



Spotlight on Iran

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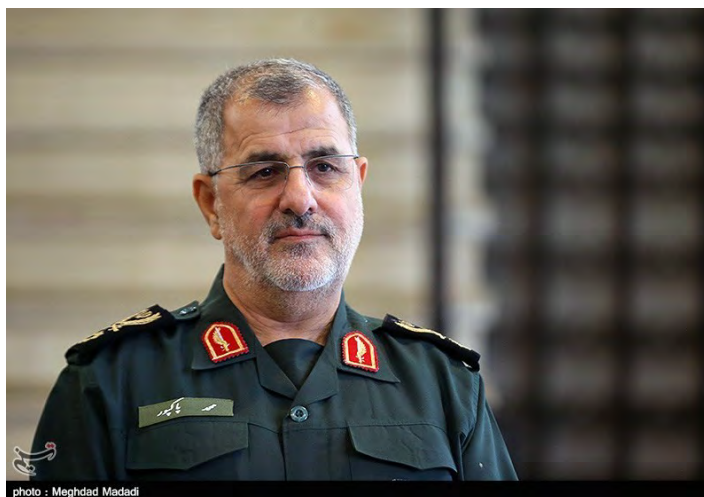
Key Events

- ▶ Senior Iranian officials continue to issue threats of vengeance following the execution of Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) fighter, Mohsen Hojaji, by ISIS near the Syria-Iraq border. The IRGC, however, denied a report published by the Lebanese TV Network al-Mayadin, which claimed that IRGC fighters launched an offensive against ISIS in the region of Hamima as retribution for Hojaji's execution.
- ▶ As part of the growing Iranian involvement in Syria's economy, about 30 Iranian companies took part in the international trade fair, held in mid-August in Damascus. The deputy president of the Iranian Chamber of Commerce participated in the fair and met with the Syrian minister of economy and the president of the Syrian Chamber of Commerce in an effort to promote the role of Iranian companies in Syria's economic recovery.
- ▶ Iran continues to watch the upcoming independence referendum in the Kurdish region in northern Iraq. The plan of the Kurdish Regional Government to hold the referendum was the main topic of discussion in an unprecedented visit to Turkey of the Chief of Staff of the Iranian Armed Forces, Mohammad Bagheri. During the visit, the sides agreed to increase their military and security cooperation, and declared their joint opposition to the referendum in Iraqi Kurdistan. Nevertheless, the IRGC denied a Turkish claim about joint Iranian-Turkish planning for an offensive against the Kurdish guerilla group, the PKK, but emphasized that Iran will respond forcefully to any activity of "terrorist groups" in northern Iraq that attempt to penetrate its territory.
- ▶ Tehran continues to warily monitor the efforts of Saudi Arabia to improve its relations with Iraq and senior Shi'ite leaders, chief among them the cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, who visited the kingdom in late July. An Iranian member of parliament declared that Saudi Arabia launched a "new project" aiming to increase its influence in Iraq at the expense of Iranian interests. Meanwhile, the hardline daily "Kayhan" accused al-Sadr of selling himself to Saudi Arabia in exchange for political and financial support. Concurrently, the

spokesman of the Shia Iraqi militias declared that Iranian advisors will participate in the offensive, launched last week, to liberate the city of Tal Afar from ISIS.

General Information

► The Commander of the IRGC Ground Forces, Mohammad Pakpour, threatened to avenge the death of Mohsen Hojaji, an IRGC fighter, who was captured by ISIS near the Syria-Iraq border and executed by the organization. He stated that there is no need to specify how the vengeance will be exacted, but insisted that it will surely be realized.



Mohammad Pakpour (Tasnim, August 14 2017)

► In a ceremony honoring the families of IRGC fighters who were killed in Syria and Iraq, Pakpour stated that Iran maintains its advisory presence in Syria and Iraq at the request of their governments. He added that in recent years, “the terrorists”, with Saudi and Western support, advanced toward Baghdad in a way that threatened Iran’s security and necessitated its intervention. According to him, the assistance offered by Iran to Syria and Iraq, aimed to prevent the advance of the “terrorists” to regions Tehran regarded as “red lines” (ISNA, August 14).

► In a speech marking “International Mosque Day” in Tehran, Qassem Soleimani, the Commander of the Qods Force of the IRGC, defended Iran’s interventions in the region. He mentioned that Iran’s presence in Iraq aimed to assist the fight against ISIS and not to take over oil fields or occupy cities such as Mosul or Kirkuk. Soleimani added that Iran does not assist Palestine due to “Shia interests” and will not support Palestinians who declare themselves to be Shi’ite, since 99.99% of Palestinians are Sunni. He rejected the domestic

and foreign criticism about Iran's interventions in Syria and Iraq by stating that this involvement, which was ordained by the Supreme Leader, intends to defend Iran's interests (Fars, August 20).



