



Iran in the Post-Islamic State Era: Aims, Opportunities and Challenges

Updated Review

November 23, 2017

Dr. Raz Zimmt¹

Main Argument

Iran's Strategic Goals

In Syria and Iraq, the gradual collapse of the Islamic State, established in Iraq and Syria, has come to an end. Following the conclusion of this process of disintegration, ISIS has returned to its “natural state” of a jihadist terror organization, which does not need to administer or protect a state with territorial borders. **The downfall of the Islamic State creates a security and political vacuum and engenders new opportunities for Iran to increase its influence in Syria, Iraq and the entire Middle East.**²

► Iran, which previously displayed dexterity in **exploiting every opportunity to enhance its standing as a regional power**, wishes to capitalize on the vacuum created in Syria and Iraq by ISIS' collapse, to **advance its ambitions in the region and play a central role in shaping the post-Islamic State Middle East**. Iran's actions in Syria and Iraq are part of a **comprehensive Iranian strategy of striving for regional hegemony**. Iran wishes to increase its influence over states and organizations in the region, while preventing forces under Western and American patronage from taking root in Syria, Iraq or any other country. Iran's regional meddling is intended not only to **implement its ideology** (“exporting the revolution”) but mainly to **realize Iranian national interests, which are perceived by Tehran as vital**.

► In its current policy in Syria and Iraq, Iran wishes to further several central goals:

¹ This document is an expansive update to an August 31, 2017 report by the Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center: “Iran in the Post-Islamic State Era: Aims, Opportunities and Challenges”. <http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/en/iran-post-isis-era-aims-opportunities-challenges/>

² On the local, regional and international ramifications of the collapse of the Islamic State, see a publication of the Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center from November 16, 2017: “The Collapse of the Islamic State: What Comes Next?” <http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/en/collapse-islamic-state-comes-next/>

- ◆ **Securing and shaping the Syrian regime:** Preserving the regime of President Assad, assisting its stabilization and increasing Iranian influence over it **are vital goals for Iran**. This policy stems from the Syrian regime's role as a strategic ally of Iran in the Arab world, and due to possible negative ramifications of Assad's downfall on Lebanese Hezbollah, which relies on the crucial Syrian logistical hub for transfers of Iranian assistance to it. In addition, Syria's location at the heart of the Arab world is **perceived as an important geo-political center from which Iran could, in the future, conduct a subversive policy to advance its regional hegemony**.
- ◆ **Reinforcing a sphere of Iranian-Shi'ite influence, stretching from Iran through Iraq to Syria and Lebanon and the Mediterranean.** In this sphere of influence, Iran can create **a land corridor from Iran to Syria and to Lebanon**. Such a corridor would provide Iran with **another route for transferring forces, weapons and equipment to Syria and Lebanon**. This in addition to the **aerial route**, which Iran frequently uses now, and the **maritime route**, which Iran has utilized several times in the past. It appears that Iran also wishes to **obtain access to the Mediterranean, and gain a long-term military foothold in Syria** (although senior Iranian officials have denied such intentions).
- ◆ **Bolstering the pressure mechanisms and escalating the threat posed to Israel, while creating a state of deterrence.** This is mainly by **augmenting the military capabilities of Hezbollah, developing the abilities of Hezbollah to manufacture weapons, and establishing local terror networks in the Golan Heights, with the aim of creating a new front for challenging Israel**. It appears to us that according to Iran's view, the networks forged in the Golan Heights will be made up of Hezbollah operatives, members of Shi'ite militias supported by Iran and local actors from the region.³
- ◆ **Maintaining Iraq's territorial integrity, with a government dominated by the Shia and allied and under the influence of Iran.** To promote this political goal, Iran

³ In the past, a Shi'ite Iraqi operative, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandes, who serves as the Deputy Commander of the Popular Mobilization Committee (PMC, an umbrella structure of Shia militias operating under Iranian patronage), stated that **if Hassan Nasrallah asked to turn toward Israel if conflict erupts, the PMC will do so**. In this context see our publication from July 20, 2017: "Iran's interests and intent in Iraq and Syria reflected in statements by senior commanders of the Popular Mobilization Committee, the umbrella organization of the Shi'ite militias in Iraq handled by the Iranian Qods Force".

fosters Shi'ite militias in Iraq that operate under its influence (“the Popular Mobilization Committee”, PMC), allowing Iran to advance its aims inside Iraq through these militias.

- ◆ **Dislodging the United States from the region.** The U.S. is perceived by Iran as a **major threat to its national security and vital interests**. The first step to realizing this goal is by **diminishing American influence in Syria and Iraq** in the phase following the downfall of the Islamic State, and subsequently, Iran aims to **blunt American influence in other countries across the Middle East**.

- ◆ **Increasing Iran’s political, economic, religious and cultural influence in Syria, Iraq and Lebanon.** This is while exploiting the weakness of the central governments in those countries and the opportunities found in the process of rebuilding the economies and infrastructure in Syria and Iraq, which have been devastated by the wars raging in those countries over the past few years. An important tool for the accomplishment of this goal are the **Shi’ite communities residing in those countries** (and in Syria, the **Alawite community**), which are experiencing sectarian tensions with the neighboring Sunni Muslim communities.

- ▶ To realize its strategic goals, Iran continues to invest most of its efforts in Syria in **stabilizing the rule of the Assad regime and expanding the territories under its control**. Despite the significant gains of Assad regime forces, the latest among them was the fall of the “Islamic State,” a decisive and final victory is yet to be achieved, and the military effort continues to pose a major challenge to Iran and the IRGC, and take a heavy toll on its manpower and that of its clients (thus, for example, in the campaign to capture Abu Kamal, the last major stronghold of the Islamic State in Syria, several IRGC officers were killed , among them two senior officers with the rank of colonel).

- ▶ Iran intends to utilize the forces operating under the command of the IRGC to **establish itself in areas from which the Syrian rebels and ISIS have been expelled**, with the aim of creating a sphere of influence stretching from Iran through Iraq and Syria to Lebanon and the Mediterranean. **Ground lines of control from east to west would allow direct Iranian access to its allies in Syria and Lebanon**. The Iranian effort to establish this corridor is being realized by **the advancement of forces supportive of the Assad regime, including Hezbollah and Shi'ite militias operating under IRGC patronage, to central crossing points on the Iraq-Syria border**. Iran encourages the organizations under its tutelage in

Iraq and in Syria to operate near the Iraqi-Syrian border. **We assess that today, organizations enjoying Iranian patronage have control or influence over large swathes of the border area.**

Obstacles Hindering the Realization of Iran's Interests

► Iran faces **several fundamental obstacles when attempting to establish itself as a powerful player in the Arab realm of the Middle East.** **First**, as a country with a Persian majority, it is perceived in the Arab world, and even among its allies, as a foreign actor that at time conducts itself in a haughty and even racist manner toward its Arab neighbors. **Second**, the Shi'ite Iran is struggling to realize regional hegemony in a sphere that is mostly Sunni Muslim. The use of local proxy organizations allows Iran to camouflage its direct involvement in this arena, **but there are also inherent problems in a strategy that relies on operating proxies, which at times have their own interests and do not follow the Iranian dictate to the letter.**

► **The creation of an Iranian sphere of influence in western Iraq and eastern Syria and establishment of a land corridor from Iran in the direction of the Mediterranean** is especially challenging for Iran. **The government of Iraq (with American encouragement) may hinder the transfer of weapons through this route.** In addition, parts of this route are controlled by **forces opposed to Iranian meddling**, such as the Kurdish militias supported by the United States or the Sunni communities residing in western and central Iraq. **ISIS** will likely change its combat patterns and revert to guerrilla tactics and terrorism following the end of the campaign against it in Iraq, and **may carry out hit-and-run attacks against Iranian vehicles moving along the land corridor** (Iranian vehicles may be perceived as attractive targets for ISIS in its new incarnation).

► The actions of the superpowers and other governments in the region, and especially those of **Russia, the United States and Turkey**, also undercut Iran's ability to realize its aim of regional hegemony and frustrate its hope of forging eastern Syria and western Iraq as parts of its sphere of influence. In Syria, Russia has become the dominant player, and **Iran has had to settle for a secondary role in the military and political developments that have occurred over the past year** (which creates tensions in the relationship between Iran and Russia). **Another actor competing with Iran in Syria (and beyond) is Turkey**, which wishes to play a central role in combatting ISIS and shaping the political deals concerning

Syria's future. In addition, it is likely that **Sunni Turkey will view increasing Shi'ite influence spearheaded by Iran as harmful to its interests.**

► Iran's efforts to gain influence in this arena may lead to **greater strife with the United States**, especially during the Trump presidency. Iran eyes with concern American activity against Syrian regime forces and sees it as a new phase in the battle to shape Syria in the day after ISIS and as an "American plot," which aims to curtail Iranian influence. In addition, the Iranian presence in Syria increases the likelihood of friction with Israel and may lead to an escalation between the two countries at a timing that is not suitable for Iran.

