



Spotlight on Iran¹

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Overview

- ✓ Senior Iranian officials expressed concern after several Arab states (led by Saudi Arabia) suspended relations with Qatar, calling on them to settle their differences. Iran accused Saudi Arabia and the American administration of responsibility for the crisis with Qatar. In the meantime, Iran allowed Qatar's planes to use its airspace and sent planes with food to Doha.
- ✓ Senior Iranian officials exploited ISIS's twin terrorist attacks on the Iranian parliament building and the shrine of the Islamic Revolution founder's grave to justify its military involvement in Iraq and Syria, and accused Saudi Arabia of responsibility for the attacks. The deputy commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) threatened to take revenge on those responsible for the attack.
- ✓ The Iranian media reported that fighters of the Fatemiyoun Brigade (Afghans operating under the aegis of the IRGC in Syria) had recently arrived at the Syria-Iraq border. Qasem Soleimani, commander of the IRGC's Qods Force, had his picture taken with the fighters near the border. The Iranian media continued their extensive coverage of American attacks against the Syrian forces near the Iraq-Syria border, representing the attacks as "an American-Zionist" effort to prevent the creation of an overland corridor linking Iran, Iraq, Syria and Lebanon.
- ✓ Iranian President Hassan Rouhani spoke on the phone with Syrian President Bashar Assad. Assad expressed his sympathy for the terrorist attacks in Tehran. Rouhani said they had only strengthened the Iranian people's determination to fight terrorism.
- ✓ Ali Shamkhani, secretary of the Supreme Council for National Security, said Iran regarded the relations between Russia and Syria as strategic, adding that the Iran-Russia-Syria-Iraq-Hezbollah coalition had succeeded in changing the balance in the Syrian arena.
- ✓ The Iranian foreign ministry expressed opposition to the Iraqi Kurdish authorities' decision to hold a referendum on Iraqi Kurdistan's independence next September. A spokesman for the foreign ministry said that unilateral decisions were liable to further destabilize Iraq.

¹ Spotlight on Iran is an Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center bulletin illuminating Iran's activities to establish its influence in the Middle East and beyond. It is based on reports in the Iranian media and written for the ITIC by Dr. Raz Zimmt, an expert on Iran's politics, society, foreign policy and social networks.

Iranian Reactions to Qatar-Arab State Tensions

- After various Arab states, led by Saudi Arabia, suspended diplomatic relations with Qatar, senior Iranian officials expressed concern and called for the parties involved to settle their differences. Bahram Qasemi, spokesman for the Iranian foreign ministry, said the growing tension between the Gulf States benefitted no one and threatened regional interests. He said Iran was concerned by recent developments and urged dialogue to resolve the crisis (Fars, June 5, 2017). Following the Arab states' aerial blockade of Qatar, Iran allowed Qatar's planes to land on its territory and sent Qatar five planes carrying 90 tons of food.
- Hamid Aboutalebi, deputy head of the Iranian president's office of political matters, Tweeted that cutting off diplomatic relations, sealing borders and imposing a siege were not the way to resolve the crisis. He said the crisis was the first result of Donald Trump's sword dance with the Saudi king (Asr-e Iran, June 5, 2017).
- Alaeddin Boroujerdi, chairman of the Majlis [Iranian parliament] committee for national security and foreign policy, also accused the United States of responsibility for the crisis, claiming the tensions between the Arab states had resulted from American intervention and Trump's visit to the Middle East. He said Iran had always contended that regional problems had to be resolved by the states themselves and had always opposed foreign intervention (IRNA, June 5, 2017).
- Amir Abdollahian, special advisor on international affairs to the speaker of the Iranian Parliament, accused Saudi Arabia of responsibility for the crisis, saying that the six countries of the Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf (the GCC) had never really been united and that Saudi Arabian policies were responsible for exacerbating differences, regional extremism and spreading terrorism throughout the Middle East and the Muslim world. He said the Saudi Arabian rulers mistakenly thought that by relying on foreigners they could lead the Arab-Muslim world by means of suspending diplomatic relations, military aggression against their neighbors and strengthening regional terrorism. However, their policies threatened regional security and worsened differences between regional states (Fars, June 5, 2017).
- In view of the crisis, Mohammad Javad Zarif, Iranian foreign minister, held a round of telephone conversations with other Muslim-world foreign ministers to discuss regional developments (Mehr, June 5, 2017). On June 5, 2017, he Tweeted that "Our

neighbors are permanent, geography cannot be changed, coercion is never a solution and dialogue is essential, especially during Ramadan."

General Information

■ Senior Iranian officials exploited ISIS's twin terrorist attacks on the Iranian Majlis building and the shrine of the grave of the Islamic Revolution's founder, Ayatollah Khomeini, to justify Iran's military involvement in Iraq and Syria, and accused Saudi Arabia of being behind the attacks. Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei gave a speech after the attacks in which he claimed that without Iranian intervention in Syria and Iraq, terrorists would have begun operating in Iranian territory a long time ago (Fars, June 7, 2017). Mohammad Ali Jafari, commander of the IRGC, claimed Iran had precise information that Saudi Arabia had supported the terrorists who had carried out the attacks in Tehran (Fars, June 12, 2017). Hossein Salami, deputy commander of the IRGC, also claimed Saudi Arabia was behind the twin attacks, saying that they were the consequence of a joint political plan formulated by the Saudis, the Americans and the "Zionist regime" during the Riyadh summit meeting as a cover for their regional failures. He said the IRGC would take revenge on those behind the terrorist attacks (Tasnim, June 8, 2017).

