



Spotlight on Iran

June 2 -16, 2019

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Overview

- ▶ **On June 13, two oil tankers were attacked in the Gulf of Oman.** One of the tankers, owned by a Norwegian company, was en route from the United Arab Emirates (UAE) to Taiwan, while the other, owned by a Japanese firm, was on its way from Saudi Arabia to Singapore. The US blamed Iran for the attack. **In a video, published by the U.S. Navy, a force of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) can be seen removing a limpet mine that failed to explode from the side of one of the targeted tankers.** Iran rejected the accusations and blamed foreign actors for the attack, which was carried out during a visit of the Japanese prime minister to Tehran.
- ▶ The deputy commander of the IRGC called Iranian presence in Syria “the realization of a divide duty” and declared that the Islamic Revolution is not confined in one geographic region. He added that the presence of Iranian fighters in Syria is an expression of the commitment to the values of the Islamic Revolution.
- ▶ Against the backdrop of reports on growing discord between Iran and Russia in Syria, a Lebanese newspaper published a report alleging a reduction in the presence of pro-Iranian militias in Damascus due to Russian pressure. The newspaper reported, based on senior military sources in Syria, that the number of Shi’ite militiamen in Damascus decreased by more than 70% over the past year. On the other hand, the newspaper reported about growing presence of foreign pilgrims visiting Shi’ite holy sites around Damascus. Meanwhile, an Iranian news website reported that an Iranian delegation of preachers and Qur’an reciters was dispatched during the month of Ramadan to Syria. The dispatch of the delegation is indication for Iranian efforts to broaden the religious and cultural activities under its guidance in Syria.
- ▶ The Lebanese businessman, Nizar Zakka, who also holds American residency, was released from prison in Iran and returned to Lebanon. Iranian officials reported that his release

followed an official request by the Lebanese president and through the mediation of Hezbollah Secretary General, Hassan Nasrallah.

► During a visit to the Khuzestan Province in southwestern Iran, the senior military adviser of the Supreme Leader of Iran called to connect Iran, Iraq and Syria through railways that would create a corridor connecting the countries of central Asia to the Mediterranean Sea and provide Iran with significant financial benefits. He remarked that Iraq and Syria strategically complement Iran, and that the alliance between the three countries can serve as an economic, political and security axis against Israel and the United States.

► During the Quds Day speeches in the Gaza Strip, senior Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad Officials thanked Iran for its support for the Palestinians. The Supreme Leader of Iran, Khamenei, used the occasion of a meeting between ambassadors of Muslim-majority countries to mark Eid al-Fitr to reiterate Iran's support for the Palestinians and call for continued Palestinian "resistance" against Israel.

Attack on Tankers in the Gulf of Oman

► On June 13, two oil tankers were attacked in the Gulf of Oman. The motor tanker "Front Altair," sailing under the flag of the Marshall Islands, belongs to the Norwegian Frontline firm. The ship carried refined crude oil on the way from the UAE to Taiwan and was targeted while sailing in international waters between Oman and Iran. The motor tanker "Kokuka Courageous" sailed under Panama's flag and belongs to a Japanese firm. The tanker carried methanol and was en route from Saudi Arabia to Singapore. One of the crew members was very lightly injured. Due to the damage to the tankers, the crewmembers of both tankers had to evacuate.

► The U.S. Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, blamed Iran for the attack. As proof for this allegation, Pompeo pointed to intelligence collected by the U.S., the type of weapon used, the level of expertise required to carry out the operation, similar Iranian attacks on ships in the region, and that fact that none of the proxy groups operating in the region have the resources and skills required to carry out such complex operations. He asserted that Iranian attacks are part of an overarching Iranian campaign intended to increase tensions in the region and that Iran is working to sabotage the flow of oil through the Straits of Hormuz.

► A few hours after the attack, the U.S. Navy published a video showing an IRGC force removing a limpet mine from the side of one of the targeted tankers, which had failed to

detonate. The spokesman of the U.S. Navy stated that the video shows a force on an IRGC patrol boat approaching the Kokuka Courageous ship and removing the mine. The Japanese operator of the ship stated, on the other hand, that he and the crewmen saw “flying objects” around the time of the attack, which could have been bullets. He rejected the possibility that the ship had been targeted with mines or torpedo missiles, since the damage done to the vessel was about the water line.

► Iran denied the American allegations and blamed foreign actors for the attack, which was executed in the midst of a visit by Japan’s prime minister to Tehran. Last month (May 14), four commercial vessels (two Saudi, one Norwegian, and one Emirati) were targeted near the Emirate of Fujairah in the Hormuz Straits. An international investigative team ruled last week that the attack had been carried out by a state actor, which used divers on speedboats to plant naval mines against the ships. The investigators, however, did not specifically name Iran as the culprit.



