welfare, for example)?

We are delighted that Iran air has decided to modernize and build its fleet with Airbus products, the firm contract of 100 aircraft spans from Airbus' single-aisle A320 Family to the wide body ➡

A330 Family and the A350 XWB. This will provide Iranian flag carrier with a modern, highly efficient fleet capable of meeting its full air transport needs – from regional routes to high-density, long-haul operations.

Airbus cabins are designed to offer passengers and airlines the highest levels of comfort, services and efficiency. All Airbus aircraft – from the single-aisle to the wide body family – are designed for today's comfort standards, benefiting travelers and the airlines that carry them.

◆ **How many planes would be delivered to Iran within the deadline set by OFAC?**

Our agreement with Iran air covers 46 A320 Family, 38 A330 Family and 16 A350 XWB aircraft, first aircraft delivery is planned for January 11th 2017.

◆ **Would Iran-Airbus agreement be called a binding deal or is it still a deal on paper? If it is still on paper, when would a binding final deal be expected?**

Yes, the deal with Iran Air is a binding deal, we have signed a firm contract for 100 aircraft and the first delivery is planned for 11 January 2017.

◆ **If sanctions snap back, Boeing will return back Iran the net amount of money plus the interests accrued. Is there any such article in deals with Airbus as well?**

Airbus coordinates closely with regulators in the EU, US and elsewhere to ensure understanding and full compliance with the JCPOA (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action). We do not discuss or comment on contractual details.

◆ **Why in the deal with Airbus, wide-**

body A380 is missing from the list?

As Airbus we are proud to be offering a full family of aircraft per size category and generally overtime we see a strong global trend for customers sizing up their commitments.

***Fouad Attar** joined Airbus Middle East in 2006 as Deputy President - head of commercial. He graduated from the Ecole Nationale Supérieure de L'Aéronautique et de l'Espace (Sup'Aero) as an aeronautical engineer and holds a business and management degree from IAE Toulouse. Attar started his career at Airbus in 1984 as a flight simulator engineer at the Airbus Training Centre in Toulouse. With over 25 years of aviation experience, Attar has considerable aviation industry experience and has contributed to the growth of the sector in the region |*

Iran regaining OPEC's market share

By Mina Ahmadi

The recent reports indicate that the Islamic Republic of Iran has already been able to escalate its oil exports to levels that existed before sanctions were imposed on the country in 2011.

Iran's exports of oil stood at 2.35 million bpd before the sanctions were imposed against the country in 2011.

One of the main reasons for the increase in output has been a gradual increase in production from the South Azadegan field, in the strategic West Karun region, according to sources and

Oil Ministry officials.

In recent months, Iran has signed a number of upstream development deals as part of its plans to increase oil and gas exports to pre-sanctions level of four mbd.

January oil exports rise

Iran's crude oil and condensate ➡



exports rose three percent month-on-month in January as it continued to regain market share, widening its appeal among refiners around the globe in the process.

Iran was the only Middle Eastern producer to see exports rise in January, as others, like Iraq, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, saw a fall in loadings, in line with agreed OPEC-led output cuts by crude producers. Unlike its peers under the landmark OPEC-led agreement, Iran has wiggle room to boost production to 3.8 mbd.

Iranian crude is similar in quality to barrels from other the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) countries in its region, meaning this is an ideal time for it to broaden its customer base, sources said.

Iran, along with Libya and Nigeria, is allowed to produce "at maximum levels that make sense" as part of any output limits in a surprise deal reached last week by the OPEC.

Export of petroleum products

On February, Minister of Petroleum Bijan Zangeneh said that the export of petroleum products is an approach adopted by the Iranian Ministry of Petroleum, adding Iran is currently meeting most of its energy needs by natural gas which would allow raising export of petroleum products.

Zangeneh further announced that the Iranian Ministry of Petroleum is bent on raising export of petroleum products, adding gasoil and petrol will be the only main liquids consumed in Iran's energy mix by next year.

Iran can currently refine 1.7 mb/d of crude oil by its refineries.

According to Zangeneh, Iran's crude oil output is at 3.9 million barrels per day, adding the country is now pumping 3.9 million barrels of oil per day.

Asia crude export up

New official data show top four Asian buyers of Iran's crude oil more than doubled their imports from the country in December compared with the same month a year earlier, for the third straight month.

The data from governments and



ship-racking services also said the buyers – China, India, South Korea and Japan- imported 1.89mn barrels per day.

According to data by International Energy Agency, in absolute terms, imports slipped for a second consecutive month, from a peak of just under 2mn bpd in October, which was the highest since at least 2010.

During the first full year since the sanctions were lifted, Iran has boosted exports to its biggest Asian customers by nearly 60 percent to 1.63mn bpd.

Post-sanctions recapture

Europe represents Iran's biggest post-sanctions recapture of the lost market, where the continent currently receives more than 700,000 barrels per day of Iranian crude oil.

US-based oilfield services company Schlumberger signed last year an initial deal with an Iranian oil company for data-sharing. European energy companies like Austria's OMV and France's Total also signed memorandums of understanding of their own, Press TV wrote.

Trade data released by Japan's Ministry of Finance on Monday showed Iran's crude oil imports cost Japan an average \$43.87 a barrel for December, the third cheapest after Ecuador and Columbia.

According to Japan's Trade Ministry, the country's imports jumped more than 40 percent from a year earlier to 246,243 bpd last month.

China's imports rose 30 percent to 689,530 bpd, meaning the country regained top spot among consumers after buying less than India for three consecutive months.

India's imports grew to 546,600 bpd, while South Korea's purchases rocketed to 410,387 bpd.

Old customers back

Last month, the International Group of P&I Clubs said it will soon provide nearly full coverage of reinsurance of around \$7.8 billion per tanker for shipping Iranian oil, in addition to resuming reinsurance coverage for the National Iranian Tanker Co.'s oil tankers.

That can boost Iran's already increasing oil exports as ongoing US sanctions had created hurdles on the availability of ships to carry Iranian barrels.

With it now easier for a wider pool of charterers and shipowners to transport and trade Iranian oil, the past month saw some old buyers returning. In the next few days, two Iranian VLCCs — the Huge and the Snow — will discharge a mix of Iranian heavy and light crude grades in the Rotterdam refining hub for the first time in five years.

National Iranian Oil Company sold a cargo of Iranian Light crude to Indonesia's state-owned Pertamina for February loading as a test sale, the first direct crude sale between NIOC and Pertamina for around 15 years, according to sources close to the matter.

The Philippines' PNOC has also recently signaled it was seeking to resume crude oil imports from Iran. PNOC president and CEO Pedro Aquino said recently his company and NIOC were in negotiations for the long-term sale of four million barrels of Iranian crude oil per month to the Philippines.

The sanctions restricted the country's oil exports to around 1 million bpd among other economic bans – already described by analysts as the toughest the world has ever seen.

The sanctions were lifted in January 2016 after a deal that Iran reached with the P5+1 – the five permanent members of the Security Council plus Germany – over the Iranian nuclear energy program became effective.

The JCPOA – the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action – which achieved between Iran and the Sextet of world powers envisaged the removal of a series of economic sanctions against Iran in return for steps by the country to restrict certain aspects of its nuclear energy activities |

Two sides of Tehran-Washington oil ties

By: Mohammad Hossein Azari

On the eve of Donald Trump's presidency, potential fluctuations in oil prices reveal two sides to coin of Tehran-Washington oil relations one depicting support of higher crude prices by both countries.

'Energy Independence' remains as the main oil policy pursued by America's newly-elected president, a policy which nowadays is also advocated by Russia, as the largest non-OPEC crude producer, along with Saudi Arabia, Iraq and Iran.

Mathematically speaking, the name of Donald Trump must be placed on the list of expensive oil advocates but the question remains whether the congruity in oil policies of Tehran and Washington should be deemed as a threat or an opportunity.

Despite the drastic fall in oil prices over the past three years, when the market even experienced lower-than-thirty-dollar levels per barrel in prices, crude output rates not only did not decline, but rather they increased and production costs of Shale and other unconventional oil types decreased dramatically.

Currently, a great portion of American Shale oil, which is known as a menace to the produced oil by OPEC members, is situated in five main regions including Macon, Eagle Ford, New Brara, Permian Delaware as well as Permian Midland.

The noteworthy point is that the latest estimations by credible international institutions indicate that production costs of shale oil in the US have fallen below 40 dollars per barrel on average as the figure for Macon stands at about 31 dollars.

In the past three years, the sharp decline in crude prices not only did not add to shale output costs in the US but also led to a boost in performance efficiency in various stages of drilling and completion which in turn had brought about a higher recovery factor.

Deciphering Tehran-Washington ties

Lower crude production costs in the US marks a forewarning for Iran as well as other OPEC and non-OPEC producers and Americans will subsequently need higher oil prices given Trump's policy of

energy independence.

In case the rise in global prices becomes realized as a result of agreement among OPEC and non-OPEC states during Trump's presidency, interests of all producers will be supplied and, on the contrary, if prices plunge, Americans will definitely seek to create a psychological shock in the oil market by imposing sanctions against some of the world's producers and exporters like Iran and Russia in which case the other side of coin of America's filthy policies will be unveiled.

Parallel with ongoing developments and the verge of Trump taking the office, the US Congress has issued licenses to American oil companies to release eight million barrels of trade oil stored in areas like Texas and Louisiana.

Iran's former governor at OPEC, Seyed Mohammad Ali Khatibi relatedly said



that the Congress act was more of an economic than a political nature since America was after a boost in crude prices in the market.

The official, while stating that US had not joint the oil freeze deal by OPEC and no-OPEC members though Americans had no plans to maintain low oil prices, asserted "in order to obtain its goals in oil and energy sector, the US is in need of higher crude prices.

Khatibi stressed that Washington had significantly decreased shale production costs in the past three years adding that the figure had dropped from the previous 60 or 80 dollars to the current 35 to 40 dollars per barrel.

The oil market analyst recalled that falling crude prices would undoubtedly come as a loss to Americans as well as that US was in favor average to high prices; "with the rise in oil prices to over \$50, America will be able to continue investment in shale reserves.

He underlined that stability in crude prices at higher levels could help develop the American oil industry and increase shale oil production; "accordingly, selling of eight million barrels of oil stored in American oil reserves marks a purely commercial policy."

Trump backs high crude prices

In response to a question whether Donald Trump's policy of energy independence and the soar in shale output aimed to reduce America's oil dependence, NIOC's former governor at OPEC explained that crude oil consumption in the US stood at an average of 18 to 19 million barrels per day.

"The average volume of oil production in America has been estimated to be lower than 10 million barrels per day," highlighted the official stressing that Washington would not be able to fill the gap between supply and demand in the short run.

He further underlined that America's oil output would never go up by mere slogans adding "American oil firms need to make new investments which in turn require stability in crude prices at higher levels."

The analyst reiterated that at lower prices, Americans would have no inclination towards increased production of oil, shale oil in particular, saying "US' Energy Information Administration has predicted that Washington's oil production in 2017 will rise by about 110 thousand barrels per day."

"With a 100-thousand increase, Americans will never be able to reach energy independence in the short run," noted the official commenting that "US Republicans have traditionally pursued the policy of increasing oil prices and the figures have enjoyed higher levels whenever Republicans were in the office."

Khatibi said American firms would favor oil prices over 60 dollars a regards making new investments while lower price figures would fall into disfavor with them.

He went on to note that a boost in activities of American companies during Trump's presidency could lead to an uplift in the country's energy demands; "the upsurge in demands will take place not only in the oil market but also in other sectors like coal, natural gas and petroleum products," he concluded |

By: M. H. Azari, M. Zaman Khani

The uplift in America's LNG exports has tightened restrictions against Qatar as the world's largest exporter of the product thus giving Iran the upper hand in gas recovery from South Pars joint field.

Nowadays, the US has taken up the leading role in the world's oil and gas markets as evidenced by the fact that even a consensus between OPEC and non-OPEC countries has exerted the minimum effect on development of the industry in the US.

Consequently, when limitations ahead of crude oil exports in the US were eliminated in Barak Obama's government, the few-dollar rise in oil prices which climbed to 50-55 dollars per barrel has offered a new opportunity to the American oil and gas industry for lifting its output capacities.

At the present time, America's oil production has soared to nine million barrels per day (bpd) 40 per cent of which is recovered and released from unconventional resources. Estimations reveal that, in view of Donald Trump's pro-independence policies in the energy sector will bring about an increase in America's production capacity for at least four years of his presidency with unconventional resources high on agenda.

The rise in US crude output will directly stimulate demand in the global market in a way that the slightest fluctuation in volume of America's oil reserves will affect crude price.

US-Qatar gas rivalry

In addition to crude oil, Americans have now turned into a full-fledged contender in the field of natural gas production and exports among major countries exporting gas and LNG.

Whence, American projects for production and exports of LNG are being implemented and becoming operational in a succession and companies like Britain's Royal-Dutch Shell and Korea Gas Corporation (KOGAS) have inked 25-year contracts with US firms for LNG purchases.

Cheniere's Sabine Pass liquefaction terminal in Louisiana, the first of its kind to ship US shale gas overseas, managed

Iran in catbird seat thanks to US-Qatar gas rivalry



to export 11 cargos only in December 2016 to countries like China, Japan and South Korea as Asia's largest gas markets.

In the meantime, Americans take advantage of the rise in gas prices in Henry Hub and Asian markets by transferring the cheaper gas of the former market to the more expensive market of North East Asian and selling it.

Estimates show that by the end of 2017, America's LNG export capacity will increase to about 14 million tons; a capacity building which, both directly and indirectly, will threaten gas markets of Qatar as the world's largest exporter of LNG.

Meanwhile, countries like Malaysia, Australia and some African countries including Guinea and Mozambique need to be considered as suppliers of LNG who are also likely to foster the competition in the market.

Russia enjoying the upper hand in European gas market

Despite the fact that position of Qatar as the world's largest LNG seller has been put at risk and the littoral state south of the Persian Gulf has become extremely generous by offering discounts and significant advantages to consumers and customers in India, China, Japan and South Korea, still, Russians enjoy the leading role in the European gas market.

In order to conduct gas exports to Europe, the US needs to pay costs of gas liquefaction and sea transport which equal several cents per cubic meter. Thus, Russians are in a better position in the gas market since they can deploy the product across Europe by merely using a few-hundred-kilometer pipeline.

What's more, existence of multiple routes for gas exports to North, East and Southeast Europe by Russians, has given them the bargaining power over countries like Ukraine, which is a barrier to the transmission of Russian gas. Presently, Russians enjoy the upper hand as regards gas exports to Europe.

Reports by international credible institutions show that the volume of Russian gas exports to Europe rose by 12.5 percent in 2016 and the country has reached the record high figure of transferring 180 billion cubic meters of gas to Europe.

Yet another noteworthy point is that the share of Russian gas in Europe's gas supply basket increase by three percent to reach 34 per cent by the end of 2016.

In addition, Europe's gas imports soared last year as the figure for 2016 indicated a 6% upsurge as compared to 2015 and hit 450 billion cubic meters.

Meanwhile, a report by BP (British Petroleum) also shows that the market remains as a secure market with a high demand for exporters as well as that trading volume of gas through pipelines →

will have become sevenfold by 2035.

Plummeting gas prices in regional markets

Gas prices in transactions leading up to January 23, 2017 followed a downward trend in all markets excluding one and it seems that even strengthening and stabilization of oil prices in the range of 55 dollars a barrel has so far failed to bring price stability to the gas market.

OPEC Affairs Department of the Iranian Ministry of Petroleum, in a report, announced that up to 23 January in North-East Asia market, price of spot LNG gas plummeted by 45 cents decreasing to 7.85 dollars per million British thermal unit (BTU).

In the South-West Europe market also spot LNG prices fell 25 cents to stand at 8.25 dollars per million BTU.

Also in America's Henry Hub market, spot natural gas prices have dropped to the range of three dollars and 14 cents to 20 cents per million BTU.

However, in the Britain's NBP market, spot price of natural gas has risen by 87 cents and been traded in the range of

seven dollars and 20 cents per million BTU due to increased seasonal demand.

Grounds ready for Iran to lift gas output

Although increased production and export of LNG in America marks bad news for the world's producers and exporters of gas, the rise in US LNG exports remains as more of a golden opportunity than a threat.

More LNG supply in the market by various countries especially America, will create more restrictions for Qatar as regards production and exports of gas in the form of LNG and given that demand has surpassed supply in LNG market, Qatar will be inevitably forced to curb its gas output from South Pars field.

Presently, nearly 90% of Qatari gas recovered from South Pars is supplied to LNG units as feedstock and with the rise in number of LNG suppliers in the market, Qatar will be forced to impose restrictions on gas production for marketing and sale purposes, a measure which will offer Iran the opportunity to recover and produce more gas from South Pars

joint field.

In the current situation, although Iran, apart from shipments to Turkey, holds no serious project to export gas or LNG, the recovered gas from South Pars holds extensive capabilities for use in industries, power stations, CNG stations, storage in underground tanks, injection into oil reservoirs as well as petrochemicals production.

On the other hand, the rise in share of natural gas in Iran's fuel and energy basket, will pave the path for exporting surplus of petroleum products, especially diesel, fuel oil and liquefied gas to regional and global markets.

In other words, although Iran is not a large gas exporter, it can take advantage of the halt in Qatar's gas recovery from South Pars in a bid to ship up to 600 thousand barrels per day of petroleum products in 2017.

Iran's gas production capacity at South Pars currently stands at about 500 million cubic meters per day though the figure is expected to hit 700 million cubic meters once remaining phases of the joint gas field come on stream |

Iran makes leap to seize fresh export markets

By: M.H. Azari, N. Ghadam Ahari

Iran is after bolstering trade ties with European countries as evidenced by the steep rise in share of EU states in the country's foreign trade.

In recent months, trade relations between Iran and European countries have expanded and majority of EU members seek to gain a share in the Iranian market as well as to deepen commercial ties with Iranian businessmen.

Czech Republic, for instance, had conducted negotiations with Iran's economic activists over the past three years and intends to reinvigorate trade relations with Iranian traders. Efforts by officials of the two countries brought about 52 million dollars of trade turnover between the two sides in 2015 indicating a 50% rise as compared to the earlier year. What's more, volume of trade turnover between Iran and Czech experienced

a 25% growth in the first 11 months of 2016 and climbed to 59.139 million dollars while the figure for the corresponding period in the previous year stood at 47.433 million dollars.

A brief look at conditions of Czech Republic reveals that the European state holds a population of about 10.6 million people with a Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of around 182 billion dollars. Moreover, the GDP growth rate of the European state reached 3.9 percent in 2015.

Presently, the national per capital income of Czech stands at 18,200 dollars on the basis of a purchasing power of 27,600 dollars while the country's inflation rate was 0.5 percent in 2015. A total budget of 48.8 billion euros has been allocated for Czech in 2017 while its government is facing a 2.2-billion-euro deficit.

GDP growth rate of Czech Republic

was about 2.4 percent in 2014, climbed to about 3.9% in 2015 and reached 4 per cent in the first six months of 2016. Inflation rate for 2015 stood at about 0.5% though it was reduced to around 0.3 percent in the first half of 2016.

Industrial production of Czech has risen by 8.1 percent as compared with the previous year. In addition, manufacturing of motor vehicles, trailers and semi-trailers increased by 16% and automakers enjoyed a 2.9% share in the 8 percent of growth in industrial production. Manufacturing of machinery and equipment also increased by 15 percent.

As announced by the association of Czech exporters, the European country's exports volume will soar by 4% by the end of the current year with the most important export destinations being Germany, Slovakia, Britain, America, France and Poland.





The association has pointed to Iran and Cuba as new and interesting markets for Czech exporters and noted that further development of exports in the current and following years will be subject to political issues in North Africa, the Middle East and Greece.

