



Spotlight on Iran

October 29 – November 12, 2017

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Overview

- ▶ Iranian reactions to the resignation of the Lebanese prime minister: Tehran rebuked the resignation statement of the Lebanese Prime Minister, Saad Hariri, in which he lambasted Iran's meddling in the internal affairs of his country. Senior Iranian officials and Iranian media outlets argued that Hariri's resignation stemmed from a Saudi dictate and presented it as another manifestation of the "Saudi-American conspiracy" that aims to increase pressure on Iran and stymie its influence in the region and in Lebanon in particular.
- ▶ In light of the Assad regime's gains in the campaign against ISIS, Iran is persisting with its effort vis-à-vis the leaderships of Syria and Russia to shape the Syrian arena. In early November, Russian President Putin visited Tehran for a trilateral summit between Iran, Azerbaijan and Russia, and discussed, among other issues, developments in Syria with Supreme Leader Khamenei and President Rouhani. In their meetings with Putin, senior Iranian officials emphasized the need to maintain the cooperation between Moscow and Tehran ahead of the culmination of the campaign against ISIS. Meanwhile, Syrian Defense Minister Fahd Jassem al-Freij, spoke to his Iranian counterpart, Amir Hatami, and invited him to visit Syria. In addition, the Senior Adviser to the Supreme Leader of Iran, Ali-Akbar Velayati, visited Syria and Lebanon and declared that Iranian presence in Syria is crucial for preventing the partition of Syria.
- ▶ In the military realm, Syrian opposition sources reported that the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) have begun recruiting Syrian youths from the Daraa governorate in southern Syria into "Battalion 313," a Syrian militia operating under the guidance of the IRGC. Meanwhile, the Commander of the IRGC's Qods Force, Qasem Soleimani, visited the region of Deir Ezzor in early November and met with militiamen of the al-Baqr Battalion, a tribal militia operating under Iranian patronage.
- ▶ In Iraq, Iran has intensified its efforts to increase its economic foothold in the post-ISIS era. The Iranian Minister of Industry, Mohammad Shariatmadari, visited Baghdad and

reached an agreement with the governor of the Iraqi Central Bank on increasing the cooperation between the two countries in the banking sector. Simultaneously, the Iranian ambassador to Baghdad inaugurated a field hospital in the city of Kut in eastern Iraq, to provide medical services to the Shi'ite pilgrims who visited Iraq on the occasion of the Arba'in, the Shi'a holy day marking the fortieth day following the A'shoura fast.

► Iran forcefully rejected the claims made by the American president and the Arab coalition led by Saudi Arabia that Iran is behind the missile launch carried out by Houthi rebels in Yemen on November 4 against the international airport in Riyadh, the capital of Saudi Arabia. The commander of the IRGC declared that Iran does not have the capability to transfer missiles to the Houthis, and claimed that the Houthis fabricated their own missiles and increased their range by themselves.

► Following the visit of a delegation of senior Hamas officials to Tehran last month, the high-ranking Hamas member Ismail Radwan defined the relationship between the movement and Iran as “strategic” in an interview to an Iranian news agency. The Iranian assistant foreign minister declared that Iran is committed to anyone who is committed to the liberation of Palestine and in particular Hamas, which realized, according to him, that Iran is the only country that can assist it.

Iranian Involvement in Syria

► On November 1, Russian President Vladimir Putin visited Tehran to participate in a trilateral summit between Iran, Azerbaijan and Russia and met with the Iranian Supreme Leader Ai Khamenei and President Hasan Rouhani.

