



Spotlight on Iran

September 2 – September 6, 2018

Author: Dr. Raz Zimmt

Overview

- ▶ A week following the visit of the Iranian minister of defense to Damascus, the Iranian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mohammad Javad Zarif, also paid a visit to Syria. The visit took place ahead of **a summit of the Iranian, Russian and Turkish presidents set to take place in Tehran** (September 7, 2018) and against the backdrop of ongoing preparations for the looming assault on the Idlib region. Similarly to the Iranian minister of defense, Minister of Foreign Affairs Zarif reiterated Iran's desire to play a central role in Syria's economic reconstruction following the conclusion of the civil war.
- ▶ **On September 1, 2018, the quadrilateral security summit**, attended by deputy chiefs of staff from Iran, Russia, Iraq and Syria, was held in Baghdad. This summit is a manifestation of the ongoing security and intelligence coordination between the four countries amid progress in the campaign against ISIS and the rebels in Syria and Iraq.
- ▶ Earlier this week, Tehran denied reports published in Western media about the transfer of ballistic missiles from Iran to the Shi'ite militias in Iraq and presented them as another attempt by the United States and its allies to harm relations between Iraq and its neighbors. Meanwhile, Iran is persisting with its efforts to affect the composition of the next government in Baghdad. These Iranian efforts come at a time when the United States is attempting, through the mediation of the special envoy to the region, to ensure the establishment of a government headed by Haider al-Abadi that excludes the al-Fath Coalition affiliated with the Iranian-backed Shi'ite militias. An Iraqi website reported this week that the Commander of the Qods Force of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), Qasem Soleimani, recently admitted that Tehran is unable to prevent Haider al-Abadi's second term in office.

Iranian Involvement in Syria

► The Russian, Iranian and Turkish presidents are set to meet on September 7, 2018 in Tehran. The summit comes at a time when Syrian regime forces and their allies are preparing to launch an offensive on the northwestern Syrian governorate of Idlib.



The Iranian, Russian and Turkish presidents (Tasnim, April 2, 2018)

- In a media interview, the Iranian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mohammad Javad Zarif, stated that Iran sees the trilateral summit as an opportunity for the three presidents to hold additional deliberations concerning the settlement of the war in Syria. He asserted that as far as Iran is concerned, the solution to the crisis in Syria will be achieved through political deliberations.
- Referring to reports in Western media that Russia is conducting negotiations with the United States concerning the withdrawal of Iranian forces from Syria, Zarif insisted that these claims are unfounded. It is impossible for Russia to hold negotiations with the United States on behalf of Iran, he argued, and if Iran was interested in holding negotiations (with the United States), it can do so itself. He added that the United States' policies in the region are extremely dangerous (Alef, September 1, 2018).
- On September 3, 2018, the Syrian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Moammad Javad Zarif, arrived for an unplanned visit in Syria, during which he met with President Assad, Syrian Prime Minister Imad Khamis, and Syrian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Walid Muallem. During the meetings, Zarif discussed with his interlocutors developments in the region and the relationship between the two countries.

- Upon arrival in Damascus, Zarif stated that the purpose of the visit is to hold consultations with Syria's leadership ahead of the summit of the Iranian, Russian and Turkish presidents in Tehran. In his meeting with the Syrian prime minister, Zarif stressed that Iran is interested in taking part in Syria's economic reconstruction. He mentioned that the first deputy of the Iranian president is set to visit Syria to sign a comprehensive long-term agreement concerning cooperation between the two countries (Tasnim, September 3, 2018).
- At a press conference he held at the end of his visit, the Iranian minister of foreign affairs stated that the reconstruction of Syria and Iraq presents a good opportunity for Iranian firms to export technical and engineering services to those two nations, creating job openings for Iranians (Mehr, September 5, 2018).