Top trade partners of Czech Republic in order of trade volume include Germany, Slovakia, China, Poland, France, Italy, England, Austria, the Netherlands, Hungary, Russia, America, Spain, Belgium, Switzerland, South Korea, Romania and Sweden. Also, major trade partners in the Middle East are Azerbaijan, UAE, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Qatar, Georgia, Oman, Kuwait, Lebanon and Iran. Zionist regime also marks a trade partner of Czech Republic.

The volume of economic exchanged between Czech Republic and Iran's neighbors in 2015 were three billion and 180 million dollars with Turkey, about one billion and 176 million dollars with Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan about 685 million dollars, about 897 million dollars with Emirates and Saudi Arabia about 620 million dollars.

Eagerness of Iranian and Czech businessmen formed the impetus for an Iranian economic delegation to travel to Prague at the invitation of Czech's National Confederation of Industries. The delegation is headed by Chairman of

Tehran chamber of commerce industries Mines and agriculture (TCCIMA) Masoud Khansari who is accompanied by more than 30 Iranian companies in the fields of machinery, equipment and mining industry, heavy industry, pharmaceuticals, medical devices, renewable energy, and environmental technologies.

The delegation, during a three-day stay in the capital of Czech Republic, will make visits to car, renewable energy, food and pharmaceutical factories. The joint meeting of the Iranian and Czech delegations will be also held within the three days with participation TCCIMA members as well as officials of the Confederation of Czech Industry.

Previously, a 20-strong delegation of Czech's Chamber of Commerce along with Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Martin Tlapa visited Tehran in September in 2014 when four agreements were signed between the two sides in Tehran, Tabriz and Isfahan. Later that year, another delegation travelled to Tehran and two major contracts were inked between Tehran and Prague.

Also in April 2015, an economic delegation comprising directors of 21 Czech firms visited Iran and held separate meetings with senior Iranian officials.

Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic Lubomír Zaorálek also led a huge delegation to Tehran later in

2014 and momentous agreements were made between entrepreneurs of the two countries. Nevertheless, the visit of Iran's Economy Minister Ali Tayebnia to Czech marked a turning point in economic relations of the two sides since the deal for elimination of extra tax was inked between the two sides and the draft of document to support mutual foreign investment was prepared.

Also in January 2016, minister of industry and trade of the Czech, along with representatives of about 65 companies, visited Tehran and Tabriz, where in addition to signing industrial cooperation contracts, the two sides reached fruitful agreements in areas of heavy industry and machinery. During the visit, agreements were signed between Iranian and Czech companies in the field of mining and mineral collaborations.

Over the past three years, several measures have been taken to promote joint economic cooperation between Iran and Czech Republic one being formation of a trilateral chamber of commerce among Czech, Iran and Slovakia. Yet another noteworthy measure was holding of the first Joint Economic Commission between the two countries in December, 2016 in Prague, a summit which covered various sectors of industry and mining, energy, finance and banking in addition to health and agriculture |

Iran's steel market in 'New Normal' era

By: Mohammad Hossein Azari

Steel industry of Iran, en route to realizing 55 million tons of output by the year 2025, is faced with abundance of ups and downs which require careful planning.

Holding of the 7th Iran Steel Market Conference (ISMC) on February 14-15 in Tehran provided the impetus for reviewing present opportunities and challenges in the country's steel industry as well as analyzing venues for reaching envisaged goals in the 6th five-year National Development Plan (NDP).

The international event was attended by over a thousand domestic and foreign activists in the steel market or related industries. Key figures who made presentations in the opening ceremony included Minister of Industries, Mines and Trade Mohammadreza Nematzadeh, Deputy Minister and Chairman of Board of Iranian Mines and Mining Industries Development and Renovation Organization (IMIDRO) Mehdi Karbasian, Former Speaker of the Iranian Parliament Ali Akbar Nategh Nouri, Deputy Minister and Chairman of the Board of Islamic Republic of Iran Railways (abbreviated RAI) Saeid Mohammadzadeh as well as Managing Director of Iran Mercantile Exchange (IME) Hamed Soltaninejad.

Also, Italy's Danieli CEO Gianpietro Bendetti, Managing Director of Spain's Sarralle Equipos Siderogicos Javier Esquiroz, CEO of Germany's SMS Group Burkhard Dahmen, Russia's INTECO Chairman and CEO Harald Holzgruber as well as Market Analyst in Turkish Steel Exporters Association Cihan Akdeniz were foreign guests who presented lectures on the opening day of ISMC 2017.

Steel industry plays a major role in economic growth and sustainable development in most countries including Iran. The Iranian government has therefore put development of the influential



industry high on its agenda as evidenced by the significance of steel market in the 6th NDP. Moreover, the target of realizing 8.8% of economic growth will undoubtedly increase the demand for steel product.

As agreed by CEOs of giant steel companies from various countries in the conference, a lack of congruence exists between current steel output figures and the dormant capacity for production and exports of a wide range of products in the supply chain of the influential material. In other words, although the capacity existed for the steel sector to flourish, Iran's main focus, at least until a few year ago, was mainly on direct exports of raw materials extracted from mines.

In his brief speech at the conference, Industry Minister Nematzadeh recalled that when the incumbent government took office, the steel chain was incomplete and malfunctioning as the country, despite enjoying unlimited resources, remained an importer of a wide variety of products in the supply chain. He further stressed that image of Iran as a sole importer of steel products was not holding true anymore as the country has now climbed to the 16th position in the global ranking of major exporters by deploying 18 million tons of steel to world markets. The official, while putting the audience on the guard that sanctions have made things less predictable, voiced optimism that Iran's 2025 prospect of building the capacity for 55 million tons of steel will become realized.

Goals and Achievements

Former Parliament Speaker Nategh Nouri opened his remarks at the conference by quoting Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) who said 'seek knowledge even if you have to go as far as china' to emphasize that gaining knowledge was incumbent upon every Muslim. He used the hadith to stress that obtaining domestic goals in steel sector would prove impossible unless multilateral cooperation is boosted with the world.

Indeed, any progressive measure in the steel industry will lead to employment opportunities as well that annual steel consumption marks a major index for developed countries. On that account, the Iranian government is seeking to treble the country's steel output by increasing the figure from 16.1 million tons of 2015 to 55 million tons in the year 2025, a goal which is theoretically feasible in view of existing capacities though certain challenges need to be tackled for it to be fully achieved.

Iran's steel industry, with nearly five decades of experience, these days takes the path of developing the sector based on geographical, natural and economic circumstances. Fortunately, serious efforts have been made to avoid non-professional and non-scientific decisions for progress. Recent measures have brought about noteworthy outcomes in the field as the Iranian industry experienced 45% of growth in the first nine months of the current Iranian calendar year leading to January 2017. Moreover, ➡

the first ever sponge iron plant of Iran came on stream two months ago while several exploration projects are still underway. A three-million-ton plant has been also constructed in Gol-e-Gohar to turn Iran into an exporter of steel sheets to Europe. Several steel giants, including Italy's Danieli, Spain's Sarralle Equipos Siderogicos, Germany's SMS Group and Russia's INTECO, have been actively participating in the Iranian industry though they seek to bolster ties with Iran. As such, Danieli Persia plant has been constructed in a joint venture between Iran and Italy and will begin production in April 2017. The plant will mark the biggest steel factory in the Middle East and will be operated only by Iranian engineers, as asserted by Danieli CEO Gianpietro Bendetti.

Despite the global recession in steel recession, Iran managed to achieve a growing trend in the year 2015. In a broader view, the growth rate for Iran has been 10% while the global figure has stood at only one per cent. Iran has also obtained considerable achievements in the mine discovery

As announced by Mr. Nematzadeh, the country's 'Steel Comprehension Plan', which comprises obligations to achieve the goal set in prospective document of steel industry in 2025 horizon, is being implemented while at the same time being modified to comply with world's changing conditions.

Opportunities

Iran remains a big market in mineral and energy sectors and the fact that it is now placed among top 15 steel producers indicates that the country's industry is practically and competitively ready to achieve intended goals. All keynote speakers at ISMC 2017 unanimously agreed that, despite certain challenges, the Iranian market holds a prosperous future thanks to numerous opportunities available at various levels.

For one thing, Iran possesses nominal capacity to manufacture 68 types of steel which can be recovered in a bid to produce more value added, boost national production and reduce reliance on foreigners.

Managing Director of Spain's Sarralle Equipos Siderogicos Javier Esquiroz enumerated Iran's strengths and its potentials for growth including diversified economy, highly scientific and educated human resources and a huge consuming class. Other features were vast urban population, the strategic location of the country and the age-old entrepreneurial tradition ongoing in the society.

These factors all indicate the business environment is following a positive and upward trend in recent years. This is attested by the words of Mr. Esquiroz who said "all facilities at South Kaveh Steel (SKS) Complex, as a subsidiary of Sarralle, have been manufactures in Iran and by local producers."

He further voiced his company's eagerness to make presence in various sectors as it has a hand also in power houses, water and slag treatment plants as well as zinc recovery factories, which in turn indicates increased willingness of foreign investors for participating in Iran. Sarralle CEO also expressed readiness of Spanish banks to finance Iranian projects which can be deemed as a golden opportunity at a time when 30 billion dollars of investment is required to complete steel chain from mining to production.

Danieli MD Bendetti, for his part, deemed low production costs as the main advantage of the Iranian steel market. He stressed that steel production in Iran was 15% less expensive than the global figure and 25 per cent lower than the figure for the US. Moreover, as maintained by IMIDRO head, natural gas is supplied to steel production plants and lower gas prices will surely lead to better steel industry.

CEO of Germany's SMS Group Burkhard Dahmen pointed to the constructive measures taken by IMIDRO who has conducted several studies not only for expanding the mineral sector but also for better exploitation of steel in automotive and petrochemical industries. He also maintained that exports of Iranian oil to Europe have drastically improved market conditions. SMS Group, which has now spread out to 50 →



locations in the world, has been present in Iran since 1970 when it constructed the first major steel production centers here. The German company, while still holding ties with Mobarakeh Steel Company, is seeking to conduct joint venture with Iranian counterparts through long-term cooperation in various arenas line spare parts, services, maintenance and repair. The project to expand Hormozgan Steel Company (HOSCO) in Bandar Abbas and Khayam Steel Complex in Neyshabur mark other instances of the German company's presence in Iran.

Yet another asset enjoyed by the Iranian steel industry pertains to the developments made by Iran Mercantile Exchange (IME). Managing Director of IME Hamed Soltaninejad, while underscoring IME's functionality in national economy, reported on addition of iron ore to world commodity exchanges saying "steel has experienced the greatest growth in global exchange markets. The official further pointed to improvements made in IME over 14 years of activity including appearance of spot contracts, commodity funds, Standard Parallel Salam contract (SPS) and above all futures and options contracts. Soltaninejad proposed the idea of using CDR contracts in the steel industry and invited foreign producers to take part in IME given its high capacity.

Challenges

Almost all lecturers at ISMC 2017, while acclaiming exceptional merits of the Iranian steel industry, acknowledged that certain obstacles exited in the path of an ideal condition. Perhaps the toughest bottleneck faced by the global market is the emergence of 'New Normal Era' introduced by Mr. Benedetti, Managing Director of Danieli. In order to explain the big picture faced by the global steel industry and markets today, he sketched out a graph of global steel consumption over time. The illustration started with the growth in demand during reconstruction after the end of the Second World War, saw the impact of the 1970s oil crisis, the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and subsequent dismantling of the Soviet Union and then a plateau in consumption at the end of the last millennium. "For ten years, we continued to consume 700 million tons per year (tpy) of steel." Then we had

China from 2000 and 'boom'," he reminded adding "now we have 'the new normal.'" He emphasized that a huge rise was being observed in output while still consumption was going down the hill for various reasons like ageing and decrease of population, rise in popularity of electric vehicles, the growth in use of plastics and carbon-fiber. Also, physical strength of steel will become ever stronger, and consequently tonnage consumed will decrease. "So, to conclude, this trend of 'the new normal' is a big question mark and I believe that the number of tons will decrease. Today we have overcapacity for steel production of 30% and it is my opinion that overcapacity will further increase." "So we have a new normal that is worse than 1970-2000 for the reasons I have explained," he added stressing that constructing new plants was not a logical idea and expressed hope the mini-mill and micro-mill concept will flourish again and offered more regional production as a suitable solution to challenges of the new normal era since transporting steel products over long distances, from developed countries which have a less demand to emerging economies with higher demands, is not feasible any longer.

To talk more specifically about the Iranian steel market, old technology used in plants remains as a major barrier to reaching desirable output levels. Furthermore, in view of the current situation of water stress condition and prolonged droughts, considerable pressure is placed on the way of development of steel industry since water supply is one of the most fundamental infrastructures of the Iranian industry and requires careful attention and planning.

Another barriers pertains to bureaucratic restrictions and frequent changes made to regulations which hinder activities of steel exporters. Also, although, Iran's access to open waters can be a significant opportunity for development of steel industry, given the limited drought in southern ports of Iran, vessels with over 150000 tons of capacity cannot berth there and the issue is likely to reduce competitiveness of Iran against other countries who pursue goals of steel exports.

What's more, the role of transportation in any industry as target of the

country's development cannot be ignored. Head of Iran Railways (RAI) Saeid Mohammadzadeh pointed to serious challenges in rail sector and called for lifting rail capacity in time with boosting output. He said despite Leader's emphasis on transferring goods from road to rail, we still observe low share of rail in goods transport. "Disputes between road and rail authorities need to be settled," highlighted the official emphasizing the need to increase capacity of mineral carriages, reopening of disused stations, raising financial resources as well as electrification of railways.

Moreover, foreign investors also seek investment security above anything else before entering the Iranian market. Iran not being a member of World Trade Organization (WTO) is yet another issue at stake which was pointed to by the Turkish market analyst Cihan Akdeniz. He also found it surprising why additional import taxes, as an additional burden, existed in Iran since the country enjoys several advantages like low energy costs and can easily compete in global markets.

Requirements

Therefore, in view of above-mentioned opportunities and challenges, high-ranking participants of ISMC believed that the time was ripe for blooming of the Iranian steel industry though the objective required raw material producers and policy makers to work hand in hand and take the most out of post-sanction chances. As put by the Iranian industry minister, recent year developments are 'just the beginning of a long process.'

Mohammadreza Nematzadeh called for more value added by discovering and exploiting underground mines in addition to ordinary ones. Deepening ties with international banks, strengthening of downstream sector in steel industry and production of stainless steel were further steps urged by the official. Other measures recommended by industry minister included lowering of energy and utility consumption as well as manufacturing of special steel directed to specific demands of customers.

Mr. Nategh Nouri called for less reliance on oil revenues on the grounds that oil-based economy proves harmful in the long run. He therefore referred ➡



to the need to attract domestic and foreign investors to other sectors including steel industry. The former speaker of Iran's Parliament said technology was fast-moving and that meeting requirements of buyers, increasing quality, adding variety and complying with latest standards were essential requirements for remaining in the global market.

Javier Esquiroz, for his part, suggested making huge domestic and foreign investment in a bid to improve productivity. He also underscored the importance of gaining know-how and improving management skills. Strengthening financial systems and upgrading infrastructures were also advocated by Sarralle CEO.

In view of Italy's Danieli CEO, proper steps to be taken in the 'new normal era' include lifting quality, improving customer services while reducing operating expense (Opex). Gianpietro Bendetti also noted the possibility to promote plant utilization from the current 72% to 95 per cent by taking the Italian firm's technological packages which can boost casting speed and bring about create smart plants with the ability to produce steel at a wide variety of grades and di-

mensions.

CEO of Germany's SMS Group Burkhard Dahmen underlined that any development would require support of both private and public sectors. He also urged authorities to back the process of bolstering banking relations with European monetary institutions.

As for supplying the required amount of water, considering current condition of drought in the country, it would be hopeless or even impossible to use underground water anymore. Therefore, alternative solutions need to be considered like using agriculture portion of water in industry, urban waste water treatment, reuse of industrial wastewater and seawater desalination for neighbors and even transferring it to target areas. Meanwhile, lack of attention to geographical location of construction of new plants in steel chain can cause irreversible damages.

One more issue to consider while building the capacity of 55 million tons is the transfer of new applications to southern coasts. This is due to the access to water and energy and price reduction complies a geopolitical and economic logic. In addition, modification, upgrad-

ing or deployment of new technologies to reduce energy consumption, especially water, is the vital need of steep output in Iran. To this end, cooperation has been launched with Japanese companies that have working experience in DRI plants in Iran. One the project is accomplished, ten million tons of steel production capacity in Iran will reduce water consumption up to 40% which is a vital consideration due to the country's climate conditions.

On the other hand, development of any industry, steel in particular, will be impossible without expansion of infrastructure. Over the past years, Iran has made efforts to construct or develop ports and elevate share of rail transport as evidenced by the Sangam-Khaf steel railway though further measures are required. Capacity of SEZs, including Persian Gulf Special Economic Zone, also needs to rise by attractive investment.

To recapitulate, transferring steel to southern coasts, use of new technologies and development of infrastructure are basic steps for reducing costs of production, transportation and also manufacturing and supplying competitive products like steel |

New chapter in Iran-Russia trade ties

By: Mohammad Hossein Azari

Recently, a 300-strong Russian trade delegation visited Iran and seminal commercial agreements were inked between Tehran and Moscow who have set out to reach unprecedented levels in bilateral turnover.

The visit of the huge Russian delegation to Iran, which came as a sequel to Iranians' visit to Moscow in February, is promising of stronger commercial relations between Tehran and Moscow.

Iran and Russia enjoy age-old strategic and irrevocable relations in the international and regional levels though their collaboration has been more of a political nature than an economic one.

In other words, Russia remains as Iran's most important political partner though the two sides lack appropriate trade and economic ties hence the efforts in recent years aim to find venues for expansion of economic collaborations between the two parties.

The need for closer economic ties between the two countries was better felt after the European Union (EU) im-

posed sanctions against Moscow and it was when Russian traders voiced eagerness for cooperation with Iran's private sector though certain barriers, including high tariffs and lack of familiarity with the Russian market, prevented elevation of trade ties between the two parties.

With Rouhani having assumed the power, there has been a giant leap forward in bilateral trade and economic ties between Iran and Russia which culminated since then; both countries saw a low point of a little more than 1 billion dollars in 2013.

Meanwhile, the volume of bilateral trade between Tehran and Moscow is still standing at the very small figure of 1.5 billion dollars, a figure which has remained constant due to trade and banking barriers.

Iranian and Russian senior officials, including President Hassan Rouhani and Vladimir Putin have repeatedly emphasized the fact that expansion of ties between Tehran and Moscow plays an important role in ensuring regional peace and stability.

Nevertheless, recent commutes between the two sides are indications of

a joint effort by Tehran and Moscow to bolster commercial relations as they are experiencing an unparalleled period of time of their relations.

It could therefore be inferred that both sides, in addition to strengthening of ties to fight with non-regional powers and certain regional states who have threatened stability in the region by shaping and supporting terrorism, are after reinvigoration of economic cooperation between one another.

Russia has on agenda to accelerate its trade cooperation with Iran and to raise the trade volume to annual staggering figure of 4 billion dollars. Experts in Moscow would see that prospect bright, since Iran provides low-cost transportation which is at the same time diverse.

In line with the recent efforts to bolster bilateral relations, a Russian delegation, comprising numerous people from 180 firms, arrived in Tehran to conduct face-to-face meetings with state and private sectors of Iran.

The presence of Russia's biggest trade delegation in Iran targeted to increase the level of trade turnover between the two countries to 10 billion dollars. ➔



Vice Chairman of Iran-Russian Chamber of Commerce Ghadir Ghiafeh said the delegation was visiting Tehran in the form of a joint commission on economic, cultural and scientific cooperation between Iran and Russia; "the commission aims to boost ties with a panel of private and state sectors while specialized committees will be in charge of investigating various subjects," he had noted prior to the visit.

Russians had identified Iran's capacities in different areas as regards meeting their demands and the visiting board sought to find trade partners and launch cooperation on technology transfer.

A relevant conference was also held at presence of 500 to 600 Iranian economic activists to discuss venues for reinvigoration of ties between the two sides.

