

TEHRAN (Tasnim) – Iranian Foreign Minister Muhammad Javad Zarif on Wednesday hailed the role of Kuwaiti Emir Sheikh Sabah al-Ahmad al-Sabah in boosting relations among regional states and called for closer cooperation between the two Persian Gulf countries.

Speaking at a meeting with his Kuwaiti counterpart Sheikh Sabah al-Khalid al-Sabah here, Zarif described Kuwait as a “good and important” neighbor of Iran. “The Kuwaiti Emir’s role in strengthening good neighborliness among regional countries is highly commendable,” he added.

ASTANA (Dispatches) — Iran intends to participate in the upcoming Geneva talks on Syria, but has not decided on the level of participation yet, Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister Hussein Ansari told Sputnik Wednesday.

“We have not yet made a decision about the level at which we will participate [in Geneva], but of course we will participate in all international and other tracks that complement it and continue the assistance to the Syrian people and the termination of its current suffering,” Ansari said.

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## U.S. Survey: Rouhani’s Popularity Plunges

TEHRAN (Dispatches) -- President Hassan Rouhani is losing some public support ahead of a May election, according to a new opinion poll, potentially signaling a shift toward his opponents following the country’s nuclear deal.

The survey results paint a picture of an Iranian public wary of the trust Rouhani placed in the U.S. and other world powers when his administration negotiated the deal, and skeptical about the economic benefits they thought it would bring.

Conducted in December for the University of Maryland, the survey is based on telephone interviews with 1,000 Iranians and provides a gauge of public opinion, the

Some 69% of Iranians surveyed said they viewed Rouhani either very favorably or somewhat favorably. That represents a significant decline from the roughly 82% who saw him very favorably or somewhat favorably in a June poll from the university. The share of respondents who view him very favorably has fallen steadily from 61% in August 2015 to 28% in the new poll.

“Rouhani’s popularity is taking a hit primarily because he is perceived to have failed to deliver on his campaign promises,” said Amir Farmanesh, the president and chief executive of Toronto-based IranPoll.com, which conducted the survey on the school’s behalf.

About 51% said the country’s economic conditions were

worsening, up from 43% in June. Almost three-quarters of the Iranians surveyed said the deal hadn’t improved people’s living conditions.

Yet Rouhani has maintained considerable popularity in part because he has successfully cast himself in a different mold from his predecessor, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

“People are emotional,” said Ali Pakzad, the editor in chief of Asr Eqtesad, an economic newspaper. “They remember the experience of 40%-plus inflation and the economic crisis of 2009 that dragged into 2013. They are critical of Mr. Rouhani, but if they see any approach similar to Ahmadinejad’s, they will turn back on it.”

IranPoll is a subsidiary of People Analytics, which specializes in polling in countries where it is challenging to operate. IranPoll has conducted polls of Iranians since 2006.

The latest poll has a margin of error of 3.2%.

“The economy is perceived as getting worse,” Farmanesh said. “The (nuclear deal) is perceived to not be delivering the promised benefits. The cherished nuclear program is perceived to have been gutted, and there have been little perceived gains on civil liberties.”

Yet the practical effects of Rouhani’s apparent fall in popularity remain difficult to gauge.

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## Saudi Arabia Excluded, Iran Included: Trump Bans Muslims From Entering U.S.



WASHINGTON (Dispatches) -- Donald Trump was expected to sign executive orders starting on Wednesday that include a temporary ban on most refugees and a suspension of visas for citizens of Syria and six other Middle Eastern and African countries.

The U.S. president, who said on Twitter that a “big day” was planned on national security on Wednesday, was expected to ban for several months the entry of refugees into the United States except for religious minorities until more aggressive vetting is in place.

Another order was to block visas being issued to anyone from Syria, Iraq, Iran, Libya, Somalia, Sudan and Yemen, said the aides and experts.

In his Twitter post late on Tuesday, Trump said: “Big day planned on NATIONAL SECURITY tomorrow. Among many other things, we will build the wall!”

The National Iranian American Council (NIAC) said Trump was “making good on the most shameful and discriminatory promises he made on the campaign trail.”

“It is notable that the list doesn’t include Saudi Arabia and would have done nothing to prevent 9/11 or the other terrorist attacks committed by radical Wahhabi jihadists in the U.S.,” the NIAC said in a statement. “But it does include Iran – from which no national has committed a terrorist act in America.”

The border security measures probably include directing the construction of a border wall with Mexico and other actions to cut the number of illegal immigrants living in the United States.

Stephen Legomsky, who was chief counsel at U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services in the Obama administration, said the president had the authority to limit refugee

admissions and the issuance of visas to specific countries.

“From a legal standpoint, it would be exactly within his legal rights,” said Legomsky, a professor at Washington University School of Law in St Louis. “But from a policy standpoint, it would be a terrible idea because there is such an urgent humanitarian need right now for refugees.”

Detractors could launch legal challenges if all the countries subject to the ban are Muslim-majority nations, said immigration expert Hiroshi Motomura at UCLA School of Law.

