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Spotlight on Iran

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Highlights of the week

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Iran begins loading fuel into Bushehr nuclear reactor; Supreme Leader says patience and resistance are needed to deal with sanctions

This week Iran has begun loading fuel into the Bushehr nuclear reactor. Launched this past August, the reactor is scheduled to begin energy production in early 2011. Speaking about the beginning of fuel loading this week, Foreign Ministry spokesman Ramin Mehmanparast stated that Iran will continue its peaceful nuclear program. At his weekly press conference, Mehmanparast said that political pressure and sanctions have no effect on the Iranian

people's will, and that they shall not hinder Iran's progress in its efforts to produce nuclear energy (various news agencies, October 26).



Majles National Security and Foreign Policy Committee spokesman Kazem Jalali noted that the activation of the Bushehr reactor proves that Iran has become a nuclear power despite the resistance of some Western countries, and that the international community must acknowledge that fact. According to Jalali, the reactor's activation has to be an important message for Western countries that have so far attempted to delay Iran's nuclear activity. That ongoing activity is proof of the Iranian people's strong will and there is no turning back from it, Jalali said (Mehr, October 26).

Meanwhile, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei declared this week that the Iranian people can surmount the difficulties they face as a result of the sanctions imposed on Iran by means of patience and resistance. At a meeting with clerics and religion students held during his visit to the city of Qom, Khamenei said that Iran overcame the sanctions in the past three decades thanks to the Iranians' patience and resistance, which thwarted the plans of the country's enemies (Mehr, October 25).

In an interview given by Dr. Kayhan Barzegar, a senior official from the Tehran Research Institute of Strategic Studies, to the Fararu website, the foreign affairs commentator said it was his assessment that the sanctions imposed on Iran will cause no change in its nuclear policy. Barzegar noted that the EU was forced to support the sanctions proposed by the U.S. hoping they would lead to a prompt change in Iran's nuclear policy. The Europeans are concerned, however, that if the sanctions continue for a long time, they may lose the Iranian markets to the Russians, the Chinese, and the Turks. Accordingly, they are interested in launching negotiations with Iran to attempt to resolve the crisis with it as early as possible. While the American policy towards Iran places more significance on political, defense, and strategic considerations than economic interests, the U.S. has also come to the conclusion that sanctions are unable to change Iran's nuclear policy. According to Barzegar, the nuclear program has become a national strategic issue in Iran and no government or political group is

therefore able to support changing the nuclear policy or agreeing to cease uranium enrichment on Iranian territory in exchange for lifting the sanctions. The sanctions cannot change Iran's nuclear policy and they even contribute to the national unity over the issue. The only way to contend with Iran is through negotiations. The commentator assessed that time is not on the side of the U.S. and the EU, since Iran is continuing to enrich uranium while the West has no military option (Fararu, October 24).

Subsidy policy reform: deposition of cash benefits continues as uncertainty remains over rate of price increase

The deposition of cash benefits into citizens' bank accounts across Iran has continued this week under the subsidy policy reform. The chairman of the Tehran Province subsidy reform headquarters said that the deposition of the cash benefits into the bank accounts of Tehran residents, who are supposed to receive them in the final stage of the deposition process, will take place in the coming two weeks (Fars, October 24).

Even though the deposition of the cash benefits has already begun, it is still not clear when the subsidies will be cut or by how much prices will increase. Kazem Delkhoush, spokesman for the Majles Committee for Economic Transformation, said this week that the correct execution of the reform is more important than the time of its implementation. He stressed that the coming reform is not supposed to improve the economic situation of Iranian citizens, but rather to improve private consumption habits and Iran's economic production (Mehr, October 24).

This week Iranian media have continued reporting on the effects the reform will likely have on the prices of products and services currently subsidized by the government. Mehr news agency reported that the government and the Majles recently reached an agreement on setting a unified gasoline price under the reform. According to the agreement, there will be no difference between the price of rationed gasoline and free market gasoline (Mehr, October 23). According to several reports recently published on Iranian media, the price of gasoline sold under the rationing policy put in effect in the summer of 2007 (up to 60 liters per private vehicle) will be conformed to the price of free market gasoline, raising it from 100 tomans (about 10 cents) per liter to 400 tomans.

