



Spotlight on Iran

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Overview

- ▶ On November 21, following the capture of the city of Albu Kamal in Syria and Rawa in Iraq from ISIS, Iran declared “victory” in the campaign against the organization in Syria and Iraq. President Rouhani announced in a speech on Iranian television the “removal of evil”, and the Commander of the Qods Force of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), Qasem Soleimani, sent a public letter to Iranian Supreme Leader Khamenei, in which he congratulated Khamenei for “the great victory.” Soleimani credited the victory to the resistance of the governments and nations of Iraq and Syria, as well as the central role of Hezbollah and the Iraqi and Shi’ite militias in the campaign. In a response letter, Khamenei expressed his appreciation to Soleimani and characterized the victory against ISIS as “a serious blow” to the policies of the United States and its allies in the region, which tried, by forming ISIS, to destroy “the anti-Zionist resistance.” Iranian media and politicians highlighted Soleimani’s role, praising his performance in directing the campaign against ISIS and presenting him as the chief actor responsible for the defeat of the organization.
- ▶ Senior Iranian officials and Iranian media outlets claimed that the victory against ISIS thwarted the conspiracy of the United States and its allies to establish “a new Middle East,” intended to serve the interests of the West and Israel. This defeat created a new and more comfortable reality for Iran and the “Resistance Axis,” they argued. They emphasized, however, that while ISIS lost territorial control, it can still carry out terror attacks and pose a security threat to countries in the region well into the future.
- ▶ The campaign in Albu Kamal exacted a high toll from the Iranian forces in Syria. Two high-ranking officers and at least five IRGC fighters were killed last week in battles in Syria. In mid-November, Qasem Soliemani arrived in Albu Kamal and took over command of the fighting there, which was carried out by IRGC forces, Hezbollah and the Shi’ite militias in the city along with the Syrian Army.

- ▶ In the political arena, Iran, Russia and Turkey continue to deliberate regarding the final settlement in Syria. The presidents of the three countries met last week in Sochi, Russia, and discussed developments in Syria and the pillars of the political agreement. Proceeding this summit, the chiefs of staff of the three nations met as well. Meanwhile, the Secretary of the Iranian Supreme National Security Council, Ali Shamkhani, rejected the assessments that ISIS' defeat may lead to rifts between Iran and Russia regarding the negotiations' process. He mentioned, however, that Russia's involvement in Syria began only in 2015, while Iran and the "Resistance Axis" have been active in Syria since the start of the crisis in January 2011. On November 14, against the backdrop of the de-escalation agreement in southern Syria, recently signed by the United States and Russia, the Russian minister of foreign affairs declared that Russia did not promise to bring about the withdrawal of Iranian-backed forces from Syria and that the Iranian presence in Syria is legitimate.
- ▶ Following a decision adopted by the Arab League condemning Iran's meddling in the internal affairs of countries in the region and designating Hezbollah as a terrorist organization, senior Iranian officials denounced the League and claimed that its decision against Iran and Hezbollah was undertaken due to Saudi pressure. President Rouhani accused the League of hypocrisy, arguing that it did nothing to stop ISIS' crimes and the suffering of Yemeni citizens under Saudi aerial attacks.

Iran Declares "the End of ISIS"

- ▶ On November 21, following the capture of the city of Albu Kamal in Syria from ISIS, Iran declared an end to the era of ISIS in Syria and Iraq. In a speech aired on Iranian television (November 21), President Rouhani congratulated the Supreme Leader Khamenei, the Iranian Army, the IRGC, the Qods Force and its commander, Qasem Soleimani, and Iranian diplomats for the victory against ISIS, declaring the "the evil has been removed" with the grace of God and struggle of the people of the region. Rouhani claimed that ISIS was established and supported by the West, the "Zionist regime" and some of the countries in the region, and that the leadership of ISIS hoped that the organization will be able to endure in the region for a long time. On the eve of his departure to the summit with the presidents of Russia and Turkey in Sochi, Rouhani declared that the victory over ISIS does not solve the problem of terrorism and ISIS, but it does deny the organization its territorial base (IRNA, November 22).

