



Spotlight on Iran



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Highlights of the week

- ✓ Attacks on Israel, disappointment with Hamas: Iranian media on Gaza fighting
- ✓ Severe shortage of drugs and medical supplies caused by sanctions
- ✓ Charity begins at home: Iranian donation to build dam in Lebanon angers web surfers
- ✓ Practical measures taken to encourage higher birth rate in wake of Supreme Leader's directive

Attacks on Israel, disappointment with Hamas: Iranian media on Gaza fighting

Iran's official reaction to Operation Pillar of Defense (also known as Pillar of Cloud) was rather predictable. Top Iranian officials were quick to condemn "the crimes of the Zionists"; Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Salehi announced that Iran supports the Palestinian people and expressed his desire to go on an official visit to the Gaza Strip; the Iranian media provided enthusiastic coverage of rockets fired from Gaza hitting Israel; and thousands of demonstrators took to the streets of Iran's major cities after the Friday prayers to express their support for the Palestinians. Twenty thousand Basij members in Esfahan even said that they are willing to go fight in Gaza.

And yet, the reactions of the Iranian media in the first days of the fighting in Gaza have exposed the complex reality that Iran is facing in light of the developments in Gaza: its commitment to support Hamas in its fight against Israel on the one hand, and the deepening rift between Iran and Hamas on the other. Iran's disappointment

with the policy pursued by Hamas this past year, including its support for the Syrian opposition and its preference of Egypt, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey over Iran and Syria, could be clearly seen in the media coverage of the events in Gaza, particularly in the commentary articles published by the Iranian press. While the fighting in Gaza is widely covered by most media outlets, most of them did not go beyond providing informative reports. With the exception of few media outlets, such as Fars News Agency and the government-controlled TV networks, the media in Iran continued focusing most of its attention on internal developments in the country, mainly the economic crisis.



The complexity of the situation facing Iran in light of the developments in Gaza could be seen mostly in the op-eds published by the Iranian press in recent days. Their support for Hamas was overshadowed by their criticism of the policy pursued by Arab governments towards the Palestinians and even of Hamas leaders for pinning their hopes on Arab governments and Turkey. In an editorial published on November 17, the conservative daily Jomhuri-ye Eslami argued that Israel is taking advantage of Syria's weakness—the result of cooperation between “world Zionism”, the United States, and the “Arab reactionary countries”—to take revenge on the residents of Gaza for its defeat in Operation Cast Lead. The conditions in Syria work in Israel's favor because a significant portion of the power and capabilities of the Arab and Islamic world are directed at the developments in Syria, and public opinion can't focus on the developments in Gaza either.

According to the daily, the leaders of Hamas have been swayed by those of Qatar, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia, and agreed to abandon Syria, which harbored them for

three decades and supported them in their fight against Israel. The leaders of Hamas now need to ask themselves why the leaders of Arab countries do not use the weapons they have to protect the people of Gaza and fight against Israel. The leaders of Arab countries have worked to weaken the anti-Zionist front and tried to persuade the leaders of Hamas to abandon the “philosophy of armed struggle” against Israel and replace it with political activity to let the Israeli “cancerous tumor” realize its objectives in the Arab and Islamic world. Rather than making their weapons available to the Palestinian Authority, they delivered considerable quantities of the weapons they have to the Syrian opposition, which works against the regime and residents of that country. Rather than standing by the people of Gaza and fighting against the Israeli army, Arab leaders hold consultations intended to let the Zionists win the war and entrench their status.

The policy of the new governments that have come to power in the Arab world these past two years is even more unfortunate, the article said. Instead of severing the ties with Israel, the president of Egypt has simply recalled the ambassador from Israel, and he continues working as part of the anti-Syrian front headed by the United States and Israel. The new war in Gaza is proof that a victory can only be achieved through a popular uprising in Arab countries.

The daily Kayhan, too, strongly criticized the leaders of Arab countries and implicitly criticized the leaders of Hamas for turning their backs on the “front of resistance” led by Iran and Syria. Like many other commentary articles linking Israel’s decision to launch the operation with the coming Israeli elections, Kayhan said that Israel’s decision to start the war had to do with the severe economic, social, political, and security challenges facing the Israeli government, which seeks to divert domestic public attention from the continuing social protest to the conflict in Gaza.

