



Spotlight on Iran

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Overview

- ▶ On September 16, the fifth round of talks between the presidents of Iran, Russia and Turkey concerning Syria's future was held in Ankara. On the eve of the talks, which focused on developments in the Idlib region, and during them, Iran's President Rouhani lambasted U.S. presence in Syria and called for continuing the campaign against "the terrorists" in Idlib.
- ▶ Dozens of Iranian companies participated in the fifth Damascus International Fair on reconstruction of the country, which was held in the Syrian capital in mid-September. Ahead of the fair, the head of the Iranian-Syrian joint economic committee announced that the committee intends to work to expand the volume of trade between the two countries to one billion dollars. He pointed to a significant rise in the number of Iranian companies that participated in the two Damascus International Fairs this year. Meanwhile, Iran also opened a booth in the International Book Fair held in Damascus.
- ▶ Following attacks attributed to Israel against targets in western Iraq and ongoing escalation between Iran and the United States, Iran and the Shi'ite militias in Iraq are expanding their coordination. The Iraqi Shi'ite politician and cleric, Moqtada al-Sadr, who in recent years adopted a critical approach with regards to Iran's meddling in his country, visited Iran on the occasion of Ashuraa' and received a warm welcome. Iranian media extensively publicized a photograph of him sitting alongside the Supreme Leader of Iran, Khamenei, and the Commander of the Qods Force of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), Qasem Soleimani, during the Shi'ite mourning ceremony on Ashuraa'. Meanwhile, sources in Iraq reported that Soleimani conducted a visit to Iraq, during which he met with senior commanders of the pro-Iranian Shi'ite militias in Iraq and called on them to strike American targets in Iraq.
- ▶ Iran rejected U.S. claims about its direct involvement in striking two oil facilities in Saudi Arabia on September 14. Despite the responsibility claim by the Houthi rebels in Yemen, the United States blamed Iran for the attack, which significantly disrupted Saudi Arabia's oil output. Assuming that this is indeed an attack that was carried out from Iranian soil, this is a

significant escalation on Iran's part, and a show of its capabilities and determination to respond to the ongoing pressures brought to bear against it, to the point of carrying out attacks directly, and not through proxy organizations, as it has done thus far.

Iranian Involvement in Syria

► On September 16, the fifth round of talks between the Iranian, Russian and Turkish president concerning the settlement of the war in Syria, as part of the Astana process, were held in Ankara. According to the closing statement of the summit, the talks focused on the situation in Idlib. In a meeting prior to the summit, the Iranian President, Hassan Rouhani, and Russian President, Vladimir Putin, discussed bilateral relations, developments in Idlib, as well as Syria's reconstruction and return of Syrian refugees to their homeland. Upon departing to Ankara, the Iranian president stated that the presence of American forces in Syria is illegal and an act of aggression. Rouhani also remarked that continuing the war against "the terrorists" in Idlib is essential. At the same time, he stressed that the regional problems in Syria and Yemen should be solved by the countries of the region through peaceful means and dialogue (Fars, September 15).



**The summit of the Iranian, Russian and the Turkish President
(Elaph, September 16, 2019)**

► The fifth Damascus International Fair was opened in mid-September with dozens of Iranian companies participating. The Iranian Ambassador to Damascus, Javad Torkabadi, who attended the opening ceremony of the fair, reiterated Iran's willingness to play a central role in Syria's reconstruction, as an expression of Iranian solidarity with Syria (al-Alam, September 18).



**The Iranian pavilion at the Damascus International Fair
(Iranian television, September 15, 2019)**

► On the eve of the fair's grand opening, Kivan Kashefi, the Head of the Iranian-Syrian Joint Economic Committee, reported that the number of Iranian companies participating in the international fair in Damascus has increased significantly. He stated that over 120 Iranian companies took part in the Expo Fair in Damascus and the International Fair on Syria's reconstruction, a three-fold rise compared to the number of Iranian companies last year. He added that in the last nine months, over seven large economic delegation from Iran and Syria exchanged visits in the two countries. With regards to future plans, the first steps of the joint committee involve expanding Iranian economic activity in Syria, renovating the Iranian trade center in Damascus, and expanding the annual trade volume between the two countries to one billion dollars (www.krccima.ir, September 15)

► The Representative of the Supreme Leader of Iran in Syria, Hojjat-ul-Islam Seyyed Abolfazl Tabatabaei, visited the International Book Fair in Damascus and declared that Iran should place cultural activity in Syria as its top priority. During a visit to the Iranian booth at the fair, Tabatabaei stated that Iran's participation in the book fair is admirable, but that Iran should strive to expand its presence in future fairs (ISNA, September 17).