The parties also touched upon issues like oil, gas, petrochemical and financing of projects in addition to looking for solutions to banking issues as the main obstacle to development of bilateral cooperation.

While calling for formation of broker relations between banks of each other, Tehran and Moscow also touched upon non-oil exports by exchanging views between Iranian and Russian authorities.

"Russia enjoys excellent capacities in various economic sectors," stressed vice chairman of Iran-Russia Chamber of Commerce saying that share of Iran in Russia's import volume stood at the negligible figure of 350 to 450 million dollars.

He maintained the Iranian traders lacked proper familiarity with the Russian market urging state and private sectors of both sides to spare no effort in introducing their potentials.

Ghiafeh recalled that volume of trade turnover between Tehran and Russia has become eightfold in the current year though the figure is still considered as insignificant.

The official further underscored that currencies of both countries were affected by global market which made it difficult to use local currencies instead of dollar for monetary transactions.

The recent visit also led to signing Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) in numerous fields including commerce, gas in addition to removal of exports tariffs for 24 categories of commodities which will greatly assists Iranian traders.

The Iran-Russia Economic Commission mainly addressed effective imple-

mentation of Putin-Rouhani strategy to boost bilateral trade.

The 13th joint commission, which was unprecedented in recent years by Iran and Russia, was headed by Iran's Mahmoud Vaezi, Minister of Information Technology and Russia's Minister of Energy Alexander Novak who arrived in Tehran on Sunday along his entourage, among whom were important entrepreneurs.

Russian quota in the economic commission was 270 participants and a workgroup was in charge of addressing issues in energy and telecommunications, new opportunities in sectors, and implementation of past agreements. Prior to the event, Iran's Ambassador to Moscow Mehdi Sanaei had already negotiated with Novak construction by Russian contractors of Bandar Abbas thermal power plant worth €1.29bn, along with other projects which included metrology, standardization, good quality assessment, and other projects of private sector.

Tehran session also sought to make efficient the legal and official frameworks of bilateral cooperation; on the sidelines of the event, a 1-day session of tradesmen and heads of 200 companies was held, where Russia participated with 320 members, which turned the session into the greatest ever such congregation of businessmen in the history of bilateral relations.

All in all, the most considerable outcome of the joint session was signing of nine joint cooperation agreements in a wide variety of areas between Iran and Russia.

The agreements were sealed by Iran's Mahmoud Vaezi and the Russian Energy Minister Alexander Novak as heads of the 13th Joint Economic Commission between the two countries.

Insurance, banking and finance

Accordingly, two cooperation documents were inked between Export Insurance Agency of Russia (EXIAR) and Iran's private sector. Additionally, another MoU was signed between Institute of Standard and Industrial Research of Iran (ISIRI) and Federal Agency for Technical Regulation and Metrology of Russia.

National Iranian Gas Company (NIGC) and Russia's Gazprom also hit an accord aimed at bolstering cooperation in gas industry. Moreover, three compacts

were formed between Iranian and Russian industry ministers over expansion of the industrial roadmap between the two parties.

Other deals were inked between Joint Business Councils and Chambers of Commerce of Iran and Russia as well as one which aimed to finance Iran's thermal power plant projects.

Also on the sidelines of the 13th joint commission, Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) were sealed to finance electrification projects in Garmsar-Incheh Borun railway.

The final accord between Iran and Russia pertained to the MoU of the 13th Joint Economic Commission between the two countries which were signed by Iran's Vaezi and Russia's Novak.

Yet, oil industry had the lion's share during the visit by Russians since joint session also established the first ever joint energy commission to bolster ties in the energy sector.

Indeed, Iranian Oil Minister Bijan Zanganeh and Russian Energy Minister Alexander Novak began their meeting behind closed door before the economic mission officially got underway.

Oil contracts

During a follow-up press conference, Iran's Oil Minister Bijan Zanganeh reported on signing research and development MoUs with Russian firms like Lukoil, Tatneft, Zarubezhneft and Gazprom for expansion of seven Iranian oilfields including Mansouri, Ab Teimour, Aban, West Paydar, Dehloran, Cheshmeh Khoshk and Chenguleh.

The documents cover the cooperation in oil exploration and extraction, the development of oil fields, petrochemical production swaps, gas deliveries cooperation and cooperation in the sphere of oil facilities production technologies.

He also appreciated Russia's constructive role in the recent OPEC meeting saying "the accord between OPEC and non-OPEC producers holds greater significance than figures or numbers since it leads to a healthy and balanced market, a fact which has been realized by the market."

Zanganeh voiced Iran's readiness to launch cooperation with Russian oil firms adding "development of oil fields and boosting recovery factor remain as main axes of negotiations with the Rus- ➔

sian side.”

The official emphasized that Iran sought to assign developmental projects for seven oilfields to Russian companies; “so far, Memoranda of Understanding have been signed with several companies on development of seven Iranian oil fields.”

As regards banking cooperation, several commission meetings were conducted during the Russians’ stay in which barriers were dealt with and future plans were talked over and good agreements were fortunately reached as evidenced by two banking documents which were inked.

Accordingly, foreign branches of banks will be established in both states in a bid to overcome one major issue faced by traders, which is absence of broker relations between Tehran and Moscow in addition to the fact that banks of each side had no branches in the other country.

Nevertheless, the issue of replacement of dollar with rial and ruble was also raised during bilateral negotiations though the currency replacement initiative demands certain mechanisms and despite the overall agreement, the process will continue until it becomes finalized.

On this topic, Novak said central banks and monetary institutions of the two countries have paved the path in this regard and money transfer is being performed.

Russian energy minister recalled that 10 major banks of Iran and Russia had embarked on the project as well as that a team was put in charge of tackling existing banking difficulties.

Also, both parties agreed that tariff obstacles in exports of goods to Russia faced by Iranian businessmen will be abolished once free trade agreement between the Eurasian Economic Union and Iran becomes finalized. Presently, export tariffs for 24 types of commodities have been removed paving the path for exports to Russia.

Other trade-related agreements between the two sides pertained to launching of customs green corridor, facilitation of visa issuance, resolving legal and banking issues, sealing MoUs on large-scale projects like to construction of Boushehr Power Plant and electrification of Iranian railways as well as allocation of a 2.5-billion-dollar credit to

proposals.

Aviation industry

Negotiations are also underway on sales of Sukhoi Superjet 100 (SSJ100) aircraft to Iran. The plane enjoys a special technology as it has been manufactured in partnership with several European companies like Italy and France.

Sukhoi Civil Aircraft Company (SCAC) had previously announced readiness to sell SSJ100 aircraft to Iran affirming “in case a sales contract is inked, the possibility for Iranians to enter the production process will be investigated.”

Nevertheless, Russia cannot be the final decision maker on sales of Sukhoi Superjet 100 to Iran though Russian media has announced earlier that Tehran and Moscow have reached primary agreement in the course of SSJ10 talks.

Agricultural cooperation

Russia is one of the suitable and huge markets for Iran’s agricultural products though grounds for elevation of exports of these products had not been prepared due to trade, economic reasons as well as structural weaknesses.

Other influential factors in this regard, in addition to trade costs, included economic and financial obstacles like banking issues as well as currency rate fluctuations. Along with trade and economic variables, poor logistics, lack of institutions or structured and systematic trade organizations have been among other problems on the path to commercial success in global markets, including Russia.

Nevertheless, the opening of a new chapter in cooperation between the two major regional countries seem to gradually alleviate obstacles leading to increased collaboration between Tehran and Moscow.

The issue is being followed up by Iranian and Russian officials and businessmen as they possess strong determination to surmount obstacles and it is hoped that recent measures would trigger further economic activities.

Outlooks

To recapitulate, in its recent visit to Iran, the Russian delegation signed nine agreements in industries ranging from energy to railways. Upon arrival in Tehran on December 18, Russia’s Ener-

gy Minister Alexander Novak outlined Moscow’s ambition to become a major investor in the Persian Gulf nation.

Later on Tuesday December 20, while speaking during one of many signing ceremonies, Novak said his country’s priority was to develop Iran’s big projects; “these agreements will have a significant influence on the relationship between our two countries,” he underscored.

It needs to be recalled that following the removal of international sanctions against Iran in January, countless economic delegations have visited Iran, which possesses a 400-billion-dollar economy. Yet, several international firms have abjured from inking final contracts with Tehran mainly due to the fact that certain sanction-related barriers are still force giving rise to hesitation of eager foreign parties who are also unsure about outcomes of Iranian elections in May.

Russian investors however seem to have an easier task for entering the Iranian market than European rivals like the UK, France or Germany since Russian banks are less affected by persisting US sanctions against Iran.

Iran has also nearly reached pre-sanction levels in crude oil production and exports following implementation of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). During a recent OPEC meeting, which ended in the agreement to cap oil output in a bid to bump up falling prices, Iran was given the authorization to go against the stream and increase its output by 90,000 barrels per day to a maximum of 3.8 million barrels per day as of the beginning of 2017.

Therefore, Iran has been looking for credible partners among international oil companies in order to develop oilfields and shore up production. Although agreements have been signed with Royal Dutch Shell Plc. and Total SA on development of several Iranian oil and gas fields, Russia also, during the recent visit, managed to secure a considerable place in developmental projects of the Iranian industry.

Finally, all the preliminary deals inked between Iran and Russia in energy, trade, finance, industry, mining and agriculture fields could end up in final contracts worth 10 billion dollars, an aim which is being seriously pursued by both sides |



Culture

Iraqi theater scene wading steadfastly through hardships

By: Marjohn Sheikhi

The international section of the 35th edition of Fajr International Theater Festival opened with a two-man performance from Iraq on Saturday, January 21, in Tehran.

The first thing that comes to mind of many, upon hearing the name of this Arab country, is unfortunately a picture of war, conflict, struggle and of course immigration. Few would even wonder about the condition of art and culture in a country gripped with war and terrorism since 2014. That is why I took this golden opportunity to get a firsthand experience of the theater scene in Iraq. And the experience did not disappoint.

'Selfa' was unfamiliar to me only on the literal level and not on the concept. As it was explained to us prior to the performance, I learned that selfa was a popular concept in Iraq (as well as here in Iran), where a specific sum of money is collected from a number of individuals and kept by one person who then distributes the collected money to one registered person for every specified period of time. It is a private mechanism for giving loans to people who have invested their money. The selection of the person who will receive the whole sum at the time is done by making a draw. In this case, selfa functions similarly to lottery, but it is still a loan as you will have to pay the whole money back over time in several installments.

For this play, performers 'Ameer Abo Alheel' and 'Ahmed Sadoon' played selfa with the audience. Each of us were given a numbered ticket randomly with a subject and expression written on the back of it. I got number 77, subject: goal, expression: bored. Other subjects included war and immigration, and expressions included fear, happiness and sadness. The performers would call out a number and play a particular scene based on the subject and expression given to them. It was an interactive play that raised a very important issue: peo-



ple's inner struggles in the face of war, their goals and aspirations and the ever present sense of fear, sadness, happiness and boredom while dealing with them.

After the play, I caught up with the group's production manager, Hella Mewis, for a short interview. It surprised me that she was from Germany and had been living in Baghdad for the last four years. "My main focus is on promoting the young generation in Iraq," she said with firm determination in her intelligent eyes. "Because they are the future of the country. The young generation still has a lot of power and potential. They want to be more active, not just on the art scene but in every other sphere in Iraq. They all possess a lot of power to change things for the better."

"Immigration is the main concern of the play," she said while talking about 'Selfa'. "A wave of migration swept across war-stricken countries like Iraq in the last two years; people who wished to change their lives for the better, who wanted to have a normal life away from war and terror. But when Europe opened its doors to refugees, a lot of our friends left Iraq through the illegal way and we lost many at the sea."

"Ameer and Ahmed were thinking that they have to talk about this. Not all the young generation, not everybody in Iraq, wants to leave. But how can we ac-

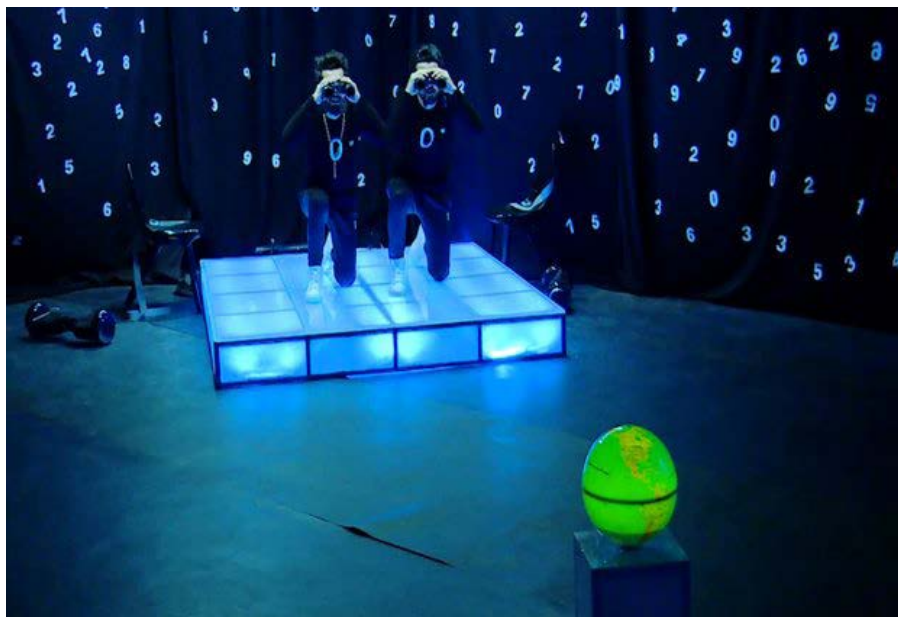
tually keep the people inside the country? We need to start to talk about it."

"Art, and specially theater, can create an awareness. 'Selfa' in Baghdad was a big success. A lot of people came to see it. It was a healing, a kind of therapy for them. Because they saw on the stage something that they might have been thinking about but never got a chance to actually voice it out. The country cannot move forward if all the people leave. We need to start from the ground up to build the country. And we need to change our perspectives for doing so."

"Selfa means we all have the responsibility to bring the country forward. And that can only be achieved if we choose to stay and try to make changes. Not to leave," she said.

I was amazed and moved by her absolute faith in the people and the force behind her words and eyes that drove her to be a part of this community and dedicate her time and efforts to make this dream a reality. "So what moved you toward this mission?," I ask her. She placed her hand on her chest, "my heart."

"When I first came to Baghdad, it was in 2010," she continues. "As soon as I put my foot on the ground I knew I was home. Baghdad feels like home to me. And in some ways, it is similar to Tehran, all the beautiful architecture and very nice people. In Baghdad you can see and →



breathe the history."

Hella described the current status of the theater scene in Baghdad as "very difficult". "Since 2014 when ISIL took Mosul, there is no money left for culture at all. Everything goes into the war. And not just the cultural scene; every sphere in the country has cut a lot of money, so it's really difficult for the theater scene to thrive."

"But there are still some people, like this group, who do not wait for any kind of support," she looked back at the performers with pride. "They simply want to do something, and this is why I love these guys. They just want to do it, and sometimes if you really want to do something from the bottom of your heart, it could become a performance much bigger than a theater play with a lot of funding."

So why theater, despite all these difficulties? "I believe that theater can create much more awareness than any other art medium such a painting or even the cinema. Theater brings you close to the people; it's more interactive. And this is very important, especially in Iraq. Artists need to be directly involved with the community. You cannot put an Iraqi alone. It's impossible. That's why theater is very important for Iraq, not just for the art scene but for the ordinary people to understand a concept."

Excluding her, the whole touring crew for 'Selfa' were male. I asked her if there are any woman actresses on theater stages in Iraq. "Well, in countries such as Iraq or Syria, it's still difficult for ladies to

become an actress or a director. We do have some ladies who try to make it into the theater scene but the perception from the society puts a damper on their aspirations. You need a lot of power and determination to continue on this path. Then one day, you marry and the family or your husband has something against you working. So it's very difficult for women in Iraq to choose this style of living. It's not comparable at all with, let's say, Germany where they have it easy. In Iraq, you have to fight a lot. And the traveling also becomes an issue for women."

So, have you staged 'Selfa' anywhere else in the world? "No, actually Iran was the first. It's a relatively new play but we hope that we can perform it in other countries as well. We'll try to bring it to Germany and France next."

The play was a hit back in Iraq and the concept of immigration is all too familiar

with the Iranian audience. But how will the European audience take into 'Selfa'? "Well, they are now more familiar with the situation in Iraq as they are dealing with a lot of refugees at home and also listen to a lot of media coverage. However, if we perform it in another country, it's necessary that the whole text be translated and we need to make a 15, 20-minute introduction in advance of the performance to give more background information on the play so that people will understand it better."

I applauded her and the crew for bringing a piece of reality of life in Iraq to the people who are constantly fed with false and propagandist media coverage. She expressed sincere love for what she was doing as the patron of the arts in a country where war and terrorism have taken a lot from the people. "Even if it brings no money at all," she said with a smile. "This is all about humanity."

The 35th edition of Fajr International Theater Festival will run from 20-31 January, 2017, in Tehran.

Tarkib Baghdad Contemporary Arts Institute was founded in 2015 on the initiative of emerging artists from the Iraqi art and creative scene. Its members come from different fields including visual art, performing art, interior design, photography, film, music, literature and journalism. Tarkib's focus is directed at empowering the youth, especially women and too artworks that form a link between art and everyday life. The institute initiated and organizes the annual Takrib Baghdad Contemporary Arts Festival in charge of presenting the most important independent Iraqi theater productions by emerging artists |



Japanese dance group 'Siro-A' lights up Iranian stage at 35th FITF

By: Marjohn Sheikhi

The video projection dance group 'Siro-A' from Japan turned the theater stage in Tehran into a magical disco venue of optical illusions and techno music at the 35th Fajr International Theater Festival.

Just drop the name 'Japan' and I am all in. We grew up with a lot of Japanese anime on TV (Iranians have fond, nostalgic memories of the anime rendition of My Daddy Long Legs, Captain Tsubasa, Little Women and so many more) and played a lot of Nintendo games which were all in Japanese but never allowed the language obstacle to stop us from enjoying ourselves. Nowadays, few may still associate Japan with kimonos, cherry blossom trees or sushi when there is this tsunami of anime productions and video games flooding the world. To me, Japan is the successful integration of technology with social life, and the performance that I got the opportunity to watch on the fourth day of the 35th Fajr International Theater Festival was a perfect testament to that: Japan knows what it's doing with technology.

'Siro-A', as the name itself suggests, defies precise definitions and specific categories. 'Siro' is derived from Japanese word shiroi which means 'white, colorless', and the added 'A' stands for 'anonymous' which stresses the troupe's aspiration to be unique, belonging to no group and impossible to define.

The seven-member Japanese entertainment performance group, hailing from Sendai, Tokyo, gave the Iranian audience something truly magical to remember for a long while. As people began pouring into the Main Hall of Tehran's City Theater – the largest performing arts complex in the capital – the visual dance artists asked for volunteers to come up on the stage and pose for pictures in a number of specific positions. We didn't learn the purpose of the fun photo shoot until much later, when the performance came to an end



and the 'credits' started to roll. The audience were all charmed by the creativity of the artists' minds as they watched the taken photos projected on the blank screen on the stage to the energetic techno beats in a variety of interesting ways.

But first, let me go back to the beginning.

"Siro-A is a fusion of video projection, dance and comedy. It's a mixed entertainment show," the 39-year-old director, Cocoon, told me soon after the show ended.

I was so blown away by the sheer enormity of the artists' imagination and technique that I had to let Mr. Cocoon know, which resulted in our talks sounding more like me 'fangirling' over the show than conducting an actual interview.

"Oh, the Iranian audience showed much more enthusiasm and excitement for the show than I had imagined," he said in obvious delight. "They made a lot of noise in exhilaration and just went along with anything that we asked them to. The European audience, in contrast, were perhaps too polite and quite. But the reception here was really powerful."