► **Inside Iran, Iranian involvement in Syria too poses a challenge.** The prolonged military operations in Syria **continue to exact a heavy human toll and financial cost from Iran**, which at times arouse internal criticism. In addition, Iran's drive for hegemony in the Middle East **may require it to increase its "investments" in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon and other arenas of contestation** with the Sunni Arab states, headed by Saudi Arabia and with the United States. The expansion of Iranian investments in personnel and other resources in the various loca of conflict **may re-ignite domestic criticism.**

The Iraqi Facet

► **ISIS' debilitating losses create new opportunities for Iran to expand its influence in Iraq.** Unlike in Syria, Iran's direct military presence in Iraq is extremely limited and is **primarily based on the Iraqi Shi'ite militias** ("the Popular Mobilization Committee", PMC), some of which operate under direct or indirect patronage of the IRGC. These militias play an important role in the domestic arena in Iraq, which may even increase following the end of the campaign against ISIS, when they demand their place in the new political order in Iraq. It appears that some of **the militias are loyal to Iran** and it appears that the ability of the central government in Baghdad to impose its will on them is in doubt.

► Iran sees its involvement in Iraq as an essential mean for maintaining its influence in the country and preventing **American presence and influence** there, which are perceived by Iran as a threat to its national interests. According to Tehran, ISIS' enfeeblement may accelerate the **confrontation against the United States over power in Iraq**. Iran strives to **neutralize American influence in Iraq**, which has increased during the campaign against ISIS, and especially during the battle for Mosul.

- ▶ **As with its policy in Syria, Iran is moving to increase its influence in Iraq in the economic, cultural and religious spheres** as well. Iran invests great efforts in augmenting the volume of trade with Iraq, it has taken over several oil fields in the border region with Iraq, and Iran may assist in rebuilding the areas captured from ISIS. Iran is also pursuing efforts to increase its religious influence in the Iraqi cities considered holy by the Shi'ite community.
- ▶ **Iranian assistance provided a significant contribution to the downfall of the Islamic State and the (temporary?) enfeeblement of ISIS**, but also resulted in growing criticism inside Iraq against Iran's interference in Iraq's domestic affairs. This criticism reflects the complexity of the Shi'ite political arena in Iraq, which encompasses a multitude of differing and even opposing views regarding Iran's involvement in the country. **Over the past two years, the Shi'ite cleric and politician, Muqtada al-Sadr, has led the opposition to Iran's involvement in Iraq.** Al-Sadr was considered a protégé of Iran, but over the past few years, has drifted away from the Iranians and began publicly criticizing Iran's meddling in Iraq. Iran is troubled by his growing activism, and especially his burgeoning ties with Saudi Arabia, Iran's main regional rival.
- ▶ **Prime Minister Haidar al-Abadi**, who was appointed to his position in the summer of 2014 replacing the pro-Iranian Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, has also **adopted an independent posture vis-à-vis Iran.** At the heart of al-Abadi's policy is the **desire to avoid turning his country into an "Iranian satellite."** Iraq also has an underlying interest to continue receiving American support and to maintain positive relations with the Sunni Arab states, chief among them Saudi Arabia. The entry of **Turkey** as another player in the Iraqi scene is also perceived as a threat by Iran, which is troubled by Turkey's aim of cementing its hold over northern Iraq.
- ▶ Another challenge Iran is facing comes **from the Kurds in northern Iraq, although this challenge was significantly curtailed due to the failure of the Kurdish initiative to carry out a referendum on the de-facto independence of the Kurdish region. Iran is troubled by the transformation of the Kurdistan region in Iraq into a de-facto independent state.** According to Tehran's view, such a trend may jeopardize Iraq's territorial integrity, harm Iran's efforts to secure its grip over Iraq and **embolden separatist aspirations among the Kurdish minority in Iran.**

Summary

In sum, the downfall of the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq and ISIS' transformation into a terrorist and guerilla organization **creates a window of opportunity for Iran to realize its regional goals and expand its influence**. The first priorities are **Lebanon, Syria, Iraq and Yemen**, over which Iran already has a strong grip, mostly through Shi'ite proxies. Nevertheless, **Iran's ability to cement its influence is constrained by fundamental characteristic of the Middle Eastern system**, chief among them the demographic composition of the region and the competing influence of other players, regional (Saudi Arabia, which is coalescing an Arab Sunni coalition around it) and international. Iran's ability to increase its influence in the region depends not only on its intentions and desires, but also on the policies of the rest of the state and non-state actors, international and local, operating in the region, and their decisions whether to facilitate Iran's ambitions or challenge its efforts to establish a sphere of influence under Iranian dominance.

Annexes

► Below are five annexes dealing with the various aspects of Iran's involvement in Syria, Iraq and the Middle East at large:

- ◆ Annex A: The evolution of Iran's involvement in Syria.
- ◆ Annex B: The nature of the Iran's current operation in Syria.
- ◆ Annex C: The challenges to Iran's involvement in Syria, Iraq and the Arab world at large.
- ◆ Annex D: Iran's involvement in Iraq.
- ◆ Annex E: The Challenges to Iran's involvement in Iraq.

Annex A

The Evolution of Iran's Involvement in Syria

- ▶ Since the outbreak of the civil war in Syria in late 2011, **the Qods Force of the IRGC, under the command of Qasem Soleimani, has spearheaded Iran's involvement in Syria.** During the first phase of the civil war, when the survival of the Assad regime was in doubt, **Iran's intervention was intended to prevent the fall of Damascus and strategic redoubts in northern Syria to the rebels** and the collapse of the Assad regime. Following this phase, Iran and its proxies currently aim to help the Assad regime expand the areas under its control, stabilize the regime's rule in areas it occupies, defend the Shi'ite community and places they consider holy, and secure the Syrian-Lebanese border region and prevent the "trickling" of global jihad into Lebanon. In the long term, the objective of Iran's involvement is **to secure Iran's grip over Syria and its influence over the Syrian regime, thus allowing Iran to use Syrian territory as a forward operating base for Iran's presence and activities in the Middle East.**
- ▶ Iran's involvement during the various stages of the Syrian civil war **manifested in a variety of ways.** At first, Iran transferred weapons, provided economic assistance and dispatched military advisers, who worked hand-in-hand with the Syrian Army and the Syrian security forces. Iran provided assistance to the Syrian Army on the strategic, operational and tactical level. Iran shared with the commanders of the Syrian Army its battlefield experience, provided training to commanders of the Syrian Army of various ranks, and established a popular militia that operates in the same manner as the Basij force in Iran. In addition, Iran provided political backing to the Syrian regime.
- ▶ Until September 2015, Iran's intervention in Syria was carried it out by **some hundreds of Iranian advisers and several thousands of Shi'ite fighters from Lebanese Hezbollah, Shi'ite Iraqi militias and Afghan and Pakistani fighters,** who were recruited by the IRGC in exchange for a monthly salary and additional benefits. During the initial phase of Iran's intervention, IRGC cadres present in Syria served mostly in an advisory capacity. At that stage, the Iranians avoided operating organic military units against the rebels and were rarely directly involved in combat. However, at times, IRGC personnel were killed when caught in the crossfire between regime forces and rebels.

► The cumulative advances of Jabhat al-Nusra and other rebel groups in north-western Syria during 2014 and 2015 **raised doubts among the Iranian leadership about Assad’s ability to survive at the helm**. This compelled Iran **to significantly augment its support to the Assad regime** and change the mode of its engagement in Syria. Due to the manpower shortage of the Syrian regime, Iran shored up its forces in Syria in mid-September 2015, by dispatching **apparently between 1,500-2,000 fighters, some of whom took part in combat**. The Iranian reinforcements were intended to assist the Pro-Syrian forces in an offensive launched in northern Syria in early October 2015. In addition, Hezbollah and the Shi’ite militias were utilized to defend the sites considered holy by the Shi’ite community in Syria, central among them the grave of Sayyidah Zaynab (south of Damascus).



