



Spotlight on Iran

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Overview

► Iran recently began implementing a more aggressive policy against the United States and Iran's regional rivals. This comes against the backdrop of tightening American sanctions on Iran, which revoked waivers granted to a number of countries to import oil from Iran, placed sanctions on Iran's steel industry and listed the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps [IRGC] as a foreign terrorist organization. This assertiveness manifested in a number of ways, in our assessment:

- ◆ Concern expressed by the U.S. Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, over apparent Iranian plans to **carry out attacks against American forces in the region** through **Shi'ite militias in Iraq** loyal to Iran.
 - ◆ **The sabotage of four commercial ships in the Persian Gulf, which** was carried out, according to U.S. assessment, under Iranian guidance.
 - ◆ **An attack utilizing unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) against Saudi oil facilities.** The Houthi rebels in Yemen, who are supported by Iran, claimed responsibility for the attack.
 - ◆ **A combative policy in Gaza of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad Organization**, Iran's preferred proxy, which recently orchestrated an escalatory round in the Gaza Strip, the worse since the 2014 conflict.
- In the latest escalation in Gaza, Iran's involvement could also be detected, through the Palestinian Islamic Jihad. In an interview to the al-Mayadin network, the Secretary General of the organization, Ziad al-Nakhla, stated that Islamic Jihad did not consult Iran during the latest escalatory round, but emphasized that his group maintains ongoing contact with Iran and Lebanese Hezbollah.

Iran's policy is intended to exact a price from the United States for its "maximum pressure" strategy against Iran; to deter its regional rivals, particularly in the Persian Gulf, by carrying out attacks that can not be clearly attributed to Iran, as well as to harm the ability of the Arab Gulf states to export oil. This strategy is implemented by Iran's traditional modus operandi of employing proxies.

► Meanwhile, Iran renewed the supply of oil to Syria, for the first time since late 2018, and Iran's national oil company announced establishing an economic representation office in Iraq. These developments reflect Iran's intention to **expand the export of oil to Syria and Iraq**, as part of its efforts to minimize the effect of the American sanctions on exports of Iranian oil.

Tensions in Iraq and the Gulf

Iraq

► On May 7, the U.S. Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, arrived for a surprise visit in Iraq, against the backdrop of reports that **Iran intends to use Iraqi territory to carry out attacks through its allies in Iraq [meaning, the Shi'ite militias] against American forces in the region**. Pompeo met with the Iraqi Prime Minister, Adel Abdul-Mahdi, and expressed his concern about **growing Iranian clout in Iraq, which may be used to carry out attacks through Iraqi Shi'ite militias loyal to Iran**. Pompeo stated that he arrived in Baghdad to ensure that Iran remains "a sovereign and independent" country and to discuss with senior Iraqi officials the possibilities for expanding cooperation between the United States and Iraq in the energy sector, which would allow Iraq to no longer be dependent on energy sourced in Iran (New York Times, May 7).

► The newspaper al-Arab reported that the United States provided the Iraqi government with a list of Iraqi individuals, some of them leaders of Shi'ite militias, and asked them to monitor their financial and trade ties with Iran, and to take steps against them if such relations are uncovered (Fararu, May 8).

► The British newspaper, The Guardian, reported (May 16), based on intelligence sources that **the Commander of the IRGC'S Qods Force, Qasem Soleimani, recently met Iraqi militias in Baghdad and told them to "prepare for proxy war"**. The sources said that **Soleimani help the meeting with leaders the militias operating under Iranian guidance three weeks ago**. In a photo recently published, Soleimani could be seen with **Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis**,

the Commander of the Popular Mobilization Units (the umbrella organization of the Shi'ite militias in Iraq), and with **Shibl al-Zaidi**, the Commander of the Shi'ite militia the Battalions of Imam Ali. It is unclear when the photo was taken.



Soleimani, al-Muhandis and al-Zaidi
(al-Arabiya, May 12, 2019)

UAE

- ▶ On the morning of May 12, four commercial ships (two Saudi, one Norwegian and one Emirati) were damaged, apparently **due to an attack utilizing explosives** near the Hormuz Straits, near the Fujairah emirate. **A source in the U.S. military assessed that Iranian fighters or organizations operating on its behalf are the ones responsible for damaging the four vessels.** A team of experts from the U.S. military was dispatched to investigate the damage, but American officials are yet to provide proof of Iranian involvement in the incident (AP, May 14).
- ▶ Iran blamed foreign elements (and specifically Israel) for the attack, which was intended to falsely implicate Tehran, according to Iranian officials. The Spokesman of the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Abbas Mousavi, expressed concern following the incident and called for a thorough investigation (Tasnim, May 13). The Chairman of the Majlis' Foreign Policy and National Security Committee, Hashmatollah Falahatpisheh, declared that the incident proves that the security of the southern region of the Persian Gulf is fragile (Fars, May 12).



