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IRAN: Political Sentiment, Economic Contraction Likely to Weaken Regional Influence

Summary: The Islamic Republic of Iran will likely lose aspects of its substate proxy operations despite attempts to bolster support of Kata'ib Hezbollah in Iraq and Hezbollah in Syria and Lebanon as internal political condemnation and foreign pressure restrict flexibility and capabilities. Reduction in domestic and international political capital, a contracting economy, and the loss of Major General Qassem Soleimani diminishes the overt and covert capabilities of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps Quds Force (IRGC-QF) to preserve foreign enterprises.

Foreign Proxy Operations: The IRGC-QF had developed an extensive network of foreign substate proxies under Qassem Soleimani that operate in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, and Gaza. The Iranian proxy network has enabled the IRGC-QF to operate covertly abroad, exploiting political instability in neighboring countries and expanding Iran's regional influence. In particular, Hezbollah remains Iran's closest proxy and operates primarily in Lebanon and Syria, countering Salafist extremist organizations such as the Islamic State (IS) and Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and regional competitors without direct military conflict.

Dissent at Home: Despite the brief wave of Iranian nationalist sentiment following the death of Qassem Soleimani, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei likely lost substantial political support following the 8 January downing of a Ukrainian passenger jet flying out of Tehran. Recent protests show growing dissent among Iranians following anti-regime protests of December 2017 and November 2019, triggered by an end to fuel price subsidies. Iranian security forces used live ammunition on protestors during demonstrations in November and January, furthering tensions between Khamenei and his people. Discontent has festered as the Khamenei regime forcefully subdues national dissent without addressing protestors' grievances.

International Pressure: International condemnation of Iran's downing of the Ukrainian jet and of its crushing of protests at home, as well as Western-backed sanctions against Iran's petrochemical, mining and maritime sectors, have hurt its military, economic, and political mobility in the region. Additionally, recent anti-Iran protests in Iraq and Lebanon following revelations that the IRGC-QF cultivated assets to subvert and influence Iraqi and Lebanese politics restrict Iran's political and diplomatic mobility in regional operations.

Economic Contraction: Iran's economy will likely contract by around 8.7% in 2020 due to shocks in its oil and gas production sector, according to the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, further restraining its ability to sustain regional influence despite attempts to bolster foreign proxy operations. Restrictions in Iran's budget combined with domestic unrest have forced the reallocation of government funding to reinforcing the economy and quelling internal turmoil. Iran's retracting of domestic oil and gas subsidies in November 2019 and pushes for Peyman, its gold-backed, blockchain cryptocurrency, suggest desperation for nominal economic gains despite the risk of political turmoil and the effectiveness of external sanctions from Western countries; however, President Hassan Rouhani announced the establishment of a rial-

backed national cryptocurrency, which nominally insulates Iran's economy from external sanctions.

Outlook and Implications: The developing internal political dissent of the Khamenei regime, agitated by external political pressure and economic sanctions, demonstrates the insecurity of Iran, which will likely continue to undermine its regional projections of power as internal political factions split in opposition to the Ayatollah. Domestic issues inflaming political tensions will likely grow as Gulf states and the West maintain economic and diplomatic pressure and Iranian security forces continue violent oppression of protests, restricting its ability to utilize foreign proxies to expand its regional influence.

Ayatollah Khamenei will likely attempt to expand Iran's utilization of its Peyman cryptocurrency and bitcoin to minimize the impact of Western-backed sanctions, but mitigation efforts will likely nominally insulate its failing economy.

Iranian-backed proxy operations will likely diminish as involvement in the war loses support amongst the Iranian people and Hezbollah due to the high financial and human costs, reducing its ability to counter IS and HTS activities in Syria and Iraq. Domestic anti-government protests will likely intensify and develop as Khamenei sustains unpopular foreign paramilitary operations through the IRGC-QF and expands internal counter-protest forces, weakening the IRGC-QF's overt and covert operations externally.

[Riley Coder]

RUSSIA: Putin Appoints New Cabinet, Keeping Key Ministers from Prior Government

Summary: Following sweeping constitutional changes, the Russian government resigned, leading to the appointment of a new cabinet, keeping many senior officials from the previous government and further obscuring Putin's goals beyond his 2024 term.

Development: On 15 January, Russian President Vladimir Putin called for constitutional changes that enable him to sustain power after his current and allegedly final term ends in 2024. These changes to the Russian constitution propose amendments that grow the powers of Parliament, the prime minister, and a Russian governmental body called the State Council. In response, Prime Minister Dmitri Medvedev along with the rest of Russia's government resigned, arguing that the proposed changes substantially change the balance of power. Mikhail Mishutin will replace Medvedev as prime minister and announced his choices for ministers on 21 January, with many senior ministers keeping their positions, which Putin approved.

Analysis: Putin's shock announcement of constitutional changes likely indicate he intended to lay the groundwork to maintain his power even after his presidential term ends in 2024. A stronger parliament, as proposed in the changes, may allow Putin to wield power as prime minister. Similarly, the newly elevated State Council could provide Putin a platform to influence the nation after retiring from the presidency. However, with fast-paced changes, a trend of the previous week, and 21 January's approval of many of the same senior officials of the previous government obscures Putin's intentions. Expanded parliamentary powers in addition to the new mandate of the State Council further obscure where Putin will retire to if he indeed steps down in 2024; however, these shifts may allow Putin to remain in power in some capacity, keeping the options of the prime minister, head of the State Council, and even the presidency open.

