



Spotlight on Iran

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Overview

- ▶ Last week, unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) struck several ISIS positions along the Syria-Iraq border. Iranian media reported that vehicles, military equipment and ammunition were destroyed in the strike. Meanwhile, the Commander of the Qods Force of the IRGC, Qasem Soleimani, stated that ISIS' eradication is near and that within two months, Iran, Russia, Syria and Iraq will be able to celebrate the elimination of the organization. Soleimani said that diplomacy does not provide a solution in all cases, and that in the battle against ISIS, similarly to the struggle to liberate Palestine, the only option is war.
- ▶ As the campaign against ISIS is drawing to a close, Iran continues to expand its foothold in Syria's economy. Last week, an Iranian delegation participated in the Expo Fair in Syria and discussed increasing the economic cooperation between Syria and Iran with the Syrian minister of public works and housing and the minister of water resources. In addition, a senior official in Iran's oil sector announced Iran's intention to establish an oil refinery in Syria, with the capacity to produce 140 thousand barrels of oil per day, and to restore two other refineries.
- ▶ Ahead of the independence referendum conducted in the Kurdish region in Iraq last week, Iran adopted a series of measures surrounding its north-western border with Iraq. On September 24, the IRGC's ground forces staged a military exercise in north-western Iran. On September 26, Iran reinforced its air defense formation in the west of the country and deployed missile batteries near its border with the Kurdish region. In addition, Iran closed its aerial border with Iraqi Kurdistan and stopped all flights to and from the Kurdish region.
- ▶ On the eve of the referendum, Iranian President Rouhani held a series of phone calls with Russian President Putin, Turkish President Erdoğan and Iraqi Prime Minister al-Abadi, and emphasized before them Iran's adamant opposition to the referendum. In a last ditch failed effort to stop the referendum, the Commander of the Qods Force of the IRGC, Qasem

Soleimani, visited the Kurdish region and attempted to convince the Kurdish leadership to renege of the decision to hold the referendum.

► Meanwhile, senior Iranian officials escalated their rhetoric against the leadership of the Kurdish region in northern Iraq. They described the referendum as a “conspiracy” by the United States and Israel to partition the countries of the region and emphasized the severe repercussions of the referendum for the Kurdish region, Iraq and regional stability. The senior adviser of the Iranian Supreme Leader, Ali-Akbar Velayati, articulated the Iranian position well when he labeled the President of the Kurdish Regional Government, Masoud Barzani, “a middleman of the Zionists for the purpose of partitioning the countries of Islam,” and proclaimed that the referendum is illegal and meaningless.

General Information

► The Commander of the Qods Force of the IRGC, Qasem Soleimani, stated in a memorial service to IRGC officer Colonel Morteza Hossein Pour, who was killed in early August 2017 in eastern Syria, that the desire to die as martyrs is the most important factor attracting Iranian youths to head for the fronts in Syria and Iraq to defend the holy places of the Shi’ite community. Other important factors, he argued, are morality and humanity. When the faithful revolutionary youths see civilians under siege in the cities of Syria and Iraq, they wish to sacrifice their lives, according to Soleimani. Referring to the combatants in Shi’ite militias recruited by Iran for the campaign in Syria, Soleimani claimed that all those who went to fight in Syria from Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan did so voluntarily.

► In the ceremony, held in the city of Langarud in Gilan Province, Soleimani declared that ISIS’ eradication is near and that within two months, Iran, Russia, Syria and Iraq will be able to celebrate the elimination of the organization. He stated that ISIS saw Iraq and Syria as a bridge to reach Iran, and that it would be unreasonable to expect Iran not to respond and allow Iraq and Syria to fall. Soleimani said that diplomacy does not provide an answer in all cases and that sometimes war is unavoidable, for example in the Iran-Iraq war, in the struggle to liberate Palestine, and in the campaign against ISIS (Tasnim, September 21).



**Qasem Soleimani speaking at a ceremony honoring an IRGC officer killed in Syria
(Tasnim, September 21 2017).**

Iranian Involvement in Syria and Lebanon

- ▶ In the evening of September 24, Iranian media reported that UAVs of the IRGC struck several ISIS positions along the Syria-Iraq border and destroyed them. The Mehr News Agency reported that in the attack in eastern Deir Ezzor, several vehicles, military equipment and ammunition were destroyed.
- ▶ An IRGC officer, Reza Sanjarani, who was in charge of a training center of the Afghan Fatemiyoun Brigade operating in Syria, was killed on September 23 (Tasnim, September 24).
- ▶ The funeral of Mohsen Hojaji, an IRGC fighter who was captured by ISIS in early August along the Syria-Iraq border and beheaded shortly after, was held in the city of Mashhad last Wednesday (September 27), in the presence of senior Iranian officials and numerous citizens. A few hours following the funeral, the Iranian Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, came to pay his last respects to Hojaji. Hojaji's remains were brought to Iran several weeks ago as part of a deal swapping prisoners and remains between Lebanese Hezbollah and ISIS, but his burial was delayed because only part of the body was handed over to Hezbollah and it was decided to postpone the burial ceremony until the retrieval of his entire body.



