



Spotlight on Iran

September 11 - 26, 2023

Author: Dr. Raz Zimmt

Overview

- ▶ The IRGC commander responded to the Israeli Mossad chief's threats to increase Israel's activity against Iran, warning that if Israel continues its assassination policy, its life will be shortened, and Iran will have the upper hand.
- ▶ The Iranian media reported on a visit to Syria by Qods Force Commander Esmail Qaani, during which he met with senior political and security officials and visited operational areas in the country.
- ▶ According to a Syrian news channel report, the IRGC and pro-Iranian militias intend to turn the Soleimani military base in eastern Syria into their main base in the region and transfer weapons currently at the Imam Ali base there.
- ▶ Intensive contacts have been held over the past two weeks between senior Iranian and Iraqi officials over Iran's demand to dismantle the separatist Kurdish groups operating in the Kurdish region in northern Iraq. The Iraqi foreign minister, who visited Tehran, stressed his country's commitment to the security agreement with Iran and to dismantling the Kurdish armed groups operating in northern Iraq.

Iranian involvement in the Palestinian arena

- ▶ On September 13, 2023, IRGC Commander Hossein Salami responded to Mossad chief David Barnea, who threatened to step up Israel's activity against Iran in light of the latter's ongoing efforts to carry out terrorist attacks against Israelis and Jews. Salami said that if Israel believes that its previous assassinations improved its security, it must continue to do so, but it must know that if the atmosphere between Iran and Israel becomes "security-related," Iran will have the upper hand, and Israel's life will be shortened. He added that the enemies should know that they can no longer threaten Iran with military attacks or economic sanctions (Tasnim, September 13, 2023).



IRGC commander (Tasnim, September 13, 2023)

► Iran International TV broadcast an investigative report on the exposure of a network that smuggled arms intended for Hamas from Iran to Lebanon. According to the report, the network was exposed after Lebanese security forces detained Lebanese residents Michel Elias Francis and Fadi Elias, and Muhammad Zaki Shaheen, a Palestinian Hamas operative. Their interrogation revealed that they had established a network run by Saeed Izadi, Majid Ziraei, and Ali Mershad-Shirazi, from the IRGC's Qods Force. The network smuggled weapons from Iran to Lebanon for Hamas (Iran International, September 13, 2023).

Iranian involvement in Syria and Lebanon

► Qods Force Commander Esmail Qaani arrived in Syria, met with senior political, military, and security officials, visited several operational areas in the country, and participated in a “joint military maneuver” conducted by Syrian and Iranian forces. During the visit, Qaani said that Iran and Syria are two sister countries that maintain strategic ties in all areas. He stressed the Islamic Republic's continued stand alongside the Syrian people and leadership (Tasnim, September 21, 2023).



Qods Force commander visits Syria (Tasnim, September 21, 2023).

► The Syrian news channel Ayn al-Furat reported (September 13, 2023) that the IRGC had recently taken new security measures at the Soleimani military base in and around the town

of Al-Qurayyah (southeast of Al-Mayadeen). According to the report, local guards at the base were replaced by Hezbollah operatives. Responsibility for taking these steps was entrusted to Hajj Haidar, the Iranian security official at the base. The report also states that the pro-Iranian militias intend to turn the Soleimani base into their largest base in the Deir ez-Zor area and transfer weapons currently at the Imam Ali base there. This is due to fears of American military action in the Albukamal area.

► Sources in eastern Syria have reported the establishment of a new militia in eastern Deir ez-Zor called the Hashemite Tribes Corps. According to the report, the militia, numbering about 1,000 fighters, is headed by Sheikh Nawaf Ragheb al-Bashir, head of the Al-Bakara tribe. Furthermore, the decision to establish the new militia under Iranian sponsorship was made at the end of a meeting held in the city of Al-Mayadeen in the presence of al-Bashir; Muhammad al-Raja, commander in a pro-regime militia; Abd al-Saheb al-Mousawi from Iraq; and Hajj Abbas from Iran. The militia was established to fight the Kurdish SDF forces operating east of the Euphrates River (shaam.org, September 13, 2023). According to the Al-Araby al-Jadeed news website (September 12, 2023), this is in fact not a new militia but rather an organizational change because of the clashes that recently took place between the SDF and Sunni Arab tribes in eastern Syria. This was done in an attempt by al-Bashir to take advantage of these developments to take over the Arab tribes with the support of the Syrian regime and Iran.

► According to Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian, during the recent meeting of the foreign ministers of Iran, Russia, Syria, and Turkey, Iran proposed that Turkey undertake to withdraw its military forces from the Syrian territory in exchange for a Syrian commitment to deploy its forces on the border to prevent an attack on Turkish territory. In an interview with the Iranian Al-Vefagh newspaper in Arabic (September 17, 2023), Abdollahian said that while the Arab countries are adopting a new positive attitude towards Syria and striving to improve relations with it out of an understanding that its status in the region must be recognized, Syria's enemies, especially the United States, are increasing the pressure on it. This is accomplished, inter alia, by supporting the "terrorist groups" in eastern and northern Syria. Referring to his recent visit to Lebanon and his meetings with Hezbollah's secretary-general and the leaders of the Palestinian organizations, Abdollahian said that the meetings were an expression of Iran's continued support for the "resistance" and that support for the "resistance" meant support for regional stability and security. He stressed that even if all the Arab and Muslim countries

normalized their relations with Israel, Iran would continue its policy of supporting the “resistance.”

► Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant, speaking at a conference at Reichman University, revealed photos documenting an airport being built by Iran in southern Lebanon (Kan News 11, September 11, 2023). The airport is in the Qalaat Jabbour mountain region, known as Hezbollah’s training area, 20 km (about 12 miles) from the border with Israel (north of Metula). The compound was built after the Second Lebanon War (2006) under the supervision of Imad Mughnieh, who served as head of Hezbollah’s military-terrorist wing until his assassination on February 12, 2008. Residential buildings, shooting ranges, and training areas were identified on the airport grounds, including a training complex for urban warfare (Al-Janoubia, September 12, 2023).



Right: Aerial photograph of the airport. Left: A compound near the airport where Hezbollah and Iranian flags are visible (Israeli Ministry of Defense, September 11, 2023)

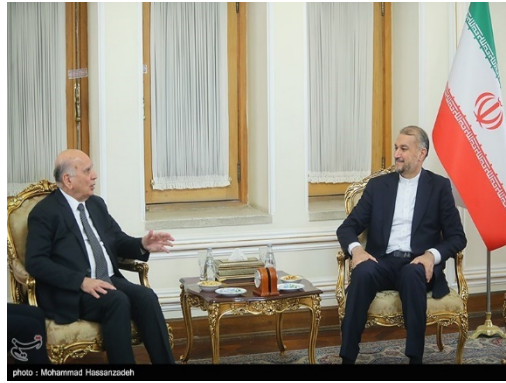
► Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein-Amir Abdollahian met on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly in New York with Lebanese Foreign Minister Abdallah Bouhabib. The two discussed the latest political developments in Lebanon and the Palestinian issue. Abdollahian stressed the need for continued support for the Palestinians by Muslim countries and Iran’s support for the “resistance” in Lebanon and Palestine against the “threats of the Zionist regime” (IRNA, September 22, 2023).



The meeting of the foreign ministers of Iran and Lebanon (IRNA, September 22, 2023)

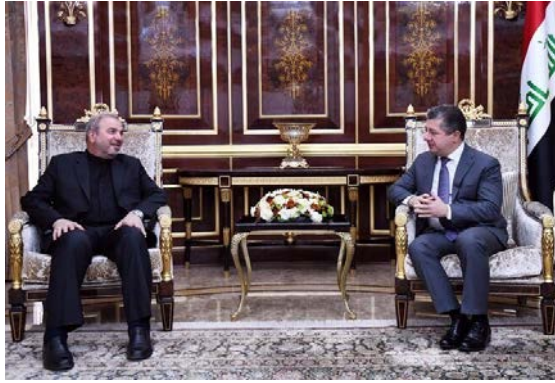
Iranian involvement in Iraq

► On September 13, 2023, Iraqi Foreign Minister Fuad Hussein arrived in Tehran for a visit, where he met with Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi and his Iranian counterpart, Hossein Amir Abdollahian. On the eve of his visit, Hussein declared that the Iraqi constitution does not allow the use of Iraqi territory to attack its neighbors. He added that Iraq had taken the necessary steps to remove the armed groups in the border area between Iran and Iraq and was committed to the security agreement with Iran. The foreign minister's visit took place against the backdrop of Tehran's demand to dismantle the Kurdish separatist groups operating in the Kurdish region in northern Iraq. At a joint press conference held by the two foreign ministers, Hussein said Iraq was committed to the security agreement with Iran and would dismantle anti-Iranian armed groups operating in the Kurdish region. He noted that the groups would be transferred to camps under UN supervision. The Iraqi foreign minister also stressed that relations between the two countries are good, but Iraq's sovereignty should not be threatened. Abdollahian thanked his Iraqi counterpart and said that during the meeting, the two discussed bilateral, regional, and international issues and the cooperation between the two countries. He added that Iraq had taken good steps to remove the "terrorist groups" from the areas near the Iranian border and transfer them deep into Iraqi territory (Tasnim, September 13, 2023). Meeting with the Iraqi foreign minister, President Raisi stressed the need to fully implement the security agreements between the two countries (Fars, September 13, 2023).



The meeting of the foreign ministers of Iran and Iraq (Tasnim, September 13, 2023)

- ▶ On September 18, 2023, the foreign ministers of Iran and Iraq held another meeting on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly in New York, during which they discussed the continued implementation of the security agreement between the two countries and the situation in the Kurdish region in northern Iraq (IRNA, September 18, 2023). On September 20, 2023, the Iranian president and the Iraqi prime minister also met on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly (Fars, September 20, 2023).
- ▶ On September 11, 2023, Iranian Ambassador to Baghdad Mohammad Kazem Al-e Sadegh met with Iraqi Kurdistan President Nechirvan Barzani to discuss strengthening the relations between Iran and the Kurdish region in northern Iraq, the security agreement between Iran and Iraq, and relations between the central government in Baghdad and the Kurdish region. Barzani said at the meeting that Iraqi Kurdistan would not allow Iran's security to be threatened from its territory (IRNA, September 11, 2023). In an interview with the Iranian Al-Alam network in Arabic (September 19, 2023), the Iranian ambassador to Baghdad said that a joint team from Iran and Iraq would travel to Kurdistan to assess the results of the security agreement between the two countries. He added that there was a clear desire on the part of the Iraqi government and the Kurdistan Region to remove the armed groups from their headquarters in the border area.



The Iranian ambassador to Baghdad meets with the president of Iraqi Kurdistan (IRNA, September 11, 2023)

► Farzad Piltan, the director of the West Asia Department at Iran's Trade Promotion Organization, announced that a joint bank, free trade zone, and transportation company would soon be established between Iran and Iraq. He noted that Iraq is of great importance to Iran and that in the first five months of the current Iranian year (March–August 2023), the volume of Iranian exports to Iraq increased by 24% compared to 2022, reaching \$3.5 billion (ISNA, September 19, 2023).