



Spotlight on Iran

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Overview

► As the COVID-19 pandemic continues to ravage Iran and the world, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and Shi'ite militias backed by Iran continue to entrench their presence in Syria. An Iranian military cargo plane was recently identified returning from Syria to Iran, and a new headquarters was apparently established by the IRGC, Hezbollah and the Shi'ite Iraqi militia Harakat al-Nujaba in the southern countryside of Aleppo, to prepare for a possible future campaign on Idlib. However, some of Iran's capacities are diverted to stemming the spread of the virus, for example, by employing fighters of the Afghan Fatemiyoun Brigade in Syria to sow protective masks and gloves.

► Iran welcomed the appointment the Director of the Iraqi Intelligence Service (IIS), Mustafa al-Kazemi, to the position of prime minister-designate. The spokesman of the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Iranian ambassador to Baghdad wished him success in his efforts to establish a new government, and stressed Iran's support for Iraq's sovereignty and stability. In recent weeks, Iran moved to thwart the efforts to Adnan al-Zurfi to form a government in Iraq. The visits to Baghdad of the Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council, Ali Shamkhani, and the commander of the IRGC's Qods Force, Esmail Qa'ani, were part of this effort.

► Meanwhile, Iran continues to stress the need for a complete pullout of U.S. forces from Iraq. The former Iranian Ambassador to Iraq, Hassan Danaeifar, declared in an interview that the United States has not choice but to withdraw its forces from the country, in line with the demand of the Iraqi Parliament. He assessed that the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Iraq will be completed in less than two years.

► Against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic, senior Iranian officials joined Hamas' call for the release of Palestinian prisoners held in Israeli prisons. The head of Iran's judiciary, Ibrahim Raisi, spoke with the Head of Hamas' Political Bureau, Ismail Haniyeh, and called for the release of the Palestinian prisoners. The Senior Adviser to the Speaker of the Majlis, Hossein Amir Abdollahian, met with the Palestinian ambassador to Tehran and urged the international

community to come to the assistance of the Palestinians in the struggle against the COVID-19 pandemic.

Iranian Involvement in Syria

- ▶ On April 9, Ali-Asghar Haji, the Senior Adviser of Iran's Deputy Foreign Minister for Political Affairs, spoke on the phone with the Russian Deputy Foreign Minister, Sergey Vershinin, and discussed political and military developments in Syria with him and the efforts to stymie the spread of the Corona virus. The two discussed the talks concerning the settlement of the war in Syria, as well as the situation in Yemen (IRNA, April 9).
- ▶ Trackers of flights in the Middle East identified an Iranian military cargo plane, probably used by the IRGC, which returned from Syria to Iran (Twitter account @Gerjon, April 14). Following the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, Iran has come to rely on military freighters, usually used to transfer materiel from Iran to Syria, to move medical equipment from China to Iran. In late March, Iranian flights were also detected from Tehran to Damascus, likely also shipping weapons and equipment.
- ▶ The Telegram channel of the Afghan Fatemiyoun Brigade operating under IRGC guidance in Syria posted an update (April 14) showing fighters of the Brigade producing protective masks and gloves, as part of the efforts to halt the spread of the Corona virus. According to this report, the fighters of the Division are employed in a factory producing thousands of masks and gloves daily. Some of the equipment is distributed among the fighters, while most of it is exported to Afghanistan.



**Manufacture of protective masks and gloves by Fatemiyoun Brigade fighters in Syria
(Telegram channel of the Brigade, April 12, 2020)**

- ▶ The Syrian pro-opposition website Zaman al-Wasl reported (April 13) that the IRGC, Lebanese Hezbollah and the Shi'ite Iraqi militia, Harakat al-Nujabaa, established a new headquarters in the town of Maharim in the southern countryside of Aleppo to wage a campaign northwest of

the town of Saraqib in Idlib. Earlier, the website reported that the IRGC and Hezbollah established a number of joint operations rooms and new military forward operating bases in the southern and western countryside of Aleppo and the eastern countryside of Idlib, while also reinforcing the overall military presence in the area.

► On April 14, the Adviser to the President of Iran and Chairman of the Supreme Council for Free Trade Zones, Morteza Bank, met with the Syrian Ambassador to Tehran, Adnan al-Mahmoud, and discussed with him the bolstering of joint investments between the two countries by establishing industrial zones and joint free trade zones. The ambassador highlighted during the meeting the need to increase the involvement of the private sector and trade and manufacturing companies in Iran and Syria (SANA, April 14).

