



Spotlight on Iran

June 24 – July 8, 2018

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Overview

- ▶ **The campaign in Syria continues to exact a price from Iranian forces:** three more Iranian combatants were killed over the past two weeks in Syria, **two of them** (including a senior Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps officer), **were killed in the Albu Kamal area.** Another Iranian officer was killed, according to a report of the Free Syrian Army, in Daraa, southern Syria. **The large number of casualties among Iranian fighters and Shi'ite militias backed by Iran, and in particular in the region of Albu Kamal, attests to the challenges Iran and its allies are facing in the efforts to secure their control of this strategic region.**
- ▶ Against the backdrop of the ongoing Syrian Army offensive against rebels in southern Syria and ISIS in Albu Kamal, the Senior Adviser to the Iranian Supreme Leader, Ali-Akbar Velayati, declared that sooner or later, **the Americans will have to withdraw from the eastern bank of the Euphrates River.** He asserted that the victory in Daraa is a prelude to additional victories in the eastern Euphrates River Valley region. Meanwhile, **Iraqi Shi'ite militias operating under Iranian guidance are taking part in the offensive in southern Syria,** although their share in the overall manpower fighting on the regime's side in the offensive is apparently insignificant.
- ▶ As reports emerge **about negotiations between the United States and Russia concerning Syria's future and military operations intensify in the country,** Tehran and Moscow continue to deliberate concerning developments in Syria. In early July, Iranian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mohammad Javad Zarif, spoke on the phone with his Russian counterpart, Sergey Lavrov and discussed with him the negotiations process concerning the settlement of Syria's war. Prior to this, Zarif's Senior Adviser, Hossein Jaber Ansari, met with the Russian ambassador to Tehran and discussed with him the cooperation between the two countries in the Middle East, and in particular, developments in Syria.

► While negotiations concerning the establishment of a new government in Baghdad continue apace, the National Security Adviser of the Iraqi Prime Minister, Faleh Fayyad, visited Tehran and met senior Iranian officials. During his meeting with Fayyad, the Secretary of the Iranian Supreme National Security Council, Ali Shamkhani, condemned the latest attack against Iraqi Shi'ite militias on the Syria-Iraq border, which was attributed both to the United States and Israel. Shamkhani also declared that Tehran will support any Iraqi decision concerning the formation of the new government in Baghdad.

► **Internal public criticism of Tehran's policy of investing beyond the country's borders, and in particular the support for the Assad regime, Hezbollah and the Palestinians is growing in Iran, as Iranian citizens face a worsening economic crisis.**

This criticism manifested during a protest of bazaar merchants in Tehran at the end of June, during which chants of "death to Palestine" could be heard. In recent weeks, Iranian users waged a social media campaign against the Imam Khomeini Relief Foundation, following reports that it distributed hundreds of thousands of meals to break the fast in the Gaza Strip during the month of Ramadan.

Iranian Involvement in Syria and Lebanon

► Three additional Iranian fighters were killed in Syria. Iranian media reported that Shahrokh Daeipour, a senior officer with the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) was killed on June 22 in the Albu Kamal region. On June 27, Iranian outlets reported that a fighter with the Basij militia of the IRGC, Mousa Rajjabi, was killed a few days prior, also in Albu Kamal. On July 2, the death of IRGC officer Mohammad Ebrahim Rashidi, a fighter with the IRGC's Ground Forces, was also reported. Iranian media did not disclose where he was killed, but according to sources in the Free Syrian Army (July 3), he was killed in Deir al-'Addas in north-western Daraa governorate. It is possible that Iranian media did not mention the location of the fighter's killing due to Iranian unwillingness to admit to Iranian presence in Daraa, southern Syria.



Shahrokh Daeipour (Tasnim, June 23 2018).



