



Spotlight on Iran

July 8 – July 22, 2018

Author: Dr. Raz Zimmt

Overview

- ▶ Ahead of the summit between the American and Russian presidents in Helsinki, which also discussed the future of Iran's involvement in Syria, **Iranian officials continued to emphasize that Iran does not intend to withdraw its forces from Syria.** The Senior Adviser to the Supreme Leader of Iran, Ali-Akbar Velayati declared during a visit to Moscow that Iran will only remove its "advisers" from Syria if the Syrian government asks it to do so. He argued that if Iran and Russia removed their forces from Syria at this point, the terrorists will regain control of Syria. The Senior Adviser to the Speaker of the Majlis, Amir Abdollahian, also declared that Iran's presence in Syria will persist.
- ▶ Ahead of the Helsinki summit, Iranian media cast doubts about the ability of the two presidents to reach an agreement concerning the withdrawal of Iranian forces from Syria. The extensive discussion in Iran concerning the future of Iranian presence in Syria reflects, in our assessment, **a constant concern in Tehran about the possibility that Russia may turn its back on Iran and demand the removal of its forces from Syria.** However, the common assessment in Tehran, at this point, is that as long as a final settlement of the war has not been reached, Moscow does not intend to demand from Iran to remove its forces from all corners of Syrian territory.
- ▶ **Iran is closely monitoring the wave of protests that erupted in southern Iraq, during which protesters chanted against Iran and its meddling in internal Iraqi affairs.** The pro-reform newspaper Etemaad warned in a commentary published last week that Iraqi public opinion is gradually shifting against Iran, in part due to a wrongheaded Iranian policy and lack of coordination between all of the Iranian bodies involved in Iraq.
- ▶ The Commander of the Qods Force of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), Qasem Soleimani, was supposed to deliver a pre-recorded speech on July 16 to a Palestinian crowd at a conference in Gaza. The speech eventually did not take place, possibly due to technical interferences or difficulties in transmission of the broadcast from Tehran. The leaders of Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad, who were set to attend the

conference, canceled their appearance, possibly in light of Egypt's opposition or due to the security situation in the Gaza Strip. Meanwhile, Khamenei, the Supreme Leader of Iran, declared that the "deal of the century" that the U.S. administration is trying to formulate to solve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict will never come to fruition. He declared that the struggle of the Muslims and Palestinians will persist until "the roots of the fake Zionist regime will be removed from the Land of Palestine."

Iranian Involvement in Syria and Lebanon

► On July 11, Ali-Akbar Velayati, the Senior Adviser on International Affairs to the Supreme Leader, arrived for a visit in Moscow. Velayati met with the Russian President, Vladimir Putin, and conveyed messages on behalf of the Iranian Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, and Iranian President, Hassan Rouhani. During their meeting, the two discussed bilateral relations between the two countries and developments in the Middle East. According to Velayati, President Putin emphasized the need to continue the regional, security and political cooperation between Moscow and Tehran, and the defense of the governments in Syria and Iraq (Tasnim, July 12).



The meeting between Velayati and President Putin (Entekhab, July 12 2018).

► During a talk at the Valdai Discussion Club in Moscow, Velayati reiterated Iran's official position that its presence in Syria and Iraq includes "advisers" alone and is based on the official invitations of the Iraqi and Syrian government. If these governments announce that they no longer require Iranian military presence and ask for the advisers to be removed, Iran will not hesitate to do so immediately. He stressed that Iran did not seek American approval to operate in Syria and will not leave the country due to American threats. According to him, Iran's presence in Syria has nothing to do with Israel and Iran does not

pay any attention to the statements made by Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu on the matter. Velayati emphasized that if Iran and Russia were to retreat from Syria under the current conditions, the terrorists will regain control of Syria. He asserted that Iran and Hezbollah assisted Syria for four years without any support from other countries, and today 80% of Syria is free of terrorists. He added that the United States will have to withdraw from the region and if the Americans do not leave the Middle East, Iran will resist them and force them to leave the region. The United States, he claimed, strives to partition Iraq into three parts and Syria into five different parts (Tasnim, July 13).

► Velayati's statement, made during the talk in Moscow, that the Assad regime would have fallen within weeks if it were not for Iran, aroused uncommon criticism in Syria. The pro-regime Syrian newspaper al-Watan published on July 15 a commentary criticizing Velayati, entitled: "Sorry, Ali-Akbar Velayati... The world would have fallen, but Syria would not have."

