



Spotlight on Iran

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Overview

- ▶ **Iran is keeping a low profile with regards to the “Northern Shield” operation** carried out by the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) to destroy Hezbollah tunnels along Israel’s border with Lebanon. The reports published on this matter in Iranian media largely focused on reporting on developments and touted the line adopted by Hezbollah that claims that Israel is deterred by the advanced capabilities of the organization.
- ▶ In response to reports about Israeli strikes on Iranian targets around Damascus in late November, the spokesman of the Iranian armed forces declared **that Iran does not have military bases in Syria**. He claimed that the only targets Israel could attack are bases and positions of the Syrian military in which Iranian advisers operate, at the request of the Damascus government.
- ▶ The Commander of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards (IRGC)’s Qods Force, Qasem Soleimani, visited Iraq and met with the country’s grand mufti. According to Iraq sources, the meeting, also attended by the deputy commander of the Shi’ite militias in Iraq, dealt with ongoing efforts to complete the formation of a new government in Baghdad. Meanwhile, Hadi al-Ameri, who heads the al-Fath Coalition of the Shi’ite militias that participated in the latest elections in Iraq, admitted that **Iran intervenes in Iraq’s political affairs and assists some of the country’s Shi’ite militias**. He insisted, however, that Iran did not meddle in Iraq’s latest elections.
- ▶ An extraordinary commentary published in the reformist Iranian paper Qanoon harshly criticized Hamas, which in recent years adopted positions contrary to Iran’s. The commentary warned that if Hamas acts against Iranian interests in the future, Tehran should find a replacement for it among Palestinian militant groups. The commentary was published following the appeal of Hamas’ leader to the Iranian minister of foreign affairs for Iranian

support in opposing the U.S. proposal to condemn Hamas in the United Nations' General Assembly.

Iranian Involvement in Syria and Lebanon

► Iran is keeping a low profile with regards to the “Northern Shield” operation to destroy Hezbollah tunnels along Israel’s border with Lebanon. The reports published on this matter in Iranian media were largely focused on conveying information of the latest IDF moves on the ground, based mainly on Lebanese sources. Iranian media touted the line adopted by Hezbollah that reflected an attempt to project a deterrent message to Israel and argue that Israel is deterred by the advanced capabilities of Hezbollah, which prevent it from initiating actions against the organization on Lebanese soil.

► Thus, for example, a report published on the website Basirat (December 6), which is affiliated with the IRGC, alleged that the threats of the “Zionist regime” against Hezbollah stem from its weakness and helplessness with regards to the Resistance Front, as reflected in Israel’s defeat in the last escalatory exchange of fire in Gaza. The website referred to Israel’s threats against Hezbollah as a reflection of “psychological warfare” waged by Israel’s leaders, whose goal is to recover domestic popular support. The commentary claimed that the increasing concern in Israel due to Hezbollah’s growing military power, the capabilities of the Resistance in Syria and the possibility of opening a new front in the struggle against Israel in the Golan, is what prompted Israel to turn to military threats and diplomatic activity in an effort to restrain the Resistance Front, and Hezbollah in particular.

► Hossein Jaber Ansari, the Senior Advisor to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, addressed the matter of Iranian military presence in Syria in an interview to the website Tabnak (December 4) after Russian officials made several statements with regards to the withdrawal of foreign forces from the country. Ansari was asked what Iran would do if asked by Russia to remove its forces from Syria. Ansari responded that Iran’s presence in Syria is based on the request of the legitimate government in Damascus and therefore, the question of Iran’s continued presence in the country, depends on agreements with the Syrian government and developments in the battlefield. He mentioned, however, that Iran does not operate in a vacuum and that its policies are affected by the positions of other actors engaged in Syria, including Russia.

► The Spokesman of the Iranian Armed Forces Abolfazl Shekarchi denied that Iran operates military bases in Syria. In an interview to the IRNA news agency (December 4) Shekarchi claimed that Iran does not have independent bases in Syria, and the only possible targets are Syrian bases and positions in which Iranian advisers operate. According to him, Iran provides assistance in the form of military advisors in Syria and Iraq, in accordance with the request of the legitimate governments of those countries and that Iran is not officially involved in combat. He remarked that Iran and Russia maintain coordination concerning the military advising they provide to Syria.

Iranian Involvement in Iraq

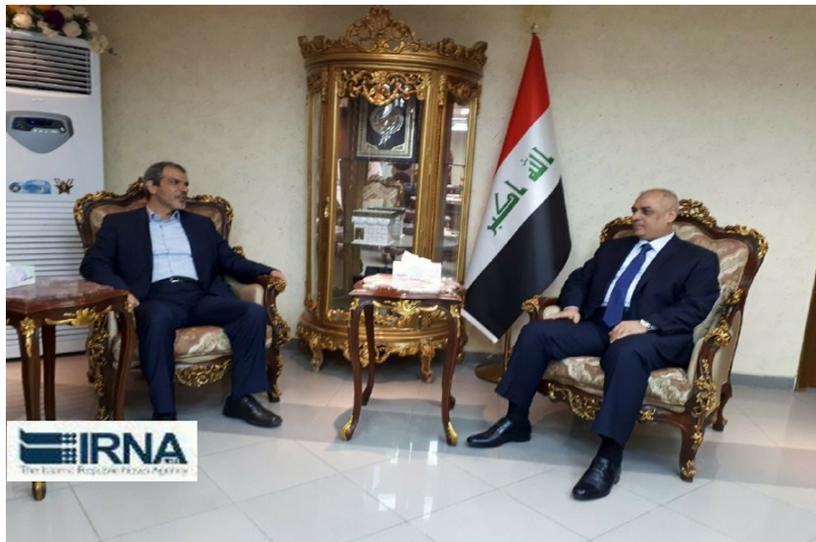
► In early December, the Commander of the IRGC's Qods Forces, Qasem Soleimani, met Iraq's Grand Mufti, Sheikh Abdul Mahdi al-Sumaidaie in his home in Baghdad. The meeting was also attended by the Deputy Commander of Iraq's Shi'ite militias, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis. Iraqi sources report that the meeting focused on the new government formation process in Baghdad (BaghdadToday.news, December 4).



