



Spotlight on Iran

November 29, 2020 - December 13, 2020

Overview

- ▶ **The recently appointed Syrian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Faysal al-Miqdad, arrived for an official visit in Tehran.** This is al-Miqdad first visit outside of Syria in his new position. During his visit to Iran, the foreign minister met with senior Iranian officials, chief among them the president, the minister of foreign affairs, the secretary of the Supreme National Security Council, the speaker of Parliament and the minister of defense.
- ▶ In light of growing criticism in Iran arguing that the volume of trade between Iran and Syria and Iraq is insufficient, the Iranian Organization for Trade Development published updated data concerning the volume of Iranian exports to Syria. The data indicate that despite the expansive political and military cooperation between the two countries, **Iran is not one of the top five exporters of goods and services to Syria.**
- ▶ The Iranian Ambassador to Iraq, Iraj Masjedi, **confirmed in a television interview that the commander of the Qods Force of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), Esmail Qa'ani, recently visited Iraq and met with senior Iraqi officials.** The ambassador claimed that Iran's ties with the parliamentary factions in the Iraqi Parliament are not intended to weaken the government, but on the contrary, to empower it and bolster the cooperation between the different groups and sects in the country.
- ▶ A senior officer of the IRGC's Qods Force died of COVID-19, which he contracted during deployment in Iraq. Abdrolrasoul Ostovar Mahmoudabadi fought in Syria and Iraq in recent years, and was close to the former Qods Force Commander, Qasem Soleimani.
- ▶ The Reuters news agency reported about **Iran's efforts to expands its influence in the religious sphere in Iraq, though the development of the Shia holy sites in Iraq.** The development works are part of Iran's efforts to entrench its influence in Iraq through "soft power" initiatives, and to further its economic interests in the country by encouraging religious tourism between the two countries.

Iranian Involvement in Syria

► On December 6, the incoming Syrian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Faysal al-Miqdad, arrived for his first official visit in Iran in his new role. On December 7, al-Miqdad met with the Iranian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mohammad Javad Zarif. The two discussed bilateral relations and expanding economic cooperation between the two countries. Zarif expressed support for the ongoing negotiations process concerning the settlement of the war in Syria. The Syrian minister of foreign affairs expressed his condolences for the deaths over the past year of the Commander of the Qods Force of the IRGC, Qasem Soleimani, and of the Iranian nuclear scientist, Mohsen Fakhrizadeh, and thanked Iran for its support for Syria in the war on “terrorism and radicalism.” al-Miqdad also condemned the activities of the United States in the region (Fars, December 7).



**The meeting of the Syrian and Iranian ministers of foreign affairs
(Fars, December 7, 2020)**

► Later during his visit, al-Miqdad met with President Hassan Rouhani, the Speaker of the Iranian Parliament, Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf, with the Adviser on International Affairs of the Supreme Leader of Iran, Ali-Akbar Velayati, with the Secretary of the Iranian Supreme National Security Council, Ali Shamkhani, and with the Minister of Defense, Amir Hhatami.

► President Rouhani stressed in his meeting with the Syrian minister of foreign affairs Iran’s ongoing support of its “strategic ally” Syria “until the final victory.” He remarked that the struggle against “the Zionist occupiers” and terrorism is a common goal of the two countries (Tasnim, December 8).