Just as well. The fusion of astonishing visual and lighting effects, duplication, rainbow colors, and techno soundtracks lend Siro-A an international appeal, completely unhindered by language ob-

stacles. Everyone knows body language, dancing moves, and music.

The performance included a lot of references to Japanese pop culture, some of which familiar to the Iranian audience: the Super Mario game (which drew peels of delightful laughter from the audience), rhythmic tapping games (where you hit buttons on the game in sync with a song; I've played Taiwanese titles 'Deemo' and 'Voez' on iPhone but Japan has these cool arcade games like 'MaiMai' and 'Jubeat' that you should totally check out when you visit the country), Sega Genesis fighting games (I grew up playing lots of 'Mortal Kombat' with my brother), Snake game, and even that (in)famous earworm 'Pen-Pineapple-Apple-Pen' created by Japanese entertainer Kazuhiko Kosaka that went viral a few months ago.

"I was actually pretty anxious about including this part in our performance because I wasn't sure if the Iranian audience were familiar with it," he admitted, and I could go with an educated guess that many of them present in the theater hall had no idea why a pen, an apple and a pineapple were so important to be granted a part in the show. Most probably had come to this show with this notion in mind that they were going to watch a good old play with a solid

plot and relatable characters (unfortunately, adequate advertising and prior information on the shows have always been lacking in Fajr Theater Festival). But we Iranians definitely know how to have a good time, and even if we don't know what is exactly going on, we just go along with it for the fun.

I, for one, had some prior understanding of what kind of performance 'Siro-A' was going to be. I had been here last year for another Japanese play at Fajr Theater Festival: 'Shadow Game' by Dazzle Company which enjoyed its first international exposure to an enthusiastic reception from the Iranian audience. 'Shadow Game' was no traditional play, it was all hip hop and street dance, electronic music, role-playing video game and a charming, anime-like story. Seeing the similarities between these two brilliant Japanese performances, I wondered if this style of infusing dance and music on a theater stage was prevailing in Japan.

"Well, not really. This style is not that common in Japan, although using technology in the theater scene is getting more popular there," Artist Manager Yoshiko Maeda said. She was also kind enough to help with the Japanese translation of our talks whenever it was needed. "We have some groups in Japan that use technologies in their performance, but each group has a different, unique way of making use of technology. Dazzle, for instance, uses technology to deliver the drama, but we at Siro-A use technology to deliver on imagination and create visuals and optical illusions."

Technology has always had a darker side, as depicted in terrifying brilliance in the British science fiction television series 'Black Mirror'. Siro-A director, while admitting to the excessive dependence of humanity on technology, believed that technology could be used in our favor and not against us. And what they created through the wizardry of video projection definitely seemed to be on the positive side of technology.

"The main concept of our performance is human and technology," Cocoon explained. "We want to convey the enormity of human power to the audience via technology. Technology has advanced so much in the last few years and people depend too much upon it by

using smartphones, the internet, Artificial Intelligence, and so on. But it is the human power, say, the thinking power, creative power, physical power, that we want to show to the audience. And we believe that technology can help us expand on our human abilities."

Siro-A dance artists have brought their dazzling performance to as many as 20 countries such as Germany, Australia, Norway, UK, several other European countries, China, and other Asian countries. They even performed in the US, where the group appeared at the top-rated competition series 'America's Got Talent' back in 2015. The Japanese group wooed and awed and thrilled judges on the American show, they even got Piers Morgan's golden buzzer and made it all the way to the semi-finals with their indisputable international appeal.

While the Iranian audience were totally taken with the magical perfor-

mance, the juries of the Fajr Theater Festival may have set their eyes on a more traditional style of play than this flawless interweaving of technology and human body movement. Mr. Cocoon voiced keen interest in returning to Iran next year. I am keeping my fingers crossed for that to happen.

***SIRO-A** is a seven member Japanese entertainment performance group from Sendai, Japan. The group was formed in 2002, and has performed at various huge venues such as Venezia Young Art Performance in 2004, Expo 2010 Shanghai China, 2011 Edinburgh Fringe Festival, followed by their first European tour in Germany, Denmark, Austria, and France in 2012.*

The 35th edition of Fajr International Theater Festival ran from 20-31 January, 2017, in Tehran |



Flamenco giant 'Duquende' gets terrific applause at Fajr Music Fest.

By: Lachin Rezaian

Festival hosted a Spanish Flamenco group starring Duquende, one of the most valued Flamenco singers, Diego Del Morao, one of the guitarists on the national scene of the moment and Israel Suarez, known as El Piraña, one of the best percussionists in the world.

The group displayed a great performance warmly welcomed and terrifically applauded by the audience.

Some of the audience cheered in Spanish that impressed the group and they extended their gratitude continuously after each piece they performed.

Flamenco is a folk art and culture from Spain. It is particular to the province of Andalusia in Spain. Historically, it has always been the musical outlet of the poor and the oppressed. It passed on by oral tradition, which the individual artist uses as the basis for his own variations.

Flamenco combines singing with dance and the guitar simultaneously - as well as rhythmic punctuation (by hand-claps and other methods) that is considered an art form.

During his performance, Duquende involved hand clapping as the spice of his songs and the rhythmic sound bestowed interesting sense to his performance. He was singing in a certain style, loud, impressive, countertenor and baritone, using a lot of energy to be special enough for the audience.

Since 1992, Duquende has started a brilliant career which has led him to perform in major Spanish theaters and auditoriums, as well as in stages around the world.

Spanish flamenco singer, considered one of the all-time greatest flamenco singers, Camarón de la Isla, invited Duquende when he was only 8, to debut on stage accompanying himself on the guitar. His performance had such an impact that he was continuously invited by the promoters and record companies, but his parents opposed the idea that he dedicates himself professionally to



music at such a young age.

The other member of the group, Diego Del Morao, is one of the most prominent guitarists on today's flamenco scene. Son of the legendary guitarist Moraíto, who along with family patriarch Manuel Morao, developed the signature sound of traditional Jerez-style flamenco guitar, Del Morao took that family legacy into the 21st century.

He excellently played at Fajr Festival, delighting the audience with his astonishing performance. He used push-pegs for tuning his flamenco guitar which gave a new spice to each of his tracks.

Iranian audience could not stop clapping for him after his dramatic performance, making him so impressed that he told people in gibberish English that he is very happy to visit the country that loves Spanish music.

And the third member, Israel Suarez, known as El Piraña, is one of the most in-demand flamenco percussionists and drummers in the world. His performance was surprising for the Iranian audience, using a cajón, a box-shaped percussion instrument, known as flamenco box.

The performance of the Spanish group in Iran, like the Gypsies who delighted Iranian people some months ago, undoubtedly is one of the most

important experiences in their professional life.

Vahdat Hall was full of audience cries of praise; the group received such a warm reception that after the end of the program, cries of "Otra" brought them to the stage again and they performed another piece with further enthusiasm.

Duquende described his experience in Iran very advantageous, saying my presence in Iran completely changed my opinions about the people of Iran.

He said he like Iranian music because of the similarities between the music of the two countries.

The group displayed a great performance warmly welcomed and terrifically applauded by the audience.

At the end of the program, Duquende answered the questions of Mehr News correspondent on his experiences in Iran and opinions about Iranian people and music:

♦ **You have never performed jointly with Diego del Mareo. Why did you decide to have joint performance at Fajr International Music Festival?**

Well, we like the work of each other, we have decided to perform together and I think it was effective. Our first time cooperation is at an Iranian event ➡

and we are happy for that.

◆ **The Iranian people have a keen interest in Spanish music. Every time Spanish singers or musicians had performances in Iran, the halls were filled and all tickets are sold out. In your opinion, what are the similarities between Iranian and Spanish music?**

Iranian people's interest in Spanish music is laudable. I think this is because Flamenco roots from here. Flamenco is a music style has an Arabic roots, which is similar between Iranian and Spanish music.

◆ **Do you listen to Persian music?**

Yes, sometimes I listen. I think Iranian music has a lot of similarities with Spanish one, and I feel Iranian music is much like ours. I like Iranian traditional music and think like it is like flamenco music. Melodies and rhythms of Iranian and Spanish songs are very similar.

◆ **How was your experience in Iran and what do you think about Iranian people?**

I had an interesting experience in Iran. It was because of the warmth of the Iranian people. Before my trip to Iran, I always thought they are cold and unfeeling, but now I believe they are warm-hearted, friendly, hospitable and very kind to the foreigners. They love flamenco and this was a good experience for me.

Juan Rafael Cortés Santiago, known as *Duquende* is a famous Spanish flamenco singer. Born in Sabadell, Spain, Duquende is considered a successor to influential Flamenco singer Camarón de la Isla. Since 1997, Duquende has been a member of the *Paco de Lucía Sextet* in addition to working as a solo artist. In 1996, Duquende was the first cantaor to be invited to perform at the *Champs Elysées theatre* in Paris |

Fado star Zambujo displays pronounced show at Fajr Music Fest.

By: Lachin Rezaian

Antonio Zambujo, an internationally acclaimed Portuguese guitarist and singer of fado with his quintet gave an appreciable performance at the 32nd Fajr International Music Festival at Vahdat Hall on Wednesday.

Fado a music genre that can be traced back to the 1820s in Portugal. Although the origins are difficult to trace, today fado is commonly regarded as simply a form of song which can be about anything, but must follow a certain traditional structure. In popular belief, fado is a form of music characterized by mournful tunes and lyrics, often about the sea or the life of the poor, and infused with a sentiment of resignation, fatefulness and melancholia.

In his biography on Facebook account, António Zambujo wrote he was raised listening to Cante Alentejano, a regional genre that inspired him while growing up in Beja, Portugal. At the age of eight, he studied clarinet at the Baixo Alentejo Regional Conservatory. At that time, Zambujo became fascinated with fado. He was shaped by Amália Rodrigues, Maria Teresa de Noronha, Alfredo Marceneiro, João Ferreira Rosa, Max and others. He regularly sang for his family and friends and won a local fado contest at the age of 16.

He became increasingly well known, not only in Portugal, but mainly beyond borders, especially after the release of his third album, "Outro Sentido" in 2007. Zambujo has won the Amália Rodrigues Foundation prize as best male fado singer.

At the beginning and end of his performance at Vahdat Hall on Wednesday



night, Zambujo thanked the audience who cheered him in Persian language who was taught to say: "I am very glad to be in Iran and to perform in front of people who love music so much," and "Thank you for coming here to see my group's performance."

His solo, duet and collective performance encouraged audiences, among them citizens of Portugal residing in Iran. His display was undoubtedly one of the best international performances at the festival.

Antonio Zambujo's group played guitar, trumpet, saxophone, mandolin, bass and drums. The drums were a bit different tonight, using special Portuguese drama frames and creating a soft and quite atmosphere at the Hall.

Zambujo's discography includes *O mesmo Fado* (2002), *Por meu Cante* (World Village, 2004), *Outro Sentido* (World Village, 2007), *Guia* (World Village, 2010), *Quinto* (World Village, 2012), *Lisboa 22:38 – Ao Vivo no Coliseu* (Universal Music, 2013), *Rua Da Emenda* (2014) and *Até Pensei Que Fosse Minha* (Universal Music, 2016) |



Iran, Italy join hands in reviving Beethoven on stage

By: Marjohn Sheikhi

The 7th night of 32nd Fajr Music Festival was devoted to joint performance of Tehran Symphony Orchestra and the Puccini Festival Orchestra from Italy, under the baton of maestros Shahraddad Rohani and Paolo Olmi.

The Puccini Festival Orchestra, one of the most prestigious orchestras of Italy, came to Iran with conductor Paolo Olmi and 40 musicians to dazzle the audience gathered at Vahdat Hall on Thursday night with a breathtaking performance together with an Iranian ensemble from Tehran Symphony Orchestra under the baton of acclaimed Iranian maestro Shahraddad Rohani.

All tickets to this highly-anticipated performance were sold out within the first hour and the beautiful 750-seated hall of Vahdat became enameled for the next two hours with the powerful, soul-moving and heartfelt notes of violins, cellos, contrabasses, oboes and clarinets.

Before the orchestra began, Rohani greeted the audience with a sad smile and dedicated the night's performance to the injured and victims of Plasco building collapse in Tehran as well as those who lost their lives in an earthquake in Italy.

Following that, the audience all rose in respect to the national anthems of Iran and Italy played by the musicians on stage.

Rohani conducted the first three pieces including "William Tell" by Gioachino Rossini, his own composition "Persian Garden", and "The Capriccio Italien" by Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky. After a short intermission, Beethoven's Symphony No. 5 was conducted flawlessly by Paolo Olmi.

The performance of "Persian Garden" had a special added beauty as Rohani invited Iranian violoncello solo performer Nasim Saad to bestow upon the ever hungry ears of the audience the soulful, plaintive notes of the wavering strings.

The piece ended with Rohani's remark on the stage, "this cultural exchange between Italian musicians and Tehran Symphony Orchestra shows just how much these two nations have in common."

He went on to add, "all human beings have something in common. Just imagine how more beautiful this world could be if we focused on our similarities instead of differences. We are all the same and it does not matter where we have come from."

Rohani then revealed another surprise just before the intermission: "While the presence of two maestros at one concert is uncommon, I have to say that tonight we have actually three." He then went on to introduce Alberto Veronesi who conducted a short piece composed by legendary Italian opera composer Giacomo Puccini.

The performance was concluded by Beethoven's Symphony No. 5, performed in four consecutive sections, which gave

Vahdat Hall a reverent, solemn air. Despite long, standing ovation, the performance was not followed by a bis, perhaps because the Italian ensemble needed to fly back to their country that night.

The composition of the musicians was so that each Italian musician was seated next to an Iranian in a symbolic move to stress on unity and commonality.

"The Italian musicians all spoke in praise of the Iranian musicians and admitted that they had not expected to witness such quality work from Tehran Symphony Orchestra," Rohani had said in an interview prior to the concert.

"In the short period of time that I was in Iran, I felt that Persian music has influenced European music," maestro Paolo Olmi said. "The kind of music that I heard at the restaurants in Iran sounded a lot like Italian pop music. The similarities are all there and this shows how different cultures can influence and be influenced by one another."

Olmi went on to add, "I have had a good experience with Iranian musicians of Tehran Symphony Orchestra. They are young, energetic and professional. I am actually looking forward to having Tehran Symphony Orchestra in Italy and introduce them to our people."

The 32nd Fajr International Music Festival, Iran's most reputable music event, was held from January 11-20, 2017 in various avenues in capital Tehran. The international section introduced to the Iranian audience music from Azerbaijan Republic, India, Lebanon, Spain, Portugal, France, Italy and Japan. Winners of this edition of the festival will be announced on Sunday.

Paolo Olmi began his career in 1979 as conductor of the Teatro Comunale di Bologna. He has directed operas and concerts all over the world (Tokyo, Berlin, Paris, Chicago, Madrid, Lisbon, Venice, Rome, Milan, Barcelona, Beijing, Shanghai). He has conducted almost all works by Giuseppe Verdi, Puccini, Mozart, Gaetano Donizetti, and Umberto Giordano. From 1990-1993, he was the Principal Conductor and Artistic Advisor of RAI National Symphony Orchestra. From 2006-2011, he was the musical director and artistic adviser of the Opera National de Nancy et de Lorraine in France. Since 2002, he is a visiting professor at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama in London |

High-profile session addresses environmental pollution

By: Samad Habibi

How would high-profile session succeed in effectively addressing pressing issues of airborne particles which have jeopardized the daily life of people in Khuzestan and other provinces in varying degrees?

A session finally decides to hear the plights of the environment in the south-western province of Khuzestan after reports of the pollution brought the issue to national and even international focus; the high-profile session is brilliant in terms of its members: Javad Zarif, Foreign Minister, Masoumeh Ebtekar, VP and Head of Department of Environment, and Hamid Chitchian, Minister of Energy. But to what extent they will succeed in bringing concrete results to the public depends on the premises of the session which seem at best only tepidly reacting to the disaster already having affected the lives of hundreds of thousands of people in a province very strategic for the system; the golden province which serve the country as a cornucopia of oil income.

Iran's state news agency IRNA coverage of the event quoted Department of Environment website, who itself quoted Javad Zarif who had been addressing the meeting about the foreign sources of the airborne particle so much the subject of officials' blame: Iraq and its very disorganized millions of acres of desert. Zarif reportedly called for an 'international consensus' on the issue of pollution which only hinged upon few countries neighboring Iran. Mr. Zarif said that Iran had been working with Syria and Iraq especially in managing the desert areas, the source or hotbed of airborne particles and dust; "however, since 2011, political incidents in both countries adversely affected the cooperation; Iran has continued and it will continue efforts in international community which included a letter to UN Secretary-General to be sent soon to urge international attention to the issue and to persuade



neighbors to look into the pollution more seriously and responsibly," he told the meeting, admitting that such consensus-building would be quite time-intensive and thus would prove futile in meeting short-term and emergent occasions of severe pollution in Khuzestan.

Hamid Chitchian also addressed the session; "the Ministry of Energy has addressed the issue by reviving Hour al-Azim marshland through channeling 4 billion cubic meters of water from River Karkha; the marshland stretches in both sides of the border with Iraq; the wetland had almost been dried and thus was an active bed of the particles," he detailed. "Two issues affect the drying of the wetland; first is Turkey's unregulated dam building on Tigris and Euphrates in its side of the border; this decreased the flow of water in these two rivers down to Iraq alluvial plain; the second is Iraq's measures to reserve water in lakes devised to trap water inside the country; this contributed to loss of about 100 billion cubic meters of water which previously inundated the marshland. In the eastern border with Afghanistan, we have a similar issue: Afghan government had not acted according to a deal signed in the 1970s whereby it became committed to allow water quota of the Hamoun wetland to perpetuate the water ecosystem of the region on which the livelihood of many people depended."

Chitchian's proposals that the foreign policy machinery should be more active



in diplomatic corridors to persuade Turkey and Iraq to abandon their water-reserving schemes as GAP (Southeastern Anatolia Project) seem impractical; the political leverages have not been enough to persuade the Turkish and Iraqi officials to merely hear the case, let alone stopping such grand schemes in their own home country. "To address the issue, the government's share of responsibility have been carried out through negotiations with Iraqi, Syria, and Turkish officials as the source of airborne particles," he said, a fact which seems quite unresponsive in immediate addressing the disaster which had made the public impatient.

The political conditions of these countries Mr. Chitchian mentions, are not conducive to addressing the disaster; in Iraq, the central government had largely been engaged in war with ISIL and the disintegrated political and social conditions would not allow such rectifying efforts to address a geographical phenomenon which affects the country's own people as well. Mr. Al-Abadi's administration is not in a stable conditions to turn to the issue, even if his delegations would assure Iran's negotiators of such and such measures. In Turkey as well, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's is highly obsessed with political crisis of an aborted coup and its far-reaching consequences. Even if the country was in peaceful terms with itself, internationalizing of the GAP project, which according to a report, has totally been disastrous to →

Syrian and Iraq in environmental terms, as Mr. Zarif admits, would be a matter of years to be realized.

Mrs. Masoumeh Ebtekar points to a different but highly effective cause; human intervention in changing climate, global warming, etc. In her scheme of things, the causes have been short-term as well. The hazards of simplifying the disaster to mere facts would be quite enormous; to seek simple solutions for a disaster which is a consequence of years of mismanagement and environmentally unfriendly practices would be to defy the laws of nature; the regional trends have been at work since time immemorial and Mrs. Ebtekar and other authorities should have been predicting such disaster to come once the overall effect of these trends turns to be a beast, equally unruly and devastating. The case of Lake Urmia provides testament to this mismanagement and the failure to study trends and the domestic sheer irresponsibility of the system.

