



Spotlight on Iran

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Overview

► In light of the escalating confrontation between Turkey and the forces backing the Assad regime in Idlib, **the Advisory Center of the Iranian Military in Syria published an extraordinary statement, threatening to retaliate against Turkey if it persists with its attacks.** The Turkish strikes killed an Iranian cleric and a number of Hezbollah fighters and members of foreign Shi'ite militias supported by Iran. Meanwhile, Iran also called for renewing the negotiations concerning the settlement of the war in Syria between representatives of Russia, Iran and Turkey. President Rouhani spoke to the presidents of Russia and Turkey and stressed the need to hold discussions between representatives of the three countries in light of the ongoing crisis in Idlib.

► The former Iraq Prime Minister, Iyad al-Allawi, accused the Adviser of the Supreme Leader of Iran on International Affairs, Ali-Akbar Velayati, of meddling in the process of new government formation in Iraq. His statement followed the failure of the elected Iraqi Prime Minister, Muhammad Tawfiq Allawi, to form a government, which forced him to resign last week, after only about a month on the job. Meanwhile, Abdulaziz al-Muhammadawi (Abu Fadak), the successor of Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, who was assassinated by the United States alongside the Commander of the Qods Force of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), visited Iran in early January. Velayati's possible involvement in the process of forming the new government in Baghdad and Abu Fadak's visit to Tehran bolster the assessment that **Soleimani's assassination may have resulted in delegating some of his authorities to other Iranian officials and commander of local Iranian proxies operating throughout the region.**

► Senior Palestinian officials praised the extensive assistance Qasem Soleimani provided to Palestinian militant groups. The Secretary General of Palestinian Islamic Jihad, Ziad al-Nakhleh, stated in an interview to the channel al-Quds al-Youm that **Soleimani was personally responsible for transferring advanced weaponry to the organization,** turning the "Palestinian revolution" from secret military formations to a powerful military with

weapons and capabilities. The Head of Hamas' Political Bureau, Ismail Haniyeh, also praised Soleimani and rebuffed criticism about the participation of Hamas representatives during Soleimani's funeral processions in Iran.

Iranian Involvement in Syria and Lebanon

► Seyyed Ali Zanjani, an Iranian cleric, was killed on February 28 in airstrikes carried out by the Turkish air force against the Syrian Army and forces backing the Assad regime in Idlib and Aleppo in northwestern Syria (Fars, February 29). The bombings followed shelling against a Turkish convoy, carried out by the Syrian regime and possibly Russia, which killed 36 Turkish soldiers.



Seyyed Ali Zanjani, an Iranian casualty in the Turkish strikes in northern Syria (Fars, February 29, 2020)

► Following Turkey's strikes in northern Syria, the "Advisory Center of the Iranian Military in Syria" issued an extraordinary statement, in which it threatened to retaliate in response to the ongoing strikes against the Assad regime. The statement read that the forces of the IRGC, Hezbollah and the "resistance" who took part in the campaign of the Syrian Army in the area, in an effort to reopen the M5 highway connecting Aleppo to Damascus, were attacked by the Turkish army from the air and by artillery, while using precision weaponry. Following this attack, mediators were dispatched to the Turkish military in an effort to halt the attacks, but those persisted, resulting in the death of a number of fighters. The artillery of the Syrian Army responded to the origin of the fire, but the Iranian forces told the Turkish military, through mediators, that they do not intend to confront the Turkish forces, and an order was given to the forces under the command of the Advisory Center not to attack the Turkish troops in Idlib. Despite this, the Turkish military kept shelling the positions and headquarters of the

Syrian Army and the forces backing it. The Iranian Advisory Center called in its statement on the Turkish forces to act reasonably, based on the interests of the Syrian and Turkish people, and pressure Turkey's leadership to maintain calm and avoid the loss of life of Turkish forces on Syrian soil. The Center stressed in the statement that the Turkish forces are located within the strike range of the Iranian forces, who could avenge if Turkish strikes continue, and repeated its insistence on continuing to provide support to the Syrian government and its army in the campaign against terrorism until the full liberation of Syria's land (Tasnim, March 1).

► On February 29, against the backdrop of the escalation in Idlib, the Iranian President, Hassan Rouhani, spoke with the presidents of Russia and Turkey and discussed developments in the region. In his conversation with President Erdoğan, Rouhani stated that Idlib's question is complicated, due to the presence of "terrorists" in the region and the need to protect the lives of innocent civilians living there. Rouhani stressed the need to resume the negotiations between representatives of Iran, Turkey and Russia to solve the crisis in Idlib and bolster the settlement process. He expressed Iran's willingness to host a new round of the talks based on previously agreed-upon principles, including maintaining Syria's territorial integrity, eliminating terrorism and protecting the lives of innocent civilians. He stated that increasing tensions does not serve the interests of any sides in the region and that problems should be solved through dialogue. Afterward, Rouhani spoke to the Russian President, Vladimir Putin, and also discussed the situation in Syria and the need to hold trilateral deliberations between Russia, Iran and Turkey for the purpose of continuing the struggle against terrorism and bolstering the Astana process to bring a resolution of the conflict in Syria (Mehr, February 29). The Iranian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mohammad Javad Zarif, also discussed the latest developments in Idlib with his Russian counterpart, Sergey Lavrov, in their call on March 4 (ISNA, March 4).