**The meeting between Zarif and Assad in Damascus
(Tasnim, September 3, 2018).**

- The Syrian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Walid Muallem, proclaimed that his country is determined to further its military cooperation with Iran. Muallem, who arrived on August 30, 2018 for a meeting in Moscow with his Russian counterpart, Sergey Lavrov, asserted that Iran is a central ally and a friend of Syria, adding that the Iranian military advisers played a crucial role in the campaign against the terrorists in Syria, alongside the Syrian Army. Muallem also mentioned the visit of the Iranian Minister of Defense, Amir Hatami, to Damascus last week, during which the two countries signed an agreement concerning military cooperation between them; Muallem stated that it is logical to sign military cooperation agreements between the two nations to allow the expansion of their ties in this sphere (IRNA, August 31, 2018).

► On September 1, 2018, the quadrilateral security committee with representative of Iran, Russia, Iraq and Syria met at the headquarters of the Iraqi ministry of defense. The committee was established three years ago to facilitate security coordination and intelligence sharing concerning the campaigns against ISIS in Syria and Iraq between the four countries. During the meeting, the deputy chiefs of staff of Russia, Iran and Syria and the Iraqi assistant chief of staff discussed the latest developments in the campaign against “terrorism,” particularly in Syria. The Iranian Deputy Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces on International Affairs, Qadir Nazemi, who headed the Iranian delegation, reported that the representatives of the four nations agreed to hold a summit of the four chiefs of staff of Iran, Russia, Iraq and Syria in the near future (Tasnim, September 2, 2018). It was reported that the four countries comprising the committee have established a joint operations room against ISIS, which is still operating in the desert region along the Iraq-Syria border (al-Nahar, September 1, 2018).



The quadrilateral security summit (IRNA, September 2, 2018).

Iranian Involvement in Iraq

► The Spokesman of the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Bahram Qasemi, forcefully denied the report published by the Reuters news agency (August 31, 2018), according to which Iran transferred ballistic missiles to the Shi’ite militias it supports in Iraq. According to this report, Iran transferred to the militias several dozen “Zelzal” and “Fath 110” missiles, capable of hitting targets within the 200 and 700 kilometer ranges respectively (120 miles and 435 miles). The purpose of the alleged transfer is to signal to Iran’s rivals in the region and the United States that it has the capability to use Iraqi territory to launch missiles in any direction

at any time Tehran chooses to do so. According to Iranian and Iraqi source as well as two Western intelligence officials, Iran transferred the missiles to its allies in Iraq in recent months, and is also assisting the Shi'ite militias in developing the capability to begin manufacturing such missiles themselves.

► The spokesman of the Iranian ministry of foreign affairs labeled the report as “delusional, meaningless and preposterous.” He asserted that the purpose of this false and unfounded report is to sow fear among countries of the region, and harm Iran’s foreign relations, and in particular, Terhan’s ties with its neighbors (Fars, September 1, 2018).

► The Iraqi ministry of foreign affairs also denied the Reuters report. A statement issued by the ministry insisted that all Iraqi state institutions are obligated by Article 5 of the Iraqi constitution prohibiting the use of Iraqi soil for actions against the security of another country (the TV channel al-Sumaria, September 2, 2018).

► In response to the decision of the Iraqi Prime Minister, Haider al-Abadi, to fire Falih al-Fayyad from his position at the National Security Advisor and the head of the authority supervising the Popular Mobilization Units (al-Hashd al-Shaabi), the Spokesman of the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Bahram Qasemi, stated that this is an internal Iraqi issue and Iran does not intend to intervene on this matter. He added that Iran sees great importance in preserving a safe, unified and advanced Iraq (Tasnim, September 1, 2018). Asemi denied that he had criticized the decision to remove al-Fayyad from his position in an interview he gave to the Russian news website Sputnik on August 31, 2018. He claimed that he did not address this issue in any way during the interview to the Russian outlet (ISNA, September 1, 2018).

