



Spotlight on Iran

November 15, 2020 - November 29, 2020



Overview

- ▶ **Senior Iranian officials have avoided publicly commenting on the statement of the IDF spokesperson about Israeli strikes on targets of the Syrian Army and Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) after explosive devices were discovered in two locations on the Syrian-Israeli border on the Golan Heights.** The explosive devices were placed by residents of Syrian villages located on the border, under the direction and with the financing of the Qods Force of the IRGC. The spokesman of the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs did not confirm the report about the death of a number of Qods Force personnel in IDF strikes in Syria, and warned of a “crushing response” to those trying to disrupt the Iranian "advisory" presence in Syria.
- ▶ **The Iranian Minister of Foreign Affairs Zarif and the special adviser to the speaker of the Majlis met in Tehran** with the UN Special Envoy for Syria, Geir Pedersen. The two Iranian officials discussed with the high-ranking UN official the negotiations concerning the settlement of the war in Syria, and called for lifting of sanctions imposed on the Syrian regime. The adviser of the speaker of the Majlis declared that Iran continues to back Syria with all of its might.
- ▶ In mid-November, the Iraqi minister of defense visited Tehran and met senior Iranian officials, including the minister of defense, the chief of staff of the Armed Forces, the commander of the IRGC and the secretary of the Supreme National Security Council. The minister headed a delegation of military and security officials who discussed with senior Iranian military and security officials the expansion of cooperation in these spheres between the two countries. Following his meeting with the Iraqi minister of defense, the Iranian chief of staff reported that an agreement concerning security cooperation will be signed by the two countries in the near future.

► Iraqi sources reported that on November 18, the Commander of the IRGC's Qods Force, Qasem Soleimani, visited Baghdad and met with the Iraqi Prime Minister, Mustafa al-Kazimi, and the commanders of Iranian-backed Shia militias. **According to these reports, Qa'ani asked the commanders of the militias to maintain the unofficial ceasefire with the United States, to avoid renewed escalation with the U.S. in the remaining weeks of the Trump administration.**

► **Iranian activities in Iraq in the cultural and scientific spheres:** The Iranian cultural attache in Baghdad met with the former Iraqi Prime Minister, Adel Abdul Mahdi, and discussed expanding scientific and academic cooperation between the two countries. Meanwhile, the Iranian cultural attache's office in Baghdad reported a rise in the number of those studying Persian in Iraq, as part of courses offered by the Iranian cultural center operating in Baghdad.

Iranian Involvement in Syria

► Senior Iranian officials avoided commenting on the statement of the IDF spokesperson about Israeli strikes against IRGC and Syrian Army targets in Syria, after the IDF uncovered multiple explosive devices in two locations near the Israeli-Syrian border on the Golan Heights. The Spokesman of the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Saeed Khatibzadeh, who was asked during his weekly press conference about the report concerning the death of a number of Qods Force personnel in the IDF strikes, did not confirm the report and remarked that the "Zionist regime" knows well that the era of "hit and run" is over, and this is why the "regime" is acting with caution. The spokesman stated that the presence of Iran in Syria is limited to an advisory role only, and warned that whoever tries to hinder it will receive a crushing response. Khatibzadeh added that the type of aggression of the "regime occupying Jerusalem" [Israel] can not be remedied, and the only way to act against it is through "resistance" (Tasnim, November 22).

► On November 18, the IDF spokesperson announced that IDF jets struck warehouses, command centers and military compounds of the Qods Force and Syrian Army. The strikes of the Air Force hit, among other locations, targets belonging to Unit 840 of the IRGC, which operates under the Qods Force, and was responsible for placing the explosive devices. According to the IDF, members of both units that placed the IEDs are residents of Syrian

border villages, who operated under the auspices of the Qods Force and with its financing (Maariv; Haaretz, November 18-19).

