



Spotlight on Iran

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Overview

- ▶ Iranian criticism of Russia is persisting in light of statements made by senior Russian officials calling for the withdrawal of foreign forces, including Iranians, from Syria. The reports about alleged understandings between Israel and Russia concerning the presence of Iranian-backed forces in southern Syria are also contributing to Iran's unease. In response, over the past week senior Iranian officials emphasized that Iran's presence in Syria is predicated on a formal request of the Syrian government, and therefore only Damascus can demand the withdrawal of Iranian forces. The Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council, Ali Shamkhani, declared in this context that Iran sees Syria's security as its security and will maintain its presence in Syria as long as the Syrian government continues to request Iran to do so. He denied that Iran has any military presence in southern Syria. A senior Iranian military official also declared that only the governments of Iran and Syria can make a decision concerning the future of Iranian presence in Syria. An adviser to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Hossein Sheykholeslam, joined the chorus in stating that the Syrian government alone gets to decide who should remain in Syria and who should withdraw from it.
- ▶ Two fighters of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps, one of them an officer, were killed last week in Syria.
- ▶ Tehran continues to closely follow the formation of the new government in Iraq. The Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council, Ali Shamkhani, declared in an interview that Iran will support any Iraqi decision on this matter, and will continue to support Iraq in the future, regardless of the configuration of the future government.
- ▶ On June 8, rallies were held across Iran to mark the International Quds Day, which is marked annually since the Iranian Revolution to express Iran's support and that of the Muslim world to the Palestinian struggle and the "liberation of Jerusalem."

General Information

- ▶ The Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council, Ali Shamkhani, discussed the latest developments in the Middle East in a wide-ranging interview with the reformist daily Shargh (June 2). With regards to the recent elections in Lebanon and Iraq, Shamkhani stated that the results are a testament to the total support of these countries to the Resistance front. In Lebanon, the position of Hezbollah and the Shi'ites has improved, while the groups supported by Saudi Arabia have lost much of their power. In Iraq, the Shi'ite and in particular the Mojahedin fighters (meaning, the Shi'ite militias) bolstered their political standing. Another significant accomplishment in the Iraqi election is the majority gained by lists opposed to U.S. presence in Iraq, Shamkhani argued.
- ▶ Shamkhani asserted that Iran does not have a position with regards to the formation of the new government in Iraq and that it will support whatever decision is made by Iraq's politicians. Iran has proven its support for the Iraqi people in their struggle against Saddam Hussein and against the terrorists over the past four decades, and it will continue supporting Iraq in the future, he added.



“Syria’s security is our security,” the Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council, Ali Shamkhani (Shargh, June 2 2018).

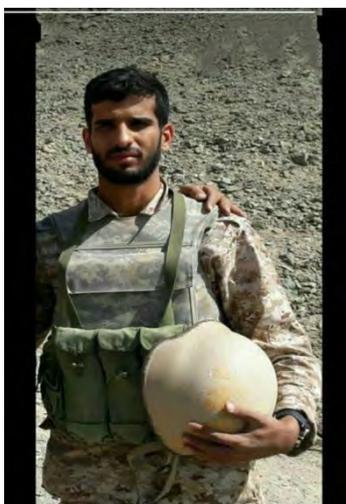
- ▶ Addressing developments in Syria, Shamkhani claimed that Iran maintains a limited presence of advisers upon the request of the Syria government. Iran views Syria’s security as its own security, and sees the maintenance of Syria’s stability as an accomplishment for Iran. The presence of Iranian advisers in Syria will remain, according to him, for as long as the Syrian government requests this. As opposed to the illegal deployment of the United States and some of the countries of the region, Iran did not impose on Syria its military presence, and Iran’s advisers are standing by the side of the Syrian forces and operate in

full coordination with them against the terrorist groups. Iran will continue to assist Syria's security in the framework of Tehran's national security interests and the future cooperation between Syria and Iran will be decided according to circumstances and agreements between the two nations.

► In response to reports concerning a Russian willingness to evict Iranian forces from southern Syria, Shamkhani claimed that Iran does not maintain any presence of its military advisers in southern Syria, and does not play any role in military activities in the region. He added that Iran supports the Russian effort to remove the terrorists from the area of the Syrian-Jordanian border and to restore the control of the Syrian Army over these regions.