**Qasem Solemani briefs fighters, probably in the Lattakia region in Syria
(Facebook, October 13, 2015)**

► The hard-fought battles in north-western Syria in late 2015 **took a heavy toll on the Iranian fighters, who led the assaults in the ground offensive.**⁴ In the first months of the offensive, over 100 Iranian fighters were killed, many of them officers including senior ones. The overwhelming majority of the fallen belonged to the regular combat units of the IRGC. **The heavy losses among the Iranian fighters forced the Iranian leadership to reevaluate the dispatch of Iranian forces to Syria and significantly scale down its order**

⁴ For more see our report “Profile of IRGC Fighters Killed in Syria during the Past Month (Updated to November 16, 2015)”, November 16, 2015 <http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/en/20909/> and our review: “The head of the Iranian Martyrs Foundation admits that 2,100 fighters sent by Iran to Syria and Iraq have been killed so far”, March 16, 2017. <http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/en/21176/>

of battle in Syria. Iran's current order of battle in Syria is estimated to amount to about one thousand fighters and advisers.

► In the spring of 2016, Iran dispatched to Syria a **limited number of soldiers of the regular Iranian Armed Forces** (amounting to probably several hundreds of fighters), with the objective of reinforcing IRGC personnel in Syria. This was the first time since the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1989), in which fighters belonging to the regular Iranian Armed Forces were sent into battle outside of Iran. Within a short period, the regular armed forces also endured casualties.

► **The battlefield gains of the forces fighting on behalf of the Assad regime with Russian assistance, which culminated in the recapture of the city of Aleppo** from the rebels in late 2016, **allowed Iran to revert to relying mainly on Hezbollah fighters and other foreign Shi'ite fighters operating under its patronage alongside Syrian forces , and limit its direct presence to a relatively small core of advisers.** Returning to the previous mode of operation decreased Iranian losses **but also impaired Tehran's ability to affect events on the ground and curtailed its political influence.** Iran's role as the main backer of the Syrian regime was **usurped by Russia, while Iran was forced to settle for a secondary role in the unfolding military and political developments over the past year** in the civil war, which have benefitted the Syrian regime.

In parallel to its support for the Assad regime, Iran aims to establish a footing in the Golan Heights to carry out terrorist attacks against Israel. Iran has done so through **local actors, who were able to embed themselves in the Golan Heights owing to the security and administrative vacuum created over the past years due to the loss of control of the Syrian regime.** These local foci involved in establishing terrorist cells against Israel are **Hezbollah operatives, local Druze actors and Palestinian Islamic Jihad cadres.** The terrorist network in the Golan Heights would not necessarily be utilized against Israel in the immediate term, but instead serve as a **base for Iranian proxies in this sensitive region, and used in the future as a lever vis-à-vis Israel.**

Annex B

The Nature of Iran's Current Operation in Syria

Iran's Involvement on the Battlefield

► Despite the significant gains made by the forces fighting on behalf of the Assad regime over the past year chief among them the fall of Aleppo and the collapse of the Islamic State, **Iran continues to devote most of its efforts to stabilizing the rule of the Syrian regime and expanding the territories under Assad's control.** The fighting in Syria is subsiding due to the de-confliction deals Russia has been able to negotiate throughout Syria, **but a final victory is nowhere near**, and it continues to pose a serious challenge to Iran and the IRGC. **Since August 2017, at least ten IRGC fighters were killed in Syria, among them four senior officers**, after several months that witnessed a significant decrease in the number of casualties among Iranian forces; this indicates that despite the relative lull in fighting, the campaign in Syria continues to take a heavy toll from Iranian forces and their partners. **As of mid-November 2017, the number of Iranians killed in Syria has reached over 520.**

Two senior Iranian officers with the rank of colonel who were killed in the campaign to capture Albu Kamal, the last major stronghold of the Islamic State in Syria



On the right: announcement that Kheirollah Samadi from the IRGC was killed in clashes with ISIS in the region of Albu Kamal (the source of the announcement is the Moata News Agency, affiliated with ISIS). In the attached image, Samadi appears alongside Qasem Soleimani, the Commander of the IRGC's Qods Force. In the center and the left, two photos of Ali Reza Nazari, a senior IRGC commander killed during the capture of Albu Kamal (Baladi News, November 20, 2017)

► In light of the negotiations led by Russia concerning a settlement in Syria, Iranian officials emphasized that **Iran's presence in the country is there to stay.** Following the ceasefire deal in southern Syria, which entered into force on July 9, 2017, and placed

restrictions on the presence of Iranian forces and their proxies in this region, **Hossein Jaber Ansari, the Deputy Foreign Minister**, stated that Iran's presence in Syria is performed upon the request of the Syrian government and that **the agreement between Russia and the U.S. will have no practical or operative effect on the presence of Iranian forces in Syria** (Fars, July 17, 2017).

It appears to us that Iran's refusal to withdraw its forces from Syria was upheld in the **memorandum of principles signed on November 8, 2017 between Russia, the United States and Jordan**. The reference to the removal of foreign forces from Syria is vague, does not specify the identity of the foreign forces, and avoids setting timetables for their removal and does not mention the locations to which those foreign forces will be transferred. In addition, the memorandum of principles is concerned with south-western Syria alone and does not refer to the removal of foreign forces from Syria as a whole. **In this context, the Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Sergey Lavrov, clarified that according to the Russians, the presence of Iranian forces in Syria is legitimate, since it was installed following an invitation of the legitimate Syrian government, and that the issue was not discussed at all during the talks in Amman** (Reuters, November 14, 2017) .

- ▶ Besides the ongoing combat operations alongside Syrian regime forces, Iran strives to utilize the forces operating under the IRGC to entrench itself in regions captured from the Syrian rebels and ISIS. Iran aims to create a sphere of influence, stretching from Iran through Iraq and Syria to Lebanon and the Mediterranean. **This realm, once controlled by ISIS until its retreat from most of the territories it once held, connects eastern Syria to western Iraq and its capture would allow Iran to transfer weapons and supply convoys from Iran through Iraq to Syria and to Hezbollah in Lebanon. Ground lines of control from east to west, which would connect between the Baghdad region to Damascus through al-Tanf near the Iraq-Syria-Jordan border triangle, and between the region surrounding Mosul in Iraq to Raqqa in Syria,** would allow Iran unimpeded access to its allies in Syria and Lebanon.
- ▶ The Iranian effort to establish this corridor is realized by **the advancement of forces supportive of the Assad regime**, including Hezbollah and other Shi'ite militias, operating under the patronage of the IRGC, to the **Iraq-Syria border**. In June 2017, forces of the Fatemiyoun Brigade, made up of Afghan fighters operating under the guidance of the IRGC in Syria, reached the vicinity of the border. Iranian media published photos of **Qasem**

Soleimani, the Commander of the Qods Force of the IRGC, praying alongside the fighters of the brigade in the border region (Tasnim, June 12, 2017).



Qasem Soleimani alongside Fatemyoun Brigade fighters near the Iraq-Syria border (Tasnim, June 12, 2017)

► During November 2017, Soleimani visited the region of Deir Ezzor, which was captured from ISIS, and the area of Albu Kamal, which was seized from ISIS following fierce clashes over the last major stronghold of the Islamic State in Syria. Soleimani, who toured Deir Ezzor despite mourning the passing of his father, met with members of the Syrian militia the “al-Baqr Brigade,” which operates under Iranian patronage. During his stay in the Albu Kamal area, Soleimani also met with fighters of the Shi’ite Iraqi “al-Nujabaa” militia, which operates under IRGC guidance, and took part in the campaign to capture the city, which was concluded on November 16, alongside the Syrian Army, Hezbollah (the best of the Shi’ite fighters) and other Shi’ite militias (ISNA, November 16, 2017). The Lebanese channel “al-Mayadin” reported (November 19, 2017) that Soleimani personally commanded the campaign in Albu Kamal. Soleimani’s visits to the front represent Iran’s desire, similar to the desire of other forces operating alongside the Assad regime, to take part in the “mission accomplished image,” which would embody the end to the existence of the Islamic State on Syrian land.



On the right: Qasem Soleimani, the Commander of the IRGC's Qods Force, in Abu Kamal, November 16, 2017. On the left: Qasem Soleimani with fighters of "al-Nujabaa' Movement" in Abu Kamal (Enab Baladi, November 17, 2017).



