



Spotlight on Iran

December 27, 2020 - January 10, 2021



Overview

- ▶ Over the past week, ceremonies to commemorate Qasem Soleimani were held in Iran, Syria, Lebanon, Iraq and Gaza. **The anniversary of the killing of Soleimani, the Commander of the Qods Force of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), was used by Iran and its proxies to stress Iran's support for the "resistance axis"** and the central role Soleimani played in developing the military capabilities of Iran's proxies in the region, particularly in enlarging and increasing the deadliness of their arsenals rockets and missiles.
- ▶ Iranian media continues to criticize **the limited economic involvement of Iran in Syria, arguing that it is insufficient**. Iranian newspapers argued that Iran should be playing a central role in Syria's economic reconstruction, given the extensive assistance Tehran provided to Damascus during the civil war, and the agreements concerning economic cooperation that had been signed by both countries in recent years.
- ▶ **Iran continues to expand its foothold in eastern Syria**: A Syrian news website reported about the establishment of a new pro-Iranian militia in Albu Kamal, whose members were recruited among the elite forces of Fawj 47, a Syrian militia operating under IRGC command in the Deir Ezzor region in eastern Syria.
- ▶ **A delegation of Iraqi politicians arrived in Tehran following the firing of Katyusha rockets toward the American embassy in Baghdad (December 20)**. In light of the tensions between the United States, Iran and the Shia Iraqi militias, Iranian officials continued to stress that Iran was not involved in the launch of the rockets, and that it is not interested in an escalation with the United States in Iraq.
- ▶ The Iranian minister of energy arrived for a visit in Baghdad against the backdrop of a disagreement between the two countries with regards to the debt Iraq owes Iran for the import of electricity and gas. As the end of the visit, the two countries reported that they had

reached an agreement regarding the settlement of the debt and resumption of supply of Iranian gas to Iraq.

Iranian Involvement in Syria

► Iranian newspapers continue to voice criticism about what they see as an insufficient volume of trade between Iran and Syria. According to this criticism, in exchange for the significant assistance Iran provided to Damascus during the civil war, Iran continues to play a marginal role in Syria's economic reconstruction. More so, Iran's role continues to be marginal despite a series of cooperation agreements signed between the two countries in recent years concerning economic cooperation. On December 27, the Mehr news agency published a lengthy article about the challenges Iran is facing in becoming involved in Syria's reconstruction. The article reported that the memorandum of understanding signed during the January 2019 visit of the First Deputy to the President of Iran, Eshaq Jahangiri, to Syria, under which Iran was set to build 200,000 housing units in Syria, is yet to be realized. The delay stems from challenges relating to obtaining banking guarantees and transfers of construction materials and personnel from Iran to Syria. The plan to establish a railroad connecting Shalamcheh in southwestern Iran through Basra in southern Iraq to Lattakia in Syria has not been realized, as well. The delay in implementing the plan harmed Iranian manufacturers and allows Turkey to use its joint border with Syria to expand trade with Syria, at Iran's expense. The article quoted Abbas Golroo, the Head of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Iranian Parliament, who also serves the deputy chairman of the Iranian-Syrian Parliamentary Friendship Group, who stated that official representatives of Iran and Syria have held many discussions concerning plans for economic cooperation between the two countries, with involvement of both the public and private sectors. He remarked that Syria is willing to welcome Iranian investors, but bureaucratic hurdles are hindering the expansion of economic ties.

► Recently, the Mashregh news agency also published (November 4, 2020) an article that 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.

► The Syrian pro-opposition website, Sada al-Sharqiya reported (January 2) about the establishment of a new pro-Iranian militia in Albu Kamal, named "the Hashemiyoun Forces." According to the report, the new militia was established by the Iranian militia directorate in the city, and is connected to Fawj 47, a Syrian militia operating under IRGC command in the Deir Ezzor region. The members of the new militia were recruited among the elite force of Fawj 47, and number about 50 fighters. According to the report, the new militia took control of a number of civilian homes and placed its headquarters in them.



The Hashemiyoun Forces (Twitter account of Sada al-Sharqiya January 2, 2021)

► In late December, the Iranian cultural center in the city of al-Mayadin in eastern Syria launched an exhibition of art work commemorating Qasem Soleimani, ahead of the first anniversary of his killing. The opening ceremony for the exhibit, which was carried out in cooperation with the al-Hassan school in the city, was attended by commanders of the pro-Iranian militias operating in the city, members of the Syrian Baath Party, and directors of governmental institutions in the city (Sada al-Sharqiya, December 28).



**The exhibition of art work commemorating Qasem Soleimani
(Sada al-Sharqiya December 28, 2020)**

► On December 31, a ceremony commemorating the one-year anniversary since the assassination of Qasem Soleimani and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis was held on the Syria-Iraq border. The ceremony was attended by officers of the Syrian Army, dignitaries from Deir Ezzor, and representatives of Palestinian organizations, as well as delegations from Iraq, Lebanon and Iran (al-Alam, December 31).



