



IRAN DEMOCRACY MONITOR

The American Foreign Policy Council's Review of
Radicalism and Reform in Islamic Republic of Iran

Iran Democracy Monitor

January 9, 2019 **Ilan I. Berman**

Related Categories: Democracy and Governance; Economic Sanctions; Iran

TEHRAN DOUBLES DOWN ON PALESTINIAN "RESISTANCE"

Iran's top ideologue has reiterated his backing for Palestinian rejectionism. During a year-end meeting in Tehran with Ziad al-Nakhala, the Secretary General of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei endorsed the group's terror activities against Israel, and called for the "downfall" of the "Zionist regime." In remarks broadcast on Iranian state television, Khamenei praised PIJ for its recent confrontation with Israel in the Gaza Strip - a confrontation that he claimed PIJ had won. "During the previous two wars, the Zionist regime called for truce after 22 days on one occasion and 8 days on another, but in the latest confrontation it requested a ceasefire after only 48 hours," he declared. "This means the Zionist regime has been brought to its knees." (*Jerusalem Post*, December 31, 2018)

IRAN'S DEEPENING ECONOMIC DOLDRUMS

Although Iranian officials remain defiant, economic conditions within the Islamic Republic are continuing to deteriorate. Just how much was highlighted in a November report from the Statistical Center of Iran, one of the Iranian government's dedicated statistics units. The Center's study warned that consumer prices had risen by some thirty-five percent over the preceding year - outpacing the purchasing power of ordinary Iranians. Sectors such as tobacco and foodstuffs saw the sharpest increases (160% and 48%, respectively). Of these, the latter - what the Center terms the "household food basket" - is the most significant, insofar as it encompasses staple goods essential to the lives of Iranian citizens. Here, the picture is bleak; "When it comes to food, prices for all items except bread, cereal and sugar rose by more than 43 percent for the year," the study notes. (*IranWire*, November 29, 2018)

A STANDOFF OVER THE STRAIT...

Iran is prepared to embrace a scorched earth economic strategy in the event of a further escalation of American pressure, the country's president has warned. According to Hassan Rouhani, the Iranian government is prepared to completely close the Strait of Hormuz if the U.S. ultimately decides to target Iranian oil exports - a policy that has been publicly floated as an option for the Trump administration. In his remarks, which were aired on Iranian state television, Rouhani also boasted that the United States would not be able to prevent Iran from exporting its crude to international consumers.

Rouhani's comments have earned a stern warning from Washington. "The [Strait of Hormuz] is an international waterway," Brian Hook, the State Department's special representative for Iran, emphasized in comments to the press following Rouhani's remarks. "The United States will continue to work with our partners to ensure freedom of navigation and the free flow of commerce in international waterways." (*Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, December 4, 2018; *Riyadh Al Arabiya*, December 5, 2018)

...AND COORDINATION IN THE CASPIAN

In the latest sign of strategic coordination between the Kremlin and the Islamic Republic, Moscow and Tehran are planning new military maneuvers in the Caspian Sea. The joint naval drills - which will include anti-piracy and rescue procedures - were recently confirmed by Iranian military officials. The maneuvers are slated to take place in coming weeks as part of an effort by Iran to deter an outside (U.S. or European) presence in the Caspian, a position endorsed by Russia. (Reuters, January 6, 2019)

RENEWED DOUBTS SURROUND RAFSANJANI'S DEATH

Was Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani murdered? When the former president and longtime regime insider died in January of 2017 at the age of 82, speculation swirled that the man widely known as the "shark" of Iran had not met his end from natural causes. Over time, these rumors abated, but they have now resurfaced anew thanks to an unexpected source: Rafsanjani's own daughter. In comments marking the second anniversary of her father's death, Fatemeh Hashemi told an Iranian news website that she has become convinced that Rafsanjani's passing "was not a natural death." According to her, the Rafsanjani family had formally requested that the country's Supreme National Security Council investigate the circumstances of the former president's passing. (*BBC Persian*, January 1, 2019)