

Iran Politics Report

December 26, 2018

Skimming the Iranian News media on US withdrawal from Syria (Page 1)

Skimming the Iranian News media on Iran's participation in Paris Accord (Page 2)

The death of senior cleric, Hashemi Shahroudi, raised concerns about Iran's aging clerical body in top posts (Page 3)

Water shortage is here to stay (Page 5)

Rouhani's controversial budget finally submitted to the Parliament (Page 6)

Browsing Iranian Newspapers on US withdrawal from Syria:

Mardom Salari (Reformist): the daily headlined Rouhani's quote stating, "Turkey took decisive stance against the US sanctions conspiracy," and went on to state facts and present a balanced account of the event.

In another edition, Mardom Salari headlined, "Earthquake in Pentagon."

Keyhan (Ultra Conservative): the daily's headline reads, "Withdrawal from Syria is yet another defeat in the US history of failures."

Here is a summary of Keyhan's article:

- Many experts and even US authorities believe that the US withdrawal from Syria had nothing but one message: US failure in Syria and victory for Iran and its allies.
- This withdrawal came as a shock to Trump supporters and the resignation of US authorities, Zionist circles and of course jubilation in the Resistance Front.
- Consecutive resignation and well as domestic chaos (fall of stocks, closing the government, congress fight with the White House and ...) has deeply confused Americans.
- In reaction to the US failure, three defense secretaries, and a former secretary of state broke their silence and confessed about the miserable condition of the US.
- Foreign Policy: In addition to the security officials this country's allies are fearful of US decisions.
- Military and intelligence institution of the Zionist regime have officially confessed that Trump's decision to withdraw from Syria as put Israel "under the wheels of Russia's train."

On another edition, Keyhan highlighted the same remarks and choose this as its headline: “US getting out of Iraq and Afghanistan; Deceiving or running away?”

Vatan Emrouz (Conservative): Vatan Emrouz headline quoted a part of Hilary Clinton’s tweet “Actions have consequences, and whether we’re in Syria or not, the people who want to harm us are there & at war. Isolationism is weakness. Empowering ISIS is dangerous. Playing into Russia & Iran’s hands is foolish. This President is putting our national security at grave risk.”

In another edition Vatan Emrouz highlighted “Escaping from the Levant (Syria) referring to the historic name of the region in which today’s Syria is located.

Arman (Reformist): the Iranian Newspaper Arman highlighted Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov’s remark saying, “Stability and predictability is what Russia is looking for in all directions of its foreign policy. Stability and predictability are what all countries welcome. And when stability gives way to unpredictability, surprise and such, I would say, chaos in certain decisions, it causes both discomfort and concern in international affairs. This applies not only to Russia, this applies to all countries.”

Sharq (Reformist): the leading reformist newspaper’s headline reads “Trump against Government.” The daily stressed on James Mattis resignation and stated that Trump’s decision is destructive, primarily for its government, since it fuels the fire of division within itself.

The Latest update on Iranian Political Groups’ View of Iran’s Participation in the Paris Accord

- **Rouhani’s Objection to Ebtekar’s Souvenir**

Source: Vatan Emrouz Daily (Conservative), December 13, 2018

It’s been a year that the critics of Paris accord are vying for proving that this accord is a trap set by the developed countries for the developing ones. Iran’s Department of Environment, as the organization accepting the accord, totally refused to implement the provisions of the accord and passed the issue to the Guardian Council for confirmation, but after a while Mohammad Baqer Nobakht, former Rouhani administration spokesman reported on Iran’s implementation of the accord with the highest rate of participation. The interesting thing is that the supporters of the accord did their best to portray the implementation of the accord as something that costs Iran nothing, but right now Rouhani has begun criticizing it.

In an administrative session, Rouhani referred to some papers written around the world that “seem to be aimed at stopping Iran’s development, while the implications of those findings are ignored by the authors themselves.”

Comment: the conservative Vatan Emrouz sarcastically writes that Rouhani should have known earlier about the magnificent souvenir that Ebtekar, former head of the Environment Department, had brought for the country.

- **Zarif Shouldn’t Have Signed the Paris Accord, Imposing Limitation on the Country at What Price?**

Source: Keyhan (Ultra Conservative) - December 13, 2018

MP Ali Ebrahimi: Zarif has signed the Paris accord on behalf of the Environment Department, while an accord can't be signed until ratified by the parliament.

