



Spotlight on Iran

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Overview

- ▶ On May 31, Iranian cities witnessed rallies on the occasion of International Quds Day, a day marked since the Islamic Revolution (1979) on the last Friday of the month of Ramadan. Adhering to Tehran's guidance, the Quds Day events this year turned into a show of opposition to the peace plan of President Trump ("Deal of the Century.")
- ▶ Iraqi security officials reported that the U.S. assesses that the Katyusha rocket firing toward the Green Zone housing the U.S. embassy in Baghdad (May 19) was carried by one of two Shi'ite Iraqi militias supported by Iran. The firing of the rocket may be another manifestation of Iran's efforts to act against the United States and its allies in the region through covert, low-signature activities utilizing proxies. Meanwhile, the Iranian minister of foreign affairs visited Baghdad and met senior Iraqi officials, against the backdrop of growing tensions between the United States and Iran, and Iraqi attempts to mediate between the two countries.
- ▶ Iranian activity to establish infrastructure in Syria and Iraq: Iran began developing a border crossing between Iraq and Syria near the official Albu Kamal border crossing, which is currently not operational. According to an intelligence published by the ISI intelligence company, the infrastructure established by Iran is supposed to serve as a conduit for movement of armed personnel, vehicles and materiel. Meanwhile, the Iranian government approved launching the project of laying down a railway from Shalamche in western Iran to Basra in southern Iraq. The works on the railway, regarding which Iraq and Iran reached an agreement during President Rouhani's visit to Baghdad in March 2019, are expected to start in the coming weeks and last for two years.

Iranian Involvement in Syria

- ▶ The American TV channel Fox News reported (May 23) based on Western intelligence sources, that Iran is laying the groundwork for a border crossing linking Iraq and Syria, possibly as a preparation for an alternative new border crossing under the control of Shi'ite

militias operating under the guidance of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC). In satellite images taken by the intelligence company ImageSat International (ISI), the construction of a border crossing linking Albu Kamal and al-Qaem can be seen. This is an area under the control of Shi'ite militias, about two kilometers away from the official border crossing between Syria and Iraq in Albu Kamal, a crossing that is currently not operational. The Shi'ite militias cleared an axis bypassing the official crossing, which traverses the line of fortification separating Iraq and Syria. This axis leads directly into a closed compound, which was targeted last June by jets, a site known to function as the headquarters of the Shi'ite militias in the region. According to the intelligence report produced by ISI, the new infrastructure appears to be the groundwork for a new border crossing that will serve as a supply route for the movement of personnel, vehicles and materiel.



**The new compound constructed in the Albu Kamal crossing area
(ImageSat International [ISI], May 19, 2019)**

► In 2018, Iran entrenched its control over the Albu Kamal border crossing area through the use of Shi'ite forces operating under its guidance. Iran perceives the crossing to be strategically important, since the ground line of supply connecting Iran, Iraq, Syria and Lebanon passes through it. The ground axis may allow Iran to reduce its dependence on the aerial supply route from Tehran to Damascus, expand and entrench its presence in Syria, and facilitate the movement of material and armed cadres to Hezbollah in Lebanon and Shi'ite militias in Syria.

