



Iran in the Post-ISIS Era: Aims, Opportunities and Challenges

Main Argument

Iran's Strategic Goals

The “Islamic State” in Iraq and Syria is undergoing a process of disintegration and ISIS will return to its “natural state” of a jihadist terror organization, not a “state” with territorial borders. The defeats experienced by ISIS in Iraq and Syria, central among them the loss of Mosul, the battle in Raqqa and the advances of Syrian forces in Deir Ezzor, **create new opportunities for Iran to increase its influence in Syria, Iraq and the entire Middle East.**

► Iran, which previously displayed dexterity in **exploiting every opportunity to enhance its standing as a regional power**, wishes to capitalize on the vacuum created in Syria and Iraq by ISIS' defeat, to **advance its ambitions in the region and play a central role in shaping the post-ISIS Middle East**. Iran's actions in Syria and Iraq are part of a **comprehensive Iranian strategy of striving for regional hegemony**. Iran wishes to increase its influence over states and organizations in the region, while preventing forces under Western and American patronage from taking root in Syria, Iraq or any other country. Iran's regional meddling is intended not only to implement its ideology but mainly to **realize Iranian national interests, which are perceived by Tehran as vital.**

- In its current policy in Syria and Iraq, Iran wishes to further several central goals:
- ◆ **Securing and shaping the Syrian regime:** Preserving the regime of President Assad, assisting its stabilization and increasing Iranian influence over it **are vital goals for Iran**. This policy stems from the Syrian regime's role as a strategic ally of Iran in the Arab world, and due to possible negative ramifications of Assad's downfall on Lebanese Hezbollah, which relies on the crucial Syrian logistical hub for transfers of

Iranian assistance to it. In addition, Syria's location at the heart of the Arab world is **perceived as an important geo-political center from which Iran could, in the future, conduct a subversive policy to advance its regional hegemony.**

- ◆ **Reinforcing a sphere of Iranian-Shi'ite influence, stretching from Iran through Iraq to Syria and Lebanon and the Mediterranean.** In this sphere of influence, Iran can create **a land corridor from Iran to Syria and to Lebanon.** Such a corridor would provide Iran with another route for transferring forces, weapons and equipment to Syria and Lebanon. This in addition to the **aerial route**, which Iran frequently uses now, and the **maritime route**, which Iran has utilized several times in the past. It appears that Iran also wishes to **obtain access to the Mediterranean, and gain a long-term military foothold in Syria** (although senior Iranian officials have denied such intentions).
- ◆ **Bolstering the pressure mechanisms and escalating the threat posed to Israel, while creating a state of deterrence.** This is mainly by **augmenting the military capabilities of Hezbollah, developing the abilities of Hezbollah to manufacture weapons, and establishing local terror networks in the Golan Heights, with the aim of creating a new front for challenging Israel.** It appears to us that according to Iran's view, the networks forged in the Golan Heights will be made up of Hezbollah operatives, members of Shi'ite militias supported by Iran and local actors from the region.¹
- ◆ **Maintaining Iraq's territorial integrity, with a government dominated by the Shia and allied and under the influence of Iran.** To promote this political goal, Iran fosters Shi'ite militias in Iraq that operate under its influence ("the Popular Mobilization Committee", PMC), allowing Iran to advance its aims inside Iraq through these militias.

¹ In the past, a Shi'ite Iraqi operative, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandes, who serves as the Deputy Commander of the Popular Mobilization Committee (PMC, an umbrella structure of Shia militias operating under Iranian patronage), stated that **if Hassan Nasrallah asked to turn toward Israel if conflict erupts, the PMC will do so.** In this context see our publication from July 20, 2017: "Iran's interests and intent in Iraq and Syria reflected in statements by senior commanders of the Popular Mobilization Committee, the umbrella organization of the Shi'ite militias in Iraq handled by the Iranian Qods Force".

- ◆ **Dislodging the United States from the region.** The U.S. is perceived by Iran as a **major threat to its national security and vital interests**. The first step to realizing this goal is by **diminishing American influence in Syria and Iraq** in the phase following the capture of Mosul and Raqqa, and subsequently, Iran aims to **blunt American influence in other countries across the Middle East**.
- ◆ **Increasing Iran's political, economic, religious and cultural influence in Syria, Iraq and Lebanon.** This is while exploiting the weakness of the central governments in those countries and the opportunities found in the process of rebuilding the economies and infrastructure in Syria and Iraq, which have been devastated by the wars raging in those countries over the past few years. An important tool for the accomplishment of this goal are the **Shi'ite communities residing in those countries** (and in Syria, the **Alawite community**), which are experiencing sectarian tensions with the neighboring Sunni Muslim communities.
- ▶ To realize its strategic goals, Iran continues to invest most of its efforts in Syria in **stabilizing the rule of the Assad regime and expanding the territories under its control**. Despite the significant gains of Assad regime forces, a decisive victory is yet to be achieved, and the military effort continues to pose a major challenge to Iran and the IRGC, and take a heavy toll on its manpower and that of its clients.
- ▶ Iran intends to utilize the forces operating under the command of the IRGC to **establish itself in areas from which the Syrian rebels and ISIS have been expelled**, with the aim of creating a sphere of influence stretching from Iran through Iraq and Syria to Lebanon and the Mediterranean. Ground lines of control from east to west would allow direct Iranian access to its allies in Syria and Lebanon. The Iranian effort to establish this corridor is being realized by the advancement of forces supportive of the Assad regime, including Hezbollah and Shi'ite militias operating under IRGC patronage (the PMC), to central crossing points on the Iraq-Syria border. Iran encourages the organizations under its tutelage in Iraq and in Syria to operate near the Iraqi-Syrian border.