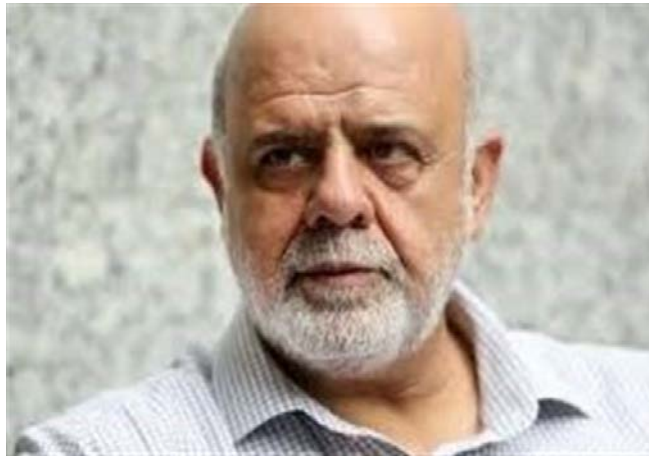


The meeting between the Syrian ambassador to Tehran and the chairman of the Iranian Supreme Council on Free Trade Zones (SANA, April 14, 2020)

Iranian Involvement in Iraq

► The Spokesman of the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Abbas Mousavi, welcomed the appointment of the Director of the Iraqi Intelligence Service, Mustafa al-Kazemi, and the Prime Minister-designate of Iraq. Mousavi claimed that Iran has always supported Iraq's independence, sovereignty, territorial integrity and political stability, and that it supports the agreements reached between the various political blocs in Iraq to task Kazemi with the formation of a new government. He wished Kazemi success in forming a government and expressed hope that the new government will meet the demands of the people and senior clerics in Iraq, and will lead to the emergence of a unified and strong Iraq. Mousavi stressed his country's willingness to collaborate with the Iraqi government in its efforts to overcome the challenges it faces and achieve the ultimate goals of Iraq's citizens (ISNA, April 9).

► The Iranian Ambassador to Baghdad, Iraj Masjedi, also expressed support to the incoming prime minister. In a post on his Twitter account (April 11), Masjedi wrote that Iran has a great deal of deference to the Iraqi constitution and political process, and that anyone who is elected in accordance with the law by the Iraqi parliament to the position of prime minister, will enjoy the support of Iran. In an interview to the IRNA news agency (April 12) Masjedi claimed that Iran did not support any candidate for the position of Iraq's prime minister and is willing to work with anyone who wins the trust of the Iraqi parliament. He added that Iran respects all of Iraq's sects and wished the incoming prime minister success in forming the government.



**The Iranian Ambassador to Baghdad, Iraj Masjedi
(Tasnim, April 12, 2020)**

► In recent weeks, Iran worked to thwart the efforts of Adnan al-Zurfi to form a new government. In March, the Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council of Iran, Ali Shamkhani, paid a visit to Baghdad and met with senior Iraqi government officials, including Mustafa al-Kazemi. In early April, the Commander of the Qods Force, Esmail Qa'ani, also paid a visit to Baghdad, in an effort to unite the Shi'ite blocs in rejecting al-Zurfi's nomination and come to an agreement regarding an alternative candidate for prime minister.

► The former Iranian Ambassador to Iraq, Hassan Danaeifar, asserted in an interview to the ILNA news agency (April 11), that the United States has no choice but to withdraw its forces from Iraq, since the Iraqi people will not allow it to violate the sovereignty of its country. He claimed that the demand of the Iraqi parliament that U.S. forces withdraw is being implemented and that American troops began removing their forces from the country. Addressing the appointment of Mustafa al-Kazemi as prime minister-designate of Iraq, Danaeifar assessed that his chances of forming a government are high, due to the support he enjoys from all parties and political currents in Iraq, including the Shi'ite, Sunnis and Kurds.

► In another interview, this one with the Tasnim news agency (April 13), Danaeifar assessed that U.S. forces will complete their withdrawal from Iraq in less than two years. Addressing the opposition by some Shi'ite militias in Iraq, chief among them Kataeb Hezbollah, to al-Kazemi's appointment as prime minister, the former ambassador remarked that there are multiple and diverse views in Iraq, and that a complete consensus can not be reached about the nomination of a prime minister, but only partial agreement, which means that not everyone is satisfied and there is a minority that is displeased with the outcome.

► The Iranian Military Attaché to Baghdad, Mostafa Moradian, met with the Iraqi Minister of Defense, Najah al-Shammari, and discussed ways to bolster military cooperation between the two countries. In the meeting, held on April 9 in the Iranian embassy in Baghdad, the two emphasized the importance of the war on terror, and particularly against ISIS cells that continue operating in Iraq. The two also discussed ways to counter the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic (Mehr, April 9).



The meeting between the Iraqi minister of defense and Iranian military attaché in Baghdad (Mehr, April 9, 2020)

► The Head of Iran's Hajj and Pilgrimage Organization, Alireza Rashidian announced that preparations and plans are being developed to renew the dispatch of Iranian pilgrims to Shi'ite holy sites in Iraq and Syria after the COVID-19 pandemic is quelled. He remarked that the organization is developing medical protocols in cooperation with the Ministry of Health and the Red Crescent organization and is coordinating through the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs with Iraq and Syria for the renewal of pilgrimages. In addition, preparations are being made to provide all the necessary services to maintain the health of the pilgrims. Meanwhile, Iraqi authorities announced that its borders with neighboring countries, including with Iran, remain closed, and no decision has been made to reopen them. The Governor of Najaf, Luay

al-Yassiri announced that the entry of pilgrims into the holy city will not be possible until the end of the COVID-19 crisis (Tasnim, April 15).