Iranian Involvement in Iraq

- ▶ On May 19, a Katyusha rocket exploded near the U.S. embassy in Baghdad. A spokesman for the Iraqi security forces stated that the rocket landed near the unknown soldier statue, less than 1.5 kilometers (one mile) from the U.S. embassy and did not result in any casualties. He stated that the military is investigating the incident and assessed that the rocket was fired from southern Baghdad, an area in which pro-Iranian Shi'ite militias are operating (Reuters, May 19). The launch of the rocket may be another manifestation of the increasingly confrontational approach Iran has adopted against the United States through covert activities and utilizing proxy groups, in light of increasing U.S. pressure on Iran.
- ▶ The pan-Arab daily al-Sharq al-Awsat reported (May 26) based on Iraqi security officials, that the U.S. suspects that the rocket launch toward the compound housing the U.S. embassy was carried out by one of two Shi'ite militias backed by Iran: The Sayyed al-Shuhada' Brigades or Imam Ali Brigades. According to this report, the Americans informed the Iraqi government that the U.S. may arrest members of these militias if they are indeed found to have been involved in launching the Katusha.
- ▶ The Iranian government approved the launch of the project to lay 32 kilometers (20 miles) of railway connecting Shalamche in western Iran to Basra in southern Iraq. The works on the railway are expected to start in the coming weeks. "The Foundation of the Oppressed [Mostazafan]," which is considered the largest charity fund in Iran, will act as the contractor executing the project and will finance 60% of its expenses. The rest of the expenses will be paid by the Iranian ministry of transportation. The railway, whose construction has been delayed for the past eight years, is expected to serve, in its initial stage, mainly the Iranian pilgrims reaching Karbala in Iraq each year. In the next stage, the railway is supposed to connect Iran through Iraq to the Lattakia port in Syria, mainly for the purpose of transferring goods. The completion of the first stage of the project is expected to take two years (Fars, May 25). The memorandum of understanding concerning the railway was signed in March 2019 between Iranian President, Hassan Rouhani, and the Iraqi Prime Minister, Adel Abdul Mahdi, during Rouhani's visit to Baghdad.
- ▶ On May 25, the Iranian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mohammad Javad Zarif, arrived for a two-day visit in Iraq during which he met senior Iraqi officials, chief among them the Prime Minister of Iraq, Adel Abdul Mahdi; the Iraqi President, Barham Salih; the Iraqi Minister of

Foreign Affairs, Muhammad Ali al-Hakim; and the Speaker of the Iraqi Parliament, Muhammad al-Halbousi. Zarif also visited the holy Shi'ite shrines in Najaf and Karbala. Zarif's visit took place amidst rising tensions between the U.S. and Iran. In a joint press conference with his Iraqi counterpart, Zarif stated that he held productive talks with his Iraqi colleague on regional affairs and that Iran seeks to maintain balanced relations with all the countries of the Persian Gulf. He offered the countries of the Gulf to sign a non-aggression treaty with Iran. At the joint presser, the Iraqi minister of foreign affairs stated that the purpose of Zarif's visit was to advance the implementation of recent understandings reached between the two countries with regards to border issues, establishing joint industrial zones and laying the railway connecting western Iran and southern Iraq, as well as to discuss regional and international development. He remarked that Iraq opposes U.S. sanctions against Iran and hopes to serve as a mediator between Tehran and Washington (Fars, May 26).



**Iranian and Iraqi foreign ministers in Baghdad
(Fars, May 26, 2019)**

Iranian Involvement in the Palestinian Arena

- ▶ On May 31, Iranian cities witnessed numerous International Quds Day processions, marked since 1979 on the last Friday of the month of Ramadan, intended to express the support of Iran and the Muslim world for the Palestinians and the 'liberation of Jerusalem.' On the eve of Quds Day, Iran moved to turn the day into a show of opposition to the peace plan of President Trump known as the 'deal of the century.'
- ▶ In a statement concluding the day's events, the organizers stated that liberating Jerusalem "from the fangs of the Zionist occupiers" and the effort to eradicate "the cancerous tumor that is Israel" are the central efforts of the Muslim world. The statement condemned the "Deal

of the Century” and the “reactionary” leaders of some Arab states that seek to normalize relations with “the regime of the fake country occupying Jerusalem.” The statement also argued that the only way to solve the question of Palestine is through intifada and resistance to the “global front of infidels” led by “the great Satan” (the United States), and refusal of any compromise and surrender until the eradication of “the cancerous tumor that is Israel,” the return of Palestinian refugees to their homeland and holding a free referendum to among original inhabitants of Palestine regarding the fate of their land, through implementing the strategy of “Palestine from the river to the sea” (Tasnim, May 31).