- ▶ The Commander of the Qods Force of the IRGC, Qasem Soleimani, also declared victory in the campaign against ISIS. In a public letter to the Iranian Supreme Leader Khamenei, Soleimani detailed the crimes perpetrated by ISIS in Syria and Iraq, and emphasized the importance of the leadership of the Supreme Leader Khamenei and the preeminent Iraqi Shi'ite cleric, Ayatollah Ali Sistani. Soleimani asserted that the victory was achieved due to the resistance of the governments and nations in Iraq and Syria, as well as the central role of Hezbollah and the Iraqi ("Popular Mobilization") and Shi'ite militias in the campaign. Soleimani wrote that the defeat of ISIS ("The American-Zionist group") in Abu Kamal and the raising of the Syrian flag herald the end of the organization's control in the region. He congratulated the Supreme Leader for the "great victory" on behalf of the commanders, fighters, and thousands of martyrs and disabled Iranian, Iraqi, Syrian, Lebanese, Afghan and Pakistani fighters who have sacrificed their souls to defend the lives and honor of Muslims and the holy sites (Fars, November 21).
- ▶ In a response letter, Khamenei lauded Soleimani for the victory over ISIS and expressed his great admiration to him. He stated that eradicating the "cancerous tumor" (ISIS) serves not only the countries of the region and the Muslim world, but also all of humanity. Khamenei characterized the victory against ISIS as a blow not just to the organization, but also to the policies of the United States and its allies in the region, which aimed to ignite internal strife in the region, destroy the anti-Zionist resistance, enfeeble the independent countries of the region and allow the "Zionist regime" to rule the region. He emphasized that Iran must remain vigilant and prepared for the possibility that those who have invested a great deal in planning "the conspiracy" will not rest after ISIS' defeat and will try to reconstitute the organization in a different area in the region or under a different form (Fars, November 21).



“ISIS is cast into the dustbin of history”(Tasnim, November 21 2017).

- ▶ Ali-Akbar Velayati, the Foreign Affairs Adviser to the Supreme Leader, applauded the victory over ISIS but warned against “new conspiracies” of the supporters of the organization, namely the United States, aiming to destabilize the Middle East following ISIS’ defeat. He alleged that the United States, Saudi Arabia and Israel have been planning to institute a “new Middle East” and weaken the “resistance” to increase Israel’s sense of security. Velayati assessed that ISIS will continue to terrorize the countries of the region and Europe even after the collapse of the “Islamic State” (Mehr, November 20).
- ▶ The Secretary of the Iranian Supreme National Security Council, Ali Shamkhani, spoke at length about ISIS’ defeat in Syria and Iraq in an interview to Iranian television (November 21). He stated that Iran’s involvement in the campaign against ISIS developed in stages, and that if Iran had entered the campaign with its full force from day one, the war could have been ended much faster, but that such an intervention would have engendered internal political ramifications inside Iran. He also claimed that the West’s support for ISIS extended the duration of the war.
- ▶ Shamkhani emphasized that while ISIS lost control of the territories it once controlled, he assesses that the organization will be able to continue to exist, carry out terror attacks and pose a security threat, especially due to the likely return of some of its operatives to the countries from which they had arrived in the West, central Asia and the Middle East.

- ▶ Addressing the cooperation between Iran and Russia in the campaign in Syria, Shamkhani asserted that while some believe that ISIS' defeat will give rise to discord between Iran and Russia, and that some in Iran even claim that Russia is leading Iran astray, this is not the case. He averred that Russia played a productive political and military role in the crisis in Syria and that Iran achieved its goals. He added, however, that Russia's involvement in the crisis only began in 2015, while Iran and the "Resistance Axis" intervened from its beginning in January 2011.
- ▶ Shamkhani discussed the improvement in the military effectiveness of Iran and its proxies as a result of the campaign against ISIS, stating that the capabilities of Hezbollah, the Shi'ite militias in Iraq and the "Resistance forces" in Yemen are far superior to what they possessed in 2011 (ISNA, November 21).
- ▶ Yadollah Javani, the Senior Adviser of the Representative of the Supreme Leader to the IRGC asserted in an interview to the Mehr News Agency (November 22) that the victory over ISIS in Syria and Iraq and the arrival of Syrian and Iraqi forces to the border between the two countries have created "a geography of resistance" from Iran's eastern borders to the shores of the Mediterranean. He claimed that the Americans created ISIS to establish "an American Middle East," but their plan was foiled, and today, a new Middle East is being forged, one based on resistance. In Syria and Iraq, the popular forces managed to thwart the conspiracy of the enemies, and in Lebanon, Hezbollah has become a symbol of Lebanese national power, he asserted. Javani added that the efforts of the United States and Saudi Arabia to exacerbate the crisis in Lebanon stem from their realization that they no longer have a role in Lebanon's future.



"The eradication of ISIS" (Fars, November 22 2017).

- ▶ Iranian newspapers hailed the “end of the era of ISIS in Syria and Iraq” and applauded the central role Qasem Soleimani played in the victory over the “Islamic State.” An op-ed published on the Asr-e Iran website (November 21) stated that the victory against ISIS heralds the beginning of a new rivalry over control in the region between the Iranian-Russian axis and the axis led by the United States, which includes the countries of the West and certain Arab countries.
- ▶ An opinion article published on the hardline website Mashregh News (November 20), asserted that ISIS’ defeat not only foiled the Western effort to partition Syria and Iraq and isolate the forces of the “Resistance Axis”, but also created, for the first time, a land bridge from Tehran through Baghdad, Damascus and Beirut to the Mediterranean. The article argued that a change in the balance of power in western Asia and the entire world is to be expected next.



The frontpage of the Iranian newspaper “Afkar”, November 22: “The Kingdom of Solomon” (in Persian, Solomon = Soleiman): “The End of ISIS, the Beginning of the Destruction of Israel.”