“Our country has agreed to the Paris accord vividly, and transparently, while we think that this limits our way to growth,” added Ebrahimi. The MP further stressed that Iran's greenhouse gas emissions are much less than the developed countries and accepting such limitations are illogical. We are among the countries possessing fossil fuels and crude oil, while those countries with more emission have only partly agreed to the accord.

Comment: Vatan Emrouz and Keyhan's views are shared by other conservative media outlets and politicians, but with slightly different tones.

- **Why has the Government Kept the Document Containing Iran's Obligations under Paris Accord Hidden from the Parliament?**

Source: Alef.ir (Moderate), November 30, 2018

Ahmad Ali Keykhah, the head of Parliament's Agriculture Commission, reports that the Guardian Council's biggest concern about the Paris accord is the Parliament's lack of access to the document on Iran's obligations under the accord aka NDC, Nationally Determined Contribution.

- **Why are the Guardian Council and the Parliament against the Paris Accord?**

Source: IRIB (Conservative), November 23, 2018

IRIB conducted an interview with Iran's former ambassador to Spain, Davoud Salehi, who opposes the accord for major powers' non-compliance.

“What really weakens trust-building are the measures taken by countries' such as the US when it comes to International Agreements,” said Salehi. He continued by slamming the US decision to pull out of the accord. “Trump administration said that it would seek a better agreement after withdrawing from it. These sorts of measures put other signatories in a state of suspension.”

- **Important Things to Bear in Mind about the Paris Accord and the Latest Meeting in Poland**

Source: Hamshahri Online (currently reformist), December 19, 2018

While representatives from different countries took part in the United Nations Climate Change Conference on how to implement the 2015 Paris Accord, some experts have warned that the accord lacks comprehensive goals and any chance of improving the world's climatic conditions.

- **Environment Activists Criticize the Poland Conference**

Source: ISNA (Conservative), December 16, 2018

Scientists, and the representatives of many countries in Poland Conference expressed regret over the US, Saudi Arabia and Russia's stance. The New IPCC report indicated that global climatic

condition seems chaotic and passiveness would lead to a 3-degree increase in temperature in near future.

The Islamic Republic and an Aging Political Elite Reluctant to Retire

Source: Radio Farda, December 24, 2018

News about Ayatollah Mahmoud Hashemi Shahroudi being “almost dead”, as well as the news blackout concerning terminal illness of senior Assembly of Expert member Ayatollah Mohammad Momen once again have brought into spotlight the mystery about the Islamic Republic's ailing and aging officials who never retire.

As anecdotes on social media and small talk among passengers on Tehran's public transport has it, they remain in office until death does them part from their seats.

According to Fararu news website, Momen is 78 years old. Ahmad Jannati who holds several top positions including the head of Guardian Council is 92, prominent cleric Ayatollah Shobeiri Zanjani is 91, Ayatollah Nouri Hamadani is 93, Ayatollah Jafar Sobhani is 90, and in fact Shahroudi, 70, is or was one of the youngest clerics holding official positions in the Islamic Republic.

There have been clerics such as Mohammad Reza Mahdavi Kani who held tightly to their post even after months of being in a state of coma. He died in 2014 while still the chairman of Assembly of experts. Of course, this was rather a sign of indecision by Supreme Leader Khamenei who probably found it hard to trust anyone else.

Clerics are not the only officials who wish to remain in their posts until their death. While the average age of President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani's first cabinet was 41, and his second cabinet was 44, President Mohammad Khatami's cabinets were 44 and 47 years old on average, and President Mahmoud Ahmadinjad's cabinets were 49 and 50 years old. In the first cabinet of President Hassan Rouhani the ministers' average age was 61 according to hardline Mashregh News website. His second cabinet was slightly younger because he introduced one minister who was in his 30s and this brought the average age of Rouhani's second cabinet to only 58, reported fact-checking website Fact Nameh.

In fact Iranian state officials have been growing older and older since 1979. One reason is that many, including Khamenei and Rouhani, who started their careers with the Islamic Republic's first government in 1979, are still holding top positions.

Even after a law was passed in 2018 to bar individuals past retirement age from holding government positions, Khamenei complained that officials wrote to him to allow some kind of exemption that would keep them in their positions.

On the other hand there is a fierce resistance against introducing new faces into the senior government posts or the non-elected institutions such as the Guardian Council and Expediency Discernment Council. It can also be a matter of trust. Iranian leaders fear new faces as they cannot trust them. This comes while trust built between individuals such as Khamenei and Rafsanjani over 50 years was eroded in the course of political upheavals created by their conflicting interests.

