



# Spotlight on Iran

July 14 – July 28, 2019

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## Overview

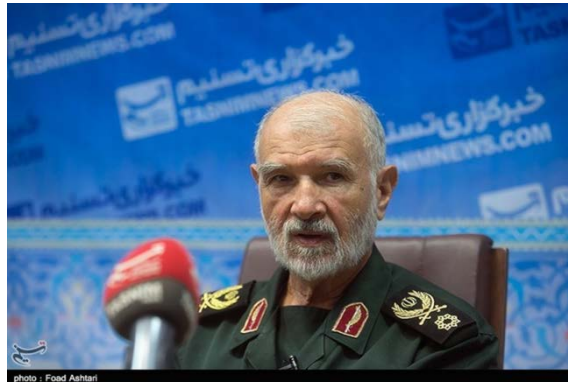
- ▶ The former commander of Iranian forces in Syria revealed for the first time details from the meeting between the Commander of the Qods Force of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), Qasem Soleimani, and Russian President Putin in the summer of 2015, during which Soleimani convinced President Putin to intervene in the civil war in Syria. In an interview to the Tasnim news agency, Mohammad Jafar Asadi stated that Soleimani told Putin that Syria is the last stronghold of the eastern front, and if it falls, Russia will have no value in the eyes of the West.
- ▶ In mid-July, the Special Adviser on Foreign Affairs to the Chairman of the Majlis, Hossein Amir Abdollahian, paid a visit to Syria and Lebanon and met with senior officials from both countries, including President Assad and the secretary general of Hezbollah. In his meeting with Nasrallah, Abdollahian stated that the entire region will become involve in case of a war between Iran and the United States.
- ▶ On July 22, Iraq's Prime Minister, Adel Abdul Mahdi, arrived for a visit in Tehran and met with President Rouhani. In the meeting, the Iranian president called to accelerate the implementation of agreements signed between the two countries in the spheres of transportation, trade, energy, industry and banking. The Iraqi prime minister declared that Iraq will never join the economic sanctions placed on Iran.
- ▶ The spokesman of the Popular Mobilization Units (al-Hashd al-Shaabi), the pro-Iranian Iraqi militias, denied the reports about presence of Iranian forces in the Amerli base in northern Iraq, which was targeted on July 19 with an unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV). According to the al-Arabiya network, the targeted weapons depot housed ballistic missiles and Iranian launchers, and among the injured and killed were IRGC personnel. Meanwhile, Iranian media reported that an IRGC cadre was killed in fighting ISIS militants in the al-Amarah region in southeastern Iraq.

► A senior delegation of Hamas officials, led by the Deputy Head of the Political Bureau of the organization, Saleh al-Aroui, visited Tehran and met high-ranking Iranian officials, chief among them the Supreme Leader, Khamenei. The senior Iranian officials reiterated Iran's commitment to the Palestinians and expressed support for continued Palestinian "Resistance." In the meeting with Iran's Supreme Leader, al-Aroui declared that Hamas will be Iran's first line of defense against the aggression of the West.

## Iranian Involvement in Syria

► In a wide-ranging interview to the Iranian news agency Tasnim (July 15), the former Commander of Iranian Forces in Syria, Mohammad Jafar Asadi, discussed the meeting held in the summer of 2015 between the Commander of the IRGC's Qods Force, Qasem Soleimani, and Russian President Putin, during which Soleimani convinced Putin to intervene in the civil war in Syria. Asadi, who succeeded Hossein Hamedani, who was killed in October 2015 in Aleppo, in his role as commander of Iranian forces in Syria, stated in the interview that Soleimani told the Russian president in their meeting, which lasted over two hours, that Syria is the last stronghold of the Eastern front and that if Syria falls, Russia will have no value in the eyes of the West.

► Asadi also remarked that there is no doubt that the Russia intervention in the civil war was effective and bolstered the Resistance Front, but those who saved Syria from the start were the Syrian Army and the Iranian military advisers, who assisted the Syrians from the beginning of the civil war, when the rebels reached locations 400 meters away from the presidential palace in Damascus. According to him, it is not right to claim that if it were not for the Russians, a victory would not have been achieved. Asadi added that as part of the military activities in Syria, there was coordination between the Iranian advisers and the Russians to avoid any targeting by Russian jets of Syrian and Iranian ground forces by accident. When responding to a question concerning the possibility of "liberating the Golan Heights," Asadi stated that with God's will, the Golan and Jerusalem will be liberated in the future.



**Mohammad Jafar Asadi, the former Commander of Iranian Forces in Syria**

► In mid-July, the Special Adviser on Foreign Affairs to the Speaker of the Majlis, Hossein Amir Abdollahian, visited Damascus and met with senior Syrian officials, including President Bashar al-Assad and the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Walid al-Muallem. In his meetings, Abdollahian discussed with the senior Syrian officials the developments in the region, the escalating tensions between Iran and the United States and bolstering relations between the two countries. President Assad emphasized in his meeting with the Iranian official Syria's support for Iran in light of "the threats and illegal measures by the United States against the Iranian people" (Tasnim, July 15).