Speaking about the conduct of Arab countries with regard to the developments in Gaza, Kayhan said that the Muslim world is waiting to see how the countries that sent armed groups to carry out terrorist attacks in Syria will now react to the Zionist aggression and the suppression of the Muslims in Gaza. The Muslim countries, particularly Turkey and Egypt, are facing a test, Kayhan said. While Hamas is firing Iranian missiles at Israel and the leaders of Arab countries maintain their silence, Hamas fighters and hundreds of millions of Muslim observers in the region now know better than ever that Iran is the one that supports the Palestinian people and places

no significance whatsoever on the differences between Shi'ite and Sunni Muslims (Kayhan, November 17).

The daily newspapers Hemayat and Javan were also quick to take advantage of the opportunity to condemn the leaders of Hamas for the mistake they made by preferring Egypt, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey over Iran and Syria, and to present the alleged support shown by the leaders of the "revolutionary" Arab countries for Hamas as being devoid of any meaning. In a commentary article titled "The lessons of Gaza", Hemayat argued that the silence of the Arab countries and Turkey over the recent events in Gaza once again goes to show that their claims of supporting Hamas and the Palestinians are false, their sole purpose being to push Hamas away from the front of resistance. Turkey and the Arab countries promised the leaders of Hamas that they would be its new allies, and that Hamas no longer needs Iran, Syria, or Hezbollah. The developments in Gaza are proof that the strategy of the Palestinian groups, including Hamas, needs to be ongoing presence on the front of resistance to achieve the liberation of Palestine, and that all the other options will fail (Hemayat, November 17).

The Javan newspaper attacked President Morsi's government in particular and called on the young people of Egypt to guide their new government into the path of revolution to fulfill Egypt's mission with regard to the Palestinians. Egypt, which was an ally of the Zionists and a servant of the Americans, has now turned into the revolutionary Egypt, whose citizens now expect their government to sever its ties with Israel, revoke the Camp David Accords, and open up all the pathways of assistance to the Palestinians (Javan, November 17).

The daily Tehran Emrooz, too, attacked the Arab governments for their hesitant reaction to the events in Gaza. An article written by Hassan Hanizadeh, a commentator on Middle Eastern affairs, said that the Arab League, which has held dozens of meetings to discuss the situation in Syria these past 20 months, does not react at all to the attack on Gaza. Its silence is proof that the Arab League does not consider protecting the Palestinian people to be one of its missions, and that it has become a pawn of countries affiliated with the West, primarily Saudi Arabia and Qatar. Egypt, which should have used the political circumstances and its regional and international powers to put an end to Israel's crimes and convene an emergency meeting of the Arab League, contented itself with dispatching the Egyptian prime minister to Gaza. The silence of Saudi Arabia and Qatar over the "massacre" of the

Palestinian people shows that they have become pawns of the United States and Israel (Tehran Emrooz, November 17).



The reserved approach taken by the Iranian media to the Palestinian leadership since the beginning of the current round of fighting in Gaza is all the more conspicuous when compared to the reactions seen in Iran during Operation Cast Lead in January 2009. In the course of that operation, the Iranian media expressed its unconditional support for Hamas. There were even some attempts by conservative circles to establish an association between the struggle of the Palestinians in Gaza—particularly the activity of Hamas—and Shi’ite Islam. In the first days of the fighting in Gaza, when Iran marked Tasua and Ashura, two days of mourning for the martyrdom of Imam Hussein in the Battle of Karbala in the 7th century (which will be marked in Iran this coming weekend), politicians, clerics, and media took advantage of the fact that the fighting in Gaza coincided with the days of mourning to imbue the events with a special symbolic and religious meaning. The Iranian effort to establish an association between the Palestinians and Shi’ite Islam persisted even after Ashura, when a number of conservative websites even argued that Hamas and the Palestinians are close in their faith and religion to Shi’ite Islam.