**The meeting between President Rouhani and the Syrian minister of foreign affairs
(Tasnim, December 8, 2020)**

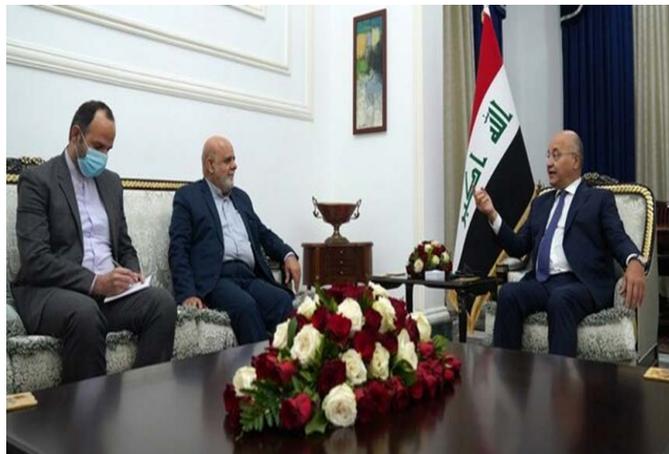
- ▶ The Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council, Shamkhani, harshly criticized the presence of the United States in Syria, claiming that it is intended to loot Syria's oil, preserve the security of the "Zionist regime" and expand ISIS cells operating in the region. In addition, Shamkhani called on the international community to join forces against Israel, declaring that the world will be safer without "the Zionist regime." He condemned the leaders of Arab countries striving to normalize their countries' relations with Israel, arguing that their fate will not be better than that of former Libyan President Muammar al-Qaddafi, and the former leader of Sudan, Omar al-Bashir (Fars, December 8)
- ▶ The Speaker of the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Saeed Khatibzadeh, denied the report about the assassination of an IRGC commander in a drone strike along the Syria-Iraq border. He remarked that he has not heard of this, and that the report is likely false (IRNA, December 1). Arab media outlets reported on November 30, based on Iraqi security sources, that a senior IRGC commander, Muslim Shahdan, was killed in an unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) strike, which bombed his car, killing and three other people who were in the car, shortly after they crossed the al-Qaem border crossing between Iraq and Syria.
- ▶ Farzad Piltan, the Director General on Arab and African Countries Affairs at Iran's Trade Development Organization reported that during the first seven months of the current Iranian year (March - October 2020), the volume of Iranian exports to Syria reached 73 million dollars. He remarked that there has been an increase in the export of pipes, copper cables, certain types of steel and iron bars, and medicine, compared to last year. On the other hand, there has been a drop in the export of car parts, turbine parts, dried yeast, and powdered milk. Piltan pointed to the relatively low volume of Iranian exports to Syria, compared to the Turkish exports to Syria, which amounted to over 112 million dollars as of September 2020.

The data on exports to Syria indicate that despite the extensive political and military cooperation between the two countries, Iran is not one of the top five exporters of goods and services to Syria (Eqtesad Online, December 4).

► The data on Iranian exports have been published against a backdrop of growing criticism in Iran that the volume of economic ties between the two countries is insufficient, and that Iran is not playing a central role in Syria's reconstruction, despite the extensive assistance offered to Syria during the civil war, and in spite of a series of agreements signed between the two countries in recent years, which were intended to increase economic cooperation between them.

Iranian Involvement in Iraq

► On December 2, the Iraqi President, Barham Salih, met with the Iranian Ambassador to Baghdad, Iraj Masjedi, and condemned the assassination of the Iranian nuclear scientist, Mohsen Fakhrizadeh. The two discussed bilateral relations and developments in the region. Salih called to avoid exacerbating tensions and stressed the need to preserve security and stability in the region. Masjedi stressed during the meeting his country's support for Iraq's stability, and the importance of bolstering economic and societal ties between the two countries (ISNA, December 2).



**The meeting between the Iraqi president with the Iranian ambassador to Baghdad
(ISNA, December 2, 2020)**

► The Iranian Ambassador to Baghdad, Iraj Masjedi, confirmed in an interview to the TV channel al-Illam the recent visit of the Commander of the IRGC's Qods Force, Esmail Qa'ani, to Iraq. Masjedi mentioned that Qa'ani met with the Iraqi Prime Minister, Mustafa al-Kazimi; the President of Iraq, Barham Salih; and several other senior Iraqi officials, and discussed with

them a host of political, security and economic matters, as well as how to bolster the security cooperation between the two countries. He stressed that Iran does not interfere in Iraq's domestic affairs, but mentioned that there are good relations between the Iraqi factions and Iran, and it is only natural that they would consult it. Iran's activities in Iraq are not intended, he claimed, to weaken the government, but on the contrary, empower it and increase the cooperation and unity of the various political groups and sects in Iraq. Masjedi warned of American military action against the Shia militias in Iraq, stating that American attacks on these "resistance groups" will be met with a harsh response by those groups.



