

TEHRAN (Dispatches) – Defense Minister Brigadier General Hussein Dehqan on Wednesday lashed out at the Pentagon chief's accusations that Yemen's Houthis were firing Iranian supplied missiles to Saudi Arabia.

"Today, Takfiri-Wahhabi terrorists are committing crimes in various parts of the world, in Syria and Iraq in particular, using U.S.-made weapons and munitions," Dehqan said in response to the claims by U.S. Defense Secretary Jim Mattis. Dehqan said Mattis and other U.S. strategists should remember that "the era of bullying, blame games and interference from a self-righteous position is over."

TEHRAN (Dispatches) – Iran is about to sign the final version of a contract with China for redesigning a heavy water reactor under a nuclear accord reached with world powers, head of the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran Ali Akbar Salehi says.

Salehi said the contract with China will be finalized in Vienna within the next week. The 200-page contract contains a lot of details covering different aspects of Tehran-Beijing cooperation in the nuclear project, he explained.

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**Viewpoint**  
By Kayhan Int'l Staff Writer  
**Who Is Behind Yemen Crisis?**  
P. 2

**Tehran to Host 8th Int'l Sculpture Symposium**  
P. 3

**Iran Announces Boxing Lineup for 2017 Islamic Solidarity Games**  
P. 6

**Evacuation of 4 Syria Towns Resumes After Deadly Bombing**  
P. 8

## U.S. Weighs Sanctions Despite Iran's Compliance

WASHINGTON (Dispatches) -- The Trump administration said on Tuesday it was launching an inter-agency review of whether the lifting of sanctions against Iran was in the United States' national security interests, while acknowledging that Tehran was complying with a deal to rein in its nuclear program.

In a letter to U.S. House of Representatives Speaker Paul Ryan, the top Republican in Congress, U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson said Iran remained compliant with the 2015 deal.

Under the deal, the State Department must notify Congress every 90 days on Iran's compliance under the so-called Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). It is the first such notification under U.S. President Donald Trump.

"The U.S. Department of State certified to U.S. House Speaker Paul Ryan today that Iran is compliant through April 18 with its commitments under the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action," Tillerson said in a statement.

"President Donald J. Trump has directed a National Security Council-led interagency review of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action that will evaluate whether suspension of sanctions related to Iran pursuant to the JCPOA is vital to the national security interests of the United States," Tillerson added.

He did not say how long the review would take but said in the letter to Ryan that the administration looked forward to working with Congress on the

issue. During his presidential campaign, Trump called the agreement "the worst deal ever negotiated," raising questions over whether he would rip up the agreement once he took office.

The historic deal between Iran and six major powers restricts Tehran's nuclear program in exchange for the lifting of oil and financial sanctions against the Islamic Republic.

Iran denies ever having considered developing atomic weapons although nuclear experts have warned that any U.S. violation of the nuclear deal would allow Iran also to pull back from its commitments to curb nuclear development.

Those commitments include reducing the number of its centrifuges by two-thirds, capping its level of uranium enrichment well below the level needed for bomb-grade material, reducing its enriched uranium stockpile from around 10,000 kg to 300 kg for 15 years, and submitting to international inspections to verify its compliance.

Iran has ordered 15 777-300ERs as part of a deal for 80 Boeing jets. They are crucial to Boeing's efforts to steady declining 777 production, pending the arrival of a new model.

Bringing forward Boeing's first delivery to Iran since the 1970s could also provide broader momentum to the sanctions pact, hampered by funding problems and uncertainty about the attitude of Trump who has said he dislikes it.

## Ayatollah Khamenei: Fearing Enemy Is the Beginning of Misery



Ayatollah Khamenei meets a group of military commanders on the occasion of the National Army Day in Tehran, April 19, 2017.

TEHRAN (Dispatches) – Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyyed Khamenei on Wednesday said the Iranian nation's resistance has been the key to thwarting different enemy plots against the country over the past decades.

"The enemies--whether the United States or greater than the United States--cannot do a single thing against an establishment that is linked to its people, an establishment that has admiration for its people and the people admire it back," the Leader said in a meeting with army commanders and staff members here.

Ayatollah Khamenei pointed to the upcoming presidential and city council elections, stating that

everyone should appreciate the elections.

"We should commemorate the elections: The elections should be healthy, safe, lucid and massive," the Leader said.

"If this is achieved—which God willing it will happen by His grace, despite how the enemies and the mainstream media tries to spoil the results of the elections, in some way or another— if the Iranian nation continues to take part in the elections with vigilance and awareness, as they always have, then a massive, lucid election, coupled with enthusiasm and eagerness, as well as health and safety will be held, and this will be a significant resource for the country which will safeguard it," the Leader added.

Ayatollah Khamenei said he had

highlighted economic slogans over the past two-three years, because he felt the enemy sought to undermine Iran by targeting its economy.

"When we have economic problems, various sectors of the establishment will not be able to carry out their tasks properly; hence, we need to see what the top priorities are in order to address them adequately, one at a time, when it comes to the officials' set of duties."

The Leader further said, "Today the economic capacity of the country is a crucial, key issue, and it is the first priority; thus, I emphasize on it. I place stress on the people's living conditions; I put stress on the living conditions of the employees of various sectors; and the living conditions of the staff belonging to the armed forces: These issues

should seriously be followed up. This is a duty of the officials."

