



Spotlight on Iran

November 1, 2020 - November 15, 2020

Overview

- ▶ The Senior Adviser to the Iranian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ali-Asghar Khaji visited Damascus and met with President Assad and discussed the ongoing negotiations process concerning the settlement of the war in Syria, regional developments and bilateral relations. Khaji headed an Iranian delegation that took part in the Russian-organized International Conference on Return of Syrian Refugees, which was held in Damascus.
- ▶ The Iranian deputy minister of defense visited Baghdad at the helm of a delegation made up of senior military and security officials, and met with high-ranking Iraqi officials, chief among them the national security adviser and the Iraqi minister of interior. During the visit, the sides discussed cooperation between the two countries on military and security matters, and combating terrorism and crime.
- ▶ Growing Iranian concerns about efforts to stymie its economic activity in Syria and Iraq: a commentary published by the Mashregh News Agency expressed disappointment about Iran's marginal role in Syria's economic reconstruction, which lags behind the role Russia and China are playing in this regard. Another opinion article, published by the Mehr News Agency expressed concern about Saudi Arabia's efforts to increase its sway in Iraq, at Iran's expense, by purchasing land and establishing economic projects. These articles join a chorus of Iranian outlets that have expressed criticism over the past two years toward the leaderships of Syria and Iraq, who prioritize other countries over Iran in carrying out economic projects in their countries.
- ▶ Iranian media outlets reported that the agreement, reached during the visit to Iraq of the governor of the Iranian Central Bank concerning the release of Iranian funds frozen in Iraqi banks, is gradually being implemented.

Iranian Involvement in Syria

► On November 10, the Senior Adviser to the Iranian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ali-Asghar Khaji, met with the Syrian President, Bashar al-Assad, and discussed the negotiations concerning the settlement of the war in Syria, regional developments and relations between the two countries. Khaji arrived in Damascus at the helm of an Iranian delegation that met with senior Syrian officials and participated in the international conference on refugee return. In his meeting with Assad, Khaji stated that the international refugee conference can be an opening for reducing the suffering of Syrian refugees, building trust and establishing peace and stability in Syria. He called for resolving the crisis in Syria through political means, and stressed the importance of continuing the work of the Syrian Constitutional Committee. As part of his visit to Syria, Khaji also met with the Syrian Deputy Foreign Minister, Faisal al-Miqdad (Fars, November 10).



The meeting between the senior adviser to the Iranian minister of foreign affairs with the Syrian president (Fars, November 10, 2020).

► During speech at the conference on refugees, which was inaugurated on November 11, Khaji declared that the refugee question is a result of the war forced on Syria. He further claimed that the “terrorist groups” supported by the United States have prevented the refugees in the Rukban Camp on the Syrian-Jordanian border from leaving the camp. He condemned the sanctions placed by the United States on Syria, calling them “inhumane.” Khaji stressed Iran’s support for a political solution to the crisis in Syria and stated that Iran offered to establish an international fund for Syria’s reconstruction (Tasnin, November 11).

► A report published by the Mashregh News Agency (November 4) expressed surprise about Iran’s marginal role in the economic reconstruction of Syria, despite the ample assistance

Iran provided to the country during its civil war, and notwithstanding a series of agreements to expand their cooperation, which the two countries have signed in recent years. The article noted that when it comes to participation in Syria's reconstruction, Iran is lagging far behind Russia, which is already promoting substantial projects, including one in the Tartous Port, with the aim of expanding the export of Russian goods to Syria. The article claimed that Iran is lagging behind China too, which has expressed great interest in being involved in Syria's reconstruction. Furthermore, Iranian exports to Syria are more limited in scope compared to China, Russia and even Turkey, the United Arab Emirates and Egypt, which displayed hostility toward Syria during the civil war, the commentary argued.

► This is not the first time that Iranian media express disappointment about Syria not prioritizing Iran in the reconstruction process. For example, on January 21, 2018, the reformist daily Qanoon published an article critical of the Syrian president, arguing that he prefers Russian companies over Iranian ones in the reconstruction process of his country. A similar article was published on January 17, 2018, on the website Tabnak, which argued that the Russians and Syrians are acting to stymie Iranian influence in the country, and that the agreement signed between the Russian and Syrian governments determined that the involvement of Iran and Iranian companies in Syria's reconstruction is contingent on Russian approval.

► On November 11, the Iranian Deputy Minister of Energy, Qasem Taqizadeh Khamesi, conducted a video call with the Syrian minister of water, during which the two discussed implementing an agreement concerning cooperation between the two countries in the sector of water and sewage. During the call, the Iranian deputy minister described the capabilities of the Iran's water and sanitation sector in handling water provision, water and waste-water treatment, manufacture of pumping equipment, and building water desalination facilities. The Syrian minister of water expressed Syria's desire to utilize Iran's capabilities in the sphere of water and sanitation (IRNA, November 11). In late September 2020, the Iranian Minister of Energy, Reza Ardakanian, conducted a video call with the Syrian Minister of Water, Tamam Ra'ad, and discussed with him the implementation of an agreement concerning cooperation in the water sector, which was signed last year between the two countries. The Syrian minister of water stressed the need to use 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 treatment projects in his country.

