



Spotlight on Iran

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Overview

- ▶ In a meeting with families of Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) fighters killed in Syria and Iraq, the Supreme Leader of Iran once again justified Iran's military involvement in the region. He declared that if it were not for the Iranian fighters who enthusiastically joined the campaign, Iran's enemies would have reached locations only a few kilometers away from the holy Shi'ite sites in Iraq.
- ▶ Senior IRGC commanders condemned the decision of Saudi Arabia and Bahrain to designate the IRGC, the IRGC's Qods Force and the Qods Force Commander, Qasem Soleimani, as sponsors of terrorism. According to the Iranian officials, the designation was intended to deflect attention away from the murder of the Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi.
- ▶ Iranian, Russian and Turkish delegations met in Moscow for another round of talks concerning the settlement of the war in Syria, and particularly the issue of Idlib. Meanwhile, some in Tehran voiced displeasure about the decision not to invite Iran to a summit in Istanbul on developments in Syria attended by leaders of Russia, Germany, France and Turkey.
- ▶ A Syrian opposition website reported that Iran began the construction of a military base in the Lajat region in Daraa governorate, intended to serve pro-Iranian militias in the region. According to the report, the construction work is carried out by fighters of Hezbollah and the Iraqi militia Asaeb al-Haqq, while the IRGC oversees the transfer of materiel to the militias in the area.
- ▶ Following the establishment of the new government in Baghdad, senior Iranian officials congratulated the incoming Iraqi leadership and called for deepening of ties between the two countries. Last week, hundreds of thousands of Iranians took part in pilgrimage to Shi'ite holy sites in Iraq held forty days after the Ashoura' fast (Arbayeen).

General Information

► The Supreme Leader of Iran, Ali Khamenei, once again justified Iran’s military involvement in Syria and Iraq and declared that if it were not for the Iranian fighters, Iran’s enemies would have reached a few kilometers away from the Imam Hussein shrine in Karbala, preventing the commemoration of Arbeyeen, the pilgrimage to Shi’ite holy sites held forty days after the fast of Ashoura’. In a meeting with families of IRGC fighters killed in Syria and Iraq, Khamenei boasted that there was no need to encourage Iranian youth to join the campaign, as they did so with enthusiasm and even begged to be allowed to go to the front due to a desire for self-sacrifice (Mehr, October 24).



The Supreme Leader with relatives of IRGC fighters killed in Iraq and Syria (Mehr, October 24 2018).

► Senior IRGC commanders condemned the decision of Saudi Arabia and Bahrain to designate the IRGC, the Qods Force and some of its commanders, chief among them Qasem Soleimani, as organizational and individual sponsors of terrorism. The Deputy Commander of the IRGC Tharollah Camp in Tehran, Esma’il Kowsari, alleged in an interview to the Mehr news agency (October 23) that the Saudis wish to deflect international public attention away from the affair of the Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi, and get it to focus on Iran, but they will fail to do so and will be unable to cleanse themselves of their crimes.

► The Deputy Commander of the IRGC on Political Affairs, Yadollah Javani, also declared that the Saudi decision is intended to distract public attention from Khashoggi’s case, and change the public atmosphere by issuing anti-Iranian declarations. He claimed that the world

knows very well that the IRGC stands at the forefront of fighting terrorism in Syria and Iraq, while Saudi Arabia has always supported terrorist groups (Mehr, October 24).

Iranian Involvement in Syria and Lebanon

- ▶ On October 23-24, delegations representing Iran, Russia and Turkey met in Moscow for a round of talks regarding the settlement of the war in Syria. Upon arrival in Moscow, the Senior Adviser to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Hossein Jaber Ansari, expressed hope that Idlib governorate would return to regime control without a loss of life. He claimed that in the summit between the presidents of Iran, Russia and Turkey, held in September in Tehran, disagreements arose regarding priorities in Syria and the issue of Idlib, but eventually, an agreement was reached based on an Iranian proposal regarding the reestablishment of Syrian government sovereignty over Idlib without bloodshed. According to him, the summit in Moscow was convened to discuss the latest developments in Idlib and complete the implementation of the understandings reached between the three countries (ILNA, October 23).
- ▶ At the end of his meeting with the Russian Foreign Minister, Sergey Lavrov, Jaber asserted that the U.S. policy, which intends to push Iran out of the negotiations process concerning Syria, is destined to fail. He claimed that Iran supported Syria over recent years and acted to promote a political solution to the crisis in the country as part of the Astana process; he added that Iran is determined to maintain its role in this process (Fars, October 24).



The meeting between Iranian and Russian representatives in Moscow (Fars, October 24 2018).