**Mohammad Ebrahim Rashidi
(ABNA, July 2 2018).**

- ▶ At least five Iranian fighters were killed in recent battles against ISIS in the region of Albu Kamal in eastern Syria. The large number of casualties among Iranian fighters and Shi'ite militias backed by Iran attests to the challenges Iran and its allies are facing in their efforts to secure control of this strategic region.
- ▶ Ali Akbar Velayati, the Senior Adviser on International Affairs to the Supreme Leader, declared that sooner or later, the Americans will have to retreat from the eastern bank of the Euphrates River Valley and that the Syrian people will get rid of them. In a meeting with the Syrian minister of higher education, Velayati congratulated Syria for its latest victories, and in particular “the recent victories in Daraa.” He asserted that Syria and Iran’s main enemies are the United States, Israel and the regional “reactionary countries” (meaning Saudi Arabia, in particular), which continue to plot against the Syrian government and the Syrian people. He added that the presence of several thousands of American troops in the Euphrates Valley is not based on a United Nations Security Council resolution or a formal invitation by the Syrian government. Velayati proclaimed that there is not doubt that the

victory in Daraa is a prelude to additional victories of the Syrian government and its allies in the Euphrates River Valley (ISNA, July 3).

► Against the backdrop of reports about negotiations between the United States and Russia concerning Syria's future, including the future of Iranian presence in the country, Moscow and Tehran continue to hold deliberations. Russian media reported (July 2) that Iranian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mohammad Javad Zarif, spoke on the phone with his Russian counterpart, Sergey Lavrov. The two discussed bilateral relations between the two countries and the negotiations process concerning the settlement of Syria's war (Interfax, July 2). On July 4, Lavrov declared after a meeting with the Jordanian foreign minister that the demand that Iran completely withdraw from Syria is "unrealistic." He asserted that Iran is one of the key regional countries and it can not be expected to abandon its interests (AP, July 4). In early July, Hossein Jaber Ansari, the Senior Adviser of the Iranian Minister of Foreign Affairs, met with the Russian Ambassador to Tehran, Levan Dzhagaryan, and discussed with him the cooperation between the two countries across the Middle East, and in particular, developments in Syria (ILNA, July 1).

► Meanwhile, Shi'ite Iraqi militias operating under Iranian control are taking part in the offensive in southern Syria, although their share in the overall manpower fighting on the regime's side in the offensive is apparently insignificant. The Shi'ite militias advertise their involvement in the campaign, possibly as a public show of defiance against Israel. Iranian media, in the meantime, provides running reports about the fighting in southern Syria without mentioning the involvement of Shi'ite pro-Iranian militias in the campaign. Among the militias participating in the campaign are the Zulfiqar Brigade, a Shi'ite Iraqi militia operating under Iranian patronage, and the Abu al-Fadhal al-Abbas Brigade, another Shi'ite Iraqi militia that is also operating under the guidance of the IRGC.

► Iran's former Ambassador to Syria, Mohammad Reza Raouf Sheibani, argued in an interview to the Tasnim news agency (July 4) that the United States has no clear strategy concerning developments in Syria and that in most cases, it is passive and is not the one to initiate moves. In the interview conducted during the Syrian Army's operation in southern Syria, Sheibani stated that Israel is one of the losers of the developments in Syria. He mentioned that the crisis in Syria created a golden opportunity for Israel to settle a historic score with the Assad administration and harm the Resistance Axis, but the involvement of Iran, Hezbollah and Russia in Syria changed the situation to Israel's detriment. Sheibani

claimed that Israel is exploiting the presence of Iranian “advisers” in Syria as an excuse to open a direct front with Iran and Syria to turn the struggle in Syria from a local one to a regional one. Israel also strives, according to him, to extend the crisis under different pretexts, because any political solution that will be reached through Iranian, Russian and Turkish initiative, will be detrimental to Israel.

► Addressing the negotiations between the United States and Russia surrounding developments in southern Syria, Sheibani stated that what matters to Syria and its allies is the cleansing of the area of armed opposition elements and terrorists and returning control of the region to the central Syrian government. Sheibani asserted that liberating southern Syria from the terrorists will encourage the Syrian government and army to complete the liberation of the last three areas beyond their control: the al-Tanf area under U.S. and ISIS control; the al-Jazira region east of the Euphrates under the control of the United States and their local allies; and Idlib governorate.



Former Iranian ambassador to Damascus, Mohammad Reza Raouf Sheibani (Tasnim, July 4 2018).

