



# Spotlight on Iran

September 9 – September 20, 2018

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## Overview

- ▶ Iran, Russia and Turkey continue to negotiate regarding Idlib's fate. **Iran publicly welcomed the agreement reached in Sochi between the Russian and Turkish presidents that called for the establishment of a demilitarized zone (DMZ) between the rebels and the Syrian Army.** The summit in Sochi took place after negotiations concerning rebel-held Idlib in Geneva and the tripartite summit between the presidents of the three nations in Tehran. During the Tehran summit, the parties failed to reach an understanding due to disagreements between the three, as Russia and Iran pushed to allow the regime to re-occupy Idlib, while Turkey objected to this scenario. In spite of the positive Iranian response in public, **we believe that Iran is concerned about the unilateral Russian-Turkish move,** which apparently has not been decided in coordination with Iran.
- ▶ Two Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps members were killed in Syria. The location and circumstances of their death are still unclear.
- ▶ The Iranian ambassador to Iraq inaugurated a new building for the Iranian consulate in Basra, after the previous consulate building was set ablaze on September 7, 2018, by Iraqi protesters. Iran, which suggested that foreigners were involved in the attack on the consular building, called on Iraqi authorities to apprehend the perpetrators. Iranian officials were quick to emphasize, however, that the attack will not affect the relationship between the two nations.
- ▶ Meanwhile, Iran continues to closely follow and try to influence the process of new government formation in Baghdad, as the current Prime Minister, Haider al-Abadi, announced that he does not intend to run for a second term. Iranian media expressed satisfaction with the nomination of Mohammed al-Halbusi for the new Parliament Speaker, which came to pass due to the support of the Fath Coalition, which is affiliated with the pro-Iranian Shi'ite militias.

► Senior Iranian military and political officials justified the September 8, 2018, missile strike by the IRGC on the headquarters of the Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan in northern Iraq, claiming it was merely an exercise in self-defense on Iran's part. The Iranian chief of staff demanded that the Iraqi government and Kurdistan Regional Government in northern Iraq apprehend and extradite the Kurdish separatists and shutter the bases the separatists use to launch attacks in northwestern Iran. The IRGC's commander proclaimed that the Iranian strike, which killed 11 people, should serve as a message to Iran's enemies not to try to impose their goals on Iran.

## Iranian Involvement in Syria

► An IRGC fighter, Ali Asghar Eliasi, with the 10<sup>th</sup> Division of the IRGC, was killed in Syria. Iranian media also reported about the death in Syria of Farhad Talebi, a cleric who fought with the 102 Brigade of the IRGC. Regarding the circumstances of Eliasi's death, there are currently contradictory initial versions. According to an Iranian version, he was killed in the Aleppo region. According to Syrian sources, he was killed in battle east of Palmyra.



**Ali Asghar Eliasi (Mizan Online, September 12, 2018)**

► Hossein Dehqan, the former Iranian Minister of Defense who currently serves as the Military Affairs Adviser to the Supreme Leader Khamenei, stated in an interview to the Russian TV channel, RT Arabic, that Iran is willing to militarily assist Syria against the United States. He asserted that if Syria wants to fight the American forces east of the Euphrates, Tehran would be willing to support it militarily, if Syria asks for such assistance. Dehqan emphasized that the campaign against the "terrorists" must continue with their eradication

from the Idlib pocket, since they threaten security wherever they move. He added that American forces must be removed from Syria, as they have never been invited in by the Syrian government. During the interview, Dehqan denied the reports about manufacture of Iranian missiles in Syria (ISNA, September 9, 2018).



**Hossein Dehqan (ISNA, September 9, 2018)**

- Iran, Russia and Turkey continue to hold negotiations in parallel to the ongoing preparations for the military offensive on the Idlib area, the last stronghold of the Syrian rebels. On September 10-11, 2018, representatives of the three countries held talks in Geneva regarding Idlib, in a follow-up meeting to the summit of the three presidents in Tehran on September 7. During the summit, differences emerged between Russia and Iran on the one hand and Turkey on the other regarding the regime's recapture of Idlib. While Russia and Iran supported a large-scale ground operation, Turkey opposed it, and publicly supported a ceasefire, calling on Russia and the Syrian regime to halt their aerial and ground attacks on the region.
- The UN's Envoy to Syria, Staffan de Mistura, took part in the talks in Geneva. At the end of the deliberations, the Envoy of the Russian President to Syria, Alexander Lavrentiev, declared that it is impossible to live besides "the terrorists" and therefore, the struggle against them must persist until their complete eradication. Lavrentiev expressed his belief that Russia, Turkey and Iran can coordinate between them a mechanism to carry out a military operation against the "terrorist organizations" in Idlib, emphasizing that this operation needs to be carried out carefully to minimize harm to uninvolved civilians and ensure their safety (RIA, TASS, September 11, 2018).