- ▶ Iranian media criticized the decision not to invite Iran to a summit held in Istanbul on October 27 regarding developments in Syria attended by leaders of Russia, Germany, France and Turkey. A report, published in the reformist daily Ghanoon (October 29) under the headline “Erdoğan and Putin Bypassed Iran,” stated that there was no reason not to invite Iran to the summit, after it had invested so much blood and money in Syria in recent years. The report argued that presidents Erdoğan and Putin should have kept their promise to President Rouhani to refuse to attend meetings concerning Syria without Iranian participation. The report mentioned that this is not the first time that the Russians have treated Iran this way, and that it would have behooved President Erdoğan, who publicly lauded his friendly relationship with Iran, to invite it for a summit held in his country.
- ▶ Tehran previously expressed dissatisfaction with unilateral moves by its two partners in the negotiations process concerning Syria. In mid-September 2018, the Russian and Turkish presidents met in Sochi and reached an agreement concerning the fate of rebel-held Idlib. Despite the positive response of Iran to the agreement reached between the two leaders, it was evident that Iran was concerned by the Russian-Turkish deal, which was apparently not coordinated with it.
- ▶ On October 20, 2018, the Syrian jihadist group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham published a video showing a captive IRGC officer it is holding. The captive was identified as Colonel Abu al-Hassan Soleiman Bayati. Bayati, who spoke in Persian, stated that he has been serving in the IRGC for 29 years. He reported that he was injured and asked that efforts be made to secure his release. He added: “I call on Iran’s leadership, including Qasem Soleimani [the Qods Force Commander] to make an effort to release me” (Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, October 20). Reports on social media indicate that Bayati was captured in 2016 in southern Aleppo. Iranian media quoted the video, but Iranian sources avoided confirming its veracity.



Abu al-Hassan Soleiman Bayati, the captive IRGC officer held by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, October 20 2018).

- ▶ A Syrian opposition website reported that following the occupation of Daraa by the Syrian regime in July 2018, Iran began constructing a military base in the area of Lajat in Daraa governorate, southwestern Syria. According to the report, the forces involved in constructing the base are mostly Hezbollah members, alongside Iraqi Shi'ite militiamen with Asaeb al-Haqq. These forces have destroyed about 650 homes and cleared several villages in the Lajat region ahead of beginning the construction of the base, which be built on approximately 30 square kilometers of land. The base is intended to serve pro-Iranian militias. In early October, weapons and ammunition began reaching the militias in the region; the weapons were transferred from Syria to Iraq through the al-Qaim border crossing. According to the report, the IRGC itself supervises the transfer of weaponry to the Lajat area, and particularly the warehouses located along the highway connecting Damascus to Amman, Jordan. The report also claimed that throughout October, a number of meetings were held between IRGC officers and local commanders of militias to discuss the provision of weaponry to the militias and the establishment of the military base in the region (al-Souria Net, October 28).
- ▶ The Commander of the IRGC's Aerospace and Missile Force, Amir-Ali Hajizadeh, announced recently that the IRGC and the Iranian Ministry of Defense have developed a special missile with a range of 23 kilometers that has been used in Syria in the past two years. The Iranian news website, Mashregh News, quoted (October 20) Hajizadeh as saying that during the Syrian civil war, he had met with the Commander of the IRGC's Qods Force, Qasem Soleimani, and asked him why missiles are not being used against ISIS targets in Syria. Soleimani responded by saying that the missiles the IRGC possesses are only appropriate for long ranges, while the campaign against ISIS in Syria requires missiles with a short range of

only ten kilometers. Six months later, the IRGC and Ministry of Defense developed a missile with a range of 23 kilometers, which has since been used in the Syrian battlefield.

Iranian Involvement in Iraq

- ▶ On October 25, Iranian Foreign Minister, Mohammad Javad Zarif, spoke on the phone with the incoming Iraqi Foreign Minister, Mohamed Ali al-Hakim, and congratulated him for the appointment. Zarif expressed hope that the strong relationship between the two countries will deepen in all spheres. Zarif also thanked the Iraqi government for hosting the Iranian pilgrims who arrived in Iraq on the occasion of Arbayeen, the Shi'ite holy day that is marked forty days after the fast of Ashoura' (Mehr, October 26).
- ▶ On October 28, the First Deputy of the Iranian President, Eshaq Jahangiri, spoke with the incoming Iraqi Prime Minister, Adil Abdul Mahdi, and congratulated him for assuming the position. Jahangiri stated that Iran will continue to support Iraq and called for expanding the consultation between the two countries to further their relationship (IRNA, October 28).