



Spotlight on Iran

February 4 – February 18, 2018

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Overview

- ▶ Tehran continues to deny Israeli reports about Iranian involvement in the clashes last weekend in Syria, which were triggered when an Iranian unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) breached Israeli airspace. The Iranian response to events in Syria reflect an Iranian effort to downplay Tehran's involvement in the events and present the downing of the Israeli jet as a success of the "Resistance Front" in changing the rules of the game with regards to future Israeli violations of Syrian sovereignty.
- ▶ Meanwhile, senior Iranian officials continue to emphasize that Iran sees the continuation of its involvement in Syria as a vital national interest and that its presence in the country is based on a formal request of the Damascus government. The deputy commander of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) declared that Iran sees Syria and Iraq as its "strategic depth" and that the best strategy is to fight the enemy far outside of one's borders. The Adviser on Foreign Affairs to the Iranian Supreme Leader, Ali-Akbar Velayati, addressed the report in Israeli media that France, Germany and the United Kingdom have passed warnings, at Israel's behest, to the Iranian president regarding Iran's activities in Syria and Lebanon; Velayati stated that Iran can not be deprived of its right to be present in the region, since it is based on formal requests of the governments of Syria and Iraq.
- ▶ In the Iraqi arena, Iran continues to try and promote its economic role as part of Iraq's forthcoming reconstruction following the conclusion of the campaign against the Islamic State. Last week, Iranian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mohammad Javad Zarif, participated in an international conference in Kuwait focused on Iraq's economic reconstruction, while the Iranian ambassador to Baghdad once again expressed Iran's willingness to take part in the reconstruction efforts in Iraq.

General Information

- ▶ Hossein Salami, the Deputy Commander of the IRGC, declared that Iran sees the militaries of Syria and Iraq as its "defensive strategic depth". In an interview to Iranian television,

Salami stated that the best strategy is to fight the enemy far from one's borders. He added that Iran can hit all the bases of the enemy in the region with its missiles (Fars, February 4, 2018).

► Mohammad Ali Jafari, the Commander of the IRGC, stated in a conference held in Kerman Province that Syria will be fully liberated in the near future. He mentioned that ISIS' defeat in Iraq and the impending liberation of Syria will lead to more countries adopting the path of resistance against oppressive and aggressive regimes and will demand the rights they deserve (Mehr, February 8, 2018).



The Commander of the IRGC, Jaafari (Mehr, February 8, 2018).

Iranian Responses to Events in Northern Israel

► Following the incursion of an Iranian UAV into Israeli airspace, which was launched on February 10, 2018, from the T-4 airbase near the city of Palmyra in Syria and downed by the IDF over Israeli territory, the IDF struck targets in Syria, including the Iranian mobile control center that had launched the drone. During the retaliatory strikes by Israel, the Syrian military fired anti-aircraft missiles, which resulted in the downing of an F-16 jet over Israeli territory. In response to the downing of the jet, the IDF carried out an extensive air campaign against Syrian air defense bases and Iranian targets in Syria. According to the IDF Spokesperson's statement, the Israeli military bombed 12 targets, including three Syrian air defense batteries and four Iranian targets.



A caricature published by the Tasnim News Agency (February 12) following the downing of the Israeli jet.

- ▶ The public statement from Iran with regards to these extraordinary security developments in Israel’s northern front reflect an Iranian effort to play down its role in the events; display a united front between Iran, Syria and Hezbollah vis-à-vis Israel; present the downing of the Israeli jet as a success of the “Resistance Front” and as a change of the rules of the game regarding the continuation of Israeli violations of Syrian sovereignty.
- ▶ Iranian officials denied Israel’s claims regarding Iranian involvement in the events in northern Israel and cast the blame on Israel for the escalation. Bahram Qasemi, the Spokesman of the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, rejected Israel’s claims regarding the breach by the Iranian UAV and reports about Iran’s involvement in downing the Israeli jet, labeling these claims as “ridiculous.” He mentioned that Iran assists Syria only through military advisors in accordance with the request of the legitimate government in Damascus. Qasemi insisted on Syria’s right to protect its territorial integrity and respond to any foreign aggression against it. According to him, the “Zionist regime” can not hide its aggressiveness and its crimes against the people of the region through lies (ISNA, February 10, 2018).
- ▶ Hossein Salami, the Deputy Commander of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), also rejected Israel’s claims. During a press conference Salami held on the sidelines of a

conference commemorating the 39th anniversary of the Islamic Revolution in Iran, Salami stated that Iran does not confirm a single report published by Israel, since Israelis “are liars.” He added that if the Syrians confirm the matter, so will Iran. Salami too expressed Iran’s official position that its military presence in Iran is limited to that of military advisers alone. In another statement during the conference Salami proclaimed that Iran can “create hell” for the Zionists and hit all American bases in the region. He reiterated the pronouncement of the Iranian Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, that Israel will cease to exist within 25 years (Tasnim, February 10, 2018).

