



Spotlight on Iran

September 20, 2020 - October 1, 2020



Overview

- ▶ On September 23, Mohammad Javad Zarif, the Iranian Minister of Foreign Affairs, arrived for a visit in Moscow and met with his Russian colleague. Zarif stressed that Tehran is coordinating its activities in Syria with Russia and Turkey as part of the Astana Process.
- ▶ The Iranian minister of energy conducted a video call with the Syrian minister of water, during which the two agreed to establish a strategic committee to facilitate the implementation of the bilateral cooperation agreement in the water sector, which was signed last year by the two countries.
- ▶ On September 26, the Iraqi foreign minister arrived for a two-day visit in Tehran, during which he met with senior Iranian government officials. At the same time, a military delegation headed by the deputy Iranian Chief of Staff for International Affairs arrived for a visit in Baghdad. In addition, Iraqi sources reported about a visit conducted by the Commander of the Qods Force of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), Esmail Qa'ani, in Karbala in Iraq. These visits were carried out against the backdrop of reports in American and Arab media about a threat, recently conveyed by the U.S. government to the government of Iraq due to the persistence of attacks by Shia pro-Iranian militias against American targets in Iraq. According to these reports, the United States threatened to shutter its embassy in Baghdad ahead of a military operation against the pro-Iranian militias if the attacks persist.
- ▶ The Iranian daily Kayhan published a rare critical article of the senior Shia cleric, Ayatollah Ali Sistani, arousing harsh responses in Iraq and Iran. The editor of the paper criticized Sistani for meeting with the UN envoy to Iraq, during which he called for international supervision of the upcoming elections in Iraq next year. Following the harsh response to his article, the editor of Kayhan was forced to issue an apology.

► The head of the joint Iranian-Iraq Chamber of Commerce admitted that the economic and trade cooperation between the two countries is encountering greater challenges due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the foreign policy of the Iraqi prime minister and the growing competition for the Iraqi market among Iran and other countries, such as China, Turkey and Saudi Arabia.

Iranian Involvement in Syria

► The Spokesman of the Iranian Armed Forces, Abolfazl Shekarchi, declared that Iran intends to reinforce Syria's air defenses following the visit conducted by the Iranian chief of staff of the armed forces in Damascus in July 2020. In a television interview on the occasion of the "Holy Defense Week" (marking the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq War), the spokesman claimed that Iran does not maintain a military presence in the countries of the region and that its presence is based on "advisers" alone. He stated that the countries of the "resistance axis" have armies and forces of their own, and that Iran is assisting them solely through providing advice and sharing its experience. According to him, Iran supports with all of its might any country facing the "Zionist regime" and the "bloodthirsty American regime," and that the assistance is not provided for free due to Iran's financial troubles. Shekarchi also stated that Iran provided the Yemeni people [meaning, the Houthi rebels in Yemen] with defensive technologies, and that the Yemenis manufactured missiles, unnamed aerial vehicles (UAVs), and weapons by themselves (Fars, September 22).



Abolfazl Shekarchi, the Spokesman of the Iranian Armed Forces (Fars, September 22, 2020)

► On September 23, the Iranian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mohammad Javad Zarif, arrived for a visit in Moscow. During the meeting (September 24) with his Russian counterpart, Sergey Lavrov, the two discussed the future of the nuclear accord (JCPOA) and developments in Syria. Upon arrival in Moscow, Zarif stated that the Syrian issue requires special cooperation

and that Tehran is coordinating its activities in Syria with Russia and Turkey as part of the Astana Process (IRNA, September 24).

► The Representative of the Iranian Supreme Leader in Syria, Ayatollah Abolfazl Tabatabai Ashkezari, declared during a Friday sermon in the Sayyeda Zainab mosque south of Damascus, that the revenge for the killing of Qasem Soleimani, the Commander of the IRGC's Qods Force, who was assassinated by the United States in January 2020, is close, and that the enemies will face nothing but humiliation and suffering. The representative of the Supreme Leader in Syria condemned the normalization between Israel and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Bahrain, declaring that "the stupid traitors" must know that the real victory will be achieved on the battlefield and not on the lawn of the White House (Fars, September 25).

► Meanwhile, the Iranian news website Hawzah News (September 26) reported that the representative of the supreme leader in Syria will end his term and will be replaced by Hojjat-ul-Islam Hamid Saffar Harandi, who has previously served as the deputy for cultural affairs and education in the office of the supreme leader's representative to Syria.



