



Spotlight on Iran

September 14, 2021 – October 7, 2021

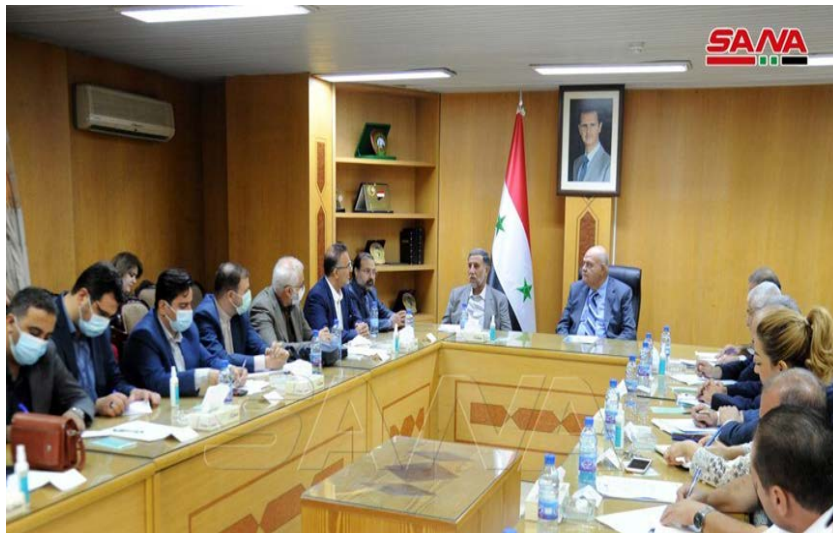
Author: Dr. Raz Zimmt

Overview

- ▶ Against the backdrop of ongoing Iranian efforts to deepen economic cooperation and increase its involvement in Syria's reconstruction, the deputy chairman of the Syrian-Iranian Chamber of Commerce complained that Russia and Turkey are obtaining economic benefits in Syria at Iran's expense. According to him, Russia enjoys preferential treatment over Iran and has won concessions to carry out a number of reconstruction projects in the country, while trade between Iran and Syria is barely expanding.
- ▶ A Syrian news website published a report containing new details concerning the Imam Ali base used by the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) and pro-Iranian militias in the Albu Kamal region near the Syria-Iraq border.
- ▶ During a visit of a delegation from the Iraqi Ministry of Electricity to Tehran, the Iranian minister of oil declared that Iran is ready to discuss new proposals put forth by Iraq to extend the contract regarding the export of Iranian gas to Iraq. Last year, the two countries conducted negotiations concerning the Iranian funds frozen in Iraqi banks, which make up a share of the debt owed by the Iraqi government to Iran for the import of electricity and gas.
- ▶ Iran harshly condemned the visit of the Israeli Minister of Foreign Affairs, Yair Lapid, to Bahrain, during which he inaugurated the Israeli embassy in Manama. The Iranian minister of foreign affairs labeled the reception Lapid received in Bahrain as "a clear betrayal of the aspirations of the Palestinian people," and the spokesman of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs declared that the "stain" of the visit will not be erased from the image of Bahrain's rulers.
- ▶ In mid-September, Iran resumed commercial flights to Afghanistan, restarting them for the first time since the Taliban's takeover of the country in mid-August. In addition, Iran began shipping humanitarian assistance to Kabul, including food and medicine, using planes of the Mahan Air airlines.

Iranian Involvement in Syria and Lebanon

► On September 20, the Syrian Minister of Internal Trade and Consumer Protection, Amr Salem, met with Mostafa Esbati, the Adviser to the Iranian Minister of Defense and the Chairman of the Committee of Economic Cooperation with the Resistance Axis. The two officials discussed trade and commercial cooperation between Iran and Syria and expediting the implementation of agreements signed by the two countries. In conversations with journalists, the Iranian official stated that the Iranian delegation will remain in Syria until an agreement is reached concerned the implementation of memoranda of understanding previously reached by the leaderships of the two countries (SANA, September 21).



The meeting between the Syrian minister of internal trade and the adviser to the Iranian minister of defense. (SANA, September 21)

► Meanwhile, the Deputy Chairman of the Iranian-Syrian Chamber of Commerce, Ali-Asgar Zebardast, complained that Russia and Turkey are enjoying greater economic access in Syria, at Iran's expense. In an interview he gave to the ILNA news agency (September 18), Zebardast stated that what happened in Iraq, where Turkey became a central trading partner, is now happening in Syria as well, where Russia is receiving preference in allocation of reconstruction projects. In the meantime, trade between Syria and Iran is barely expanding. He remarked that although the volume of trade between Iran and Syria has not decreased, it has also not expanded at a satisfactory rate. Zebardast added that pro-Assad Syrian traders are willing to work with Iran, but traders who oppose the Assad regime prefer to trade with Jordan and Arab countries of the Persian Gulf. He pointed to the issue of ground trade routes