Obstacles Hindering the Realization of Iran's Interests

- ▶ Iran faces **several fundamental obstacles when attempting to establish itself as a powerful player in the Arab realm of the Middle East**. **First**, as a country with a Persian majority, it is perceived in the Arab world, and even among its allies, as a foreign actor that at times conducts itself in a haughty and even racist manner toward its Arab neighbors. **Second**, the Shi'ite Iran is struggling to realize regional hegemony in a sphere that is mostly Sunni Muslim. The use of local proxy organizations allows Iran to camouflage its direct involvement in this arena, but there are also inherent problems in a strategy that relies on operating proxies, which at times have their own interests and do not follow the Iranian dictate to the letter.
- ▶ **The creation of an Iranian sphere of influence in western Iraq and eastern Syria and establishment of a land corridor from Iran in the direction of the Mediterranean** is especially challenging for Iran. **The government of Iraq (with American encouragement) may hinder the transfer of weapons through this route**. In addition, parts of this route are controlled by **forces opposed to Iranian meddling**, such as the Kurdish militias supported by the United States or the Sunni communities residing in western and central Iraq. After losing Mosul, **ISIS** will likely change its combat patterns and revert to guerrilla tactics and terrorism, and **may obstruct the movement of vehicles along the land corridor**.
- ▶ The actions of the superpowers and other governments in the region, and especially those of **Russia, the United States and Turkey**, also undercut Iran's ability to realize its aim of regional hegemony and frustrate its hope of forging eastern Syria and western Iraq as parts of its sphere of influence. In Syria, Russia has become the dominant player, and **Iran has had to settle for a secondary role in the military and political developments that have occurred over the past year** (which creates tensions in the relationship between Iran and Russia). **Another actor competing with Iran in Syria (and beyond) is Turkey**, which wishes to play a central role in combatting ISIS and shaping the political deals concerning Syria's future. In addition, it is likely that **Sunni Turkey will view increasing Shi'ite influence spearheaded by Iran as harmful to its interests**.
- ▶ Iran's efforts to gain influence in this arena may lead to **greater strife with the United States**, especially during the Trump presidency. Iran eyes with concern American activity against Syrian regime forces and sees it as a new phase in the battle to shape Syria in the day after ISIS and as an "American plot," which aims to curtail Iranian

influence. In addition, the Iranian presence in Syria increases the likelihood of friction with Israel and may lead to an escalation between the two countries at a timing that is not suitable for Iran.

- ▶ **Inside Iran, Iranian involvement in Syria too poses a challenge.** The prolonged military operations in Syria **continue to exact a heavy human toll and financial cost from Iran and its proxies**, which at time arouse internal criticism, and fan the flames of conflict with ISIS (as was evident in the multi-pronged terrorist attack carried out by the organization in Tehran on June 7, 2017). In addition, Iran's drive for hegemony in the Middle East **may require it to increase its "investments" in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon and other conflict arenas, which may further inflame domestic criticism.**

The Iraqi Facet

- ▶ **ISIS' waning power creates new opportunities for Iran to expand its influence in Iraq.** Unlike in Syria, Iran's direct military presence in Iraq is extremely limited and is **primarily based on the Iraqi Shi'ite militias** ("the Popular Mobilization Committee", PMC), most of which operate under direct or indirect patronage of the IRGC. These militias play an important role in the domestic arena in Iraq, which may even increase following the end of the campaign against ISIS, when they demand their place in the new political order in Iraq. It appears that most of **the militias are loyal to Iran** and the ability of the central government in Baghdad to impose its will on them is in doubt.
- ▶ Iran sees its involvement in Iraq as an essential mean for maintaining its influence in the country and preventing **American presence and influence** there, which are perceived by Iran as a threat to its national interests. According to Tehran, ISIS' enfeeblement may accelerate the **confrontation against the United States over power in Iraq**. Iran strives to **neutralize American influence in Iraq**, which has increased during the campaign against ISIS, and especially during the battle for Mosul.
- ▶ **As with its policy in Syria, Iran is moving to increase its influence in Iraq in the economic, cultural and religious spheres** as well. Iran invests great efforts in augmenting the volume of trade with Iraq, it has taken over several oil fields in the border region with Iraq, and Iran may assist in rebuilding the areas captured from ISIS. Iran is also pursuing

efforts to increase its religious influence in the Iraqi cities considered holy by the Shi'ite community.

► **Iranian assistance provided a significant contribution to stymieing ISIS** but also resulted in growing criticism inside Iraq against Iran's interference in Iraq's domestic affairs. This criticism reflects the complexity of the Shi'ite political arena in Iraq, which encompasses a multitude of differing and even opposing views regarding Iran's involvement in the country. **Over the past two years, the Shi'ite cleric and politician, Muqtada al-Sadr, has led the opposition to Iran's involvement in Iraq.** Al-Sadr was considered a protégé of Iran, but over the past few years, has drifted away from the Iranians and began publicly criticizing Iran's meddling in Iraq. Iran is troubled by his growing activism, and especially his burgeoning ties with Saudi Arabia, Iran's main regional rival.

► **Prime Minister Haidar al-Abadi**, who was appointed to his position in the summer of 2014 replacing the pro-Iranian Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, has also **adopted an independent posture vis-à-vis Iran.** At the heart of al-Abadi's policy is the **desire to avoid becoming an "Iranian puppet."** Iraq also has an underlying interest to continue receiving American support and to maintain positive relations with the Sunni Arab states, chief among them Saudi Arabia. The entry of **Turkey** as another player in the Iraqi scene is also perceived as a threat by Iran, which is troubled by Turkey's aim of cementing its hold over northern Iraq.

► Another challenge Iran is facing comes **from the Kurds in northern Iraq. Iran is troubled by the transformation of the Kurdistan region in Iraq into a de-facto independent state.** According to Tehran's view, this may jeopardize Iraq's territorial integrity, harm Iran's efforts to secure its grip over Iraq and **embolden separatist aspirations among the Kurdish minority in Iran.** Iran's concern is clearly evident in its public opposition to raising of the Kurdistan flag in the city of Kirkuk in northern Iraq and its efforts to prevent the holding of the independence referendum in the Kurdish region.

Summary

In sum, ISIS' decline in Syria and Iraq and its transformation from an "Islamic State" to a terrorist and guerilla organization **creates a window of opportunity for Iran to realize its regional goals and expand its influence.** The first priorities are Lebanon, Syria, Iraq and

Yemen, over which Iran already has a strong grip. Nevertheless, **Iran's ability to cement its influence is constrained by fundamental characteristic of the Middle Eastern system**, chief among them the demographic composition of the region and the competing influence of other regional and international players. Iran's ability to increase its influence in the region depends not only on its intentions and desires, but also on the policies of the rest of the state and non-state actors, international and local, operating in the region, and their decisions whether to facilitate Iran's ambitions or challenge its efforts to establish a sphere of influence under Iranian dominance.



IRGC fighters in battle against ISIS (al-Mayadin, August 16, 2017)

Annexes

- ▶ Below are five annexes dealing with the various aspects of Iran's involvement in Syria, Iraq and the Middle East at large:
 - ◆ Annex A: The evolution of Iran's involvement in Syria.
 - ◆ Annex B: The nature of the Iran's current operation in Syria.
 - ◆ Annex C: The challenges to Iran's involvement in Syria, Iraq and the Arab world at large.
 - ◆ Annex D: Iran's involvement in Iraq.
 - ◆ Annex E: The Challenges to Iran's involvement in Iraq.

