



# Spotlight on Iran

May 13 – May 27, 2018

Author: Dr. Raz Zimmt

## Overview

- ▶ The statements made by the Russian President, Vladimir Putin, and his Presidential Envoy to Syria, Alexander Laverentiev, according to which foreign forces, including those of Iran and Hezbollah, should leave Syria, have aroused sharp criticism in recent days in Iran toward Russia. The spokesman of the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated that no one can force Iran to do anything. According to him, Iran will remain in Syria as long as the terrorist threat is present there and as long as the Syrian government is interested in Iran's presence. Sharp and extraordinary critiques of Russia also appeared in the Iranian press, arguing that Russia's latest statements provide further proof that Russia can not be trusted, to stand by Iran.
- ▶ Against the backdrop of the challenges Iran is facing in its efforts to cement a military foothold in Syria, Tehran continues to try to advance its economic influence in the country. The Iranian Minister of Roads and Urban Development, Abbas Akhondi, visited Damascus in mid-May and met with Syrian officials, including President Assad, to discuss bolstering the economic cooperation between the two countries and Iran's participation in the post-war reconstruction efforts.
- ▶ Iran appears to be troubled by the results of the general elections in Iraq, and in particular, the success of Muqtada al-Sadr's list. In recent years, the cleric led the opposition to Iran's involvement in Iraq. Iranian officials are trying to downplay the implications of the al-Sadr's performance on the future of Iranian-Iraqi ties, but Iranian commentators have voiced concerns about the formation of a coalition between the current Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi, and al-Sadr, which would place additional restrictions about Iran's involvement in Iraq. At this point, Tehran is awaiting to see the configuration of the new government in Baghdad. Meanwhile, Western and Arab media outlets reported that the Commander of the Qods Force of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), Qasem Soleimani, arrived in Baghdad following the elections to hold consultations and promote the establishment of a government friendlier to Iranian interests.

► Iranian officials rebuked the move of the United States' embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. A special statement published by the IRGC claimed that the embassy move will awaken a new wave of struggle and hatred for the United States and its allies and will be “a nightmare” for the Zionists.

► **Yahya Sinwar, the leader of Hamas in the Gaza Strip**, gave an interview to the al-Mayadeen network, during which he addressed, among other topics, relations between Hamas and Iran. In response to a question about the relationship between Hamas and the Commander of the Qods Force of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), Qasem Solemani, Sinwar stated that **Hamas maintains daily contact with Hezbollah for the purpose of coordination**. He asserted that Hamas' relationship with Iran is strong and that **Iran provides financial support, weaponry and expert knowledge to Hamas and other organization. In addition, there are contacts with the IRGC and in particular Qasem Soleimani**. According to Sinwar, all these forces are working together against Israel ("the occupation") for the realization of Palestinian interests (al-Mayadeen, May 21, 2018).

## Iranian Involvement in Syria

► The statements made by the Russian President, Vladimir Putin, and his Presidential Envoy to Syria, Alexander Laverentiev, calling on foreign forces, including those of Iran and Hezbollah, to depart Syria, have been met with a sharp rebuke in Iran toward Russia. On May 17, the Russian president met with the Syrian President, Bashar al-Assad, at the Sochi retreat. Following the meeting, President Putin declared that progress in the settlement process in Syria should accelerate the withdrawal of foreign forces from Syria. The day following the meeting, Putin's presidential envoy to Syria clarified that the Russian president referred to all foreign forces in Syria, including Iranian, Hezbollah, Turkish and American troops. Laverentiev emphasized that Putin's statement is a “political message,” but added that it should not be seen as the beginning of a withdrawal process of foreign forces from the country. He added that such a withdrawal is a very complicated matter, since these steps need to be implemented alongside and as part of a stabilization process of the region (Interfax, May 28, 2018).

► In an initial response to the Russian statements, the Spokesman of the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Bahram Qasemi, stated that no one can force Iran to do anything. According to him, Iran will remain in Syria as long as the terrorist threat is present there and as long as

the Syrian government is interested in Iran's presence. During his weekly press conference, Qasemi asserted that those who must leave Syria are those who entered it without the approval of the Syrian government, referring to Turkey and the United States (Tasnim, May 21, 2018).