**The Iranian Ambassador to Baghdad, Iraj Masjedi
(al-Ilam, December 5, 2020)**

- ▶ The Spokesman of the Iraqi Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ahmed al-Sahaf, declared in an interview to the Russian news agency Sputnik that the committee for sharing intelligence, which includes Iraq, Iran, Russia and Syria, is continuing its work as part of the war on terror. He mentioned that the security cooperation between the countries, which is comprised of the military attaches of Iran, Russia and Syria to Baghdad, as well as an Iraqi representative, has been ongoing since 2015 and until today (al-Alam, December 6). During a meeting held in June 2020 between the Iranian Military Attache to Baghdad, Mostafa Moradian, and the Iraqi Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces, Abdul Amir Yarallah, the Iraqi chief of staff asked to expand and bolster the intelligence cooperation as part of the quadrilateral committee, which was originally established for sharing intelligence and coordinating the campaign against ISIS (IRNA, June 23).
- ▶ Abdolrasoul Ostovar Mahmoudabadi, a senior officer in the IRGC's Qods Force, died of COVID-19, which he contracted during deployment in Iraq. The Tasnim news agency reported that Ostovar, who played a series of different roles within the IRGC since the Iran-Iraq War,

was close to the former Commander of the Qods Force, Qasem Soleimani, and fought in the ranks of the Qods Force in Syria and Iraq. He was among the founders of the special forces unit, Saberin (“those who remain steadfast”), of the IRGC. The report did not provide any information about his mission in Iraq, during which he was infected with the Corona virus. The lungs of Mahmoudabadi were impacted by chemical weapons during the Iran-Iraq War (Tasnim, December 6).



Abdolrasoul Ostovar Mahmoudabadi
(Tasnim, December 6, 2020)

► The Reuters news agency published an in-depth report about Iran’s efforts to expand its religious influence in Iraq by developing the Shia holy sites in Iraq. In the extensive article published by the agency (December 2), it was reported that Iran is investing hundreds of millions of dollars in a project to develop and expand the gravesite of the Shia Imam Ali in Karbala. The project is led by Hassan Pelarak, who heads the Headquarters for Refurbishing Holy Sites, which was established with the guidance of the supreme leader of Iran, and is being overseen by IRGC members, and by the Kowsar Foundation. The Headquarters, which are meant to renovate Shia holy sites in Syria and Iraq, is serving as a channel to assist the illicit activities of the Qods Force of the IRGC, including hiding the transfer of weaponry to militias supported by Iran in both countries.



**Hassan Pelarak, the Director of the Headquarters for Refurbishing Holy Sites
(Mehr, September 7, 2020)**

► The works on the sites are part of Iran’s efforts to entrench its influence in Iraq through “soft power” efforts, and promote its economic interests by encouraging religious tourism between Iran and Iraq. Pelarak’s activities are ongoing despite him being placed on the United States’ sanctions list, and he continues to visit Karbala and oversee the development work. In addition to the works to develop the gravesite of Imam Hussein in Karbala, Iran is carrying out works to develop religious sites in Najaf, Baghdad and Samara as well, through a number of subcontracting companies. In addition, the Kowsar Foundation is involved in infrastructure projects, including in the energy sector, such as the establishment of a power station in the city of Basra.

Iranian Involvement in Yemen

► The U.S. Treasury Department announced the imposition of sanctions on the Iranian Ambassador to Yemen, Hassan Irlu (Reuters, December 8). Irlu, who previously served in the ranks of the IRGC’s Qods Force, was appointed as Iran’s ambassador to Yemen in late October 2020. Prior to his appointment, Irlu served for five years as the deputy on Yemen affairs to the special adviser of the Iranian Minister of foreign affairs (al-Ilam, October 27). In response to the announcement by the United States, the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced imposing sanctions on the American ambassador to Yemen (Fars, December 9).



**Hasan Irlu, the Iranian Ambassador to Yemen
(Fars, December 9, 2020)**