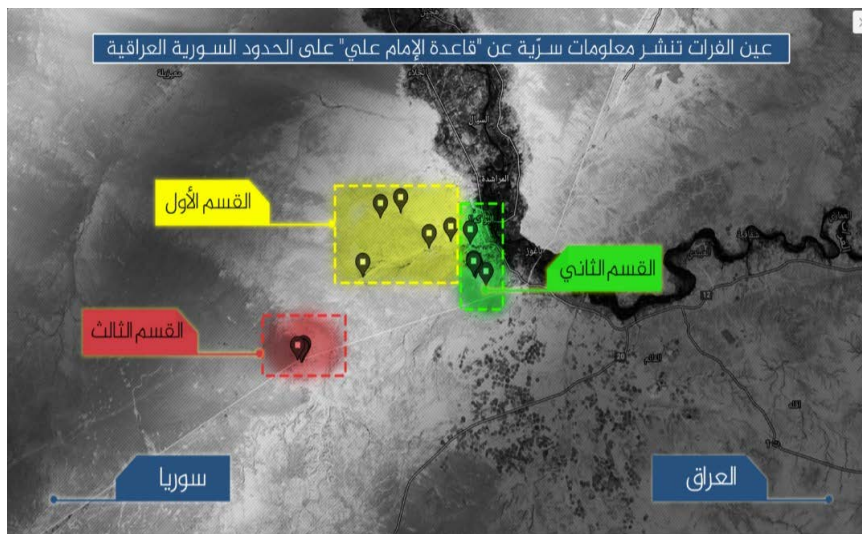
between Iran and Syria as a central impediment to trade between the two countries. According to him, thus far, Iran has failed in its efforts to convince Iraq to open a ground trade route connecting Iran to Syria through its territory. Zebardast remarked that there are many Iranian institutions and bodies operating in Syria and those enjoy influence over the economy, but they are not encouraging economic activity of the Iranian private sector. This is not the first time Iranian officials have expressed disappointment that Syria is not prioritizing Iranian interests in its reconstruction process, and is instead granting access to Russian and Turkish firms, despite the significant assistance Tehran provided to Syria during the civil war, and in spite of a series of agreements concerning economic cooperation signed between Tehran and Damascus in recent years.

► During the international ExpoDubai fair, which opened on September 30, the Iranian Minister of Tourism, Ali-Asghar Shalbfafian, met with the Syrian Minister of Economy and External Trade, Mohammad Samer al-Khalil, and discussed economic cooperation between the two countries and mutual investments. Shalbfafian stressed the need to include Iran in Syria's reconstruction, through investments in construction and rebuilding hotels in the country. He also offered Iranian assistance in reconstructing Syria's tourism infrastructure and historical sites that were damaged throughout the civil war (SANA, October 2).

► The Syrian pro-opposition news website, Ayn al-Furat¹, published (October 1) an investigative report about the Imam Ali base used by the IRGC and pro-Iranian militias in the Albu Kamal region near the Syrian-Iraqi border. According to the report, the construction work of the base began in 2018, upon the order of the Supreme Leader of Iran, Ali Khamenei, to the Qods Force of the IRGC. According to the website, the Israeli and American strikes on the base have not had any noticeable effect on the activities on the base, since most of it was constructed under ground. The report alleges that the base is comprised of three parts: the first located southwest of Albu Kamal and stretches over a territory of about 600 square meters (6,500 square feet) and is considered the most important part of the base. This area is used to store heavy weapons, long-range Scud missiles and Iranian missiles of the Raad and Fajr-5 variety, as well as their launchers. In addition, the main command headquarters are located in this part of the base, alongside the residence halls of the Iranian officers and

¹ An independent news network in Syria, operating from the Al-Bukhmal area on the Syrian border. The network covers news and events mainly in Deir al-Azour and in the eastern region of Syria and Iraq. The network documents and reveals the activities of the Assad regime and the Iranian activities in Syria.

soldiers, operations rooms, communication rooms, as well as food and water storage facilities. The base was built by the construction unit of the IRGC, and the process was overseen by Iranian engineers. The second part of the base is located in the al-Salabi area west of Albu Kamal and most of it was constructed under ground. The third part of the base, constructed recently, is located 35 kilometers (22 miles) southwest of Albu Kamal, and is used as an air defense base. That part of the base contains weaponry and ammunition storage, and it is directly connected to Iraq for the purpose of ferrying supplies. That part of the base is closely guarded by about 200 Iranian, Iraqis and Afghans.