► On November 22, Mohammad Javad Zarif, spoke with the incoming Syrian Foreign Minister, Faisal Miqdad, and congratulated him for his appointment. In the call, Zarif expressed his condolences for the passing of the former Syrian Foreign Minister, Walid al-Muallem, who passed away on November 16, and expressed hope for the continuation of strategic cooperation between the two countries (ISNA, February 22). On February 21, Zarif met with the UN Special Envoy on Syria, Geir Pedersen, and called for removing sanctions placed on Syria. The two discussed developments in Syria, the discussions of the Constitutional Committee, and efforts to end the crisis in the country (Tasnim, November 22).



The meeting between the Iranian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Zarif, with the UN's Special Envoy on Syria (Tasnim, November 22, 2020)

► On November 23, the special UN envoy met with the Special Adviser to the Speaker of the Majlis, Hossein Amir Abdollahian. During the meeting, the Iranian official remarked that Tehran supports the UN's efforts to preserve the territorial integrity of Syria and to return security to the country. Abdollahian stressed that Iran continues to back Syria and its security with all of its might (ISNA, November 23).

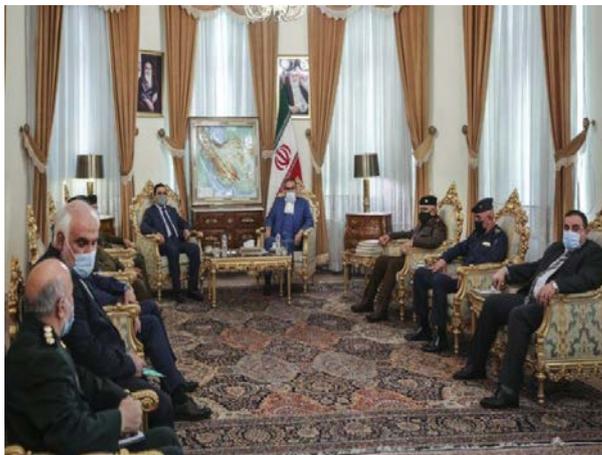
► During a visit paid by the Syrian Minister of Oil, Bassam Tomeh, to the oil refinery in Homs City, he received a presentation about the work of an Iranian company that is carrying out renovation and maintenance work in one of the production units in the plant. During the visit, the minister met with the engineers from the company who described to him the work of the control systems at the facility (the Facebook page of the Homs Oil Refining Company, November 12). In recent years, a number of reports were published about Iran's intention to assist in restoring Syria's oil refining infrastructure, which was damaged during the civil war. In late September 2017, a senior official at the research center of Iran's oil industry

announced that Iran will establish a refinery near the city of Homs, which would be able to produce 70,000 barrels of oil per day during the first stage of operation, and eventually the capacity will be doubled to 140,000 oil barrels per day. In addition, there were reports about Iran's intention to refurbish two other refineries (ISNA, September 26, 2017).

Iranian Involvement in Iraq

► In mid-November, the Iraqi Minister of Defense, Juma Anad Saadoun, arrived for a visit in Tehran and met with senior Iranian officials, chief among them the Iranian minister of defense, the chief of staff of the Iranian Armed Forces, the commander of the IRGC, and the secretary of the Supreme National Security Council. Saadoun headed a delegation of security and military officials, which also included the commander of Iraq's Air Force, the commander of Iraq's Air Defense, and several other senior officers. The visit was intended to discuss expanding security and military cooperation between the two countries. The Iranian Chief of Staff, Mohammad Baqeri, reported after his meeting with the Iraqi minister of defense that the two sides reached an agreement concerning security cooperation between the two countries, which will be signed in the near future. He mentioned that the Iraqi delegation discussed matters concerning military industries, security of shared borders, training plans and conducting joint military exercises (Mehr, November 15).

► The Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council, Ali Shamkhani, stated in his meeting with the Iraqi minister of defense that Iran will act decisively against any threat to the security of the people in both countries. During the meeting, the two also discussed regional and international developments. Shamkhani spoke about the cooperation between Iran and Iraq in the campaign against terror and declared that this cooperation ensures the stability and security of the region, and should be expanded to the strategic levels. He added that through its presence in the region, the United States strives to create disagreements and confrontations between the countries of the region, and that Iraq and Iran should face down this conspiracy. He praised the decision of the Iraqi Parliament, which called for the removal of U.S. forces from Iraq. The Iraqi minister of defense expressed his appreciation for Iran's support to Iraq in the campaign against terrorism, and stressed the importance of bolstering ties between the two countries, particularly in the security and military spheres. He remarked that no third country can impact that ties between Iran and Iraq (Tasnim, November 15).