Meanwhile, the Asr-e Iran website criticized reports that appeared in the Iranian media in recent days and were denied by top Iranian officials that the missiles used by Hamas are made in Iran. The website said that, by using this argument, Iran takes away from the heroism of the “Palestinian resistance fighters” and credits itself for the

struggle against Israel. In addition, such claims could have negative political and legal implications given the large number of lawsuits filed against Iran in Western courts by victims of terrorist attacks in Palestine and Lebanon. These lawsuits are based on the claim that Iran has relations with Hezbollah and Hamas and provides them with weapons. Even if Iran did provide Hamas with Fajr-5 missiles, making such claims is inappropriate in the current circumstances and at a time when the Iranian regime itself denies it (Asr-e Iran, November 19).

Severe shortage of drugs and medical equipment caused by sanctions

Amidst reports of an escalating shortage of drugs and medical supplies due to the economic sanctions, the Iranian media reported last week that a teenage boy had died, apparently due to shortage of drugs. Last Wednesday, November 14, the Khabar Online website reported that Manouchehr Esma'ili, a 15-year-old teenager with hemophilia from one of the tribal areas near the city of Dezful in southwestern Iran, had died after an accident when blood-clotting drugs were not available at his home.

Ahmad Ghavidel, chairman of the Iranian Hemophilia Society, said in an interview given to Khabar Online that hemophilia patients need to keep enough drugs at home to help them in an emergency, which is currently impossible due to the shortage of drugs. He noted that hemophilia medication supplies have been almost completely depleted, which puts the patients at a severe risk. Ghavidel accused the Western governments that the sanctions they have imposed on Iran severely compromise the humanitarian needs of its people. Even though Western countries claim that the sanctions do not include restrictions on exporting drugs to Iran, the sanctions imposed on Iranian banks do have an impact on the country's ability to import drugs, he said. Despite the considerable progress Iran has achieved in recent years in manufacturing its own drugs, it still requires raw materials imported from the West for their production.

The shortage of drugs and medical equipment became a topic of discussion in the Majles last week and may lead to a vote of no-confidence in Health Minister Marzieh Vahid Dastjerdi. Speaking at a Majles meeting dedicated to the issue, Hossein Ali Shahriari, chairman of the Health Committee, warned of a severe crisis in the healthcare system as a result of the poor performance of the government and the

Central Bank. Shahriari argued that the government, which was supposed to allocate some of its revenues from the subsidy policy reform for acquiring drugs and medical equipment, did not allocate even one rial for that purpose. He said that the government was supposed to earmark 480 billion tomans for the healthcare system, of which it actually earmarked only 220 billion. At the same time, the expenses of the healthcare system became significantly higher due to the increase in the costs of water, electricity, and gas which came about when the subsidies were abolished. The water expenses of the healthcare system have increased 6.5 times, electricity expenses have increased 7.2 times, and gas expenses have increased 11 times. He claimed that he had approached President Ahmadinejad about the crisis in the healthcare system, but that he had been completely ignored. He warned that, if the current situation continues, it will lead to a disaster.

Shahriari argued that, while citizens in European countries cover only 18 percent of the cost of medical treatment and drugs from their own pockets, in the past two years the citizens of Iran have had to finance 54 percent of such expenses. The percentage of out-of-pocket medical costs has increased even more in recent months and reached 80 percent. This has put some families below the poverty level and severely jeopardizes the health of the Iranian people. He noted that, in the past two to three years, the only healthcare system worse off than Iran's was that of Afghanistan, and even the healthcare system in post-war Iraq is in better shape.

Shahriari also discussed the sharp increase in the prices of medical equipment and drugs as a result of the surge in foreign currency exchange rates. In some cases, according to Shahriari, prices have increased by more than 200 percent. For instance, the cost of an x-ray has gone up from 1000 tomans to 5000 tomans, and the cost of a heart valve surgery has gone up from 37 million tomans to 120 million tomans. The price of medical equipment, such as dialysis and blood transfusion machines, has also increased by several hundred percent. He warned that Iran is facing a severe shortage of medications, vaccinations (including flu vaccinations), and milk for newborn children. The chairman of the Majles Health Committee also strongly criticized the Central Bank for not allocating foreign currency at the official low exchange rate to the healthcare system in the past six months. Shahriari concluded his speech by saying that, even though he is able to solve the problems of his friends and acquaintances, those citizens who are poor are unable to deal with the crisis on their own (Mehr, November 14).