The prices of electricity and water are projected to increase as well. The Headquarters of Economic Transformation has announced this week that the price of electricity will increase from 16 tomans/kWh to 43 tomans/kWh (Mehr, October 25). Before that, Energy Minister Majid Namjoo announced that the increase in electricity prices will not be significant for most Iranians and that for 70 percent of them the electricity bill will become more expensive by

less than 4,000 tomans (about 4 dollars). Significant changes in the calculation of electricity prices will be introduced under the reform, and unlike now, the same calculation method will be used everywhere in Iran (Mehr, October 24). Speaking about the expected increase in water prices, Deputy Energy Minister Mohammad-Reza Attarzadeh announced that the projected price increase for the coming year will be carried out in a gradual manner. He noted that it is not inconceivable that water prices will increase slightly after the other increases expected as a result of the subsidy cuts (ISNA, October 25).

The price of bread is also expected to increase following the subsidy cuts. The director of the government trading company assessed this week that the increase of wheat prices will likely make bread somewhat more expensive. He said that the price increase will improve the quality of the bread sold to consumers (Fars, October 23).

Meanwhile, the government has begun the implementation of a special program to monitor prices and prevent the exploitation of the subsidy policy reform for profiteering. The deputy director of the Consumer Protection Organization warned against attempts by manufacturers and retailers to exploit the reform to irrationally increase prices, saying that the government will take strong measures against profiteers. Within the framework of the program, special monitoring teams have started patrolling Iran's markets, shops, and chain stores to make sure that prices are not increased unjustifiably. In addition, information centers have been established to provide consumers with information on the prices of goods and services, also, a hotline was set up for consumer complaints about profiteering (ILNA, October 22).

Iranian press claims U.S. administration is behind the WikiLeaks affair

Most Iranian media have reacted with skepticism to reports on the publication of the tens of thousands of secret documents exposed on the WikiLeaks website about the war in Iraq. In addition to the information published on the deaths of innocent civilians and abuse of Iraqis by local security forces, the documents revealed information according to which Iran had trained and armed militias that fought the Americans.

The conservative daily Jomhuri-ye Eslami, which defined WikiLeaks as a "new game" in service of U.S. intelligence services, mainly the CIA, claimed that it is not inconceivable that the American intelligence itself is responsible for the website, being part of an attempt to blame various elements, mainly Iran, for the situation in Iraq and Afghanistan. The daily played down the importance of the information exposed in recent days about the war in Iraq, claiming that it offered no new insights into the "crimes" committed by the U.S. and its allies in Iraq and Afghanistan. Violations of human rights by the U.S. do not require special

exposure since they are all too familiar, and it is clear that American leaders must stand trial for war crimes, the daily said. The daily wondered why WikiLeaks chose not to release information about the “Zionists’ crimes” against the Palestinians (Jomhuri-ye Eslami, October 25).

Fars news agency also questioned the reliability of the exposed documents, claiming that there are many doubts regarding their authenticity. The agency brought up the possibility that the American administration was responsible for the leak, and that it will use it as an excuse to avoid pulling the American forces out of Iraq. According to the assessment of the agency, some documents are authentic but most of them are designed to prove that the government of Iraq is allegedly unable to ensure the country’s safety, thus giving the American administration an excuse not to withdraw. If the documents were authentic, the agency claimed, the U.S. Department of Defense could have prevented their publication (Fars, October 24).

The conservative daily Javan claimed that careful examination of the published documents indicated that they were selectively chosen with the purpose of provoking a conflict between Iraq and its ally, Iran, on the one hand, and Iraq’s Sunni Arabs and their supporters in other Arab countries on the other. And it is the Zionist regime, the daily said, that will benefit from a destabilized Iraq (Javan, October 25).

An unusual reaction was published in the daily Ebtekar, which discussed the connection between freedom of press and national security as reflected in the WikiLeaks affair. According to the daily, the affair reflects the priority given in the U.S. to freedom of press over national security considerations. While the situation in Iran cannot be compared to the situation in the U.S., the daily said, it would not be unreasonable to use the affair to talk about freedom of press in the country. The daily argued that freedom of press makes it possible for the media to increase monitoring of politics, economy, society, and culture affairs. While such monitoring may prove harmful for some Iranian groups and leaders in the short term, in the long term it may help correct mistakes and lay the groundwork for a better culture, based on asking questions and giving answers. Freedom of press may become a highly significant element to safeguard the law, national security, the foundations of the regime, and national and religious values (Ebtekar, October 25).