The Evolution of Iran's Involvement in Syria

► Since the outbreak of the civil war in Syria in late 2011, **the Qods Force of the IRGC, under the command of Qasem Soleimani, has spearheaded Iran's involvement in Syria.**

During the first phase of the civil war, when the survival of the Assad regime was in doubt, Iran's intervention was intended to prevent the fall of Damascus and strategic redoubts in northern Syria to the rebels and the collapse of the Assad regime. Following this phase, Iran and its proxies currently aim to help the Assad regime expand the areas under its control, stabilize the regime's rule in areas it occupies, defend the Shi'ite community and places they consider holy, and secure the Syrian-Lebanese border region and prevent the "trickling" of global jihad into Lebanon. In the long term, the objective of Iran's involvement is to secure Iran's grip over Syria and its influence over the Syrian regime, thus allowing Iran to use Syrian territory as a forward operating base for Iran's presence and activities in the Middle East.

► Iran's involvement during the various stages of the Syrian civil war **manifested in a variety of ways.** At first, Iran transferred weapons, provided economic assistance and dispatched military advisers, who worked hand-in-hand with the Syrian Army and the Syrian security forces. Iran provided assistance to the Syrian Army on the strategic, operational and tactical level. Iran shared with the commanders of the Syrian Army its battlefield experience, , provided training to commanders of the Syrian Army of various ranks, and established a popular militia that operates in the same manner as the Basij force in Iran. In addition, Iran provided political backing to the Syrian regime.

► Until September 2015, Iran's intervention in Syria was carried it out by **some hundreds of Iranian advisers and several thousands of Shi'ite fighters from Lebanese Hezbollah, Shi'ite Iraqi militias and Afghan and Pakistani fighters,** who were recruited by the IRGC in exchange for a monthly salary and additional benefits. During the initial phase of Iran's intervention, IRGC cadres present in Syria served mostly in an advisory capacity. At that stage, the Iranians avoided operating organic military units against the rebels and were rarely directly involved in combat. However, at times, IRGC personnel were killed when caught in the crossfire between regime forces and rebels.

► The cumulative advances of Jabhat al-Nusra and other rebel groups in north-western Syria during 2014 and 2015 raised doubts among the Iranian leadership about Assad’s ability to survive at the helm. This compelled Iran to significantly augment its support to the Assad regime and change the mode of its engagement in Syria. Due to the manpower shortage of the Syrian regime, Iran shored up its forces in Syria in mid-September 2015, by dispatching apparently between 1,500-2,000 fighters, some of whom took part in combat. The Iranian reinforcements were intended to assist the Pro-Syrian forces in an offensive launched in northern Syria in early October 2015. In addition, Hezbollah and the Shi’ite militias were utilized to defend the sites considered holy by the Shi’ite community in Syria, central among them the grave of Sayyidah Zaynab (south of Damascus).



Qasem Solemani briefs fighters, probably in the Lattakia region in Syria (Facebook, October 13, 2015)

► The hard-fought battles in north-western Syria in late 2015 **took a heavy toll on the Iranian fighters, who led the assaults in the ground offensive.**² In the first months of the offensive, over 100 Iranian fighters were killed, many of them officers including senior ones. The overwhelming majority of the fallen belonged to the regular combat units of the IRGC. **The heavy losses among the Iranian fighters forced the Iranian leadership to reevaluate the dispatch of Iranian forces to Syria and significantly scale down its order**

² For more see our report “Profile of IRGC Fighters Killed in Syria during the Past Month (Updated to November 16, 2015)”, November 16, 2015 <http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/en/20909/> and our review: “The head of the Iranian Martyrs Foundation admits that 2,100 fighters sent by Iran to Syria and Iraq have been killed so far”, March 16, 2017. <http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/en/21176/>

of battle in Syria. Iran's current order of battle in Syria is estimated to amount to about one thousand fighters and advisers.

► In the spring of 2016, Iran dispatched to Syria a **limited number of soldiers of the regular Iranian Armed Forces** (amounting to probably several hundreds of fighters), with the objective of reinforcing IRGC personnel in Syria. This was the first time since the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1989), in which fighters belonging to the regular Iranian Armed Forces were sent into battle outside of Iran. Within a short period, the regular armed forces also endured casualties.

► **The battlefield gains of the forces fighting on behalf of the Assad regime with Russian assistance, which culminated in the recapture of the city of Aleppo** from the rebels in late 2016, **allowed Iran to revert to relying mainly on Hezbollah fighters and other foreign Shi'ite fighters operating under its patronage alongside Syrian forces , and limit its direct presence to a relatively small core of advisers.** Returning to the previous mode of operation decreased Iranian losses **but also impaired Tehran's ability to affect events on the ground and curtailed its political influence.** Iran's role as the main backer of the Syrian regime was **usurped by Russia, while Iran was forced to settle for a secondary role in the unfolding military and political developments over the past year** in the civil war, which have benefitted the Syrian regime.

In parallel to its support for the Assad regime, Iran aims to establish a footing in the Golan Heights to carry out terrorist attacks against Israel. Iran has done so through **local actors, who were able to embed themselves in the Golan Heights owing to the security and administrative vacuum created over the past years due to the loss of control of the Syrian regime.** These local foci involved in establishing terrorist cells against Israel are **Hezbollah operatives, local Druze actors and Palestinian Islamic Jihad cadres.** The terrorist network in the Golan Heights would not necessarily be utilized against Israel in the immediate term, but instead serve as a **base for Iranian proxies in this sensitive region, and used in the future as a lever vis-à-vis Israel.**