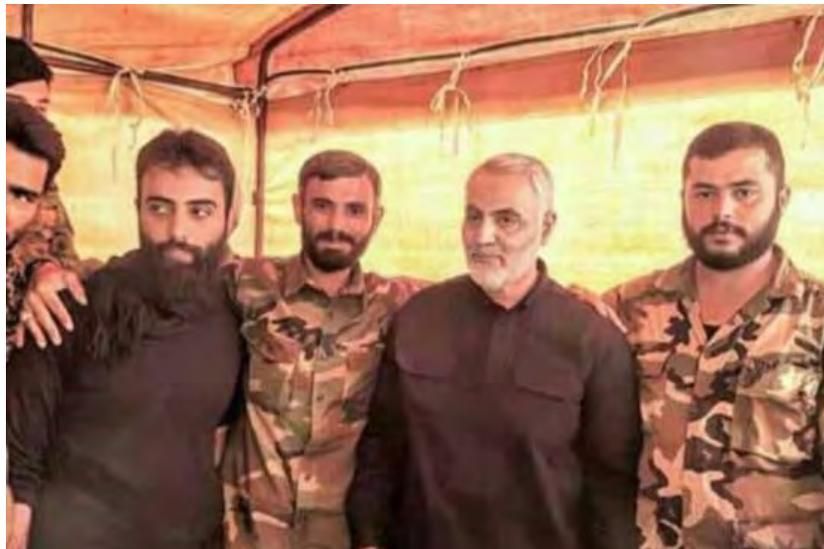
► In his meeting with Putin, Supreme Leader Khamenei stated that the excellent experience of cooperation between Russia and Iran regarding Syria has proven the ability of Moscow and Tehran to achieve mutual aims, even under challenging circumstances. Khamenei told Putin that the defeat of the American “terrorism supporting” Coalition is an undeniable reality, and that a comprehensive solution to the Syria question requires the continuous cooperation between Moscow and Tehran.

► In his meeting with Putin, President Rouhani stated that the cooperation between Russia and Iran in the campaign against terrorism in Syria has had immense impact, adding that maintaining this cooperation is crucial for the final stages of that campaign (Tasnim, November 1).



The Putin-Rouhani meeting in Tehran (Mehr, November 1 2017).

- ▶ On November 5, Iranian Minister of Defense, Amir Hatami, spoke over the phone with his Syrian counterpart, Fahd Jassem al-Freij, and discussed with him developments in Syria and the region. Hatami congratulated his interlocutor for the liberation of Deir Ezzor from ISIS and stated that Iran is determined to stand by Syria and support it once the war is over, as it has done up until now. The Syrian minister of defense invited his Iranian counterpart to visit Syria (Tasnim, November 5).
- ▶ The Commander of the IRGC's Qods Force, Qasem Soleimani, visited the region of Deir Ezzor in early November. In photos, shared on social media networks, Soleimani is seen alongside fighters of the Syrian al-Baqr Battalion militia, which operates with support from the IRGC (Tasnim, November 5). It should be mentioned that Soleimani spent most of the past two weeks in Iran due to the death of his father.



Qasem Soleimani in Deir Ezzor (Twitter, November 5 2017).

- ▶ Syrian opposition sources reported that the IRGC had begun recruiting Syrian youths from the Daraa governorate in southern Syria to “Battalion 313,” a militia operating under the guidance of the IRGC. According to the report, over 200 youths from the town of Izraa’ in Daraa governorate have been recruited into the ranks of the militia thus far. The recruits were provided with personal identification cards bearing the emblem of the IRGC, which allows the fighters to move freely through Syrian regime checkpoints (Al-Arabiya, November 5).
- ▶ The Foreign Affairs Adviser to the Supreme Leader, Ali-Akbar Velayati visited Syria last week after concluding a visit to Lebanon. Velayati met President Assad and discussed increasing cooperation between Syria and Iran in the economic and educational sectors. The adviser to the Supreme Leader, who also serves as the chairman of the board of directors of the “Azad University,” a chain of private universities and colleges in Iran, discussed the possibility of establishing a branch of the university network in Syria with the Syrian president (Tasnim, November 7). During his stay in Syria, Velayati also visited Aleppo. In a meeting with pro-regime fighters in the region, Velayati stated that if Iran does not assist Syria, it will be partitioned and the link between Syria, Iraq, Lebanon and Palestine will be broken. He claimed that Iran’s presence in Iraq and Syria and the presence of Iraqis and Syrians side by side are intended to foil the conspiracy to partition Syria and the region. Velayati declared that the “Resistance Axis” starts with Tehran, continues through Baghdad, Damascus, Beirut and reaches Palestine (IRNA, November 8).

