



Spotlight on Iran

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Overview

- ▶ The Commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) in Syria, Javad Ghafari, concluded his deployment to Syria and conducted a last round of visits to bases of the Shia militias operating in Syria. The Saudi al-Arabiya channel reported that Ghafari was removed from his position due to a demand of the Syrian leadership, including President Assad, who were displeased with his activities. This report has not been confirmed and was denied by the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which called it “fake news” and added that the Iranian general even received a medal from the Syrian minister of defense as a sign of appreciation upon the conclusion of his deployment.
- ▶ Following a visit of the head of the Iranian Organization for Pilgrimage to Damascus, Iran and Syria agreed to resume the pilgrimage visits of Iranian citizens to Shia holy sites in Syria, which was halted following the outbreak of COVID-19.
- ▶ Senior Iranian officials condemned the attempted assassination of the Iraqi Prime Minister, Mustafa al-Kazimi, carried out on the night of November 7, and denied any Iranian involvement in the event. Iranian media also hinted at American involvement in the attack on al-Kazimi’s house, as a false flag attack intended to harm the reputation of the Shia militias, undermine stability in Iraq and justify the continued U.S. presence in the country and the disarmament of the Shia militias. Following the failed assassination attempt, the Commander of the IRGC’s Qods Force, Esmail Qa’ani, arrived for an unplanned visit to Baghdad, during which he met with Prime Minister al-Kazimi, other senior Iraqi government officials and the commanders of the Shia militias.
- ▶ The deputy head of Hamas’ Politburo in Gaza declared that Hamas is proud of its ties with Iran and is not hiding these ties. In an interview with the al-Jazeera channel, the senior Hamas official stated that Iran provides Hamas with assistance in all spheres.

►Iran continues to engage with the Taliban government in Kabul: in mid-November, the special envoy of the Iranian president arrived for a visit in Kabul for meetings with senior Taliban government officials. Additionally, the Iranian ambassador in Kabul met with the ministers of higher education, intelligence and culture in the interim Afghan government and discussed ways to bolster cooperation between the two countries. Meanwhile, the Russian state-run Sputnik agency reported that Ahmad Masoud, the Commander of the National Resistance Front, which remains active against the Taliban, recently made a visit to Iran, during which he conducted informal meetings with senior Iranian officials.

Iranian Involvement in Syria

►Syrian opposition sources reported that Ahmad Madani, known as Javad Ghafari, the Commander of the IRGC in Syria, concluded his deployment to the country and conducted visits to the bases of the pro-Iranian militias operating in Syria and local dignitaries ahead of his departure to Iran. According to some of the reports, Ghafari ended his deployment due to medical reasons (@dyaakaddor, November 6, ammar_sakkar, November 7).



The commander of the Iranian forces in Syria during a goodbye visit in the Shia towns Nubul and Zahraa' in Aleppo governorate. (Twitter accounts of pro-opposition Syrian journalists, November 6)

►The Saudi al-Arabiya channel reported (November 10) that Ghafari was removed from his position after the personal intervention of the Syrian President, Bashar al-Assad, and senior Syrian officials, who were displeased with his activities, which were seen as a grave violation of Syrian sovereignty. According to this unconfirmed report, Ghafari was accused of smuggling goods, thus harming the Syrian economy, and exploiting Syria's natural resources for his personal enrichment. Additionally, the Iranian commander was accused of placing forces and weaponry in areas where the Syrian regime banned the presence of Iranian-

backed forces, and for initiating military attacks against American forces and Israel, which may entangle Syria in an unwanted conflict.

► In his weekly press conference, the Spokesman of the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Saeed Khatibzadeh, denied the report about the supposed firing of the commander of the Iranian forces in Syria, stating that this claim is fake news. He remarked that the “commander of the Iranian team of advisers in Syria” even received a medal from the Syrian minister of defense on the occasion of the end of his deployment, and that Iran has deep and strategic relations with Syria in all spheres (Fars, November 15).

► On November 9, a delegation led by the Head of the Iranian Organization for Pilgrimage, Alireza Rashidian, arrived for a visit in Damascus. During the visit, the delegation met with the ministers of interior, tourism and Islamic endowments. On the eve of the visit, Rashidian stated that during their visit to Damascus, the delegation will discuss resuming the pilgrimages of Iranian citizens to Shia holy sites in Syria, which were ended following the outbreak of COVID-19 (IRNA, November 7). During the visit, the two countries agreed that in the initial stage, 100,000 Iranian pilgrims will be allowed to travel to Syria per year. In parallel, Syrian tourists will be allowed to visit Iran and stay for up to 90 days without requiring a visa (ISNA, November 12).

