



# Spotlight on Iran

## July 22 – August 5, 2018

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### Overview

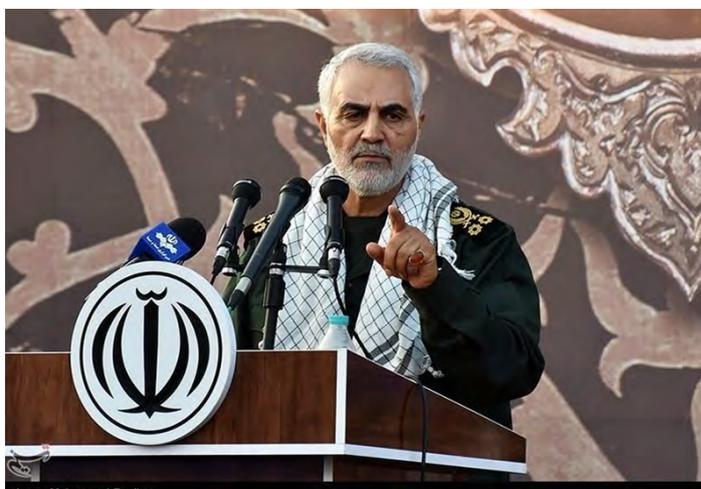
- ▶ As tensions mount between Iran and the United States, **the Commander of the Qods Force of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), Qasem Soleimani, warned the United States against launching military action on Iran.** Soleimani declared that President Trump can start the war, but it will be Iran that concludes it. He also warned that U.S. presence in the Red Sea is no longer secure. In recent weeks, senior IRGC officials, including Soleimani, expressed support for the statements made by Iranian President, Hassan Rouhani, threatening to close the Hormuz Straits if an oil embargo is imposed on Iran.
- ▶ The Iranian news agency Tasnim published a video documenting the capture of the town of Albu Kamal in Syria by the fighters of the Fatemiyoun Brigade, the Afghan militia operating under IRGC guidance in Syria. **The video was released on social media at a time when Iran continues to entrench its hold over the area surrounding the Albu Kamal border crossing between Syria and Iraq by utilizing Shia militias operating under its control.**
- ▶ Iran, Russia and Turkey continue to hold deliberations concerning the settlement of the war in Syria. Delegations from the three countries met last week in Sochi, Russia, to discuss the situation in Syria. In September, representatives of Iran, Russia and Turkey are set to hold talks in Geneva with the UN Envoy to Syria, Staffan de Mistura, to complete the establishment of the body that would draft Syria's constitution.
- ▶ Statements of Russian officials concerning Iranian presence in Syria: In an interview to Israeli media, the Russian ambassador to Israel stated that Russia can not force Iran to withdraw from Syria, but only try to convince it to do so. His statement was quoted by Iranian media, which in recent months provided extensive coverage and analysis concerning the question of Russia's future commitment to Iran after the defeat of Assad's opponents in Syria. In an interview to the Russian news agency Sputnik, the Special Envoy

of the Russian President to Syria, Alexander Laverentiev, stated that **Russia managed to achieve a withdrawal of Iranian forces from 85 kilometers away from Israel's border.**

► Iranian media continues to cover the ongoing protests in southern Iraq, during which protesters have voiced anger toward Iran and its involvement in Iraq. The media coverage reflects an Iranian concern over the burgeoning criticism of Iran among Iraqis, and in particular the Shi'ites, which may undermine Iran's position in the country.

## General Information

► As tensions between Iran and the United States continue to rise, the Commander of the IRGC's Qods Force, Qasem Soleimani, warned the United States against launching military action on Iran. During a speech he gave in the city of Hamedan, Soleimani stated that it is beneath the President of Iran, Hassan Rouhani, to respond to the threats of President Trump, and that he, Soleimani, is doing so as a soldier. "I am your adversary, the Qods Force is your adversary," Soleimani proclaimed. He argued that the United States can not do anything beyond what it has done over the past 20 years, pointing to the U.S. failures in the region, including Iraq, Afghanistan and Yemen. "You can start the war, but it will be us who conclude it," Soleimani declared. He added that Iran is "a nation of martyrs" that is willing to fight against Trump and that such a war will devastate all the capabilities of the adversary. Soleimani warned that U.S. presence in the Red Sea is no longer secure (Tasnim, July 26). In recent weeks, senior IRGC officials, including Soleimani, expressed support for the statements made by Iranian President, Hassan Rouhani, threatening to close off the Hormuz Straits if an oil embargo is imposed on Iran.



**Qasem Soleimani during his speech in Hamadan  
(Tasnim, July 26 2018).**

► Shortly after Soleimani's speech, an Instagram account affiliated with Soleimani uploaded a video allegedly showing Soleimani in the Syria-Iraq border area. Iranian media claimed that these are previously unpublished images from a visit Soleimani continued in the region. The time of the visit was not mentioned.