Iranian Reactions to the Resignation of the Lebanese Prime Minister

- ▶ The Special Adviser on International Affairs to the Chairman of the Majlis, Hossein Abdollahian, declared that the resignation of Lebanon’s Prime Minister, Saad Hariri, is a hasty step that will create a political vacuum and serve the interests of the “Zionist regime” (Tasnim, November 4).
- ▶ The Assistant Minister of Foreign Affairs, Hossein Sheikholeslam, claimed that Hariri’s resignation was carried out in coordination with the President of the United States, Trump, and the Saudi Crown Prince, Mohammad bin Salman, as part of an American-Saudi “conspiracy” intended to create tensions in Lebanon and compensate for the losses incurred by the United States and Saudi Arabia due to the defeat of ISIS. He stated that it

would have been better had Hariri submitted his resignation in Lebanon and not in Saudi Arabia (Fars, November 4).

► The Spokesman of the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Bahram Qasemi, rejected the assertions made by Hariri about Iran’s meddling in Lebanon’s internal affairs. Qasemi stated that Hariri’s remarks reflect the baseless accusations levelled against Iran by the Zionists, Saudis and Americans and that Iran and Lebanon maintain a good relationship (ISNA, November 5).



Hariri’s resignation under Saudi dictate. “I can not bear the interference of foreigners [in Lebanon]” (Fars, November 5 2017).

► The Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council, Ali Shamkhani, argued that Hariri’s resignation is a result of a Saudi dictate. He stated that just like Riyadh does what Washington orders it to do, so does Hariri execute what Riyadh commands him to do (ISNA, November 5).

► The Commander of the IRGC, Mohammad Ali Jafari, claimed that Hariri’s resignation announcement on Saudi soil indicates that he resigned under the instruction of “the Zionists and the Saudis” to create tensions in Lebanon. He asserted the Hariri’s resignation, however, may improve the situation in Lebanon (Mehr, November 5).

► On November 7, Iranian President Hasan Rohani spoke over the phone with the Lebanese President, Michel Aoun, and told him that the unity of the people of Lebanon is a crucial factor in preventing a regional crisis (Fars, November 7).

► A day before Hariri’s resignation from his position, he met with the Foreign Affairs Adviser to the Supreme Leader, Ali-Akbar Velayati, who visited Beirut to participate in a gathering of Muslim clerics. After Hariri’s resignation, a source close to Velayati stated that

in the meeting Hariri passed on a message from Saudi Arabia demanding that Iran cease supporting the Houthis in Yemen and improve its ties with the Gulf states. Velayati rebuffed the Saudi demand and answered that Saudi Arabia should cease its aerial attacks on Yemen and lift the economic blockade it imposed on Yemen, which prevents the entry of foodstuffs and medicine to civilians in the country. This report was denied by the Iranian embassy in Beirut (Fars, November 5). During his visit to Beirut, Velayati also met with the Lebanese President, Michel Aoun, and the Secretary General of Hezbollah, Hassan Nasrallah.



The Velayati-Nasrallah meeting (Fars, November 3 2017).

Iranian Involvement in Iraq and Yemen

- ▶ The Commander of the IRGC's Ground Forces, Mohammad Pakpour, stated in a conference in Mahabad, north-western Iran, that the referendum on independence of the Kurdish region in northern Iraq is a conspiracy tied to Israel, which was first hatched during the 2006 Lebanon War and its aim is to establish "a new Middle East." He mentioned that Iraq's neighbors, Iran among them, warned the Kurds several times about the dangers entailed in conducting the referendum, but the Kurds insisted on holding it. Pakpour labeled the failure of the referendum "an effective nail in the coffin of the Zionist regime" (Tasnim, November 1).
- ▶ The Iranian Minister of Industry, Mohammad Shariatmadari, met in Baghdad with the Governor of the Iraqi Central Bank, Ali Mohsen al-Allaq, and reached an agreement with him to establish a joint committee of the central banks, which will work to implement the financial agreements between the two countries (Mehr, November 3). The expansion of ties

between the central banks in Iraq and Iran can be examined in light of Iran's intention to augment its economic activities in Iraq following the conclusion of the military campaign against ISIS. In a meeting with the Iraqi Prime Minister, Haider al-Abadi, who recently visited Tehran, President Rouhani declared that the two countries should boost their ties in the banking sector in order to bolster the trade, economic ties and tourism between the two nations.