Israeli involvement in the Fajura Port incident
(Fars, May 14, 2019)

Saudi Arabia

► Saudi Arabia reported that **on the morning of May 14, explosive UAVs damaged two oil pumping stations belonging to the national Saudi oil company, Aramco.** Following the attack, the flow of oil in the damaged pipe was halted. Prior to this, the Houthi rebels in Yemen, who are supported by Iran, claimed responsibility for the attack (Reuters, May 14).

The Palestinian Arena

► The Palestinian Islamic Jihad organization, Iran's preferred proxy, is increasingly adopting a combative posture. This policy, accompanied by threatening rhetoric aimed at Israel, **seeks, in our assessment, to escalate tensions in the Gaza Strip.** This organization is the one responsible for the sniper attack, which injured IDF soldiers and precipitated the latest escalatory round in Gaza, the worst of its kind since 2014, between the Palestinian factions and the IDF. **In our assessment, Iran encourages this policy, and may be the one behind it,** although the Secretary General of Palestinian Islamic Jihad, Ziad al-Nakhla, claimed in an interview to the al-Mayadin TV network (May 7) that the organization did not hold consultations with Iran during the last round of fighting in Gaza (but admitted that the organization maintains ongoing communications with Iran, which supports the Palestinian "Resistance"¹).

¹ See the report by the Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, "Threatening Messages Sent to Israel in an interview with Palestinian Islamic Jihad Secretary General Ziyad al-Nakhalah," May 13, 2019. Accessible online: <https://www.terrorism-info.org.il/en/threatening-messages-sent-israel-interview-palestinian-islamic-jihad-secretary-general-ziyad-al-nakhalah/>



Ziad al-Nakhla, the Secretary General of Islamic Jihad in an interview to the Lebanese TV channel al-Mayadin (al-Mayadin's YouTube channel, May 7)

► The Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs published a special statement on the occasion of the Palestinian Nakba Day, marked on May 15. The statement read that the establishment of the illegitimate entity called “the Zionist regime” is one of the most painful events in the history of Islam and the world. This entity was established by a group holding deviant and racist ideas, which killed innocent women, men, the elderly, the young and children and forcibly displaced them from their homes. The statement added that Israel is the main source of crises in the region and threatens world peace and security. The Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs called on the international community, and particularly to the UN, to end the occupation of Palestine and Israel and lay the groundwork for the return of Palestinian refugees to their lands. Iran also called on the UN to conduct a referendum among the original inhabitants of Palestine, including Muslims, Christians and Jews, to determine the type of regime they wish to see in their land (Fars, May 14).

Iranian Involvement in Syria

► On May 8, **the Iranian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mohammad Javad Zarif**, met in Moscow with his Russian counterpart, Sergey Lavrov. The two discussed bilateral matters, the future of the accord concerning Iran’s nuclear program, and the ongoing negotiations process to end the war in Syria. During the joint press conference, held after the meeting, Lavrov stated that he discussed with Foreign Minister Zarif the developments in northern Syria and the two agreed to continue the negotiations process to settle the war in the framework of the Astana talks, with the goal of advancing the establishment of the committee that will draft Syria’s next constitution.

► Lavrov added that **American pressure will not lead Iran to withdraw its forces from Syria, and that the U.S. policy, which is intended to end Iranian influence in the region is**

unrealistic, since every significant country in the region, such as Iran or Saudi Arabia, wishes to affect processes happening around it. He emphasized that **Iran was invited to enter Syria by the legitimate government in Damascus**, and that Moscow and Tehran are assisting Syria in the war on terror (Tasnim, May 9; TASS, May 8).



**The Lavrov-Zarif meeting in Moscow
(Tasnim, May 9, 2019)**

► Sources in companies tracking the movement of oil tankers reported that **Iran recently renewed the supply of oil to Syria**, for the first time since late 2018, against the backdrop of a fuel crisis in the war-torn country. According to those sources, the **two oil tankers reached Syria recently**, which is suffering from a severe fuel shortage that has forced the Damascus regime to place limits on the amount of benzine, mazut and cooking gas Syrians are allowed to purchase. The Iranian tanker, which carried about one million barrels of oil, reached the Banyas Port on May 5, near the largest refinery in the country. In addition, another tanker owned by an anonymous businessperson reached Syria recently (CNBC, May 9; Reuters, May 10)

The Opening of a Representative Office for Iran's National Oil Company in Iraq

► The National Iranian Oil Company **announced opening a representative office in Iraq in an effort to facilitate cooperation in the oil sector** and transfer of engineering and technical services from Iran to Iraq. The decision to open the office was made during a meeting between the directors of the Iranian company and senior officials in the Iraqi Ministry of Oil. A senior official in the Iranian oil company stated that only Iranian firms,

approved by the National Oil Company, would be able to participate in projects of the Iraqi Ministry of Oil (Fars, May 4).