- ▶ On September 17, 2018, the presidents of Russia and Turkey met in Sochi and reached an agreement concerning Idlib, which will see the establishment of a demilitarized zone (DMZ) between the rebels and the Syrian military. The DMZ will be patrolled by Turkish and Russian forces. Iran welcomed the agreement reached between the two leaders. The Iranian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mohammad Javad Zarif, posted on his Twitter account (September 18, 2018), that diplomatic efforts will avert war in Idlib and that diplomacy works. The Spokesman of the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Bahram Qasemi, stated that the agreement reached following the meeting of the Russian and Turkish presidents in Sochi is an important step toward solving the problem of the terrorists groups remaining in Syria. He claimed that one of the central goals of Iranian foreign policy is to end the bloodshed in the region and cleanse it of terrorists. He added that Tehran was updated about the agreement before it was signed (ISNA, September 18, 2018).
- ▶ On September 18, 2018, the foreign ministers of Iran and Turkey held a phone call, in which the agreement reached in Sochi was discussed. The two agreed to deliberate on the details on the deal during the tripartite meeting of the Iranian, Turkish and Russian foreign ministers, set to be held on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly meeting in New York (Tasnim, September 18, 2018).

## Iranian Involvement in Iraq

- ▶ On September 11, 2018, the Iranian Ambassador to Baghdad, Iraj Masjedi, inaugurated the new building of the Iranian consulate in Basra, southern Iraq, after the previous building of the consulate was set ablaze on September 7 by Iraqi protesters who charged the Iranian consulate and chanted against Iranian meddling in their country. The attack on the Iranian consular office took place amid a wave of riots in Basra against the social and economic hardships and corruption afflicting Iraq.
- ▶ At the inaugural ceremony of the new consulate, attended by governor of Basra, several Iraqi parliamentarians and local tribal leaders and clerics, Masjedi asserted that the attack on the Iranian consulate will not have any effect on the relationship between the two countries and their trade relations. He affirmed that Iran's ties with Iraq are strategic and mentioned that the two countries maintain military, economic and cultural cooperation. Masjedi claimed that those who torched the consulate have nothing to do with Iraq, and called on the government in Baghdad to expose their identity (ISNA, September 11, 2018). In an interview

to the Tasnim news agency (September 12, 2018), Masjedi blamed the United States and Saudi Arabia for involvement in the attack on the Iranian consulate, claiming that the two countries seek to harm the relationship between Iran and Iraq.



**Iran's ambassador to Baghdad inaugurates the new Iranian consulate in Basra (Mehr, September 12, 2018)**

► Senior Iranian officials justified the missile strike carried out by the IRGC on September 8, 2018, against the headquarters of the Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan (PDKI) in northern Iraq. According to the Kurdish separatists, 11 people were killed in the strike and dozens more were injured, among them the chairman of the party. The Iraqi government condemned the attack. A statement of the Iraqi ministry of foreign affairs proclaimed that Baghdad opposes any violation of its sovereignty by attacks on its territory (Arab News, September 10, 2018).



**The launch of the Fath-110 missile toward the headquarters of the PDKI in northern Iraq (Tasnim, September 9,11, 2018)**

- ▶ Following the attack, Mohammad Baqeri, the Chief of Staff of the Iranian Armed Forces, demanded that the Iraqi government and the administration of the Kurdish region in northern Iraq extradite to Iran the Kurdish separatists operating on Iraqi soil, and shutter the bases that they use to launch attacks in northwestern Iran. He insisted that if Iraq is unable to extradite the separatists, it must deport them. He asserted that Iran had warned the Kurdish separatists several times against continuing to operate on Iranian soil, and added that Tehran has the right to defend itself against “separatist terrorists” supported by the United States and several of the countries in the region (Defa Press, September 11, 2018).
- ▶ The Commander of the IRGC, Mohammad Ali Jafari, commented on the missile attack on the Kurdish guerrilla movement, stating that it was revenge for the death of over ten Iranian soldiers killed in a PDKI attack in last July in the Marivan region along the Iran-Iraq border. He mentioned that the Iranian attack, which utilized precision-guided missiles, should serve as a message to all of Iran’s enemies, and particularly to the superpowers that think they can impose their goals on Iran (Fars, September 13, 2018).
- ▶ The Spokesman of the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Bahram Qasemi, also addressed the missile strike on northern Iraq, stating that Iran will not tolerate any violation of its sovereignty or harm to its national security (IRNA, September 13, 2018).
- ▶ Tehran is clearly pleased with the appointment of the former Governor of Anbar Province, Muhammad al-Halbusi, to the position of Speaker of the Iraqi Parliament. The website “Fararu” called al-Halbusi’s nomination “an Iranian achievement,” made possible thanks to the support for his nomination of the Fath Coalition, which is affiliated with the pro-Iranian Shi’ite militias. In a commentary published on the website (September 17, 2018), it stated that following the announcement of the Iraqi Prime Minister, Haider al-Abadi, that he will not seek a second term in office, the likelihood has increased that a government formed by Hadi al-Ameri’s Fath Coalition, which is aligned with Iran, will emerge. Over the past several weeks, both Iran and the United States have attempted to influence the formation of the next coalition government in Iraq.
- ▶ Meanwhile, the spokesman of the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs denied a report published by the Kuwaiti daily al-Jareeda, according which the Commander of the IRGC’s Qods Force, Qasem Soleimani, met with the U.S. Envoy to Iraq, Bret McGurck, to discuss the government formation process in Baghdad. Bahram Qasemi called it “a complete

fabrication.” The U.S. embassy in Baghdad also denied the report (Tasnim, September 17, 2018).