On the right: Qasem Soleimani with one of the fighters of the "al-Nujabaa' movement" (Enab Baladi, November 17, 2017). On the back of the fighter appears the emblem of the group, which bears a similarity to the emblem of Hezbollah. On the left: Qasem Soleimani talking over a walkie-talkie in Abu Kamal (Twitter account of Hezbollah's central military propaganda arm, November 20, 2017).

The Iranian approach of aiming to establish a sphere of influence from Iran to Lebanon was **verbalized by the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei during his meeting with Iraq's Prime Minister, Haidar al-Abadi**, in June 2017. Ali Khamenei presented the arrival of the Iraqi Shi'ite militias to the Iraq-Syria border as **"significant and strategic"** (the website of the Supreme Leader, June 20, 2017). **Ali Akbar Velayati, the Adviser on International Affairs to the Supreme Leader**, declared in a press conference in June 2017, that the link created between the popular forces in Iraq and the united forces in Syria constitute a strategic victory for Iran. **According to him "the ring of resistance" which starts in Tehran, continues all the way to Iraq, Syria and Lebanon, facing off against the Zionists and their supporters** (IRNA, June 13, 2017).

Velayati gave expression to this approach during his visit to the area of the city of Aleppo in November 2017. In a meeting with combatants in the area, Velayati stated that if Iran does not assist Syria, it will be partitioned, and the link between Iran, Syria, Iraq, Lebanon and Palestine will be disconnected. He argued that Iran’s presence in Iraq and Syria and the presence of Iraqi and Syrian fighters side by side were aimed at preventing the materialization of the conspiracy to partition Syria and the region. Velayati proclaimed that the “Resistance Axis” starts in Tehran, continues to Baghdad, Damascus, Beirut and reaches all the way to Palestine (IRNA, November 8, 2017).

Gaining a Military Foothold in Syria and Access to the Mediterranean

- ▶ Iran’s desire to expand its access to the Mediterranean and gain a long-term military presence in Syria is also **evident in the possibility that Iran will ask to receive a naval base along Syria’s shores, which would provide it with regular access to the Mediterranean Sea**. In late November 2016, **Mohammad Hossein Bagheri, the Chief of Staff of the Iranian Armed Forces, declared in a conference of the Iranian Navy, that Iran might need to expand its maritime capabilities in the future in waters far from its borders, and establish naval bases on the shores of Syria and Yemen** (Fars, November 26, 2016). In March 2017, **Rasoul Sanaei-Rad, the Deputy Commander of the IRGC, denied** that Iran intends to establish a naval base in Lattakia, stating that Iran is not interested in establishing a naval base in the city, where Russia maintains an army base, and that Iran’s presence in Syria involves advisers alone (Tasnim, March 12, 2107).
- ▶ On November 17, Bagheri arrived for a visit in Syria at the helm a high-ranking military delegation. During his visit, Bagheri met with President Assad, the Syrian minister of defense and the Syrian chief of staff and discussed with them developments in the Syrian battlefield and increasing the military and security cooperation between the two states. Although we do not have detailed information about the substance of the meeting, it is likely that Bagheri discussed with the senior Syrian officials the modes of military operations of the Iranian forces and their proxies in Syria following the end of the campaign against ISIS, and about Iran’s intention to establish a long-term military foothold in the country.
- ▶ **Reports, published in Israeli media**, claiming that the IRGC established a training camp outside of Iran, **were denied by Iranian officials**. In August 2017, the deputy commander of

the Imam Hossein Training and Officer College for IRGC cadres asserted that even the Qods Force of the IRGC does not establish training centers outside of Iran, and that in Syria too, the IRGC utilizes Syrian bases for their advisory missions (Tasnim, August 1, 2017). **Despite this, according to our estimate, the possibility that in the future, Iran will wish to entrench its presence in Syria by establishing a naval base and bases for ground forces on Syrian land should not be ruled out.** Information that appears to buttress the assessment that Iran intends to establish a long-term military foothold in Syria (whether of Iranian forces or Shi'ite militias supported by Iran) can be found in a report published by BBC on November 10, 2017; “a Western intelligence official” told the BBC that Iran has begun constructing a permanent base near the town of al-Kiswah south of Damascus. The BBC reported that satellite images indicate that construction work at the site began during 2017.

► **It should be emphasized, however,** that most of Iran’s activities in Syria are carried out (as it typical for Iran) by Sh’ite proxies, with members of Lebanese Hezbollah (about 6,000-8,000 of them) representing the elite among those forces. In addition to Hezbollah fighters, Iran transported to Syria over 10,000 Shi’ite fighters who are operating under militias supported by Iran: The Fatimiyoun Brigade, made up of Sh’ite Afghan fighters and includes between 2,000-3,000 fighters; the Zeynabioun Brigade, made up of Shi’ite Pakistani fighters and includes about 1,000 members; and Iraqi Shi’ite militias that include thousands of fighters.⁵ We estimate that the total number of Shi’ite forces in Syria to be about 20,000 fighters.



On the right: the emblem of the Afghani Fatimiyoun Brigade. On the left: the emblem of the Pakistani Zaynabioun Brigade. Under the name Zaynabioun the writing appears: “Islamic Resistance in the World”

⁵ Based on the article of Ephraim Kam, “Iran’s Shi’ite Foreign Legion”, *Strategic Assessment* vol. 20:3. October 2017. <http://www.inss.org.il/publication/irans-shiite-foreign-legion/>



**The emblem of the Iraqi Shi'ite militia “The movement of the Nobles”
(Harakat al-Nujabaa’)**

► We assess that Iran is well-aware of the possibility that it will eventually need to withdraw its forces from Syria (including the foreign Shi'ite forces operating on its behalf) and is therefore working to recruit Sunni fighters into militias operating under its guidance. Syrian opposition sources reported recently that the IRGC began recruiting youths from Daraa governorate in southern Syria to “Division 313,” a militia operating under IRGC patronage. According to the report, over 200 fighters from the town of Izraa’ were recruited into the militia and granted identification documents bearing the emblem of the IRGC, which allow the fighters to freely move through Syrian regime checkpoints (al-Arabiya, November 5, 2017). This report is yet to be confirmed.

Bolstering Hezbollah’s Military Capabilities

Iran has been working methodically over an extended period to upgrade Hezbollah’s military infrastructure. The spearhead of the military infrastructure the Iranians are building in Lebanon is **Hezbollah’s rocket and missile arsenal, which threatens the Israeli home front.** Hezbollah’s leader, Hassan Nasrallah, bragged that **his organization has precise missiles** and that if used, would turn the lives of hundreds of Israelis into living hell. The military infrastructure the Iranians established for Hezbollah in Lebanon **far exceeds, in terms of size and quality, the military capabilities of other terrorist organizations in the Middle East and around the world.**

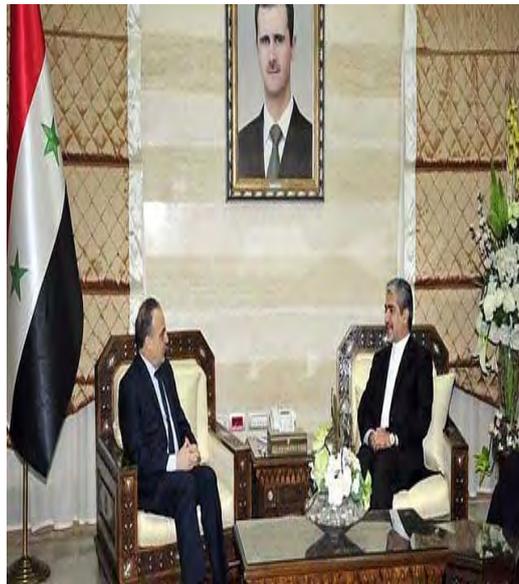
► Over the past year, a number of reports claimed that Iran is working to establish factories in Syria and Lebanon for the manufacture of weapons. In November 2016, **Mohammad Bagheri, the Iranian Chief of Staff,** announced that several years ago, Iran established a factory for the manufacture of missiles near Aleppo in Syria, which were used by Hezbollah against Israel in the 2006 Lebanon War (Tasnim, November 10, 2016). In March