Qassem Soleimani meets with the family of Mohsen Hojaji who was executed by ISIS (Twitter, August 20 2017)

Iranian Involvement in Syria and Lebanon

► On August 16, the Lebanese television network al-Mayadin aired a video documenting IRGC personnel battling ISIS fighters near Hamima in Syria. The video also shows firing of missiles and rockets at ISIS targets. The network's report stated that the IRGC fighters launched a battle against ISIS to avenge the death of Mohsen Hojaji, an IRGC fighter captured and executed by ISIS near the Iraq-Syria border.



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

- ▶ In response to the report, the IRGC Spokesman, Ramazan Sharif, denied that the IRGC launched an independent ground operation in Syria and stated that the retribution for Hojaji's death is the top priority of the IRGC and will be carried out at the appropriate time. He added that the IRGC will continue, with even greater determination, to assist in advising the Syrian Army and popular forces in Syria until the eradication of terror in that country. (Tasnim, August 16)
- ▶ On August 25, al-Manar, the television network of Lebanese Hezbollah, aired a report documenting Iranian unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) striking ISIS forces near the Syria-Iraq border. According to the report, the IRGC UAVs targeted ISIS vehicles that approached a position of the Syrian Army and the Afghan "Fatemiyoun" Brigade, which operates under the command of the IRGC.
- ▶ The Deputy President of the Iranian Chamber of Commerce, Hossein Selahvarzi, stated in a meeting held in Damascus with the Syrian Minister of the Economy and Foreign Trade, Mohammad Samer al-Khalil, that Iran can help in development and reconstruction projects in Syria. Selahvarzi, who participated in the international fair in Damascus, mentioned that organizations, firms and provincial chambers of commerce in Iran can answer Syria's trade needs and help the country rebuild itself. He called on the Syrian minister to advance free trade agreements between the two states. About 30 Iranian firms took part in the Damascus fair, which was held for the first time in six years. During his visit in Syria, Selahvarzi concluded an agreement with the president of the Syrian Chamber of Commerce to

establish a joint Iranian-Syrian chamber of commerce, with the aim of increasing the economic cooperation between the two countries. (Tasnim, August 18; Fars, August 19)

► The Deputy Foreign Minister for Arab-African Affairs, Hossein Jaber Ansari, visited Lebanon last week and met with Lebanese officials, including President Michele Aoun, Prime Minister Saad al-Hariri, the Minister of Foreign Affairs Gebran Bassil, the Speaker of Parliament Nabih Berri, the Secretary General of Hezbollah Hassan Nasrallah, and discussed regional developments, the situation in Lebanon and the cooperation between the two states. In the meeting with the Lebanese minister of foreign affairs, Ansari briefed the minister on the efforts to bring an end to the crisis in Syria in the negotiations held in Astana, adding that assistance from Lebanon and other countries in the region is necessary for the resolution of the crisis. In the meeting with the Lebanese President, Michele Aoun, Ansari expressed Iran's appreciation for the role of the Lebanese government, the Lebanese Armed Forces and the Lebanese "Resistance" in the struggle against the "Zionist occupation" and terrorism. He stated that increasing regional cooperation and bolstering economic diplomacy will be the top priorities for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs during the second term of President Rouhani's government, and that Lebanon will enjoy precedence as Iran undertakes the realization of these top priorities. (ILNA, August 21)



The Ansari-Nasrallah meeting (Khabar Online, August 22 2017)

Iranian Involvement in Iraq

► Ahmad al-Asadi, the Spokesman of the Iraqi Shia militias, stated that Iranian advisers will participate in the offensive, launched last week, to liberate the city of Tal Afar from ISIS. He

mentioned that advisors from Iran and Lebanese Hezbollah participated in an official capacity in all previous battles, assisted the Shia militias with advice and planning and played an important role in the victories against ISIS. He added that in the battle to liberate Tal Afar, Iranian advisers will officially participate at the request of the Iraqi government and will provide assistance to the Shia militias and the other Iraqi forces taking part in the offensive (Elaph, August 21).

► In mid-August, the Chief of Staff of the Iranian Armed Forces, Mohammad Bagheri, held an unprecedented three-day visit in Turkey. Bagheri headed a delegation of high-ranking officials, among them the Head of the Ground Forces of the IRGC, Mohammad Pakpour, the Deputy Chief of Staff of the Iranian Armed Forces on Intelligence Affairs Gholam-Reza Mehrabi, the Commander of the Border Guards Qasem Rezaei, and Deputy Foreign Minister Ebrahim Rahimpour. During the visit, Bagheri met with senior Turkish government and military officials, chief among them President Erdoğan, and discussed regional developments with them, including the Kurdish Regional Government's decision to hold a referendum on the independence of the Kurdish region in northern Iraq. The Turkish and Iranian officials also discussed the military and security cooperation between the two countries and their efforts to increase their coordination with regards to Syria and Iraq (IRNA, August 15). 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 (Farda News, August 16 2017)

