



Spotlight on Iran

October 6, 2019 – October 20, 2019

Author: Dr. Raz Zimmt

Overview

- ▶ **Iran condemned the Turkish invasion of northern Syria and demanded that Turkey halt the operation.** Iran's official reaction **reflects its position, which rejects the presence of Turkish and American forces on Syrian land and against encroachment on its territorial integrity and its concern over jeopardizing its assets and influence in Syria.** Despite the official condemnation, in our view, Iran likely sees the developments in northern Syria as an **opportunity for the Syrian regime to regain control of large swaths of northern and eastern Syria and weaken the Kurds, who have operated with American support.** In addition, Iran sees the latest developments as another manifestation of the determination of the U.S. president to withdraw American forces from the region, **even at the expense of American allies in the region.**
- ▶ **Iranian officials and media have been presenting the wave of protests that rocked Iraq in early October as a sign of a “Western plot” and blamed the United States, Saudi Arabia, Israel and Western media for fanning the flames of the protests.** During the protests, which saw the death of over 100 protesters, some chanted against Iran and its involvement in Iraq. As of October 20, Iran has not responded to the protests in Lebanon and Iranian media is providing only descriptive updates about the growing protest movement.
- ▶ In mid-October, over three million Iranian pilgrims arrived in Iraq to mark the 'Arbaeen holy day, which marks the end of the 40 mourning days of the death of the Shia Imam Hussein (marked on the 'Ashoura holy day). Iran is presenting the ceremonies as testament to the powerful connection between Tehran and Baghdad, to the solidarity between Muslim nations, and to the failure of the efforts by the United States and its allies to harm Iran's standing in Iraq and destabilize Iraq through the recent protests.

Iranian Involvement in Syria

► Iran condemned the Turkish invasion of northern Syria and demanded that Turkey cease the operation. The President of Iran, Hassan Rouhani, stated during the weekly cabinet meeting that Turkey has the right to protect its southern border and assuage concerns it has surrounding it, but that it must choose the right path to do so. He remarked that he emphasized during the summit of the presidents of Iran, Russia and Turkey, held last month in Ankara, that preserving the security of the Syria-Turkish border is only possible through Syrian Army presence in the region. He called on the Turkish government to show restraint and reconsider its decision to take military action, which does not contribute to the stability of the region (Tasnim, October 9). The Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs called on Turkey to immediately halt its attacks on Syria and remove its forces from the country. The statement by the Ministry of Foreign affairs asserted that Iran is aware of Turkey's security concerns, but the military action will not address those concerns, and instead will lead to more losses in property and lives (Fars, October 10).

► The Senior Adviser to the Speaker of the Majlis, Hossein-Amir Abdollahian, posted on Twitter (October 9), that the Turkish military action further complicates the situation in the region and is contrary to its security. He insisted that the way to ensure the security of border is through preserving the territorial integrity of Syria, negotiations and agreements, and that military actions only escalate the crisis, create new waves of refugees and increase terrorist activities. Following the Turkish military operation, the Speaker of the Majlis, Ali Larijani, canceled his planned visit to Turkey (ISNA, October 9).

► On October 18, the Iranian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mohammad Javad Zarif, spoke on the phone with his Turkish counterpart, Mevlüt Cavuşoğlu, and discussed the latest developments in the region, chief among them the situation in northern Syria (Tasnim, October 18).

► On October 16, the Secretary of the Iranian Supreme National Security Council, Ali Shamkhani, met in Tehran with the Special Envoy of the Russian President, Alexander Lavrentiev, and discussed with him global and regional developments, including the Turkish invasion of Syria. Shamkhani claimed that the United States wishes to revive ISIS and increase instability in the area, and called on the countries of the region to increase their coordination against steps that may be deleterious to the stability of the region. He

expressed opposition to the Turkish operation, stressing that any action that increase insecurity in the region must be halted quickly (ISNA, October 16).



**The Shamkhani-Lavrentiev meeting
(ISNA, October 16, 2019)**

Iranian Involvement in Iraq

► A response to protests in Iraq, published on the Twitter account of the Supreme Leader of Iran, Ali Khamenei (October 6), stated that the people of Iran and Iraq are tied to each other by belief in God and love for the Imam Hussein and the descendants of the Prophet and that this connection grows stronger every day. The enemies are trying to sow discord, but they have failed and their schemes will have no effect, it argued. The Spokesman of the Iranian government, Ali Rabiei, also declared that the enemies will never succeed in breaking the strong bond between Iran and Iraq. At a press conference in Tehran, Rabiei stated that Iran stands alongside Iraq in light of the violent events in the country. He called on all sides to help find a way to reach a “democratic” solution to the crisis, and not allow foreign forces to exploit the protests to achieve their goals (ISNA, October 7). Meanwhile, Iranian media claimed that foreign hands, including the United State, the West and Saudi Arabia, were involved in fomenting the protests in Iraq.



**The involvement of the “empire of lies” (the BBC) in the protests in Iraq
(Tasnim, October 5, 2019)**

- In mid-October, over three million Iranian pilgrims reached Iraq to mark the occasion of ‘Arbaeen (the conclusion of the days of mourning over the death of the Shi’ite Imam Hussein). The Iraqi Ambassador to Tehran, Sa’ad Jawad Qandil, stated in a special interview to the Mehr news agency (October 17), that Iraqi authorities provided all logistical assistance to facilitate the arrival and presence of the pilgrims, providing them with all necessary services, securing their passing through the border crossings, and transferring them to the Shi’ite holy sites in Iraq. He stated that all Iraqi security forces, including the police, army, Popular Mobilization Units (al-Hashd al-Shaabi militias), and the anti-terrorism units are taking part in providing security for the pilgrims.
- Addressing the trade relations between Iran and Iraq, the ambassador remarked that the current annual volume of trade stands at \$12 billion and is expected to grow to \$20 billion, in accordance with an agreement the two capitals signed, which would make Iran Iraq’s largest trading partner. He reported that under the agreement, free trade zones will be established near the border crossings connecting both countries; Iranian firms will participate in reconstructing areas liberated from ISIS; and the visa fees for nationals of both countries for visits across the border will be waived.



**The Iraqi ambassador to Tehran
(Mehr, October 17, 2019)**

► On October 19, the First Deputy of the President of Iran, Eshaq Jahangiri, arrived for a visit in Iraq to participate in the ‘Arbaeen ceremonies. He was welcomed by the Governor of Najaf Province, Luay al-Yassiri and the Iranian Ambassador to Baghdad, Iraj Masjedi. Jahangiri thanked Iraqi authorities for welcoming the millions of Iranian pilgrims and stated that Iran will not spare any effort to handle the deficiencies in infrastructure that are incumbering the pilgrimage. He added that the ‘Arbaeen ceremonies are a testament to the unity and solidarity of the Muslim world. The governor of Najaf stated in the meeting with the Iranian deputy president that the Iraqi people and the city of Najaf are proud to host the pilgrims, and particularly the Iranian ones, and that the ‘Arbaeen ceremonies contribute to bolstering ties between Iran and Iraq (Tasnim, October 19). During his visit to Iraq, Jahangiri spoke on the phone with the Iraqi Prime Minister, Adel Abdul Mahdi, and thanked him for Iraq’s efforts to host the pilgrims, again expressing the willingness of the government of Iran to help resolve challenges pertaining to the pilgrimage to Shi’ite holy sites in Iraq (Fars, October 19).



**The visit of the Iraqi deputy president (fourth from the left) in Najaf
(Fars, October 19, 2019)**