



Spotlight on Iran

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Overview

- ▶ Iran, Russia and Turkey continue to hold deliberations concerning the settlement of the war in Syria. Representatives of Iran, Russia and Turkey met on September 13 ahead of the sixth round of talks, which began on September 14 in Astana. In addition, the Iranian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mohammad Javad Zarif, met with President Putin in Sochi, Russia and discussed developments in Syria. The 'al-Sharq al-Awsat' newspaper published in London reported last week that Turkey and Iran are close to reaching an agreement under Russian sponsorship according to which Iran will accede to Turkish military presence in the region of Idlib in northwestern Syria, in exchange for Iranian control in southern Damascus.
- ▶ Iranian media published new details about the circumstances surrounding the death of Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) fighter Mohsen Hojaji, who was captured and executed in August by ISIS in the Syria-Iraq border region. The details were provided due to a lingering delay in laying him to rest in Iran, although parts of his body were handed over by ISIS to Hezbollah over two weeks ago.
- ▶ Iran is persisting in its intensive diplomatic and public relations offensive against the upcoming referendum on independence of the Kurdish region in northern Iraq. In a meeting with Turkish President Erdoğan, President Rouhani cautioned against changes to the region's borders. The Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council, Shamkhani, warned that the referendum will be exploited by foreign forces to expand their influence in the region. Meanwhile, Iranian media emphasized Israel's support for the referendum as a manifestation of Israel's desire to increase its clout in Iraqi Kurdistan. At the same time, Kurdish media outlets reported that the Commander of the Qods Forces of the IRGC, Qasem Soleimani, visited the Kurdish region in northern Iraq in a last-ditch effort to convince the leadership of Iraqi Kurdistan to cancel the referendum.
- ▶ Iran and Syria signed several agreements on cooperation in the electricity sector, reifying the growing Iranian role in Syria's economy. According to the contracts, worth

hundreds of millions of Euros, signed during a visit of the Syrian minister of electricity in Tehran last week, Iran will export several power plants to Syria. Iran also continues to buttress its cultural influence in Syria and Lebanon. The Iranian embassy in Damascus held a ceremony to commemorate the Shia Ghadir holiday, while the Iranian cultural attaché in Beirut detailed in an interview to Tasnim News Agency the extensive cultural activities Iran cultivates in Lebanon.

General Information

► On September 9, Iranian President Rouhani met with his Turkish counterpart, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, during the science and technology summit of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) held in Astana, the Kazakh capital. The presidents discussed the bilateral relations between the countries and developments in the region, particularly in Syria and Iraq. President Rouhani stated during the meeting that Iran and Turkey are the two largest and most influential countries in the region, and that cooperation between them in different spheres, including in the struggle against terrorism, is crucial. Rouhani declared that the two countries are united in their aim to stabilize their border regions and preserve the territorial integrity of their neighbors. He stated that any changes to the borders of the region will lead to acute tensions and harm the people of the region (Tasnim, September 10).

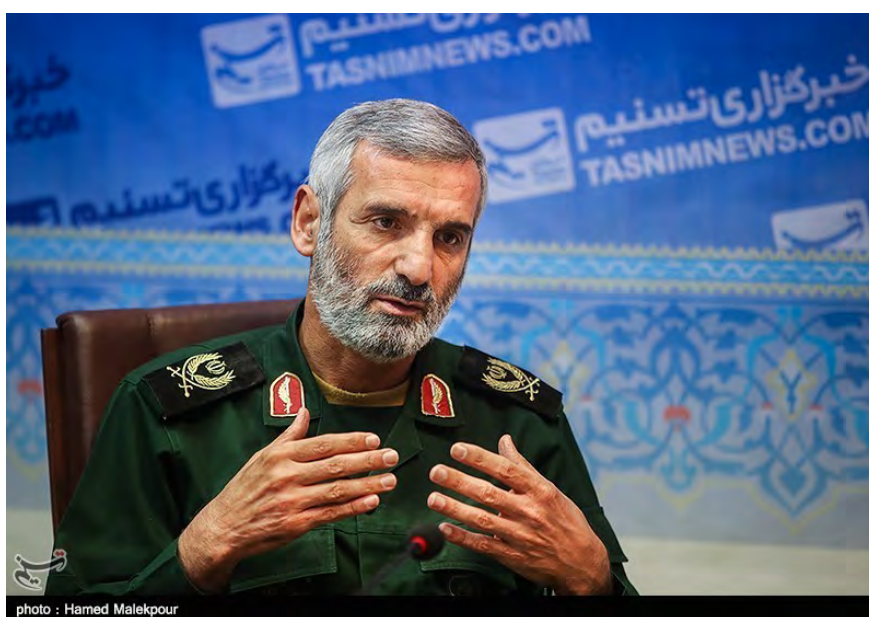


The Rouhani- Erdoğan meeting in Astana (Tasnim, August 10 2017).

