



Spotlight on Iran

April 15- April 29, 2018

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Overview

- ▶ Iranian officials continue to react to the alleged Israeli strike on the Syrian air force base T-4: the deputy commander of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) warned Israel that if it initiates a war against Iran, this will lead to its eradication. The secretary of the Supreme National Security Council declared that the “Zionist regime” will surely be punished, but the location, time and mode of the response will be determined by Iran. The Iranian minister of foreign affairs clarified that he does not expect a regional war due to the Israeli strikes. Iran’s response (threats alongside and effort to tamp down the flames) represent the dilemma Tehran is facing following the alleged Israeli strike. On the one hand, Iran is determined to respond to the strike, which it sees as a blatant Israeli provocation that challenges its efforts to establish a permanent military foothold in Syria. On the other, Iran is currently not interested in a full confrontation with Israel, which may further endanger Iranian assets in Syria, especially at the current critical juncture, ahead of the expected American decision on May 12, 2018 regarding the future of the nuclear accord and the worsening of the economic crisis in Iran.
- ▶ Iran condemned the strikes carried out on April 14, 2018 by the United States, the United Kingdom and France in Syria in response to the Assad regime’s chemical attack on Douma. The Iranian Supreme Leader labeled the attack “a crime” and the spokesman of the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs called the strikes “illegal” and insisted that they will not affect Iranian policies in Syria.
- ▶ The coordination efforts between Iran, Turkey and Russia continue against the backdrop of recent events in Syria: The Iranian president held a phone call with his Turkish counterpart, while the Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council, Ali Shamkhani, visited Russia to attend an international security conference. Meanwhile, the special adviser to the Iranian minister of foreign affairs stated in an interview that the cooperation between Iran, Turkey and Russia in Syria can be maintained despite the differing interests of the three countries.

► At the center of development in Iran-Iraq relations was the visit of Iranian Minister of Defense, Amir Hatami, to Baghdad, on April 18th and 19th, 2018. Hatami met with Iraqi officials, including the prime minister, minister of defense, the chief of staff of the armed forces, the minister of the interior and the national security adviser of Iraq, and participated in a joint defense summit of the two countries and in a quadrilateral meeting with representatives from Iran, Iraq, Russia and Syria. Hatami also paid a visit to the headquarters of the “Popular Mobilization Units,” the umbrella organization of the Shi’ite militias in Iraq. During his visit, Hatami declared that assistance for Iraq’s reconstruction is a top priority for Iran after ISIS’ defeat. Meanwhile, as Iran strives to expand its economic clout in Iraq, Iraq recently imposed new restrictions on imports from Iran.

Iranian Involvement in Syria

► The Spokesman of the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Bahram Qasemi, condemned the strikes carried out by the United States, Britain and France in Syria on April 14, 2018, in response to the Assad regime’s chemical weapons attack on Douma. He labeled it “illegal,” unjustifiable and in violation of all international conventions. At his weekly press conference, held on April 16, 2018, Qasemi stated that these strikes are incapable of altering Iran’s policies in Syria. Qasemi also addressed the strike on the Syrian air force base T-4, which was attributed to Israel, and said that sooner or later, “the Zionist regime” will receive an appropriate response for its aggression. He claimed that “the resistance forces” are capable of responding to the crimes of “the Zionist regime” at the appropriate time. Qasemi reiterated Iran’s official position that the presence of its “advisers” in Syria is legal and based on the request of the Syrian government (ISNA, April 16, 2018).

► Earlier, the Supreme Leader of Iran, Ali Khamenei, proclaimed that the leaders of the United States, France and Britain are “criminals” who perpetrated an offence (Fars, April 14, 2018). Following the Western strikes in Syria, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani, Minister of Foreign Affairs Javad Zarif and the Minister of Defense Amir Hatami, held phone calls with their Syrian counterparts. In addition, the Foreign Minister Zarif conducted a phone call with the British Foreign Minister, Boris Johnson, during which the two discussed the strikes in Syria (Mehr, April 14-15, 2018).