► In a ceremony held on February 28 to commemorate the fallen Commander of the Afghan Fatemiyoun Brigade Alireza Tavasoli (Abu Hamed), who was killed while taking part in a campaign of the Assad regime in Daraa in February 2015, the Commander of the IRGC's Qods Force, Esmail Qa'ani, praised the work of the division in Syria. Qa'ani claimed that when the fighter of the division arrived in Syria, the streets of the country were in the hands of the United States. But now, the situation has calmed down after the fighters managed to strike the United States. He asserted that if the fighters had not displayed such strength in the

battlefield, there would have been no choice but to negotiate with the United States (Telegram channel “IRGC News,” February 28).



The commander of the Qods Force with the son of the commander of the Fatemiyoun Brigade, who was killed in Syria in 2015 (Telegram channel affiliated with Esmail Qa’ani, February 28, 2020)

Iranian Involvement in Iraq

► Abdulaziz al-Muhammadawi (Abu Fadak), who was lately appointed as the chief of staff of the Popular Mobilization Committees (the Iraqi Shi’ite militias in Iraq) as the successor of Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, who was assassinated by the United States alongside the commander of the Qods Force in early January, recently paid a visit to Iran. During his visit, Abu Fadak visited the gravesite of Qasem Soleimani, the former commander of the Qods Forces, in the city of Kerman (Masregh News, February 24). Following Abu Fadak’s appointment as al-Muhandis’ replacement, the United States’ Department of State placed him on their list of Specially Designated Global Terrorists.



**Abu Fadak al- Muhammadawi at Qasem Soleimani's gravesite
(Mashregh News, February 24, 2020)**

► The former Iraqi Prime Minister, Ayad al-Allawi, accused Iran of meddling in the government formation process in Iraq. According to al-Allawi, who currently serves as the President of the Iraq National Alliance Coalition, Ali-Akbar Velayati, dictated orders concerning the formation of the new government to Muhammad Tawfiq Allawi, who was appointed in February 2020 as Iraq's incoming prime minister. Al-Allawi called on Iran to respect Iraq's sovereignty and understand that it can not subjugate Iraq and other Arab countries to its rule (bultanews.com, March 3). The elected Prime Minister, Muhammad Tawfiq Allawi, resigned this week after only a month in his position, due to his inability to form a government.

Iranian Involvement in the Palestinian Arena

► The Spokesman of the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Abbas Mousavi, condemned Israel's strike against Palestinian Islamic Jihad targets in Gaza and Damascus on February 23. Mousavi declared that the IDF's taking custody of the body of one of the militants who placed an explosive device near the barrier in the southern Gaza Strip is "a barbaric and inhumane" act, attesting to the fact that the Zionists are not committed to humane and moral principles. He praised the "Palestinian resistance" and its struggle against "the occupiers of Palestine," and expressed his disappointment about the apathy of international institutions in light of the "repeated crimes of the Israeli regime in occupied Palestine" and Israel's attacks on neighboring countries (Tasnim, February 25).

► In an interview to the al-Quds al-Youm network, the Secretary General of Palestinian Islamic Jihad, Ziad al-Nakhleh, praised the assistance Soleimani has provided to the organization. He remarked that Gaza now has thousands of missiles capable of hitting all the "Zionist cities" and that Soleimani was personally responsible for transferring weaponry to the organization,

oversaw complex operations and traveled to a number of countries to facilitate the transfer of weaponry to Gaza. According to al-Nakhleh, Soleimani turned the “Palestinian revolution” from a number of clandestine armed groups to a powerful army with weapons and capabilities. Soleimani not only ensured the supply of ready-made missiles, but also brought about a qualitative improvement with regards to the missiles (Fars, March 1).



**The Chairman of Palestinian Islamic Jihad in an interview to al-Quds al-Youm
(Fars, March 1, 2020)**

► Meanwhile, the head of Hamas’ Political Bureau, Ismail Haniyeh, addressed the critique leveled at Hamas for the participation of a delegation representing the movement in Qasem Soleimani’s funeral in Iran in January, saying this participation was “a natural matter.” In an interview to the al-Mayadin Channel, Haniyeh stated that Soleimani played a central role in the region (ISNA, March 3).