The meeting between the Iranian minister of industry with the governor of the central bank of Iraq (IRNA, November 2 2017).

- ▶ Iran's Ambassador to Baghdad, Iraj Masjedi, inaugurated a field hospital in the city of Kut in eastern Iraq, to provide medical services to the Shi'ite pilgrims who visited Iraq last week on the occasion of the Arba'in, the Shi'a holy day marking the fortieth day following the A'shoura fast. In the opening ceremony of the hospital, Masjedi stated that Iran will continue to cooperate with Bagdad with regards to reconstructing Iraq, similarly to how it helped Iraq in the campaign against ISIS (Mehr, November 5).
- ▶ On November 6, the Iranian Minister of Defense, Amir Hatami, spoke over the phone with his Iraqi counterpart, Irfan al-Hayali, and discussed regional developments and military and security cooperation between the two countries. al-Hayali, who visited Tehran in July 2017, declared that Iraq will never forget Iran's support in the campaign against ISIS and invited Hatami to visit Iraq (ILNA, November 6).
- ▶ The Commander of the IRGC, Mohammad Ali Jafari, denied the claims made by the American president and the Arab coalition led by Saudi Arabia that Iran is behind the missile launch carried out by Houthi rebels in Yemen on November 4 against the King Khaled International Airport in Riyadh, the Saudi capital. Jafari declared that Iran does not

have the capability to transfer missiles to the Houthis, claiming that the Houthis fabricated their own missiles and increased their range to avenge the death of the martyrs in Yemen. The Iranian Minister of Defense, Ahmad Hatami, also rejected the allegations regarding Iranian involvement in the missile launch against the Saudi airport (ISNA, November 5).

Iranian Involvement in the Palestinian Arena

- ▶ A senior Hamas official, Ismail Radwan, stated in an interview to the Iranian Mehr News Agency (November 1) that Hamas' relations with Iran is strategic and that the visit of Hamas' delegation to Tehran last month reflects this relationship. He stated that Hamas intends to maintain its ties to Iran and that it does not pay any attention to the demand of the Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, to cut the movement's ties with Iran as part of the Hamas-Fatah reconciliation agreement.
- ▶ The Assistant Minister of Foreign Affairs, Hossein Sheikhleslam, stated in an interview to the Iranian news agency Farda (November 1) that Iran is committed to assisting anyone who is committed to the liberation of Palestine, especially Hamas. He referred to the disagreements between Iran and Hamas concerning Syria and stated that Hamas has reached the conclusion that its position vis-à-vis Syria was wrong and decided to send to Iran a high-ranking delegation last month in spite of the Israeli demand that Hamas cut its ties with Iran. Sheikhleslam remarked that Hamas knows very well that Iran is the only country that can assist it, guide it and provide it with weaponry to destroy Israel, and therefore, it cannot disengage from Iran. He added that the positions of the former Head of the Hamas' Political Bureau, Khaled Mashal, have not changed, but that control of Hamas is now in the hands of other people. He emphasized that the Iranian strategy is support for the eradication of Israel. As long as Hamas adopts thus path, it will enjoy Iran's support, and if it strays from this route, Iran will stop supporting the movement.



Hossein Sheikhleslam (Farda, November 1 2017).

- ▶ In early November, Ali-Akbar Velayati, the Foreign Affairs Adviser to the Supreme Leader, visited Beirut and participated in an international conference of Muslim clerics concerning the Palestinian question. Velayati declared in the conference that Palestine was and will always be the issue of greatest importance for the Muslim world. He criticized some countries of the region for their willingness to normalize relations with Israel and stated that the conference of senior Muslim clerics in Beirut proves that the path to the liberation of Palestinian is through resistance and not compromise (Fars, November 3).