► The statements by Russian officials aroused sharp and extraordinary critiques in the Iranian press. Commentaries published in recent days in Iran argued that Russia's latest statements provide further proof that Russia can not be trusted, as it is always willing to sacrificed Iran at the service of its interests. The commentaries argued that Russia recently agreed to Israeli requests not to hinder Israel's operations against Iranian targets in Syria, as long as this is done in coordination with Moscow. Iranian media buttressed the claim regarding the change in Russia's policies by pointing to the Kremlin's silence following the strikes carried out by Israel on the night of May 10, 2018, against dozens of Iranian targets in Syria in response to a rocket attack on IDF positions in the Golan Heights.<sup>1</sup>

► The Iranian Minister of Roads and Urban Development, Abbas Akhondi, visited Syria in mid-May and met with the Syrian Minister of Public Works and Housing, Hussein Arnous, and the Minister of Economy and Foreign Trade, Samer al-Khalil, and discussed the expansion of economic cooperation between the two countries. Akhondi, who heads the joint Iranian-Syrian economic committee, stated that Iran is ready to assist Syria in its reconstruction in the spheres of infrastructure development and construction (SANA, IRNA, May 17, 2018). During his visit to Damascus, Akhondi also met President Assad, who declared that bolstering Iranian-Syrian economic ties in one of the most important paths of resistance in light of the West's efforts to besiege the people of Syria and Iran, and defeat the two countries through economic sanctions (Mehr, May 18, 2018).

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<sup>1</sup> For more, see the May 24, 2018 publication of the Intelligence and Terrorism Center, "Russian Declarations Regarding Removal of Foreign Forces from Syria Encounter Sharp Criticism in Iran" <http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/en/russian-declarations-regarding-removal-foreign-forces-syria-encounter-greater-criticism-iran/>



**The meeting between President Assad and the Iranian minister of transportation and urban development (Mehr, May 18, 2018)**

## Iranian Involvement in Iraq

- ▶ Iran welcomed the general elections held on May 12 in Iraq. The Spokesman of the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Bahram Qasemi, congratulated the Iraqi government and the Iraqi people for holding “successful elections.” He added that through its participation in the elections, the Iraqi people cemented the successes and accomplishments of the war on terror. He stated that Iran is willing to support Iraq’s reconstruction (IRNA, May 15, 2018).
- ▶ Despite the official Iranian response, there is an evident unease in Iran over the significant success of Muqtada al-Sadr’s list. In recent years, al-Sadr led the opposition to Iran’s involvement in Iraq. Iranian media reported on the solid performance of Sadr’s list and mentioned his criticism of Iran and its involvement in Iraq. It appears, however, that Tehran is still awaiting to see the composition of the new government in Baghdad, especially in light of the victories of the al-Fath List, headed by Hadi al-Ameri, which is associated with the pro-Iranian Shi’ite militias. The political analyst Hadi Ansari assessed in a commentary published on the website Parsine (May 16) that the results of the elections in Iraq may pose a significant challenge to the future of Iranian influence in Iraq, especially if a Prime Minister al-Abadi and Muqtada al-Sadr form a coalition. He mentioned, however, that Iran can adopt a smart strategy to overcome this challenge, and maybe even utilize al-Sadr as a bridge to the Arab world and Saudi Arabia.
- ▶ Another Iranian analyst, Sadegh Kushki, also tried to downplay the influence of al-Sadr’s achievement on Iran’s future position in Iraq. In an interview to the daily Arman-e Emruz (May 17), the commentator pointed to the gap between statements made by politicians during elections campaigns and their actual conduct. He assessed that even if al-Sadr managed to

form a coalition with other individuals opposed to friendly relations with Iran, he could not ignore the positive relations between the two countries, and the reality of having a shared 1,200-kilometer (745-mile) border between Iran and Iraq.