The meeting of the Iraqi minister of defense with the Iranian secretary of the Supreme National Security Council (Mehr, November 15, 2020)

► The Commander of the IRGC, Hossein Salami, vowed in his meeting with the Iraqi minister that Iran will avenge the death of Qasem Soleimani and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, who were assassinated by the United States in January 2020 in Iraq. Salami stressed the need to ensure the withdrawal of American forces from Iraq, in light of the resolution of the Iraqi Parliament, and the wishes of the Iraqi people (Tasnim, November 15).



The meeting of the Iraqi minister of defense with the commander of the IRGC (Tasnim, November 15, 2020)

► The AP news agency reported (November 20) that according to two Iraqi Shia politicians, the Commander of the IRGC's Qods Force, Esmail Qa'ani, arrived for a visit in Baghdad on November 18, and met with senior Iraqi politicians and the commanders of the pro-Iranian Shia militias. According to the report, Qa'ani instructed the commanders of the militias to maintain high vigilance but avoid creating tensions vis-a-vis the United States, to avoid giving

President Trump a reason to launch an attack in his last weeks in power. The Iraqi sources reported that the commander of the Shia militias who met with Qa'ani in Baghdad agreed to maintain the unofficial ceasefire with the United States, as negotiations continue between Baghdad and Washington concerning the pullout of U.S. troops from Iraq (Shafaq News, November 21). The Turkish Anadolu news agency reported (November 21) according to a source close to the Iraqi government, that during his visit to Baghdad, Qa'ani also met with the Prime Minister of Iraq, Mustafa al-Kazimi. According to another report, prior to his visit in Baghdad, Qa'ani visited Damascus and Beirut and met with President Assad and Secretary General of Hezbollah, Hassan Nasrallah (BBC, November 21).

► The Iranian Cultural Attache in Baghdad, Hojjat-ul-Islam Gholareza Abazari, stated in a meeting with the former Iraqi Prime Minister, Adel Abdul Mahdi, that Iran is ready to share its scientific and medical experience with Iraqi universities. The two discussed expanding ties between the two countries in the spheres of science, academia and culture, and discussed a plan to establish a portal campus focusing on medical sciences of the University of Tehran in Karbala, southern Iraq (IRNA, November 22).



The meeting of the former Iraqi prime minister with the Iranian cultural attache to Baghdad (IRNA, November 22, 2020)

► Mohammad Reza Talari, the head of the scientific department in the office of the Iranian cultural attache in Baghdad reported a rise in the number of those learning Persian in Iraq. In an interview to the Tasnim news agency, Talari reported that the Iranian cultural attache's office carries out dozens of Persian courses, for students at differing skill levels, at the Iranian cultural center operating in Baghdad. He mentioned that due to COVID-19 restrictions, the lessons this year are held virtually, but the exams are held in person. According to him, the Iranian cultural center completed dozens of Persian courses and 12 additional courses are

taking place now, totaling 150 students (Tasnin, November 23). The courses for learning Persian, which are carried out by the Iranian embassy to Baghdad, are part of Iran's effort to expand its religious and cultural influence in Iraq.

► The Iranian Qeshm airliner announced the resumption of the company's flights from Tehran and Mashhad to the city Najaf in Iraq, which were grounded due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The passengers will be obligated to have a negative COVID-19 test within 72 hours of the flight, and airports in both countries could ban the entry of specific passengers with possible symptoms of the virus, even with negative test results (IRNA, November 25). Some of the flights between Iran and Iraq were already resumed in October 2020, after they were halted in late September due to the rise in the infection rate in Iran, and efforts of Iraqi authorities to prevent the arrival of Iranian pilgrims by air to the Shia holy sites in Iraq.