"The session addresses bilateral and multilateral measures in regional and international levels to prepare for dust storms and drafting a national roadmap to secure national rights and to address damage in health, national economy, water resources, agriculture, and natural resources," Mrs. Ebtekar grandiloquently said. The objectives set totally exceed the possible achievements of

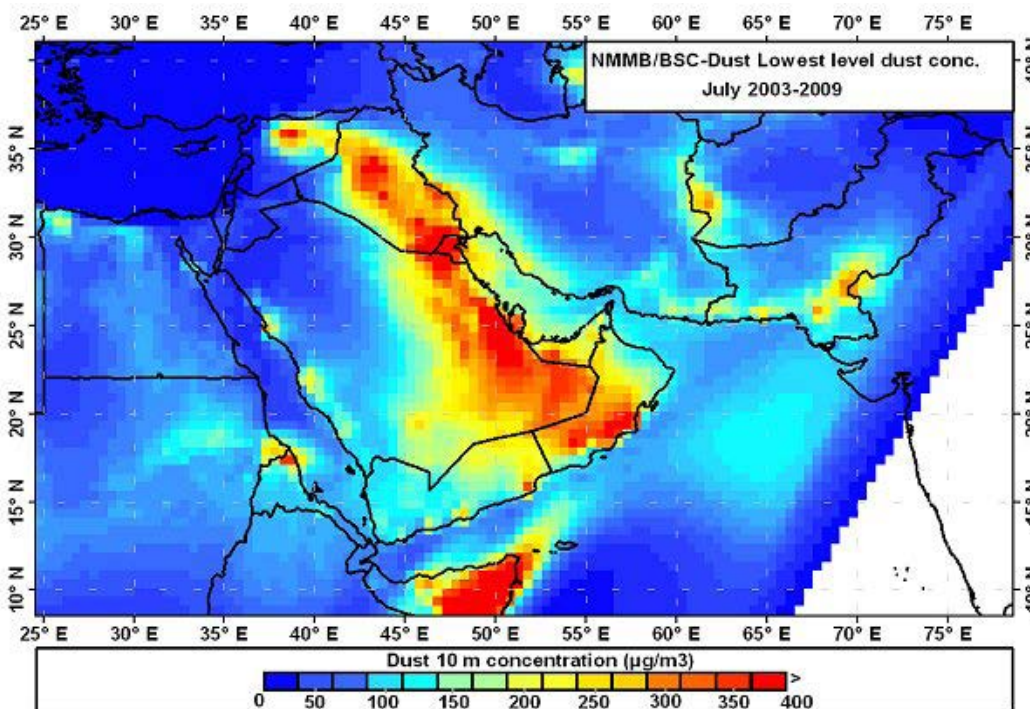
the session, with members' proposals to remain on paper at least for the time being. "Local interventions in natural resources in Karoun and distorting the natural ecosystem in Hour al-Azim marshland, grand scheme of plantations of sugarcane planned to cover Karoun upstream lands, and to expand still further plantation for another 550,000 hectares are the causes for the current situation; the real solution is to reform these changes to the better; to improve resilience would not mean to allow the status quo but to adapt to conditions to prevent further damage to the environment," she said.

Yet another official, Mr. Khoda Karam Jalali, Deputy Minister and Head of the Forest, Range and Watershed Management Organization (FRWO) drew dark prospects for still deteriorating conditions of the dust storm and airborne particles in the years to come; the response, he says, had been addressing short-term solutions to immediately provide relief for the affected citizens through seeking cooperation of WHO and their advice and expert consultation. "Currently, the province's dried 40,000 hectares are the grounds from where severe sand storms roam the city of Ahvaz the most hit area; planting saplings in these lands would require 3 years to gradually reduce the critical conditions in weather for the public; the

drying of wetlands and marshlands in the province contributed to emergence of 350,000 such empty land susceptible to provide sands enough to reduce the vision in cities to less than 5 meters; add to this 250,000 hectares of varying area of Hour marshland, 46,000 permanent wetlands, 58,000 hectares of dry farming lands, and 40,000 hectares of empty desert; such extensive surface areas are demanding for management and keeping the dust and sands on place," he lamented, where he believed water shortage of years of drought and water loss had hollowed the soil.

"Sand storm should be addressed apart from naturally-born sand brought by 120-day seasonal winds; the particle size, wind speed, soil moisture, and grass covering in the area determine the wind erosion and sand storm and its severity; particles less than 100 micrograms in diameter remains suspended in the air for 4-7 days, moving horizontally up to 8,000km and soaring up to 6km in altitude," said Ziaeddin Shoaee, head of the Department of Environment's task force to combat dust storms detailed.

He believed general practices of tiling the lands to secure ownership in Iraq and then abandoning it exacerbated already tense situation in the western borders; "in eastern borders, Lake Hamoun is the major source of dust storms where extreme evaporation of 5,000mm renders the region virtually uninhabitable, with villagers preferring flight to cities with better conditions; in Central Asia and Lake Aral regions, cotton plantations had since long dried up the lake during the Soviet era with disastrous effects on the ecosystem of the lake; we believe that low-intensity dust in northern provinces should be considered an implication of the Aral drying up, and negotiations would be on the horizon to address the issue with Uzbekistan and other countries of the region," he told the meeting |



Oshtornakouh; a safe refuge for Persian Leopard



By: Samad Habibi

Oshtorankouh or Sanowbaran, a part of Zagros massifs with breath-taking scenery is home to valuable large cat Persian Leopard and other wildlife species.

Located in a pristine part of the Zagros range which crosses in a north-west-southeast direction the uncharted territories of Lorestan province in southwest of the country, Oshtorankouh is among rare habitats of the country where there is some solace for the lovers of the nature and wildlife pushed to the edges by the unregulated city and land use planning; here the Persian leopard or (*Panthera pardus ciscaucasica* or *Panthera pardus saxicolor*) roam its territory freely.

Yet the local official believes local communities should join efforts to protect the pristine mountainous terrain and its treasures. He is Mehrdad Fathi Beiranvand, the Head of provincial office of Department of Environment who spoke to Mehr News local correspondent; he has good news yet; "during 3 years of hard work by the rangers of the Department, the wildlife succeeded in multiplying their numbers through mating; rare species of large cat and other carnivorous fauna abounds in the region," he says. "Yet human intervention should be at work to protect the Persian leopard, an invaluable large cat, from extinction; local people should contribute to protection of the cat and no less val-

uable the brown bear; public should help these species to create territories of their own; the public spirit should also have a strong belief that the wildlife is worthy of protection and the government should inculcate in them the belief," Beiranvand emphasizes.

"Villagers should eschew from any reckless action when they detect a leopard or a bear approaching their homes; they are totally harmless to them and will leave the area; local people should inform the authorities; this is the best approach to the wildlife seen in the proximity of the villages," he called the public.

He also believes that the extension of villages into the territory of the bears and leopards created such problems of confrontation of the wildlife and human. In the past, myriads of reports have taken the headlines in local and national papers that local people trapped and slaughtered a leopard, a bear, or a hapless hyena which quite accidentally turned out to be in the realm of the villagers or in the vicinity of towns.

Beiranvand however says the legal protection of the wildlife would discourage such unnecessary collective on-slaught to the wildlife by the untrained rural people; "anyone who attacks or kills a member of species in the wild, will be sued and tried in the court; hunting such species will face 5 years behind the bars and a fine of \$ 20, 780," he tells Mehr News correspondent.

Head of Oshtorankouh Protected Wildlife Refuge Patrolling Unit Ahmad

Goudarzi had told Mehr News earlier in November that the wildlife protection measures had been strongly enforced in the area during 3 past years; "rangers reportedly found remains and bones of the mountain goat in the vicinity of the natural Lake Gahar; this is indication that a natural predator, possibly Persian leopard is in the area; mountain goat, wild dog, and hug are in the daily menu of the leopard; the bones bore the traces of cat's teeth," he said.

Goudarzi rejoiced to provide figures of improved numbers of the mountain goat aged 9-13 years. "40 of them had been detected by rangers in the wildlife refuge; the punitive measures and fines had largely discouraged the hunters from entering into the area," he added.

Dubbed 'the Alps of Iran,' Oshtorankouh is unique in hosting flora and fauna highly protected by the authorities. Hunting is banned and Department of Environment had been implementing projects to study the sheer diversity of plant species on the verge of extinction. Fauna also burgeoned and reached to a balanced level. "In 1960, a general ban was put on hunting which had covered Oshtorankouh range and Niga valley where the nature hosts 600 plant species and 274 animal species; 68 plant species are native to the mountains which sets the area in the top of areas rich in genetic reserves; we believe the area has the necessary requirements for being designated a national park," Goudarzi concluded |

Astana Peace Talks for Syrian Settlement



Dossier

Astana meeting; is peace negotiable?

By: Parnaz Talebi

Kazakh capital is hosting one the most controversial peace talks since the international efforts started for bringing back the stability to Syria.

Russia, Turkey and Iran agreed upon an agenda to help settle the Syrian crisis earlier in a trilateral meeting held in Moscow on December 20 and the Resolution 2336 was adopted by UNSC on Dec. 31 to support an inclusive ceasefire in Syria and the political process. Russian President Vladimir Putin and his Turkish counterpart Recep Tayyip Erdogan had discussed earlier, on December 17, the possibility of holding talks in Kazakhstan's capital Astana between the Syrian government and opposition groups with Russia, Iran and Turkey as potential mediators. Kazakh President Nazarbayev supported this initiative, expressing readiness to provide a platform for the talks in the Kazakh capital.

The last round of such talks was held in Geneva on April 13-27, bearing no fruit as the Riyadh-formed High Negotiations Committee (HNC) opposition group walked out of the negotiations. Staffan de Mistura, UN Special Envoy for Syria, said in December 2016 that the United Nations plans to resume the talks on February 8, 2017. The Astana peace talks, Russia has underlined, is just a complementary platform to Geneva meetings and does not seek rivalry.

Astana talks marks a great step toward the long-desired political solution to the Syrian conflict, as it was able to bring the armed opposition groups to the negotiation table for the first time since the onset of peace meetings. The meeting has been organized to consolidate the ceasefire and engage of the armed opposition in the Syrian political process. "I believe that one obstacle to the talks was the fact that the UN only sent invitations to members of the political opposition, the overwhelming majority of whom were emigrants living in Europe, the Middle East or other countries but not in Syria, and to some opposition members in Syria... These talks were not attended by those who really determine the situation on the ground,



that is, armed groups or armed opposition," Lavrov has emphasized. The participation of armed opposition would contribute to the main objective of Astana talks, which is an inclusive and lasting ceasefire. A lasting ceasefire would establish the stability and peace largely needed for political talks. Accordingly, with a minor US participation in ambassador level and no participation by Arab states of the region, the nature of the Astana talks seems different providing space for a real intra-Syrian talks. Iran and Russia, on the hand, are basically regarded as close allies of Syria and Turkey, although in a concerning situation, has been flexible and showed eager to help the process during recent months.

Yet the condition is still very complicated and makes any prediction very difficult. First of all the talks are generally a platform for a dialogue between Syria's armed opposition groups and the government of Damascus who have definitely very less in common to negotiate on. The opposition group itself includes different representatives from different groups with different approaches labeled by US as moderates, a division not accepted by Syrian government.

Another notable issue is the stance of US, which has just recently welcomed its new president, Donald Trump. "The rise of ISIS is the direct result of policy decisions made by President Obama and Secretary Clinton; the Obama-Clinton

foreign policy has unleashed ISIS, destabilized the Middle East," Trump has said in his speech against the terrorism. Trump also has noted the wrong approach US has taken toward the conflict in Middle East that has paved the way for rise of terrorism "our current strategy of nation-building and regime change is a proven failure. We have created the vacuums that allow terrorists to grow and thrive." He had also expressed readiness to cooperate with Russia on the issue who has the leading role in fight against the terrorists in Syria. Trump sounds promising on the issue of fight against terrorism however it would be very difficult to believe the positive role US is claiming to play in the Middle East. The interests of US and its great allies in the region, including Saudi Arabia and Israeli regime, lie directly at the sectarian conflict currently enflaming the tensions in countries like Syria, Iraq, Yemen and Libya.

Turkey also is a concern. The country has long been an adversary to the Syrian government collecting efforts to topple down the legitimate Syrian President Assad. Ankara has also been one of the key supporters of the terrorists in Syria by whether letting the flow of human resources through its borders or funding and arming them. The enthusiasm Turkey shows in cooperation with Russia and Iran on the Syrian issue, although understandable regarding the insecurity

rity the country is experiencing, raises doubts. Turkey's interests got in a contradictory direction with US' when the latter refused to submit Fetullah Gulen, founder of the Gullen movement, after the failed coup in Turkey. Erdogan's foreign policy then shifted positively toward Russia, Syria and Iran and set the ground for a trilateral co-operation on the Syrian conflict. Other major contrast of Ankara and Washington is the issue of Kurds to whom Turkey looks at as terrorists and fights against while US supports them entirely in the region in hope of setting up an independent Kurdish state. Nonetheless, Turkey has vowed not to let terrorist groups violate the reached ceasefire agreement on December and to establish security at its borders with Syria.

Astana round of talks, an initiative by Syrian allies, is a result of achievements reached in the battle field. A relatively stable ceasefire was established after the trilateral meeting of Iran, Russia and Turkey in Moscow on December, successful to the moment despite all previous ceasefire agreements, and the armed opposition groups are at the moment at the negotiation table with Syrian government in Astana at the presence of mediators like De Mistura, Iran, Russia and Turkey. Despite all pessimism, what is obvious is that Astana peace talks is an opportunity and such an opportunity should be optimized by Syria and its allies to urge all involved parties to stay committed to their obligations, particularly Turkey who has accepted to manage the issue on the opposition side due its influence among them. The opportunity should be used as a means to stress the political process and the road map towards it requiring all parties to the conflict to hold the ceasefire strictly, to put emphasis on legitimacy of fight against terrorists regardless of their labels, Syria's territorial integrity, and the need to refrain from interfering in the final decision to be agreed upon by Syrian nation and government |

US to abandon Assad ouster under Trump



Interview by: Marjohn Sheikhi

Former CIA officer Philip Giraldi in an interview with MNA said the incoming president Trump will not support Obama's ouster policy for Assad and will be eager to back an option that will let US withdraw from the region.

Weeks before the Astana talks on the Syrian situation aimed at achieving a political solution to the six-year conflict in the Arab country that will convene today in the Kazakh capital, officials in Iran, Russia and Turkey had been busy holding last minute talks either in face-to-face meetings or by phone.

The United Nations also confirmed attendance in the talks, led by diplomat Ramzy Ramzy and accompanied by Chief of the Mediation Support Unit Robert Dann.

The Astana meeting gains special magnitude in the wake of recent developments in Syria, most notably the liberation of Aleppo by the Syrian Army back in December, and the inclusion of Turkey, this time as the guarantor of the ceasefire, and not as an advocate of toppling President Bashar Assad – an option that Turkish President Erdogan had been pursuing vehemently as his Syria policy.

Meanwhile, the incoming Trump administration had, reportedly, received an invitation to the talks by Russia, although Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif has voiced his ob-

jection to the inclusion of the US in the course of negotiations. Trump's presidential campaigns on regional policies marked a stark contrast to the Obama administration policy which sought regime change in Syria as the only way to settle the conflict. It remains to be seen, however, if incoming President Trump will keep his presidential vows in regard to Middle Eastern affairs.

In an exclusive interview with Mehr News Agency, former CIA counter-terrorism specialist and military intelligence officer Philip Giraldi expressed optimism over the outcome of the Astana talks, adding "it is clear that the Syrian government and its allies have the upper hand militarily and it will now be necessary to confirm that the government will not be replaced in the near term while also drawing up zones of responsibility for the parties in the conflict as part of a cease fire and disarmament agreement."

"Once the government and opposition are operating in and confined to their established zones it will be possible to discuss issues like amnesty and political reconciliation, both of which will have to take place," he added.

Giraldi assessed the role and impact of each participating side on the process of the negotiations, adding "the shift by Turkey in no longer demanding the ouster of al-Assad has been critical as it has severely limited direct support of the insurgents, but the role of Iran, Turkey and Russia as guarantors of the

process is absolutely essential."

He went on to add, "it has always been clear that Syria will need a local solution and Turkey and Iran presenting a unified front alongside the Syrian government makes a successful outcome much more likely."

Giraldi found it likely that the US represented by incoming president Donald Trump would participate in the Astana talks. He maintained that in this case, the presence of Trump administration in the meeting will signal that "Trump will be abandoning the Obama policy of ouster for al-Assad and will seek to stabilize the situation, which Iran and Russia have been working to do for the past two years."

"I do not believe that Trump and his advisers wish to continue the current policy and will be eager to support an option that will permit US to focus on destroying ISIL and withdrawing from the region," he further stressed. "Trump will not support the Obama policy and has no interest in removing al-Assad."

"I do not expect Saudi Arabia and the Persian Gulf States to participate even if they were to be invited and will not willingly cooperate with what is decided," he added.

"Syria will be for the foreseeable future a state in reconstruction, much like neighboring Iraq has been," Giraldi predicted for Syria in the wake of a positive outcome of the Astana talks. "It will need considerable outside resources, which, in normal circumstances could be coming from the Saudis and Gulf States, so the question becomes to what extent will those governments go along with a solution for Syria that leaves the government in place and gives to Iran a major role in the settlement process."

"I suspect there will be serious problems and also Israel will be seeking to disrupt any settlement that leaves Syria intact as its desire is to see Syria broken up into tribal and ethnic groupings much as has happened in Iraq," he said, but went on to dismiss the notion that the US under the presidency of Donald Trump would back these disintegrating policies.

"I do not think the United States will give in to the demands of the Saudis or Israelis, however, as I believe that Trump will be seeking to finish the fighting and disengage rather than continue the armed conflict," he said.

The Astana talks are slated for Janu-

ary 23 and 24 in the Kazakh capital city where representatives of the Syrian government and the opposition groups that have not been blacklisted in the UN as terrorists will sit down at the negotiating table to arrive at a political solution and sustainable peace and stability in the country. Iran, Russia and Turkey as well as a delegate from the United Nations will observe the meeting. Latest developments note that the Trump administration have not sent a delegation to Astana talks due to "immediate demands of the transition," but the US ambassador to Kazakhstan will attend as an observer.

The Astana meeting will also prepare for Geneva talks resumption on February 8.

Philip Giraldi is a former CIA counterterrorism specialist and military intelligence officer who served eighteen years overseas in Turkey, Italy, Germany, and Spain. He is a recognized authority on international security and counterterrorism issues. Giraldi is currently President of San Marco International, a consulting firm that specializes in international security management and risk assessment |



Former US diplomat:

Turkey more reliable than US for Syria talks

Interview by: Marjohn Sheikhi

Former US diplomat James Jatras in an interview with MNA said Moscow's decision to replace Washington with Ankara for the upcoming Astana talks on Syria proves to be more promising for a positive result.

At the end of a trilateral meeting held in Moscow on December 20, foreign ministers of Iran, Russia and Turkey issued a joint statement that highlighted the revitalization of a political process to end the Syrian crisis. The statement, later supported by UN's special envoy on Syria, Staffan de Mistura, underscored, among other topics, the three countries' "full respect for the sovereignty, independence, unity and territorial integrity" of Syria, the inevitability of a political solution, and the importance of expanding ceasefire and unhindered humanitarian assistance.

Most notably, the statement reiterated Iran, Russia and Turkey's determination to fight jointly against ISIL and al-Nusra terrorists and to separate them from armed opposition groups. Following this, the three sides became all the more determined to hold a meeting in Kazakh capital Astana, where representatives from the Syrian government and the opposition groups that are not blacklisted as terrorists in the UN, will be given the opportunity to sit down for Syrian-Syrian dialogues to reach a political solution to six years of conflict.

The Astana meeting on Syria is slated for 23 January where President Hassan Rouhani, President Vladimir Putin and President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan will observe the talks between the Syrian sides.

In an interview with Mehr News Agency, former US diplomat and policy adviser for Senate Republican leadership James George Jatras voiced cautious optimism toward the upcoming Astana talks, noting that the replacement of Washington with Ankara in the talks was a wise move by Moscow that finally decided "the Obama Administration could not be a productive interlocutor" for settling the Syrian conflict.