**Khamenei kissing Mohsen Hojaji's coffin
(the official website of the Supreme Leader of Iran, September 27 2017).**

- ▶ Last week, an Iranian delegation participated in the Expo Fair in Syria and met with Hussein Arnous, the Syrian Public Works and Housing Minister and the Syrian Minister of Water Resources, Nabil al-Hassan, and discussed with them the expansion of cooperation between the two countries. Minister Arnous stated that the Iranian delegation, comprised of 25 firms, was the largest one in the fair, which focused on the opportunities in Syria's post-civil war reconstruction. The delegation, headed by the Iranian deputy minister of energy, also met with the Syrian minister of water resources, and discussed opportunities for collaboration between Iranian and Syrian firms in the sectors of water, sanitation and irrigation (SANA, September 24). Two weeks ago, during a visit of the Syrian Minister of Electricity, Mohammad Zuhair Kharboutli to Tehran, the two countries signed contracts totaling hundreds of millions of Euros concerning cooperation in the electricity sector.
- ▶ A senior official at the research center of the Iranian oil industry stated that Iran intends to build an oil refinery in Syria. The refinery will operate near the city of Homs and will be able to produce 70 thousand barrels of oil per day during the initial phase, and later on its capacity will be expanded to be able to refine 140 thousand barrels per day. The refinery will use Syrian oil as its raw material and utilize Iranian know-how. The refinery will be constructed by a consortium of Iranian, Syrian and Venezuelan firms. In addition, Iran will restore two other refineries in Syria (ISNA, September 26).

Iranian Involvement in Iraq

- ▶ On the eve of the independence referendum in the Kurdish region in northern Iraq, the foreign ministers of Iran, Iraq and Turkey issued a joint statement following a meeting in New York in which they voiced vehement opposition to the referendum and called upon the leaderships of the Kurdish Regional Government to cancel it. At the end of the meeting, which was held on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly convocation, the three foreign ministers emphasized the need to preserve Iraq's territorial integrity and voiced concern about the intension to hold the referendum. According to the ministers, the referendum will jeopardize the gains made in the campaign against ISIS. The statement argued that the referendum contravenes Iraq's constitution, does not serve the Kurds' interests and may engender tensions and new conflicts in the region. In their statement, the foreign ministers called upon the international community to intervene and convince the leadership of the Kurdish Regional Government to cancel the referendum (ISNA, September 21). Meanwhile, Turkish President Erdoğan announced that Iran and Turkey may decide to impose joint sanctions against Iraqi Kurdistan if the referendum is not aborted (Reuters, September 23). On September 24, the Iranian and Turkish presidents held a phone call in which they discussed the referendum in the Kurdish region. The issue was also raised in a phone call between President Rouhani and the Russian President Putin on September 25 (Mehr, September 24-25).
- ▶ The Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister, Abbas Araqchi, also reiterated Iran's opposition to the referendum. In a conference of foreign ministers of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), held in parallel with the UN General Assembly meeting in New York, Araqchi stated that Iran supports preserving the territorial integrity, sovereignty and national unity of Iraq within the framework of the Iraqi constitution (Fars, September 23).
- ▶ An adviser of the Supreme Leader and former Minister of Defense, Hossein Dehghan, stated on the eve of the referendum that no one is willing to tolerate an independent Kurdistan. He argued that if the Kurds act wisely, they will not choose the path of independence, since the Kurdish region is land-locked and its neighbors are not willing to accept its independence (Iskanews.ir, September 23).
- ▶ The senior military adviser of the Supreme Leader, Yahya Rahim Safavi, labeled the referendum as "a new conspiracy of the United States and the Zionist regime in the region"

following ISIS' defeat in Syria and Iraq. He stated that regardless of the referendum results, it will not be accepted by the central government, parliament and armed forces of Iraq (Tasnim, September 25).



“A referendum of death”, a caricature of the Tasnim News Agency (September 24) against the referendum in the Kurdish region.