2017, the Kuwaiti newspaper al-Jarida, reported that Iran established factories in Lebanon for the manufacture of long-range rockets and additional weapons for Hezbollah, following strikes against weapon manufacturing plants in Sudan and against supply convoys destined for Hezbollah in Syria, strikes that were attributed to Israel. **Two months later, the head of Israel's Military Intelligence Directorate confirmed that Iran has worked over the past year to assemble the infrastructure for the independent manufacturing of precision weaponry in Lebanon and Yemen** (Haaretz, June 22, 2017). In mid-August, several media outlets reported about a Scud missile factory located near the Syrian coast, which is identical to a missile manufacturing plant build in Tehran (Israeli Channel 2 News, August 15, 2017). **The creation of this infrastructure is intended, according to our estimate, to reduce the dependence of the Syrian Army and Hezbollah on weapon supplies from Iran.**

Rebuilding Syria's Economy

- ▶ Alongside activities in the military sphere, the need to rebuild the devastated Syrian economy after years of civil war **provides Iran with an opportunity to increase its economic clout in that country.** Over the past two years, senior Iranian and Syrian officials have been in talks to promote cooperation between Iranian and Syrian companies in the communications, electricity and energy sectors. During the **visit of the Syrian Energy Minister, Imad Mohammad Deeb Khamis** in Tehran in June 2015, the minister met with representatives of Iranian firms operating in Syria and called on additional Iranian firms to invest in projects in the water and electricity sectors in Syria. In addition, the minister met his **Iranian counterpart, Hamid Chitchian** who announced Iran's intension to expand the activity of private Iranian firms in the electricity sector in Syria (Tasnim and Alef, June 17, 2015).
- ▶ It was reported in early 2017 that Iranian telecom companies won a license to operate a third cellular network in Syria, under agreements to expand economic ties between the two countries (Reuters, January 17, 2017). In August 2017, 30 Iranian companies took part in the international fair in Damascus, held for the first time in six years. The deputy president of the Iranian Chamber of Trade and Commerce, who participated in the fair, stated in a meeting with the Syrian minister of economy and foreign trade that organizations, firms and Iranian chambers of commerce can help Syria by promoting development and reconstruction projects (Tasnim, August 18, 2017).

► In June 2017, **Imad Khamis, the Syrian Prime Minister**, met with the **Iranian Ambassador to Damascus, Javad Torkabadi**, and discussed with him ways to expand the economic ties between the two countries. Khamis emphasized the importance of economic cooperation between Iran and Syria and pointed to the need to promote joint economic ventures with the involvement of the private sector (Fars, June 12, 2017). The next day, the **Head of the Majles Committee on National Security and Foreign Policy, Alaeddin Boroujerdi**, announced that Iran will spare no efforts in Syria's reconstruction following the civil war. In a meeting with the Secretary General of the Syrian Prime Minister's Office, Mohammad al-Ammouri, Boroujerdi stated that Iran will offer assistance to reconstruct Syria and will share with Damascus the experience gained by Iran during the reconstruction phase following the Iran-Iraq War (Mehr, June 13, 2017).



The meeting between Iran's Ambassador to Damascus Javad Torkabadi and Syrian Prime Minister Imad Khamis (ISNA, June 12, 2017).

► **In August 2017, about 30 Iranian firms attended the trade fair Expo in Damascus**, held for the first time in six years. The Deputy President of the Iranian Chamber of Commerce, Hossein Selahvarzi, who visited the fair, stated that **organizations, firms and Iranian chambers of commerce can provide Syria's trade needs and help rebuilt the country**. He called on the Syrian minister of economy to promote free trade agreements between the two nations and concluded a deal with the president of the Syrian Chamber of Commerce to establish a joint chamber of commerce of the two countries (Tasnim, August 18, 2017; Fars, August 19, 2017).

- ▶ **In September 2017, Iran and Syria signed multi-million Euro contracts concerning cooperation in the electricity sector.** During a visit of the Syrian Minister of Electricity Mohammad Zuhair Kharboutli to Tehran, a deal was concluded to export five power plants from Iran to Syria in an effort to improve the stability of the electrical grid in Syria. Additional contracts were concluded to **establish Iranian power stations in Aleppo and Lattakia** and to expand cooperation in the field of solar energy (SANA, September 11, 2017). The Iranian deputy minister of energy discussed with the Syrian minister of water the possibilities for cooperation between Iranian and Syrian firms in the sectors of water, sanitation and irrigation (SANA, September 24, 2017).
- ▶ A senior official at the research center of the Iranian oil industry stated that **Iran intends to build an oil refinery in Syria.** The refinery will operate **near the city of Homs** and will be able to produce 70 thousand barrels of oil per day during the initial phase, and later on its capacity will be expanded to be able to refine 140 thousand barrels per day. The refinery will use Syrian oil as its raw material and utilize Iranian know-how. The refinery will be constructed by a consortium of Iranian, Syrian and Venezuelan firms. In addition, Iran will restore two other refineries in Syria (ISNA, September 26, 2017).
- ▶ A manifestation of Iran's desire to bolster the "economic axis" with Syria and Iraq can be found in the statement of the Senior Military Adviser of the Supreme Leader of Iran, Yahya Rahim Safavi, who called to **encourage religious tourism between the countries** and to boost economic ties between Iran, Iraq, Syria and Lebanon by **laying railroad tracks from Iran through Iraq, Syria and reaching the Mediterranean.** (YJC.IR, October 4, 2017)

Iranian Religious and Cultural Activities in Syria

- ▶ Alongside military and economic activities, **Iran is also working to increase its religious influence in Syria.** In recent years, **Iran has been holding Shi'ite religious ceremonies during Shi'ite holy days**, such as the Ghadeer holiday, when according to Shi'ite tradition, Prophet Muhammad proclaimed Ali Ibn Abi Taleb to be his successor, the Arba'een holy day marking 40 days after the fast of Ashoura'. In addition, Iran is promoting **reconstruction and expansion works in Shi'ite holy cites damaged in the fighting through the civil war.** In October 2017, Hassan Palarak, who directs the Headquarter for Reconstruction of Shia Holy Sites in Syria and Iraq, announced that **the dispatch of Iranian pilgrims to the Shi'ite holy sites to Syria will soon resume.** The senior Iranian official mentioned that the fighting in Syria resulted in a great deal of damage to the holy Shi'ite

sites, the most important of them being the **gravesite of the granddaughter of Prophet Muhammad, Sayyidah Zaynab**, south of Damascus, which is a central pilgrimage site. About a year ago, reconstruction work has begun on the site and as part of the restoration process, there is an intention to enlarge the compound by buying lands surrounding the gravesite. Reconstruction works of sites holy to the Shi'ite have begun in other parts of Syria as well, after their takeover by regime forces, including the **gravesite of Sayyidah Sakinah**, the daughter of the Shi'ite Imam Hussein and a granddaughter of the Prophet Muhammad, in the town of Daraya. Palarak mentioned that the restoration works are being financed by donations of citizens and Iranian foundations and not through the budget of the Iranian government. (Fars, October 23, 2017)

► Iran is also acting in the cultural-educational field. During his visit to Syria in November 2017, Ali-Akbar Velayati, the Senior Adviser of the Supreme Leader of Iran and also serves at the Chairman of the Board of Governors of the “Azad University,” a network of private universities in Iran, discussed with the Syrian president the possibility of establishing a branch of the network in Syria (Tasnim, November 7, 2017).

Annex C

The Challenges to Iran's Involvement in Syria, Iraq and the Arab World at Large

Iran faces several fundamental obstacles when attempting to establish itself as a powerful player in the Arab world. First, as a country with a Persian majority, **it is perceived, even by its allies in the Arab world, as a foreign actor** that at times conducts itself in a haughty and even racist manner toward its Arab neighbors. **Second, the Shi'ite Iran struggles to realize regional hegemony in a sphere that is mostly Sunni Muslims.** Over the past years reports did emerge about Iran's alleged attempts to alter the demographic makeup of regions with a Sunni majority in Syria, but ultimately, **Iran cannot promote "Shi'ization" in a region where the Shi'ite make up a minority.** The use of local proxy organizations allows Iran to camouflage its direct involvement in this arena, but there are also inherent problems in a strategy that relies on utilizing proxies, which at times have their own interests and do not follow the Iranian dictate to the letter.

► The creation of an Iranian sphere of influence in western Iraq and eastern Syria and establishment of a land corridor from Iran in the direction of the Mediterranean is especially challenging for Iran. Parts of this sphere are indeed under the control of Iran's allies, including the Assad regime, Hezbollah and some of the Iraqi Shi'ite militias. However, **vast regions of this area, in both Iraq and Syria, are controlled by populations and forces that will likely oppose encroachment by Iran and its proxies.** In the long run, this will likely make it difficult to hold a land round corridor under Iranian control. In addition, **the local population** (mostly in western Iraq) **is largely Sunni**, and will probably resist the pervasion of Iranian influence in the region.

