



Spotlight on Iran

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Overview

- ▶ A prominent Iranian commentator denied in an interview to the Tasnim news agency, which is affiliated with the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), the unconfirmed reports that Syria's leadership was behind the decision to end the tenure of the commander of the Iranian forces in Syria. He added that since the liberation of Abu Kamal in eastern Syria in 2017, IRGC forces have rarely taken part in large-scale offensives in Syria.
- ▶ In late November, the Fatemiyoun Brigade, an Afghan militia operating under IRGC command in Syria, carried out a military exercise with special forces, ground troops and armored vehicles.
- ▶ The Iranian minister of industry and trade arrived for a visit in Damascus to open the Iranian trade show and establish a joint trade commission for the two countries. Meanwhile, the Iranian deputy minister of trade reported that Iran's share in Syria's imports comprises of only three percent, compared to Turkey's 30 percent share. His statement joins that of other senior Iranian officials who have expressed indignation about the economic preferential treatment supposedly given by the Syrian regime to Turkey and Russia at Iran's expense.
- ▶ The Secretary General of Hezbollah, Hassan Nasrallah, stated in a TV interview that since September, the organization has paid over 10 million dollars to import fuel and diesel from Iran to Lebanon. He reported that in the coming days, another ship from Iran carrying fuel to Lebanon will dock in Syria, from where its content will be transferred by ground to Lebanon.
- ▶ The Iranian minister of foreign affairs condemned the UK's decision to label Hamas as a terrorist organization, remarking that the Rights of Palestinians cannot be trampled on by "distorting facts."

Iranian Involvement in Syria and Lebanon

► An Iranian commentator on Middle Eastern affairs, Masoud Asadollahi, refuted in an interview to the Tasnim news agency (November 21) the unconfirmed reports that the Commander of the Iranian forces in Syria, Javad Ghafari, was removed from his duty due to an order of the Syrian President, Bashar al-Assad, following a request of the Emirati minister of foreign affairs, who recently paid a visit to Damascus. He remarked that Ghafari's tenure was set to end about 18 months ago, but that his deployment was extended following the assassination of the Commander of the IRGC's Qods Force, Qasem Soleimani, in January 2020. He reaffirmed the statement of the spokesman of the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, who asserted that the Syrian Minister of Defense, Ali Ayoub, held a formal send-off ceremony to Ghafari, which was attended by several senior Syrian Army officers, representatives from the IRGC and Hezbollah, and that the minister of defense expressed appreciation for Ghafari's work. He added that if the Syrian authorities were indeed interested in removing Ghafari from their country, they would not have allowed them to move around the country for a month, conducting multiple public ceremonies marking his departure.



Javad Ghafari. (Tasnim, November 21)

► Addressing Iranian activities in Syria, the prominent analyst averred that since the liberation of Albu Kamal in eastern Syria in late 2017, the operational circumstances changed. Qasem Soleimani personally thought that the IRGC and forces operating under their command in Syria should no longer participate in major military operations, but merely assist the Syrian army. According to him, the last major military operation in which IRGC, Hezbollah and Fatemiyoun

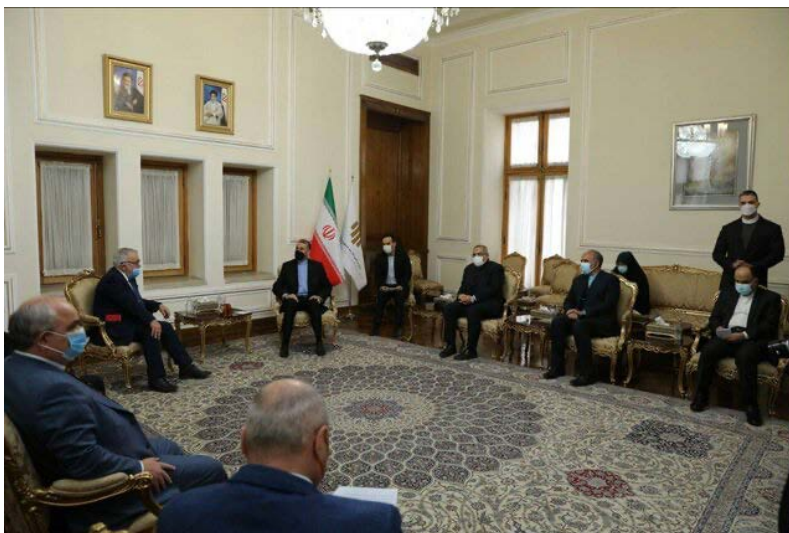
Brigade militiamen participated was the capture of the M5 highway connecting Aleppo to Damascus in early 2020.