He further maintained that Moscow, closely working with Damascus and Tehran, have the upper hand in the talks and the participation of the incoming Trump administration could be a positive sign if "Trump keeps faith with his campaign promises to work with Russia and destroy, not just contain, Daesh" and relinquish the policy of "regime change" and "nation-building".

The following is Mehr News Agency's interview with this American specialist in international relations and government affairs, James Jatras:

◆What are the possible points of agreement that the sides will reach at the meeting? Do you think Astana talks would eventually lead to a positive result?

I am cautiously optimistic that there can be a positive result. The key is that after repeated rounds of the "Geneva Process" between Lavrov and Kerry, Moscow finally decided that the Obama Administration could not be a productive interlocutor. They decided to deal with Ankara instead, and despite the notoriously erratic course of war, he's turned out to be more reliable than Obama and Kerry. The first evidence of that was the relatively quiet wrap-up of east Aleppo, which was far less than the humanitarian catastrophe many in the west predicted,

and perhaps were hoping for.

◆How do you assess the role and impact of each side on the process of the negotiations?

Moscow, closely working with Damascus and Tehran, have the upper hand. Most importantly, the Assad government stays. There will be no "regime change." Turkey remains the odd man out in the tripartite discussion between Moscow, Tehran, and Ankara. On the other hand, in these talks, Ankara, and only Ankara, speaks for the "opposition" – that is, the terrorists fighting against the Syrian government. If Erdogan has abandoned unreal, maximalist goals, as appears to be the case, he can secure terms that wind the war down in a way that lessens the terrorist blowback Turkey has already experienced.

◆Besides Russia, Iran and Turkey, what other countries may participate in the Astana meeting and what message would their presence in the talks convey?

Well, Syria of course, but unity of purpose among Syria, Russia, and Iran has been essential to their success on imposing their terms on their adversaries. Turkey has been forced to come to terms, the Obama Administration has been dealt out, and other powers – notably Saudi Arabia and Qatar – need to consider how disruptive they intend

to be even though they cannot prevail in their initial goals. Qatar is probably smart enough to figure that out. Saudi Arabia probably isn't, as its behavior in Yemen shows.

◆ **In case of the US, some Western media reported that Russia has invited the incoming Trump administration to Syrian peace talks, interpreting it as a sign of enhanced cooperation between Putin and Trump. How do you evaluate the possible involvement on the part of the US on the course of negotiations?**

It's too soon to tell, but the invitation – as, I assume, only an observer for now – is a positive sign. If Trump keeps faith with his campaign promises to work with Russia and destroy, not just contain, Daesh, their participation could be a big positive as opposed to the Obama approach, which could only be a “spoiler.”

✎ **Delving a little deeper into this topic, Donald Trump had strongly criticized Obama's policy in Syria during his presidential campaigns, saying President Assad's ouster should not be a primary US interest. Do you believe that, in case of attending the Astana talks, Trump administration would stick to this position or would carry on with the same policy that Obama**

supported?

If the incoming administration limits itself to those goals, it could be a big success. However, it's not clear to what extent other “baggage” might complicate things. There are many “Iran hawks” coming into the Trump administration. The ridiculous and false phrase “Iran is the world's leading sponsor of global terrorism” is commonly heard. Recently, a group of former officials, including many close to the incoming Trump team, issued a letter calling for what amounts to “regime change” in Iran. In effect, it's a call for Trump to destroy his administration over Iran the way George W. Bush destroyed his in Iraq. On the other hand, Trump himself has noted that Iran, along with Syria and Russia, are fighting Daesh. He has said that the days of “regime change” and “nation-building” are over. As a businessman, he's smart enough to know that dumping a few trillion dollars down the drain will ruin his primary goal to restore the American economy and create jobs. He has to choose. Unfortunately, even in his own administration he may find himself lonely. We shall see.

◆ **How do you predict the fate of Syria in the wake of the Astana meeting and**

with Russia and Turkey proclaimed as guarantors of the signed ceasefire agreements?

If a tripartite Moscow-Tehran-Ankara agreement that showed a partial success in Aleppo can be replicated countrywide, and if Trump makes good on his pledge to work with Moscow to destroy Daesh (and hopefully al-Qaeda and its many offshoots), we could see this war wind down quickly. To be sure, some resistance will continue in the eastern part of the country. Pacifying Syria also depends to some extent on events in Iraq, notably in Mosul (where lack of reports in our media suggest things are not going as well as hoped). But the prospect exists to liberate and restore peace to the major populations centers, which would be a great start.

James George Jatrás is a specialist in international relations, government affairs, and legislative politics. He served for many years (1985-2002) as policy adviser and analyst for the Republican leadership in the US Senate; before that (1979-1985), he was a US Foreign Service Officer with the US Department of State, with service in Mexico and in Soviet affairs and public diplomacy. He is currently Deputy Director of the American Institute in Ukraine, a privately funded American NGO |



Trump cannot afford to shut out Iran if he wants to defeat ISIL

By: Seyed Hossein Mousavian

Throughout his campaign, US President Donald Trump vowed that confronting terrorism and destroying the self-proclaimed Islamic State would be his highest foreign policy priority.

Since assuming office, however, he has taken measure after measure that exacerbates, rather than alleviates, the threat of terrorism. His “secret” plan to confront ISIL has so far turned out to just be an order to the Pentagon to develop a plan to destroy the organization — which, according to some reports, would not be a radical departure from the current anti-ISIL campaign. Other actions he has taken or seems poised to take — on immigration, Iran and Russia — will actively harm efforts to combat the terrorist group.

Trump’s current foreign policy approach is not only self-defeating, but also forgoes a golden opportunity to shape a coherent strategy that would allow him to usher in a political solution to the Syrian war, destroy ISIL and repair US ties with the Kremlin. Improved U.S.-Russia relations will also open the door to Moscow serving as an interlocutor facilitating mutually beneficial US-Iran engagement.

Rather than pursue strategically wise diplomacy, however, Trump has started his presidency by signing a controversial executive order on immigration; banning temporarily immigrants and visitors and from seven Muslim-majority countries — with an indefinite ban on Syrian refugees. Not only does this move defy legal precedent, it has also torn apart countless families and upended lives across the world. By failing to distinguish between extremists and the vast majority of peaceful Muslims, the racially inflammatory executive order also utterly fails in its aim of thwarting terrorism and in fact is a boon to terrorist groups like ISIL. It bars over 200 million people from entry in the United States, even as studies have shown that no individuals from these countries have committed terror-



ist attacks on US soil.

As Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif has said, the ban is a “great gift to extremists” and “aids terrorist recruitment by deepening fault-lines exploited by extremist demagogues.” The Iranian Foreign Ministry also responded to Trump orders by stating it was “considering” taking a reciprocal action, but unlike the US ban, will not apply it to Americans who already have visas. Iran is one of the seven Muslim-majority countries targeted by Trump’s executive order. Millions of people of Iranian background in America and across the world have been affected — whether it be because they are on student or work visas, have green cards, or are dual-Iranian nationals with any other country. Iranian-Americans, for their part, have contributed immensely to US society and are among America’s most successful immigrant groups. This ban not only reinforces elements in Iran which have always argued that the US government cannot be trusted, but also signals to Iranians of every political stripe that Washington views them with discriminatory disdain.

Trump Poised to Pursue Self-Defeating Syria, ISIL Strategies

On top of the executive order, which promises to add fuel to the war in Syr-

ia by empowering groups like ISIL, unsubstantiated rumors are circulating that the Trump administration wishes to reach a solution in Syria at the expense of Iran. If so, this is a recipe for disaster and will guarantee the failure of diplomacy. Iran, long at the forefront of the fight against ISIL, has significant leverage on the ground in Syria and has participated in the Geneva process since 2015. It is eager to use its leverage to reduce the level of violence and bring about a lasting peace in Syria. But if the US tries to forcefully exclude it from negotiations and approach it in a zero-sum manner, it will have no choice but to use the many tools available to it to thwart such efforts.

Iran’s important role in Syria was demonstrated last week in two days of landmark negotiations over the Syrian war in Astana, Kazakhstan. The talks marked the first time in nearly six years of war that representatives of the Syrian government and armed opposition negotiated directly. Brokered by Turkey, Iran and Russia — the latter two the Syrian government’s main backers and the former a leading supporter of the rebels — the negotiations ended with a signed agreement by the outside powers to uphold the fragile country-wide cease-fire and set up a trilateral body to monitor and enforce it.

By bringing the government and opposition together and solidifying support for the cease-fire, the three convening powers moved the warring parties one step closer to a political agreement. The joint statement they released at the end of the talks also affirmed their support for the underlying principles of the Geneva process, the peace talks led for years by the United Nations and the United States. While the Geneva process has long stalled and struggled to implement its agreed-to principles, the Iran-Russia-Turkey-led diplomatic initiative, as exemplified by Astana, has proven able to bring together the real stakeholders in the conflict, both inside and outside the country. If complemented with the Geneva framework as planned, a peaceful settlement to the Syria crisis — and an end to the suffering of millions of innocents — will be in reach.

Russia and Iran Must Be on Board in Diplomatic Efforts

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and his Iranian counterpart Mohammad Javad Zarif lay flowers in front of a photo of a Russian ambassador to Turkey, who was killed in Ankara, on Dec. 20, 2016.

The fact that Iran joined Russia and Turkey in driving the Astana talks, which relegated US participation to observer status and saw no Saudi participation, is a testament to its importance in delivering a viable peace in Syria. At a recent conference in the Middle East, a senior Arab official divulged to me how the Saudi leadership feels overstretched in the region and entangled in Yemen, where they are increasingly dedicating the lion's share of their capabilities and resources. At the same time, the official told me, the Saudis feel their efforts in Syria have resulted in blowback, given that their preferred groups have either been overtaken or outright coopted by terrorist groups. As a result, Saudi Arabia did not go to the Astana talks, but the Syrian opposition High Negotiations Committee — founded in Saudi Arabia in 2016 — decided to lend its support to the anti-government military delegation going to Astana after debating the matter for two days in Riyadh.

Having Iran on board is crucial if any peace talks are to be successful. Russia is

currently serving as the bridge between Iran and Turkey — which is de-facto representing Saudi and Gulf Cooperation Council interests — and is attempting to increase areas of commonality between the two countries. As Trump pursues diplomacy with Russia, it is critical that he recognize the importance of the Russian-Iranian relationship both in combating terrorism and facilitating a political solution in Syria and elsewhere in the region. Attempting to increase distance between Iran and Russia will not only be a moot effort, but will also harm regional cooperation and prospects for the inclusive diplomacy necessary to end the Syrian war.

It would be in the interests of the United States if Trump were to have a positive, win-win mentality in approaching Russia and Iran. While his current approach will almost certainly greatly worsen America's quagmires in the Mid-

sabotage Russian-Turkish-Iranian dialogue, any hope he has in defeating ISIL and diminishing the terrorist threat in the Levant will be eliminated. Furthermore, Trump should know that Iran and Russia are neighbors, and that strong relations between them is a strategic imperative for both of them. Improving the US-Russia relationship should not be envisioned as coming at the cost of Iran-Russia relations. First and foremost, it will simply not work, as it is far beyond the imagination of Russian policy makers that they can count on the United States as a stable, long-term partner in the same way they can of Iran. Secondly, in the region currently, Russia and Iran are bearing a maximum level of burden for keeping regional states intact, while the United States is bearing a minimum amount, a reality which binds them to each other. The region is on the verge of total collapse, and Russia, the US and



dle East and make the threat of terrorism all the more difficult to effectively address, the potential exists for him to choose another path and score major achievements. If Trump elected a more diplomatic and inclusive foreign policy, he could simultaneously achieve four accomplishments: Improve ties with Russia, facilitate a resolution to the Syrian crisis, eradicate ISIL, and through Russian mediation, work to mend US-Iran ties. If such a reality comes to pass, a truly effective coalition will emerge that can manage other regional crises as well.

On the other hand, if Trump tries to

Iran should welcome collective cooperation to prevent all-encompassing chaos.

Seyed Hossein Mousavian is a Middle East security and nuclear policy specialist at Woodrow Wilson School of Princeton University and author of *"Iran and the United States: An Insider's View on the Failed Past and the Road to Peace."* He previously served as the head of the Foreign Relations Committee of Iran's National Security Council from 1997 to 2005, and was spokesman for Iran in its nuclear negotiations with the international community from 2003-2005 |

Fmr. US Army PsyOp officer:

US young generation seek Russia-Iran in circle of friendship

Interview by Lachin Rezaian

A former US army psychological operation officer and counter-terrorism analyst said American younger generation is by instinct more inclusive and are looking for ways to include Russia-Iran in the circle of friendship, and they voted for Trump largely because of his desire for this also.

Criticizing the US Congress, Scott Bennett said the key to getting a 'yes vote' in the Congressional hearings for the elected secretaries of President Trump is essentially to say nothing and commit to nothing, and smile and nod in 'bobble-head' approval to the puppets in Congress who ask the questions.

Pointing to the boycott by Democrats of Trump Presidential Inauguration due on Friday, Bennett said it will be celebrated and lamented by many as the death of the Democrat party.

"It will be celebrated by Republicans because it is an "abandonment of the field" by Democrats, and confirmation of an emotional breakdown and child-like tantrum by the Democrats in a desperate attempt to somehow hurt Donald Trump," Bennett said in an exclusive interview with Mehr News Agency:

◆ **Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov has said he believes US representatives should be invited to the Astana meeting on Syria. Iran rejects any participation by US representatives at the scheduled Syria peace talks in Astana. Do you think Trump will attend the meeting, regarding that he had told during his presidential campaign that Russia and Iran are fighting against ISIL and this is in our interest?**

President Trump has said one of his top priorities is to establish a positive working relationship with Russia in order to fight and destroy the ISIL terrorists. He has also expressed a willingness to work with "other countries" who are willing to do this.



Therefore it would be a natural and intelligent choice for President Trump to send US representatives to participate in these discussions, and I believe he will.

Despite the criticisms of Trump's past statements and concerns regarding Muslims in general, I believe this prior confusion can be cleansed with clear facts, history, and honorable sources of information which can help President Trump assemble a complete picture of the current Middle East community of nations, the issues, and the potential solutions.

◆ **If Trump attends Astana meeting, it may lead to the resumption of Russia-US ties. Do you think it can also provide grounds for Iran-US relations?**

President Trump, like many Americans, knows two things: 1) America has suffered a distorted information environment with regards to Iran by the media and virulent Zionist fanatics; and 2) every American under the age of fifty years of age has absolutely no problem, prejudice, or passion towards either Russia or Iran, and this is the future Americans want to pursue. Americans under fifty have not suffered the emotional hysteria, blind hatred and political schizophrenia of the "cold war" of Amer-

ica towards Iran and Russia, and they certainly do not wish to become—and in fact will not allow—politicians and a media from trying to lobotomize them into this mindset.

Obama himself has said that the younger generation is "by instinct more inclusive" and this means they are looking for ways to include Russia-Iran in the circle of friendship, and they voted for Trump largely because of his desire for this also. Fortunately, for Americans, President Trump's "business man" acumen enables him to analyze people, countries, and projects from a pragmatic political perspective, rather than an emotional one, and this will be his policy in the future.

◆ **Some of Trump's choices for his cabinet members have taken opposite positions in their hearings comparing to Trump's during his presidential campaign. What are the outcomes and reasons for their disagreement on JCPOA, Russian issue, etc?**

Trump's cabinet members are saying things now, in front of Congress and the Senate hearings, largely to simply "get approved". Most of their statements are calculated simply to get them a "passing

vote” and will not reflect the philosophy of Donald Trump.

President Trump will order every member of his cabinet to implement his personality, his political philosophy, his policy agenda into all the agencies of the federal government, and not to pursue their own agenda or prior goals or ideas. So many members of the Trump cabinet, although distasteful and ignorant as they may be towards Russia and Iran, will have to report to President Trump on everything they say and do, and follow his policies and philosophy, not their own.

◆ **How do you evaluate over the situation of Trump's elected ministers? Would they be able to get yes vote?**

The key to getting a “yes vote” in the Congressional hearings is essentially to say nothing and commit to nothing, and smile and nod in “bobble-head” approval to the puppets in Congress who ask the questions. Simply speaking in “plain-vanilla” language, without a lot of facts or details and little or no passion, and go around in circles, pleases the empty headed American Congress, who are more interested in hearing their own voices and pleasing the money-lenders who fund their re-election campaigns. Now of course there are some psychotic, homicidal maniacs—such as Senator John McCain—and homosexual cheerleaders—such as Senator Lindsay Graham—who desire only war and conflict and cultural destruction in America, but they are an aberration and not respected by the majority of Americans.

Like Ronald Reagan in the 1980's, President Trump will implement far-reaching and profound pro-business, anti-tax, anti-regulation and big government policies, as well as a pro-peace, non-interventionist foreign policy in the coming year. Once the positive effects and friendly thaw in relations begins to appear to Americans, they will exuberantly support President Trump even more. This naturally will mean that any politician—especially Republican—who stands against Trump and his cabinet picks, will be most likely voted out of office in the coming year.

◆ **How do you think about Trump's situation in the current US community, regarding his low popularity rate and**

his attacks to CNN and many other things, and what will be the nation's reactions and especially those who voted for him?

President Trump knows, and has passionately and publicly proclaimed, that CNN is “fake news”, and has invented all kinds of lies and deceptions and distortions about him. He has stated he will also continue to communicate on his own, acting as his own Press Secretary in a way, on Twitter and social media. This means he will have a direct access to the American heart and mind, and will cultivate a positive and transparent “one-on-one” dialogue with America—and the world. As history shows, President Franklin Roosevelt did this in his “fire-side chats” on the radio with Americans, and Ronald Reagan also did this on TV from the Oval Office. These acts of open, transparent, intimate conversations with Americans was what made them two of the most loved and respected and successful Presidents in American history. The same will occur with Trump—and more so—given the renaissance in the American identity, peace with other nations he wishes to secure, and hope for the future that he passionately believes in.

◆ **Dozens of democratic lawmakers are boycotting President-elect Donald Trump's inauguration, accusing Trump of preaching policy of division and hate, his insults to some US democratic representatives and saying his election has depended on the foreign interference of Russia's leaders. What do you evaluate this?**

This boycott of the Presidential Inauguration by Democrats will be celebrated and lamented by many as the death of the Democrat party. It will be celebrated by Republicans because it is an “abandonment of the field” by Democrats, and confirmation of an emotional breakdown and child-like tantrum by the Democrats in a desperate attempt to somehow hurt Donald Trump. But instead, Democrats will only be hurting themselves, because the American people have no patience or respect for this behavior. They expect and demand their politicians to behave like aristocrats, like statesmen, like leaders worthy of the great trust and faith put into them by the Voter American voter. By boycotting Trump, they are instead contradicting

and degrading everything they are expected to uphold, preserve, and protect.

The other fantasy—or lie—the American public is refusing to accept from the mainstream media or the psychotic politicians is the “Russian hacking of the US election and connection to Trump”. Ironically, the vast majority of Americans have said, regardless of how Trump was elected, they are more than happy is was elected. Americans are relieved because of the great fear they had that Hillary Clinton was preparing to lead America into endless wars in the Middle East, China, and Russia—which would have effectively destroyed America, if not the world. This hell was avoided, and the God of the Universe heard the prayers of Americans—and the world—and has spared us this destruction. Americans—and the people of the world—are now hoping and praying that Donald Trump will wisely lead America along a new path of tolerance, peace, and prosperity, and abandon the fanaticism and obsession for empire which started on September 11, 2001 when the greatest deception in history occurred in the false-flag attacks upon the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. The final hope of course is that European leaders are being replaced, such as in France, Britain, and Germany, and they will join President Trump into lifting the sanctions against Russia, creating new relations with Iran, and combining their wisdom to work together on terrorist problems through diplomacy, rather than interventionism, regime change, and reckless wars.

