



Spotlight on Iran

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Overview

- ▶ At the center of events of the past two weeks was the visit to Syria of the Chief of Staff of the Iranian Armed Forces, Mohammad Bagheri. This is Bagheri's second official visit outside of Iran since assuming his post in June 2016, following his visit to Turkey in August.. During his visit, Bagheri met with President Assad, the Syrian minister of defense and the Syrian chief of staff and discussed with them developments in the Syrian battlefield and increasing military and security cooperation between the two countries. Bagheri conveyed a personal message from the Iranian Supreme Leader Khamenei and toured the frontlines in the areas of Aleppo and Lattakia. The visit of the Iranian chief of staff represents another step in the Iranian effort to gain a long-term military foothold in Syria and increase its influence in Syria in the post-ISIS era.
- ▶ Meanwhile, the fighting in Syria continues to exact its toll on Iranian forces: a commander of an Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) battalion and three additional fighters were killed in Syria in the past two weeks.
- ▶ Alongside its military effort, Iran is acting to increase its religious influence in Syria. Last week, a senior Iranian official declared that the dispatch of Iranian pilgrims to the Shi'ite holy sites in Syria will be soon renewed. The director of the Headquarter for Reconstruction of Shia Holy Sites in Syria and Iraq stated that over the past year, Iran has carried out reconstruction and restoration work of the holy Shi'ite sites in Syria, which were damaged in the fighting during the civil war, most important among them being the Sayyidah Zaynab Shrine south of Damascus.
- ▶ The visit of the Commander of the Qods Force of the IRGC, Qasem Soleimani, to the Kurdish region in northern Iraq was at the center of events in Iraq. Soleimani's visit concluded shortly before the attack, launched by the Iraqi army and Shi'ite militias, on the city of Kirkuk, which led to the withdrawal of the Kurdish forces from the city. According to reports, whose reliability is unclear, the takeover by the Iraqi central government was facilitated by an agreement reached between Soleimani and the Patriotic Union of

Kurdistan Party (PUK). Under this agreement, the Kurdish forces (Peshmerga) withdrew from the regions under dispute between the Kurds and the central government in Baghdad. Iran denied its involvement on the assault on Kirkuk, but expressed satisfaction about the takeover of the city by the Iraqi army.

► For the second time in the past two months, a delegation of senior Hamas officials visited Tehran. The delegation, headed by Saleh al-‘Arouri, met with senior Iranian officials and discussed with them developments in the Palestinian arena, including the reconciliation agreement between Hamas and Fatah, and the bolstering of relations between Iran and Hamas. The growing strength of the pro-Iranian bloc inside Hamas in the last internal Hamas elections, Hamas’ economic hardship and Iran’s desire to regain its foothold in the Gaza Strip are contributing to the improvement in relations between Hamas and Iran, following the crisis between the sides as a consequence of the eruption of the civil war in Syria.

Iranian Involvement in Syria and Lebanon

► Loses for the IRGC in Syria: Abdollah Khosravi, the commander of the “Fatehin Battalion” in the IRGC’s Basij was killed in mid-October in Syria. In addition, over the past two weeks, Hossein Aghadadi from the IRGC Combat Engineering unit in Esfahan and two IRGC fighters, Habib Riyazpur and Mostafa Nabilou were killed in Syria.



Abdollah Khosravi, the IRGC officer killed in Syria (Fars, October 15 2017).