The Nature of Iran's Current Operation in Syria

Iran's Involvement on the Battlefield

- ▶ Despite the significant gains made by the forces fighting on behalf of the Assad regime over the past year, **Iran continues to devote most of its efforts to stabilizing the rule of the Syrian regime and expanding the territories under Assad's control.** The fighting in Syria is dying down due to the de-confliction deals Russia has been able to negotiate throughout Syria, **but the battle is far from over**, and it continues to pose a serious challenge to Iran and the IRGC. The death of seven IRGC fighters, among them two high-ranking officers, during the first half of August 2017, after several months that witnessed a significant decrease in the number of casualties among Iranian forces, indicate that despite the relative lull in fighting, the campaign in Syria continues to take a heavy toll from Iranian forces and their partners. **As of mid-August 2017, the number of Iranians killed in Syria has reached about 500.**
- ▶ In light of the negotiations led by Russia concerning a settlement in Syria, Iranian officials emphasized that Iran's presence in the country is there to stay. Following the ceasefire deal in southern Syria, which entered into force on July 9, 2017, and placed restrictions on the presence of Iranian forces and their proxies in this region, Hossein Jaber Ansari, the Deputy Foreign Minister for Arab-African Affairs, stated that Iran's presence in Syria is performed upon the request of the Syrian government and that the agreement between Russia and the U.S. will have no practical or operative effect on the presence of Iranian forces in Syria (Fars, July 17, 2017).
- ▶ Besides the ongoing combat operations alongside Syrian regime forces, Iran strives to utilize the forces operating under the IRGC to entrench itself in regions captured from the Syrian rebels and ISIS. Iran aims to create a sphere of influence, stretching from Iran through Iraq and Syria to Lebanon and the Mediterranean. **This realm, once controlled by ISIS until its retreat from most of the territories it once held, connects eastern Syria to western Iraq** and its capture would allow Iran to transfer weapons and supply convoys from Iran through Iraq to Syria and to Hezbollah in Lebanon. Ground lines of control from east to west, which would connect between the Baghdad region to Damascus through al-Tanf near the Iraq-Syria-Jordan border triangle, and between the region surrounding Mosul in Iraq to Raqqa in Syria, would allow Iran unimpeded access to its allies in Syria and Lebanon.

► The Iranian effort to establish this corridor is realized by **the advancement of forces supportive of the Assad regime**, including Hezbollah and other Shi'ite militias, operating under the patronage of the IRGC, to the **Iraq-Syria border**. In June 2017, forces of the Fatemiyoun Brigade, made up of Afghan fighters operating under the guidance of the IRGC in Syria, reached the vicinity of the border. Iranian media published photos of Qasem Soliemani, the Commander of the Qods Force of the IRGC, praying alongside the fighters of the brigade in the border region (Tasnim, June 12, 2017).



**Qasem Soliemani alongside Fatemiyoun Brigade fighters near the Iraq-Syria border
(Tasnim, June 12, 2017)**

The Iranian approach of aiming to establish a sphere of influence from Iran to Lebanon was **verbalized by the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei during his meeting with Iraq's Prime Minister, Haidar al-Abadi**, in June 2017. Ali Khamenai presented the arrival of the Iraqi Shi'ite militias to the Iraq-Syria border as "**significant and strategic**" (the website of the Supreme Leader, June 20, 2017). **Ali Akbar Velayati, the Adviser on International Affairs to the Supreme Leader**, declared in a press conference in June 2017, that the link created between the popular forces in Iraq and the united forces in Syria constitute a strategic victory for Iran. **According to him "the ring of resistance" which starts in Tehran, continues all the way to Iraq, Syria and Lebanon, facing off against the Zionists and their supporters** (IRNA, June 13, 2017).

Gaining a Military Foothold in Syria and Access to the Mediterranean

► Iran's desire to expand its access to the Mediterranean and gain a long-term military presence in Syria is also **evident in the possibility that Iran will ask to receive a naval base along Syria's shores, which would provide it with regular access to the**

Mediterranean Sea. In late November 2016, **Mohammad Hossein Bagheri, the Chief of Staff of the Iranian Armed Forces, declared in a conference of the Iranian Navy, that Iran might need to expand its maritime capabilities in the future in waters far from its borders, and establish naval bases on the shores of Syria and Yemen** (Fars, November 26, 2016). In March 2017, **Rasoul Sanaei-Rad, the Deputy Commander of the IRGC, denied** that Iran intends to establish a naval base in Lattakia, stating that Iran is not interested in establishing a naval base in the city, where Russia maintains an army base, and that Iran's presence in Syria involves advisers alone (Tasnim, March 12, 2107).

► **Reports, published in Israeli media,** claiming that the IRGC established a training camp outside of Iran, **were denied by Iranian officials.** In August 2017, the deputy commander of the Imam Hossein Training and Officer College for IRGC cadres asserted that even the Qods Force of the IRGC does not establish training centers outside of Iran, and that in Syria too, the IRGC utilizes Syrian bases for their advisory missions (Tasnim, August 1, 2017). **Despite this, according to our estimate, the possibility that in the future, Iran will wish to entrench its presence in Syria by establishing a naval base and bases for ground forces on Syrian land should not be ruled out.**

Bolstering Hezbollah's Military Capabilities

Iran has been working methodically over an extended period to upgrade Hezbollah's military infrastructure. The spearhead of the military infrastructure the Iranians are building in Lebanon is **Hezbollah's rocket and missile arsenal, which threatens the Israeli home front.** Hezbollah's leader, Hassan Nasrallah, bragged that **his organization has precise missiles** and that if used, would turn the lives of hundreds of Israelis into living hell. The military infrastructure the Iranians established for Hezbollah in Lebanon **far exceeds, in terms of size and quality, the military capabilities of other terrorist organizations in the Middle East and around the world.**

► Over the past year, a number of reports claimed that Iran is working to establish factories in Syria and Lebanon for the manufacture of weapons. In November 2016, **Mohammad Bagheri, the Iranian Chief of Staff,** announced that several years ago, Iran established a factory for the manufacture of missiles near Aleppo in Syria, which were used by Hezbollah against Israel in the 2006 Lebanon War (Tasnim, November 10, 2016). In March 2017, the Kuwaiti newspaper al-Jarida, reported that Iran established factories in Lebanon

for the manufacture of long-range rockets and additional weapons for Hezbollah, following strikes against weapon manufacturing plants in Sudan and against supply convoys destined for Hezbollah in Syria, strikes that were attributed to Israel. **Two months later, the head of Israel's Military Intelligence Directorate confirmed that Iran has worked over the past year to assemble the infrastructure for the independent manufacturing of precision weaponry in Lebanon and Yemen** (Haaretz, June 22, 2017). In mid-August, several media outlets reported about a Scud missile factory located near the Syrian coast, which is identical to a missile manufacturing plant build in Tehran (Israeli Channel 2 News, August 15, 2017). **The creation of this infrastructure is intended, according to our estimate, to reduce the dependence of the Syrian Army and Hezbollah on weapon supplies from Iran.**