► The actions of other state actors in the region, and especially those of **Russia, the United States and Turkey, also restrict Iran's ability to realize its aims of regional hegemony and of forging eastern Syria and western Iraq into parts of its sphere of influence. In Syria, Russia has become the dominant player and it must not be assumed that Moscow will take Iran's ambitions into account.** Iran did encourage the Russian intervention in Syria to save the Assad regime, but as a result of this intervention, Iran has lost its hegemonic position in Syria and has had to allow Russia to assume the dominant role Tehran once enjoyed. **Iran**, which supports preserving Syria's territorial

integrity under Assad's rule, **has reservations about Russia's policy to establish a loose federation in Syria and is dissatisfied with the prominent position Russia has given Turkey in the negotiations process over the resolution of the war.**

► For now, Iran has had to acquiesce to bolstering its hold over areas where the Russians have allowed it to operate. At this stage, the mutual interests of Russia and Iran are significant enough to allow the preservation of their cooperation in the Syrian arena. Russia has also not obliged the American and Israeli demand to decrease Iranian influence in Syria. Despite this, there are also disagreements between the two countries, which stem from the desire of each of them to influence and even dominate Syria, and from differing perceptions regarding the relationships with other regional actors, including Israel. It is possible that in the future, these disagreements would intensify, as the talks surrounding a political agreement that will determine President Assad's fate will progress, since Iran, unlike Russia, sees the preservation of Assad's rule as a top priority.



Meeting between Russian President Putin and Iranian President Rouhani in Tehran (Mehr, November 1, 2017).

► Another actor competing against Iran in the Syrian arena is **Turkey**, which supports Islamist rebel groups and the Free Syrian Army. Turkey, eyeing with concern the growing power of the Kurdish forces in northern Syria, wishes to play a central role in the military effort against ISIS and in shaping the political agreements concerning Syria's future. It is probable that **Sunni Turkey, which also aspires to increase its regional sway, will object to Syria and Iraq turning into Iranian protectorates.**

► Iran's efforts to gain influence in Syria and Iraq may lead to **greater strife with the United States**, especially in the era of President Trump, who has defined Iran as a central

threat in the Middle East.⁶ In recent months, the Syria-Iraq-Jordan border triangle has become a focal point of armed confrontations between the American Air Force and Syrian regime forces and Shi'ite militias operating under Iranian patronage. American forces have shot down at least one Iranian armed drone in the region of al-Tanf in eastern Syria. **Iran eyes with concern the American activity against Syrian regime forces near the Iraq border** and sees it as a new phase in the battle to shape Syria in the day after ISIS and as an "American-Zionist plot," which aims to stymie the advance of the Iranian-led "resistance front."

► **Iran's former Ambassador to Baghdad, Hassan Kazemi Qomi**, recently estimated that following ISIS' defeat, the United States is following a new plan that focuses on establishing a "terrorist army," reinforcing its forces in the region and supporting the Kurds in Syria. **He called for coordinated action between Iraq and Syria to liberate the border regions shared by the two countries to thwart the American plan to partition the region** (Tasnim, June 5, 2017).⁷ In addition, the Iranian presence in Syria, its aspirations in the Golan Heights, and the transfer of weapons to Hezbollah, **increases the likelihood of friction with Israel** and may lead to an escalation between the two countries at a timing that is not suitable for Iran.

► **Inside Iran too, the Iranian involvement in Syria poses a challenge to the Iranian regime.** The prolonged military operations in Syria continue to exact a heavy human toll and financial cost from Iran and its proxies, which at time arouses domestic criticism. It is true that this criticism does not have a practical impact on Iran's policies, and it is unclear to what extent this criticism enjoys wide public support. However, it does reflect alternative voices among segments of the Iranian public, which are displeased with Iran's ongoing support of the Syrian regime. Some of the prominent critical voices over the past year have been **the reformist political activist Mostafa Tajzadeh** who argued that preserving Assad's rule has become more important in the eyes of the regime than preserving Iranian provinces. **The former Mayor of Tehran, Gholam Hossein Karbaschi**, stated in a

⁶ For more see our report "Iranian Responses to President Trump's Speech", October 18, 2017. <http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/en/iranian-responses-president-trumps-speech/>

⁷ **There is a dissonance between the Iranian conspiratorial view of the American policy in Syria and the United States' conduct in reality. The U.S. is actually reducing its footprint on the ground**, and does not display a desire to attempt to affect the shaping of the future Syrian regime, thus making it easier for the other players in Syria (mainly Russia and Iran) to realize their goals.

controversial speech that the Shi'ite communities of the region can be empowered without sending them money, weapons and acts of killing (Tasnim, May 1, 2017).

► Iran's intervention in Syria also fans the flames of conflict with ISIS, which retains significant operational capabilities even after the collapse of the Islamic States. The multi-pronged terrorist attack carried out by the organization against targets in Tehran on June 7, 2017, illustrated the potential dangerous effects of the confrontation between Iran and ISIS on Iran's internal security. In response to the attacks on the Majlis building and Khomeini's tomb, on June 18, 2017, the IRGC launched six surface-to-surface Zulfaqr missiles to a medium-range of 700 kilometers (435 miles) from two bases in Kermanshah and Kurdistan in western Iran, toward ISIS targets in Deir Ezzor, eastern Syria.



Launch of missiles from western Iran toward eastern Syria (Twitter, June 18, 2017)

Annex D

Iranian Involvement in Iraq

- ▶ **In Tehran's view, Iraq was and continues to be the most important arena for Iran's regional policy.** Since the overthrow of Saddam Hussein in 2003, Iran has acted to preserve its neighbor to the west as **one territorial unit, under Shi'ite dominance and Iranian influence.** Following the occupation of Iraq by the United States in 2003, **the Qods Force of the IRGC led the assistance to the Shi'ite militias, established by it in Iraq, and wielded against the American military and Coalition forces.** Iran pursued this policy in an effort to prevent American entrenchment in Iraq, while at the same time fortifying Iran's influence over the Shi'ite community in Iraq and the country's leadership.
- ▶ As part of its intervention in Iraq, **the Qods Force provided financing, equipment and weaponry to most of the Shi'ite militias** there. In addition, the Qods Force planned and coordinated the **dispatch of Lebanese Hezbollah operatives** to Iraq to aid in the campaign against the United States. In parallel, the Qods Force and its commander Soleimani established channels of communications with the Iraqi regime and other powerful actors in the domestic political arena in Iraq.⁸
- ▶ **ISIS' dramatic gains in the summer of 2014 posed a strategic challenge to Iran.** To answer this challenge, Iran dispatched advisers and weapons to Iraq, headed by Qasem Soleimani, who leads the military intervention in Iraq. The main proxy for furthering Iranian interests in Iraq are the Shi'ite militias supported by Iran, which as mentioned, were established during the phase of the campaign against the American military.

The Nature of the Iran's Current Involvement in Iraq

- ▶ **ISIS' waning power in northern Iraq provides Iran with new opportunities to expand its influence in Iraq.** Unlike in Syria, Iran's direct military presence in Iraq is quite limited and is primarily based on the Iraqi Shi'ite militias, most of which operate under direct or indirect patronage of the IRGC. The capture of redoubts on the Syria-Iraq border by Iran's Shi'ite militias, the noticeable frequent presence of Qasem Soleimani in Iraq in recent months and the appointment of **Iraj Masjedi, who previously served as Soleimani's**

⁸ For more see our report "Portrait of Qasem Soleimani, commander of the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps' Qods Force, Instigator of Iranian Subversion and Terrorism in the Middle East and around the Globe", October 29, 2015. <http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/en/20899/>

senior military adviser, to the position of Iran's new ambassador in Iraq, perfectly illustrate Iran's growing clout in Iraq.

► **Iran provides varying degrees of support to the Shi'ite militias.** These militias play an important role in the domestic arena in Iraq, which may even increase following the end of the campaign against ISIS, when they demand their place in the new political order in Iraq. At least some of the militias view the IRGC as a role model for their future involvement in the political and economic arenas, and the ability of the central government in Baghdad to impose its will on them is in doubt.