**The ceremony marking the one year anniversary of the assassination of Qasem Soleimani and
Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis (al-Alam, December 31, 2020)**

► The Deputy Commander of the Qods Force, Mohammad Hejazi, stated in an interview to the Lebanese TV station al-Mayadin (January 3) that the number of precision-guided missiles in Hezbollah's arsenal is higher than Israel imagines, and that the "resistance" now possesses great capabilities. Addressing Iran's involvement in Syria, Hejazi claimed that Iran does not maintain bases in Syria and that Iranian presence in the country is limited to advisers alone. He denied reports about Israeli strikes on Iranian targets in Syria, calling them "lies and propaganda." He remarked that President Assad has held meetings with the Commander of the Qods Force, Esmail Qa'ani.

► Hejazi added that Iran supports all the Palestinian factions working to liberate Palestine. With regards to the situation in Iraq, the deputy commander of the Qods Force asserted that

any threat to Iraq poses a threat to Iran, and anything that threatens Iran also endangers Iraq, since the two countries share common interests.



The Deputy Commander of the Qods Force, Mohammed Hejazi in an interview to al-Mayadin TV (January 3, 2021)

Iranian Involvement in Iraq

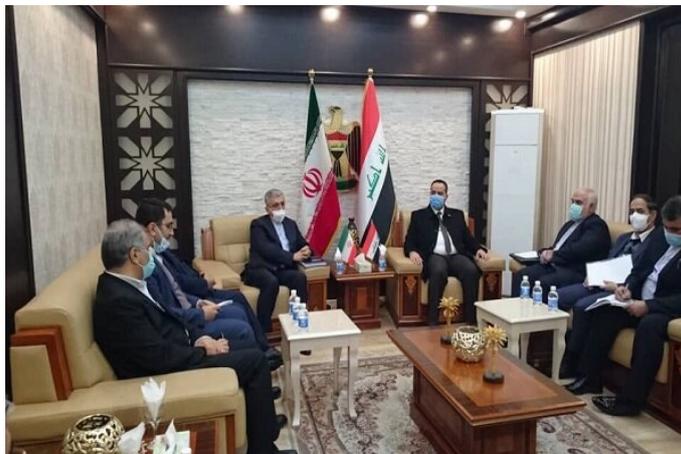
- ▶ Following the violation of the informal ceasefire between the United States and Iran-backed militias with the firing of rockets at the American embassy in Baghdad (December 20), on December 27, a delegation headed by Abu Jihad al-Hashemi, the Chief of Staff of the former Iraqi Prime Minister, Adel Abdul Mahdi, arrived for an unplanned visit to Tehran, bearing a message from the Prime Minister of Iraq, Mustafa al-Kazimi (Fars, December 27). Iraqi political sources told al-Jazeera (December 27) that Iranian officials insisted before the members of the Iraqi delegation that Tehran has made a decision not to escalate the situation. The Spokesman of the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Saeed Khatibzadeh, addressed the meeting of the Iraqi delegation in his weekly press conference, stating that Iran maintains regular and close deliberations with Iraqi authorities in various spheres, and that the delegation arrived at Iran's invitation to discuss bilateral issues (ISNA, December 28).
- ▶ In a television interview to the Iraqi TV channel al-Ahed (December 28), the Iranian Ambassador to Baghdad, Iraj Masjedi, stated that Iran reserves the right to avenge Qasem Soleimani's death, but that the revenge does not have to be realized through military means, and that the removal of U.S. forces from the region will be equal in its worth to armed revenge. Masjedi asserted that Iran did not turn Iraq into a place to settle scores with others [implicitly, the United States], and does not interfere in the domestic affairs of Iraq or tries to force Baghdad to adopt certain policies. He rejected the claims of the United States with regards to Iran's involvement in the launch of rockets toward the American embassy in

Baghdad on December 20, and remarked that Iran does not know who carried the attack, does not support the launch of the rockets and does not wish Iraq to become an arena for conflict with the United States. Masjedi mentioned in the interview that the Commander of the Qods Force of the IRGC, Esmail Qa'ani, is the one in charge of the Iraq file in Iran.



The Iranian ambassador to Iraq during his interview to Iraqi al-Ahed TV (December 29, 2020)

► On December 29, the Iranian Minister of Energy, Reza Ardakanian, arrived for a visit in Baghdad to discuss cooperation between the two countries in the electricity and energy sectors, and settle Iraq's debts to Iran for the import of electricity and gas. Prior to the visit of the minister, Iran's national gas company announced reducing the export of gas to Iraq due to an Iraqi debt to Iran, totaling in six million dollars. At the end of Ardakanian's visit to Baghdad, it was reported that the two countries reached an agreement concerning the settlement of the debt and the resumption of regular supply of Iranian gas to Iraq (IRNA; Tasnim, December 29).