► Ahead of Velayati's visit to Moscow, the former Iranian Ambassador to Jordan, Nasratollah Tajik, stated in an interview to the website Entekhab (July 11) that Iran should increase its cooperation with Russia regarding Syria to ensure that Russia does not reach an agreement with the United States, which would harm Iranian interests and ignore Iran's role in Syria. According to him, Iran should play a role in Syria's economic reconstruction and Velayati's visit is an opportunity to clarify to Russia Iran's positions.

► On the eve of the summit between the U.S. and Russian presidents on July 16, which also discussed the Iranian presence in Syria, Iranian media estimated that it is highly doubtful that an agreement will be reached between the two leaders concerning Iranian withdrawal from Syria. An Iranian commentator on Russia affairs assessed in an interview with the Fararu website (July 14) that Russia has a firm understanding of Iran's deep and strategic influence in the region, and realizes that Iran can not be removed from Syria by applying pressure on it. In addition, the withdrawal of Iran from Syria would harm Russian influence in the region, which was facilitated to a large extent by Iranian involvement in Syria. Therefore, it is unlikely that Russia will reach a deal with the United States concerning Iranian withdrawal from Syria. The commentator did mention that Russia is not interested in confrontations between Iran and Israel in Syria, as those may undermine Russia's achievements there over the past few years.

- ▶ The editors of the Tabnak website also assessed (July 14) that it is doubtful that presidents Trump and Putin will reach an agreement concerning Iranian withdrawal from Syria. As long as the Russians are not confident about the stabilization of the situation in Syria and their victory, they will not apply pressure on Iran to retreat from Syria. Russia is also using Iran's presence in Syria as a bargaining chip to achieve concessions and a larger deal with the West, particularly with the United States. In addition, a large share of the combat forces in the Syrian arena are operating under Iranian guidance and command, which increases Tehran's ability to withstand pressures exerted by Russia or any other party. At the end of the day, similar to Prime Minister Netanyahu, who has thus far failed, through his trips to Moscow, to engender pressure on Iran to retreat from Syria, President Trump will also likely fail to achieve this goal in his meeting with Putin. This is unless Russia wins significant concessions from Trump in exchange for sacrificing Iran, Tabnak argued.
- ▶ The pro-reform press in Iran adopted a more critical approach toward Russia and warned about its "possible betrayal" of Iran. A commentary published by the Etemaad paper (July 16) emphasized that Iran and Russia are two sovereign powers that intervened in the crisis in Syria based on their goals and interests and may in the future adopt divergent policies and plans based on their particular goals and interests.
- ▶ On July 17, the Senior Adviser to the Iranian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Hossein Jaber Ansari, visited Syria and met with the Syrian President, Bashar Assad and the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Walid Muallem. The meeting concerned developments in Syria and future coordination between the two countries. During their meeting, Ansari congratulated President Assad for the accomplishments of the Syrian Army in southern Syria (ISNA, July 17). Prior to his visit in Damascus, Ansari visited Beirut and passed on a letter from President Rouhani to Lebanese President Michel Aoun (IRNA, July 16).
- ▶ Amir Abdollahian, the Special Adviser to the Speaker of the Majlis, asserted in a meeting with Salah al-Zawawi, the Palestinian Ambassador to Tehran, that the presence of the "resistance forces and Iranian military advisers" in Syria will persist in order to fight terrorism. He alleged that "the Zionist regime" strives to take over Syria after the defeat of ISIS, but the Syrian people will not allow Syria to again become a base for "the Zionists terrorists."
- ▶ Abdollahian added that Iran will continue with its steadfast support for the Resistance and will not stop assisting the Palestinians due to the threats of the "Zionist regime," which

endangers the security of the countries of the region. He stated that resistance and holding a referendum among the residents of historical Palestine, including Christians, Muslims and Jews, are the two foundations for a practical political solution of the Palestinian problem (ISNA, July 8).



The meeting between Abdollahian and the Palestinian ambassador to Tehran (ISNA, July 8 2018).

- ▶ On July 17, Abdollahian met with the Syrian Ambassador to Tehran, Adnan Mahmoud, and discussed with him developments in Syria and the relations between the two countries. Abdollahian defined the relationship between Damascus and Tehran as “strategic,” and insisted that “the Zionist regime” can not affect the future of relations between Syria and Iran.” According to him, the cooperation between Tehran, Moscow and Hezbollah in returning security to Syria has been a successful experience. Abdollahian also emphasized the need to expand the trade and economic ties between the two countries (Mehr, July 17).
- ▶ During a ceremony for the appointment of a new commander for the IRGC’s forces in Sistan-Baluchestan province, the Deputy Commander of the IRGC, Hossein Salami, proclaimed that Iran and Hezbollah foiled Israel’s plans to take over the region. He alleged that the Zionists wanted to occupy the entire area stretching from the Mediterranean to the Euphrates River, but Hezbollah thwarted all of their plans. The Zionists intended to occupy Syria, but today they are hearing the voices of Iranian, Afghans, Iraqis, Lebanese and Pakistanis near their border, a testament to the establishment of an international force for the eradication of “the arrogance” (a term for the West) (Fars, July 14).