► Mohammad Jalal Firouznia was appointed as Iran’s new Ambassador to Lebanon. He replaces Mohammad Fathali, who served as Ambassador in Beirut since 2014. Firouznia previously served as Iran’s ambassador to Yemen, Bahrain and Malaysia (ISNA, June 30).



Mohammad Jalal Firouznia, the new Iranian Ambassador to Beirut (Tasnim, June 30 2018).

- ▶ Iran's embassy in Lebanon announced that the Speaker of the Iranian Majlis, Ali Larijani, will pay a visit to Lebanon during the summer. In his trip, Larijani intends to congratulate his Lebanese counterpart and other senior Lebanese officials on the general elections, recently held in the country. Larijani also plans to discuss strengthening relations between the two countries, particularly in the economic sphere (Mehr, July 1).

Iranian Involvement in Iraq

- ▶ On June 25, the Secretary of the Iranian Supreme National Security Council, Ali Shamkhani, met with Faleh Fayyad, the National Security Adviser of the Iraqi Prime Minister, and discussed regional developments and relations between the two countries. Shamkhani congratulated the Iraqi government on holding the recent general elections. Shamkhani expressed hope that the improvement in Iraq's security situation will allow to expand economic and trade ties between Tehran and Baghdad. Shamkhani accused the United States of supporting "what remains of the terrorists" in the region and condemned the recent attack against Shi'ite Iraqi militias on the Syria-Iraq border, which was attributed both to Israel and the United States. He asserted that the United State and Israel play a central role in many crises in the region. He emphasized once again Iran's unrelenting support for Iraq and stated that Tehran will support any decision made in Iraq concerning the formation of the new government in Baghdad (Fars, June 25). During his visit to Tehran, Fayyad also met with the Senior Adviser to the Iranian Supreme Leader, Ali Akbar Velayati.



**Ali Shamkhani's meeting with Faleh Fayyad
(YJC.IR, June 25 2018).**

Iranian Involvement in the Palestinian Arena

- ▶ As internal criticism in Iran continues to mount against Iranian investments beyond Iran's border, the Spokesman of the Fatah Movement, Osama Qawasmeh, declared that Iran has not provided any assistance to Palestine. Qawasmeh condemned the anti-Palestinian slogans voiced in the recent protest of bazaar merchants in Tehran, including the chant "death to Palestine." Qawasmeh said that the claims that the economic crisis in Iran is connected to Iran's support of the Palestinian people is unfounded. He argued that Iran has not given a thing to the Palestinian people, and that the Palestinians never intervened in Iran's internal affairs. The Palestinian people appreciate and respect the Iranian people, and the Iranian people support the rights of the Palestinians, he stated. Qawasmeh asserted that he is unaware of any Iranian participation in the establishment of a school, university, hospital or a development project in Palestine. Qawasmeh added that Iran's support for Hamas does not mean support for the Palestinian people, but merely support for a specific party.
- ▶ Following the statement of the Fatah spokesman, the Spokesman of Hamas' Resistance Committees, Abu Mujahed, declared that Iran provided plentiful support for the Palestinian people and the Resistance, especially through the Palestinian branch of the Iranian Martyr's Foundation, which supports the families of fallen Palestinians in the Gaza Strip. He argued that the fact that Iran does not transfer its assistance to the Palestinians through the institutions of the Palestinian Authority, does not mean that it does not support the Palestinian people (Asr-e Iran, July 3).

► As protests increase in Iran, the country is witnessing growing public outcry against Iran's ongoing support for the Syrian regime, terrorist organizations and the Palestinians at the expense of Iran's citizenry. In recent week, a campaign was launched on Iranian social media against the Imam Khomeini Relief Foundation for providing assistance to needy Muslims around the world, and in particular in the Gaza Strip and Lebanon. The campaign was launched after at the beginning of the month of Ramadan (mid-May 2018), Iranian media outlets and social media published photographs and videos documenting the distributing of fast-breaking meals on behalf of the Imam Khomeini Relief Foundation to 300,000 Palestinians residing in the Gaza Strip (IRNA, May 18).