



Spotlight on Iran

July 30 – August 13, 2017

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Overview

- ▶ A bloody week for the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Forces (IRGC) in Syria: Five fighters (including a senior officer) were killed in Syria and another fighter was executed in the Syria-Iraq border region after being captured by ISIS. Following the death of the captive, senior IRGC officials threatened to avenge his death. (Tasnim, August 10)
- ▶ Iran is clearly concerned with the improvement in relations between Saudi Arabia and the Baghdad central government and some Shia leaders in Iraq, which according to Tehran, may undermine Iran's influence in Iraq. Iranian media provided extensive coverage of the unusual visit of the Shia cleric Muqtada al-Sadr in Saudi Arabia at the end of July. The visit was portrayed as an additional manifestation of the Saudi efforts to curtail Iranian influence in Iraq. Meanwhile, Iran continues to advance development work in Iraq. The Iranian deputy minister of health announced Iran's intention to establish a medical university in Iraq and the representative of the Supreme Leader at the IRGC visited Najaf to supervise the development work of a central mosque in this city, considered holy by Shia Muslims.
- ▶ Hamas-Iran ties continue to improve: the adviser on international affairs of the speaker of the Majlis, who in early August visited Syria and Lebanon, met with a delegation of senior Hamas officials in Beirut. In parallel, Hamas took advantage of the inauguration ceremony of President Rouhani, held on August 5, to send a delegation to Tehran. The delegation met with senior Iranian officials who emphasized Iran's commitment to continue supporting the Palestinians.

General Information

- ▶ The Chief of Staff of the Iranian Armed Forces, Mohammad Bagheri, stated in a conference in the city of Zahedan in Sistan-Baluchistan Province, that Iran, which previously fought its enemies on its land, is now waging a battle against the "global and Zionist arrogance" on the shores of the Mediterranean Sea, and that Iran instills fear in its

enemies. He mentioned that Iran does not distinguish between Hezbollah and Hamas, and that it is committed to helping them both, although one organization is Shia and the other is Sunni (Tasnim, July 31).

► Ahmad Mehraban, the Deputy Commander of the Imam Hossein Training and Officer College, stated in an interview to the Tasnim News Agency (August 1), that the college dispatches instructors on its behalf to train “popular forces” in Syria and Iraq, including the Shia militias. Mehraban added that the college then utilizes this experience gained by the instructors in the training it provides to IRGC officers at the college. He rejected the reports, which were published in Israeli media, claiming that the IRGC established training bases in various countries, including Yemen. He went on to add that the Qods Force of the IRGC does not establish training centers in other countries, and that in Syria too, the IRGC utilizes Syrian bases for their advisory missions.

► The Deputy Foreign Minister of Arab and African Affairs, Hossein Jaber Ansari, referred in an interview he gave the Reformist daily Shargh (August 9) to the interaction between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Qods Force of the IRGC in directing Iran’s regional policy. He stated that in Iran, similarly to other countries, there are different bodies that influence foreign policy. According to him, all the Iranian bodies involved in directing regional foreign policy are operating based on shared principles and a single strategy determined by the Supreme National Security Council, and that these bodies maintain constant and full cooperation on everything pertaining to regional matters.

Iranian Intervention in Syria and Lebanon

► Five IRGC fighters were killed fighting in Syria: Ali Azimi from the Kerman province, Officer Morteza Hossein-Pour from Gilan province, and three fighters from Khuzestan - Mohammad Ali-Pour, Mohammad Tajbakhsh and Sajjad Bavi. Another fighter of the IRGC, Mohsen Hajaji, who was taken prisoner by ISIS near the Syria-Iraq border, was executed by his captors. Following the death of the captive, senior IRGC officials threatened to avenge his death. (Tasnim, August 10).



Morteza Hossein-Pour (right) and Mohammad Tajbakhsh (left) who were killed in Syria (Twitter, August 7 2017).

- ▶ Representatives from Iran, Russia and Turkey met in Tehran on August 8-9 to prepare the next round of talks over Syria's future and to set a date for these negotiations (Mehr, August 8).
- ▶ Hossein Amir Abdollahian, the Advisor on International Affairs of the Speaker of the Majles, arrived on July 31 for a visit in Beirut where we met Lebanese officials to discuss regional and bilateral matters. (Mehr, July 31) In addition, Abdollahian met with the Secretary General of Hezbollah, Hassan Nasrallah, and congratulated him on "the latest victories of the resistance against the terrorists in Arsal." Nasrallah, in turn, emphasized the important role of the Iranian Supreme Leader in the struggle against the conspiracies of the enemies in the Muslim world, adding that the resistance in Palestine, Syria and Lebanon are directly tied to the stability and security of the region. (Fars, August 2).



The Abdollahian – Nasrallah meeting (From Fars, August 2 2017).