Dr. Scott Bennett, formerly of the US Army 11th Psychological Operations Battalion, attempted to blow the whistle by contacting the commercially-controlled media and writing to US politicians after being sacked from his job as terrorist finance investigator after he proved too zealous at the job. He also tried to expose Union Bank of Switzerland for financing terrorism (Al Qaeda, Benghazi, ISIL) through the US and Allies, Saudi, Qatar, Turkey, Israel back in 2012; then thrown in prison for it. Bennett had a background in advertising, before being fast tracked into the US military PSYOPS division, receiving a Direct Commission as an Officer, and held a Top Secret/Sensitive Compartmentalized Information (TS/SCI) security clearance |

Dire Humanitarian Situation in Bahrain



Dossier

By: Hamid Reza Gholamzadeh

January 6 marks 200 days since the ruling regime in Bahrain has imposed a siege on the whole village of Diraz banning tens of thousands of civilians from access to basic rights.

The siege was a step forward by Al Khalifa ruling dynasty in the tiny Persian Gulf state, where the majority of people are Shia Muslims ruled by the minority Sunni rulers, after the Shia figure Ayatollah Sheikh Isa Qassim was stripped of his Bahraini nationality. The verdict was received by public anger and tens of thousands of people supporting the religious figure poured to the streets of Dizar district, a village where Sheikh's house is located, to prevent any possible attack by the armed forces.

The history of such rising pressure on Shia community dates back to early 2011 when the Islamic Awakening also known as Arab Spring erupted in the region. On 14 February 2011, massive protests of people in Bahrain started and unlike what was going on in birthplace of the unrest, Tunisia, as well as others such as Egypt, the protests in Bahrain were totally peaceful and their leaders had strongly warned against any violence. Like Tahrir Square in Cairo, Lulu (Arabic for pearl) Square was symbol and epicenter of demonstrations. The sign at the middle of the square consisted of six pillars going to skies and reaching together at the top, holding a pearl which the square was named after. The pillars symbolically represented six members of the Persian Gulf Cooperation Council unity of whom was considered a pearl at the top of the structure. The site was chosen wisely and metaphorically as the venue of protests to show unity of demonstrators, too.

It was no surprise that fearing a possible toppling of the rulers, the regime forces showed a heavy hand in response to the protests. Many male protesters, including men and boys, were detained in masses to an extent that very soon, the majority of demonstrators were women. Meanwhile, on March 18, 2011, the government rushed into demolishing the Lulu square. The regime, further, sought help of neighboring Saudi Arabia to deploy its forces for crackdown of opposition.

200 days of siege in Bahrain amid global indifference



Uprisings without ousting demands

But why were the people holding peaceful protests after all?

It is an important question which can be a key to the current situation in Bahrain. At least nearly 80 percent of the population in Bahrain is made by Shia people which are surprisingly deprived of many basic human and social rights and of course of any high level and managing positions in military, government and state-run organizations. Along with this longstanding discrimination, the conduct of promises the king had made has been a source of problem, too.

When Sheikh Hamad took the throne in 1999 he first decided to bring protests of that decade to an end. In 2001 he promised democratic reforms based on a National Action Charter which considered amendments to 1973 constitution; the opposition refused the amendments as serving the power of the king. King Hamad accepted to remove amendments to the constitution, but in 2002 he unilaterally promulgated a new constitution which granted him privileges to personally appoint PM or the judiciary members or approve ministers. He also formed a second legislative council whose members were appointed by the king and had the right to confirm or reject legislations of the current body.

Who is targeted by the siege?

In response to the authoritative behavior of the king, leader of the Muslims in Bahrain Sheikh Isa Qassim embraced three phases of moves to pave the way for a democratic reform. He contributed to establishment of Islamic Ulema Council, Al-Wefaq Party and Islamic Tawfiya (Enlightenment) Society, each focusing on religious issues and policy making, political issues and cultural affairs, respectively.

One can make a parallel between these three organizations and those Americans have supported in many countries to promote democracy and democratic values. Not only did not the bodies seek any violence or discord being promoted in society, but also they were a huge contributor of unity among the Shia and the Sunni. The entities meant an effort to properly criticize problems and promote reforms in the government.

As the intellectual leader of the movement, Sheikh Isa has always refuted violence or even any demands to topple the regime; his words and demands of him and his followers is to make reforms in current structure to make it democratic.

It is no secret anymore that supported by the United Kingdom and the

United States, Persian Gulf countries are being ruled by authoritarian regimes which have no respect or concern about democracy and human rights; and regretfully, the West never stops supports and trades with them. This actually has paved the way for the Al Khalifa regime to show suppressive reaction to Sheikh Isa Qassim and the abovementioned organizations. In 2014, religious council was closed and late same year opposition party leader Sheikh Ali Salman was arrested to be the first step in closing Al-Wefaq Party. Very soon, the cultural center was closed, too. Although the protests in Bahrain were not like other countries witnessing unrests and never turned to violence on the side of people, the regime in the tiny island was, if not more, as brutal as forces in those countries; moreover, it was the only state which allowed a foreign army put step on its soil and suppress its own citizens.

As the oppression on masses failed to stop the protests, Al Khalifa decided to focus all the pressure on Sheikh Isa Qassim. While the Shia Muslims form the majority of population in Bahrain,

the regime decided to accuse Sheikh Isa of money laundering on the pretext that he had received money from his followers; the money is in fact a religious duty in Shia Islam which doesn't exist in Sunni Islam. In other words, the ruling dynasty which is from minor Sunni faith, charged a Shia figure for exercising his faith and religious duties. The outcome was a sentence stripping him of his nationality which was another step in line with other policy of the regime to change demography of the country by granting nationality to Sunni and Wahhabi people from other countries. (In about 10 years, the population was nearly doubled from 600,000 people due to the same policy of granting nationality to foreigners, while stripping nationality of Shia citizens.)

King Hamad who had reportedly vowed other Arab states in Persian Gulf to expel Sheikh Isa Qassim within 48 hours, faced public support of people who gathered around Sheikh's house and military forces had no way through to reach him. This Friday marks 200 days since then and the regime has so far

imposed a siege on the whole neighborhood. Recently the army cordoned off the region with armored vehicles and riot police forces surrounded the area Sheikh's house is located. Once again, news broke out among the people and more people rushed to the location to prevent any raid on his house. Very soon, the regime officials claimed that the whole forces were after a convict in adjacent building which later turned to be a 16-year-old boy.

Nearly 6 years have passed since the first calls for better rights and democracy in Bahrain and the outcome has been more pressure and discrimination and finally 200 days of siege on people of a village all under the heavy, deadly silence of all international organizations and human rights bodies. World needs to wake up and oppose situation in Bahrain, before more bloods are shed and before Sheikh Isa Qassim is executed the same way Nimr BAqir al-Nimr was martyred by Saudi regime.

People in Diraz have been under siege for 200 days and eye help from the world |



Al Khalifa regime bribes HR organizations into silence

Interview by: *Lachin Rezaian*

Bahraini political activist criticized the international community for its silence over the crimes committed by the Al Khalifa rulers of Bahrain.

Bahrain recently executed three anti-regime Shia activists Sami Mus-haima, Abbas Jamil Tahir al-Sami' and Ali Abdulshahid al-Singace over their alleged role in a 2014 bomb attack, amid widespread public anger against the death verdicts.

The execution of three innocent young Bahrainis provoked wave of protests against the Al Khalifa regime. Thousands of Bahrainis by holding demonstrations in different parts of Bahrain, expressed outrage towards recent unjust and brutal executions.

International and human rights bodies and all popular organizations across the world have attested to the lack of transparency in the unfair trial proceedings of the three Bahraini citizens.

Bahraini political activist with the

Public Committee for the Unemployed Hassan Abd al-Nabi elaborated more on the outcomes of suppressing Bahraini activists which is against the human rights principles.

"Unfortunately, the international community only expresses concern in this regard without taking any measure against the regime's crimes. Some of the countries which claim to be democratic, to defend human rights and to fight terrorism have also remained silent. This is while some of these countries have closed their eyes to the crimes and some of them even support and also sell weapons to Al-Khalifa regime in Bahrain," he underlined.

Abd al-Nabi added that Bahraini rulers use the weapons to oppress and massacre the defenseless people of Bahrain. The attacks against the people of Bahrain have negative impacts on the people of the region in general and Bahrain in particular.

"Al-Khalifa attacks will not remain unanswered and the people of Bahrain will not be fooled by the crimes," he said, adding "At any moment it is pos-



sible to re-create a new Arab Spring to overthrow the regimes."

Hassan Abd al-Nabi went on to discuss the role of other countries in stopping the human rights violations in Bahrain. He said "unfortunately, so far no country has taken any steps to stop the criminal acts to reduce crimes against people. Even the countries in the region are inactive to show solidarity with the people of Bahrain.

"This shameful silence will lead to the intensification of the regime's efforts to continue their support for the dictatorship in the region and in Bahrain," he noted.

Bahraini political activist called those who claim to defend human rights as traders or dealers fed in the way. "The governments pay bribes and gifts to these organizations to keep them silent and fill their political case with legal awards and titles," he noted adding "in this regard, Prime Minister of Bahrain Prime Minister of Bahrain recently received many awards and gifts, among them 'Flame of Peace' in tribute for his humanitarian role to promote global peace and boost relations between people, something completely in contrary to who he really is: "He is the greatest commander of Bahraini blood-thirsty military and security murderers and executioners."

Hassan Abd al-Nabi is a Bahraini political and media activist |



Support for Al-Khalifa, Western strategy to project power in Persian Gulf

Interview by: Lachin Rezaian

Canadian Human Rights Attorney Edward Corrigan rejected the 'muted' protests of the United States, Great Britain and other Western powers against the human rights violation in Bahrain as appalling.

Bahrain's human rights climate remains highly problematic. The country's courts convict and imprison peaceful dissenters and have failed to hold officials accountable for torture and other serious rights violations.

Edward Corrigan said Western countries are more concerned about their

an noted in an exclusive interview with Mehr News Agency:

◆ **What is the outcome of Bahraini government's suppression of pro-democracy activists? How do you evaluate the role of international community in countering the crimes and torture in Bahrain?**

The brutal repression of peaceful marchers who are protesting the execution by firing squad of the three young activists is only going to intensify the resistance to the Al-Khalifa regime. If the regime does not allow peaceful protest and recognize the right to free speech and address the concerns of the major-

ed Nations Human Rights Commissioner issued a harsh rebuke saying that it was appalled by the executions. The UN Commission said they had "serious doubts whether the accused were provided with the right to have a fair trial."

The UN Committee was extremely critical of the trials and executions. In a Press Release they wrote: "We are appalled at the execution by firing squad of three men in Bahrain on Sunday. The men had been convicted of a bombing in Manama in 2014 that killed three police officers. They were found guilty after being allegedly tortured into making false confessions and their lawyers were not given access to all the evidence against them nor allowed to cross-examine prosecution witnesses during court hearings."

They were joined by the United States who said they were "concerned" about the executions. France also condemned the executions. Great Britain and the European Union deplored the use of the death penalty in this situation. Many other countries including Iran, and Iraq strongly condemned the executions of what they called "political" prisoners.

Here is what Human Rights Watch wrote about the trials: "The UN Human Rights Committee, which interprets the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which Bahrain has ratified, has said that "in cases of trials leading to the imposition of the death penalty scrupulous respect of the guarantees of fair trial is particularly important and that any death penalty imposed after an unfair trial would be a violation of the right to life. Human Rights Watch opposes the death penalty in all circumstances because of its inherent cruelty."

Amnesty International has made similar criticism of the trials and called them "unfair" and they noted that the confessions were based on torture. The trials did not meet the required international standards.

◆ **How do you analyze the role of other countries, including US and UK, in raising tensions in Bahrain resulting in**



strategic alliance with the Al-Khalifa regime than about human rights or the wishes of the majority of the population in Bahrain.

He warned if the population of Bahrain explodes in anger over the repression and discriminatory treatment, it will put in jeopardy the presence of the United States and Britain, given their long history of support for the Al-Khalifa dictatorship.

"Strategic relationship with the Al-Khalifa regime is due to its strategic location of Bahrain which allows the United States and Britain to project their power in the Persian Gulf area," Corrigan

ity Shia population there will be more violence. If one suppresses peaceful protest then it makes it inevitable that violent protest will result if there is no other alternative.

In September 2016 in a joint statement signed by 35 countries, the UN Human Rights Council expressed serious concern about human rights violations in Bahrain including imprisonment of those exercising their rights to freedom of expression, assembly and association, and lack of accountability.

In response to the executions the international community has been more vocal in their criticism. The Unit-



human rights abuses?

The muted protests of the United States, Great Britain and other Western powers is appalling. They are more concerned about their strategic alliance with the Al-Khalifa regime than about human rights or the wishes of the majority of the population in Bahrain. Britain has a military presence in Bahrain which they wish to protect. The United States 5th Fleet is based in Bahrain. The Americans also provide other support. In June 2016, the US government lifted its embargo on arms sales to the Bahrain National Guard and Bahrain Defense Forces. In August 2016 approved an US\$150 million deal to supply military aircraft parts, ammunition and communications equipment to Bahrain. These actions reward the Manama regime for its violation of human and political rights.

If the population of Bahrain explodes in anger over the repression and discriminatory treatment, it will put in jeopardy the presence of the United States and Britain, given their long history of support for the Al-Khalifa dictatorship.

◆ **Why human rights pretenders like the US and UK not only are silent against Bahraini government curtailing freedoms of expression, association and assembly and cracking down on dissent, but also provide the country with financial aids?**

Again it is the perceived "strategic relationship" with the Al-Khalifa regime and the strategic location of Bahrain

which allows the United States and Britain to project their power in the Persian Gulf area that dominates the thinking of the Western Powers. The importance of oil and the ongoing support of the British, and now the Americans, for the monarchical dictatorships in the Persian Gulf region necessitates a military presence to prop up the autocratic feudal regimes in the area. There is a realization on the part of the West that if they did not support the Persian Gulf States with weapons, money and military force if needed, these regimes would collapse given their precarious nature.

◆ **Do you think the Conflict, Stability and Security Fund (CSSF)- a financial pool worth more than £1bn a year- is evidence of the militarization of Britain's development budget and UK complicity in abuses?**

Yes. This budget is largely without oversight and is controlled by the Conservative British government at the present time. There has been funding to Bahrain in the amount of two million pounds. It does appear that this fund is being used to support dictatorships and not development.

◆ **Many activists, NGOs and Human rights campaigners in Bahrain, like the Labor party in Britain, complain about the lack of transparency surrounding how the reserves are spent and about a high degree of ambiguity about the status of the CSSF fund. What do you**

think about this?

This money is reportedly to help Bahrain to improve its justice system and to improve human rights in the tiny Persian Gulf monarchy. However, as critics have pointed out that the justice system in Bahrain is getting much worse. Torture is being used against prisoners and being used to convict activists with some receiving the death sentence. In addition, there is violent suppression of peaceful demonstrators, the killing of unarmed demonstrators and the revocation of citizenship from more than 200 Bahrainis. Freedom of speech and political rights are under severe attack in Bahrain. There have been calls in Britain by the Labor Opposition and by human rights groups to stop sending money to Bahrain until the Al-Khalifa regime substantially improves its human rights record. This money should be used to improve human rights and not to reward human rights abusers.

Edward C. Corrigan holds a B.A. in History and a Master's Degree in Political Science from the University of Western Ontario. He also has a Law Degree from the University of Windsor and was called to the Bar of the Law Society of Upper Canada in 1992. His academic area of expertise is the Middle East and he has published many articles in academic publications including Middle East Policy, Middle East International, Outlook and Z Magazine |

Bahrain regime to be tougher in 2017 realizing its fail



By: **Mohamamd Mazhari**

Saeed Al-Shahabi is one of first political figures in Bahrain who was forced to a self-exile after Manama regime imposed a death sentence against him.

Shahabi and many other protesters inside and outside Bahrain protest discrimination, injustice and brutality of the ruling Al Khalifa regime in the tiny Persian Gulf Arab country.

After 14 February 2011 uprisings erupted across Bahrain, the regime showed an oppressive reaction by deploying Saudi regime army forces in the country suppressing massive peaceful rallies. It has also put pressure on different political parties and religious figures including Sheikh Ali Salman and Sheikh Issa Qasem; whereas the latter has been under an imposed siege for over 7 months now and has been stripped of his Bahraini nationality by a court ruling.

As the tough responses by Al Khalifa dynasty is increasing day by day, we have talked to Saeed Al-Shahabi to ask him share his views about the current situation and what may happen in future in Bahrain.

◆What Bahraini people seek to achieve from protests? Would they seek introducing reforms to the current establishment or they seek to topple the system and instate a new system?

It is clear from the beginning of the

revolution on the 14th February 2011 that the people had reached stage of despair with the regime that this regime is not reformable. They had tried various methods of reform for about 50 years, and the regime had the chance to reform itself from 1922 until 2017 that is about 90 years, however it became clear that it is not possible. This tribal dictatorship cannot be reformed. In fact, none of despotic regimes and dictatorships in the world have been reformed. You cannot transform a dictatorship into a democracy. You cannot expect from despotism and tyranny to give people freedom and respect freedom of opinion and expression. Any attempt to reform these kinds of dictatorships is futile. So the people were clear in their demand that they want fundamental change and this process is unacceptable and intolerable. If reform was possible they would have done so. They tried that in the 90th and the uprising of 1994 - 96 was a clear example of that and we were there in the 80th and 70th and we did our best to push through some degree of reform plan based on constitution in 1973 but the regime proved that it is impossible.

◆Why western powers such as UK and the USA support Bahraini regime despite its violation of human rights?

They have some reasons; first of all, there is a lack of loyalty to the principles, so the western countries especially UK and USA are simply not loyal to de-

mocracy and human rights principles and they just use these values and exploit them but only where it is in their interest. When they come to Saudi Arabia or Bahrain or other friendly countries, though they are the most despotic countries, the most vicious systems they neglect their principles and values of modern democratic governance.

The second reason is greed of these countries, they think that they are ready to support these dictatorships as long as they remain a source of financial interest for the west, because they have oil especially Saudi Arabia and of course UAE, Qatar and Bahrain and because they have plenty of reserved money, US and UK would never ignore all that money. This is why you see a lot of investment today in UK. If you go to a street in London, you can see the high-rise buildings, football stadiums, crossing of river themes and any big enterprise you see is invested hugely by those countries in different sectors.

And the third and final factor is the misconception by the western countries. They imagine that they can ensure stability of the region under rule of these monarchies. But the reality opposes this approach. You cannot have stability and security without democracy. These despotic states have exported only extremism in past decades as you have seen. Extremist ideologies and terrorism in the Middle East are outcomes of supporting these countries. If the west is serious about achieving peace and harmony and defeating terrorism, then they must stop supporting these dictatorships.

◆How do you evaluate reaction by international institutions to Al-Khalifah cruel crackdown on protestors?

There is hypocrisy and double standard. Hypocrisy in their dealing. They know that Al-Khalifa regime is killing people. They know that Bahraini prisons have at least 5000 prisoners, large amount of them are imprisoned because of expressing their opinion. They know that people have been killed out-

side the rule of law which is termed as "extra judicial killing". They know that this regime has destroyed the country and represents just a minority of Bahrain while the majority is opposing it. They also know that this regime has revoked illegally the nationality of citizens and natives and brought foreigners and granted them citizenship. They know that this regime cannot respect human rights and freedom of expression, newspaper has been banned or restricted, journalists are either killed or imprisoned, human rights activists has been persecuted, including Nabil Rajab the most prominent human rights activist. They know that this tribal system has violated civil liberties and political rights and the leaders of political societies were imprisoned and some of them are still in jail like Sheikh Ali Salma and Fadhel Abbas while Ebrahim Sharif and Sheikh Mohammad Ali al-Mahfouz, secretary generals of two other politically institutions were released recently, but they are under constant surveillance. The west knows that the regime is cracking down on the oppositions harshly, but they chose to ignore it and they don't want to see what is going on. They just want to have business as usual with the most vicious government in the Middle East.