The meeting between the Iranian minister of energy and Iraqi minister of trade in Baghdad (Mehr, December 29, 2020)

► This is Ardakanian’s second visit to Baghdad in recent months. In June 2020, the Iranian minister of energy visited Baghdad and discussed with senior Iraqi officials the expansion of cooperation between the two countries in the electricity and water sectors. At the end of the prior visit Ardakanian declared that the two countries extended the contract concerning the exports of electricity from Iran to Iraq by two additional years, and that Iraq paid Iran a debt totaling in 400 million dollars for the supply of Iranian electricity, half of the sum demanded by Iran (Tasnim, June 3, 2020).

Iranian Involvement in the Palestinian Arena

► On January 4, a ceremony commemorating Qasem Soleimani was held in Gaza, with senior Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad officials in attendance. The speakers stressed in their speeches the contribution of Iran, and specifically Qasem Soleimani, to the Gaza Strip. Mahmoud al-Zahar, a member of Hamas’ Politburo, remarked that Soleimani was the first to provide financial support to the Hamas government in 2006 to pay salaries and assist families of the needy and “martyrs.” Khaled al-Batash, a member of the Politburo of Palestinian Islamic Jihad, recounted that Soleimani was interested in the smallest details concerning the Palestinian fighter and his training. According to him, hundreds and even thousands traveled to Iran to receive training and returned with better knowledge and combat skills (PalToday, January 4).



Senior Hamas official Mahmoud al-Azhar (right) and senior Palestinian Islamic Jihad official, Khaled al-Batash (left) give speeches at an event in Gaza commemorating Qasem Soleimani (PalToday, January 4, 2021)

► Ahead of the anniversary, posters were hanged across Gaza bearing Soleimani’s image and the epitaph “the martyr of Jerusalem.” Shortly after the posters were hanged, several videos and photos were uploaded to social media showing Gaza residents removing and defacing the posters. Majdi al-Maghrebi, a Salafi preacher from Rafah, who is opposed to Iran’s involvement in the Middle East and the Gaza Strip in particular, called to tear and deface the

posters, and even published a photo of himself removing one of the placards (Facebook page of Sheikh Majdi al-Maghrebi, December 30, 2020).



On the right: a poster erected in Gaza commemorating Soleimani. On the left: Sheikh al-Maghrebi tearing one of the posters (Facebook page of Sheikh al-Maghrebi, December 30, 2020).

► Ziad al-Nakhleh, the Secretary General of Palestinian Islamic Jihad, arrived for a visit in Tehran at the helm of a delegation of the faction to take part in the events commemorating the one-year anniversary of the death of Qasem Soleimani (the website of Palestinian Islamic Jihad, January 1, 2021). In a speech he delivered during a ceremony held at Tehran University, al-Nakhleh declared that “the blood of the martyrs is the lifeline of the tree of resistance and jihad.” According to him, Soleimani was present in all battlefields, including the Palestinian arena. He repeatedly mentioned that Soleimani was the one who ensured the supply Palestinian Islamic Jihad with rockets that hit Israel (the website of Palestinian Islamic Jihad, January 1, 2021; al-Alam, January 1, 2021). In an interview he gave during his visit to Iran, the secretary general of Palestinian Islamic Jihad asserted that all the engineering units that manufacture weaponry of his group and those of Hamas were trained in Iran, and only later the factions were able to establish training units, and create their own cadre of engineers and experts capable of training additional teams. He remarked that the weaponry reached the Gaza Strip owing to Soleimani, who used of all Iran’s capabilities to transfer weaponry to the Strip. Soleimani was also the one who raised the option that militants from the Strip will practice manufacturing long-range rockets. According to al-Nakhleh, the Palestinian factions now possess thousands of rockets and the factories producing them “work around the clock” (al-Mayadin, January 1, 2021).

► The Commander of the IRGC’s Air Force, Amir Ali Hajizadeh, stated in an interview to Hezbollah’s TV channel, al-Manar on the occasion of the anniversary commemorating Qasem

Soleimani's assassination, that all the missiles currently present in the Gaza Strip and Lebanon were provided with Iranian support, adding that knowledge was transferred as well: "instead of giving them fish or teach them how to fish, we taught them how to build a fishing rod," meaning that Iran provided the factions with the ability to manufacture their own missiles. He remarked that in line with the directions of the Supreme Leader, the Islamic Republic supports anyone who stands at the forefront of the struggle against "the Zionist regime." Hajizadeh added that the Palestinians are now fighting with missiles instead of stones, and that the abilities of the "resistance axis" are far improved compared to those they possessed a decade ago (Tasnim, January 2).