At the end of the call, the two ministers agreed to establish a strategic committee for cooperation in the water sector, headed by the deputy ministers of water and energy of the two countries (ILNA, September 25).

► A ceremony held in Damascus launched the Arabic translation of a book that collects the sayings of the Supreme Leader of Iran, Ali Khamenei, about the Prophet Muhammad. The speakers at the conference condemned the denigration of Prophet Mohammad in the French satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo. The conference was attended by the Iranian Ambassador to Syria, Javad Torkabadi, Sheikh Hatem al-Jabouri, one of the leaders of the tribes of Deir Ezzor, and Sunni and Shia religious clerics, including Sheikh Akram Diab, a member of the Shura Council of Lebanese Hezbollah (website of the Iranian Broadcasting Authority, November 7). The book launch event in Damascus is yet another manifestation of Iran's efforts to increase its religious influence in Syria. In recent years, Iran held Shia religious events in Syria on various holy days, and has also been involved in reconstruction and restoration work in Shia religious sites damaged during the civil war.



The launch event of the book of the supreme leader of Iran in Damascus (Website of the Iranian Broadcasting Authority, November 7, 2020).

Iranian Involvement in Iraq

► In early November, the Iranian Deputy Minister of Defense, Qassem Taqizadeh, arrived for a visit in Baghdad at the head of a delegation of senior military and security officials, and met with high-ranking Iraqi officials. On November 3, Taqizadeh met with the Iraqi National Security Adviser, Qassim al-Araji, and discussed bilateral relations and political and security developments in the region. The senior Iranian official stated during the meeting that just as Iran stood by Iraq during the campaign against ISIS, it will also stand by its side during the reconstruction phase. The Iranian deputy minister of defense also remarked that Iran is willing to share its capabilities in the military industry sector with the Iraqi army and security

forces, and also to assist Iraq in sectors of civilian industries, such as car and airplane assembly and petrochemical production. The Iraqi national security adviser asserted that Iraq seeks to improve and expand the ties between the two countries, and that the cooperation with Iran contributes to the stability and security of the region (IRNA, November 3). On November 5, the Iranian deputy minister of defense met with the Iraqi Minister of Interior, Othman al-Ghanmi, and discussed bilateral cooperation, security issues and combating crime and terrorism (IRNA, November 5).



The meeting between the Iranian deputy minister of defense (left) with the Iraqi national security adviser (IRNA, November 3, 2020).

► Against the backdrop of a visit by a senior Saudi delegation headed by the ministers of industry and agriculture in Iraq, and the likely upcoming visit of the Iraqi Prime Minister, Mustafa al-Kazimi, to Saudi Arabia, the Iranian news agency Mehr (November 10) published a report on “the Saudi Influence Operation in Iraq under the Cover of Economic Investment.” The report claimed that Saudi Arabia seeks to establish economic projects across Iraq to gain influence and control over the country. The report pointed to growing criticism within Iraq’s political system of handing over land across Iraq, including in Shia holy cities of Najaf and Karbala, to the Saudis, which may endanger Iraq’s sovereignty and security, and also damage its aquifers. According to Mehr, the Saudis wish to take over Iraq’s natural resources and economy, thus achieving their economic and political goals, including reducing Iranian influence in Iraq, activating ISIS cells across the country, and involving Iraq in the normalization process with Israel. The news agency assessed, however, that the Iraqi government will be forced to re-examine its decision to hand over Iraqi lands to Saudi Arabia given the widespread internal opposition in Iraq to Saudi’s economic activities, and that in any case, Saudi Arabia will fail to realize the goals of the United States and Zionism in Iraq.

► This is not the first time that Iranian media expresses concern about the possibility of improved relations between Iraq and Saudi Arabia, which may jeopardize Iranian interests. In May 2020, the Iraqi Minister of Finance, Ali Alawi, visited Riyadh, which raised concerns in Iran. Following the visit, reports emerged about Saudi's intention to supply Iraq with electricity, as an alternative to electricity from Iran. In response, the website Khabar Online published (May 24, 2020) a commentary warning of Saudi Arabia's intention to exploit the formation of a new government in Baghdad and the economic crisis in Iraq to bolster its ties with Iraq at Iran's expense.

► Iranian media reported last week that the agreement reached in the last visit of the governor of the Iranian Central Bank in Baghdad last month, concerning the release of Iranian funds frozen in Iraqi banks, is gradually being implemented (Asr-e Iran, November 11). In mid-October 2020, the Governor of Iran's Central Bank, Abdolnaser Hemmati, visited Iraq at the helm of a banking delegation, to discuss with senior Iraqi banking and economic officials, the matter of Iranian funds frozen in Iraqi banks. At the end of the visit, Hemmati declared that an agreement had been reached between Iran and the Iraqi Central Bank and trade banks concerning the unfreezing of the funds, which total at about \$5 billion. Those funds will be used by Iran to purchase basic goods (Mehr, October 12; Fars, October 14).