◆ **How have Bahraini authorities handled protestors? There have been stories in the media that they use unconventional weapon against people.**

The regime has broken all possible redlines, so you are not allowed to have right of assembly, the right of expression or to hold meeting or criticize. This regime has tightened restrictions on liberties yet it has managed to avoid sanctions thank to western support. They used all possible means to crack down on protesters, they used tear gas that was proven by the University of Dublin 2012 that is up to 10-times more toxic than normal tear gas in order quell anti-government protestors. They used shotguns against demonstrators and you can see in photos people bodies are wounded by small bullets. They used extensive number of foreign mercenaries to surround villages and towns like Doraz which is under the oppression for six months. They use also foreign experts in security fields, for instance, British personnel are working behind the scene to direct the operation against Bahraini people. Recently we understood that the regime has had links with Israeli government to provide security technology and follow effective methods of suppressing and cracking down on Bahraini nation, because of similarities between these two regimes especially in their occupation policy. So these regimes is using every means to crack down on protestors knowing that it will be always protected by western powers.

◆ **Do you expect to see more clashes in future? What is protestors' strategies to confront the regime?**

In the last months we have seen escalation of brutality by the Al-Khalifah; we saw executing people on January 15th and on February 9th also killed three people –we don't know where- but Bahraini authorities say that they killed them in the sea. So the regime has committed serious crimes against humanity as torture is practiced so commonly among Bahraini security forces.

What I expect this year is more repression, more killing. We are bracing ourselves to more retribution and revenge by Al-Khalife regime.

We expect to see more cruelty, more torture, more killing and viciousness from the regime this year, because it knows well that it cannot continue much longer.

However, people are no longer afraid of the Al Khalifa's suppression and they cannot give up their demands because of regime's brutality and the more vicious Bahraini regime becomes the braver people become, because they don't want to repeat experience of last decades and They will not let the regime prevail the country again and it must go...This is the strategy of revolutionaries. They will persist, they will have potions, will continue to be in the streets and they will go to jail and continue demonstrate until the Al-Khalifah are removed from power because otherwise they will remain under the threat of mass killing, mass execution, destruction of identity of country as well as its historic values and religion |



Interview by: Mohammad Mazhari

Irish human rights activist and CEO of Human Rights Sentinel believes green lights from the United States and Britain has encouraged Bahraini regime's oppressive measures.

It has been more than 7 months now that Al Khalifa regime in Bahrain has imposed a siege on Diraz village where top religious figure Sheikh Isa Qassim is residing; moreover, a recent execution of three young Bahrainis drew much criticisms toward the tough response the country has had through 6 years of peaceful protests.

As the intense situation and oppressive measures of the regime in Bahrain is increasing in recent days, we have talked to the Irish human rights activist and CEO of Human Rights Sentinel Tara Reynor O'Grady to shed more light on the issue. Here is our conversation:

◆ **How do you see protest movement in Bahrain against Al Khalifah regime? Do you suppose it a violent movement or it seeks its goals peacefully?**

The people know that the regime wants to incite violence so that they can be justified in cracking down on them. It is against their ethos and their best interest to rise in that manner. This is why the opposition have been exhausting every effort to engage through using internationally accepted methods of diplomacy. However, there is no will from the regime to commit to meaningful dialogue.

The youth are understandably frustrated and have no way to express themselves in order to be heard, this is one of the reasons for burning tyres. The forces patrol the villages with malevolence and seek opportunities for reprisals against protestors. Protecting the villages from these raids coupled with an element of enraged retaliation affords the opportunity for skirmishes to break out. But the weapons are one sided. Considering the absolute enormity of the protests it is clear that if the people were indeed given to rebellion... there would be a blood bath.

◆ **What is Bahraini regime's goal from trial of Bahrain's senior Shia Cleric Sheikh Isa Qassim after execution of**

US, UK, Saudi Arabia behind Bahrain brutality



three young political activists? And why Bahraini authorities postponed the trial?

Sheikh Issa Qassim is the most senior and most highly respected holy man in the country, this means that the Shia community are his flock and that in actuality he has more 'power' over them than the Al Khalifas ever possibly could. They fear his voice and want to silence him, similar to the authorities in Eastern Qattif who wanted to remove Sheikh Nimr Al-Nimr (God rest his soul).

One would hope that the postponement of the trial is due to some rational thinking on the part of someone in the authorities or a small group of voices with common sense. However, the regime does not care about their international reputation because they have not listened to the many loud calls for human rights to be observed by NGOs, the UN and many governments who have expressed profound concern over the crisis. The recent executions reflect how they have been emboldened to by their strange military and economic relationships with America and the UK and the familial support they enjoy from Saudi.

◆ **What's your comment –as a human right defender- on preventing people from practicing their religious rituals? Is that illegal accord to UN charter?**

I believe in plurality and fostering respect for one another's faith. It is a heinous thing to prevent someone from practicing their method of prayer, to de-

molish their holy places, to arrest clerics and to kill people while they are congregating.

Why western states always ignore some Arab regimes crimes and continue arming these totalitarian governments?

Follow the money, the weapons and the power. The war machine must be fed.

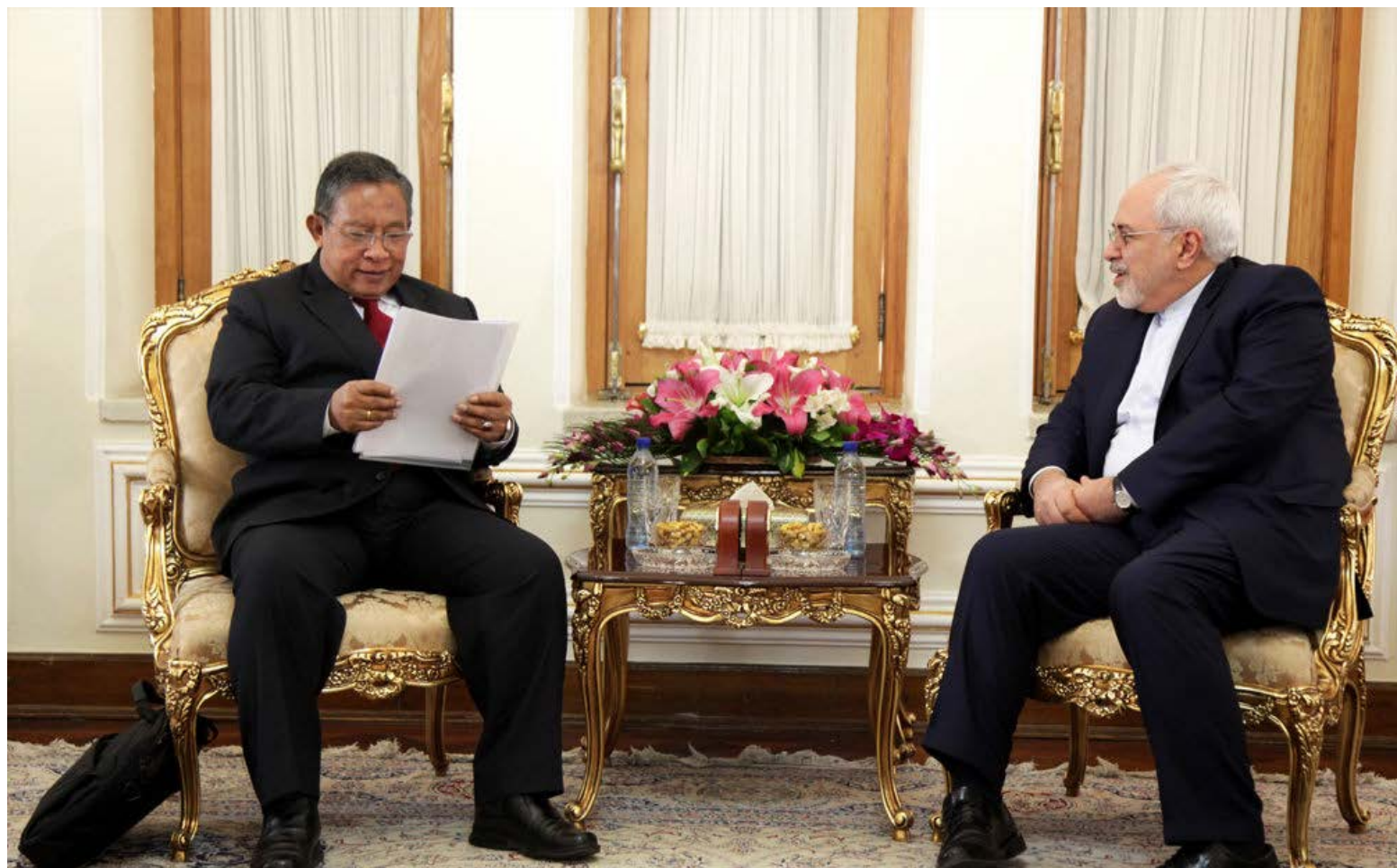
◆ **Why don't we consider a strong reaction from international society to crimes of Bahrain government, in comparison with their propaganda against Syrian state? While we see Syrian rebels are armed but Bahraini protestors are unarmed?**

We actually DO see a strong reaction from international society. Everyone knows what's happening in Bahrain. It is a high agenda topic in Brussels at EU Parliament and Geneva at the UN, for many concerned NGOs, for the Trade Unions and others. But because the USA, KSA and UK have such powerful influence on the island and are already very comfortably in bed with the authorities there is little fear of a mass spill over to negatively impact profitability. A 'stronger' reaction would be economic sanctions, removing privileges from the elite who try to whitewash their activities by hosting science fairs or racing horses and cars, and preventing their children from attending private schools and colleges in countries that are willing to do more than just lend oral solidarity to those suffering under this tyrannical regime |



Asghar Farhadi's 'The Salesman' wins Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film

News in Vision



Iran's Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif held separate talks with Executive Director of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) Yuri Fedotov and Indonesia's Coordinating Minister for Economic Affairs Darmin Nasution on Feb. 27.

Iran-Azerbaijan business forum was held in Urmia, West Azerbaijan province, in the presence of Iran's ICT Minister Mahmoud Vaezi on Feb. 24.



The Pakistani Prime Minister's Foreign Affairs Advisor Sartaj Aziz met with Iran's Defense Minister Brigadier General Hossein Dehghan at the Headquarter of Iran's Defense Ministry in Tehran on Feb. 21.

The 6th International Conference in Support of the Palestinian Intifada opened in Tehran on Feb. 21.





Chairman of Supreme People's Assembly of Democratic People's Republic of Korea Choe Thae-bok met with Parliament Speaker Ali Larijani in Tehran on Feb. 20.



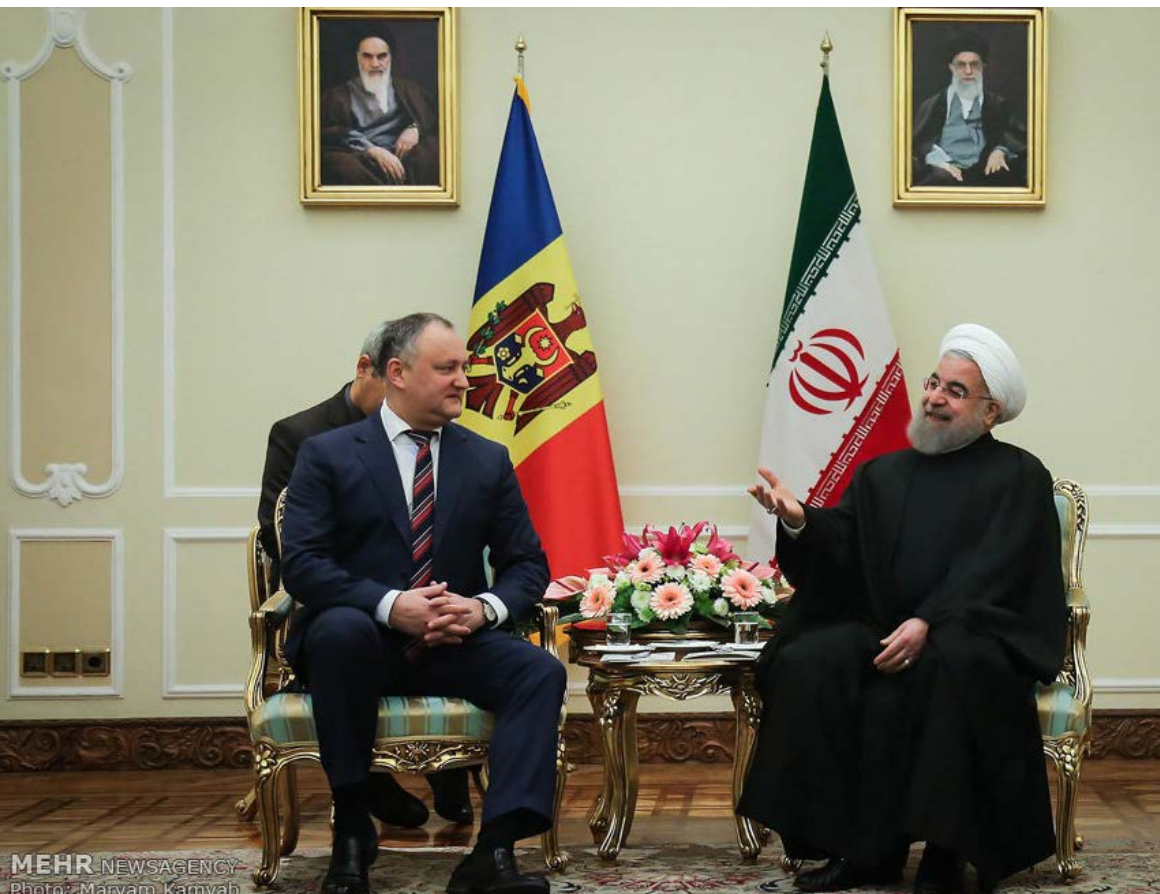
FIVB Beach Volleyball World Tour Kish Island 3-Star 2017 wrapped up on Kish Island Feb. 19, with Russia 1, Poland and Russia 2 standing at first, second and third places, respectively.



Tehran's designated Aftab City Fair Ground hosted Tehran Auto Fair February 14-18 where domestic and foreign automakers participated.



Tous Gasoline-burning Marine Outboard Engine, a propulsion system for boats, was unveiled as a part of 1st Marine Propulsion Conference, on Feb. 14 in Tehran's Olympic Hotel.



Iran's President Hassan Rouhani met with Moldovan counterpart Igor Dodon on Feb. 12.

Leader of the Islamic Revolution Seyyed Ali Khamenei received Swedish Prime Minister Stefan Löfven in Tehran on Feb. 11.





People of Tehran, from all walks of life, came to streets on Feb. 10 to commemorate the 38th anniversary of Islamic Revolution.



Tehran hosted the 35th Fajr Film Festival on 31 January – 10 February, 2017.



President Rouhani met with Venezuelan Foreign Minister Delcy Rodriguez and Oil Minister Nelson Martinez and on Feb. 18.

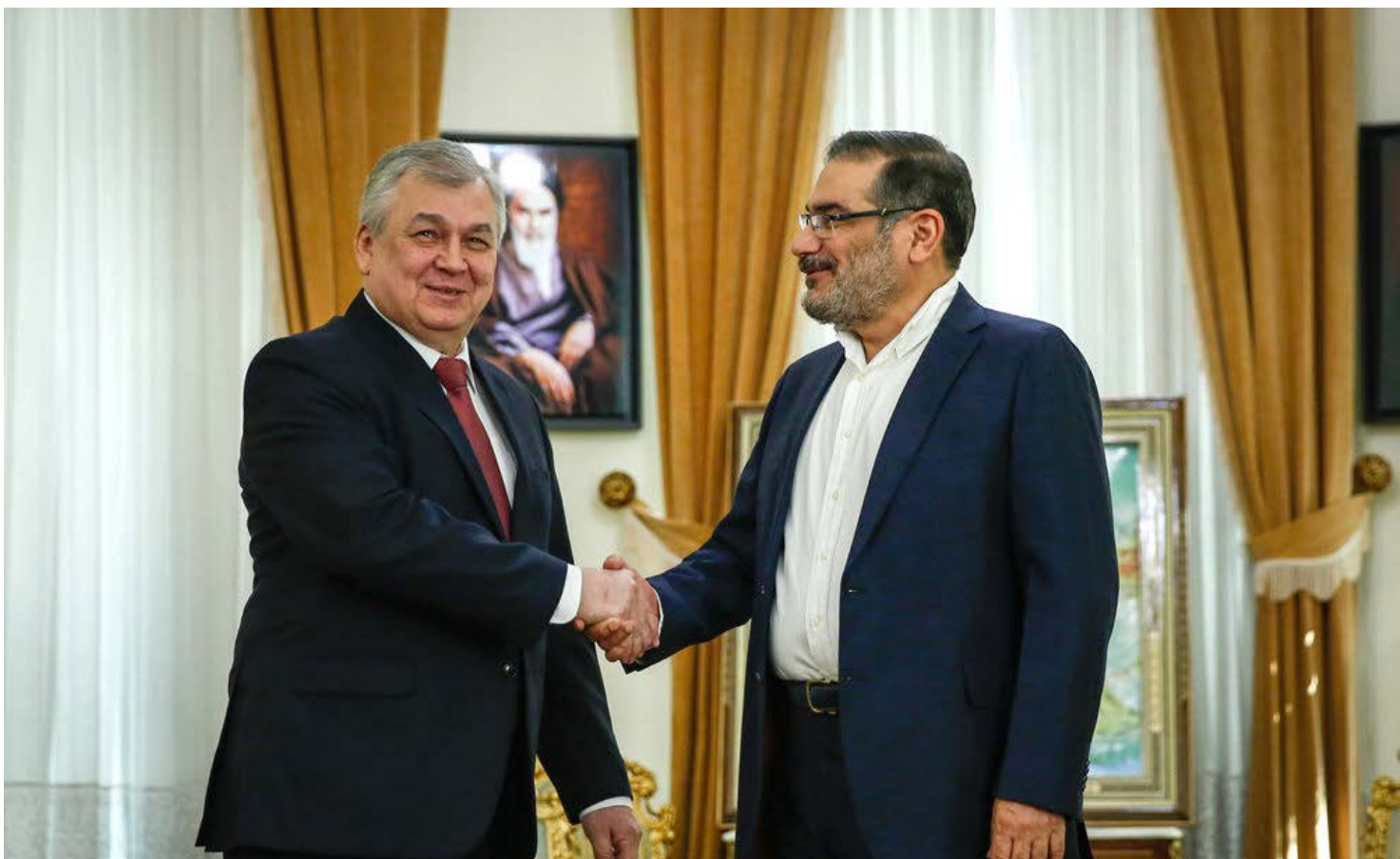
President Hassan Rouhani met with the Chairman of the Council of the Republic of the National Assembly of Belarus Mikhail Myasnikov in Tehran on Feb. 7.





Iran's Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif met with UN Secretary-General Special Representative for Iraq Ján Kubiš in Tehran on Feb. 6.

Head of Supreme National Security Council Ali Shamkhani met with President Putin's special envoy on Syria Alexander Lavrentiev in Tehran on Feb. 6.





Defense Industries Organization (DIO), of the Ministry of Defense has inaugurated country's first ever oceanographic ship dubbed aptly Persian Gulf Explorer, in Bandar Abbas on Feb. 4.

Iranian President Hassan Rouhani met with French Foreign Minister Jean-Marc Ayrault in Tehran on Jan. 31.





Plasco, an old commercial building in central Tehran, collapsed after burning for about four hours despite the efforts of firefighters to quench the fire on Jan. 19. More than 20 firefighters were killed in the collapse.



President Hassan Rouhani and Albania's Foreign Minister Ditmir Bushati met in Tehran on Jan. 15.



The first purchased Airbus A321 after the implementation of Iran's nuclear deal landed in Mehrabad International Airport on Jan. 12.



Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Ali Khamenei led the ritual 'prayer for the deceased' in the funeral of former Iranian president and chairman of the Expediency Council Ayatollah Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani at Tehran University on Jan. 10.



New Year celebration was held on Jan. 1 in Saint Sarkis Cathedral in Tehran.