- ▶ Ali-Akbar Velayati, the Senior Adviser on International Affairs to the Iranian Supreme Leader, lambasted the President of the Kurdish Regional Government, Masoud Barzani, and labeled him “a middleman of the Zionists for the purpose of partitioning the countries of Islam,” and proclaimed that the referendum is illegal and meaningless (Mehr, September 26).
- ▶ On September 24, a day before the referendum in northern Iraq, the ground forces of the IRGC and the regular armed forces of Iran staged a military exercise in the Kurdistan and west Azerbaijan provinces in north-western Iran, near the border with Iraq. A day following the referendum, Iran reinforced its air defense formation in the west of the country and deployed missile batteries near its border with the Kurdish region in northern Iraq. In addition, Iran closed its aerial border with Iraqi Kurdistan and stopped all flights to and from the Kurdish region. The Spokesman of the Iranian Supreme National Security Council, Keyvan Khosravi, stated that all the Iranian flights to the international airports in Sulaymaniyah and Erbil and all the flights from Iraqi Kurdistan that pass in Iran’s airspace were halted at the request of the central government in Iraq (Tasnim, September 24). Iran, nevertheless, denied media reports about shelling of targets in Iraqi Kurdistan by Iranian

artillery. The Spokesman of the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Bahram Qasemi, stated that these are baseless reports; He refused to address the possibility that Iran will downgrade its diplomatic and economic relations with the Kurdish region (Mehr, September 25).

► On September 24, Iranian President, Hassan Rouhani, spoke over the phone with Iraq's Prime Minister, Haidar al-Abadi, and emphasized before him Iran's support for the territorial integrity of Iraq in light of the referendum in the Kurdish region. The Iraqi prime minister thanked Rouhani for Iran's support and stressed the need to bolster the cooperation between Tehran and Baghdad in all spheres (Tasnim, September 24).



“The results of the Kurdish referendum”, a caricature of the Tasnim News Agency, September 25 2017.

► The President of the Kurdish Regional Government, Masoud Barzani, confirmed in a press conference he held on September 24 ahead of the referendum in the Kurdish region, that he had spoken a few days earlier with the Commander of the Qods Force of the IRGC, Qasem Soleimani, who visited the Kurdish region. The envoy of the Kurdish Regional Government in Iran, Nazem Dabbagh, stated in an interview that Soleimani visited Erbil and Sulaymaniyah and advised the Kurdish Regional Government not to hold the referendum. In exchange, he promised that Iran will work to promote agreements between the Kurdish region and the central government in Baghdad that would resolve the disagreements between the two (Alef, September 25). Two weeks ago, Kurdish media outlets reported

about another visit conducted by Soleimani in early September in Erbil, the capital of the Kurdish region, in an attempt to convince the Kurdish leadership to cancel the referendum.

► Last week, the Majlis National Security and Foreign Policy Committee held a hearing about the referendum in the Kurdish region. The Deputy Foreign Minister for Arab and African Affairs, Hossein Jaber Ansari, was among the attendees. During the hearing, the Chairman of the Committee, Alaeddin Boroujerdi, provided a report on the referendum and the decisions adopted by Tehran on this matter. Boroujerdi called the referendum “a Zionist plan” and stated that it harms, first and foremost, the Kurds themselves and the Kurdish region, as well as Iraq’s neighbors and the entire region. The deputy foreign minister stated in the hearing that Iran, Turkey and Iraq will take the necessary measures in light of the developments in the Kurdish region (Fars, September 24). The Chairman of the Majlis, Ali Larijani, expressed his dismay about the referendum and stated that Iran previously warned delegations from the Kurdish region that had visited Iran, that the referendum will create a new crisis in Iraq and the region. He stated that Iran opposes Iraq’s partition and that the referendum does not serve the interests of Iraq or the Kurds (Khabar Online, September 26).



Masoud Barzani in Netanyahu’s pocket (the frontpage of Kayhan, September 26 2017).

► On September 27, the Majlis plenum held a closed hearing concerning the referendum in northern Iraq. In the hearing, Ali Shamkhani, the Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council, presented the next stage in Iran’s strategy considering the developments in the Kurdish region. Shamkhani estimated that following the referendum, Iran, Iraq and

Turkey will continue to deliberate among themselves on the matter, and that talks with Kurdish groups and parties in Iraqi Kurdistan will persist as well. He further estimated that sanctions will be placed on Iraqi Kurdistan. He stated that Iran will support any step undertaken by the Iraqi government on this matter. Referring to the protests of support for the referendum held by Kurds in Iran, Shamkhani argued that this is a natural display of solidarity that should not be a cause of consternation (Mehr, September 27).