

## China to Ink \$3 Billion Iran Refinery Deal

TEHRAN (Dispatches) -- Iran and China will sign a \$3 billion contract next month to upgrade Iran's oil refining capacity, according to Iran's Mehr News agency.

Iran's Deputy Oil Minister Abbas Kazemi said that the deal will focus on upgrading the Abadan oil refinery, Mehr said. "Last week, China officially opened the financing for the plan to fix and improve the quality of the Abadan refinery," Mehr quoted Kazemi as saying. The deal is expected to be signed when a delegation of Chinese oil officials visit Tehran next month, Kazemi said.

# Kayhan International



## Zarif: Iran to Reserve Judgment on Trump

DAVOS (Dispatches) -- Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif vowed to keep an open mind toward Donald Trump, saying it was too early to judge his policies despite the U.S. president-elect's strongly worded antagonism toward Iran.

"We will have to wait and see what President-elect Trump, once inaugurated, will try to pursue as his policy," Zarif said Wednesday, addressing a panel at the World Economic Forum here. He added, though, that from the perspective of Iranians, "the policies of the United States have never been positive."

VOL NO: LV 10238 TEHRAN / Est.1959

Thursday, January 19, 2017, Dey 30, 1395, Rabi as-Sani 20, 1438, Price 10000 Rials

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By Kayhan Int'l Staff Writer

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## Iran Asks Saudi Arabia to Help End Conflicts

DAVOS, Switzerland (Dispatches) -- Iran and Saudi Arabia should be able to work together to help end conflicts in Syria and Yemen, after successfully cooperating over Lebanon last year, Iran's foreign minister said on Wednesday.

"I do not see any reason why Iran and Saudi Arabia should have hostile policies towards each other. We can in fact work together to put an end to miserable conditions of the people in Syria and Yemen and Bahrain and elsewhere in the region," Muhammad Javad Zarif told the World Economic Forum.

Saudi Arabia and Iran support opposite sides in regional conflicts in Syria and Yemen and regularly accuse each other of fomenting unrest in the Middle East.

"Iran and Saudi Arabia were able to actually stop impeding the process of the presidential election in Lebanon. We have a success story," Zarif said.

Iran has in the past stated that it does not want to interfere in the internal issues of other countries, especially the presidency issue in Lebanon.

Zarif's statements come despite continuous remarks by Lebanese factions that the election of President Michel Aoun was a decision made in Lebanon.

Aoun's election has ended almost three years of vacuum in the country's top Christian post, which has much crippled the Cabinet and the Parliament.

Saudi Arabia and Iran back different sides in Lebanon, with Riyadh backing the so-called March 14 coalition, while Tehran backing Hezbollah and its allies.

Zarif said Riyadh needs to see the realities on the ground before relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia could go back to normal.

He said Iran has a lot of grievances, including the loss of over 460 Iranian pilgrims in a tragic crush during the Hajj rituals in September 2015, which he said was caused by "negligence" and Saudi officials' anti-Iran rhetoric.

"We have seen a lot of rhetoric from Saudi Arabia... interesting comments from my colleague, the foreign minister of Saudi Arabia, which considered Iran responsible for Daesh, which is the joke of the century," Zarif said, adding that Riyadh needed to see the realities on the ground and the fundamental reasons behind the current problem gripping the region instead of pointing the finger of blame at others.

The top Iranian diplomat said that "nobody can derive any benefits even temporary benefits from supporting terrorism and sectarianism."

"Once we understand that we cannot contain terrorism in one part of our region, and that terror-

ism and extremism are like contagious diseases that will spread throughout the region, throughout the world before we know it -- and it is happening right now -- then Iran and Saudi Arabia can start to think about different modus operandi for their relations," Zarif said.

Top security official Ali Larijani also said Iran does not seek the fall of Saudi Arabia or its royal family, rather it seeks to protect it for fear of what might replace it.

"The fall of the House of Saud would not mean that the alternative would be any better," Shamkhani said.

Shamkhani is the secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council which oversees international coordination on the Syrian war, and made his comments in an interview with Tehran Foreign Policy Studies Quarterly Journal.

"Rather, it is very likely that it would lead to divisions within Saudi Arabia and to the dominance of the debased extremist ideology of Daesh over large parts of Saudi Arabia," he said.

Shamkhani, who was Iran's defense minister from 1997 to 2005, said that his country "has always confronted the growth of extremism and defended the territorial integrity of countries in the region because the division of states would lead to terrorist ideology dominating in Muslim countries, which conflicts with the strategic interests of the Islamic world."

Regarding Saudi's role in the region, he said: "Unfortunately, we see that the regional policies of Saudi Arabia's rulers in Syria and Yemen have helped terrorist groups and strengthened them."

His comments were echoed by Syria's foreign minister in a TV interview on Wednesday, who said Persian Gulf states could have a role in talks on the country's future if they ceased support for rebel groups in Syria.

"Once Qatar and Saudi Arabia halt their support for terrorism we will discuss the matter of their participation in the talks," Deputy Syrian Foreign Minister Faisal Meqdad was quoted as saying by the Lebanon-based TV station Al-Mayadeen.

Iranian officials said on Wednesday they were strongly opposed to the United States joining Syrian peace talks in Kazakhstan next week, local media reported.

"We are hostile to their presence and we have not invited them," Zarif said.

That goes against the position of the other two organizers of the talks - Russia and Turkey - which have said the new U.S. administration of Donald Trump should be represented in Astana on Monday.

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## Russia, Turkey in First Joint Airstrikes in Syria



Russia launched its bombing campaign in Syria in September 2015.