► The Secretary General of the Supreme National Security Council, Ali Shamkhani, also denied the reports about the incursion by the Iranian UAV. On February 11, during the processions commemorating the 39th anniversary of the Islamic Revolution in Tehran, Shamkhani stated that the claims made by Israel are false, since F-16 jets are not dispatched to down a UAV. Shamkhani also averred that the reports about Israeli strikes on Iranian targets in Syria following the launch of the UAV are “a lie.” He asserted that the response of the Syrian Army to the Israeli attacks has proven to the Zionists that the era of “hit and run” is over. (Fars, February 11, 2018)

► In parallel to denying Iranian involvement in the developments in Syria, senior Iranian officials and Iranian media outlets emphasized that the forceful reaction to the Israeli strikes in Syria, and in particular the downing of the Israeli jet, signal a change in the “rules of the game.” According to Tehran, Israel will no longer be allowed to violate Syrian sovereignty and attack targets in Syria without retaliation. Ali-Akbar Velayati, the Senior Adviser of the Iranian Supreme Leader on International Affairs, proclaimed in response to the events in Syria that the Syrian government and people have proven that they are ready to sacrifice their lives to defend the territorial integrity of their county, its security and independence. He asserted that the Syrian people and their government, which fought and won the war that had lasted for seven years, will not continue to acquiesce to aggression from the “Zionist regime” (ISNA, February 10, 2018).

► The launch of the Iranian unmanned aerial vehicle from Syria into Israeli territory signals another stage in Iran’s efforts to entrench its influence in Syria and gain a central role in shaping reality in Syria in the post-Islamic State era. The current event is exceptional because the launch of the UAV was carried out directly by Iran and not (according to Tehran’s normal practice) through Shi’ite proxies. This may, in our assessment, indicate an increase in Iran’s

self-confidence in Syria, in the post-Islamic state era. The Iranian UAV launch can be seen as another effort by Iran to position itself as a central player able to influence the new reality in Syria; to challenge Israel, which is attempting to block Iran's direct influence and that of its proxies in Israel's northern front; to change the rules of the game regarding IDF actions in Syria and the response such actions engender. However, in our assessment, Iran's effort to play down its role in the events may indicate that it is not interested, at least currently, in a direct confrontation with Israel, and it prefers to maintain a strategy of brinkmanship in its effort to achieve its goals.¹

Iranian Involvement in Syria

- ▶ An IRGC fighter, Seyyed Fazel Mousavi, was killed in the Albu Kamal region in Syria.



**Fazel Mousavi, the IRGC fighter killed in Syria
(Twitter, February 12, 2018).**

- ▶ Iranian President Rouhani stated in a press conference he held on February 6 that Iran categorically opposes the military presence of the United States in Syria, which is intended to bring about the partition of the region. He criticized the Turkish offensive in northern Syria

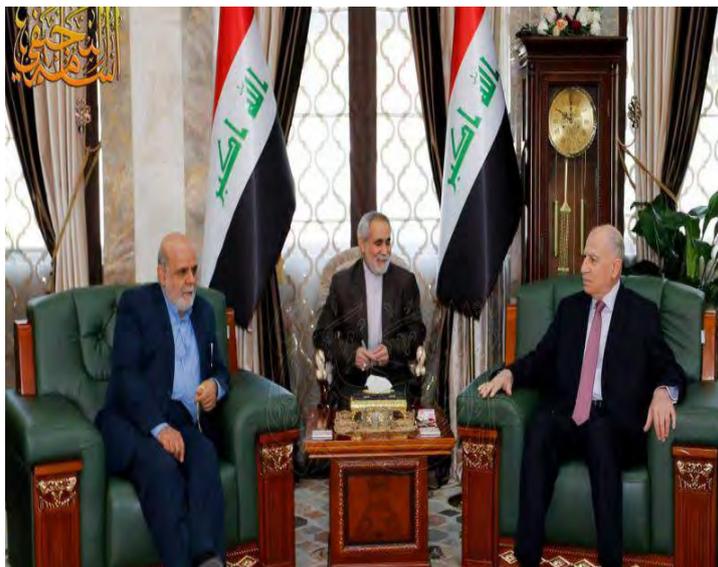
¹ For further analysis and information, see a brief by the Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center from February 12, 2018. "Iranian Responses to Growing Tensions with Israel and an Initial Assessment of Their Implications from an Iranian Standpoint". Accessible at <http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/en/iranian-responses-growing-tensions-israel-initial-assessment-implications-iranian-standpoint/>

and stated that despite the good relationship between Tehran, Moscow and Ankara, Iran opposes any foreign military presence in another country that is not based on the consent of its government. Prior to the press conference, President Rouhani spoke with his Russian counterpart, Vladimir Putin. The two discussed developments in Syria and Rouhani asserted that Iran opposes any violation of Syria's sovereignty and territorial integrity. Rouhani also emphasized the importance of cooperation between Iran, Russia and Turkey in the struggle against terrorism and in returning stability to Syria (Fars, February 6, 2018).

