



# Spotlight on Iran

November 4, 2018 – November 18, 2018

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## Overview

- ▶ Diplomatic efforts concerning the settlements of the Syrian war continue: In early November, the envoy of the Russian president arrived to Tehran and met with the secretary of the Supreme National Security Council to update him regarding the outcome of the summit held by the leaders of Russia, Germany, France and Turkey at the end of October in Istanbul. The special assistant of the Iranian minister of foreign affairs visited Damascus and met with the Syrian president to discuss developments in Syria and deepening of ties between the two countries.
- ▶ In the military domain, on November 9, Syrian sources reported that special forces of the Syrian military in collaboration with the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) carried out a raid against a position of the Syrian rebel groups Jaysh al-Izza near Lataminah, in the southern areas of the demilitarized zone surrounding Idlib. Meanwhile, the deputy commander of the IRGC declared that Iran does not have plans to stay in Syria in the long-term, and insisted that there is no disagreement between Iran and Russia with regards to Syria.
- ▶ A growing Iranian role in religious and economic affairs in the region: the head of the Headquarters for the Restoration of Holy [Shi'ite] Shrines in Syria and Iraq visited Syria to supervise the reconstruction and restoration works that Iran is supervising near the Sayyeda Zaynab gravesite south of Damascus. The deputy of the Iranian railways company announced that Iran will finance the final stage of constructing a railway connecting Shalamcheh in southwestern Iran to Basra in southern Iraq. The railway is eventually supposed to reach the Lattakia port in northwestern Syria, and thus allow the transfer of goods from Iran to Syria via Iraq.
- ▶ Iranian media provided extensive coverage of the events of the past week in the Gaza Strip and presented the ceasefire between Israel and Hamas as a victory for Hamas. During the escalation in Gaza, the spokesman of the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs condemned

Israel's actions and called on the international community to intervene to stop the "Zionist war machine."

## Iranian Involvement in Syria

- ▶ On November 5, the Envoy of the Russian President to Syria, Alexander Lavrentiev, arrived in Iran for a visit. Upon arrival to Tehran, Lavrentiev stated that he was dispatched by President Putin to update Iran regarding the outcomes of the summit between the leaders of Russia, Germany, France and Turkey, which was held in late October in Istanbul and focused on developments in Syria. Another reason for his visit, Lavrentiev declared, was to express Russia's support for Iran as the United States re-imposed its sanctions on the country.
- ▶ In Tehran, Lavrentiev met with the Secretary of the Iranian Supreme National Security Council, Ali Shamkhani. Shamkhani remarked that the cooperation between Iran and Russia in Syria is based on three principles: support for the legitimate government in Syria and cooperation with it in the struggle against terrorism, maintaining the territorial integrity of Syria, and creating the political mechanisms to allow Syria's citizens to determine the future of their country. Shamkhani mentioned that the cooperation and coordination between Iran, Russia and Syria are the main factor that allowed the Syrian military to gain the upper hand in the battlefield. He added that Iran and Russia will continue to bolster the Syrian armed forces in their struggle against terrorism (Tasnim, November 5).



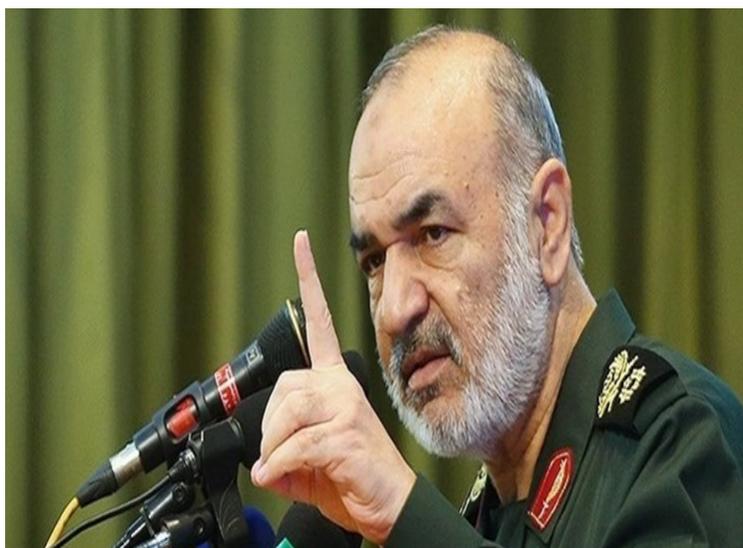
**The Shamkhani - Lavrentiev meeting  
( Fars, November 5 2018).**

► On November 12, the Special Assistant to the Iranian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Hossein Jaber Ansari, met with the Syrian President, Bashar al-Assad, and discussed developments in Syria and the region and the deepening of ties between the two countries (Tasnim, November 12). At the end of October, Ansari participated in the meeting of Iranian, Russian and Turkish delegations in Moscow, which discussed the settlement of the war in Syria.



**The meeting between Assad and Ansari  
(Mehr, November 12 2018).**

► The Deputy Commander of the IRGC, Hossein Salami, stated in an interview to Iranian television that Iran has no plans to stay in Syria in the long-term. He maintained that the Iranian presence in Syria is based on the request of the Syrian government. Salami also emphasized that there is no disagreement between Iran and Russia concerning Syria, and that media reports claiming so are unfounded (Fars, November 4).



