



Spotlight on Iran

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Overview

- ▶ Seven Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) cadres, including a senior commander with the rank of colonel in the unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) operation of the IRGC, were killed last week in an airstrike on the Syrian Air Force Base T-4, a strike attributed to Israel. According to reports in Arab and Israeli media, the base served as a control and development center for the IRGC's UAV operation. Following the strike, a senior adviser to the Supreme Leader of Iran threatened that "Israel's crimes will not go unanswered."
- ▶ Bolstering of the Iran-Russia axis: Iran and Russia held discussions on the escalation in Syria. The Special Envoy to Syria of the Russian President, Alexander Laverentiev, conducted an unplanned visit to Tehran and met with the secretary general of the Iranian Supreme National Security Council and with an adviser to the minister of foreign affairs. Iranian sources reported that following the visit, Iran approved Russia's request to resume using the Iranian air force base in Hamadan in western Iran to refuel Russian jets used to strike targets in Syria. Prior to the latest escalation in Syria, the presidents of Iran, Russia and Turkey met in Ankara to discuss developments in Syria.
- ▶ Iran stood by Syria following the chemical weapons attack on Douma by the Assad regime, and the United States' threat to respond militarily to this attack. Senior Iranian officials declared that the U.S. accusations are intended to serve as an excuse for military action against Syria in light of the Syrian regime's successes in the campaign against "the terrorists."
- ▶ The announcement by U.S. President, Donald Trump, about his desire to end, as soon as possible, U.S. military presence in Syria, garnered a great deal of interest in Iranian media. According to Iranian commentators, an American withdrawal from Syria would be considered an acknowledgment of its defeat and a victory for the "Resistance Front" led by Iran. In a commentary published by the Tasnim News Agency, which is affiliated with the IRGC, it was argued that the retreat of American forces from Syria is intended to prevent

possible attacks on them following the expected U.S. withdrawal from the nuclear accord in May.

► Iran is stepping up its efforts to influence the political arena in Iraq ahead of the upcoming elections in the country in May. The Iranian ambassador to Baghdad met with senior Iraqi politicians, while the commander of the Basij Force of the IRGC participated in a meeting with representatives of the electoral bloc formed by leaders of some of the Shi'ite pro-Iranian militias ahead of the elections.

► The Iranian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mohammed Javad Zarif, held a phone call with the Head of Hamas' Political Bureau, Ismail Haniyeh, against the backdrop of the "Marches of Return" in Gaza. Zarif emphasized to Haniyeh Iran's support for the Palestinians. In parallel, the Supreme Leader of Iran Khamenei sent a telegram to Haniyeh in which he emphasized that resistance is the only path for reclaiming Palestine.

Iranian Involvement in Syria

► Seven IRGC fighters, including a senior commander in the IRGC's UAV program, Colonel Mehdi Dehqan, were killed last week in an airstrike on the Syrian Air Force Base T-4 in the vicinity of the city of Palmyra in Syria; the strike was attributed to Israel. According to reports in Arab and Israeli media, the base functioned as a control and development center of IRGC personnel, and several of the buildings served the manufacturing operation of the type of a UAV that Iran launched toward Israel on February 10, 2018.



Photos of six of the seven Iranians killed in the strike in Syria (Iranian media, April 10 2018).

► The spokesman of the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs condemned the strike and stated that they constitute a grave violation of international law. He claimed that the purpose of the strikes was to bolster the terrorist groups in Syria and distract public opinion from events in the Gaza Strip (ISNA, April 9).



Photos from the aftermath of the strike on the Syria base (Tasnim, April 11 2018).

► Following the strike, the Senior Adviser to the Supreme Leader on International Affairs, Ali-Akbar Velayati, threatened with Iranian retaliation against Israel. Velayati, who had arrived on April 10th to Damascus to participate in a conference on Jerusalem, declared that Israeli crimes will not remain unanswered, and that victory is near in Syria (IRNA, April 10).



The Adviser to the Supreme Leader, Ali-Akbar Velayati, at a press conference in Damascus (al-Alam, April 10 2018).