The Representative of the Supreme Leader of Iran to Syria, Ayatollah Abolfazl Tabatabai Ashkezari (Fars, September 25, 2020)

► The Iranian Minister of Energy, Reza Ardakanian, held a video call with the Syrian Minister of Water, Tamam Ra'ad, and discussed implementing the agreement for cooperation in the water sector, which was signed by the two countries last year. The Syrian minister of water stressed the need to utilize the experience and knowledge of Iranian companies in rehabilitating the water and sewage infrastructure in Syria, and called for expanding the participation of Iranian companies in water sanitation projects in his country. The two minister agreed to establish a strategic committee for cooperation in the water sector, headed by the ministers of energy and water of the two countries during the next two weeks (ILNA, September 25).

Iranian Involvement in Iraq

► On September 26, the Iraqi Minister of Foreign Affairs, Fuad Hussein, arrived for a two-day visit in Tehran. During the visit, the minister of foreign affairs met with senior Iranian officials, chief among them the Iranian President, Hasan Rouhani; the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mohammad Javad Zarif; the Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council, Ali Shamkhani; the Speaker of the Majlis, Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf, and discussed developments in Iraq and the region, bilateral relations, and the implementation of agreements signed during the last visit of the Iraqi Prime Minister, Mustafa al-Kazimi, to Tehran in last July (IRNA, September 26).

► In the meeting with the Iraqi foreign minister, President Rouhani declared that the presence of American forces in Iraq, Afghanistan and the Persian Gulf states is harming the security and stability of the region, and that it is the obligation of every country to remove the United States from the region. Rouhani claimed that Iran does not meddle in the domestic affairs of Iraq, and called for expanding political, cultural and particular economic ties between the two countries. The Iraqi foreign minister stated following the meeting that he and the Iranian president agreed to establish a special committee that will discuss the implementation of the cooperation agreements signed by the two countries (Tasnim, September 26).



The meeting of the Iranian and Iraqi foreign ministers (ISNA, September 25, 2020)

► Iraqi sources reported (September 26) that the Commander of the IRGC's Qods Force, Esmail Qa'ani, arrived for a visit in Karbala in Iraq. In a video shared on social media and Iranian media, Qa'ani was seen in the city of Karbala, likely in the company of pro-Iranian Iraqi Shia militias. The report did not include information about the date of the visit, but it clearly occurred after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic.



The Commander of the Qods Force, Esmail Qa'ani, during a visit in Karbala (Mehr, September 26, 2020)

► On September 27, an Iranian military delegation headed by the Deputy Chief of Staff of the Iranian Armed Forces on International Affairs, Qadir Nezami, who also serves as the head of the joint Iranian-Iraqi military committee, arrived for a visit in Baghdad. During the visit, the delegation met with the Iraqi Minister of Defense, Juma Inad Saadoun, and discussed with him the military and security cooperation between the two countries, and continuing the campaign against ISIS (IRNA, September 27).



The meeting between the Iranian deputy chief of staff on international affairs with the Iraqi minister of defense (IRNA, September 27, 2020)

► The visit of the Iraqi minister of defense to Tehran and the visit of the Iranian deputy chief of staff of international affairs, and the commander of the IRGC's Qods Force to Iraq took place against the backdrop of reports in U.S. and Arab media about a threat, conveyed by the United States administration to the government of Iraq, due to the persistence of attacks by pro-Iranian Shia militias against U.S. targets in the country.

► The Washington Post reported (September 26), that the American Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, recently warned the Iraqi government that if it does not act to halt the attacks by pro-Iranian militias against the compound of the U.S. embassy and U.S. forces in Iraq, the United States will close its embassy in Beirut. According to the report on the Iraqi website

Iraqi24 (September 22), Pompeo sent a stern letter to the President of Iraq, Barham Salih, warning that if the United States is forced to shutter its embassy and withdraw its forces, it will act to eliminate all those who were responsible for attacking American targets, starting with the Shia pro-Iranian militias Kataeb Hezbollah and Asaeb Ahl al-Haqq.

► Senior commanders of Shia pro-Iranian militias responded angrily to the threats made by the American secretary of State. The Secretary of Harakat al-Nujabaa', Akram al-Kaabi, wrote in a tweet on his Twitter account (September 25), that the Shia militias intend to continue in their resistance to the American forces in Iraq, that the American threats will not deter them, and they will continue in their struggle or achieve martyrdom. al-Kaabi called on all political forces in Iraq to implement the decision of the Iraqi parliament, which demanded the complete withdrawal of American forces from Iraq.

► The official in charge of internal security in the Kataeb Hezbollah militia, Abu Ali al-Askari, also responded to the American threat, tweeting on his account (September 25) that Pompeo's threats will not weaken the forces of the resistance, which will continue to ferociously act against American forces.

► The Shia cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, on the other hand, called for halting attacks against diplomatic and governance institutions in Iraq, and establishing a security, military and diplomatic committee to investigate these attacks. According to him, the attacks threaten Iraq's interests (Muqtada al-Sadr's Twitter account, September 25). Two additional senior officials within the Shia militias, Hadi al-Ameri and Falah al-Fayyad, condemned the attacks against American forces.