► Last week, the Deputy Commander of the IRGC, Hosseim Salami, joined the Iranian chorus of threats against Israel following the strike in Syria, which has been attributed to Israel. In a

speech given before the sermon at the Friday prayers in Tehran on April 20, 2018, Salami warned Israel that if it initiates a war against Iran, this will lead to Israel's elimination. He boasted that Iran knows "the Zionists" well and their vulnerabilities. They have no depth, and can not escape to any place, they are exposed to fire at every point across the "occupied territories" from the north and the west, he claimed. He asserted that the Resistance Front is stronger than ever and that Israel must remember that a new war will be nothing like the 2006 Lebanon War. He added that Israel can not rely on its air force bases, since those are within the strike distance and will be quickly made inoperable. It also can not rely on the support of the United States and Britain, since by the time they come to help it, there will be nothing left of Israel, similar to how an ambulance arrives to save a person who is already dead, and all it can do is transfer the body to the cemetery. Salami issued another warning to Iran's enemies, and declared that Iranian missiles are ready to be deployed at any moment, and the instance the enemy wants to act against Iran, these missiles will be launched.



The Deputy Commander of the IRGC, Hussein Salami (Tasnim, April 20, 2018)

- ▶ When referring to the Western strikes in Syria, Salami claimed that the United States suffered a defeat in Syria and that it no longer has a strategy or a policy concerning Syria. When Americans carry out an operation in Syria, it is not part of an overall strategy, and therefore it is ridiculous, as happened with the last strike, he argued (Tasnim, April 20, 2018).
- ▶ The Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council, Ali Shamkhani, also responded to the alleged Israel strike, and declared that "the Zionist regime" will surely be punished, but the time, place and mode of response will be determined by Iran. Shamkhani, who visited Russia last week to participate in an international security conference, stated during a press

conference that Iran paid a heavy price to achieve regional stability and fight terrorism, and therefore can not remain indifferent in the face of the increase in destabilizing actions by the United States, Israel and their allies in the region. During his visit to Sochi, Shamkhani met with the Secretary of the Russian National Security Council, Nikolai Patrushev, and discussed developments in Syria and the future of the nuclear deal (Fars, April 24, 2018).

► The Iranian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mohammad Javad Zarif, stated in an interview to the American CBS network (April 22, 2018), that he does not expect a regional war following the alleged Israeli strike in Syria. Zarif asserted that the strike increased tensions and that if Israel continues to violate the sovereignty of other nations, there will be repercussions. He added, however, that he does not believe “that we are heading toward a regional war.”

► On April 17, 2018 Iranian President Rouhani held a phone call with the Turkish President Erdoğan; the two discussed the situation in Syria and the future of cooperation between Iran, Turkey and Russia in Syria. Rouhani mentioned to his Turkish counterpart that events in Syria demonstrate the importance of the cooperation between the three countries in promoting the settlement of the war in Syria (Tasnim, April 17, 2018).

► The Special Adviser to the Iranian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Hossein Jaber Ansari, discussed in an interview to the reformist daily Shargh (April 21, 2018) developments in Syria and the relationship between Iran, Russia and Turkey in this arena.



Hossein Jaber Ansari (ILNA, April 21, 2018)

► Ansari stated that the missile strikes by the United States, the United Kingdom and France on Syria have not had an effect on the balance of power in Syria. According to him, the three countries wanted to prove through the operation that despite the developments in Syria over the past 18 months, and in particular Assad regaining control over most of the country’s

territory and Iran and Russia's growing influence, they still maintain the initiative to act in the political and military arenas in Syria.

- ▶ The special adviser repeated Iran's official position that opposes Turkish presence in northern Syria and northern Iraq and sees it as a violation of those countries' sovereignty and territorial integrity. He mentioned, however, that Iran understands Turkey's concerns about developments in those regions and Turkey's interests, and that the disagreement about Turkey's interventions does not preclude the cooperation between Iran, Turkey and Russia as part of the negotiations process to end the war in Syria.
- ▶ When addressing Iran-Russia relations, Ansari stated that the two countries have mutual interests in Syria, but this does not mean that there is a stable, long-term alliance between the two countries, since both Iran and Russia have their own interests.
- ▶ In a congratulatory message sent by the Iranian President, Hassan Rouhani, to the Syrian President, Bashar al-Assad, on the occasion of Syria's Independence Day, Rouhani emphasized that Iran will stand by Syria during the post-civil war reconstruction, just as it stood by Syria in its struggle against terrorism. Rouhani mentioned that Iran will not spare any efforts to foil the schemes of the enemies and to restore security and stability in Syria (IRNA, April 21, 2018).