In the case of Shahroudi, while Expediency Discernment Secretary Mohsen Rezai (64) has been putting his name forward and in fact grooming himself for the top post in the council as the news of Shahroudi's illness became widespread in 2017, Khamenei first appointed Movahedi Kermani (87) and Jannati (92) as the substitute chairmen of the council.

The Islamic Republic's Old Guard has been always reluctant to open room for the younger generation of clerics and technocrats to take over the government and dozens of non-elected posts at state organizations.

However, with nearly all state officials, particularly clerics being well above retirement age with many in their 80s and 90s, it will be inevitable for the next generation to take over at one point.

Meanwhile, the death of Shahroudi, one of the most likely persons to succeed Khamenei as Iran's new Supreme Leader, will once again remind everyone in the political elite to think of other possible nominees for the post. This task would be harder than ever owing to the widening gaps between key political figures and factions in Iran over what direction the country should take in the future.

Official Says 30 Million Iranians Had Shortage of Drinking Water Last Summer

Source: Tasnim, RFE, December 25, 2018

An official of Iran's energy ministry says that more than 30 million Iranians faced drinking water shortages last summer. Iran has a population of 82 million and this figure would constitute more than 30 percent of all inhabitants.

Banafsheh Zahrayi who is in charge of an energy ministry project to deal with water shortages told a conference on December 25 that water shortage in Iran is mainly due to climate change, as precipitation has become more irregular. Warmer weather has also increased irrigation needs.

As Iran suffers from years of drought, the government has also been accused of lack of water management, leading to abuse of underground reserves for agricultural needs. Zahrayi told "Iran and Challenge of 2020", a conference about water shortage. That if in past years the concern was water for agriculture, now the problem is foremost drinking water.

The Director General of water shortage management, Ali Seyyedzadeh has recently told reporters that Iran's water reserves have 36% less water in comparison with 2017, adding that the amount of rainfall was less than that of the last decades.

Comment: the average water consumption per capita in the developed countries revolves around 120 to 130 litres in 24 hours. In Iran the average stands at 157 liters in the cities other than Tehran. In Tehran it goes as high as 185 liters.

Farmers in Iran held many noisy protests in Iran in 2018, as scarce water is often redirected from one region to another.

A Budget with Shrinking Revenues

Sources: RFE, Algemeiner, Reuters- December 25, 2018

On December 14, the intervention of Islamic Republic's Supreme leader interrupted the process of presenting Iran's new budget bill for approval. Khamenei wanted to review the budget himself before parliament took it up.

A catalogue of problems including uncertainty about the Islamic Republic's future, perceived threats and vulnerabilities due to U.S. sanctions, and the Iranian leader's lack of confidence in the government's ability to cope with the ongoing economic crisis appear to have led Khamenei to directly intervene in the budget.

Furthermore, increasing the defense budget by withdrawing money from the National Development Fund could also be the objective of Khamenei's intervention, as some MPs have pointed out.

Finally the budget was submitted to parliament on December 25, but there are no details about its appropriations.

According to Planning and Budget Organization Chief Mohammad Baqer Nobakht, the budget for the fiscal year starting in March 2019 is 12% more than the budget for the previous year and should reach 4,330,000 billion rials. But with a higher dollar exchange rate they have set for the new budget, the figure in dollars will come to around \$75 billion, \$29 billion less than the current budget passed last December.

The budget is drawn based on selling one to 1.5 million barrels of oil per day (One million barrel less than the figure in the current year's budget bill) at a projected price of \$54 per barrel but all this may change as a result of upcoming developments and the way US sanctions affects Iran's oil export. Already world oil prices have significantly dropped, making Iran's oil cheaper than \$54.

It was reported in September that Iran may be considering a plan to ration foodstuffs and other essential commodities.

Rouhani's speech was interrupted by parliament members, who Iranian news agencies said were mostly from the southwestern Khuzestan province and were protesting over shortages of drinking water in their region.

On September 2, the parliament discussed a bill that called on the government to import essential commodities and sell the goods at subsidized prices at cooperatives and state-owned shops, said the parliament's website.

MPs who have tabled the bill listed meat, rice, sugar, bread, and other items as essential commodities. MP Mohammad Mahmoudi Shahneshin suggested essential commodities including foodstuffs should be distributed via coupons or other means, Iranian media reported.

The Iranian government has lost two thirds of its revenues, according to statements from the head of the Planning and Budget Organization (PBO) on December 5 that were quickly removed from official websites. The budget shortfall is largely due to losses in oil revenue as a result of sanctions.