Rebuilding Syria's Economy

- ▶ Alongside activities in the military sphere, the need to rebuild the devastated Syrian economy after years of civil war **provides Iran with an opportunity to increase its economic clout in that country.** Over the past two years, senior Iranian and Syrian officials have been in talks to promote cooperation between Iranian and Syrian companies in the communications, electricity and energy sectors. During the **visit of the Syrian Energy Minister, Imad Mohammad Deeb Khamis** in Tehran in June 2015, the minister met with representatives of Iranian firms operating in Syria and called on additional Iranian firms to invest in projects in the water and electricity sectors in Syria. In addition, the minister met his **Iranian counterpart, Hamid Chitchian** who announced Iran's intension to expand the activity of private Iranian firms in the electricity sector in Syria (Tasnim and Alef, June 17, 2015).
- ▶ It was reported in early 2017 that Iranian telecom companies won a license to operate a third cellular network in Syria, under agreements to expand economic ties between the two countries (Reuters, January 17, 2017). In August 2017, 30 Iranian companies took part in the international fair in Damascus, held for the first time in six years. The deputy president of the Iranian Chamber of Trade and Commerce, who participated in the fair, stated in a meeting with the Syrian minister of economy and foreign trade that organizations, firms and Iranian chambers of commerce can help Syria by promoting development and reconstruction projects (Tasnim, August 18, 2017).

► In June 2017, **Imad Khamis, the Syrian Prime Minister**, met with the **Iranian Ambassador to Damascus, Javad Torkabadi**, and discussed with him ways to expand the economic ties between the two countries. Khamis emphasized the importance of economic cooperation between Iran and Syria and pointed to the need to promote joint economic ventures with the involvement of the private sector (Fars, June 12, 2017). The next day, the **Head of the Majles Committee on National Security and Foreign Policy, Alaeddin Boroujerdi**, announced that Iran will spare no efforts in Syria's reconstruction following the civil war. In a meeting with the Secretary General of the Syrian Prime Minister's Office, Mohammad al-Ammouri, Boroujerdi stated that Iran will offer assistance to reconstruct Syria and will share with Damascus the experience gained by Iran during the reconstruction phase following the Iran-Iraq War (Mehr, June 13, 2017).



The meeting between Iran's Ambassador to Damascus Javad Torkabadi and Syrian Prime Minister Imad Khamis. From: ISNA, June 12, 2017

The Challenges to Iran's Involvement in Syria, Iraq and the Arab World at Large

- ▶ Iran faces **several fundamental obstacles when attempting to establish itself as a powerful player in the Arab world. First**, as a country with a Persian majority, **it is perceived, even by its allies in the Arab world, as a foreign actor** that at times conducts itself in a haughty and even racist manner toward its Arab neighbors. **Second, the Shi'ite Iran struggles to realize regional hegemony in a sphere that is mostly Sunni Muslims.** Over the past years reports did emerge about Iran's alleged attempts to alter the demographic makeup of regions with a Sunni majority in Syria, but ultimately, Iran cannot promote "Shi'ization" in a region where the Shi'ite make up a minority. The use of local proxy organizations allows Iran to camouflage its direct involvement in this arena, but there are also inherent problems in a strategy that relies on utilizing proxies, which at times have their own interests and do not follow the Iranian dictate to the letter.
- ▶ **The creation of an Iranian sphere of influence in western Iraq and eastern Syria and establishment of a land corridor from Iran in the direction of the Mediterranean** is especially challenging for Iran. Parts of this sphere are indeed under the control of Iran's allies, including the Assad regime, Hezbollah and some of the Iraqi Shi'ite militias. However, **vast regions of this area, in both Iraq and Syria, are controlled by populations and forces that will likely oppose encroachment by Iran and its proxies.** In the long run, this will likely make it difficult to hold a land round corridor under Iranian control. In addition, **the local population** (mostly in western Iraq) **is largely Sunni**, and will probably resist the pervasion of Iranian influence in the region.
- ▶ The actions of other state actors in the region, and especially those of **Russia, the United States and Turkey**, also restrict Iran's ability to realize its aims of regional hegemony and of forging eastern Syria and western Iraq into parts of its sphere of influence. In Syria, Russia has become the dominant player and it must not be assumed that Moscow will take Iran's ambitions into account. Iran did encourage the Russian intervention in Syria to save the Assad regime, but as a result of this intervention, Iran has lost its hegemonic position in Syria and has had to allow Russia to assume the dominant role Tehran once

enjoyed. Iran, which supports preserving Syria's territorial integrity under Assad's rule, has reservations about Russia's policy to establish a loose federation in Syria and is dissatisfied with the prominent position Russia has given Turkey in the negotiations process over the resolution of the war.

► For now, Iran has had to acquiesce to bolstering its hold over areas where the Russians have allowed it to operate. At this stage, the mutual interests of Russia and Iran are significant enough to allow the preservation of their cooperation in the Syrian arena. Russia has also not obliged the American and Israeli demand to decrease Iranian influence in Syria. Despite this, there are also disagreements between the two countries, which stem from the desire of each of them to influence and even dominate Syria, and from differing perceptions regarding the relationships with other regional actors, including Israel. It is possible that in the future, these disagreements would intensify, as the talks surrounding a political agreement that will determine President Assad's fate will progress, since Iran, unlike Russia, sees the preservation of Assad's rule as a top priority.



Meeting between Ali Shamkhani and the Secretary of the Russian National Security Council, Nikolay Patrushev (Asr-e Iran, May 23, 2017)

► Another actor competing against Iran in the Syrian arena is **Turkey**, which supports Islamist rebel groups and the Free Syrian Army. Turkey, eyeing with concern the growing power of the Kurdish forces in northern Syria, wishes to play a central role in the military effort against ISIS and in shaping the political agreements concerning Syria's future. It is

probable that **Sunni Turkey, which also aspires to increase its regional sway, will object to Syria and Iraq turning into Iranian protectorates.**

► Iran's efforts to gain influence in Syria and Iraq may lead to **greater strife with the United States**, especially in the era of President Trump, who has defined Iran as a central threat in the Middle East.³ In recent months, the Syria-Iraq-Jordan border triangle has become a focal point of armed confrontations between the American Air Force and Syrian regime forces and Shi'ite militias operating under Iranian patronage. American forces have shot down at least one Iranian armed drone in the region of al-Tanf in eastern Syria. **Iran eyes with concern the American activity against Syrian regime forces near the Iraq border** and sees it as a new phase in the battle to shape Syria in the day after ISIS and as an "American-Zionist plot," which aims to stymie the advance of the Iranian-led "resistance front."