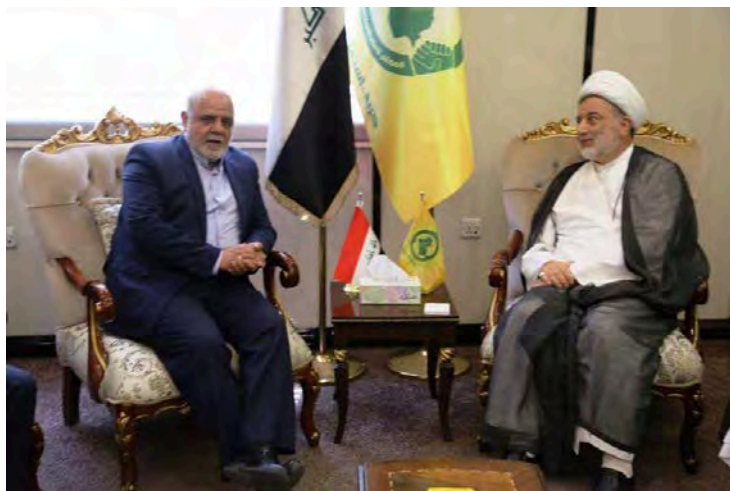
- ▶ At the same time, the IRGC denied a Turkish claim that Iran and Turkey planned to initiate a joint military offensive against the Kurdish guerrilla organization, the PKK. A statement issued by the IRGC asserted that the organization did not prepare any operational plans outside the borders of Iran, but will resolutely act against any group or person who attempt to infiltrate Iranian territory to harm its security or carry out terrorist attacks. Iran does not have any plans for extensive operations outside its borders, the statement claimed, but it will forcefully respond against “terrorist groups” in northern Iraq, as Iran has done in the past, if these groups attempt to operate in its territory (Fars, August 22).
- ▶ In his weekly press conference, the Spokesman of the Iranian Foreign Minister, Bahram Qasemi, announced that Iran welcomes the talks between the Iraqi Prime Minister, Haidar al-Abadi, and the Kurdish Regional Government regarding the planned referendum in the Kurdish region, adding that the talks may further Iraq on the path to stability and security. He stated that Iran is interested in maintaining constructive relations with all the political, social, religious and ethnic components in Iraq, and is willing to take part in the effort of the Iraqi government and people to rebuild their country (Mehr, August 14).
- ▶ The Deputy Chief of Staff of the Iranian Armed Forces, Masoud Jazaeri, stated that Iran opposes the planned referendum in the Kurdish region in northern Iraq and sees it as a move in line with the comprehensive American policy of partitioning the countries of the region (Tasnim, August 23).
- ▶ Tehran continues to monitor with concern the efforts of Saudi Arabia to improve its relations with Iraq and senior Shi'ite leaders, chief among them the cleric Muqtada al-Sadr,

who visited the kingdom in late July. Iran views this trend as a “Saudi plot” aiming to curtail Iran’s regional influence after ISIS’ defeat. 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.

► A Member of the Majlis Ahmad Salek Kashani stated 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. He claimed that Saudi Arabia is interested in using al-Sadr and his positions against the Shi’ite militias to save ISIS. Kashani asserted that Saudi Arabia and Israel are worried about the expansion of the “Resistance” in the Middle East, which threatens their regimes (ICANA, August 14).

► A commentary published on the “Tasnim” website (August 18), warned against the efforts of some Arab countries in the region to undermine the relationship between Iran and Iraq and create chasms among the Shi’ite community in Iraq. The article stated that Iran has an interest in preserving Iraq’s security and stability and it has never opposed the expansion of ties between Iraq and the countries of the region. The relationship between Iran and Iraq is based on the historical cultural and religious ties between the two countries, and Iraq is indebted to Iran for the assistance Iran has offered it in the battle against ISIS, without which ISIS would have occupied Baghdad. The commentary calls on Iraq’s political leaders to remain united and thwart the efforts of Iraq’s enemies to exploit the disagreements among the Shi’ite leadership to achieve their aims.

► The Iranian Ambassador in Baghdad, Iraj Masjedi, met with the new President of the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq, Humam Hamoudi, who replaced Ammar al-Hakim who left the Council last month. Masjedi stated that Hamoudi’s election is a correct choice, which emboldens the spirits of the holy warriors and that Iran will continue to cooperate with the Council (ISNA, August 15).



The meeting of Iran's ambassador to Iraq with Humam Hamoudi (Hamoudi's Facebook page, August 16 2017)

► Iran initiated the construction of the first Iranian university in Iraq. In mid-August, the cornerstone for the al-Mustafa al-Amin University was laid in Kadhimiya, northern Baghdad. The representative of the Supreme Leader in Iraq, the Iranian ambassador in Baghdad and the Iraqi deputy minister of science and technology all attended the cornerstone laying ceremony. The university is expected to house five faculties and about 3,000 students are set to attend it (IRNA, August 15).



The cornerstone laying ceremony for the first Iranian university in Iraq (IRNA, August 15 2017).