



Spotlight on Iran

June 10 – June 21, 2018

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Overview

► In an interview to Iranian Arab-language television, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad asserted once again that Iran's military presence in Syria is limited to that of "advisers" alone, and that there are no Iranian military units or Iranian bases on Syrian territory. Against the backdrop of negotiations between Russia, the United States and Israel concerning Syria's future, including Iran's presence in the country, **Iranian and Syrian officials have emphasized that Iran does not maintain a military presence in Syria and that the presence of Iranian military advisers in Syria is based on an official request of the Syrian government.**

► The Commander of the Qods Force of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), Qasem Soleimani, **labeled the results of the latest elections in Lebanon "a great victory" for Hezbollah, and added that following the elections, Hezbollah has become the "government of resistance."** Soleimani recently conducted a visit in Syria and was documented with fighters of the Afghan Fatemiyoun Brigade, which operates in Syria. The visit took place during an ISIS offensive on the city of Albu Kamal, near the Syrian-Iraqi border. At least two fighters of the IRGC, including one officer, were killed in the attacks.

► The spokesman of the political bureau of the Shi'ite Iraqi cleric, Muqtada Sadr, stated in an interview with the Iranian Tasnim news agency that Sadr's relationship with Iran is strong despite the disagreements between them. The spokesman asserted that Sadr, who made significant gains in the recent elections held in Iraq, is interested in maintaining the historical ties between Iran and Iraq, and in cultivating balanced relations with Iraq's neighbors. This interview followed an announcement by Sadr about the formation of a political pact with Hadi al-Amiri, the leader of the Fath Alliance, which won the second largest number of seats in parliament in the recent Iraqi elections, and one of the senior leaders of the pro-Iranian Shi'ite militias. According to reports in Arab-language media, Qasem Soleimani, the head of the IRGC's Qods Force, was involved in the negotiations between Sadr and al-Amiri.

► Meanwhile, Iran continues to maintain political and security coordination with its partners in the campaigns in Syria and Iraq. A senior adviser to the Iranian minister of foreign affairs arrived in Geneva to participate in another round of talks between Iran, Russia, Turkey and the UN concerning Syria's future. In Iraq, representatives of Iran, Iraq, Russia and Syria met to discuss their continued cooperation in the campaign against ISIS.

Iranian Involvement in Syria and Lebanon

► In an interview to Iranian Arab-language TV channel, al-Alam (June 13), Syrian President Bashar al-Assad stated that relations between Iran and Syria are “strategic” and not contingent on “political games.” He claimed that Iran's presence in Syria is limited to volunteer advisers alone who are operating under Iranian command, adding that no Iranian military units or Iran bases exist on Syrian soil. He mentioned that Damascus may agree to the establishment of Iranian bases in Syria if the need arises. Assad stated that he intended to visit Iran several months ago, but the visit was delayed due to the situation in Syria. Assad added that he hopes to travel to Iran soon.



Al-Assad in an interview with al-Alam TV (al-Alam, June 13, 2018)

► In an interview to Russian television (May 31), Assad once again declared that there are no Iranian forces in his country, and there are only Iranian officers who assist the Syrian Army. The Syrian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Walid al-Mualem, also asserted in a press conference in Damascus in early June that Iran has no military presence in Syria, except for advisers who operate alongside the Syrian Army and assist it (Tasnim, June 2, 2018).

► On June 18, Hossein Jaber Ansari, the Senior Adviser to the Iranian Minister of Foreign Affairs, arrived in Geneva to participate in another round of talks between Iran, Russia, Turkey and the UN concerning Syria's future and the establishment of a committee to draft a new constitution for Syria (Fars, June 18, 2018).



Hossein Jaber Ansari, the Adviser to the Iranian Minister of Foreign Affairs (al-Alam, June 18, 2018)

► The Commander of the IRGC's Qods Force, Qasem Soleimani, stated that following the last elections in Lebanon, Hezbollah has become the "resistance government." He asserted that the elections in Lebanon were a referendum on Hezbollah's role, held at a time when Hezbollah was accused of intervening in Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Yemen and the entire region, and when Saudi Arabia invested 200 million dollars to meddle in the elections. According to him, Hezbollah won 74 seats in the Lebanese parliament for the first time, and this is a great victory (Tasnim, June 11, 2018).

► It is unclear where Soleimani uttered this statement, but it is possible he made it during a visit he conducted in Syria and possibly Lebanon as well. On June 10, the Telegram channel of the Afghan Fatemiyoun Brigade, which is taking part in the campaign against ISIS in eastern Syria, posted an up-to-date photo of Soleimani with combatants of the Afghan militia in Syria. It should be mentioned that Soleimani was uncharacteristically absent from the al-Qods Day rallies held across Iran on June 8.



Soleimani alongside Fatemioun Brigade fighters (Telegram, June 10, 2018)

Iranian Involvement in Iraq

- ▶ Zia al-Asadi, the Spokesman of the Political Bureau of the Shi'ite Iraqi cleric Muqtada Sadr, stated in an interview to the Iranian Tasnim news agency (June 14), that Sadr's relationship with Iran is strong despite the problems that have arisen between them at different periods. He asserted that the world should know that the Islamic Republic of Iran does not intervene and will not intervene in Iraq's affairs. He added that Muqtada Sadr is interested in a strong Iraq that maintains balanced relations with its neighbors and the world. He added that Sadr places great importance on relations with important regional countries such as Iran, Turkey, Jordan, Syria, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. Balanced relations based on mutual interest are the only way to guarantee stability in the relationship between Iran and Iraq, the spokesman asserted. Sadr is interested, according to al-Asadi, in mainlining the historical relations between the two countries, because whether they like it or not, they are neighbors, and nothing will change that reality.
- ▶ Al-Asadi gave this interview following the announcement by Muqtada Sadr about the formation of a political pact with Hadi al-Amiri, the leader of the Fath Alliance, which won the second largest number of seats in the last elections in Iraq, and one of the senior commanders of the pro-Iranian Shi'ite militias. The daily newspaper al-Hayat, published in London, reported (June 18) that concomitantly to the agreement reached between Sadr and

al-Amiri, the Commander of the IRGC's Qods Force, Qasem Soleimani, paid a visit to Karbala, Iraq, to oversee the negotiations between the two senior Iraqi politicians.

- ▶ However, it is still early to assess the final configuration of the new Iraqi government following the elections, which were held on May 12, 2018. It is unclear who will head the government and how long the negotiations concerning the formation of the government will last.
- ▶ Representatives of Iran, Iraq, Russia and Syria conducted a meeting in Baghdad in mid-June to discuss their ongoing military cooperation in the campaign against ISIS. In the meeting, the representatives of the four countries, including the Iranian Military Attaché to Baghdad, Mostafa Moradian, exchanged intelligence information concerning ISIS' activity and emphasized the importance of continuing to cooperate in the war on terrorist groups in the region, chief among them, ISIS (IRNA, June 14, 2018).



The quadrilateral meeting in Baghdad (IRNA, June 14, 2018)

- ▶ The Spokesman of the Iranian Armed Forces, Abolfazl Shekarchi, denied the statement made by the Turkish Minister of Defense, Nurettin Canikli, that Iran expressed support for the Turkish military offensive against the PKK in northern Iraq. Shekarchi asserted that Iran thinks that any military action undertaken in the territory of a third country without the legal approval of the government on whose territory the operation is taking place is illegal, even if carried out under the justification of fighting terrorism. He added that Iran will never support military action against terrorist groups that constitute a violation of any country's sovereignty (ISNA, June 14, 2018).