► al-Abadi’s decision to depose al-Fayyad due to his political involvement in the ongoing cabinet formation talks caused a firestorm among the Shi’ite militias, some of whom are supported by Iran. Recently, Iran ratcheted up its criticism of al-Abadi following his statement that Iraq will abide by the economic sanctions on Iran, recently re-imposed by the United States. Tehran, which sees these statements as another sign for al-Abadi’s intention to pursue an independent and even apprehensive approach toward Iran if chosen again for the position of prime minister, is working to affect the process of formation of the next government in Baghdad. Iran’s efforts coincide with American moves, headed by the Special Envoy Brett McGurk, also intended to affect the formation of the new Iraqi government. The U.S. is seeking to exclude the al-Fath Coalition, affiliated with the Iranian-backed Shi’ite

militias, from the next cabinet. On September 2, 2018, the coalition of the Iraqi Prime Minister al-Abadi, and the Shi'ite cleric, Muqtada al-Sadr, announced that they have been able to form, alongside other parties, the largest bloc in the Iraqi parliament. The bloc currently does not include the al-Fath Coalition.

► Meanwhile, the Iraqi website The Baghdad Post reported (September 2, 2018) based on Iraqi political sources, that the Commander of the IRGC's Qods Force, Qasem Soleimani, recently admitted that Tehran is incapable of preventing Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi from running for the position of the next prime minister. According to this report, whose veracity is unclear, Soleimani told two of Iran's allies, the former Iraqi Prime Minister, Nouri al-Maliki, and the head of the Fath Coalition, Hadi al-Ameri, that Iran failed in its efforts to remove Haider al-Abadi from the running, and that he is one of the strongest contenders for the position.

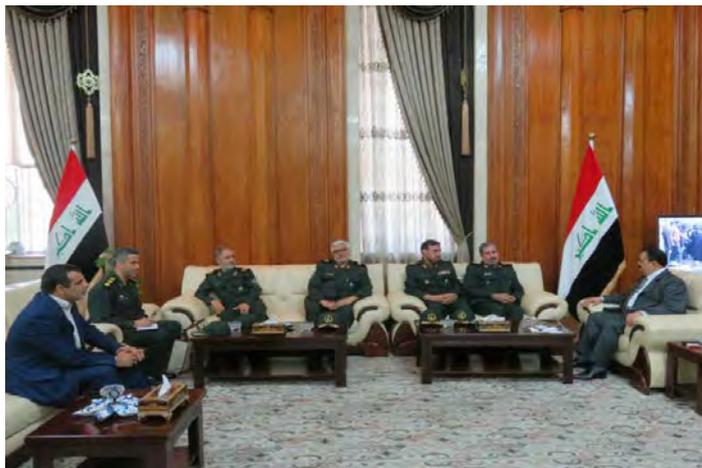
► The Head of the Joint Iranian-Iraqi Chamber of Commerce, Yahya al-e Eshagh, stated that the two countries agreed to abandon the dollar in transactions between them to deal with the restrictions recently instituted as part of the sanctions re-imposed by the United States against Iran. He reported that the U.S. dollar had been removed from the list of currencies that can be used in deals between the two countries, and those will now be carried out using Iranian rials, Iraqi dinars and the Euro. At the same time, Iraqi and Iranian traders can continue executing transactions through barter deals (Mehr, September 1, 2018).

► The former Iranian Ambassador to Iraq, Hassan Danaeifar, assessed in an interview to the Tasnim news agency (September 2, 2018), that Iran and Iraq will continue to tighten their bilateral relationship, despite the efforts of the United States and Saudi Arabia to undermine this relationship. He asserted that the re-imposition of U.S. sanctions against Iran will not impede the relationship between Tehran and Baghdad, which maintain comprehensive relations in the economic and tourism spheres.



**Hassan Danaeifar, the former Iranian Ambassador to Iraq
(Tasnim, September 2, 2018)**

► During his visit to Baghdad to attend the quadrilateral security committee, the Deputy Iranian Chief of Staff, Qadir Nezami, met with Iraq's Minister of Defense, Irfan al-Hayali, and discussed the expansion of military cooperation between the two countries. al-Hayali stated that Iraq is ready to implement agreements previously signed between senior military officials of the two countries, and thanked Iran for its cooperation in the campaign against ISIS (IRNA, September 2, 2018).



**The meeting of the delegation headed by the Iranian deputy chief of staff
with the delegation headed by the Iraqi minister of defense (IRNA, September 2, 2018)**