**Deputy Commander of the IRGC, Hossein Salami
(Fars, July 14 2018).**

- ▶ On July 13, marking the 12th anniversary of the 2006 Lebanon War, the Supreme Leader of Iran met with Hezbollah fighters who were injured in the war (Mashregh News, July 13).



**Iranian Supreme Leader with a delegation of Hezbollah fighters who were injured fighting in the
2006 Lebanon War (Mashregh News, July 13 2018).**

Iranian Involvement in Iraq

- ▶ Iran is monitoring the protests that erupted over the past two weeks in southern Iraq due to the economic crisis, shortages of water and electricity and corruption. Some of the chants during the demonstrations were directed against Iran and its meddling in internal Iraqi politics. The pro-reform newspaper Etemaad warned in a commentary published on July 15 that Iraqi public opinion is gradually turning against Iran, in part due to a wrongheaded policy and lack of coordination between various Iranian bodies, including the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the IRGC and Iranian state media.

- ▶ The commentary asserted that following the occupation of Iraq by the United States, the position of Iraq's citizenry toward Iran was positive due to the assistance Tehran provided to citizens and various political groups in Iraq during the American occupation. Iran could have utilized the fall of Saddam Hussein to take part in the reconstruction of Iraq's infrastructure and to expand the economic and trade ties between the two countries. This did not come to pass, however, due to the economic problems and sanctions Iran was enduring. Other countries, on the other hand, chief among them Turkey and China, invested significant resources in Iraq over the past 15 years to develop economic and industrial projects. Iran's rivals promoted social, education and medical projects in Iraq, and as a result, public opinion shifted against Iran.
- ▶ The commentary further argued that Iran's support for the political forces in Iraq affiliated with Tehran led rival political groups in Iraq to begin claiming that Iran is meddling in Iraq's internal affairs; those forces have been able to mobilize political support surrounding this claim. The failed policies of former Iraqi Prime Minister, Nuri al-Maliki, who was seen as close to Iran, further harmed Iran's image. As a result, some of the political forces in Iraq, among them several Shi'ite groups, hold Iran and its policies responsible for Iraq's problems, and blame Tehran for all the malaises afflicting the citizens of Iraq, including economic problems and corruption.

Iranian Involvement in the Palestinian Arena

- ▶ The Supreme Leader of Iran, Ali Khamenei, proclaimed that the "deal of the century" that the U.S. administration is trying to formulate to solve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict will never come to fruition. In a meeting with officials of the Iranian pilgrims' organization, Khamenei asserted that the Palestinian question will not be forgotten and that Jerusalem will remain the capital of Palestine. The Palestinian people will resist the American plot and the Muslim nations will stand behind them, he claimed. "The Muslim nation and the Palestinian people will defeat their enemies and see the day when the roots of the fake Zionist regime will be removed from the Land of Palestine," asserted the Iranian Supreme leader (Fars, July 16).
- ▶ On July 16, the Commander of the IRGC's Qods Force, Qasem Soleimani, was supposed to deliver an unusual pre-recorded speech to a Palestinian crowd at a conference held with senior Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad officials at the Commodore Hotel in Gaza. The

speech was set to be broadcast by satellite at the same time in Tehran and Gaza, as part of the Wet Gunpowder Award ceremony, organized annually by Iran. The speech eventually did not take place, possibly due to technical interferences or difficulties in transmission of the broadcast from Tehran to Gaza. The leaders of Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad, chief among them the leader of Hamas in the Gaza Strip, Yahya Sinwar, who were invited to attend the event, did not appear and instead sent lower-ranked officials. This was possibly due to Egypt's opposition or due to the security situation in the Gaza Strip. The representative of Hamas at the conference, Ismail Radwan, thanked Iran in his speech for its political, financial, military and media support for the organization.

► The central speech delivered from Tehran was given by the Commander of the Basij Force of the IRGC, Gholam-Hossein Gheibparvar, who declared that “the Zionist regime,” which had previously voiced the slogan “from the Nile to the Euphrates,” is now left to defend the homes of its citizens while Palestine's youth deprive the Zionists of their sleep and security (Tasnim, July 16).



The commander of the Basij force of the IRGC in a pre-recorded speech to a conference in Gaza (Tasnim, July 16 2018).