Legal arguments could claim the executive orders discriminate against a particular religion, which would be unconstitutional, he said.

“His comments during the campaign and a number of people on his team focused very much on religion as the target,” Motomura said.

To block entry from the designated

countries, Trump is likely to tell the State Department to stop issuing visas to people from those nations, according to sources familiar with the visa process. He could also instruct U.S. Customs and Border Protection to stop any current visa holders from those countries from entering the United States.

### Iranians Angry

Trump provoked an angry backlash from Iranian voices, with the NIAC saying “Donald Trump appears intent on throwing that America away and taking us down a slippery slope towards a dark future.”

The NIAC added that “a blanket ban based on national origin does nothing” to make America safe from terror.

“I don’t have the money or the inclination to travel to the United States but to be branded a threat or a terrorist is deeply offensive,” Muhammad Reza Jafari, a 37-year-old bank teller, told NBC News. “Iranians are proud and dignified people this is absolutely the wrong way to treat us.”

The move is “certainly going to make things harder for Iranians who want to go to America ... there are a lot of Iranians who have family in America and regularly visit and you can’t just stop that,” said Shahin, a Tehran travel agent who asked to be identified by his first name only.

Many Iranians wondered why Saudi Arabia was not on the list of seven countries reportedly facing a visa-ban, as most of the 9/11 hijackers were citizens of the Persian Gulf Arab country.

Also absent from Trump’s reported list were Afghanistan and Pakistan, which are a base of operations for a number of extremist groups.

## OMV Inks Iran Oil Development Deal

TEHRAN (Dispatches) -- Austria’s OMV and Iran’s Dana Energy have signed a memorandum of understanding to evaluate possible oil and gas development and redevelopment projects in Iran, the companies said Wednesday, in a development that could open an indirect route for UAE interests to participate in Iran’s upstream petroleum sector.

The deal, which an Iranian news agency characterized as “a bid to revive energy cooperation” between Austria and Iran, at first glance appears similar to a series of previous recent deals in which prospective international participants in Iran’s upstream oil sector teamed up with Iranian partners to size up potential development projects for which

they might later submit bids.

However, the OMV/Dana agreement is unusual in bringing to Iran an international oil company in which an Arab state entity holds a substantial equity stake, and in teaming up the international partner with an Iranian private-sector petroleum company instead of one owned by Iran’s government.

In another departure from the previous pattern, the deal was signed outside Iran, specifically in Vienna, OMV disclosed in a statement.

OMV is the former state petroleum company of Austria in which Vienna still holds a 31.5% stake.

Its second-biggest shareholder, with 24.9%, is Abu Dhabi government-owned International

Petroleum Investment Co., which last Saturday became a wholly-owned subsidiary of Mubadala Investment, the newly created Abu Dhabi industrial group with international petroleum assets that include over 800,000 b/d of oil production.

Mubadala, chaired by Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed, is currently 100% government-owned, although its creation as a joint-stock company means that shares in the company could in future be offered for sale to public investors.

Dana, a private company founded in 2000 and headquartered in Tehran, has operated in Iran’s onshore and offshore oilfield services sectors since 2002.

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## Zionists Step Up Settlement Expansion: Palestinians Shocked by U.S. Silence

RAMALLAH (Dispatches) -- A senior Palestinian official said Wednesday he was “shocked” by the White House’s silence on the occupying regime of Israel’s settlement expansion and called on U.S. President Donald Trump’s administration to clarify its policy.

“We used to hear condemnations, we used to hear American positions saying (Israel) should stop settlement activities, it’s an obstacle to peace,” Palestine Liberation Organization secretary general Saeb Erekat told AFP.

“Not commenting, does that mean that President Trump is encouraging ... settlement activities? We need an answer from the American administration,” he said.

Since Trump’s inauguration last week, the Zionist regime has approved

some 3,000 settler units in the occupied West Bank and in annexed East Jerusalem Al-Quds, signaling a sharp change of pace from such projects during the Barack Obama years.

In a telling break with the previous administration, the Trump White House did not condemn the occupying regime of Israel’s latest settlement announcements at least on the surface.

Erekat said he was “shocked” that the White House did not comment on the settlement announcements.

Settlements are viewed by much of the world as illegal and major stumbling blocks to peace efforts as they are built on land the Palestinians see as part of their future state.

Speaking in the Knesset, the Zionist regime’s parliament, on Wednesday, prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu

said the latest spate of building decisions are just the start of a new wave made possible by the changing of the guard in Washington.

“We have seen eight not easy years,” he said in response to lawmakers’ questions, recalling that on his first visit with Obama in Washington he was told bluntly to halt all settlement expansion.

“Not a brick,” he said, switching from Hebrew to English. “We have left that era,” he said. “There has been one round (of new construction) and there will be more rounds.”

Following Israel’s approval on Tuesday of plans for 2,500 settler units in the West Bank, the United Nations expressed “grave concern” and the European Union said the move would “further seriously undermine” prospects for a two-state solution.