Iranian Involvement in Iraq

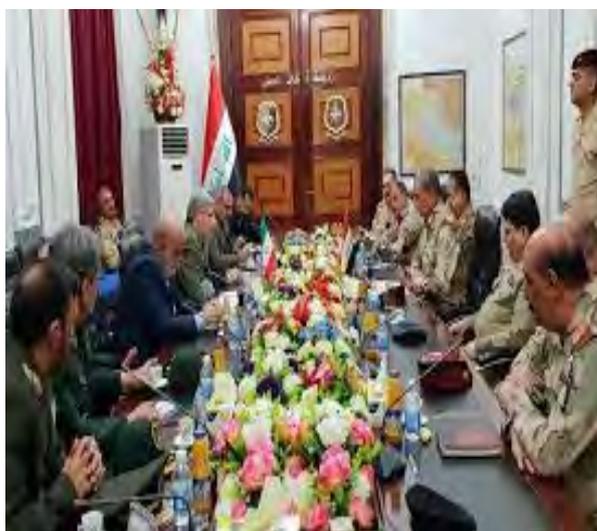
- ▶ On April 18, 2018 Iranian Minister of Defense, Amir Hatami, arrived in Baghdad for a visit. During his trip, Hatami met with senior Iraqi officials, including Prime Minister, Haider al-Abadi, Minister of Defense, Irfan al-Hayali, the Chief of Staff of Iraq's Armed Forces, Othman al-Ghanimi, and the Iraqi National Security Adviser, Faleh al-Fayyad. In addition, Hatami participated in a joint security conference of the two countries, as well as a quadrilateral meeting with representatives from Iran, Iraq, Russia and Syria.
- ▶ Upon arrival in Baghdad, Hatami announced that the purpose of the trip is to discuss with Iraqi official the latest developments in the region and further military and security cooperation between the two countries. During his meetings with Iraqi officials, Hatami declared that Iran is determined to continue the campaign against terrorist groups in the region, and emphasized the need to maintain the security cooperation between Iran, Iraq, Syria and Russia in the war on terror. He asserted that Iraq is opposed to any infringement of Iraq's sovereignty, including the military operation (conducted by Turkey) in northern Iraq.

During the visit, the ministers of defense of the two nations signed an agreement for technical cooperation between Iran and Iraq. While in Iraq, Hatemi paid a visit to the headquarters of the “Population Mobilization Units,” the umbrella organization of the Shi’ite militias in Iraq, and met with the commander of the Popular Mobilization, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis.



The Iranian minister of defense at the headquarters of the “Popular Mobilization Units” alongside Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis (Alef, April 19, 2018)

► During a meeting with the Iraqi Minister of Interior, Qasim al-Araji, Hatami stated that assistance for Iraq’s reconstruction is a top priority after ISIS’ defeat (ISNA, Fars, Tasnim, April 18-19, 2018).



A meeting between Iraqi and Iranian officials during the visit of the Iranian minister of defense to Baghdad (Mehr, April 18, 2018)

- ▶ The Head of the Joint Iranian-Iraqi Chamber of Commerce, Yahya Al-Eshaq, confirmed in an interview that Iraq recently imposed restrictions on the import of dozens of types of Iranian goods. The Iran's Trade Promotion Organization recently announced that Iraq has increased the import tariffs and banned the import of 63 types of Iranian goods due to failure to meet Iraqi standards. Al-Eshaq reported that representatives from Iran and Iraq are holding talks to try and remove the trade restrictions between the two countries, including regulations in the spheres of trade tariffs and banking (ISNA, April 17, 2018). Meanwhile, Iranian Customs reported that Iraq's position in the rankings of volume of imports from Iran fell last year from second to third place (Radio Zamaneh, April 17, 2018).
- ▶ In recent months, Iranian officials have expressed discontent due to the challenges Iran is facing in its efforts to expand its economic clout in Syria and Iraq. In December 2017, Yahya Al-Eshaq alleged that Iraq is adopting a discriminatory policy toward Iranian traders who wish to export goods to Iraq, compared with a welcoming approach adopted toward businessmen from Turkey and Saudi Arabia (Tasnim, December 6, 2017). Last month, the leader of the Friday prayers in Mashhad, Ayatollah Ahmad Alamolhoda, criticized Iran's marginalization in the reconstruction of Iraq and Syria. During a Friday sermon delivered on March 23, 2018, the senior cleric stated that it's painful to observe that when Iraq and Syria need Iran to liberate themselves from the terrorists, Iranian fighters came to their defense, but when those two countries are supposed to serve as markets for Iranian goods, Iran does not get any share of their economies, while those countries that helped ISIS, are gaining a share in the Syrian and Iraqi markets (ILNA, March 23, 2018).