Ayatollah Khamenei made the point that if the officials look at the enemy's motives, they may gain motivation to work harder.

"When we hear what the enemies say and examine their words we realize that they stress on the same points, so that they can use weaknesses and flaws to sabotage others and exert harm.

"The invasive superpowers' technique is to threaten and bully. We have reiterated this fact several times. The invasive powers want to interfere everywhere. They overestimate themselves, they threaten and frown upon others. Remember the aggressiveness that previous U.S. administrations would pose? And now, too, they do the same, but in a different manner."

Ayatollah Khamenei said the worst situation for a country is when its officials fear the enemy's threats and bullying techniques.

"If they fear them, they have actually opened up a way for the enemy's invasion and aggression. Tasks should be done with wisdom, logic and prudence—there is no doubt about that—but they should also be done courageously. Fearing or worrying, or becoming affected by the threats, frowns, and mistreatment that arises from the world's superpowers, is just the beginning of (a country's) misery.

"If there is an official who fears the superpowers in his heart, then it is up to him, but he has no right to talk on behalf of the people and say our people are fearful. The nation is standing. Had the nation not stood firm, since 1979 to this day, there would be no trace of Iran or Iranian left," he asserted.

## Saudi Plans to Diversify Economy Face Setbacks

LONDON (Middle East Eye) -- For more than half a century, Saudi Arabia and crude oil have gone together like baseball and hotdogs. But that may be about to change.

One young prince wants to ditch the country's dependency on oil exports, with the process starting in earnest next year when there are plans to sell the state-owned oil company, Aramco. It's a high stakes move with the future prosperity of the kingdom depending on the success of the effort.

Few observers expect the process to be smooth. Worse still, the world will be watching closely to see if the kingdom is serious.

Currently, the kingdom, which is one of the largest producers of crude oil in the world, gets 87% of its budget revenues from oil, according to the CIA Factbook.

But it's also clear that the country cannot continue to rely on that revenue for much longer as demand for oil is expected to fall over the

next few years. The result of this realization was the development of a plan for the post-oil era named Saudi Vision 2030, which was revealed last year by Saudi Arabia's Deputy Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman al-Saud.

Bin Salman is the young man who is taking a leading role in radically changing the kingdom and its economics.

The plan itself was described as having "dizzying pace and ambition," according to the Center for the Middle East at the Baker Institute for Public Policy.

Ambition is one thing, but analysts see plenty of potential roadblocks to reform.

Saudi Arabia's first obstacle is to make Aramco's public offering go well.

"The centerpiece of the economic reform is the sale of Aramco," says David Roberts, professor of Middle East defense studies at King's College London. "They hope it will

be so big and will make up for some of the drop in oil income. Equally important is how it looks."

The problem surrounding how much money the Initial Public Offering (IPO) will gross is that it depends in large part on the health of the oil market. That's a market that has been volatile for the past couple of years. For instance, in mid-2014, a barrel of crude oil sold for more than \$100 a barrel, but then sank to \$26 in February 2016. Recently the price climbed to around \$55. Such gyrations have analysts concerned.

"A key element to the Aramco IPO is also oil price stabilization, and Saudi Arabia is unlikely to proceed until the long-term structure of oil markets becomes clearer," states a recent report from the political consultancy organization Eurasia Group. In other words, the Aramco sale may need to wait until oil prices stop dancing up and down like a yo-yo.

(Continued on Page 7)

## Lufthansa in Talks for Iran Air Catering Deal

DUBAI (Dispatches) -- Lufthansa is in talks with Iran Air to provide catering, maintenance and pilot training as it seeks to take advantage of emerging business opportunities in the country, executives at the German airline group said on Wednesday.

The talks are the latest in efforts by Western aviation companies to use Iran's return to the world markets to their advantage in order to cope with a downturn in global demand and provide homes for airplanes orphaned by reversals in the growth plans of airlines elsewhere.

Foreign companies have been vying for contracts in Iran since economic sanctions were lifted last year in return for Tehran curbing its nuclear program.

"We are in very, very intense

discussions, actually almost on a weekly basis," Karsten Zang, Lufthansa's regional director for the Persian Gulf, Iran, Pakistan and Afghanistan, said at a press briefing in Dubai.

However, a Lufthansa spokesman later told Reuters by email that "the talks with Iran Air are just held to explore business opportunities in the areas of catering and maintenance. There are however no concrete plans for a cooperation.

"Lufthansa Group subsidiaries LSG Sky Chefs, Lufthansa Technik and Lufthansa Pilot Training are seeking the contracts with Iran Air whilst the group is also in talks to provide services to other Iranian aviation firms, Zang said.

"We are talking with Iran Air because their new aircraft are

coming. They need training, of course, and we have the experience in all of these fields but we can't give timelines," Zang said.

The lifting of sanctions has not brought the economic boom to Iran that many foreign companies had hoped for. Uncertainty over U.S. President Donald Trump's attitude to the nuclear deal, as well as remaining sanctions that limit international banking with Iran, are seen as deterring some would-be investors.

The Trump administration said on Tuesday it was launching a review of whether lifting remaining sanctions against Iran was in U.S. national security interests, while acknowledging that Tehran was complying with the nuclear deal.

(Continued on Page 7)