► **Iran's former Ambassador to Baghdad, Hassan Kazemi Qomi**, recently estimated that following ISIS' defeat, the United States is following a new plan that focuses on establishing a "terrorist army," reinforcing its forces in the region and supporting the Kurds in Syria. **He called for coordinated action between Iraq and Syria to liberate the border regions shared by the two countries to thwart the American plan to partition the region** (Tasnim, June 5, 2017).⁴ In addition, the Iranian presence in Syria, its aspirations in the Golan Heights, and the transfer of weapons to Hezbollah, **increases the likelihood of friction with Israel** and may lead to an escalation between the two countries at a timing that is not suitable for Iran.

► **Inside Iran too, the Iranian involvement in Syria poses a challenge to the Iranian regime.** The prolonged military operations in Syria continue to exact a heavy human toll and financial cost from Iran and its proxies, which at time arouses domestic criticism. It is true that this criticism does not have a practical impact on Iran's policies, and it is unclear to what extent this criticism enjoys wide public support. However, it does reflect alternative voices among segments of the Iranian public, which are displeased with Iran's ongoing

³ For more see our report "Iranian conduct in the early days of the Trump administration," March 6, 2017. <http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/en/21169/>

⁴ **There is a dissonance between the Iranian conspiratorial view of the American policy in Syria and the United States' conduct in reality. The U.S. is actually reducing its footprint on the ground**, and does not display a desire to attempt to affect the shaping of the future Syrian regime, thus making it easier for the other players in Syria (mainly Russia and Iran) to realize their goals.

support or the Syrian regime. Some of the prominent critical voices over the past year have been **the reformist political activist Mostafa Tajzadeh** who argued that preserving Assad's rule has become more important in the eyes of the regime than preserving Iranian provinces. **The former Mayor of Tehran, Gholam Hossein Karbaschi**, stated in a controversial speech that the Shi'ite communities of the region can be empowered without sending them money, weapons and acts of killing (Tasnim, May 1, 2017).

► Iran's intervention in Syria also fans the flames of conflict with ISIS, which retains the ability to carry out terrorist attacks. The multi-pronged terrorist attack carried out by the organization against targets in Tehran on June 7, 2017, illustrated the potential dangerous effects of the confrontation between Iran and ISIS on Iran's internal security. In response to the attacks on the Majlis building and Khomeini's tomb, on June 18, 2017, the IRGC launched six surface-to-surface Zulfaqar missiles to a medium-range of 700 kilometers (435 miles) from two bases in Kermanshah and Kurdistan in western Iran, toward ISIS targets in Deir Ezzor, eastern Syria.



Launch of missiles from western Iran toward eastern Syria (Twitter, June 18, 2017)

Annex D

Iranian Involvement in Iraq

► **In Tehran's view, Iraq was and continues to be the most important arena for Iran's regional policy.** Since the overthrow of Saddam Hussein in 2003, Iran has acted to preserve its neighbor to the west as **one territorial unit, under Shi'ite dominance and Iranian influence.** Following the occupation of Iraq by the United States in 2003, **the Qods Force of the IRGC led the assistance to the Shi'ite militias, established by it in Iraq, and wielded against the American military and Coalition forces.** Iran pursued this policy in an effort to prevent American entrenchment in Iraq, while at the same time fortifying Iran's influence over the Shi'ite community in Iraq and the country's leadership.

► As part of its intervention in Iraq, **the Qods Force provided financing, equipment and weaponry to most of the Shi'ite militias** there. In addition, the Qods Force planned and coordinated the **dispatch of Lebanese Hezbollah operatives** to Iraq to aid in the campaign against the United States. In parallel, the Qods Force and its commander Soleimani established channels of communications with the Iraqi regime and other powerful actors in the domestic political arena in Iraq.⁵

► **ISIS' dramatic gains in the summer of 2014 posed a strategic challenge to Iran.** To answer this challenge, Iran dispatched advisers and weapons to Iraq, headed by Qasem Soleimani, who leads the military intervention in Iraq. The main proxy for furthering Iranian interests in Iraq are the Shi'ite militias supported by Iran, which as mentioned, were established during the phase of the campaign against the American military.

The Nature of the Iran's Current Involvement in Iraq

► **ISIS' waning power in northern Iraq provides Iran with new opportunities to expand its influence in Iraq.** Unlike in Syria, Iran's direct military presence in Iraq is quite limited and is primarily based on the Iraqi Shi'ite militias, most of which operate under direct or indirect patronage of the IRGC. The capture of redoubts on the Syria-Iraq border by Iran's Shi'ite militias, the noticeable frequent presence of Qasem Soleimani in Iraq in recent months and the appointment of **Iraj Masjedi, who previously served as Soleimani's senior military adviser, to the position of Iran's new ambassador in Iraq, perfectly illustrate Iran's growing clout in Iraq.**

⁵ For more see our report "Portrait of Qasem Soleimani, commander of the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps' Qods Force, Instigator of Iranian Subversion and Terrorism in the Middle East and around the Globe", October 29, 2015. <http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/en/20899/>

► **Iran provides varying degrees of support to the Shi'ite militias.** These militias play an important role in the domestic arena in Iraq, which may even increase following the end of the campaign against ISIS, when they demand their place in the new political order in Iraq. At least some of the militias view the IRGC as a role model for their future involvement in the political and economic arenas, and the ability of the central government in Baghdad to impose its will on them is in doubt.



On the right: Qasem Soleimani with fighters of the Iraqi Shi'ite militias (Twitter, May 29, 2017); on the left: Soleimani in the area of Falouja after the start of the campaign to liberate the city (Twitter, May 25, 2016)

► Iran sees its intervention in Iraq as a necessary mean to preserve its influence in the country and prevent American presence there, which Iran perceives as a threat to its national interests. According to Iran, **ISIS' decline will likely accelerate the struggle with the United States over influence in Iraq.** Therefore, Iran strives to neutralize American influence in Iraq, which has grown during the campaign against ISIS, and especially during the Mosul campaign. In a meeting with **the Iraqi Prime Minister, Haidar al-Abadi**, who visited Tehran on June 20, 2017, the **Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei** warned him not to trust the Americans, since they oppose Iraq's independence, identity and unity. He argued that the United States must not be provided with an opportunity to expand its penetration of Iraq and that the arrival of American forces to Iraq under the guise of instructors must be prevented. The Americans are not interested, said Khamenei, in destroying ISIS, which was established and supported by them, and they have no desire to expel ISIS from Iraq (the website of the Supreme Leader, June 20, 2017).



