



Spotlight on Iran

December 1 –15, 2019

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Overview

- ▶ Iran is continuing to try to minimize the impact of the ongoing protests in Iraq on Iranian interests in the country, and particularly economic interests. Arab media outlets reported about an additional visit of Qasem Soleimani, the Commander of the Qods Force, to Baghdad, following the resignation of Iraqi Prime Minister, Adel Abdul Mahdi. In light of the persistent protests in Iraq, Iranian officials continue blaming the West, and particularly the United States and Israel, of fomenting the protests, which are presented by Tehran as a manifestation of a Western conspiracy intended to weaken the “Resistance Axis” in the region.
- ▶ Against the backdrop of ongoing Iranian efforts to entrench its foothold in Albu Kamal, on the Syrian side of the Syrian-Iraqi border, Arab media outlets reported about recent strikes carried out against targets linked to Iran and pro-Iranian militias. Meanwhile, a report of the ImageSat company revealed that Iran is constructing a tunnel to store missiles and rockets in the Imam Ali military base near Albu Kamal.
- ▶ Tensions between Iran and Israel in Syria: A Lebanese news website reported about an unusual deployment of Hezbollah and forces linked to the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps’ (IRGC) Qods Force near the town of Rankous on the Qalamoon mountain range, north of Damascus, ahead of a possible revenge attack in retaliation to IDF strikes in Syria.
- ▶ A senior Iranian financial official complained that the volume of trade between Iran and Syria is not satisfactory given the positive relationship between Tehran and Damascus. The official’s statements reflect growing dissatisfaction in Iran due to ongoing delays in the implementation of agreements concerning economic cooperation that have been signed over the past two years between the two countries.

Iranian Involvement in Syria

- ▶ Airstrikes against Iranian entrenchment in the Albu Kamal region on the Syria-Iraq border: al-Arabiya reported (December 4) that a weapons depot of the IRGC, located in the Hamdan

Air Base near Albu Kamal in eastern Syria, was bombed on December 4 at night, by unidentified jets. The report did not provide information about injuries or damage caused by the strikes. No other source confirmed this report. On December 8, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) reported that on the night between December 7 and 8, unidentified jets struck positions of Iranian and pro-Iranian militias in the Albu Kamal region. The report claimed that at least five fighters in the ranks of the militias were killed.

► It should be mentioned that on November 18, 2019, the American TV network, Fox News, published aerial photography of the Israeli ImageSat company, alleging that Iran is reconstructing the Imam Ali military base near Albu Kamal, in the Syria-Iraq border region. The base was hit two months ago in a strike widely attributed to Israel. The base is intended to store materiel and house personnel of the pro-Iranian militias operating in that region. Last week, a report by ImageSat further revealed that Iran is constructing a tunnel to store missiles and rockets under the Imam Ali base. The length of the tunnel is 120 meters, it is 4.5 meters wide and four meters deep. According to ImageSat, dozens of storage facilities and structures to store missiles were established in the northwestern section of the base.