**One of the tankers hit in the Gulf of Oman
(Tasnim, June 13, 2019)**

Iranian Involvement in Syria and Lebanon

► Ali Fadavi, the Deputy Commander of the IRGC, called the Iranian presence in Syria a “realization of divide duty.” At a ceremony memorializing Iranian fighters killed in the Iran-Iraq War, Fadavi stated that the Islamic Revolution is not limited to one geographic area and that one of the most beautiful expression of holding steadfast to the Revolution is the presence of Iranian young men thousands of kilometers away from Iran’s borders and the victory they have achieved. Fadavi asserted that even the enemies of the Islamic Revolution are admitting the victory of the Iranian young men in Syria. The United States, the countries

of Europe and the “reactionary” Arab states that opposed the current government in Syria and strove to topple it have failed to do so because Iran did not allow it to happen, boasted Fadavi (Tasnim, June 2).



**Deputy Commander of the IRGC, Ali Fadavi
(Tasnim, June 2, 2019)**

► The Lebanese paper al-Modon reported (June 2) that the presence of pro-Iranian militias in Damascus has decreased due to Russian pressure. According to this report, at the end of the military campaign around Damascus, the Russians began exerting pressure on the Iranians to leave the city and halt efforts to spread Shi’ite Islam in the area. Following this, Shi’ite pro-Iranian militias began withdrawing from dozens of military positions and hotels where they were staying in Damascus. The newspaper cited senior military sources who claimed that the number of Shi’ite militiamen in Damascus decreased by more than 70% over the past year. In addition, the number of posters hanging in public of Hezbollah Secretary General, Hassan Nasrallah, and the Supreme Leader of Iran, Ali Khamenei, has also decreased. However, the Iranians still maintain several dozens of headquarters and offices in certain areas of Damascus out of which Iranian and Iraqi commanders continue operating. In addition, there has been a marked rise in the number of pilgrims visiting Shi’ite holy sites around Damascus. In parallel to the decrease in Iranian military presence there has also been a rise in the military presence of Russians in the streets and markets of Damascus.

► A delegation of Iranian preachers and Qur’an reciters were dispatched during the month of Ramadan to Syria. The preachers took part in religious ceremonies in Damascus, Hama, Aleppo, Palmyra, al-Mayadin, Albu Kamal, Deir Ezzor, Nubul and Homs. The Iranian news agency Quran reported that Iran intends to expand its religious activities in Syria and establish centers for the study of the Qur’an across the country (iqna.ir, June 9).



**An Iranian Qur'an reciter during a religious ceremony in Syria
(iqna.ir, June 9, 2019)**

► On June 11, Iran released from prison the Lebanese businessman Nizar Zakka who was convicted of spying on behalf of the United States. Zakka, a resident of the United States who was detained in Iran since 2015 was accompanied on his way back to Lebanon by the Director of Lebanese General Security, Ibrahim Abbas. The Spokesman of the Iranian Judiciary, Gholam-Hossein Esmaili, stated that Zakka was released following an official request of the Lebanese President, Michel Aoun, conveyed to Iranian authorities. He added that the pardon request was approved by the judiciary following consultation of the Iranian Supreme National Security Council and with Hezbollah, taking into account that Zakka served over a third of his sentence and displayed good behavior (Fars, June 11). The Spokesman of the Iranian Supreme National Security Council, Keivan Khosravi, also stated that Zakka's release was made possible following the request of the Lebanese president and the mediation of Hezbollah Secretary General, Hassan Nasrallah. He noted that the request of the president of Lebanon was approved due to his support for the "Resistance Front" in Lebanon (Tasnim, June 11).

Iranian Involvement in Iraq

► On June 10, Iranian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mohammed Javad Zarif met with Falih Fayyad, the Iraqi National Security Adviser and head of the Popular Mobilization Units (al-Hashd al-Shaabi, the umbrella organization of Iraqi militias). The two discussed relations between the two countries, ways to expand them and latest developments in the region (ISNA, June 11).