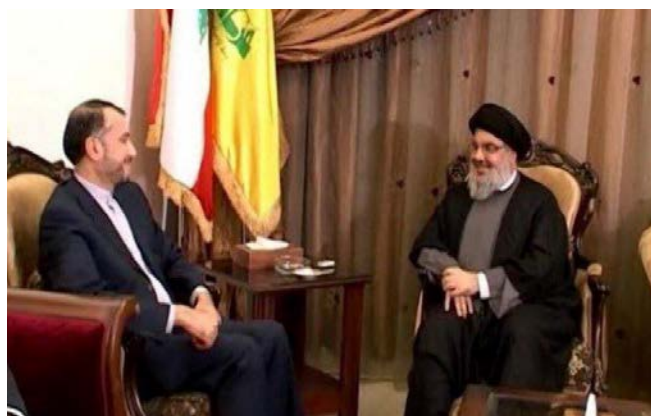
► The Deputy Head of the Iranian-Syrian Friendship Committee of the Syrian Parliament, Hussein Gharib al-Hussein, stated in an interview to the Syrian newspaper al-Watan (July 16), that during his meeting with President Assad, Abdollahian also discussed ways to deal with Israeli strikes in Syria, and presented Assad with an initiative of the Supreme Leader Khamenei to counter the U.S. "Deal of the Century."



**The meeting between Abdollahian and President Assad  
(Tasnim, July 15, 2019)**

► Following his visit to Syria, Abdollahian continued to Beirut and met with senior Lebanese government officials, with the Secretary General of Hezbollah, Hassan Nasrallah, and with a delegation of senior Hamas leaders. In his meeting with the Speaker of the Lebanese

Parliament, Nabih Berri, Abdollahian emphasized Iran's support for the "Resistance" in Lebanon [Hezbollah]. He asserted that Iran and its allies will never allow "the Zionist regime" and the United States to harm the security of the region (Fars, July 17). In his meeting with Abdollahian, Hassan Nasrallah declared that the United States can not force a war against Iran and that in the case of war, the entire region will be embroiled in it. He proclaimed that resistance is the only way and the most powerful way to struggle against the crimes of the Zionists and their aggression, and that the Zionists only understand the language of resistance (Fars, July 19).



**The meeting between Abdollahian and Hassan Nasrallah  
(al-Alam, July 19, 2019)**

► A news website aligned with the Syrian opposition reported that about two hundred fighters of the IRGC and Hezbollah have recently embedded themselves in positions belonging to the 9<sup>th</sup> Division of the Syrian Army in the northern Daraa region. This step was done to avoid being noticed or targeted by Israeli jets and UAVs, which have recently stepped up their activities in the western Damascus countryside and Quneitra, areas in which IRGC and Hezbollah positions are located. According to the report, the fighters are undergoing training in the area, under the supervision of senior commanders in the 9<sup>th</sup> Division (Sy24, July 23).

## Iranian Involvement in Iraq

► Ali al-Husseini, the Spokesman of the Popular Mobilization Units, an umbrella group for pro-Iranian militias in Iraq, denied the presence of Iranian forces in the Amerli base in northern Iraq, which was targeted by a UAV on July 19. It is unclear who operated the UAV and the Pentagon denied reports that American forces were involved in the attack. The al-Arabiya network reported (July 19), that the weapons depot targeted in the strike contained Iranian ballistic missiles and launchers, and that among those killed and injured were IRGC cadres.

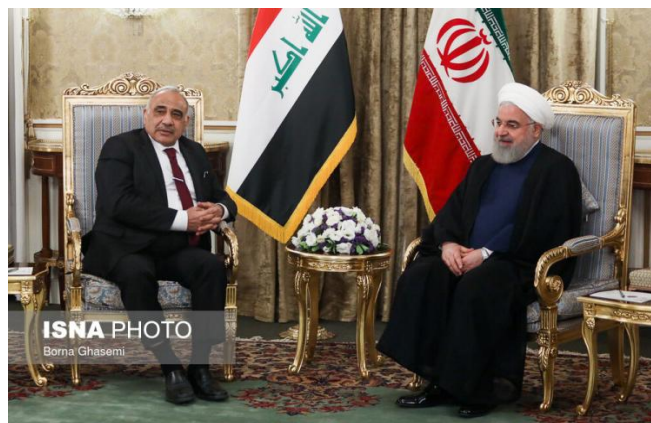
► The spokesman of the Iraqi militias stated that there is no reason Iranian advisers would be present at an administrative base, such as the one targeted. Al-Husseini remarked that it is impossible to assign blame to any side for the explosion before the investigation of the incident has been completed, adding that a committee has been forced to investigate the matter. He added that contrary to reports, only two people were injured in the attack (ISNA, July 20). On July 21, the Iraqi official news agency reported that that conclusions of the investigative committee were that the explosion in the base was caused due to internal failure, which resulted in the burning of solid fuel and not due to a drone strike. The report also claimed that there were no deaths in the ranks of the Shi'ite militias.