► On October 17, Mohammad Bagheri, the Chief of Staff of the Iranian Armed Forces, arrived for a visit in Syria, heading a high-ranking military delegation. The visit was

conducted at the invitation of the Syrian minister of defense and chief of staff of the Syrian army. During his visit, Bagheri met with President Assad, the Syrian minister of defense and the Syrian chief of staff and discussed with them developments in the Syrian battlefield and expanding military and security cooperation between the two countries (Fars, October 17). At the end of his meeting with the Syrian Chief of Staff, Ali Ayoub, Bagheri stated that it is unacceptable that Israel will attack Syria by air and ground whenever it so desires. He proclaimed that the friendship and cooperation between Iran and Syria have persisted for nearly 40 years and will endure in the future as well, stressing that Iran is standing by Syria in the face of the dangers confronting it. He mentioned that he discussed in his meeting with Ayoub the bolstering of cooperation between the two countries. Bagheri also addressed the developments in northern Iraq, and expressed hope that mistakes, as the one made by Masoud Barzani, will not be repeated in the future (Tasnim, October 18).



The Iranian Chief of Staff Bagheri at a press conference with his Syrian counterpart (Tasnim, October 18 2017).

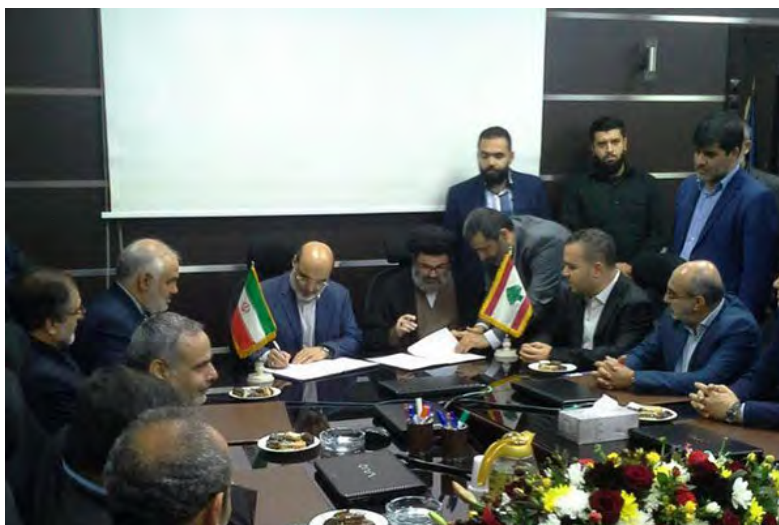
► In his meeting with President Assad, Bagheri conveyed a personal message from the Iranian Supreme Leader Khamenei. During his visit in Syria, Bagheri also visited Aleppo and toured the frontlines in the southern countryside of Aleppo and the area of Lattakia. In a meeting with fighters in the area, the Iranian chief of staff stated that the unity, solidarity and faith of the “resistance front” fighters are the ones that ensured the success and victories in the fight against terrorism (ISNA, October 20).



Bagheri at a frontline visit in the area of Aleppo (IRNA, October 20 2017).

- ▶ The Chief of Staff of the Iranian Army, Amir Pourdastan, stated in an interview to the Tasnim news agency (October 21) that advisers from the ground forces and air force of the regular Iranian army continue to be present in Syria. He asserted that Iranian fighter jets have not been utilized in Syria and mentioned that the advisers from the regular Iranian army are operating in Syria under the command of the IRGC's Qods Force.
- ▶ Hassan Palarak, who directs the Headquarter for Reconstruction of Shia Holy Sites in Syria and Iraq, announced in an interview to the Fars news agency (October 23) that the dispatch of Iranian pilgrims to the Shi'ite holy sites to Syria will soon resume. The senior Iranian official mentioned that the fighting in Syria resulted in a great deal of damage to the holy Shi'ite sites, the most important of them being the gravesite of the granddaughter of Prophet Muhammad, Sayyidah Zaynab, south of Damascus, which is a central pilgrimage site. About a year ago, reconstruction work has begun on the site and as part of the restoration process, there is an intention to enlarge the compound by buying lands surrounding the gravesite. Reconstruction works of sites holy to the Shi'ite have begun in other parts of Syria as well, after their takeover by regime forces, including the gravesite of Sayyidah Sakinah, the daughter of the Shi'ite Imam Hussein and a granddaughter of the Prophet Muhammad, in the town of Daraya. Palarak mentioned that the restoration works are being financed by donations of citizens and Iranian foundations and not through the budget of the Iranian government.
- ▶ The Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB) signed a memorandum of understanding with Lebanese Hezbollah concerning media cooperation between the two entities to buttress the "media front" of the "resistance axis." The memorandum of understanding was signed in the headquarters of Hezbollah's TV station al-Manar between