Iranian Involvement in Syria

► Two IRGC fighters were killed last week in Syria. One of them was an officer named Khalil Takhtinejad. A report of the Iranian news agency Mehr cited the commander of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) in the Iranian Hormozgan Province, where the killed officer served, stating that Takhtinejad was responsible for the operations in the Daraa command. The Hormozgan Province commander, however, did not explicitly state where the officer was killed. There are contradictory reports in Iranian media concerning the location of his death, with some stating he was killed in Daraa, southern Syria, and others reporting he was killed in Albu Kamal in eastern Syria. The second IRGC cadre killed, Mohammad Mehdi Fereydouni, from the Fars Province in southern Iran, belonged to the naval forces of the IRGC (Mashregh News, June 6). According to all the reports he was killed in Albu Kamal.



**IRGC officer killed in Daraa
(Twitter, June 5 2018).**

- ▶ Iranian criticism of Russia persists in light of statements made by senior Russian officials calling for the withdrawal of foreign forces, including Iranians, from Syria. On May 30, the Russian Defense Minister, Sergey Lavrov, repeated Russia's position that all forces that are not Syrian should be withdrawn from the Israel border as soon as possible (TASS, May 30). Concomitantly, Arab and Israeli media outlets reported on Russian-Israeli understandings concerning a prohibition on the presence of Iranian forces in southern Syria. The pan-Arab daily al-Sharq al-Awsat reported (June 1) that during their last meeting on May 31, the Israeli Minister of Defense, Avigdor Liberman, and the Russian Defense Minister, Sergey Shoygu, reached understandings concerning the removal of Iranian forces from the Israel-Syria border. According to the report, Russia granted Israel a "green light" to continue with its military activity against Iranian targets deep inside Syria's territory, as long as the strikes do not harm positions of the Syrian regime. During a press conference held on June 1, the Russian Ambassador to the United Nations, Vasily Nebenzya, also confirmed the existence of an agreement concerning the retreat of Iranian and Hezbollah forces from the Syria-Israel border. In response to a question on the matter, the ambassador stated that according to his understanding, an agreement has indeed been reached on the matter, but that it is still unclear whether it is already being implemented on the ground (TASS, June 1).
- ▶ In a commentary published by the reformist daily Shargh (May 30), the author argued that Russia is marginalizing Iran as part of the ongoing talks between Moscow and the West concerning Syria's future. Russia is striving for an agreement with the United States, and is therefore willing to accede to the demands made by Israel and the West concerning diminishing Iran's influence in Syria. The analysis published by Shargh assessed that the latest statements made by Russian officials were not coordinated with Iran, and that Moscow is acting independently, without considering Tehran's position. The article argued that Russia is willing to sacrifice Iran to achieve a deal with the West that will protect Russia's national interests. Iran and Russia do not have a strategic alliance, and President Assad will not be able to resist the Kremlin in case Russia coerces him to evict Iran's forces from Syria, the commentary argued.
- ▶ The website Entekhab (May 30) published the assessments of commentators arguing that Russia is closer to Israel's positions than to Iran's. The former Iranian diplomat, Fereydoun Majlesi, stated in an interview to the website that Russia was never Iran's ally, did not support Iran, and is even a rival to Iran in the oil and gas sector. He assessed that

Russia is interested in maintaining its bases in Syria and believes that Iran's continued presence in Syria will provide an excuse for the United States to maintain its presence as well. Russia and the United States are in agreement, according to Majlesi, that Iranian presence in Syria is no longer needed.

► Ebrahim Farahani, a commentator on the Middle East, asserted in an interview to the website Nameh News (May 30) that Iran-Russia relations have entered the post-ISIS phase, during which Russia no longer sees a need to maintain cooperation and coordination with Iran. The only common interest of the two countries, as long as the campaign against ISIS was waged, was the preservation of the rule of President Assad and Syria's territorial integrity. The Turkish military offensive on northern Syria has proved that Russia is even willing to capitulate on the matter of Syria's territorial integrity and cooperate with Turkey. While Iran strives to maintain the Resistance axis by continuing to provide assistance to Hezbollah and Hamas and maintain a military presence near Israel's border, Russia is opposed to this.

► Mohammad Javad Jamali Nobandgani, a member of the Majlis' Foreign Policy and National Security Committee, stated in an interview to the Qanoon newspaper (June 2), that Iran's presence in Syria has nothing to do with Russia or Israel, as it is based on the request of the legitimate Syrian government, and therefore, the presence will remain in place for as long as the Syrian government agrees to this.

► The political analyst, Hassan Hanizadeh, alleged in an interview to Qanoon (June 2) that the Russians chose the side of "the Zionist regime" and have proven themselves to be untrustworthy. According to him, the Russians prefer "to eat the cake of victory on their own" celebrating the defeat of the terrorist groups by the Syrian government. He claimed, however, that Iran does not have many forces in Syria and that its presence is limited to advisers alone.