► In late November, fighters of the Fatemiyoun Brigade, the IRGC-backed Afghan militia operating in Syria, carried out a major exercise in Syria. The statement issued by the militia reported that during the training, the fighters proved their operational abilities in a joint exercise of special forces, ground troops and armored vehicles, which successfully captured the pre-determined targets without incurring casualties (Telegram channel of the Fatemiyoun Brigade, November 26).



**The military drills of the Fatemiyoun Brigade militia in Syria.
(Telegram channel of the Brigade, November 26)**

► On November 21, the Iranian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Amir-Hossein Abdollahian, and his senior adviser, Ali-Asghar Khaji, met with a Russian delegation headed by Alexander Laverentiev, the Special Envoy on Syrian Affairs of the Russian President Putin, and Sergey Varshinin, the Russian Deputy Foreign Minister. During their meetings, the two sides discussed cooperation in the Middle East between Iran and Russia, and particularly in Syria. The Iranian minister of foreign affairs stated that the cooperation between the countries is very successful and vital for the reconstruction of Syria and ensuring the country's stability. The adviser of the Iranian minister of foreign affairs stressed the need to maintain the cooperation between the two countries in the "war on terror" in Syria, as well as the importance of preserving Syria's sovereignty and facilitating its reconstruction. In addition, Khaji highlighted the need to reach a political solution to the crisis in Syria as part of the Astana negotiations process (Fars, November 21).



**The meeting of the Iranian minister of foreign affairs with the Russian delegation.
(Fars, November 21)**

► The Iranian Minister of Industry and Trade, Reza Fatemi-Amir, arrived in late November for a visit in Syria at the helm of a trade delegation. The visit centered around the opening of an Iranian trade fair in Damascus, and the establishment of a joint Syrian-Iranian trade committee. During the visit, the minister met with senior Syrian officials, including the Prime Minister, Hussein Arnous; Mohammad Samer al-Khalil, the Minister of industry, Economy and Foreign Trade; and Minister of Oil and Mineral Resources, Bassam Tohme (IRNA, November 28).



**Delegation headed by the Iranian minister of industry and trade visits Damascus.
(SANA, November 29)**

► The Deputy Chairman of the Iranian Chamber of Commerce, Mohammad Amirzadeh, stated that Iran's relative share in Syria's imports stands at only three percent, compared to Turkey's share of 30 percent. According to him, these data point to the weakness of Iran's "economic diplomacy," which manifests in additional spheres (ISNA, November 21). Amirzadeh's

statement joins the criticism voiced in recent years by Iranian officials concerning the supposed favoritism of the Syrian regime toward Russia and Turkey at Iran's expense. In September 2021, the Deputy Chairman of the Joint Iranian-Syrian Trade Commission, Ali-Asghar Zebardast, alleged that Russia and Turkey are obtaining economic favors in Syria at Iran's expense. In an interview to the ILNA news agency (September 19), Zebardast claimed that Iran is gaining economic benefits in Syria, as opposed to Iran, and won several reconstruction projects, this is while trade between Iran and Syria is barely happening.

► The Iranian Ambassador to Syria, Mehdi Sobhani, argued in an interview to the Lebanese newspaper al-Ahed that the relationship between Iran and Syria is strategic and encompasses all spheres, including military cooperation. He remarked that “the enemy” has not changed its strategy vis-à-vis Syria, but did change its tactics and moved from a military campaign to an economic and political one, attempting to force Syria to alter its positions. Addressing the sale of fuel by Iran to Lebanon through Syria, the ambassador stated that this has geopolitical importance greater than solving the fuel crisis in Lebanon, and that the transfer of the fuel represents an understanding that the battlefield has moved from the land to the sea. The arrival of the oil trucks to Lebanon proves, according to him, that if the “resistance axis” makes a decision on any matter, no one will be able to overturn this decision, and that in some cases, sanctions can be turned into opportunities (ISNA, November 27).

► The Secretary General of Hezbollah, Hassan Nasrallah, stated in a TV interview (November 26) that since the month of September, the organization paid over ten million dollars to purchase fuel and diesel from Iran to Lebanon through Syria's ports. He remarked that part of the supplies, worth a total of 2.6 million dollars, was distributed for free to NGOs, municipalities, governmental hospitals and other organizations, while the rest was sold at a subsidized price. He added that another tanker carrying fuel will arrive in the coming days from Iran to Syria. According to him, the plan to import fuel will continue for another month, and during the winter season, preference will be given to distributing heating fuel to residents of Lebanon's high-altitude areas.