► The Iraqi Civil Aviation Authority announced the cancellation of all flights from Iraq to Iran starting in September 25 and until October 8 (IRNA, September 25). The decision to cancel the flights was likely taken following the rise in the number of COVID-19 cases in Iran, and the efforts of Iraqi authorities to prevent the arrival by air of Iranian pilgrims to the Arbaeen ceremonies (the pilgrimage to Shia holy sites at the end of the mourning period for the death of the Shia Imam Hussein), after preventing the entry of pilgrims through land crossings between the two countries.

► The Editor of the Kayhan daily, Hossein Shariatmadari, authored an extraordinary critique of the most senior Iraq cleric, Ayatollah Ali Sistani, after the cleric had met with the UN Special Representative to Iraq, Jeanine Hennis-Plasschaert, during which he called on the UN to provide election monitoring for the parliamentary elections in Iraq set for next year. In the

editorial, which Shariatmadari published in the Kayan daily (September 26), the editor of the paper claimed that the call for UN monitoring of the election process impinges on Iraq status as an independent and free country. Shariatmadari alleged that the UN does not act to bring peace to the world, but has become a pressure tool wielded by the United States and its allies, as can be seen in the silence of the international body concerning “the crimes of the Zionist regime” in Palestine, and its turning a blind eye to the support offered by the United States and its allies to the former Iraqi ruler, Saddam Hussein, during his war against Iran, as well as the occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan by the United States, the slaughter of Muslims in Burma and Kashmir, the crimes of Saudi Arabia in Yemen and the assassination of Qasem Soleimani and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis by the United States. Shariatmadari called on Sistani’s office to issue a clarifying statement concerning the content of his meeting with the UN representative, in light of his high religious standing in the Muslim world.

► At a press conference of the spokesman of the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (September 28), the official expressed reservations about the criticism leveled by the Kayhan editor against the senior Iraqi cleric, stating that no one should be allowed to denigrate the standing of senior clerics, such as Sistani (Fars, September 28). In response to the editorial, President Rouhani, the Foreign Minister Zarif, and the Commander of the Qods Force, Qa’ani, all praised Sistani’s role in the campaign against ISIS and preserving Iraq’s independence. Following the harsh criticism aroused by Shariatmadari’s editorial in both Iraq and Iran, the editor of Kayhan published (September 28) an official and public apology.

► In an interview to the news agency Tasnim, the Head of the Joint Iranian-Iraqi Chamber of Trade, Yahya Al-e Eshaq, addressed (September 26) the challenges facing the economic cooperation between the two countries. He mentioned that the volume of Iranian exports to Iraq reached \$12 billion last year, out of which \$3 billion comprised of electricity, energy and technical and engineering services. According to him, the COVID-19 pandemic and drop in Iraq’s oil revenues resulted in a reduction in the volume of trade between the two countries, but Iranian exports to Iraq this year will still amount to over nine billion dollars. The head of the chamber of commerce admitted that the formation of Mustafa al-Kazimi’s government negatively impacted the economic cooperation of the two countries, since al-Kazimi is striving to expand his country’s ties with all of its neighbors and strike a balance between them.



**The Head of the Joint Iranian-Iraqi Chamber of Trade, Yahya Al-e Eshaq
(Tasnim, September 26, 2020)**

► In addition, Al-e Eshaq addressed the growing competition between Iran and other countries, including China, Turkey and Saudi Arabia for a share of the Iraqi market. He mentioned that Iran’s economic rivals are awaiting an improvement in the security situation in Iraq to push Iran out of the Iraqi market. He specifically mentioned the concerns that Saudi Arabia allegedly has due to the strong economic relationship between Iran and Iraq, and strikes to expand its presence in Iraq, for example, in the sectors of energy and electricity. He warned about the intention of European countries to enter the Iraqi market, which may significantly jeopardize Iran’s economic standing in Iraq. Al-e Eshaq added that the central banks in Iran and Iraq are conducting negotiations to find ways that will allow them to deal with the restrictions stemming from the banking sanctions imposed on Iran. The senior Iranian official also remarked that Iraq wishes to reduce the import of goods from Iran to stimulate local production, and prefers to focus its economic ties in Iran on joint investments.

Iranian Involvement in the Palestinian Arena

► The Iranian Ambassador to Azerbaijan, Seyyed Abbas Mousavi, met with the Palestinian Ambassador to Baku, Nasser Abdul Karim. The two discussed developments in the region, the “Deal of the Century” of President Trump, and the normalization process between Israel and several Arab countries (ILNA, September 26).



The meeting between the Iranian and Palestinian ambassador in Baku, the Azerbaijani capital (ILNA, September 26, 2020)