Belated outrage in Iran over an Iranian athlete standing on the medal podium with an Israeli athlete

Almost one month after the World Masters Weightlifting Championships held in Poland in September, this week Iranian media gave extensive coverage of the award ceremony, during

which the Iranian former world champion Hossein Khodadadi appeared on the podium beside Sergio Britva, the Israeli representative. Britva took the first place and Khodadadi, who won second place, stood beside him on the medal podium while the Israeli national anthem played in the background. He refused, however, to shake the Israeli athlete's hand.

The story was reported this weekend on the homepage of the ISNA news agency website, and was shortly cited by several major news websites and dailies. The agency noted that the Iranian athlete's participation in the award ceremony and his appearance beside "the representative of the artificial regime" was puzzling and contrary to the principles of the Islamic republic. According to the ISNA report, it was the first time since the Islamic revolution that an Iranian representative stood beside an Israeli at an official competition.

Mir-Rasoul Ra'isi, the head of the Iranian delegation to the competition in Poland, reacted to the "incident" by saying that the award ceremony took place on the final day of the competition, and that he was not personally present there. He noted that when he received a report about the scheduled ceremony, he informed the Iranian representative in the embassy in Warsaw, who told him that there was no problem with Khodadadi's participation in the ceremony. Ra'isi noted that if Khodadadi had not taken part in the ceremony, the Iranian delegation would have had to return the medals won during the competition. Hossein Khodadadi, who addressed the incident as well, said he did not want to step on the podium and stand next to the Israeli representative. However, he was informed that if he did not take part in the medal ceremony, not only would the Iranian delegation have to return the medals won during the competition, but it would be disqualified from further competitions. He stressed that the head of the Iranian delegation authorized him to attend the ceremony, and that he refused to shake the outstretched hand of the Israeli representative. He said that even if he had not stepped up on the pedestal, the Iranian flag would still have been raised next to the flag of the "Zionist regime". Khodadadi added that he dressed in casual clothing and flip-flops to lend his participation in the ceremony an unofficial character, and that upon his return to Iran he submitted a written report about the incident to the security department of the Physical Education Organization (ISNA, October 22).



The reformist daily Mardom Salari dedicated its editorial to the incident, wondering why it took a whole month to uncover and deal with the affair. The editorial said that all those responsible for the issue—from the Foreign Ministry and the Physical Education Organization to the team coach—must provide answers. The daily strongly criticized the head of Iran's Weightlifting Association for taking no action about the issue until it was exposed on the media (Mardom Salari, October 23).

It should be noted that last month, Ali Sa'idlou, the head of the Physical Education Organization, sent a letter to the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, asking for instructions on the participation of Iranian athletes in competitions against Israeli athletes. The letter was sent after Iranian wrestler Taleb Ne'matpour was forced to withdraw from the World Wrestling Championship in Moscow when he was drawn against an Israeli opponent. The head of the Iranian Wrestling Federation said that, following his withdrawal, Iran had lost a definite chance to win a medal. After the letter was sent, major Iranian sports personalities once again stressed their support for Iran's official policy, forbidding its athletes from taking part in official competitions against Israeli athletes.

Coming soon: Wikifeqh, the Wikipedia for Islamic religious law

Seyyed Mehdi Khamoushi, the head of the Islamic Ideology Dissemination Organization, announced this week the coming launch of Wikifeqh, an online encyclopedia which is based on "wiki" technology and includes articles on Islamic religious law and the principles of Islam. At a meeting with Islamic religious law lecturers, Khamoushi stressed the need for using advanced technology for education and dissemination of Islam, and indicated the significance of social networks and wiki-based online encyclopedias in the modern world. The authors of the articles include religion students from the major Shi'ite religious seminaries in Iran and Iraq (Tabnak, October 24).



www.wikifeqh.ir, the homepage of the website (still inactive)

In recent years, top clerics in Iran have made increasing use of advanced telecommunications and information technology for education, study, and dissemination of Islam. For example, major clerics make use of the internet and cellular technology to issue religious rulings, provide religious consultation, and fortune telling. Last month it was reported that the religious seminary in Qom launched a new service allowing web surfers to watch and listen to religion lessons given by Shi'ite clerics in the religious centers of Iran and Iraq. In addition, most senior Shi'ite clerics in Iran now have their own official websites.

Pictures of the week: Supreme Leader continues his visit to Qom