The al-Abadi-Khamenei meeting (website of the Supreme Leader, June 21, 2017)

- ▶ An articulation of Iran's intentions in Iraq can be found in the statements of **Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, the Deputy Commander of the "Popular Mobilization Committee"**, the umbrella organization of the Shi'ite militias in Iraq. al-Muhandis recently gave a speech in Mashhad, Iran, about the future directions of the militias' activities in the phase following Mosul's liberation.⁶ Statements made by al-Muhandis and other senior officials of the Shi'ite militias indicate that **the top priorities for Iran in Iraq are increasing Iranian influence, empowering the Shi'ite community, marginalizing the United States and the West, establishing control along the Iraq-Syria border and opening a ground line of communications connecting Tehran, Baghdad, Damascus and Beirut.** According to these officials, it is possible the Shi'ite militias will also be dispatched to the Golan Heights, when the appropriate circumstances arise. al-Muhandis' speech clearly displays determined opposition (backed by Iran) to any attempt of the Iraqi government to dismantle the Shi'ite militias.
- ▶ As in Syria, **Iran seeks to expand its influence in Iraq in the economic, cultural and religious spheres as well.** Iran has invested great efforts into augmenting the volume of trade with Iraq, **took over several oil fields** in the border region with Iraq, **and controls religious tourism** to the cities in Iraq considered holy by the Shi'ite. **Recently, Tehran initiated the construction of the first Iranian university in Iraq, in Kazimayn, north of**

⁶ For more see our report "Iran's interests and intent in Iraq and Syria reflected in statements by senior commanders of the Popular Mobilization Committee, the umbrella organization of the Shi'ite militias in Iraq handled by the Iranian Qods Force," July 20, 2017. <http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/en/21243/>

Baghdad. The university will include five faculties and will be attended by about 3,000 students (IRNA, August 15, 2017).



Cornerstone laying ceremony of the first Iranian university in Iraq (IRNA, August 15, 2017)

► In parallel, Iran is continuing the **expansion and development work on the Hazrat-e Zahra Mosque in the city of Najaf** (Defa Press, August 2, 2017). The development and expansion of the mosque can be seen as **another indication of Iran's effort to increase its religious influence in the holy city of Najaf**, which serves as a central pilgrimage site for Shi'ite worshippers from around the world. In May 2017, the Iranian ambassador to Iraq visited the city of Najaf and met with senior clerics, among them Sheikh **Abdul Mahdi Karbalai, the Representative of the senior Shi'ite cleric, Ayatollah Ali Sistani**. The two discussed joint Iranian-Iraqi projects for developing the holy Shi'ite sites and preparations for the annual pilgrimage to the city of Karbala. Ambassador Masjedi stated that Iran and Iraq should expand their cooperation concerning the development of holy sites, and that Iran will do its best to improve security in Iraq (IRNA, May 16, 2017).



**The meeting between the Iranian ambassador and the representative of Ayatollah
Sistani (Mehr, May 16, 2017)**

The Challenges to Iran's involvement in Iraq

Apprehensions about Iran's Role among the Shi'ite Community in Iraq

- ▶ Iranian assistance provided a significant contribution to stymieing ISIS but also resulted in **growing criticism inside Iraq against Iran's interference in Iraq's internal affairs.** This criticism reflects the complexity of the Shi'ite political arena in Iraq, which encompasses a multitude of differing and even opposing views regarding Iran's involvement in the country. Some of the power players among the Shi'ite community in Iraq support Iran and even see it as the leader of the Shi'ite world, **while others see Iran as a foreign non-Arab actor, and are apprehensive about its meddling in the internal affairs of their country.**
- ▶ Most of the Shi'ite militias in Iraq see Iran as the sole source of authority and more than once their commanders expressed their fealty to the Supreme Leader of Iran, Ali Khamenei, as a source of religious guidance. **Facing these militias is the senior cleric, Ayatollah Ali Sistani, the highest Shi'ite religious authority in Iraq, who enjoys widespread support among the Shi'ite of Iraq and is considered a fierce opponent of the "guardianship of the Islamic jurist," which was implemented in Iran following the Islamic Revolution.** Sistani sees Iran's involvement in Iraq's internal affairs as threatening foreign interference, and he has expressed his reservations about Qasem Soleimani's increasing meddling in Iraqi politics. An Iraqi politician reported to the "al-Sharq al-Awsat" newspaper (September 7, 2015), that Sistani had sent a letter to the Iranian Supreme Leader, in which he questioned whether Soleimani's political involvement is carried out under the guidance of the Supreme Leader or is his initiative alone.



Qasem Soleimani visiting Karbala in Iraq (IBNA, August 21, 2015)

- ▶ **Over the past two years, the Shi'ite cleric and politician, Muqtada al-Sadr**, has led the opposition to Iran's involvement in Iraq. Al-Sadr was considered a protégé of Iran, but over the past few years he **has drifted away from the Iranians and began publicly criticizing Iran's meddling in Iraq**. During the political crisis that erupted in April 2016 between Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi and the Iraqi parliament due to the reform package the prime minister had attempted to enact, al-Sadr's supporters took over the Iraqi parliament building and shouted harsh anti-Iranian chants.
- ▶ In recent weeks, Tehran has been visibly troubled by al-Sadr's increasing activism, and in particular his visit to Saudi Arabia in late July 2017 during which he met the Crown Prince, Muhammad Bin Salman. Iran is concerned that al-Sadr intends to form an alliance hostile to Iran with other actors in the Iraqi political arena, including Sunnis, ahead of the parliamentary elections slated for April 2018. Iranian media provided extensive coverage of the unusual visit of the Shi'ite 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. An editorial published in the hardline daily "Kayhan" (August 13) lambasted al-Sadr, accusing him of selling himself to Saudi Arabia in exchange for political and financial support. The article argued that al-Sadr, who feels himself isolated in Iraq, has adopted anti-Iranian positions in an effort to regain the initiative, defeat his political rivals and become a national hero.