► During the visit, Abdollahian also met with representatives of Palestinian factions, including representatives from Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine. In the meeting with PIJ Secretary General, Ramadan Shalah, Abdollahian stated that the events in the Temple Mount refocused attention on Jerusalem and the al-Aqsa Mosque and proved that the religious and political question of the al-Aqsa Mosque still matters greatly to Muslim public opinion. Abdollahian criticized the willingness of some leaders of Arab countries to normalize relations with Israel, which he labeled as “a betrayal of the values of the Palestinian people.” (Mehr, August 1) Following his visit to Beirut, Abdollahian continued to Damascus for meetings with senior Syrian officials. In his meeting with the Syrian Foreign Minister, Walid al-Muallem, Abdollahian stated that Israel is trying to normalize its relations with Arab counties and sees Syria and the “resistance axis” as an impediment to its plan. He added that Tehran and Moscow will continue to cooperate in protecting Syria, alongside the Syrian Army, Syrian people and the Syrian leadership (Mehr, August 3).



The Muallem – Abdollahian meeting (Mehr, August 3 2017).

► Syrian Prime Minister, Imad Khamis, who arrived in Tehran to participate in the inauguration ceremony of President Rouhani, met on August 6 with Ali Shamkhani, the Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council. In the meeting, Shamkhani described the American airstrikes in a-Raqqa in Syria as “genocide” and a grave human rights violation. He also stated that the United States and European countries encourage terrorism instead of fighting it (Mehr, August 6).

Iranian Intervention in Iraq

► Iranian media provided extensive coverage of the unusual visit of the Shia Iraqi cleric Muqtada al-Sadr in Saudi Arabia at the end of July. During his visit, al-Sadr met with the Saudi Crown Prince, Muhammad Bin Salman, in the city of Jeddah. Al-Sadr was previously considered to be an Iranian protégé, but in recent years, he has distanced himself from the Tehran and even criticized Iranian meddling in Iraq. Iranian media presented al-Sadr’s visit in Saudi Arabia as another manifestation of the Saudi effort to curtail Iranian influence in Iraq, following the victory over ISIS, by bolstering ties between Riyadh and the central government in Baghdad and some Shia leaders, including al-Sadr. A commentary published by the Tasnim News Agency (August 1) argued that the visit occurred against the backdrop of the preparations of the Iraqi political arena to the upcoming parliamentary elections next year. Saudi Arabia, fearful of a victory of the current considered to be close to Iran in these elections, is attempting to augment its relationships with political currents in Iraq, among them Shia forces that disapprove of the ties between Tehran and Baghdad.

- ▶ When asked about the visit in his weekly press conference, the Spokesman of the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Bahram Qasemi, stated that Iraq is an independent country, and it does not need Iranian approval for visits of senior Iraqi officials outside of Iraq. (Fars, August 7) The extensive coverage in Iranian media of al-Sadr's visit in Saudi Arabia attests to Iranian concern about the improvement of ties between Saudi Arabia and the Iraqi central government and some Shia leaders in Iraq, which according to Tehran, may curtail its influence in Iraq.
- ▶ Iranian Deputy Health Minister, Bagher Larijani, announced that Iran intends to establish the first foreign medical school in Iraq. In a meeting with an Iraqi delegation headed by the deputy Iraqi minister of higher education and scientific research, the parties agreed to establish cooperation between the two countries in the fields of education, research and science. One fruit of this cooperation will be the establishment of a medical university in Iraq by the University of Tehran, under the supervision of the Iranian Ministry of Health. (Mehr, July 27)
- ▶ Ali Sa'idi, the Representative of the Supreme Leader at the IRGC, and the Representative of the Supreme Leader at the Qods Force of the IRGC, Ali Shirazi, visited Najaf in Iraq to supervise the development and expansion work of the Hazrat-e Zahra Mosque in the city. (Defa Press, August 2) The development and expansion of the mosque can be seen as another indication of Iran's effort to expand its religious influence in the holy city of Najaf, which serves as a central pilgrimage site for Shia worshippers from around the world.



Sa'idi (left) and Shirazi (right) in their visit in Najaf (Defa Press, August 2 2017).

Iranian Intervention in the Palestinian Arena

- ▶ A delegation on behalf of Hamas arrived in Tehran on August 4 to participate in the inauguration ceremony of President Rouhani, held on August 5. Among the members of the delegation were Izzat al-Rishq, Salah al-Arouri, Zaher Jabarin and Usama Hamdan. A statement released by Hamas remarked that the participation of the delegation in the ceremony was intended to convey the appreciation of the movement to Iran's important role in supporting the Palestinian resistance and protecting the legitimate rights of the Palestinians. The Secretary General of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, Ramadan Shalah, also attended the swearing in ceremony (Mehr, August 4).
- ▶ During its visit in Tehran, the Hamas delegation met with senior Iranian officials who emphasized Iran's commitment to continue supporting the Palestinians. The Iranian Foreign Minister, Mohammad Javad Zarif, told the members of the delegation that the position of the Islamic Republic of Iran with regards to the matter of Palestine is stable and unshakable (Tasnim, August 7). Ali Akbar Velayati, the Adviser on International Affairs to the Supreme Leader, stated in a meeting with member of the delegation that the Iranian Supreme Leader emphasized time and time again that the struggle in the Palestinian territories is the only way to save the Palestinians. Velayati conveyed his congratulations to Ismail Haniyeh for his election as the Head of Hamas' Political Bureau, adding that Iran fully supports the "political and revolutionary positions" of Haniyeh (Mehr, August 9).



Meeting of Foreign Minister Zarif with the Hamas Delegation (Tasnim, August 7 2017).