the Executive Director of the IRIB Abdol-Ali Ali-Asghari and the Head of Hezbollah's Executive Council Hashem Safi al-Din. The Director of the al-Manar station, Ibrahim Farhat, declared that the resistance axis has achieved a great victory in the fight against terrorist that deserves extensive media coverage (Tehran Times, October 17).



The executive director of the IRIB and a senior Hezbollah official sign the memorandum of understanding (Tehran Times, October 17 2017).

Iranian Involvement in Iraq

► The Commander of the IRGC's Qods Force, Qasem Soleimani, visited the Kurdish region in northern Iraq in mid-October and paid his last respects to the Kurdish leader, Jalal Talabani, who had passed away in early October. Soleimani's visit was held against the backdrop of growing tensions between the Kurdish Regional Government and the central government in Baghdad due to the referendum for independence held in the Kurdish region and developments surrounding the city of Kirkuk. According to the daily Shargh (October 16), during his visit, Soleimani met with senior Kurdish officials in an effort to solve the crisis between the Kurdish Regional Government and the Baghdad government. The Representative of the Kurdish Regional Government in Tehran, Nazim Dabbagh, stated that Soleimani's visit to the Kurdish region was intended to warn the Kurdish leadership about the ramifications of the referendum (ISNA, October 18).



Qasem Soleimani next to Jalal Talabani's grave(Mashreq News, October 14 2017).

- ▶ Following the withdrawal of Kurdish forces from Kirkuk, the Kurdish Iraqi parliament member, Masoud Haydar, published new details about an agreement reached between Bafel Talabani from the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and Hadi al-Ameri, the head of the “Badr” organization and one of the commanders of the Shi’ite militias in Iraq. The agreement was brokered by the Commander of the IRGC’s Qods Force, Qasem Soleimani, and concluded under the supervision of Iraq’s Prime Minister, Haider al-Abadi, following the independence referendum in the Kurdish region.
- ▶ According to the information publicized by the Kurdish politician, the agreement included nine articles, including: the withdrawal of the Kurdish forces (Peshmerga) belonging to the PUK from the areas under dispute between the Kurds and the Iraqi central government; handing over strategic areas in the city of Kirkuk and its surrounding, including the oil and gas fields, to the central Iraqi government; establishment of a joint committee to manage the center of Kirkuk province; renewal of flights from the Sulaymaniyah airport; transfer of salaries from the Iraqi government to employees in Sulaymaniyah and Kirkuk and Peshmerga fighters in Sulaymaniyah based on lists prepared by Bafel Talabani; and the establishment of a new area in the Kurdish region under the control of the PUK (Fararu, October 17)
- ▶ Senior Iranian officials expressed their satisfaction about the takeover by the Iraqi army of the city of Kirkuk. Ali Akbar Velayati, the Adviser of International Affairs of the Supreme Leader of Iran stated that the defeat of the Kurds in the city foiled “Barzani’s plot against the region’s security.” He alleged that Barzani’s goal, with Israeli backing, was to expropriate the oil wells in Kirkuk for the benefit of Israel. Velayati added that the raising of