The meeting between Muqtada al-Sadr and the Saudi Crown Prince (ISNA, July 7, 2017)

Misgivings about Iran in the Iraqi Political Arena

- ▶ The disquiet about Iran’s brazen attempts to intervene in Iraq is not limited to the religious establishment alone or Muqtada al-Sadr. **Prime Minister Haidar al-Abadi, who was appointed to his position in the summer of 2014 instead of the pro-Iranian Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, has also adopted an independent posture vis-à-vis Iran.** At the heart of al-Abadi’s policy is the desire to prevent Iraq from becoming an “Iranian puppet,” and ensuring Iraq’s underlying interest to continue receiving American support and to maintain positive relations with the Sunni Arab states.
- ▶ Arab newspapers published several reports over the past two years about **heated confrontations between al-Abadi and Qasem Soleimani.** The Lebanese daily al-Nahar reported (September 12, 2015) about two significant incidents that transpired between the two in August 2015. The first incident occurred when al-Abadi instructed Iraqi security forces to conduct a search of Iranian jets at the Baghdad airport, to examine their content and prevent the transfer of weapons to the Syrian regime and the Shi’ite militias in Iraq. A second incident occurred during a meeting that al-Abadi held in mid-August 2015 with Nouri al-Maliki and other senior Iraqi government officials after the return of the former prime minister from a visit in Tehran. Soleimani, who also attended this meeting, criticized the political reforms proposed by al-Abadi in response to the popular protests against corruption in Iraq. al-Abadi assailed Soleimani and asked him whether he speaks on behalf of the Iranian government or is expressing his personal views. Soleimani responded that he is speaking as an adviser to the popular militias in Iraq. The prime minister responded that his decisions are consistent with the will of the Iraqi people and the Shi’ite religious

leadership in Najaf. al-Abadi went on to mention that Soleimani's presence in the meeting is unjustified, and as a result Soleimani left the conference room.

► On September 22, 2015, the Arab daily al-Sharq al-Awsat (which is affiliated with the Saudi regime and published in London) reported on another incident between Soleimani and al-Abadi. The incident occurred when al-Abadi encountered on his way to the city of Basra a convoy of government vehicles driving toward the airport in Baghdad. When the prime minister inquired about the identity of the convoy, he was told that they are used by Soleimani, who was set to arrive in Baghdad for a meeting with Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, the Deputy Commander of the PMC. al-Abadi became irate and ordered to stop the convoy. According to the report's source, whose reliability is unclear, al-Abadi stated that if Soleimani is interested in conducting an official visit in Iraq, he should notify authorities about it, and if he wants to visit the country in a private capacity, he should apply for a visa.

► **al-Abadi's approach vis-à-vis the Shi'ite militias is also incongruent with Iran's policy.** In 2016, al-Abadi promoted a law regularizing the status of the militias as an Iraqi national force, part of the armed forces subordinate to the general staff of the army. al-Abadi clearly understands the problems inherent in the involvement of the Shi'ite militias in the campaign against ISIS, which is taking place mostly in regions populated by Sunnis who are troubled by the involvement of the militias in liberating cities controlled by ISIS. Therefore, he preferred until recently to incorporate the militias in battles by assigning the militias with posts far from the frontline. The role of the militias usually involved surrounding cities, and cutting ISIS' supply lines that connect western Iraq to eastern Syria. **It appears that following the liberation of Mosul, the Shi'ite militias have begun operating with a greater visibility.**

► al-Abadi has adopted a posture independent from Iran in the foreign policy arena as well, **especially in his relations with the United States and Saudi Arabia.** The actions of other state actors, chiefly the United States, Turkey and Saudi Arabia, restrict Iran's ability to turn Iraq into a puppet state. In March 2017, al-Abadi visited Washington and met President Trump. He continues to emphasize the cooperation between the U.S.-led Western Coalition and the need to maintain the American assistance to the Iraqi military and security forces, assistance that has proved crucial in the campaign against ISIS. **In addition, , a significant improvement in the relations between Iraq and Saudi Arabia occurred over the past year.** This improvement is evident in visits to Baghdad of high-

ranking Saudi officials, among them the Deputy Foreign Minister, Adel al-Jubeir, and the Saudi Chief of Staff, Abdel Rahman al-Bunyan. After being shut down 27 years ago, the Arar border crossing between Iraq and Saudi Arabia was reopened, and there are reports of plans to restart the direct flights between the two countries.

► **Iran is eyeing with concern the improvement of ties between Iraq and Saudi Arabia**, especially given the current severe crisis in its relations with Saudi Arabia. **A Member of the Majlis Ahmad Salek Kashani** stated recently in an interview to the website of the Iranian Majlis that Saudi Arabia launched a “new project” endeavoring to expand its influence in Iraq at the expense of Iranian interests. He mentioned that Saudi Arabia aims to partition Iraq by means of the referendum in the Kurdish region in northern Iraq and by creating ruptures among the Shi’ite community in Iraq. (ICANA, August 14, 2017)

Additional Challenges

► **The entry to Turkey to the Iraqi scene as another regional player is also perceived as a real threat by Iran.** While Tehran is pleased with the eradication of ISIS forces in Iraq, it is clearly troubled by Turkey’s objective of cementing its hold over northern Iraq. The Turkish military presence in northern Iraq is seen as a joint attempt by Turkey and the United States to partition Iraq and stymie Iranian influence in the region.

► Another challenge facing Iran comes **from the Kurds in northern Iraq. Iran is concerned** by the transformation of the Kurdistan region in Iraq into a de-facto independent state. According to Tehran’s view, this may jeopardize Iraq’s territorial integrity, harm Iran’s efforts to cement its influence over Iraq and embolden separatist aspirations among the Kurdish minority in Iran. Iran’s concern is clearly evident in its efforts to prevent the holding of the independence referendum in the Kurdish region.

► In recent months, **Iran stepped up the pressure of the Kurdish Regional Government to avoid holding the independence referendum scheduled for this September.** In July 2017, the **Iranian Chief of Staff, Mohammad Bagheri**, declared in a conference of commanders of the IRGC Ground Forces, that **conducting the referendum concerning the future of Iraqi Kurdistan is unacceptable to Iraq’s neighbors** (Fars, July 17, 2017). A message in the same vein was conveyed by Ali Shamkhani, the Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council, in his July 17, 2017 meeting with a delegation from the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) that visited Tehran. Shamkhani warned that the referendum will

lead to the isolation of the Kurds in Iraq, increasing pressure on them and weakening Kurdistan and Iraq as a whole (Tasnim, July 17, 2017).



The meeting between Ali Shamkhani and the PUK delegation (ISNA, July 17, 2017)

► The Iranian concern about possible Kurdish independence in northern Iraq was the main topic of discussion in an **unprecedented visit to Ankara of the Chief of Staff of the Iranian Armed Forces, Mohammad Bagheri**. In mid-August 2017, Bagheri held a three-day visit in Turkey, the first of its kind since the Islamic Revolution, and met with senior government and military officials, chief among them President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. In an interview to the IRNA News Agency (August 16), Bagheri stated that **Iran and Turkey are united in their opposition to the referendum in the Kurdistan region**. He argued that the referendum will result in tensions and clashes within Iraq, which will affect its neighbors as well, and thus Iran and Turkey believe that the referendum should not take place.



The Bagheri- Erdoğan meeting. From: Farda News, August 16