[Gianna Geiger]

[GREAT BRITAIN: Admission of New 5G Technology May Shift Strategic Relationships](#)

Summary: The decision to not ban Chinese technology company Huawei will likely impact Britain's relationship with the broader global community.

Development: On 28 January, British officials announced that Britain would not ban equipment produced by the Chinese technology company Huawei. This move comes after officials designated Huawei as a "high-risk vendor" due to security and counterintelligence concerns. New rules created by British Prime Minister Boris Johnson and Britain's National Security Council restrict vendors categorized as high-risk such as Huawei to certain parts of telecommunication infrastructure, limiting access to the base structure. Although the announcement limits any one high-risk vendor to no more than a 35% market share, officials predict that Huawei will be instrumental in building the UK's 5G network. Experts predict that Johnson's acceptance of Huawei will sway other leaders considering whether or not to work with Huawei, such as Germany's Chancellor Angela Merkel and France's President Emmanuel Macron. Other countries, such as Australia and Japan, have either banned Huawei completely or severely limited its capabilities.

Analysis: The acceptance of Huawei's technology will likely lead to a more positive relationship between Britain and China while adding potential tension to Britain's relationship with countries that have restricted Huawei's technology. Concerned countries will likely be reluctant to send information which Britain may store in Huawei's products due to security concerns surrounding China's connection to the technology, possibly leading to a reduction in shared intelligence. However, this announcement will likely lead to greater trade between Britain and China, improving the relationship between the two countries, even with the limits placed on Huawei's operating ability. During the implementation of the 5G technology, British security officials will likely remain on high alert due to Huawei's categorization as a "high-risk vendor," but as the British continue to implement the technology, Britain's relationship with China will likely develop.

[Alli McIntyre]

NORWAY: Coalition Breakdown Likely Indicates Growing Fear of Islamic Terror

Summary: The crisis facing Oslo's governing coalition due to the Progress Party's (FRP) withdrawal from its coalition government following the repatriation of a woman suspected of forming links with the Islamic State (IS) likely indicates a developing fear of Islamic fundamentalist terrorism in Norway.

Development: On 20 January, the FRP left Norway's coalition government following the repatriation of a young woman from Syria suspected of having IS connections in Syria, creating a minority government and several vacant cabinet seats. The FRP stated they left the coalition due to concern about the acceptance of suspected terrorists in along with refugees from primarily Middle Eastern countries. Norwegian Prime Minister, Erna Solberg, defended her decision, citing the reported serious illnesses of the woman's children as the reason for the repatriation. The three remaining parties in the coalition, the Conservative, Liberal, and Christian Democratic Parties, support the repatriation. Islamic fundamentalist organizations constitute the gravest threat to Norway in 2019, according to the Norwegian Police Security Service.

Analysis: The crisis facing Oslo's governing coalition likely indicates a growing fear of Islamic extremism among Norwegian people and government officials. Norway, like several other European countries, continues to struggle with the threat of Islamic fundamentalism hidden amongst refugees from the Syrian civil war and other conflicts in the Middle East. The Norwegian government will likely try to find a compromise between the FRP and the remaining coalition members which may include harsher restrictions on repatriation of suspected jihadists.

[Max Olson]

MEXICO: Vigilante Group Uses Child Soldiers to Combat Gang Violence

Summary: Vigilante group will likely continue to recruit universally and form self-defense communities to oppose local cartels as cartel violence continues to affect Mexico.

Development: On 22 January, the armed vigilante group CRAC-PF that formed to combat drug gangs inducted 19 children members near the town of Chilpancingo, Mexico and have shown them bearing arms and participating in militia-style training. Many citizens formed similar vigilante groups in the Guerrero state, claiming a Mexican constitutional provision that allows indigenous groups to create self-government systems. The Mexican government quickly released statements criticizing the group for child abuse and questioned the legitimacy of the group's intentions. Additionally, the use of children in armed conflict by CRAC-PF constitutes a war crime, violating the UN's Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict. This follows an attack on indigenous musicians on 17 January by suspected members of the Los Ardillos cartel, which took place while the group was traveling through the town of Chilapa.

Analysis: As drug gang and cartel violence continue to affect Mexico, vigilante groups such as CRAC-PF may see an uptick in membership and the formation of new groups. The attack on an indigenous music group may prompt Mexico's indigenous populations to form their own community vigilante groups to defend against gang activity in Guerrero and other states. The breaking of UN protocol may draw the attention of the UN to Mexico, making it vulnerable to possible action from the UN. In addition to possible new international pressure, Mexico will likely continue to face internal protests and calls for government intervention to combat criminal violence in Guerrero state and across Mexico.

[Dorian Taylor]

This is a global intelligence briefing prepared by the students of the Global Security and Intelligence Studies program at Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University in Prescott, Arizona. The views expressed in this briefing are those of the students, not the university.

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