The Imam Ali Base. (Ayn al-Furat, October 1)

► The Syrian pro-opposition website, Sada al-Sharqiya reported (October 28) based on local sources in the town of Hatla in the Deir Ezzor Countryside, that the Iranian Cultural Center operating in Deir Ezzor city distributed cash gifts of 5,000 Syrian lira (about \$1.4) to each child who took part in the Arbaeen ceremony, marking the end of the forty days of mourning over the death of the Shia Imam, Hussein. The ceremony was organized by the Iranian cultural center and Iranian-linked associations in Hatla, a town where some residents converted to Shia Islam decades ago.



**Children participate in the Arbaeen ceremony in Hatla.
(Sada al-Sharqiya, September 28)**

► On September 15, the Iranian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Amir Abdollahian, met with Hezbollah’s representative in Iran, Abdallah Safieddine. Abdollahian congratulated the Hezbollah official for the formation of the new government in Beirut and expressed hope that it will be able to solve the problems of the Lebanese people as soon as possible. He stressed the support of Iran under the leadership of President Ebrahim Raisi, to the “resistance” against “the takfiri and Zionist enemy,” and expressed his country’s willingness to expand ties with Lebanon to support the country’s needs in various spheres. Safieddine congratulated Abdollahian for assuming his position, expressed the gratitude of the Lebanese people for Iran’s support for the people of Lebanon, and thanked Iran for selling oil to Lebanon (IRNA, September 15). Abdollahian is expected to pay a visit to Lebanon in the coming days (Mehr, October 3).



**The meeting between Hezbollah’s emissary and the Iranian minister of foreign affairs.
(IRNA, September 15)**

Iranian Involvement in Iraq

► While he attended the UN General Assembly meeting in New York, the Iranian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Hossein-Amir Abdollahian, met with Iraq's President, Barham Salih, and discussed bilateral relations, developments in Afghanistan and the Middle East. Abdollahian stressed his country's willingness to deepen ties with Iraq in all spheres (Mehr, September 23). During his stay in New York, Abdollahian also met with the Iraqi Minister of Foreign Affairs, Fuad Hussein, and discussed with him developments in the region, the Persian Gulf, Afghanistan, and bilateral relations, including the matter of exporting Iranian gas and electricity to Iraq, and the transfer of Iranian funds frozen in Iraq (ISNA, September 26).



The meeting between the Iraqi president and Iranian minister of foreign affairs in New York. (Mehr, September 23)

► On September 25, the Iranian Minister of Oil, Javad Owji, met with the Iraqi Minister of Electricity, Adel Karim, and with the Adviser of the Iraqi Prime Minister, Rashid Ali, who arrived for a visit in Tehran at the helm of a delegation of Ministry of Electricity officials. In the meeting, the officials discussed cooperation between the two countries in the spheres of energy and gas (ILNA, September 26). During the meeting with the Iraqi delegation, the Iranian Deputy Minister of Oil, Majid Chegeni, stated that Iran is willing to discuss new proposals by the Iraqi Ministry of Oil concerning extending the contract for export of gas to Iraq (ISNA, September 29).

Iranian Involvement in the Palestinian Arena

► The Iranian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Hossein-Amir Abdollahian, condemned the visit of the Israeli Minister of Foreign Affairs, Yair Lapid, to Bahrain, during which the Israeli embassy

in the country was inaugurated. In tweets in Arabic and Persian on his Twitter account (October 1), Abdollahian condemned the reception Lapid received by the Bahraini government, labeling it as “a clear betrayal of the aspirations of the Palestinian people,” and added that Iran only recognizes the state of Palestine, whose capital is Jerusalem. He proclaimed that the “Zionist regime” will bring Bahrain and the region as a whole only insecurity. Prior to this, the Spokesman of the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Saeed Khatibzadeh, also condemned Lapid’s visit to Bahrain, and declared that the reception he received by the rulers of Bahrain is contrary to the position and will of the citizens of the kingdom. He stated that it is unfortunate that the leaders of Bahrain are ignoring the daily crimes that the “Zionist regime” is perpetrating against the Palestinian people. He declared that the “stain” of the visit will not be erased from the image of the rulers of Bahrain, and that the citizens of the region will persist in their resistance to normalization with the “Zionist regime” (Fars, October 1).

Iranian Involvement in Afghanistan

► In mid-September, Iran resumed commercial flights to Afghanistan, for the first time since the takeover of the country by the Taliban in mid-August. On September 15, a flight of Mahan Air departed from Mashhad to Kabul with 19 passengers on board, and another flight operated by the airline departed from Tehran to Kabul (Fars, September 15). Meanwhile, Iran began transferring humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan. During the second half of September, Iran provided three shipments of food and medicine to Kabul, the Afghan capital, utilizing Mahan Air jets (Tasnim, September 26).



A shipment of humanitarian assistance from Iran to Afghanistan.

(Tasnim, September 26)