The meeting with Iraq's mufti, attended by Soleimani and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis (BaghdadToday.news, December 4 2018).

► On December 9, the Adviser to Iran's Deputy President and former Iranian Ambassador to Iraq, Hassan Danaifer, met with the Iraqi Minister of Transportation, Abdullah Luaibi, and discussed expanding transportation links between the two countries, including the completion of laying the railway connecting Khoramshahr in southwestern Iran to Basra in southern Iraq. According to the agreement signed between the two countries, Iraq is

supposed to complete laying down the last 30 kilometers (18.6 miles) of the railway. Danaifer mentioned that Iranian companies are willing to take it upon themselves the completion of the project. During his visit to Baghdad, Danaifer also met with Iraq's Prime Minister Adil Abdul Mahdi, and some of his ministers. In the meeting, the Iraqi prime minister declared that the relationship between Iran and Iraq is in the national interests of both countries, and can not be affected by pressures from other forces. He asserted that Iraq is a sovereign country that sees a great deal of importance in its foreign relations, and particularly, the economic ties with Iran. During the meeting, Danaifer called for opening additional border crossings between the two countries to expand the export of Iranian goods to Iraq (IRNA, December 9). The railway between Iran and Iraq is later planned to reach the Lattakia Port in northwestern Syria and allow the transfer of Iranian goods from Syria via Iraq.



The meeting between the Iraqi minister of transportation and the adviser of the Iranian deputy president (IRNA, December 9 2018).

► Hadi al-Ameri who heads the al-Fath Coalition that participated in Iraq's last general elections, confirmed in a press conference in Baghdad that Iran intervenes in Iraq's political matters to ensure the rights of the Shi'ite community. He asserted, however, that Iran avoided meddling in the last Iraqi elections, unlike Saudi Arabia and the United States. Al-Ameri stated that Iran directly assists several militias in Iraq, including Asaeb al-Haqq headed by Qais al-Ghazzali, Harakat al-Nujabaa led by Akram al-Kaabi, Kataeb Hezbollah, Kataeb Sayyid al-Shuhada and Saraya al-Khorasani, by providing them with materiel, funds and by establishing satellite TV channels for them. He mentioned that he recently refused Iran's

demand that his list join the al-Nasr Coalition headed by former Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi, to form a united Shi'ite bloc (al-Arabiya, December 9).



Hadi al-Ameri (al-Arabiya, December 9 2018).

► Meanwhile, former Iraqi Prime Minister, Haider al-Abadi, claimed in an interview to the Iraqi TV station, al-Sharqiya, that Iran acted to foil his reelection as Prime Minister due to his commitment to abide by the U.S. sanctions against Iran. He stated that Iran felt threatened by his position on the manner, and thus supported the appointment of Adel Abdul Mahdi as prime minister instead (ISNA, December 10).

Iranian Involvement in the Palestinian Arena

► On December 3, the head of Hamas' Political Bureau, Ismail Haniyyeh spoke on the phone with the Iranian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mohammad Javad Zarif, and discussed the latest developments in the Palestinian arena. Haniyyeh asked Zarif for Iran's support in opposing the U.S. proposal to condemn Hamas in the UN General Assembly. Zarif reiterated Iran's support for the Palestinians and promised that Iran will act in cooperation with Muslim and additional "progressive" countries to foil the proposed U.S. condemnation (ILNA, December 3).

► An commentary published in the reformist Iranian paper Qanoon (December 4) harshly criticized Hamas' past conduct and argued that Iran can replace Hamas with other Palestinian militant groups as the object of its support if the organization once again adopts position contrary to Iranian interests. This is a reference to Hamas' decision to support the opposition to Assad's regime in the Syrian civil war and Saudi Arabia in the civil war raging in Yemen.

► The article was published following reports on the phone conversation between Ismail Haniyyeh and the Iranian Minister of Foreign Affairs Zarif during which Hamas' leader asked for Iran's support in foiling the U.S. proposal to condemn Hamas in the UN. The commentary argued that what matters now is that Hamas fights a common enemy of Hamas and Iran [Israel], and since Israel commits crimes against the Palestinians and directly threatens the Iranian people, the Islamic Republic should support groups such as Hamas. However, Hamas previously acted against Iranian interests and thought it could maintain its interests by relying on other countries that are supported by Israel and the United States. Now that Hamas has come to its senses, the commentary argued, one would hope that its leaders adopt a new path, because if they do not, there are other jihadist groups that Iran can replace Hamas with to further the goal of liberating Jerusalem, which is a top Iranian priority.