On the right: Qasem Soleimani with fighters of the Iraqi Shi'ite militias (Twitter, May 29, 2017); on the left: Soleimani in the area of Falouja after the start of the campaign to liberate the city (Twitter, May 25, 2016)

► Iran sees its intervention in Iraq as a necessary mean to preserve its influence in the country and prevent American presence there, which Iran perceives as a threat to its national interests. According to Iran, **ISIS' decline will accelerate the struggle with the United States over influence in Iraq.** Therefore, Iran strives to neutralize American influence in Iraq, which has grown during the campaign against ISIS, and especially during the Mosul campaign. In a meeting with **the Iraqi Prime Minister, Haidar al-Abadi**, who visited Tehran on June 20, 2017, the **Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei** warned him not to trust the Americans, since they oppose Iraq's independence, identity and unity. He argued that the United States must not be provided with an opportunity to expand its penetration of Iraq and that the arrival of American forces to Iraq under the guise of instructors must be prevented. The Americans are not interested, said Khamenei, in destroying ISIS, which was established and supported by them, and they have no desire to expel ISIS from Iraq (the website of the Supreme Leader, June 20, 2017).



The al-Abadi-Khamenei meeting (website of the Supreme Leader, June 21, 2017)

- ▶ An articulation of Iran's intentions in Iraq can be found in the statements of **Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, the Deputy Commander of the "Popular Mobilization Committee"**, the umbrella organization of the Shi'ite militias in Iraq. al-Muhandis recently gave a speech in Mashhad, Iran, about the future directions of the militias' activities in the phase following Mosul's liberation.⁹ Statements made by al-Muhandis and other senior officials of the Shi'ite militias indicate that **the top priorities for Iran in Iraq are increasing Iranian influence, empowering the Shi'ite community, marginalizing the United States and the West, establishing control along the Iraq-Syria border and opening a ground line of communications connecting Tehran, Baghdad, Damascus and Beirut.** According to these officials, it is possible the Shi'ite militias will also be dispatched to the Golan Heights, when the appropriate circumstances arise. al-Muhandis' speech clearly displays determined opposition (backed by Iran) to any attempt of the Iraqi government to dismantle the Shi'ite militias.
- ▶ As in Syria, **Iran seeks to expand its influence in Iraq in the economic, cultural and religious spheres as well.** Iran has invested great efforts into augmenting the volume of trade with Iraq, **took over several oil fields** in the border region with Iraq, **and controls religious tourism** to the cities in Iraq considered holy by the Shi'ite. In October 2017, the Chairman of Expediency Discernment Council, Hashemi Shahroudi, declared that Iran can not be content with solving only Iraq's security problems and that it must act to **bolster the economic cooperation** between the two countries by increasing its share in the Iraqi

⁹ For more see our report "Iran's interests and intent in Iraq and Syria reflected in statements by senior commanders of the Popular Mobilization Committee, the umbrella organization of the Shi'ite militias in Iraq handled by the Iranian Qods Force," July 20, 2017. <http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/en/21243/>

market and **helping rebuild Iraq following the end of the campaign against ISIS** (Tasnim, October 21, 2017).

► In early November 2017, the Iranian Minister of Industry, Mohammad Shariatmadari, visited Baghdad and concluded with the governor of Iraqi Central Bank the **expansion of cooperation in the banking sector between the two countries** (Mehr, November 3, 2017). This move is in congruence with the statement made by President Rouhani during his meeting with the Iraqi Prime Minister, Haidar al-Abadi, who visited Tehran in October 2017, calling for bolstering of the banking ties between the two nations so as to buttress the ties between the two countries in the spheres of trade, economy and tourism.



A meeting between the Iranian minister of industry with the governor of the Central Bank of Iraq (IRNA, November 2, 2017).

► **Recently, Tehran initiated the construction of the first Iranian university in Iraq, in Kazimayn, north of Baghdad.** The university will include five faculties and will be attended by about 3,000 students (IRNA, August 15, 2017).



Cornerstone laying ceremony of the first Iranian university in Iraq (IRNA, August 15, 2017).

► In parallel, Iran is continuing the **expansion and development work on the Hazrat-e Zahra Mosque in the city of Najaf** (Defa Press, August 2, 2017). The development and expansion of the mosque can be seen as **another indication of Iran's effort to increase its religious influence in the holy city of Najaf**, which serves as a central pilgrimage site for Shi'ite worshippers from around the world. In May 2017, the Iranian ambassador to Iraq visited the city of Najaf and met with senior clerics, among them Sheikh **Abdul Mahdi Karbalai, the Representative of the senior Shi'ite cleric, Ayatollah Ali Sistani**. The two discussed joint Iranian-Iraqi projects for developing the holy Shi'ite sites and preparations for the annual pilgrimage to the city of Karbala. Ambassador Masjedi stated that Iran and Iraq should expand their cooperation concerning the development of holy sites, and that Iran will do its best to improve security in Iraq (IRNA, May 16, 2017).



**The meeting between the Iranian ambassador and the representative of Ayatollah Sistani
(Mehr, May 16, 2017)**

Annex E

The Challenges to Iran’s involvement in Iraq

Apprehensions about Iran’s Role among the Shi’ite Community in Iraq

- ▶ Iranian assistance provided a significant contribution to stymieing ISIS but also resulted in **growing criticism inside Iraq against Iran’s interference in Iraq’s internal affairs**. This criticism reflects the complexity of the Shi’ite political arena in Iraq, which encompasses a multitude of differing and even opposing views regarding Iran’s involvement in the country. Some of the power players among the Shi’ite community in Iraq support Iran and even see it as the leader of the Shi’ite world, **while others see Iran as a foreign non-Arab actor, and are apprehensive about its meddling in the internal affairs of their country**.
- ▶ Most of the Shi’ite militias in Iraq see Iran as the sole source of authority and more than once their commanders expressed their fealty to the Supreme Leader of Iran, Ali Khamenei, as a source of religious guidance. **Facing these militias is the senior cleric, Ayatollah Ali Sistani, the highest Shi’ite religious authority in Iraq, who enjoys widespread support among the Shi’ite of Iraq and is considered a fierce opponent of the “guardianship of the Islamic jurist,” which was implemented in Iran following the Islamic Revolution**. Sistani sees Iran’s involvement in Iraq’s internal affairs as threatening foreign interference, and he has expressed his reservations about Qasem Soleimani’s increasing meddling in Iraqi politics. An Iraqi politician reported to the “al-Sharq al-Awsat” newspaper (September 7, 2015), that Sistani had sent a letter to the Iranian Supreme Leader, in which he questioned whether Soleimani’s political involvement is carried out under the guidance of the Supreme Leader or is his initiative alone.



Qasem Soleimani visiting Karbala in Iraq (IBNA, August 21, 2015)

- ▶ **Over the past two years, the Shi'ite cleric and politician, Muqtada al-Sadr**, has led the opposition to Iran's involvement in Iraq. Al-Sadr was considered a protégé of Iran, but over the past few years he **has drifted away from the Iranians and began publicly criticizing Iran's meddling in Iraq**. During the political crisis that erupted in April 2016 between Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi and the Iraqi parliament due to the reform package the prime minister had attempted to enact, al-Sadr's supporters took over the Iraqi parliament building and shouted harsh anti-Iranian chants.
- ▶ In recent weeks, Tehran has been visibly troubled by al-Sadr's increasing activism, and in particular his visit to Saudi Arabia in late July 2017 during which he met the Crown Prince, Muhammad Bin Salman. Iran is concerned that al-Sadr intends to form an alliance hostile to Iran with other actors in the Iraqi political arena, including Sunnis, ahead of the parliamentary elections slated for April 2018. Iranian media provided extensive coverage of the unusual visit of the Shi'ite cleric Muqtada al-Sadr in Saudi Arabia at the end of July. The visit was portrayed as an additional manifestation of the Saudi efforts to curtail Iranian influence in Iraq. An editorial published in the hardline daily "Kayhan" (August 13) lambasted al-Sadr, accusing him of selling himself to Saudi Arabia in exchange for political and financial support. The article argued that al-Sadr, who feels himself isolated in Iraq, has adopted anti-Iranian positions in an effort to regain the initiative, defeat his political rivals and become a national hero.



The meeting between Muqtada al-Sadr and the Saudi Crown Prince (ISNA, July 7, 2017)

Misgivings about Iran in the Iraqi Political Arena

- ▶ The disquiet about Iran's brazen attempts to intervene in Iraq is not limited to the religious establishment alone or Muqtada al-Sadr. **Prime Minister Haidar al-Abadi, who was appointed to his position in the summer of 2014 instead of the pro-Iranian Prime**

Minister Nouri al-Maliki, has also adopted an independent posture vis-à-vis Iran. At the heart of al-Abadi's policy is the desire to prevent Iraq from becoming an "Iranian puppet," and ensuring Iraq's underlying interest to continue receiving American support and to maintain positive relations with the Sunni Arab states.