Iranian Responses to the Arab League Decision against Iran and Hezbollah

- ▶ Iran lambasted the decision adopted by the Arab League in its meeting in Cairo on November 19 condemning Iran’s meddling in the internal affairs of countries in the region and designating Hezbollah as a terrorist organization. In his speech in Tehran during which the Iranian president declared the victory over ISIS, Rouhani condemned the Arab League and criticized its ongoing silence regarding the crimes committed by ISIS over recent years.

Rouhani added that when ISIS' terrorists beheaded the Syrian people in Aleppo and the citizens of Yemen were subjected to aerial bombings, the Arab League did nothing (Fars, November 21).

- ▶ The Iranian Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, Hossein Jaber Ansari, asserted that the decision of the Arab League was adopted under Saudi pressure and it contradicts the policies of many Arab countries to expand their ties with Tehran (the website "Iranian Diplomacy," November 20).
- ▶ The Senior Adviser on Military Affairs of the Supreme Leader, Yahya Rahim Safavi, described the Arab League decision to designate Hezbollah as a terrorist organization "a big shame" (Mehr, November 21).
- ▶ Iranian newspapers also condemned the Arab League's decision. An editorial published in the hardline daily "Kayhan" (November 21), stated that the Arab League was established to act against the "Zionist regime," but since its founding has done nothing but issue worthless declarations. The latest decision of the League against Iran and Hezbollah was passed due to Saudi pressure, "Kayhan" argued, but the league can not do anything but issue proclamations against Iran.

Iranian Involvement in Syria

- ▶ Two senior IRGC officers, Kheirollah Samadi and Ali Reza Nazari were killed in Abu Kamal. In addition, five IRGC fighters were killed over the past week: four in Abu Kamal and one in al-Mayadin in Deir Ezzor governorate.



The IRGC officer Kheirollah Samadi who was killed in Abu Kamal alongside Qods Force Commander, Qasem Soleimani (Defa News, November 19 2017).

► The Commander of the IRGC's Qods Force, Qasem Soleimani, arrived in mid-November to the area of the town of Albu Kamal, where fierce battles raged in the past two weeks over the last major redoubt of the "Islamic State" in Syria. During his stay, Soleimani met with fighters in the Iraqi Shi'ite militia "al-Nujabaa", which operates under Iranian guidance. The militia took part in the campaign to capture the city, alongside the Syrian Army, Hezbollah and other Shi'ite militias (ISNA, November 16). The Lebanese "Al-Mayadin" network reported (November 19) that Soleimani personally command the Shi'ite forces that took part in the campaign for the city. Hezbollah and the Shi'ite militias were slated to play a central role in occupying the city and the "mission accomplished image" following the capture. These forces indeed played a central role in the initial assault on the city, but they were routed by ISIS militants and took heavy casualties. It appears that only after the Syrian Army joined the offensive were the forces able to capture the city, although the role of Iran and the Shi'ite forces was prominent in media coverage of the battle.



Qasem Soleimani with fighters in the Iraqi al-Nujabaa' militia in Albu Kamal (ISNA, November 16 2017).

► On November 22, the presidents of Iran, Russia and Turkey met in Sochi, Russia, to discuss developments in Syria and the foundations of the political settlement of the war. The summit was preceded by a meeting on November 19 of the chiefs of staff of the three nations in Anatolia, Turkey. In his speech at the summit, President Rouhani stated that following ISIS' defeat there is no excuse for the presence of foreign armed personnel on Syrian soil without the consent of its legitimate government. He emphasized that Syria's citizens can now utilize the new conditions created in their country to decide their future

for themselves. Rouhani added that Syria's citizenry will not allow foreigners to meddle in their internal affairs and will object to any step contrary to the territorial integrity, full sovereignty, unity and independence of their country. He stressed the need to maintain international cooperation around the reconstruction of Syria and creation of a safe environment for the return of Syrian refugees who left their country throughout the war (IRNA, November 22).



The summit in Sochi (Tasnim, November 22 2017).

- ▶ The three chiefs of staffs of the three countries met ahead of the summit of the three presidents in Sochi. Following the meeting, the Iranian Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces, Mohammad Baqeri, stated that after the defeat of ISIS, there is no justification for the presence of American forces in Syria and they must leave the country. He reported that Iran, Russia and Turkey agreed to establish positions and military bases to preserve security in Idlib governorate in north-western Syria (Iranian television, November 21).
- ▶ Meanwhile, the Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Sergey Lavrov, announced that Russia did not promise to bring about the withdrawal of forces supported by Iran from Syria and that Iran's presence in Syria is legitimate (Reuters, November 14). His statement comes against the backdrop of reports claiming that as part of the the de-escalation agreement concerning southern Syria, signed recently between the United States and Russia, Moscow committed to removing the Iranians, Hezbollah and the Shi'ite militias supported by it from a designated zone along the Syria-Israel border.