► In light of the escalation in Syria, Iran and Russia conducted consultation on the matter. On April 10, the Adviser on Political Affairs to the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Hosein Jaber Ansari, met in Tehran with the Special Envoy of the Russian President on Syria, Alexander Laverentiev. Ansari stated that developments in Syria necessitate closer

coordination between the two countries. Representatives from the ministries of defense of the two countries also took part in the meeting. During his unplanned visit to Tehran, Laverentiev also met with the Secretary General of the Iranian Supreme National Security Council, Ali Shamkhani, and discussed developments in Syria with him, and in particular the strike attributed to Israel on the T-4 Base, and U.S. threats to bomb Syria in response to the chemical weapons use by the Syrian Army (ISNA, April 10). On April 13, Hezbollah's network al-Mayadin reported that Iran acceded to Russia's request to resume using the air force base in Hamadan, western Iran, for fueling Russian bombers used to strike targets in Syria. A reporter for the Tasnim News Agency published on his Twitter account (April 13), that the Russian request was conveyed to the Secretary General of the Supreme National Security Council, Ali Shamkhani, during Alexander Laverentiev's visit to Tehran. In August 2016, Russian jets used the Hamadan air base to strike targets in Syria. This Russian presence sparked a fierce backlash in Iran, and resulted in an end to such use of the air base. However, Iranian officials clarified that they will allow Russia to use the military airport in the future, in accordance with operational needs.



The meeting between the envoy of the Russian president on Syria with Ali Shamkhani (Tasnim, April 11 2018).

► Iran stood by the Assad regime following the chemical weapons attack carried out by the Syrian Army on Douma in eastern Ghouta (April 7). The Spokesman of the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Bahram Qasemi, labeled the U.S. allegations against Syria as “a new conspiracy” and claimed that they are intended to serve as an “excuse” for military action against Damascus. According to him, it made no sense for the Syrian army to use chemical weapons when it had the upper hand in the campaign against the “armed terrorists.” He

emphasized that Iran is opposed to chemical weapons' use anywhere in the world, and that Syria is cooperating with the United Nations on the chemical weapons issue and has disarmed and liquidated all the stockpiles of chemical weapons it once possessed. Qasemi warned that military action against Syria will further complicate the situation in Syria and boost the terrorists (ISNA, April 8).

► The declaration of the U.S. President, Donald Trump, about his intention to end American military presence in Syria “very soon” elicited a great deal of interest in Iranian media.

► Hassan Hanizadeh, a commentator on Arab affairs, said in an interview to the Tasnim News Agency (April 2) that President Trump's announcement proves that Tehran and its partners have defeated the United States and America's regional allies in Syria. He asserted that if U.S. forces indeed retreat from Syria, this would be considered an acknowledgment by the United States of its defeat and a great victory for the “Resistance Front.” According to his assessment, the U.S. withdrawal from Syria would lead to the gradual isolation of Saudi Arabia, France and Britain in the region.

► In a commentary published by the Tasnim News Agency (March 30), it was argued that the removal of American troops from Syria is intended to prevent possible attacks on them in light of the impending U.S. withdrawal from the nuclear accord in May, which may lead to an escalation between Tehran and Washington.

► The presidents of Iran, Russia and Turkey met on April 4 in Ankara to discuss developments in Syria. The presidential summit was preceded by a meeting of the foreign ministers of the three countries. Ahead of his departure to Ankara, President Rouhani told reporters that the presidential summit will focus on Syria's reconstruction and the writing of a new Syrian constitution. Rouhani criticized the continuous military presence of the United States in Syria and argued that the United States supports partitioning Syria and is against the Syrian government's efforts to regain control over Syria's entire territory. He mentioned that the presence of foreign forces in Syria without the permission of its government is illegal, illogical and must come to an end. Rouhani accused Israel of harming Syria's national security with its attacks on Syria and support for “terrorists,” and added that Israel's intervention is contributing to the escalation of the situation in Syria (ISNA, April 3).

► During his speech at the summit, President Rouhani lambasted American military involvement in Syria and stated that the U.S. forces were not invited by anyone, and that their presence is illegal and is aimed at increasing tensions and leading to the partition of

Syria. He also condemned the violation of Syrian sovereignty by Israel and argued that the international community can not remain indifferent to the “crimes of the Zionist regime.”

► The Iranian president called to increase the coordination between the three countries based on the principles of respecting Syria’s sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity, as well as continuing the struggle against terrorism until the elimination of all terrorist groups. He called for the transfer of Efrin to Syrian Army control and emphasized that there is no military solution to the crisis in Syria. Rouhani also expressed his country’s willingness to take part in Syria’s reconstruction (the website of the Iranian presidency, April 4). At the end of the summit, the three presidents agreed to meet once again, with the future summit set to be held in Tehran.