► On November 8, the Syrian Minister of Higher Education, Bassam Ibrahim, arrived for a visit in Tehran upon the invitation of the Iranian Minister of Science and Technology, Mohammad-Ali Zolfigol to sign a strategic memorandum of understanding in the spheres of science and technology between the two countries. During his two-day visit, the Syrian minister visited a number of Iranian universities and research centers and examined the possibilities to expand the cooperation between universities and higher education institutions in the two countries (ILNA, November 7).



The meeting of the delegations of the Syrian Ministry of Higher Education and the Iranian Ministry of Science in Tehran. (IRNA, November 8)

Iranian Involvement in Iraq

► Iran condemned the assassination attempt of the Iraqi Prime Minister, Mustafa al-Kazimi, on the night of November 7. Al-Kazimi survived an assassination attempt carried out using three explosive-laden unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) produced in Iran, which were launched toward his home in Baghdad's Green Zone. In a tweet on his Twitter account (November 7), the Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council of Iran, Ali Shamkhani, labeled the assassination attempt "a new incitement," which likely originated in "foreign think-tanks," whose support for the terrorist groups and the occupation of Iraq has only brought insecurity, division, and instability to the Iraqi people. The Spokesman of the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Saeed Khatibzadeh, also condemned the attempt on al-Kazimi's life and stressed his country's support for Iraq's stability and security (Fars, November 7). Following the assassination attempt, the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Amir Abdollahian, spoke on the phone with the Iraqi Minister of Foreign Affairs, Fuad Hussein, and passed on wishes of full recovery to Prime Minister al-Kazimi, who was lightly wounded in the attack, from the Iranian President, Ebrahim Raisi. Abdollahian condemned the assassination attempt and stressed that it undermines Iraqi stability and security and was carried out by those wishing ill to Iraq (ISNA, November 7).

► Iranian media implied that the United States was involved in the attack on the home of al-Kazimi as a false flag operation intended to implicate the Shia militias, undermine Iraq's stability and justify the continued U.S. military presence in the country, and the disarming of the Shia militias. A commentary article published by the website Nour News (November 7), which is politically affiliated with the Supreme National Security Council of Iran, argued that

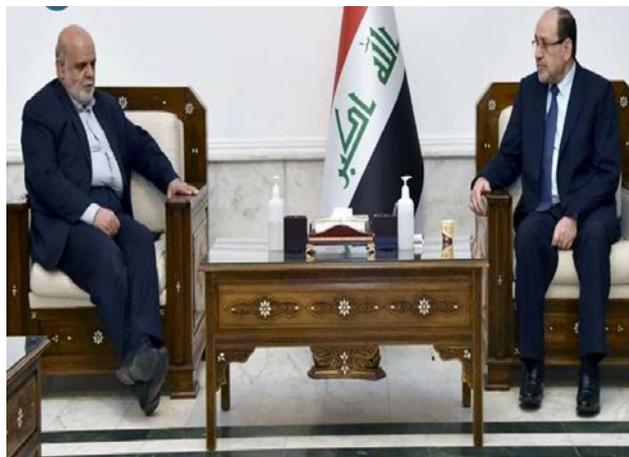
the events that took place in Iraq since the parliamentary elections, including the violent protests of supporters of the pro-Iranian Shia militias, their confrontations with security forces, and the attack on the home of the Iraq prime minister are “suspicious.” The undermining of Iraq’s stability and security is, the article argued, contrary to the interests of the “resistance groups” [the Iranian-backed Shia militias]. Additionally, the alleged assassination attempt of the Iraqi prime minister was carried out shortly after the decision to establish a formal commission of inquiry to investigate the violent clashes in Baghdad, and such a killing could have scuttled the demand of the militiamen-protesters. The author further argued that the fact that the American air defense system, deployed in the American embassy in Baghdad, ought to have protected the Green Zone in the capital of any aerial attacks. However, the commentary claimed that the system was not activated during the attack with the booby-trapped UAVs, which raises grave suspicions. The author concluded by saying that it is impossible to ignore that “the occupiers of Iraq” [the American forces] have used all political, security and military means as their disposal to undermine Iraq’s stability and security, so as to justify their continued presence in the country.

► On November 8, the Commander of the IRGC’s Qods Force, Esmail Qa’ani, arrived for an unplanned visit in Baghdad, following the attempt on the life of the Iraqi Prime Minister, al-Kazimi. According to the reports, Qa’ani met with the commanders of the Iranian-backed Shia militias (Shafaq News, November 8). The newspaper Baghdad al-Youm reported (November 8) that prior to his meetings with the commanders of the Shia militias, Qa’ani met with Prime Minister al-Kazimi, condemned the assassination attempt, and stressed that Iran played no role in it.