**The representative of the Supreme Leader during a visit to the Damascus book fair
(ISNA, September 17, 2019)**

Iranian Involvement in Iraq and the Gulf

► The Iraqi Shi'ite cleric and politician, Muqtada al-Sadr, received a warm welcome during his visit in Iran during the commemoration of the holy day of Ashuraa'. During the Shi'ite mourning processions in Tehran, al-Sadr, who in recent years adopted a critical position toward Iran and its involvement in Iraq, was seated next to the Supreme Leader of Iran, Ali Khamenei, and the Commander of the IRGC's Qods Force, Qasem Soleimani. In addition, al-Sadr participated in the mourning ceremonies in the city of Qom. Iranian media did not provide details about the content of his meetings in Iran, but the publication of his photographs aroused speculation regarding the meaning of the visit and the possibility of rapprochement between the Shi'ite leader and the Iranian regime.



**Moqtada al-Sadr alongside Khamenei and Soleimani
(Fars, September 10, 2019)**

► Following the publication of the photograph of al-Sadr alongside Khamenei, an Iranian commentator wrote that although al-Sadr's behavior in recent years has demonstrated that he is not particularly trustworthy, any person or group with influence in the region who are acting against the United States and Israel, and particularly among the Shi'ite community, deserve support from Iran. According to him, Hamas too acted throughout the Syrian civil war in contravention of Iran's position, but the relationship between Iran and Hamas was not severed, and Tehran continued to support the military wing of the movement. The United States is the main enemy of Iran and anyone who is willing to assist and cooperate in the resistance to the United States and Iran deserves the support of the Islamic Republic. According to the commentator, Amir Hossein Yazdanpanah, the mere presence of al-Sadr alongside the Supreme Leader, despite his disagreements with Iran, sends an important message of support for Iran from an important and influential current among the Shi'ite

community in Iraq. This support joins the expression of fealty from the leaders of Hezbollah, Hassan Nasrallah, and the leader of the Houthis in Yemen, Abdul-Malik Badreddin al-Houthi (The Telegram channel of Amir Hossein Yazdanpanah, September 11).

► The Spokesman of the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Abbas Mousabi, addressed al-Sadr's visit in his weekly press conference, saying that this is not a major development, since al-Sadr comes in and out of Iran frequently. He claimed that al-Sadr is a good friend of Iran and that his presence in Iran is a blessing. He asserted that al-Sadr did not convey any special or particular message during his last visit (Fars, September 16).

► The former Iranian Minister of Islamic Guidance, Seyyed Mohammad Hosseini, declared that al-Sadr's participation in the Ashouraa' ceremony alongside the Supreme Leader of Iran caused great joy to "the forces of the revolution and the resistance front," because Western media has tried to portray al-Sadr as an opponent to Iran's policies in Iraq for a long time. Hosseini argued that disagreements are a natural phenomenon, but that al-Sadr never had fundamental disagreements with Iran when it comes to support of the "resistance front." He added that there is no reason to cast doubt al-Sadr's anti-American stance, mentioning al-Sadr's statements over the past year condemning U.S. sanctions on Iran. He proclaimed that al-Sadr's visit to Iran increases the sense of hope among the revolutionary forces. He also thanked the Commander of the IRGC's Qods Force, Qasem Soleimani, for his efforts to bolster the "resistance front" (Elaph, September 14).

► The al-Arabiya network reported based on Iraqi sources (September 18) that the Commander of the IRGC's Qods Force, Qasem Soleimani, visited Baghdad last week and met with commanders of pro-Iranian Shi'ite militias and politicians close to Iran and called on them to strike American targets in Iraq.