**Soleimani near the Syria-Iraq border  
(Instagram, July 26 2018).**

## Iranian Involvement in Syria

► On July 22, the Tasnim news agency, seen as closely tied to the IRGC, published a video documenting "the liberation of Albu Kamal in Syria by the fighters of the Fatemiyoun Brigade [the Afghan militia operating under IRGC control in Syria] and the rest of the resistance groups and the forces of the Syrian Army." The video was shared on social media by the media center of the Fatemiyoun Brigade.



**Fatemiyoun Brigade fighters in the battle to capture Albu Kamal  
(Tasnim, July 22 2018).**

- ▶ In recent months, Iran has entrenched its hold over the areas surrounding the Albu Kamal border crossing between Syria and Iraq, utilizing the Shi'ite militias under its control. Tehran perceives this crossing to hold great strategic importance, as the ground line of supply between Iran, Iraq, Syria and Lebanon (“the ground axis”) passes through it. Iraqi-Shi'ite militias and Lebanese Hezbollah played a pivotal role in the capture of the town of Albu Kamal, which marked the end of the Islamic State as an entity governing a territory (November 9, 2017). Hezbollah, the Iraqi Shi'ite militia Harakat al-Nujabaa' (the Movement of the Noblemen), a force from the Fatemiyoun Brigade, a force from the Pakistani Zeynabiyoun Brigade all took part in the capture of Albu Kamal. Iranian officers serving as commanders and advisers are attached to the Shi'ite forces. Several Iranian officers were recently killed in the region during combat operations against ISIS elements.
- ▶ During a meeting with François Sénémaud, the former French Ambassador to Tehran, who was recently appointed as the Special Envoy to Syria of the French President, Hossein Jaber Ansari, the Senior Adviser to the Iranian Minister of Foreign Affairs, stated that Iran supports a political solution for the crisis in Syria. He claimed that since the outbreak of the crisis in Syria, Iran believed that there is no military solution to the crisis and called to eradicate the terrorist groups in the country (Fars, July 29).
- ▶ On July 31, delegations from Iran, Turkey and Russia took part in a conference held in Sochi, Russia, of the three guarantor states of the Astana process. The representatives discussed developments in Syria and deliberated on the settlement of the war. At the helm of the Iranian delegation was the Adviser to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Hossein Jaber Ansari. At the end of the tripartite meeting, the delegations issued a concluding statement emphasizing the need to preserve the sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of Syria (Fars, July 31). According to the United Nations statement, issued on the day of the tripartite conference, the UN Envoy to Syria, Staffan de Mistura, intends to hold talks in Geneva about Syria's future with representatives from Iran, Russia and Turkey in early September. The goal of the meeting is to complete the establishment of a body that would draft the future constitution of Syria (Reuters, July 31).



**The conference between Russian, Turkish and Iranian delegations in Sochi (IRNA, July 31 2018).**

- ▶ In an interview to Israeli Channel 10 News (July 30), Russia’s Ambassador to Israel, Anatoly Victorov, stated that Iranian presence in Syria is legitimate and that Moscow’s influence over Iran is limited. He argued that it is unrealistic to demand the removal of “foreign forces” from Syrian territory. Victorov asserted that Russia and Syria currently require the assistance of Iranian military advisers and Iranian militias, which according to him, are playing a very important role in the joint struggle against terrorists in Syria. He explained that Russia can not compel Iran to withdraw from Syria, but only try to convince it to do so. The statements made by the ambassador were reported by Iranian media as well.
- ▶ The Special Envoy of the Russian President to Syria, Alexander Laverentiev, stated in an interview to the Russian website Sputnik (August 1), that Russia managed to achieve the withdrawal of Iranian forces 85 kilometers away from Israel’s borders. He added that Russia is taking into account the interests of neighboring countries, including Israel, and assessed that Israel’s fear of Iranian presence along the border has subsided.

## Iranian Involvement in Iraq

- ▶ Iranian media continues to provide coverage of the ongoing demonstrations in southern Iraq, during which protesters voices criticism of Iran's involvement in Iraq. The Director of the Arab Center for Iranian Studies, Mohammad Saleh Sadaghian, argued in an interview to the website Iranian Diplomacy (July 23) that the latest developments in Iraq damaged the support for Iran among the Iraqi public. He explained that the main reason for the ongoing protests in southern Iraq is political and economic corruption. However, recent developments allow anti-Iranian currents operating in Iraq, including remnants of the Baath Party, to exploit the situation to carry out an anti-Iranian campaign and cast the blame on Iran for Iraq's ills.
- ▶ Sadaghian criticized the sudden manner of Iran's cutoff of electricity to Iraq, although he acknowledged that the Iraqi government was aware of Iran's intention to do so, due to the water crisis in Iraq's south, and the Iraqi debt in electricity payments to Iran. He pointed to Iran's vital contribution to liberating Iraq from ISIS, and the assistance Iran provided to Iraq to rebuild its electricity infrastructure, but added that the electricity stoppage harmed Iran's popularity among Iraq's citizenry. According to him, the sudden electricity cutoff gave rise to claims that Tehran stopped the flow of electricity to pressure the political currents in Iraq and affect the composition of the next government in Baghdad.