The summit of the presidents of Iran, Russia and Turkey in Ankara (Website of the presidency, April 4 2018).

► The Iranian Minister of Defense, Amir Hatami, stated in a press conference during his visit to Russia to attend the Moscow Conference on International Security, that the cooperation between Russia and Iran will continue until the “complete eradication of the terrorists.” During his visit to Moscow, Hatami met with Russian Defense Minister, Sergey Shoygu, and discussed the bilateral relations between Russia and Iran and the cooperation in the Middle East between the two countries (IRNA, April 4).



The Iranian defense minister in Moscow (IRNA, April 4 2018).

► Hassan Kazemi-Qomi, the former Iranian Ambassador to Iraq and member of the Iranian negotiations team concerning Syria in Astana, addressed developments in Syria and the cooperation between Russia and Iran in Syria in an interview to the website “Khabar Online” (April 3). He stated that Iran and Russia share mutual interests in fighting terrorism in Syria and resisting American hegemony in the region. Russia can help restrain U.S. policy in Syria and Iran can find assistance in Russia in the struggle against the United States and terrorism, although it is clear that Russia has many different interests in Syria. Kazemi-Qomi asserted that there is no reason to fear Russian “betrayal” of Iran, as long as Tehran continues to conduct itself in a shrewd manner. He emphasized that Iran does not agree with all tactical moves adopted by Russia in Syria, for example, its agreement with the United States concerning de-escalation zones, but this should not preclude Iran from enlisting Russian assistance against mutual threats. He assessed that the military reality on the ground does not allow Russia to betray Iran, since Moscow needs Iran’s presence in Syria.



Hassam Kazemi-Qomi (Khabar Online, April 3 2018).

Iranian Involvement in Iraq

► Against the backdrop of the general elections scheduled to be held in Iraq next month, the Iranian Ambassador to Baghdad, Iraj Masjedi, met with senior Iraqi politicians. On April 5, the office of the Iraqi president reported that the Iranian ambassador met the Iraqi President, Fuad Masum in Baghdad, and discussed with him bolstering of ties between the two countries. In addition, the ambassador met with the leader of the Shi'ite party, the “National Wisdom Movement”, Sayed Ammar al-Hakim, and discussed bilateral relations and regional developments (Fars, April 5).



The meeting between the Iranian ambassador to Baghdad with the Shi'ite cleric, Sayed Ammar al-Hakim (Fars, April 5 2018).

► Meanwhile, the al-Arabiya network reported (April 8) about a meeting held last week in Baghdad between senior Iranian officials and representatives of the Fath electoral bloc, which was formed by several of the Shi'ite pro-Iranian militias ahead of the general elections in Iraq. Among the participants in the meeting were the Commander of the Basij Force of the IRGC, Gholam-Hossein Gheybparvar, and the Iranian Ambassador to Baghdad, Iraj Masjedi.

Iranian Involvement in the Palestinian Arena

► On April 3, Iranian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mohammad Javad Zarif, spoke on the phone with the head of the Hamas Political Bureau, Ismail Haniyeh, and emphasized to him Iran's support for the “resistance of the Palestinian people” following the events of the “Marches of Return” in Gaza. Zarif reported that Iran intends to raise the issue for discussion in the United Nations, at the Organization of Islamic Cooperation and at the Non-Aligned

Countries' Movement. Haniyeh thanked Zarif for Iran's support for the Palestinians and provided him with updates on the latest developments in Gaza (ISNA, April 4).



“This is also your holiday in Passover,” a caricature published by the Tasnim News Agency following the “March of Return”, April 3 2018.

► In view of events in Gaza, the Iranian Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, dispatched a letter to Ismail Haniyeh in which he emphasized that resistance is the only way to reclaim Palestine and the recipe for healing the wounds of the Palestinian people. He mentioned that Iran does see standing by the Palestinian people as a religious and moral obligation that supersedes political developments. The message was sent in response to a letter sent by Haniyeh to the Supreme Leader, in which the Hamas leader expressed his appreciation to Iran for its support for the Palestinian struggle against Israel (Fars, April 4).