► Arab newspapers published several reports over the past two years about **heated confrontations between al-Abadi and Qasem Soleimani**. The Lebanese daily al-Nahar reported (September 12, 2015) about two significant incidents that transpired between the two in August 2015. The first incident occurred when al-Abadi instructed Iraqi security forces to conduct a search of Iranian jets at the Baghdad airport, to examine their content and prevent the transfer of weapons to the Syrian regime and the Shi'ite militias in Iraq. A second incident occurred during a meeting that al-Abadi held in mid-August 2015 with Nouri al-Maliki and other senior Iraqi government officials after the return of the former prime minister from a visit in Tehran. Soleimani, who also attended this meeting, criticized the political reforms proposed by al-Abadi in response to the popular protests against corruption in Iraq. al-Abadi assailed Soleimani and asked him whether he speaks on behalf of the Iranian government or is expressing his personal views. Soleimani responded that he is speaking as an adviser to the popular militias in Iraq. The prime minister responded that his decisions are consistent with the will of the Iraqi people and the Shi'ite religious leadership in Najaf. al-Abadi went on to mention that Soleimani's presence in the meeting is unjustified, and as a result Soleimani left the conference room.

► On September 22, 2015, the Arab daily al-Sharq al-Awsat (which is affiliated with the Saudi regime and published in London) reported on another incident between Soleimani and al-Abadi. The incident occurred when al-Abadi encountered on his way to the city of Basra a convoy of government vehicles driving toward the airport in Baghdad. When the prime minister inquired about the identity of the convoy, he was told that they are used by Soleimani, who was set to arrive in Baghdad for a meeting with Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, the Deputy Commander of the PMC. al-Abadi became irate and ordered to stop the convoy. According to the report's source, whose reliability is unclear, al-Abadi stated that if Soleimani is interested in conducting an official visit in Iraq, he should notify authorities about it, and if he wants to visit the country in a private capacity, he should apply for a visa.

► **al-Abadi's approach vis-à-vis the Shi'ite militias is also incongruent with Iran's policy.** In 2016, al-Abadi promoted a law regularizing the status of the militias as an Iraqi

national force, part of the armed forces subordinate to the general staff of the army. al-Abadi clearly understands the problems inherent in the involvement of the Shi'ite militias in the campaign against ISIS, which is taking place mostly in regions populated by Sunnis who are troubled by the involvement of the militias in liberating cities controlled by ISIS. Therefore, he preferred until recently to incorporate the militias in battles by assigning the militias with posts far from the frontline. The role of the militias usually involved surrounding cities, and cutting ISIS' supply lines that connect western Iraq to eastern Syria.

It appears that following the liberation of Mosul, the Shi'ite militias have begun operating with a greater visibility.

► al-Abadi has adopted a posture independent from Iran in the foreign policy arena as well, **especially in his relations with the United States and Saudi Arabia.** The actions of other state actors, chiefly the United States, Turkey and Saudi Arabia, restrict Iran's ability to turn Iraq into a puppet state. In March 2017, al-Abadi visited Washington and met President Trump. He continues to emphasize the cooperation between the U.S.-led Western Coalition and the need to maintain the American assistance to the Iraqi military and security forces, assistance that has proved crucial in the campaign against ISIS. **In addition, , a significant improvement in the relations between Iraq and Saudi Arabia occurred over the past year.** This improvement is evident in visits to Baghdad of high-ranking Saudi officials, among them the Deputy Foreign Minister, Adel al-Jubeir, and the Saudi Chief of Staff, Abdel Rahman al-Bunyan. After being shut down 27 years ago, the Arar border crossing between Iraq and Saudi Arabia was reopened, and there are reports of plans to restart the direct flights between the two countries.

► **Iran is eyeing with concern the improvement of ties between Iraq and Saudi Arabia,** especially given the current severe crisis in its relations with Saudi Arabia. **A Member of the Majlis Ahmad Salek Kashani** stated recently in an interview to the website of the Iranian Majlis that Saudi Arabia launched a "new project" endeavoring to expand its influence in Iraq at the expense of Iranian interests. He mentioned that Saudi Arabia aims to partition Iraq by means of the referendum in the Kurdish region in northern Iraq and by creating ruptures among the Shi'ite community in Iraq. (ICANA, August 14, 2017)

Additional Challenges

► **The reversal of ISIS into a terrorist and guerilla organization** may pose challenges to Iran, since it is likely that ISIS will act (as it had done in the past) against the Shi'ite

community in Iraq, against the Shi'ite militias and against Iranian presence in Iraq. We assess that Iran and the militias under their patronage will struggle to provide an adequate response to this terrorism challenge. The ability of Iraqi state forces to do the same is also in question.

► **The entry to Turkey to the Iraqi scene as another regional player is also perceived as a real threat by Iran.** While Tehran is pleased with the eradication of ISIS forces in Iraq, **it is clearly troubled by Turkey's objective of cementing its hold over northern Iraq.** The Turkish military presence in northern Iraq is seen as a joint attempt by Turkey and the United States to **partition Iraq and stymie Iranian influence in the region.**

► Another challenge facing Iran comes **from the Kurds in northern Iraq, although this challenge has been significantly reduced due to the collapse of the referendum initiative in the Kurdish region in northern Iraq.** Iran is concerned by the transformation of the Kurdistan region in Iraq into a de-facto independent state. According to Tehran's view, this may jeopardize Iraq's territorial integrity, harm Iran's efforts to cement its influence over Iraq and embolden separatist aspirations among the Kurdish minority in Iran.

In the months leading up to the referendum in northern Iraq, held in September 2017, **Iran exerted great pressures on the leadership of the Kurdish Regional Government to stop the referendum from taking place.** The referendum was the main topic under discussion during the **unprecedented visit to Ankara of the Chief of Staff of the Iranian Armed Forces, Mohammad Bagheri in mid-August 2017.** During the visit, the first of its kind since the Islamic Revolution, **Bagheri met with senior political leaders and high-ranking officers, chief among them President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, and warned about the ramifications of holding the referendum.** (IRNA, August 16, 2017) The matter of the referendum was also raised during the visit to Tehran of the Turkish president in early October. During the visit, the leaders of the two countries expressed their vehement opposition to the independence of Kurdistan and agreed to continue coordinating their response to the developments in northern Iraq.



The Bagheri- Erdoğan meeting (Farda News, August 16 2017).

► Iranian involvement in northern Iraq due to the referendum reached its peak in October 2017 in light of the **escalation between the Kurds and the government of Iraq around the city of Kirkuk**. Shortly before the attack carried out by the Iraqi army and Shi'ite militias on Kirkuk, **which led to the withdrawal of the Kurdish forces from the city, the Commander of the IRGC's Qods Force, Qasem Soleimani, visited the Kurdish region in northern Iraq**. According to several reports, whose reliability is unclear, the takeover by the Iraqi government was made possible by an agreement reached between Soleimani and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), which ensured the withdrawal of the Kurdish forces (Peshmerga) of the PUK from the areas under dispute between the Kurds and the central government in Baghdad (ISNA, October 18, 2017; Fararo, October 17, 2017). Iran denied involvement in the offensive on Kirkuk, but **expressed satisfaction with the takeover of the city by the Iraqi army**. The Foreign Affairs Adviser of the Supreme Leader, Ali-Akbar Velayati, stated that the defeat of the Kurds in the city “foiled Barzani’s conspiracy against the security of the region” under Israeli patronage (Tasnim, October 16, 2017). The Deputy Commander of the IRGC, Hossein Salami, also expressed his contentment with the developments in the Kurdish region and labeled the overturning of the referendum in Iraqi Kurdistan “another nail in the coffin of the United States and the Zionist regime” (Mehr, October 25, 2017).

Iran’s active involvement in the events surrounding the city of Kirkuk **clearly demonstrated** (in Iran’s view, at least) **the weakness of the U.S. policy and the limitations on the power of the United States, which adopted a policy that appeared debilitated vis-à-vis the ongoing escalation**. In our assessment, this may **increase**

Iranian motivation to challenge the policies of the United States in other arenas as well in which Iran strives to cement its influence.