► During his visit to the Khuzestan Province in southwestern Iran, Yahya Rahim Safavi, the Senior Military Adviser of the Supreme Leader of Iran and former IRGC Commander, stated

that Iraq and Syria strategically complement Iran and that the three countries should be connected by railway. He remarked that if it was possible to connect the railways from western Iran to Baghdad through the Kohsravi border crossing in Kermanshah or Khoramshahr in Khuzestan reaching Basra in southern Iraq, such railways would create a land bridge that would connect the countries of western Asia to the Mediterranean through Iran, Iraq and Syria. Iran could, according to Safavi, make billions of dollars from the passage of goods through this corridor. Safavi added that the alliance between Iran, Iraq and Syria could serve as an economic, political, security and defensive axis against the “Zionist regime” and the United States (IRNA, June 12).



**Yahya Rahim Safavi, the Senior Military Adviser to the Supreme Leader
(IRNA, June 12, 2019)**

► The Iranian news website, Mashregh News, affiliated with the IRGC, reported (June 11) about U.S. attempts to stymie Iranian effort to create a ground line of supply from Tehran to the Mediterranean. The website reported that recently, the U.S. suddenly halted the training U.S. were providing in the Ain al-Assad military base to fighters among the Sunni tribes of al-Anbar Province to prepare them to fight ISIS. The website alleged that the decision to halt the training is part of an American effort to destabilize security in the region to expand American military influence and thwart Iranian efforts to utilize the ground line of supply through Iran and Syria to the Mediterranean. The website also mentioned that the Americans, concerned about the activation of the land corridor by Iran, have also moved forces and military equipment from Jordan to military bases used by the Americans in al-Anbar, to ensure they are present closer to the sphere of operation of the Popular Mobilization Unit militias around the al-Qa'im border crossing between Syria and Iraq.

Iranian Involvement in the Palestinian Arena

- ▶ During the International Quds Day speeches in the Gaza Strip, senior Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad Officials expressed their gratitude toward Iran for its support for the Palestinians. A senior Hamas leader, Ismail Radwan, gave a speech at the al-Awda (Return) Camp in eastern Gaza City and thanked Iran and the “Resistance Axis” for their support for the “Resistance” (Facebook page of Ismail Radwan, May 31).
- ▶ On the occasion of Quds Day, Yahya al-Sinwar, the Head of the Political Bureau of Hamas, delivered a speech (May 30) in Gaza. The Hamas leader declared that during the 2012 conflict the Palestinian organization struck Tel Aviv for the first time with Fajr rockets provided to them by Iran. He boasted that during the 2014 conflict, the organizations struck Tel Aviv with 370 rockets, including Fajr rockets provided by Iran, and rockets manufactured locally, thanks to financial assistance from Iran (al-Mayadin, May 30).
- ▶ In a speech delivered in Gaza by Ziad Nakhla, the Secretary General of Palestinian Islamic Jihad, on the occasion of Quds Day, he declared that Iran is the only country supporting the Palestinians against the “aggression” of Israel, adding that Iranian support manifests in weaponry and knowledge Iran has transferred to the “Resistance.” He declared that the Palestinian Islamic Jihad is committed to Palestine, to Jerusalem and to the line of Khomeini, the leader of the Islamic Revolution. Al-Nakhla praised Qasem Soleimani, the Commander of the Qods Force of the IRGC, for his support and added that Soleimani personally knows most of the leaders of the “Resistance.” According to al-Nakhla, Iran continues to support the “Resistance” and thanks to this, the Resistance will continue to exist (al-Manar, May 30).
- ▶ In an event marking International Quds Day in Gaza, the event host announced that Iran had decided to provide financial assistance to the families of the fallen whose stipends were cut by the Palestinian Authority. According to him, the total sum of assistance will be \$651,000, intended for families of 1,540 fallen, whose stipends from the Palestinian Authority were halted by Ramallah. The family of a Palestinian killed while single will receive a payment of \$200, while the family of a married fallen Palestinian will receive \$600. According to the announcer, the stipends will also cover 242 individuals injured during the “Marches of Return.” He vowed that Iran will continue to take care of the injured of the “Marches of Return” in the Gaza Strip (Safa, May 30; the website of the radio station Sawt al-Quds, May 30).

► The Supreme Leader of Iran, Ali Khamenei, expressed once again his confidence in the imminent victory of the Palestinian people in the struggle against Israel. In a meeting with the ambassadors of Muslim countries on the occasion of Eid al-Fitr (June 5), Khamenei stated that the point of view of the Islamic Republic, unlike that of some old Arab leaders who believed that the Jews should be thrown into the sea, is that the Palestinian struggle must continue in the military, political and cultural arenas until the “occupiers” will succumb to the will of the Palestinian people. The Iranian leader lambasted Muslim countries that strive to reach a compromise with Israel and called on the countries of Islam to unify against “the criminal presence of the occupying enemy in Palestine” instead of fighting one another (Fars, June 5).