**The deputy commander of the IRGC  
(Fars, November 4 2018).**

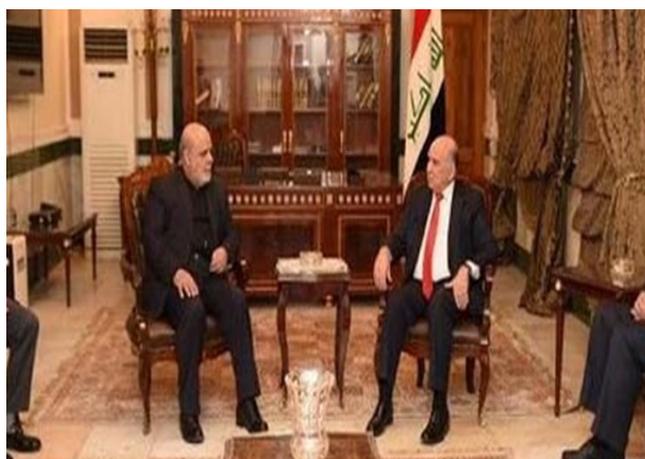
- ▶ On the night of November 9, special forces of the Syria Army in cooperation with IRGC forces carried out a raid near the town of Latminah, in the southern section of the demilitarized zone surrounding Idlib (66 kilometers, 41 miles, south of Idlib city). According to Syrian sources, twenty member of the Free Syrian Army group, Jaysh al-Izza, and four members of the regime-aligned forces, including an Iranian commander, were killed in the raid (Nedaa Suriya, November 9). Iranian media did not report about this operation and no Iranian casualties were reported.
- ▶ Hassan Palarak, the Director of the Headquarters for the Restoration of Holy Shrines in Syria and Iraq visited Syria to supervise the reconstruction and restoration works of holy Shi'ite shrines that Iran is supervising near the gravesite of Sayyeda Zaynab, the granddaughter of Prophet Muhammad, south of Damascus. A statement issued by the public relations department of the Headquarters for the Restoration of Holy Shrines reported that following the completion of the reconstruction of the gravesite, damaged during the civil war, the organization intends to construct a three-story, 1,500 m<sup>2</sup> (16146 ft<sup>2</sup>) guest house for pilgrims wishing to visit the site (ISNA, November 10).
- ▶ In October 2017, Palarak announced that the dispatch of Iranian pilgrims to Shi'ite holy sites in Syria, which was halted due to the Syrian civil war, will be renewed in the near future. Palarak had mentioned that the restoration works of Shi'ite holy sites across areas regained by the regime in Syria are financed by donations from private Iranian citizens and Iranian foundations, and not through an Iranian governmental budget (Fars, October 23, 2017).



**Visit of the director of the Headquarters for the Restoration of Holy Shrines in Iraq and Syria to Damascus (ISNA, November 10 2018).**

## Iranian Involvement in Iraq

► On November 6, the Iranian Ambassador to Baghdad, Iraj Masjedi, held separate meetings with the minister of foreign affairs, minister of finance, minister of transportation and minister of electricity of the new Iraqi government. The meetings were held in the Iranian embassy in Baghdad. The ambassador discussed with his interlocutors the ties between the two countries and the expansion of cooperation between them (IRNA, November 6).



**The meeting between the Iranian ambassador to Iraq with Fu'ad Hussein, the Iraqi Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance (Fars, November 6 2018).**

► In an interview to the Kurdish outlet Rudaw (November 10), the Iranian Ambassador to Iraq, Iraj Masjedi, stated that he hopes for expanded cooperation between the two countries following the formation of the new government in Baghdad. Masjedi expressed his confidence that the relationship between Tehran and the new government of Adil Abdul Mahdi will be good, and that the new prime minister will strive to improve the ties between the two countries. Masjedi remarked that Iran has expressed its willingness to assist the new government in any way possible, including the economic, political and security spheres. Referring to the effect on Iran-Iraq ties of the economic sanctions re-imposed by the United States against Iran, Masjedi stated that the government of Iraq needs to act in accordance with its interests. He added that Iraq's ties to the United States should not be used to undermine the relationship between Iran and Iraq. According to him, the governments of Iraq and Iran are currently negotiating an agreement concerning cooperation in the oil sector.



**The Iranian Ambassador to Baghdad, Iraj Masjedi  
(Rudaw, November 10 2018).**

- ▶ In the interview, Masjedi denied any Iranian involvement in the attack carried out by the Iraqi army and the Shi'ite militias on the city of Kirkuk in October 2017, which resulted in the withdrawal of Kurdish forces in the city, following the referendum concerning independence of the Kurdish region in northern Iraq. Masjedi asserted that Iran maintains good relations with the Kurdish Regional Government in the political and economic spheres and will continue to foster those ties. He added that Iran maintains positive relations with the Kurdish parties and that it is intended in facilitating the resolution of disagreements between the various Kurdish factions.
- ▶ The Deputy Director on Technical and Infrastructure Affairs of the Islamic Republic of Iran Railways Company, Maziar Yazdani, stated that Iranian technicians and engineers will complete the construction of a railway section, in the length of 32 km (20 miles), connecting Shalamcheh in southwestern Iran to the city of Basra in southern Iraq. Eventually, the railway track is supposed to reach the Lattakia port in northwestern Syria and allow the transfer of goods from Iran to Syria via Iraq. He mentioned that following Iraq's announcement that it can not afford to finance the construction of the railway track to Basra, the Iranian railway company decided to cover the expenses of laying down the Iraqi section of the railway track, which will be later repaid by Iraq (Fars, November 12).

## Iranian Involvement in the Palestinian Arena

- ▶ The Spokesman of the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Bahram Qasemi, condemned Israel's actions in Gaza and called on the international community to intervene and put an end to the "Zionist war machine." He called Israel's actions "a manifestation of state

terrorism in the region,” and claimed that the slew of Zionist terrorist acts, crimes and aggression are persisting with the support and encouragement of the American administration, and with the silence and cooperation of some of the countries of the region (IRNA, November 12).