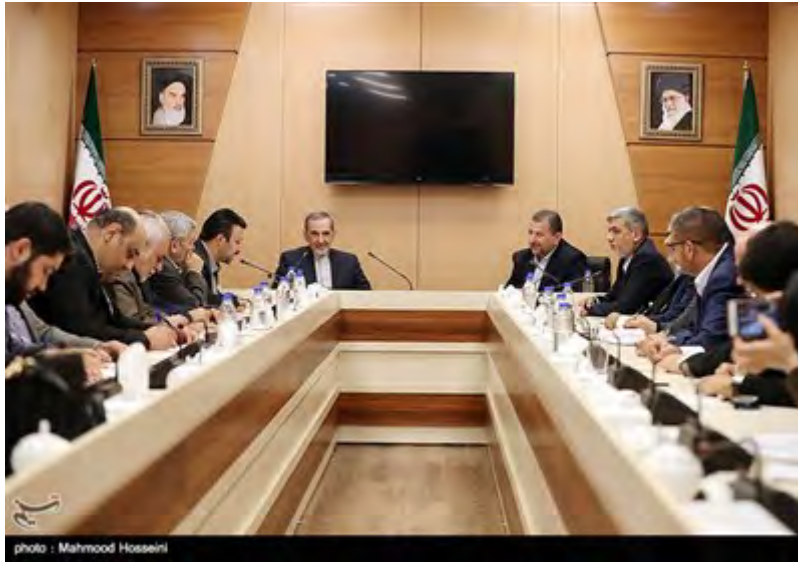
Israel's flag in the Kurdish region attests to the fact that if the Kurds of Iraq gain independence, Israel will reach Iran's borders (Tasnim, October 16). In another statement, Velayati claimed that the IRGC did not play any role in the military offensive against the Kurds in Kirkuk. In a meeting with the envoy of the French president responsible for the Syria file Velayati argued that Barzani must admit to having made a mistake when deciding to hold the referendum (ISNA, October 17). The Deputy Commander of the IRGC, Hossein Salami, also expressed his content with the developments in the Kurdish region and called the freeze of the referendum in Kurdistan "another nail in the coffin of the United States and the Zionist regime" (Mehr, October 25).

► During a meeting of the Expediency Discernment Council on October 21, the Chairman of the Council, Hashemi Shahroudi, stated that Iran, the IRGC and the Commander of the IRGC's Qods Force, Qasem Soleimani, made a pivotal contribution to Iraq's security in the campaign against ISIS. He mentioned that Iran cannot suffice itself with solving Iraq's security problems alone and that it must act to tighten the economic cooperation between the two countries by increasing its share in the Iraqi market and helping rebuild Iraq following the conclusion of the campaign against ISIS (Tasnim, October 21).

Iranian Involvement in the Palestinian Arena

► On October 20, a Hamas delegation headed by Saleh al-'Arouri, the Deputy Chairman of Hamas' Political Bureau, arrived for a visit in Tehran. The delegation met with senior Iranian officials and discussed with them developments in the Palestinian arena, including the reconciliation agreement with the Palestinian Authority, and the relations between Iran and Hamas. In a meeting with the delegation headed by al-'Arouri, Ali Akbar Velayati, the Adviser of International Affairs of the Supreme Leader of Iran, praised Hamas' refusal to lay down its arms. He proclaimed that the matter of Palestine is of the utmost importance to the Muslim world, and as time goes by, "the Zionist regime" is growing weaker and the Palestinians are growing stronger. He added that the visit by the Hamas delegation in Iran provides an opportunity to exchange opinions with senior Iranian officials. al-'Arouri asserted in the meeting that Hamas is certain that Iran is the central supporter of the resistance in Palestine (Tasnim, October 21). The delegation also met with the Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council, Ali Shamkhani, who stated that the ongoing struggle against "the Zionist regime" is a principled and strategic policy of the "resistance

front,” which can not be changed, and that Hamas must preserve its position in the struggle against the occupation (Tasnim, October 22).



The meeting between Velayeti and the Palestinian delegation (Tasnim, October 21 2017).

► This is the second time since August that a senior Hamas delegation visits Iran. In early August, a delegation headed by al-‘Arouri visited Tehran to attend the inauguration ceremony of President Rouhani and to meet with senior Iranian regime officials.