► It has been reported recently that President Erdoğan intends to pay an official visit to Tehran following the visit of the Iranian Chief of Staff, Mohammad Bagheri, in Turkey in mid-August. During the visit, the first of its kind since the Islamic Revolution, Bagheri met

with senior politicians and military officials in Ankara and discussed regional developments, and particularly the measures adopted by both countries ahead of the looming independence referendum in the Kurdish region in northern Iraq, which is vehemently opposed by Tehran and Ankara.

►The Deputy Commander of the Imam Hossein Training and Officer College, Brigadier General Hamid Abazari, stated in an interview to the Tasnim News Agency (September 12), that commanders and instructors of the college are sent to the “war front” (in Syria and Iraq) to train them for war by proxy. Recently, another senior official at the college, Ahmad Mehraban, stated that the college sends instructors on its behalf to train “popular forces” in Syria and Iraq, including the Shi’ite militias, and then utilizes the experience gained there to train the officers in the college (Tasnim, August 1).

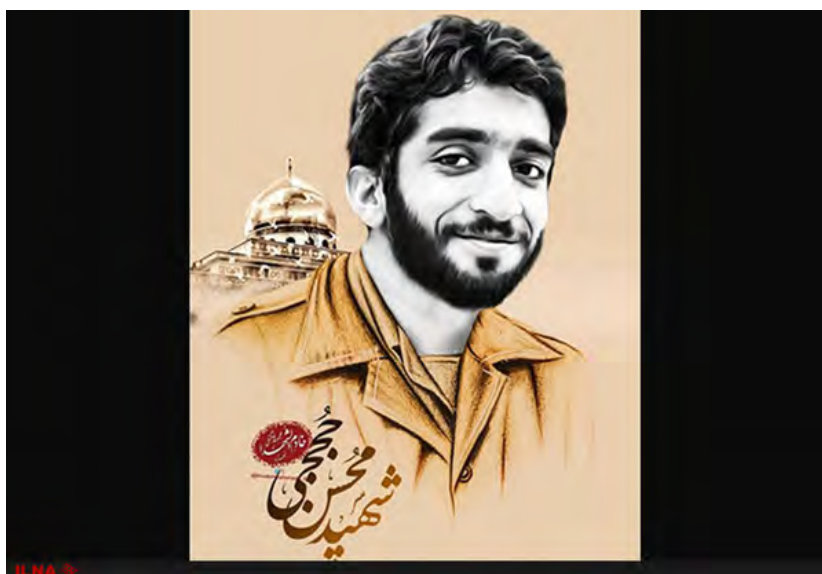


Hamid Abazari of the Imam Hossein Training and Officer College (Tasnim, September 12 2017).

Iranian Involvement in Syria and Lebanon

►Iranian commentator Sadollah Zarei published new details about the circumstances surrounding the death of Mohsen Hojaji, an IRGC fighter captured in early August by ISIS along the Syria-Iraq border and executed shortly after. His body was recently returned to Iran as part of a deal swapping prisoners and remains between Hezbollah and ISIS, but his body was still not brought to burial in Iran. According to the information provided by Zarei, which was published on social media and several Iranian news sites, the incident in which Hojaji was captured occurred around al-Tanf, when a force numbering about 200 fighters

(most of them Iraqis and a few Iranians), conducted a mission in the tri-border region of Syria, Iraq and Jordan. The force was ambushed by ISIS, which launched a night-time attack against the Shi'ite force utilizing vehicle-borne IEDs and suicide bombers. The attack resulted in the death of about 40 fighters from the force, among them two Iranians, and over 30 ISIS members. Mohsen Hojaji was taken prisoner and executed the next day by decapitation around the al-Waleed Border Crossing in Anbar province of Iraq. After his execution, the body was mutilated and during the execution of the deal swapping bodies and prisoners between ISIS and Hezbollah, ISIS handed over only the lower part of the body to Hezbollah. The upper part of the body remains in the al-Waleed area, which is under ISIS' control. Therefore, based on consultation with Hojaji's family it was decided to postpone the burial ceremony until the return of his entire body. (Mashreq News, September 10).