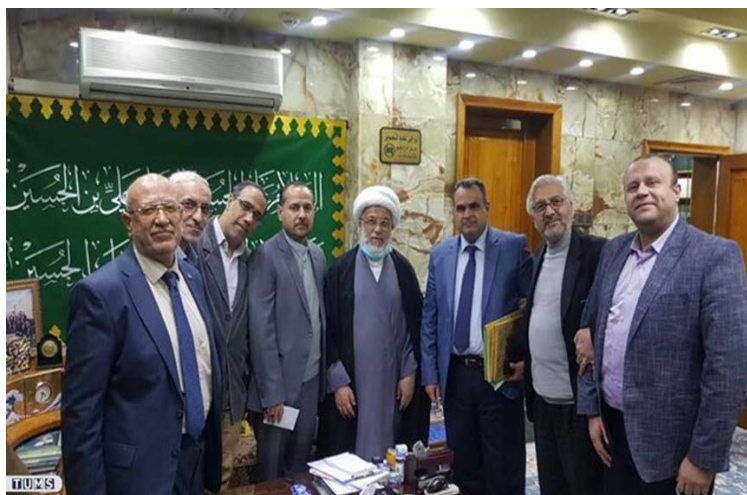
Iranian Involvement in Iraq

► The Spokesman of the Iraqi Ministry of Electricity, Ahmed Mousa, stated that his ministry is willing to pay for the gas Iraq has been acquiring from Iran to supply its power stations. In an

interview with the IRNA news agency (November 19), he remarked that the Iraqi Ministry of Finance is the one that must repay the debts Iraq has already accrued to Iran. He added that a number of Iraqi delegations previously held meetings with senior Iranian officials concerning the manner in which the debt will be repaid, and the scheduling of repayment. Over the past year, negotiations continued between officials of the two countries, including the two chairmen of the central banks, concerning the repayment of the Iraqi debt for electricity and gas sold by Iran to Iraq, estimated to total in a sum of about seven billion dollars. In May 2021, the Iranian Minister of Electricity, Majid Mahdi Hantoush, visited Tehran and discussed with his Iranian counterpart cooperation between the two countries in the spheres of energy and the matter of settling Iraq's debt to Iran (IRNA, May 2, 2021).

► On November 28, the Iranian Minister of Agriculture, Javad Sadatinejad, spoke on the phone with his Iraqi counterpart, Mohammad Karim al-Khafaji, and discussed ways to expand agricultural cooperation between the two countries. The Iranian minister stressed the need to solve the issue of transferring agricultural goods and called to establish a taskforce that will include representatives from both countries to solve the problem. The Iraqi minister of agriculture stated that Iran is an advanced country in the sphere of agriculture, and that his country is interested in expanding its cooperation with it. He remarked that an Iraqi delegation will soon visit Iran to discuss issues related to trade of agricultural products between the two countries, and that later on, he will himself visit Tehran (the website of the Iranian government, November 28).

► The Dean of the Medical Sciences University of Tehran, Hossein Qanati, signed during a visit to Iraq a memorandum of understanding concerning the establishment of a medical university in Karbala, Iraq. The academic administration of the university will be entrusted to the Tehran Medical University for a period of 50 years. During the initial phase of its operation, 50 medical students, 50 nursing students, and 50 physical therapists will be trained each year (ISNA, November 24).



The ceremony marking the signing of the memorandum of understanding concerning the establishment of a medical university in Iraq by the Tehran Medical University. (ISNA, November 24)

Iranian Involvement in the Palestinian Arena

- ▶ Iran condemned the decision of the United Kingdom to label Hamas as a terrorist organization. The Iranian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Amir-Hossein Abdollahian, wrote on his Twitter account (November 19) that it would be impossible to make anyone forget the rights of the Palestinians by distorting facts, and that the only political solution for Palestine is holding a referendum of its original inhabitants in 1948.
- ▶ The Head of Hamas' Politburo, Ismail Haniyeh, thanked Iran for its support to the organization and defined the ties between them as "strategic." In an interview with Hamas' TV station, al-Aqsa (November 20), Haniyeh asserted that Iran plays a central role in supporting the "resistance" and that it provides financial, political, military and technological support to the "resistance" in Palestine.
- ▶ The Secretary General of Palestinian Islamic Jihad, Ziad al-Nakhleh, insisted in an interview to the TV channel al-Mayadeen (November 24) that Iran's position concerning "the Zionist regime" and Palestine will never change. On the occasion of the second anniversary of the death of senior Palestinian Islamic Jihad leader, Bahaa' al-'Ataa, al-Nakhleh stated that Iran sees itself as the defender of the Palestinian cause and sees Israel as an enemy; this will not change, he asserted.

Iranian Involvement in Afghanistan

► In late November, an Iranian delegation departed to Herat in western Afghanistan for talks with Afghan authorities concerning a joint railway project linking the two countries. The Tasnim news agency reported (November 24) that the delegation is set to discuss the restart of the fourth stage of the project to lay a railway connecting Herat to the city of Khaf in northeastern Afghanistan. The works on this stage of the project were paused after the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan. Meanwhile, the head of Afghanistan's Chamber of Commerce reported a rise of 50 percent in Afghanistan's exports to Iran. He remarked that the volume of trade (most of it agricultural goods) reached 17 million dollars this year (IRNA, November 28).