**International Quds Day rally in Tehran
(Fars, May 31, 2019)**

- On the eve of Quds Day, held this year against the backdrop of U.S. intention to promote the ‘deal of the century’ and growing tensions between Iran and the United States, Iranian officials assailed the Palestinian peace plan and the intention of some Arab countries, including Saudi Arabia and the UAE, to participate in the economic summit in Bahrain, set to be held at the end of June, and would be the first stage in the implementation of the American plan.
- On the eve of Quds Day, the Spokesman of the IRGC, Ramazan Sharif, announced that the slogan of the Quds Day processions this year will be: “International Quds Day: the defeat of the Deal of the Century and stabilizing the Palestinian Question.” During a press conference on the occasion of Quds Day, Sharif, who also serves as the chairman of the Intifada and Jerusalem Department of the Coordinating Council of Islamic Propagation ,” stated that the Palestinians have moved from using rocks to using rockets and that the new Palestinian generation is more determined than the generation before it to struggle against Israel, further

claiming that this is one of the accomplishment of Quds Day. He argued that due to Palestinian resistance, the Zionists are no longer able to carry out their military activities in Gaza easily, and are forced to retreat.

► Sharif declared that Quds Day is a day of warning of the Islamic Ummah to some Arab countries, and particularly to Saudi Arabia and the UAE, with regards to the “fictional summit” in Bahrain. These countries are forewarned to avoid trampling on the Palestine issue and the rights of the Palestinian people while they play in the court of the Americans and the “Zionist regime.” He added that the “deal of the century” is linked to additional steps of the Trump administration, including the move of the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem and its recognition as Israel’s capital, refusal to accept the return of Palestinian refugees, and talk of establishing an “alternative homeland” to the Palestinians in Jordan and the Sinai desert. The “deal of the century,” according to Sharif, is aimed solely at eliminating Palestine. The unified position of the Palestinians against the plan will lead to its demise, and that there are indications that an intifada will erupt in the West Bank, which raises the fears of the Zionists and the supporters of the “deal of the century.” This plan and any other step that does not guarantee the legitimate demands of the Palestinian people, and particularly the return of refugees and holding free elections to determine the fate of the Palestinians, will never be able to solve this big issue that concerns the Muslim world. The Islamic ummah will prove on Quds Day that the Palestinian question is alive and well, and that the “deal of the century,” whose only goal is to completely erase Palestine from the geography of the region and the Muslim world, will only lead to the failure and humiliation of those crafting the plan and supporting it.

► Sharif warned that making decisions regarding Palestine without paying heed to the Palestinians will lead in the near future for a new massive intifada, and that the West Bank too will turn to the path of resistance. The “deal of the century” will only bolster the determination of the Palestinian to resist and fight the “plots of the enemies of al-Quds” and increase the motivation of citizens of the world to support Palestine (Tasmin, May 28).



**The Spokesman of the IRGC, Ramazan Sharif
(IRNA, May 28, 2019)**

- ▶ Ahead of Quds Day, 252 Iranian majlis members published a statement, expressing their support for the “Palestinian Resistance” and called on Iranian citizens to participate in marches that day. The majlis members emphasized in the statement their opposition to the peace plan of President Trump and declared that the U.S. must know that the “deal of the century,” the move of the embassy to Jerusalem, the recognition of Israeli sovereignty over the Golan and the listing of the IRGC as a terrorist group are failed attempts, which will join the dozens of previous failed plans by the United States concerning Palestine. The statement added that Saudi Arabia and other countries, including the UAE and Bahrain, need to know that establishing friendly relations with the “Zionist regime” casts “eternal shame” upon them, is clearly contrary to God’s edict and will inflame the hatred of the entire Islamic ummah against them. The “Zionist regime” must know that the countdown to its elimination has begun, and that its fate is destruction. The Resistance Front is stronger today than it has ever been in the past, the members of parliament argued. The majlis members emphasized Iran’s role under the leadership of Ali Khamenei in resisting the “plots” of the United States, the “Zionist regime” and its regional allies, chief among them being Saudi Arabia (Mehr, May 26).
- ▶ The Speaker of the Majlis, Ali Larijani, also emphasized in his speech ahead of Quds Day the need to resist the American peace plan. Larijani strongly condemned the countries that intend to participate in the economic summit in Bahrain. He remarked that the American plan, which he labeled “treacherous and evil,” ignores even the handful of Palestinian rights recognized in previous peace plans, and aims to increase Israel’s control of the West Bank, recognize the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine and erase the rights of the

Palestinians, who will be left without a say with regards to the fate of their land. Larijani emphasized that under the current conditions, there is particular importance in participating in Quds Day rallies, since marking the day serves as a “deafening cry” for the rights of the Palestinian people and support for it (Fars, May 26).