► Ahmad al-Asadi, the Iraqi Member of Parliament and Spokesman of the Fath Alliance, which represents the Shi'ite militias in parliament, stated in an interview to the al-Mayadin TV channel, which is close to Hezbollah, that Iran plays a central role in guaranteeing the stability of the region. Al-Asadi added that Israel's strikes against compounds used by the Shi'ite militias in Iraq are "a declaration of war" and that all options are on the table when it comes to the response of the Shi'ite militias to these attacks. He praised Hezbollah's resistance to Israel, saying that the Lebanese organization is a source of inspiration for the "resistance axis" in all countries of the region. Addressing the visit of the Shi'ite Iraqi leader, Moqtada al-Sadr, to Iran, al-Asadi stated that al-Sadr's presence alongside Khamenei and

Soleimani brings joy to the “resistance” and that al-Sadr’s relationship with Iran is not a new phenomenon (Tasnim, September 14).



Ahmed al-Asadi
(Tasnim, September 14, 2019)

- ▶ Hassan al-Sari, the Commander of the Iraqi Shi’ite militia, Saraya al-Jihad, declared that the people of Iran and Iraq are committed to thwarting the conspiracies of the United States, “the Zionist regime,” and Saudi Arabia. In a ceremony commemorating an Iranian fighter recently killed in Iraq, al-Sari praised the leadership of the Supreme Leader of Iran, Khamenei, boasting that the downing of the American drone and takeover of the British oil tanker by Iran in recent months has altered the balance of power in the region. He asserted that the United States and its regional allies strive to sow divisions between Iran and Iraq, but that both people will prove once again their brotherhood during the Arbayeen ceremonies, marked next months, 40 days after the Ashouraa’ fast (Tasnim, September 12).
- ▶ The U.S. Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, accused Iran of striking the two oil installations of the Saudi ARAMCO company in Saudi territory on September 14. ARAMCO announced that following the attack, its oil output will be cut by about 5.7 million barrels per day. The Houthi rebels supported by Iran claimed responsibility for the attack and announced that dozens of drones were deployed to carry it out. They defined it as the largest aerial operation they have carried out to date (Reuters, September 14). In a tweet on his Twitter account (September 14), Pompeo claimed that Tehran is behind almost one hundred attacks on Saudi Arabia, and that there is no evidence that the Houthi rebels in Yemen, who claimed responsibility for the attack, are in fact behind it.
- ▶ The Spokesman of the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Abbas Mousavi, forcefully rejected Pompeo’s claim, arguing that after the U.S. failed with its “maximum pressure” policy, the U.S. has moved to a “maximum lies” policy to destroy Iran’s reputation and pave the way for

future actions (ISNA, September 15). The Iranian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mohammad Javad Zarif, responded to Pompeo's accusations with a tweet of his own (September 15), writing that the United States and its supporters are stuck in Yemen due to the illusion that the superiority of their weapons will lead to military victory, but blaming Iran will not end the disaster in Yemen.

► Iranian media also rejected Pompeo's claims, describing them as unfounded. A commentary published by the Iranian Mehr News Agency (September 15) argued that the United States can not level accusations at Iran without any proof or reason after each attack by "the resistance forces in Yemen" against the "aggressor states" of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. The United States should know that the Yemeni forces have achieved their military capabilities without assistance of other countries and that the accusations by the United States against Iran were meant to deflect public attention from the failure of the American air defense systems, which it placed in Saudi Arabia, and were meant to alert about Yemeni drone attacks.

► A short while after the attack, a Twitter account affiliated with the Commander of the IRGC's Qods Force, Qasem Soleimani, sent a tweet (September 14) welcoming the attack on the Saudi oil installations. The tweet read: "today, the Ansar Allah in Yemen [the Houthis] are continuing down the path of Imam Hussein.

► Meanwhile, the commander of the Aerospace Force of the IRGC, Amir-Ali Hajizadeh, confirmed in an interview to Iranian television (September 14), that Iran is providing assistance to the Yemenis as much as possible, despite the embargo placed on Yemen. The senior Iranian commander also stated that all American bases and aircraft carriers within 2,000 kilometer radius from Iran are within the firing range of the IRGC's missiles.

Iranian Involvement in the Palestinian Arena

► A senior Hamas official in Gaza, Ismail Radwan, declared that Iran's support for Palestine is genuine and based on principles. In an interview to the news website al-Risala Net, Radwan asserted that the visit conducted by a senior Hamas delegation in Tehran this July was "strategic, unprecedented and extremely important." He underlined the depth of the strategic relationship between Hamas and the other components of the "resistance axis," chief among them Iran (IRNA, September 13).