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Spotlight on Iran

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Highlights of the week

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Victory for Iran, failure for Western policy: Iranian press comments on launch of Bushehr nuclear power plant

Last week, the Iranian press extensively covered the launch of the nuclear power plant in Bushehr, presenting it as a tremendous achievement for Iran and a crushing defeat for the Western policy of sanctions and threats.

An editorial published in the conservative daily Keyhan said that the launch of the nuclear reactor reflects the failure of the Western campaign against Iran, which was waged on four fronts: economic sanctions, military threats, destabilizing Iran's internal situation, and psychological warfare. The US has been unable to force many countries in the world to join the sanctions against Iran, and even the West admits that the policy of sanctions has failed.

At the same time, military threats have also proved to be a failure, and a military attack seems unlikely as the US and Israel are trying to throw the ball into each other's court. The attempt to destabilize Iran's internal situation following the presidential election was a resounding failure as well. The enemies of Iran must learn the lesson from its technological abilities, which demonstrate the resolve of the Iranian people. If the US and Israel open their eyes, they will come to the understanding that their plans to deal with Iran have not been effective (Keyhan, August 23).

Another article published in Keyhan claimed that, while the Americans are trying to play down the significance of the power plant's launch, it in fact deepens the US strategic predicament and may be expected to have considerable influence not only on Iran's nuclear program but also on the regional balance of power. Russia's conduct and the delays in the launch of the power plant have shown Iran that it cannot be trusted, which is why Iran has to keep enriching its own uranium. The daily noted that the launch of the power plant has turned the already improbable possibility of a military attack on Iran's nuclear facilities to completely impossible due to its environmental effects. Each nuclear facility will serve as a defense system that will prevent attacks on the other facilities. In addition, the launch of the power plant has changed the mood prevailing in Iran following the Security Council's decision to impose further sanctions on the country. The US hoped to step up pressure on Iran and convince the Russians to delay the launch of the power plant; however, it failed, and the fact that the power plant has indeed been launched shows that highly sensitive materials were transferred to Iran despite the decision of the Security Council. Iran can no longer be considered an isolated country under intense pressure, which is what the Americans hoped to achieve, but rather the only country in the region that has a nuclear power plant, an example for many other countries in the region to follow. It was Keyhan's assessment that the launch of the power plant would provide Western companies involved in nuclear technology with an opportunity to enter the Middle East and build similar power plants in other countries (Keyhan, August 24).



The daily Resalat also claimed that the launch of the power plant was proof that Iran would never yield to pressure or sanctions and would not give up its right to nuclear technology. The West proved that it cannot be counted upon to provide Iran with the necessary fuel to operate its electricity-producing nuclear power plants. Western countries use their willingness to help establish civilian nuclear infrastructure in third world countries as a means to exert pressure on those countries in order to promote their interests, including the establishment of military bases and forcibly spreading Western political and cultural thought in the world. According to the daily, the launch of the power plant demonstrates the inherent power in maintaining Iran's national unity under the slogan: "Nuclear energy is our full right" (Resalat, August 22).

Some Iranian newspapers also attempted to explain the circumstances which ultimately led Russia to fulfill its obligations to Iran and complete the launch of the power plant. The daily Ebtekar claimed that the launch of the power plant reflected Russia's recognition of the need to cooperate with Iran to guarantee regional stability. Russia also realized that a failure to meet its obligations to Iran would jeopardize its status with its other partners worldwide. The daily assessed that the developments in Russia's relations with the West in recent weeks, mainly the ruling of the International Court of Justice in the Hague that Kosovo's secession from Serbia and its declaration of independence were not illegal, as well as the American senate's decision to postpone the vote on the US-Russia START treaty to reduce and limit strategic arms, also played a part in Moscow's decision to complete the launch of the power plant. The Russians wanted to send the Americans a message that ignoring Russia's national and defense interests would have severe consequences for the US as well (Ebtekar, August 22).

Vice president's mention of "slaughter of Armenians" sparks diplomatic incident between Iran and Turkey

A vice president's mention of the slaughter of the Armenian people in World War I has sparked a diplomatic incident between Iran and Turkey this week. Speaking at a conference titled "Iran—Bridge to Victory" held in Tehran last week, Hamid Baqa'i, one of Ahmadinejad's vice presidents and chief of the Cultural Heritage and Tourism Organization, said that in 1915 the Ottoman Empire had committed a "massacre" against the Armenians (Fars, August 28). The subject of the conference at which Baqa'i spoke was developments in Iran during World War II surrounding its demand for compensation for the damage it incurred as a result of the allied forces' invasion in 1941.

It wasn't long before the vice president's statement was extensively covered on Turkish media, sparking a heated controversy. The Turkish government demanded explanations from

the government of Iran about Baqa'i's statement. In a telephone conversation held by Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki with his Turkish counterpart, Ahmet Davutoglu, Mottaki stressed that Tehran's stance on the events which took place in the Ottoman Empire in 1915 remained unchanged. The Iranian embassy in Ankara also rushed to release a statement saying that the vice president had been misquoted on the media, and that he simply intended to address an issue that still has an influence on Turkish-Armenian relations rather than express his own personal opinion on it.

Baqa'i, who has recently been appointed by the president as his special envoy for Asian affairs, was also forced to explain his statement. In an interview to Fars News Agency, the vice president said that his speech at the conference had been meant to address the historic debate between Turkey and Armenia rather than express any personal opinion or commentary on that issue. According to Baqa'i, he simply intended to use the events of 1915 as an example showing that historic issues may affect relations between countries even one hundred years later. He claimed that his statement was misrepresented by some of the media in an attempt to damage his reputation (Fars, August 28).