Amidst the crisis in Iran's healthcare system and the shortage of medications, Hassan Ta'minilicha'i, deputy chairman of the Majles Health Committee, said that in the next few weeks Majles members intend to discuss the possibility of impeaching the health minister. In an interview given to the Majles news agency, the committee's deputy chairman said that Iran is currently undergoing a crisis in drugs and medical equipment, signs of which can be seen in the severe shortage of drugs and the predicament of the hospitals. He argued that the Health Ministry has not taken the necessary measures to make sure that there is an adequate supply of medications in the markets, and that this is the cause of the current crisis. If the Health Ministry had prepared properly, resources could have been allocated for vital medical needs instead of being used for importing less vital products (www.icana.ir, November 14).



Thalassemia patients demonstrate in Shiraz in August 2012 to protest the shortage of medications

Rasoul Hazari, also a member of the Majles Health Committee, warned that Iran's supply of medications may be depleted within two months. He noted that regulations established by the Health Ministry make it necessary to maintain a supply of drugs that will last for six months, when in fact the ministry has already used up four months' worth of drugs (Mehr, November 14).

Nader Qazipour, a Majles representative for the city of Orumiyeh, also discussed the escalating shortage of drugs, saying that it applies mostly to drugs used to treat severe diseases. He added that, since there has been no allocation of foreign currency at the official exchange rate for importing drugs, there has been a decrease in importing drugs and an increase in smuggling them into Iran. He accused the

government of playing with the lives of citizens by not providing budgets to the healthcare system and imposing restrictions on importing drugs to Iran (Mehr, November 14). On the other hand, Dr. Abdolreza Azizi, chairman of the Majles Social Committee, argued that no limitations have been imposed on allocating foreign currency for importing drugs, and denied that the shortage of drugs has been caused by the sanctions. He called on Majles representatives and the government to cooperate with each other to find a solution to the drug problem as soon as possible (Mehr, November 14).

Charity begins at home: Iranian donation to build dam in Lebanon angers web surfers

Iranian website users and bloggers affiliated with regime opponents expressed anger over a report published in the Iranian media this weekend about a decision made by Iran's Energy Ministry to give a donation to the government of Lebanon for building a dam in that country.

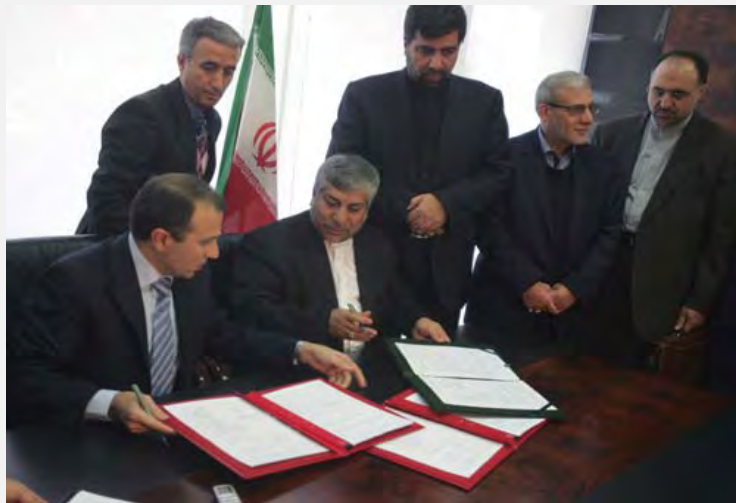


Image source: Aftab News (www.aftabnews.ir), November 17

The report, published by several news websites, said that, while on a visit to Lebanon, Iran's Energy Minister Majid Namjoo signed an agreement with his Lebanese counterpart according to which Iran will provide the government of Lebanon with a 40-million dollar grant to fund a project for building a dam and a water treatment facility in Batroun, a region in northern Lebanon. The project will be managed by a Lebanese company and supervised by an Iranian company to be chosen by the Energy Ministry, and is supposed to finish within three years. Speaking

at the agreement signing ceremony, Namjoo said that Iran had long stressed the significance it placed on Lebanon's national interests. Iran intends to put all of its professional, advanced engineering capabilities at Lebanon's disposal, he added (Asr-e Iran, November 17).