► The official Arabic-language Iranian TV channel, al-Alam, reported (November 10) that during Qa’ani’s visit in Iraq, he also met with the Speaker of Parliament, Mohammed al-Halbousi, and a number of additional Sunni politicians. Qa’ani also visited the Kurdistan Region of Iraq and met with senior Kurdish officials. The reported quoted the Iranian Ambassador to Iraq, Iraj Masjedi, who stated that in his meetings, Qa’ani called on all actors in Iraq to work to calm tensions and stressed that the final results of the parliamentary elections must be recognized.

► On November 4, the Iranian Ambassador to Baghdad, Iraj Masjedi, met with the former Iraqi Prime Minister, and the Chairman of the State of Law Coalition, Nouri al-Maliki, and discussed developments in Iraq and the region. The two discussed the outcome of the parliamentary

elections held in Iraq last month, and the riots that erupted after them, due to claims of the pro-Iranian Shia militias that the results were falsified. Al-Maliki stressed in the meeting the need to form a new government as soon as possible and called for expanding ties between the two countries. Ambassador Masjedi congratulated the former Iraqi prime minister for the achievement of his party in the election, which won 35 seats in the future parliament (Fars, November 4). Meanwhile, the violent clashes that erupted between supporters of the pro-Iranian militias (overwhelmingly members of the militias in civilian clothing) and Iraq's security forces did not receive extensive coverage by Iranian media outlets, nor any official statements by senior Iranian officials.



**The meeting between the former Iraqi prime minister and the Iranian ambassador to Baghdad.
(Fars, November 4)**

Iranian Involvement in the Palestinian Arena

► The Deputy Head of Hamas' Politburo in the Gaza Strip, Khalil al-Hayya, declared that Hamas is proud of its ties with Iran. In an interview to the al-Jazeera TV channel (November 8) al-Hayya stated that Hamas does not hide these relations and warmly welcomes any assistance to Palestine and Jerusalem. He added that Iran provides assistance to Hamas in all spheres, and that this ongoing support bolsters the power and capabilities of the "resistance" in Palestine.

Iranian Involvement in Afghanistan

► On November 15, the Special Envoy of the Iranian President to Afghan Affairs, Hassan Kazemi-Qomi, arrived for a visit in Kabul to meet with senior Taliban government officials. During his visit to Kabul, the Iranian special envoy met with senior Afghan officials to discuss various matters, including developments in Afghanistan and the region, the Afghan refugees

in Iran, Iranian humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan and economic cooperation between the two countries (Fars, November 15).



The Iranian special envoy arriving in Kabul. (Fars, November 15)

► On November 4, the Iranian Ambassador to Afghanistan, Abhadar Aminian, met with the Higher Education Minister of the Taliban government, Abdul Baqi Haqqani. During the meeting, the two agreed that a delegation of the Taliban will visit Tehran to examine the problems faced by Afghan refugees residing in Iran who wish to study in higher education institutions. Additionally, the delegation will discuss potential cooperation between the two countries in the sphere of higher education. Meanwhile, the Iranian ambassador to Kabul also met with the ministers of intelligence and culture in the interim Afghan government and discussed bolstering ties in the spheres of culture, communications and tourism between the two nations (Fars, November 4).



The meeting between the Iranian ambassador to Kabul with the Taliban's minister of higher education. (Fars, November 4)

► The state-run Russian news agency Sputnik reported (November 5) that Ahmed Masoud, the commander of the National Resistance Front of Afghanistan, which continues to resist the

Taliban, recently conducted a visit to Iran lasting several days. According to this report, Masoud met in the city of Mashhad Ismail Khan, one of the senior former commanders of the resistance forces against the Taliban in Herat province and conveyed a message to him from the President of Tajikistan, Emomali Rahmon, concerning the establishment of an alternative government that will represent a coalition of all the forces resisting the Taliban. An Iranian news website, Modara, also reported (November 7) about the visit of Masoud in Mashhad. According to this report, during his visit to Iran, which lasted ten days, Masoud held informal private meetings with senior Iranian officials.

► The head of the Joint Iranian-Afghan Trade Committee in Herat announced the resumption of the export of oil, gas and fuel from Iran to Afghanistan, starting in mid-November. The IRNA news agency reported (November 8) that between May 2020 until May 2021, Iran exported 400,000 tonnes of fuel to Afghanistan. At the same time, the spokesman of the Afghan electrical company announced signing of an agreement with Iran to purchase 1000 megawatts of electricity from Iran to address the electricity shortage in the provinces of Herat, Farah and Nimruz in western Afghanistan (Fars, November 11).