Photo : Ali Mohammadi

FARS NEWS AGENCY

Hamid Baqa'i

Ahmadinejad's political critics did not take long to take advantage of the diplomatic incident to once again slam the president and his associates. Tehran Emrouz, a daily affiliated with Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf, the mayor of Tehran and the president's political opponent, criticized Baqa'i's statement, claiming that if he were an experienced diplomat, as one could expect from a person appointed by the president to be his envoy on Asian affairs, the diplomatic incident with Turkey could have been prevented. The vice president's statement, the daily said, jeopardizes the efforts mounted by Iran to improve its relations with Turkey, a country which, for the past several months, has been one of Iran's main supporters on the nuclear issue, and which refuses to give in to American pressure to join the sanctions against it. The daily called on Baqa'i to exercise more caution with his statements and positions, particularly now that he has been appointed the president's special envoy.

Javad Mansouri, Iran's former ambassador to China and Pakistan and the foreign minister's advisor in the government of reformist president Mohammad Khatami, also addressed Baqa'i's statement, taking advantage of it to strongly criticize the president's decision to appoint some of the people close to him as his special envoys for Middle Eastern, Asian, Caspian Sea, and Afghanistan affairs. Mansouri claimed that the appointment of inexperienced individuals as the president's envoys in the world is unjustified and illogical, and that it compromises the status of Iran's Foreign Ministry and diplomatic network in the world. Baqa'i's statement, Mansouri said, exemplifies the negative impact of such appointments on Iran and its status (Mehr, August 29).

As part of the president's latest appointments, his controversial office chief, Rahim Masha'i, was appointed as Ahmadinejad's special envoy for Middle Eastern affairs.

Tehran stock exchange continues to surge

The Tehran stock exchange has reached a new record this week, its main index closing the second day of the trading week at 17,938 points, representing an increase of over three percent compared to the beginning of the trading week. The recent climb of the index has been particularly helped by the stock rally led by publicly-traded telecommunications companies. In total, over the past five months the Tehran stock exchange index has completed an increase of over 41 percent. In early August, the stock exchange index crossed the 16,000-point mark for the first time.

The daily trading volume has also broken a new record this week, reaching a total of about 80 billion US dollars. The significant increase in trading volume is the result of publicly traded companies' shares increasing in value rather than issuing new shares (Donya-ye Eqtesad, August 30). There are currently about 330 companies traded on the Tehran stock exchange.

The surge on the stock exchange continues despite problematic figures regarding Iran's economy and the escalation of international sanctions against it. In recent months, economic experts in Iran have assessed the spectacular rise of the Tehran stock exchange mostly stems from the lack of more successful investment options due to the ongoing slump in the housing market and the low interest rates offered by banks on savings accounts. The continuing policy of privatizing large government companies and publicly offering their shares has also played a part in the overall upward trend of the stock exchange.

Some experts believe that the stock exchange index will continue to rise in the coming months, and that it may even cross the 20,000-point mark by the end of the current Iranian year (March 20, 2011). In an interview recently granted to the daily Hamshahri, an expert on

financial markets has recently assessed that if the government soon makes a final decision on the implementation of the subsidy policy reform scheduled for late September, it will have further positive influence on the Tehran stock exchange (Hamshahri, August 18).



Substitute for Google and Yahoo? Iran soon to launch a national search engine

Hadi Malek-Parast, the R&D director general at an IT company, has stated this week that, in the course of the coming year, Iran will launch an online service called Ya Haq, a national search engine that will cater to the needs of Iranian web surfers. He noted that while international search engines such as Google and Yahoo currently meet the local and international needs of the web surfers, the main goal of the national search engine is to provide government services to web surfers in Iran. In an interview to Mehr News Agency, Malek-Parast said that government and non-government institutions in Iran place utmost importance on using a national search engine to quickly provide information to the public, and that the engine will also allow access to information currently available on all the servers used by the authorities.

He added that the national search engine will also be accessible through Iran's own intranet, therefore making it much cheaper than accessing the international search engines. In addition, he said that the new engine will be much faster than other search engines, and will provide Iranian web surfers with better security while searching for information. Malek-Parast noted that, during its development stage, the project was used in the private sector and in Iranian universities, and that the launch of the search engine is scheduled for early 2012 (Mehr, August 28).

In early 2010, several news websites reported that the authorities intended to launch a search engine as well as "national" e-mail services as a substitute for Google and Yahoo, and even to completely block access to Western search engines due to the use made by reformist opposition supporters of such services as Google Earth and Google Farsi, which translates

web pages from English to Persian. In light of those reports, various elements in Iran questioned the feasibility of finding a proper “national” substitute for international search engines and e-mail services currently used in the country. Last March, Mehr News Agency claimed that even though the development of an Iranian search engine was technologically possible, the expenses and the end-user technology required put it beyond Iran’s reach at this point. The news agency also claimed that the social network services offered by Western companies, which also operate e-mail services, provide Iranian web surfers with possibilities that a national e-mail service cannot.



Pictures of the week: earthquake devastates villages in Semnan Province

An earthquake that hit northern Iran on Saturday evening killed three people and injured about 40. The earthquake, which measured 5.9 on the Richter scale and whose epicenter was about 175 mi (280 km) east of Tehran, caused severe damage to several villages in Damghan County, Semnan Province, and was also felt in Tehran.