Mohsen Hojaji (ILNA, September 9 2017).

► In a wide-ranging interview to the news website Khabar Online (September 11), the former Iranian Ambassador to Syria, Mohammad Reza Sheibani, addressed developments in Syria and the cooperation between Iran and Russia. Sheibani, who completed his tenure as Iran's ambassador in Damascus in October 2016 following a five-year term, stated that Iran supports any Russian move intended to allow a de-escalation in Syria, although Iran is not directly involved in all the diplomatic initiatives spearheaded by Russia. He stated that the cooperation between Iran and Russia is a strategic necessity for both countries, and it is this cooperation that enabled the military and political gains in the struggle against terrorism in Syria. Sheibani emphasized the need to preserve the alliance between Iran and

Russia considering the efforts by foreign actors to sabotage it, among them Prime Minister Netanyahu in his last visit to Moscow. As part of the continuous coordination between Iran and Russia, Iranian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mohammad Javad Zarif, arrived on September 13 to Sochi, Russia, for a meeting with President Putin. In the meeting, the two discussed the bilateral relations between the countries, and regional developments, particularly in Syria and the nuclear agreement between Iran and the major global powers (ISNA, September 13).



**Former Iranian Ambassador to Syria, Mohammad Reza Sheibani
(Khabar Online, September 11 2017).**

- ▶ On September 13, representatives of Iran, Russia and Turkey held discussions ahead of the sixth round of negotiations concerning the war in Syria, which began on September 14 in Astana, the capital of Kazakhstan. The talks focused on the de-confliction zone in Idlib, north-western Syria and were attended by Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister, Hossein Jaber Ansari (Tasnim, September 13). Meanwhile, the daily ‘al-Sharq al-Awsat,’ which is published in London with Saudi financing, reported on September 13 that Turkey and Iran are close to an agreement under Russian sponsorship according to which Iran will agree to Turkish military presence in the area of Idlib in exchange for Iranian control in southern Damascus.
- ▶ The Syrian Minister of Electricity, Mohammad Zuhair Kharboutli, who visited Tehran last week, stated on the eve of his arrival that during his visit, the two countries will sign contracts to export five power plants from Iran to Syria in an effort to improve the stability of the electrical grid in Syria. A contract in the sum of 130 million Euro will be signed with the Iranian energy company Mabna to install power stations in Aleppo with the goal of improving the supply of electricity to the city. In addition, the two sides will discuss a

second contract in the sum of 400 million Euro to establish a power plant in the Lattakia governorate as well as cooperation in solar energy projects (SANA, September 11).

► The visit of the Syrian minister of electricity is part of a wider trend of increasing economic cooperation between Syria and Iran, which views the rebuilding of Syria's devastated economy as an opportunity to expand its economic influence in the country. Over the past two years, senior Iranian and Syrian officials held numerous talks with the aim of increasing cooperation between Iranian and Syrian firms in the sectors of communications, electricity and energy. During the visit of the Syrian Minister of Energy Imad Mohammad Deeb Khamis in Tehran in June 2015, the minister met with representatives of Iranian firms operating in Syria and invited additional Iranian companies to invest in projects in the electricity and water sectors in Syria. In addition, the minister met with his Iranian counterpart, Hamid Chitchian, who announced Iran's intention to expand the role of private Iranian firms in Syria's electricity sector (Tasnim, Alef, June 17, 2015).

► Hundreds of guests attended a ceremony held at the end of last week in Damascus marking the Shia Ghadir holiday, commemorating the event when according to Shi'ite tradition, Prophet Muhammad announced Ali ibn Abu Taleb to be his successor. The representative of the Iranian Supreme Leader in Syria, Abolfazl Tabatabai and the Iranian Ambassador to Damascus, Javad Torkabadi, were among the attendees of the ceremony, held in the Sayyidah Zaynab Mosque south of Damascus. The representative of the Supreme Leader in Syria congratulated in his speech the Syrian Army and the "Islamic Resistance" for their latest victories in Syria and Iraq, including the breaking of the siege over Deir Ezzor city (Fars, September 9).



The ceremony marking the Ghadir holiday south of Damascus (Tasnim, September 9 2017).