Readers of the Asr-e Iran website had reservations over Iran's generous donation to build the dam in Lebanon. One of them had the following to say about the news report: "At a time that workers at the textile factory in [the north Iranian city of] Mazandaran have not received their salaries for the past 27 months, Iran is giving Lebanon 40 million dollars." Another reader called on the editors of the website to conduct a public opinion poll to see how many Iranians support the government's decision to donate the money to Lebanon.

In addition, many readers of the Aftab News website expressed their protest against the government's decision to help finance the project in Lebanon. Some readers criticized the Arab countries, arguing that, even though Iran provides them with assistance, they completely ignore Iran's interests on various occasions. One reader discussed Hassan Nasrallah's recent speech on the fighting in Gaza, saying that he had called on Arab countries to take advantage of their relations with the United States to pressure it into solving the problem of Gaza. This means, the website reader said, that while Iran helps the Arab countries, they enjoy friendly relations with the United States, act in accordance with their own interests, and completely ignore Iran. It is therefore unclear why Iran should help Lebanon build a dam when the homes destroyed in the earthquake that has recently struck Azerbaijan Province have yet to be rebuilt; the victims of the floods that occurred in northern Iran have not received assistance; and factory workers have yet to receive their salaries. Another reader wrote that the Arab countries have no appreciation for Iran whatsoever, and that they are only interested in its oil money. Yet another website reader mentioned the fact that Lebanon abstained from voting on the U.N. Security Council resolution to impose sanctions on Iran, saying that, while Iran helps the Arab countries, they are not even willing to abstain from voting against it at the U.N.

One website reader expressed anger at the Energy Minister and wondered if the money being transferred to Lebanon was his father's. The Energy Minister is taking the money from the pockets of children hit by the earthquake, from the pockets of women who support their families, and from the pockets of orphans. "This money can be used to find jobs for one thousand young Iranians", a reader complained, while

another took issue with the government taking out money from the treasury to give it to the “uncultured Arabs” while young Iranian people are unemployed and many families are unable to cover their medical expenses and starving for bread. A manifestation of the Iranian website readers’ sentiments could be seen in an Iranian proverb many of them quoted, whose English equivalent is “Charity begins at home”: “A lamp that is right for the home is forbidden in the mosque” (چراغی که به خانه رواست به (مسجد حرام است).

Practical measures taken to encourage higher birth rate in wake of Supreme Leader’s directive

Shahla Mirgalou Bayat, member of the Majles Health Committee, reported this week that sterilization and castration surgery will no longer be free, the way it is now. Bayat said that the country needs a young population and cannot afford having a negative population growth. Accordingly, those interested in undergoing sterilization and castration surgery will no longer be entitled to any financial aid from the state (Tabnak, November 18).

The decision to stop government participation in funding this type of surgery was made as part of the efforts to boost Iran’s birth rate, which began with an instruction issued by Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei to reexamine the birth planning policy adopted in Iran in the late 1980s. In a speech given this past July, Khamenei argued that, while the policy was right at the time, it was a mistake to continue pursuing it in later years. He noted that scientific studies indicate that, if the current policy remains in place, the Iranian society will undergo considerable aging and, eventually, population decline, which is why the policy should be reconsidered.

The Health Committee’s decision to stop government support for sterilization and castration surgery joins a series of other decisions recently made by the authorities in an effort to encourage families to have more children. Maryam Mojtahedzadeh, the president’s advisor on women’s affairs, reported recently that the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution is looking into a series of proposals intended to increase Iran’s birth rate, which include paying a childbirth benefit of one million tomans and raising maternity leave from six to nine months (Mehr, November 10). In addition, the committee decided to cancel the “family planning” classes given to university students and replace them with “family knowledge” classes (ISNA, November 15).