► Iranian media reported the death of IRGC cadre, Abolfazl Sarabian, in Iraq. The news agency Fars reported (July 20), that Sarabian, from the Kermanshah Province in western Iran, was killed in a battle with ISIS militants in the al-Amarah region in southeastern Iraq. In other reports, spread on social media, it was claimed that Sarabian belonged to the Qods Force of the IRGC, and that his death of July 19 was linked to the alleged strike carried out by a UAV on the Amerli base in northern Iraq.



**Abolfazl Sarabian, IRGC cadre killed in Iraq  
(Fares, July 20, 2019)**

► On July 22, Iraq Prime Minister, Adel Abdul Mahdi, arrived for a visit to Tehran and met with the Iranian President, Hassan Rouhani. In their meeting, President Rouhani called to accelerate the agreements signed between the two countries pertaining to the sectors of transportation, trade, energy, industry and banking. He pointed to the importance of furthering cooperation between Tehran and Baghdad as a way to increase stability and safety in the region, Iraq's prime minister expressed support for expanding ties between the two countries, adding that Iraq has never joined and will never join the sanctions against Iran (Fars, July 22).



**The meeting between Iraq's prime minister and Iran's president  
( ISNA, July 22, 2019).**

## Iranian Involvement in the Palestinian Arena

- ▶ On July 20, a delegation of senior Hamas officials led by Saleh al-Arouri, the Deputy Head of Hamas' Political Bureau, arrived for a visit spanning several days in Tehran. The delegation included Mousa Abu Marzouq and Izzat al-Rishq, both members of Hamas' politburo, Maher Saleh, a senior Hamas operative residing outside of the Palestinian territories, Zaher Jabarin, a senior Hamas official in the West Bank, Husam Badran and other senior officials. The Head of Hamas' Politburo, Ismail Haniyeh, stated that Hamas is expecting significant results from the visit (Tasnim, July 20).
- ▶ On July 21, al-Arouri met with the Chairman of the Strategic Council on Foreign Relations of Iran, Kamal Kharazi, and expressed his confidence that Iran will continue to support the Palestinians and in the struggle against the American "Deal of the Century." Kharazi pointed to the good relations between Iran and Hamas, adding that he held a long conversation with al-Arouri on various topics, and that there is no doubt that the "Deal of the Century" will fail (ISNA, July 21).
- ▶ On July 22, the Hamas delegation met with the Iranian Supreme Leader, Khamenei, and delivered a letter on behalf of Ismail Haniyeh. In the meeting, Khamenei asserted that the Palestinian question is the most important issue for the Muslim world and that victory is possible only through resistance and struggle. He remarked that one of the main reasons for the hostility directed toward Iran was its position on the Palestinian issue, but this hostility and pressure will not affect Iran's position, since its support for the Palestinians is an ideological and religious matter.
- ▶ Khamenei mentioned the speech of Hezbollah Secretary General, Hassan Nasrallah, in which he expressed hope to pray at the al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem, arguing that this is a

practical goal that can be realized. He lambasted the “Deal of the Century” stating that the goal of the “dangerous conspiracy” is to eliminate Palestinian identity by buying them off, and that it must be resisted. The Iranian leader boasted that only few years ago, Palestinian were fighting with stones, while now they are armed with precision missiles. Al-Arouri vowed in the meeting that Hamas will be Iran’s first line of defense against Western aggression, adding that any enemy of Iran is an enemy of Palestine and the Resistance Front (Fars, July 22).



**The Meeting between the Hamas delegation and the Iranian supreme leader (Tasnim, July 22, 2019).**

- ▶ The Secretary of the Iranian Supreme National Security Council, Ali Shamkhani, also met with the Hamas delegation. In his meeting with the Palestinians, he asserted that “the plot of the reactionary Arabs” to create a rift between Iran and the Palestinian Resistance will fail. He declared that Iran’s support for the Palestinians will continue until the final victory of the Resistance current against the occupiers (Fars, July 23). During its visit to Tehran, the delegation also met with the Supreme Leader’s Senior Adviser on International Affairs, Ali Akbar Velayati, with the Speaker of the Majlis, Ali Larijani, and with the Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister, Abbas Araghchi.
- ▶ In a commentary published on the Tabanak website (July 20) on the eve of the delegation’s visit, the author argued that in recent months, Hamas has invested a great deal of effort in bolstering its ties with Iran and Syria. One of the factors compelling Hamas to make this effort is President Trump’s “Deal of the Century,” the website argued, and Hamas’ realization that the Arab world, and particularly Saudi Arabia, have failed to meet the expectations of Hamas to support the Palestinians.
- ▶ The Israeli internal security service, the Shin Bet, exposed in recent months a network that was recruiting agents in Israel, the West Bank and Gaza on behalf of Iranian intelligence. The Shin Bet reported that the network operated out of Syria, with Iranian guidance, and under

the direction of a Syrian known as Abu Jihad. The network initially approached individuals through fictitious Facebook profiles, and later maintained contact with the agents through messaging applications. The recruited agents were asked to collect, among other intelligence, information on military bases, sensitive security installations, particular individuals, police stations and hospitals, all as part of preparing targets for attacks in Israel, with Iranian guidance (Maariv, July 24).