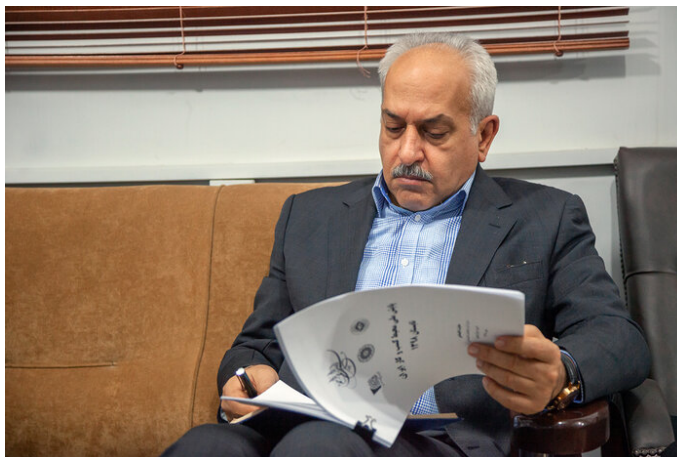
ImageSat, December 10, 2019

► The Lebanese website al-Modon reported (December 7) about unusual deployment of Hezbollah and Qods Force militants ahead of a possible revenge attack in response to IDF strikes in Syria. According to the report, Hezbollah ferried fighters, equipment, materiel and anti-aircraft weaponry from southern Syria to an area near the town of Rankous in the Qalamoon mountainous region, north of Damascus. In parallel to dispatching these reinforcements, commanders of the Qods Force and the Iraqi Badr militia, which operates under the guidance of the IRGC, also reached the area. The report further alleged that these

forces established operations rooms, a network of tunnels and intelligence gathering positions in the area. In addition, the website's sources reported that following the last IDF strike against Iranian targets in Syria (November 20), three Iranian jets landed in the Syrian T4 air base near Homs, and unloaded precision-guided missiles, weaponry and logistical equipment intended for Hezbollah operatives present in Qalamoon, Quneitra and Daraa.

► Iranian website reported based on original reporting of the Lebanese al-Mayadeen TV network, which is identified with Hezbollah, about growing disagreements between Russia and Iran concerning Syria. According to this report, based on Russian sources, Moscow does not approve of the ongoing talks between the Syrian President, Bashar al-Assad and Iran, concerning the drafting of the Syrian constitution. As a result, Russia intensified its engagement with Arab Gulf states, chief among them Saudi Arabia, to promote a political settlement in Syria and encourage the Gulf countries' participation in Syria's reconstruction. The report also claimed that Moscow is furious about Assad's repeated attempts to build closer ties to Iran, to balance the pressures applied on him by Russia, which is demanding from the Syrian regime that it adopt a position resisting Iran's economic, social and political influence of Iran in Syria. In addition, Russia opposes Iran's intention to establish permanent military bases in Syria (Entekhab, December 7).

► The Chairman of the Joint Iranian-Syrian Economic Committee, Kivan Kashefi, said during an interview to the website YJC.IR (December 5) that during the first six months of the current Iranian year (March until September 2019), the volume of Iranian exports to Syria reached \$75 million. He stated that the volume of economic ties between the two countries is still unsatisfactory given the solid political ties between Tehran and Damascus, and the agreements signed between the two countries to bolster their economic cooperation. The Chairman of Iran's Chamber of Trade, Reza Padidar, also remarked that the trade volume between the two countries remains severely circumscribed. The economic affairs commentator, Ebrahim Razzaqi, pointed out a number of reasons that are impeding the expansion of economic ties between the two countries in an interview to YJC, including: lack of capital and foreign exchange reserves in Iran and banking-related difficulties that are impeding Iranian investments in Syria.



The Chairman of the Joint Iranian-Syrian Economic Committee, Kivan Kashefi
(Source: IRNA, December 4, 2019)

Iranian Involvement in Iraq

- ▶ Arab media outlets reported that the Commander of the IRGC's Qods Force, Qasem Soleimani, arrived on November 29 for a visit in Baghdad following the resignation of the Iraqi Prime Minister, Adel Abdul Mahdi. According to this report, Soleimani arrived in Baghdad accompanied by a delegation made up for 500 IRGC personnel and met with commanders of the Shi'ite pro-Iranian Iraqi militias (al-Hadath, al-Arabiya, December 1). It should be mentioned that in late October, Soleimani visited Iraq as part of Iran's effort to resolve the crisis in Iraq, and to ensure that Prime Minister Abdul Mahdi remains in his position.
- ▶ In light of the ongoing protests in Iraq, the Iranian pilgrimage organization announced the suspension of visits of Iranian citizens of the Shi'ite holy sites in Iraq. The statement of the organization read that pilgrimages have been stopped until further notice to protest the safety of the Iranian pilgrims, and no date has been set for the renewal of such visits (YCJ.IR, December 8). On December 3, Iraqi protesters torched the Iranian consulate in the holy city of Najaf for the third time in six days.