Fars News Agency reported recently that the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution had recently submitted a detailed proposal containing a series of measures to increase the birth rate for the consideration of the president's office, the Majles, government ministries, Iran Broadcasting, the Islamic Publicity Organization, and the headquarters of Iran's armed forces. The proposal includes conducting public awareness campaigns in the media and in the education system to encourage a higher birth rate as well as programs to encourage marriage and bring down the age of marriage; encouraging the employment of women in jobs that will let them fulfill their "family responsibility" as women and mothers; providing free health insurance to women and babies until the age of two; giving free food rations and free medical care to babies in low-income families; providing complete coverage of fertility treatments; raising maternity leave to nine months with an additional 21 months of optional unpaid leave; introducing a two-week paternity leave; paying maternity grants in gold; offering benefits to student mothers; providing work benefits to pregnant women and women with children under the age of 5; increasing long-term mortgages for large families; providing benefits in house repairs to large families; and shortening military service for married men with children (Fars, October 17).

In addition, the Majles Planning and Budget Committee discussed a proposal to lift the restrictions established by law with the intention of limiting Iran's birth rate. Gholam-Reza Kateb, the committee's spokesman, said in an interview to ISNA News Agency that the committee intends to lift all restrictions having to do with birth planning, which include the reduction of insurance payments to large families (ISNA, November 5).

Meanwhile, the Asr-e Iran website criticized this week the government's proposal to include condoms in the list of products that can't be imported to Iran. The website argued that, even if the reason for the ban imposed on importing condoms is the desire to encourage Iranians to have more children, the decision is wrong because a higher birthrate can't be encouraged by force. The website reported that 72 million condoms are produced in Iran each year, enough to cover 75 percent of the country residents' needs. Asr-e Iran warned that the decision may lead to a shortage of condoms and, consequently, a renewed spread of AIDS in Iran, mostly among the weaker sectors of society (November 19).



The birth policy changes are a clear departure from the birth planning policy that has been pursued in Iran for the past twenty years. The second half of the 1980s saw an increased recognition of the economic and social consequences of an uncontrolled increase in population, perceived as an impediment to economic growth and development. In December 1989 Iran adopted a birth planning program to limit the number of pregnancies and the number of children per family. The family planning law, which cut benefits for families with many children while encouraging small families, was approved by the Majles in 1993. The program included a public awareness campaign on the media and through the education system, as well as the establishment of clinics and medical centers to provide family planning services. The authorities also encouraged the use of contraceptives, including castration and sterilization procedures. Young couples were even required to receive instruction on contraceptives to get their marriage license. The renewal of the birth planning policy was a success, and the birth rate dropped to 1.2 percent in 2001.

Even if the decisions intended to increase Iran's birth rate are in fact implemented, it remains highly doubtful that they will be able to curb the trend which can be seen in Iran's society in recent years to have fewer children, which stems mostly from the continuing increase in the average age of marriage and in the cost of living.

Pictures of the week: Shi'ite mourning ceremonies are held as month of Muharram begins



Photo :Amir hashem Dehghani FARS NEWS AGENCY



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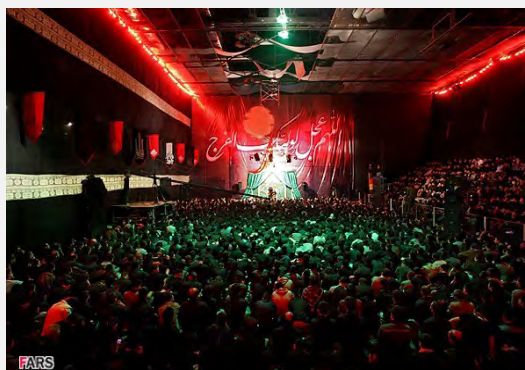


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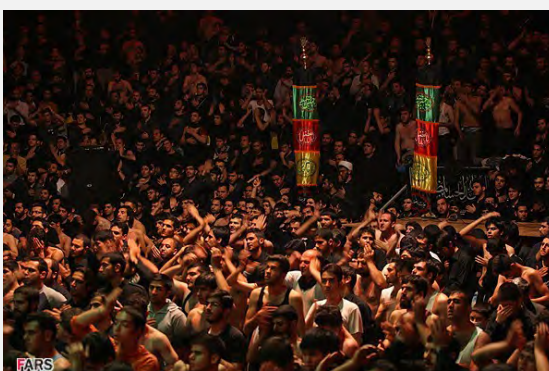


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