► The Adviser on Foreign Affairs to the Supreme Leader, Ali-Akbar Velayati, asserted that Iran has the right to assist friendly nations in the region. He added that when Iran is asked to provide advice or any other assistance that may buttress the "Resistance Axis," it does so. He insisted that the United Kingdom, Germany and France have no right to permit themselves to maintain a presence in the region and prevent Iran from doing so, when Iran is an important country in the region and its presence is based on formal requests by the governments in Syria and Iraq. Velayati made this statement in response to a report published in Israel according to which France, Germany and the UK passed cautionary messages on behalf of Israel to Iranian President, Hassan Rouhani, regarding Iran's activities in Syria and Lebanon. Referring to the events in northern Israel, Velayati stated that if the "Zionist regime" wishes to violate the airspace of Syria or any other country, the countries of the region have the right to use their airspace to retaliate against such actions. Velayati also addressed the Israeli claims that Iran is attempting to establish an air force base in Syria by claiming that Iranian presence in Syria is intended to assist its legitimate government and people, and that Iran has no other goal in Syria (Fars, February 12, 2018). In another statement, Velayati asserted that those who should leave Syria are the foreign forces operating there without permission, chief among them, the Americans (Fars, February 14, 2018).

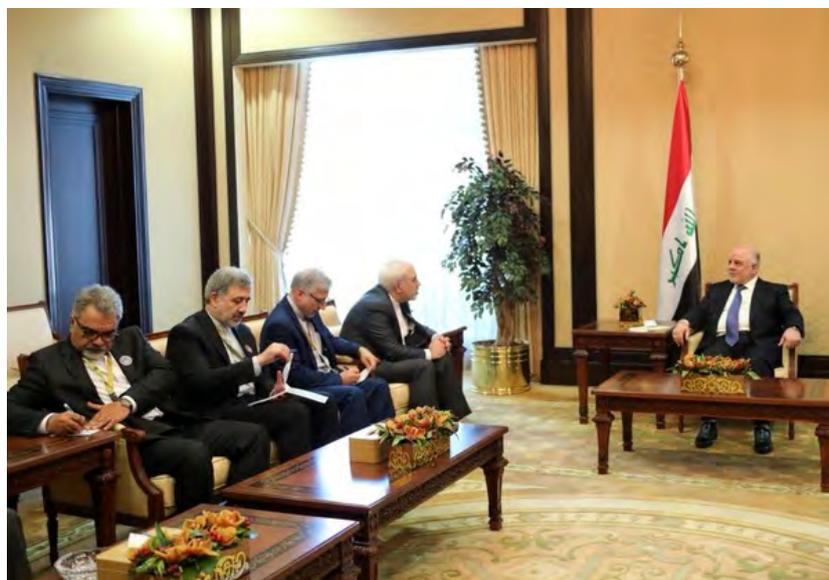
Iranian Involvement in Iraq

► On February 5, Iran's Ambassador to Iraq, Iraj Masjedi, met with Iraqi Vice President, Osama al-Nujaifi, and discussed with him developments in Iraq and the relationship between the two countries. The ambassador stated in the meeting that Iran wishes to maintain good relations with the Sunnis of Iraq and their representatives in government, and in particular with al-Nujaifi. Masjedi added that Iran is interested in taking part in the mission of rebuilding Iraq (Fars, February 6, 2018).



The meeting of Iran's ambassador to Baghdad with the Iraqi Vice President, Osama al-Nujaifi (IRNA, February 6, 2018).

► The Iranian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mohammad Javad Zarif, took part in an international conference in Kuwait that focused on Iraq's reconstruction. Representatives of over 50 states took part in the conference and it is intended to garner financial aid and investments for rebuilding Iraq following the end of the campaign against the Islamic State. Upon arrival in Kuwait, Zarif stated that Iran is committed to Iraq's economic reconstruction (Mehr, February 13, 2018). On February 14, Zarif met in Kuwait with the Prime Minister of Iraq, Haider al-Abadi and discussed the cooperation between the two countries. Zarif told al-Abadi that Iranian firms are interested in working in Iraq (Asr-e Iran, February 14, 2018).



The meeting between the Iraqi prime minister and Iran's minister of foreign affairs (Asr-e Iran, February 14, 2018).

► On the eve of the conference, the spokesman of the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated that Iran welcomes the convening of the conference and believes that international participation in rebuilding Iraq is crucial. He mentioned that Iran will continue to support the reconstruction and development of Iraq's economy, as it has helped Iraq until now (Tasnim, February 13, 2018). In recently months, several high-ranking Iranian officials have expressed Iran's willingness to assist in the reconstruction effort in Iraq.