Iranian Intervention in Syria

■ Three IRGC fighters were killed in battle near Hama, Syria. Javad Mohammadi was killed on June 6, 2017, Mostafa Sadeghi on June 8, 2017, and Heydar Jalilvand on June 11, 2017.



IRGC fighter Javad Mohammadi, killed near Hama, Syria (ABNA News, June 7, 2017).

■ On June 12, 2017, the Iranian Tasnim News agency reported that fighters from the Fatemiyoun Brigade (Afghans operating under IRGC aegis in Syria) had recently arrived near the Syria-Iraq border. Tasnim News published a picture of Qasem Soleimani, commander of the IRGC's Qods Force, praying alongside Fatemiyoun Brigade fighters near the border.



IRGC Qods Force commander with Fatemiyoun Brigade fighters on the Syria-Iraq border (Tasnim, June 12, 2017).

■ In the meantime, the Iranian media gave extensive coverage to the American attacks on the Syrian forces near the Iraq-Syria border, representing the attacks as "an American-Zionist" attempt to prevent the "resistance axis" from advancing in Syria and Iraq and to keep it from establishing an overland corridor linking Iran, Iraq, Syria and Lebanon. Bahram Qasemi, spokesman for the Iranian foreign ministry, criticized America's activities in Syria. At his weekly press conference he said that the United States had often declared it was fighting terrorism, but its actions in Syria proved otherwise. Qasemi advised the United States to concentrate its efforts on ISIS and other terrorist groups, and to avoid any other action in Syria (Fars, June 12, 2017).

■ On June 5, 2017, Hassan Kazemi Qomi, former Iranian ambassador to Baghdad, gave an interview to the Iranian Tasnim News agency in which he said that in his opinion the Americans sought to take control of territory in southern and eastern Syria by supporting the terrorist groups operating there. He said that following ISIS's defeat, the United States had acted according to a plan aimed to establish a "terrorist army", increase its forces in the region and support the Kurds in Syria. The Iraqi and Syrian governments, he said, were faced with the threat of terrorism jointly supported by the United States, Zionism and "reactionary" regional rulers. He said the way to foil the

American plan for regional division was through an Iraqi-Syrian coordinated effort to liberate the territories along their common border.



Hassan Kazemi Qomi, former Iranian ambassador to Baghdad (Tasnim, June 5, 2017).

- On June 8, 2017, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani spoke on the phone with Syrian President Bashar Assad, who expressed his condolences following the twin terrorist attacks in Tehran. Rouhani thanked him, saying the attacks had only served to strengthen the Iranian people's determination to fight terrorism. He said Iran and Syria were engaged in a joint fight against terrorism and the ties between the two countries improved every day. He expressed hope that the ceasefire in Syria would continue and that in the near future Syrian forces would be victorious in the war on terrorism (website of the Iranian president, June 8, 2017)
- On June 12, 2017, Javad Torkabadi, Iranian ambassador to Syria, met with Imad Khamis, the Syrian prime minister, to discuss ways to expand bilateral ties and regional developments. Torkabadi said Iran was prepared to increase its economic ties with Syria. Khamis noted the importance of economic cooperation between the two countries and the need to promote joint economic investments with private sector participation (Fars, June 12, 2017).



The Iranian ambassador to Damascus meets with the Syrian prime minister (ISNA, June 12, 2017).

- Alaeddin Boroujerdi, chairman of the Majlis committee for national security and foreign policy, said Iran would spare no effort to reconstruct Syria once the civil war had ended. Meeting with Mohammad al-Ammouri, secretary general of the Syrian prime minister's office, he emphasized Iran's support for Syria, saying Iran would provide support to reconstruct Syria and share the experience it had gained in reconstructing Iran following the war with Iraq (Mehr, June 13, 2017).

- On June 7, 2017 Alexander Lavrentiev, Vladimir Putin's special envoy for Syria, arrived in Iran for a visit at the invitation of Hossein Jaber Ansari, deputy foreign minister. While there he spoke with Ali Shamkhani, secretary of the Supreme Council for National Security, about developments in Syria (Fars, June 7, 2017). On the eve of Lavrentiev's visit Shamkhani said that Iran regarded its relations with Russia and Syria as strategic. He said the Iran-Russia-Syria-Iraq-Hezbollah coalition had changed the balance of power in Syria and made it possible to liberate Aleppo from the terrorists. He said Iranian-Russian cooperation was aimed at achieving common goals and did not mean that Iran's national interests or independence were compromised (Tasnim, June 6, 2017).

Iranian Intervention in Iraq

- Bahram Qasemi, spokesman for the Iranian foreign ministry, said Iran opposed the Iraqi Kurdish authorities' decision to hold a referendum on Iraqi Kurdistan's

independence next September. He said Iran supported Iraq's territorial integrity and that holding a referendum would cause new problems. He said Iraqi Kurdistan was part of Iraq and that unilateral decisions were liable to complicate the situation and further destabilize the country. He called on the Kurdish authorities to settle their differences with the central government in Baghdad through dialogue and in accordance with the Iraqi constitution (Fars, June 10, 2017).

Iranian Intervention in the Palestinian Arena

■ On June 5, 2017, IRNA official news agency posted photos of the Iranian Imam Khomeini Relief Foundation distributing Ramadan fast-breaking meals to "warriors on the Gaza border".



(IRNA, June 5, 2017).