MOSCOW (Dispatches) -- Russia said on Wednesday its warplanes had joined forces with Turkish jets for the first time on Wednesday to target Daesh militants holding the town of al-Bab in northern Syria, evidence of increasingly close cooperation between Moscow and Ankara.

Russia and Turkey are the main organizers of a new round of Syrian peace talks due to take place

in Kazakhstan on Jan. 23 and have set aside their differences over the political fate of President Bashar al-Assad to try to forge a wider Syria deal.

Moscow backs Assad, while Ankara has diluted its demands for the Syrian leader to urgently step down as part of what some sources say is a backroom deal aimed at dividing Syria into informal zones of regional power influence.

## British PM Rejects Probe Into Zionist Influence

LONDON (Dispatches) -- British Prime Minister Theresa May has dismissed a call from opposition leader Jeremy Corbyn for an investigation into allegations of improper Israeli influence in British public life.

A spokesperson for May on Wednesday reiterated that the government did not intend to take any further action over revelations in an Al Jazeera documentary series in which a secretly filmed member of staff at the Zionist embassy discussed "taking down" a government minister and talked about a "hit list" of MPs.

"The Israeli ambassador (Mark Regev) has apologized and is clear these comments do not reflect the views of the embassy" or the Zionist regime, the spokesperson told Middle East Eye.

"The UK has a strong relationship with Israel and we consider the matter closed."

Labor leader Corbyn wrote to May last week to urge her to launch an investigation, suggesting that the evidence raised by the films should be treated as a "national security issue."

The films included footage of Shai Masot, a senior political officer based in the embassy who was

forced to resign after being exposed by an undercover reporter, discussing "taking down" foreign office minister Alan Duncan because he was causing "problems."

Masot also talked about setting up a pro-Zionist youth group within the Labor Party and described Corbyn, a long-time supporter of Palestinian activism, as "crazy."

"I am sure you will agree that such improper interference in this country's democratic process is unacceptable, whichever country is involved," Corbyn wrote.

The occupying regime of Israel's embassy has sought to play down Masot's activities, describing him as a "junior member of staff" whose actions were "completely unacceptable". He has since left London and resigned from the Israeli foreign ministry.

Members of May's Conservative Party have also called for further action over the scandal, with Crispin Blunt, the chair of the foreign affairs select committee, indicating that he hoped to include it within the committee's wider inquiry into the Middle East peace process.

"This is clearly interference in another country's politics of the

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Lieutenant-General Sergei Rudskoi, a senior Russian Defense Ministry official, said that nine Russian jets and eight Turkish warplanes had together struck targets in al-Bab, which is located around 40 km (25 miles) northeast of Aleppo.

"Today the Russian and Turkish air forces are conducting their first joint air operation to strike Islamic State in the suburbs of al-Bab,"

Rudskoi said.

"The assessment of the initial results ... showed the strikes were highly effective."

Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan wants Turkish-backed rebels to capture al-Bab to prevent Kurdish militias from doing so. Rudskoi claimed the joint mission had been conducted in agreement with the Syrian government.

He said the Russian air force was also providing air support to Syrian government troops trying to fight off a Daesh assault around the town of Deir al-Zor.

The town's civilian population could be massacred if Daesh took Deir al-Zor, he said.

Russian jets were also backing a Syrian army offensive near the town of Palmyra, said Rudskoi, who added that Daesh militants were planning to blow up more of the ancient city's historical monuments.

"We have received information, confirmed by several sources, that a large amount of explosives has been brought into the Palmyra area and that the terrorists plan on destroying the city's world-class historical legacy," he said.

Significant numbers of Daesh terrorists fleeing Mosul in neighboring Iraq were streaming into Syria "almost unobstructed," Rudskoi said.

## Egyptians Urge Trial of 'Traitor' Sisi

CAIRO (Dispatches) -- Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi is facing calls to be prosecuted for treason following a court's ruling against his government over the proposed transfer of the Red Sea islands of Tiran and Sanafir to Saudi Arabia.

The hashtag "Tiran and Sanafir are Egyptian" rose to the top of Egypt's trending hashtags following the verdict -- but was swiftly replaced by "One million signatures to prosecute Sisi" and "Sisi is a traitor by verdict of the court."

A top Egyptian court on Monday rejected the plan to transfer the two uninhabited Red Sea islands to Saudi Arabia in a deal that provoked outrage among Egyptians.

The government had appealed against a lower court ruling in June that found the controversial border demarcation agreement was illegal.

But the courtroom erupted in cheers on Monday as the judge delivered the final verdict on the issue, with lawyers and activists chanting: "These islands are Egyptian."

The islands saga has deeply wounded national pride and brought people out onto the streets in a public show of dissent against Sisi's government.

The verdict fractured Egypt's normally pliant and pro-Sisi media scene -- with some going as far as celebrating a decision that has dented the president's authority.

The staunchly pro-government Wael el-Ebrashy opened his evening program with the famous patriotic song "Egypt today is in Eid." But other TV personalities warned that celebrations over the ruling may be short-lived if it led to a further deterioration in already tense Saudi-Egyptian relations.

Ahmed Moussa, one of Sisi's more flamboyant supporters, said on his TV program: "Saudi has people in it agitating after the verdict, and you could find two-and-a-half, three million Egyptians who were working in Saudi here in Egypt."

"And the entire (Persian) Gulf could do like Saudi, and you could find seven million Egyptians returning," he continued. "How will you deal with them?"

"And if we go to an international court, today's verdict is local, it doesn't have any weight -- so prepare your papers and proof," he said.

The state-owned al-Akhbar newspaper

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