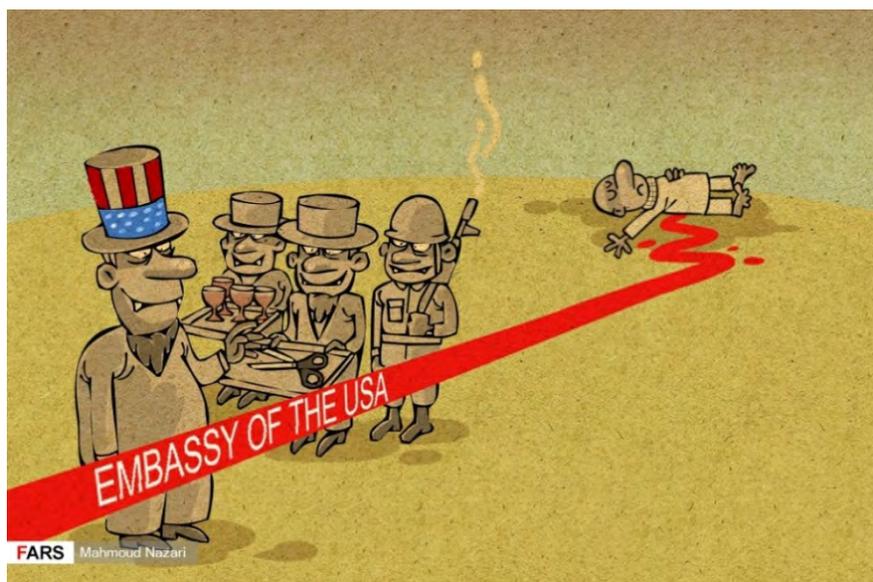
**A photo from 2006 of Muqtada al-Sadr and Ali Larjani  
(the Speaker of the Majlis and at the time, the Secretary of the  
Iranian Supreme National Security Council) (ISNA, January 22, 2006)**

- ▶ Meanwhile, Arab and Western media reported that the Commander of the IRGC's Qods Force, Qassem Soleimani, visited Baghdad in mid-May to hold political consultation following the elections in Iraq, and to promote the formation of a government that would serve Iranian interests (al-Sharq al-Awsat, Reuters, May 16, 2018).
- ▶ Addressing the election results in Iraq, the Spokesman of the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Bahram Qasemi, asserted during his weekly press conference that no problems are likely to arise between Iran and the new Iraqi government due to the positive relations between the two countries. He recommended waiting to see which political currents will make up the new government. Qasemi emphasized that Iran considers Iraq to be an independent country and respects the choices of the Iraqi people (Tasnim, May 21, 2018).
- ▶ The Iranian Ambassador to Baghdad, Iraj Masjedi, also addressed the election results in Iraq by saying that Iranian officials, including the commander of the IRGC's Qods Force,

Qasem Soleimani, maintain positive and friendly relations with Muqtada al-Sadr. He rejected the reports about disagreements between Iran and al-Sadr and insisted that Iran maintains good relations with all the groups that won the largest number of seats in the Iraqi parliament (IRNA, May 21, 2018).

## Iranian Involvement in the Palestinian Arena

► Iranian officials lambasted the relocation of the United States’ embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. At the start of the weekly cabinet meeting, President Rouhani addressed the move in stating that Israel and the United States believe that by increase pressure on the Palestinian people they can deprive them of their rights. He added that Israel and Washington are hoping to separate Muslims from Jerusalem, but this is a grave error on their part, since the 1.5 billion Muslims can not be torn apart from Jerusalem through political games. Rouhani mentioned that the Palestinian people have been struggling for seventy years and will keep struggling until the realization of their legitimate rights. He expressed disappointment about the silence of some Arab countries in the face of “the Zionists’ crimes” and underlined Iran’s unrelenting support for the rights of the Palestinians (ISNA, May 16, 2018).



**The opening of the United State’s embassy in Jerusalem (Fars, May 15, 2018)**

► The Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council, Ali Shamkhani, declared that the harm done to security and stability as a result of moving the embassy is the responsibility of the “Zionist regime” and the United States. He condemned the relocation of the embassy and labeled it “an illegal step in contravention of the rights of the Palestinian people.” He

asserted that the move of the embassy will only bolster the unity of the Muslims in defending the Palestinian people and hasten the disintegration of the “Zionist regime” (Fars, May 14, 2018).

► The former Adviser to the Iranian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Hossein Sheikholeslam, stated that President Trump wishes to act against the Resistance Front with all of the tools at his disposal and in all spheres, since Trump knows that the Resistance Front is gaining strength day by day, while Israel is growing weaker. He claimed that the United State can no longer guarantee the existence of the “Zionist regime” and that Israel is losing its status in the West, as was evident in the absence of British, French and German representatives in the inaugural ceremony of the embassy in Jerusalem (Mehr, May 14, 2018).

► The IRGC also condemned the relocation of the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem. A special statement published by the IRGC stated that the embassy’s move not only will fail to provide security to the “Zionist occupiers” but will also arouse a new wave of struggle against the United States and foment hatred against the supporters of the United States beyond the Middle East. The embassy’s relocation will be a nightmare for the Zionists, who will have no way to escape other than living in shelters, the statement proclaimed (ISNA, May 14, 2018).