**Iranian pilgrims visit Iraq as part of the 'Arbayeen ceremonies
(Fars, October 12, 2019)**

- ▶ Meanwhile, fears are growing in Iran concerning the impact of the ongoing protests on the trade between the two countries, in part due to calls by Iraqi citizens to boycott Iranian goods. A member of Iran's chamber of commerce, Ali Shariati, published a tweet on his Twitter account (December 8) in which he described his experience during his last flight from Iran to Iraq last week. He mentioned that he was almost the only Iranian on the flight, and when he landed, he felt the hostility of those around him when they noticed his Iranian passport. According to him, a person accompanying him suggested that he avoid speaking in Persian.
- ▶ On December 10, Iranian media outlets reported that Iraq announced a halt to exporting 17 agricultural goods from Iran. According to the statement of the Iranian Ministry of Agriculture, Iraq banned exporting various agricultural goods, including tomatoes, cucumbers, potatoes, eggplant, carrot, onion, garlic, lettuce, pumpkin, corn, dates, watermelons, melons, pomegranate and cabbage, since Iraqi farmers are able to grow them in sufficient quantities (Asr-e Iran, December 10). On the other hand, the Iranian Minister of Energy, Reza Ardakanian, announced that Iran will extend the contract concerning export of electricity to Iraq. He remarked that Iran and Iraq signed a three-year agreement to develop Iraq's electric industry in various fields, and that under this agreement, Iran will continue exporting electricity to Iraq, for as long as Iraq needs it (Fars, December 9).
- ▶ In light of the ongoing protests in Iraq, senior Iranian officials continue blaming the West, and particularly the United States and Israel, of fomenting the protests in an effort to weaken the "Resistance Front" and destabilize the security and stability of the region. The Commander of Iran's Law Enforcement Forces, Hossein Ashtari, declared during a gathering

of commanders, that the attack on the “Resistance Axis” and the exploitation of the demands of the citizens of Iraq, Lebanon and Iran reflect an organized plot of the West, led by the United States, Israel and Arab countries (Tasnim, November 9). Mohammad Kowsari, a senior IRGC commander, alleged in a media interview that “the enemies” are exploiting the protests in Iraq to assassinate senior commanders in the “Resistance Front” (Defa Press, December 9).

► On December 5, the New York Times published, based on American intelligence and military sources, that Iran is exploiting the unrest in Iraq to conceal an arsenal and short-range missiles in the country. According to this report, Tehran enjoys the assistance of Shi’ite pro-Iranian Iraqi militias for the purpose of hiding the missiles and moving them from one location to another. According to the U.S. officials, the missiles pose a threat to the allies of the United States in the region, including Israel and Saudi Arabia, and can endanger American troops posted in the region. Meanwhile, the American al-Hurra network (December 5) reported that Iran is moving ballistic missiles to western Iraq through a border crossing in the region of Diyala. An Iraqi security official told the network that the forces of the Iraqi Shi’ite militias assume the identity of the Iraqi Border Police, which is operating under the command of the Ministry of Interior, and move the missiles in cars to weapon storage facilities of the pro-Iranian militias.

Iranian Involvement in the Palestinian Arena

► The Palestinian newspaper al-Quds reported (December 9), based on sources close to the leadership of the political bureau of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, that the leadership of the organization intends to conduct a round of meetings in Iran, Syria and Lebanon. According to this report, four high-ranking officials in the military wing of the organization, Saraya al-Quds, received permission from Egypt to leave Cairo toward Syria and from there, travel to Iran.

► Senior Hamas officials, on the other hand, reported that the Chairman of Hamas’ Political Bureau, Ismail Haniyeh, who arrived on December 8 for a visit in Turkey from Egypt, as part of a round of visits abroad, which also includes Russia, Malaysia and Qatar, will not visit Iran (al-Khaleej Online, December 7).