► The Iranian Cultural Attaché in Lebanon, Mohammad Mehdi Shariatmadari, detailed in an interview to the Tasnim News Agency (September 13), the extensive cultural activities Iran fosters in Lebanon. These activities include translating books from Persian to Arabic and publishing them in Lebanon, mainly through Hezbollah’s publishing house; conducting ceremonies to mark special commemorative days, including: the anniversary of passing of the leader of the Islamic Revolution Khomeini, International Jerusalem Day, and Islamic Revolution Day; maintaining and building cooperation between Lebanese and Iranian universities, which includes student and lecturer exchanges; and wide-ranging activity in schools that includes, among others, instruction of the Persian language in over 80 schools across the country and organizing “Iran Days” for the students. Shariatmadari mentioned that Iran’s cultural activities in Lebanon are not limited to Beirut alone and in recent years expanded to additional cities and villages and that the office of the Iranian cultural attaché carries out activities among non-Shi’ite populations as well, including Sunnis and Christians.

Iranian Involvement in Iraq

► Iraqi cleric and the Chairman of the “Iraqi National Alliance”, Ammar Hakim, said in an interview to an Iranian Arabic-language website that those who attempt to undermine the relations between the Shi’ite in Iraq and the Iranian Leader, Ali Khamenei, are delusional. He stated that Iraq sees Iran as its strategic depth and Iraq can not ignore the advice and guidance of Khamenei concerning Iraq’s reconstruction. He added that Khamenei, who has been in direct contact with most Iraqi leaders for the past 40 years, pays special attention

to Iraq. Addressing the improvement of relations between Iraq and Saudi Arabia, Ammar stated that Iraq geographically links the three most important countries in the Middle East: Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey, and thus can bring them closer together (Tasnim, September 8). On September 4, Hakim, who recently left his position as the President of the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq, met with a delegation of high-ranking Iranian officials headed by Ayatollah Hashemi Shahroudi, the Chairman of Expediency Discernment Council, which visited Baghdad.



The meeting between Hakim and Hashemi Shahroudi (Tasnim, September 4 2017).

- ▶ Ali Shmkhani, the Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council, stated in an interview to the Arabic-language newspaper 'al-Wefaq,' published in Iran, that holding the referendum in Iraqi Kurdistan, when Iraq is close to the final stage of cleansing its territory from ISIS terrorists, is illegal and will negatively affect the security of the region, of Iraq and particularly of Iraqi Kurdistan. He stated that holding the referendum and partitioning Iraq not only will not solve the problems of the Iraqi people, but will also enfeeble Iraq and create new problems, which will be exploited by foreign forces to entrench their economic and political influence in the region (Fars, September 12).
- ▶ Kurdish media outlets reported that Qasem Soleimani, the Commander of the Qods Force of the IRGC, visited Iraqi Kurdistan last week and discussed with senior officials of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) party the upcoming independence referendum of the region. According to the Kurdish reports, Soleimani met with the Kurdish officials in Erbil and tried to convince them to cancel the referendum (ISNA, September 12).
- ▶ Against the backdrop of Iranian opposition to the plans of the Kurdish Regional Government in northern Iraq to hold an independence referendum, Iranian media

emphasized Israel's support for the referendum as a manifestation of Israel's desire to expand its presence in the Kurdish region. A commentary published in the hardline Iranian daily "Khorasan" (September 10), accused Israel of planning to expand its influence in Iraqi Kurdistan by engendering support for the planned referendum. The article, entitled "The security threats to neighboring countries due to the establishment of a second Israel," argued that Israel is the only country supportive of the referendum in Iraqi Kurdistan, a position that stems from Israel's desire to expand its influence in the region and bring to bear greater pressure on Iran. The article warned the Kurdish Regional Government that Iraq's neighbors oppose Iraq's partition and that Iran will now allow the "red lines" concerning its national security to be crossed, despite Iran's extended friendly relations with Iraq's Kurds before and after the fall of the Baath regime.

Iranian Involvement in the Palestinian Arena

► In another manifestation of the improvement in relations between Iran and Hamas, the Chairman of Iran-Palestine Parliamentary Friendship Group, Amir Khojasteh and his Deputy, Mohsen Alijani, met with Hamas' representative in Tehran, Khaled Qadoumi. The official website of the Iranian Majlis reported (September 6), that Khojasteh stated in the meeting that "the Zionist regime," the West and some regional leaders are vainly trying to sideline the issue of Palestine. He stated that the question of Palestine is the most important one to the Muslim world, and that Iran proved its tangible support for the Palestinian people. He stated that all Palestinian groups must understand that resistance is the only way to combat "the Zionist regime" and that negotiations with it will be futile.