► A member of the executive board of the joint Iranian-Iraqi chamber of trade, Seyyed Hamid Hosseini, reported that due to the COVID-19 outbreak, only three of the eight customs crossing along the Iran-Iraq border are operational, allowing for the passage of between 700 to 800 trucks from Iran to Iraq daily. He remarked that the border crossings to the Iraqi Kurdistan region remain open, but that the closing of most crossings between the two countries is impacting the volume of Iranian exports to Iraq (Pana.ir, April 15).

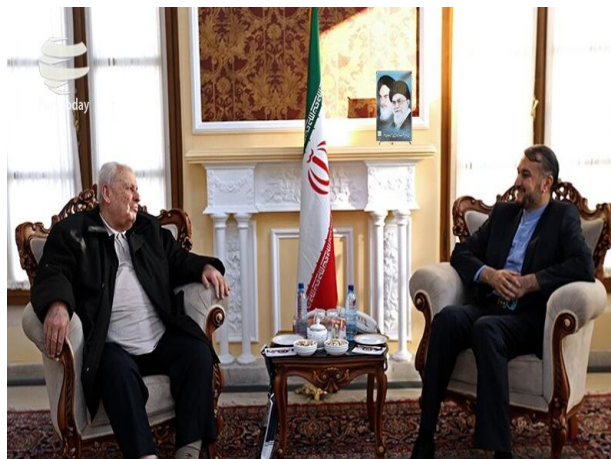
Iranian Involvement in the Palestinian Arena

► The Head of Hamas' Political Bureau, Ismail Haniyeh spoke on the phone with the Senior Adviser on International Affairs to the Supreme Leader, Ali-Akbar Velayati. Haniyeh congratulated Velayati on the occasion of the Iranian New Year and expressed his sympathy to Iran as it copes with an outbreak of the COVID-19 epidemic. Haniyeh also praised Iran's position, and particularly the position of the Supreme Leader, toward the Palestinian people. Velayati thanked Haniyeh for the call and praised the struggle of the Palestinian "resistance groups." He declared that Palestine and Jerusalem belong to the Muslim world and will continue down the path of resistance until the goals of the Palestinian people are realized (Mehr, April 5).

► On April 9, the Head of the Iranian Judiciary, Ibrahim Raisi, spoke on the phone with the Head of Hamas' Political Bureau, Ismail Haniyeh. Raisi stated that Iran is concerned about the fate of thousands of Palestinians held in Israeli prisons and the health of Gaza's residents who live in "the largest prison in the world" in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. He declared that the release of Palestinian prisoners is now more essential than ever, since they are at a heightened risk of contracting the virus. Raisi also expressed concern about the shortages in medicine, equipment and medical services in the Gaza Strip and called the limitations placed on Gaza "a crime against humanity." The head of the Iranian judiciary criticized the silence of the United Nations, human rights organizations, and countries in the region in light of Israel's actions in Gaza. According to him, this silence encourages Israel to continue carrying out crimes against the Palestinian people and Gaza residents in particular. He expressed his appreciation of Haniyeh's and Hamas' "revolutionary positions," and promised that Iran will continue its support for the Palestinians, in line with the instruction of the Supreme Leader of Iran who has

emphasized that the question of Palestine and liberation of Jerusalem is the most important issue for the Muslim world. Hanniyeh thanked Raisi for Iran's support to the Palestinian people and Gaza and stressed that the "path of resistance" will continue until victory over the Zionist and liberation of all Palestinian prisoners (Tasnim, April 9).

► Hossein Amir Abdollahian, the Senior Adviser on International Affairs to the Speaker of the Majlis, called on the international community to rally in support of the Palestinians in the campaign against the COVID-19 pandemic. In a meeting with the Palestinian Ambassador to Tehran, Salah al-Zawawi, Abdollahian warned that the "crimes of the Zionists," who maintain the closure of the Gaza and West Bank, will arouse the anger of the Palestinians and that of the "resistance." In addition, the senior Iranian official praised the contribution of the former Commander of the Qods Force of the IRGC, Qasem Soleimani, to the Palestinian struggle, adding that Soleimani always believed in the "liberation of Jerusalem." al- Zawawi expressed his appreciation to Iran's support for the Palestinians and stressed the need to continue the Palestinian struggle until the "full liberation of Palestine" (Fars, April 9).



The meeting between the adviser to the speaker of the Majlis with the Palestinian ambassador to Tehran (Quds Online, April 9, 2020).