► The political affairs commentator, Ali Bigdeli, blamed Russia for taking Syria hostage to pressure the West to remove the sanctions levied against Moscow. He assessed that if the United States and Russia decide to force Iran to withdraw its forces from Syria, Tehran will not be able to withstand the international pressure and maintain its forces in Syria (Qanoon, June 2).

► Meanwhile, senior Syrian officials insisted that Iranian presence in Syria is limited to that of "advisers" alone and emphasize that those are operating in accordance with the explicit

request of the Syrian government. In an interview to the Russian RT network (May 31), President Assad declared that there are no Iranian forces in Syria, and there are only Iranian officers who assist the Syrian Army. During a press conference in Damascus, Syrian Foreign Minister, Walid al-Mualem, also stated that Iran has no military presence in Syrian territory, but only advisers who operate alongside the Syrian Army and assist it. He emphasized that Iran's presence in Syria is legal and is based on the request of the Syrian government, as opposed to the presence of the United States, France and Turkey. He added that Iran assisted Syria in the struggle against the terrorists and that Syria thanks the Supreme Leader of Iran and the Iranian people for this (Tasnim, June 2).

► The Adviser to the Chief of Staff of the Iranian Armed Forces, Masoud Jazayeri, responded in an interview to the Tasnim news agency (June 3) to reports about a possible Iranian withdrawal from Syria. Jazayeri asserted that Iran and Syria maintain deep strategic relations, which are not affected by propaganda, and that the only conceivable agreement concerning this matter is between the Iranian and the Syrian government. He argued that the biggest fear of the “Zionist regime” is to live alongside a border with the fighters of Islam, and now that this has happened, the United States and Israel are desperately trying in vain to alter this reality. He stated that the “Zionist regime” does not have a future and that the United States has no choice but to leave the region. Jazayeri stressed that unlike the American military personnel in Syria, the Iranian advisers in the country are operating upon the request of the Syrian government.



Masoud Jazayeri (Tasnim, June 3 2018).

► In an interview to the official paper “Iran” (June 3), the former Iranian Ambassador to Syria and an adviser to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Hossein Sheykholeslam, discussed

Iran's involvement in Syria and the statements made by Russian officials concerning the withdrawal of foreign forces from the country.

- ▶ Sheykholeslam argued that the Syrian government is the one who should decide who needs to stay in Syria and who needs to withdraw from it, and that the presence of Iranian “advisers” in Syria, will thus continue, in accordance with the decision of the Syrian and Iranian governments. He argued that the position of both Iran and Russia is that the American presence in Syria is illegal and hence all U.S. forces must leave the country. He added that Russia should not meddle in Syria's internal affairs, and only the Syrian government should decide who needs and does not need to remain in the country.
- ▶ Sheykholeslam was asked about claims that Syria prefers Russia over Iran as an economic partner. He responded by asserting that Iran did not intervene in Syria to make money, but to protect its national security. According to him, Iran played a central role in Syria in the energy, water, infrastructure and automobile sectors before the start of the civil war and will continue to play such a role in the future.

Iranian Involvement in the Palestinian Arena

- ▶ The Spokesman of the IRGC, Ramazan Sharif, declared in a sermon prior to the Friday prayers in Tehran, that for the first time since the “establishment of the Zionist regime,” Israel has suffered a severe blow from the “Resistance Axis” in the rocket attack on the Golan Heights in May. He added that this is only the beginning of “a great road.” Sharif, who also serves as the Secretary of the Intifada and Jerusalem Bureau at the Coordinating Committee of Islamic Propagation that the “Marches of Return” in Gaza prove that the third and fourth generation of Palestinian fighters are ready to return to their homeland, just like the first generation of fighters. Sharif condemned the relocation of the United States' embassy to Jerusalem and called it “a crazy and suicidal step” by President Trump (Tasnim, June 1).
- ▶ On June 8, Iran marked the “International Quds Day.” The events of Quds Day are held annually since 1979, in accordance with a decision of the leader of the Islamic Revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini, and are intended to express Iran's support and that of the Muslim world for the Palestinian struggle and the “liberation of Jerusalem.” During the processions, the attendees chanting “death to Israel” and raised banners condemning the United States and Saudi Arabia.



Qods Day rally in Tehran (Fars, June 8 2018).

- ▶ Ahead of International Quds Day, Iranian leaders escalated their diatribes against Israel. The Secretary of the Guardianship Council, the senior cleric Ayatollah Ahmad Jannati, declared: “I hereby officially declare that Israel’s days have come to and end. It will not be long before we celebrate the destruction of this regime in Palestine.” (ISNA, June 5).