



Iran Reengages in the Middle East to Promote Its Strategic Goals, Despite the COVID-19 and Economic Crises

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Main Argument¹

Two months after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in Iran, it appears that **Iran is returning to its routine conduct**. According to figures released by the Iranian Ministry of Health, the pandemic cost the lives of over 6,000 people, although it is likely that the real number of casualties is significantly higher than the official toll. Although the pandemic has not been halted completely, starting in early April, Iranian authorities began allowing for the gradual resumption of activities of government ministries and some businesses, and removed the limitations on travel inside the country, while adopting policies of “smart social distancing.” **Iran’s regional activities are also reverting to their normal patterns**, after several developments during March 2020 indicated that Iran was scaling down its volume of activities across the region, for example, the frequency of transfer of Iranian weaponry to Syria.



An Iranian medical crew treats a COVID-19 patient
(IRNA, April 26, 2020)

► **In Syria, Iran maintains its involvement in the political, military, and economic spheres.** A major development in the political sphere was the visit of Iranian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mohammed Javad Zarif, to Damascus on April 20, his first visit outside of Iran

¹ This report is an update to the review published by the Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center on March 25, 2020: “Initial Assessment of the impact of the COVID-19 Crisis on Iran’s Regional Activities,” accessible: <https://www.terrorism-info.org.il/en/initial-assessment-covid-19-crisis-irans-regional-activities/>

since the outbreak of the virus. **In the military arena**, the activities of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) and the Shi'ite militias operating under IRGC patronage continue. This included sending reinforcements to Idlib and Aleppo, where the Assad regime is facing jihadist and Turkish-backed rebel factions.

► In mid-April the regular activity of Iran cargo planes resumed along the Iran-Syria axis after some of the freighters were used to move medical equipment from China to Iran due to the outbreak of COVID-19. **The movement of Iranian cargo flights to Syria has stepped up significantly in recent days.** In the past two weeks, Syrian freighter planes started flying from Lattakia to Tehran, for the first time since the outbreak of the pandemic. In addition, Iran resumed dispatching ships to the Lattakia Port, after a three-months break, and also significantly increased the export of crude oil to Syria.

► **In Iraq, Iranian involvement continues as well, manifesting in an effort to preserve Iran's political, military and economic influence.** Against the backdrop of the ongoing tensions between the United States versus Iran and the Shi'ite Iraqi militias, Iran is stepping up efforts to accelerate the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Iraq, and was involved in the talks concerning the formation of a new government in Baghdad.

► In light of the escalation between American forces and Shi'ite militias in Iraq, which intensified further in mid-March, and the efforts to form a new government in Baghdad, the Commander of the IRGC's Qods Force, Esmail Qa'ani, visited Iraq in late March. His visit was held a short while after another visit to the Iraqi capital of the Secretary of the Iranian Supreme National Security Council, Ali Shamkhani. Tehran's meddling in the talks proved successful, as the Prime Minister-Designate Adnan al-Zurfi, a perceived opponent of Iranian influence in Iraq, failed in his efforts to form a government.

► **In the Persian Gulf, Iran reverted to its defiant behavior vis-à-vis the American naval forces stationed in the region.** Tensions between Iran and the United States spiked on the night of April 15, when 11 warships of the IRGC's Navy approached six American warships within a 10-meter distance before retreating. Meanwhile, Iran announced in recent weeks a significant development in its military capabilities and also successfully launched the Nour-1 military satellite into space.

In sum, it appears that the change in the patterns of Iranian activities in the region following the outbreak of the COVID-19 crisis was at most tactical and temporary, and did not reflect any compromise on the strategic goals of the Iranian regime. It appears,

therefore, that despite the deepening economic crisis, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and the assassination of Qasem Soleimani, **Iran is determined to maintain its involvement in the Middle East, and particularly in Iraq and Syria.** Iran also intends to **continue assisting Hezbollah in Lebanon to acquire precision-guided missiles, entrench its hold in the Golan Heights Front, and accelerate the withdrawal of U.S. forces from the region, with the first priority being the removal of American troops stationed in Iraq.** It is possible that Iran's policy is based on the assumption that **the United States and Israel are preoccupied with the COVID-19 crisis** (and the American administration in preparations for the presidential elections) in a way that allows Iran to maintain and even step up its regional activities **without being drawn into a military confrontation, which Iran seeks to avoid.**

► Undoubtedly, the outbreak of the epidemic dealt a serious blow to the Iranian economy, which was already at an unprecedented nadir due to the economic sanctions and collapse in the price of oil. The growing economic strains may pose a challenge to Iran's ability to finance its ongoing military activities in the Middle East, and even force it to cut back the financing to its allies and proxies operating under its patronage in the region, as it has done in the past in the face of economic constrains. Iran may also reexamine its patterns of activities and prefer, as it has done in the past, to rely more heavily on proxy organizations and Shi'ite militias rather than engaging in direct military involvement. However, in our assessment, **the economic strains on Iran are not affecting Tehran's motivation and determination to continue furthering its strategic goals** and they will not lead Iran to give up on its aims in spheres that are perceived as essential for the preservation of its national security, chief among them the nuclear program, development of long-range missiles and entrenching Iran's influence in the region.



We shall defeat Corona too
(Fars, April 12, 2020)

Iranian Activities in Syria Since Late March 2020

The COVID-19 crisis placed additional difficulties on Iranian activities in Syria, and even threatens the lives of IRGC, Hezbollah, and Iraqi Shi'ite militia personnel operating in Syria. Despite this, Iran maintained its political, military and economic involvement in Syria and reengaged in the arena in recent weeks.

► At the epicenter of Iran's activity in the **political sphere** was the visit of Iranian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mohammed Javad Zarif, to Syria, on April 20. During the visit – the first for the Iranian foreign minister since the outbreak of COVID-19 - Zarif met with Syrian President Assad and the Syrian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Walid al-Muallem. During the visit, the sides discussed developments in Syria and the region and the ongoing political negotiations process in the country. Zarif declared that the assassination of Qasem Soleimani, the former Commander of the IRGC's Qods Force will not bring about any change in Iran's support to “the resistance and war on terror in the region” (Tasnim, April 20, 2020).



**The Iranian minister of foreign affairs and Syrian president
(Tasnim, April 20, 2020)**

► **In the military arena**, the IRGC and Iranian-backed Shi'ite militia remain engaged in Syria. On April 13, the Syrian pro-opposition website Zaman al-Wasl reported 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 several joint operations rooms and in the southern and western countryside of Aleppo and the eastern countryside of Idlib. According to this report, based on a senior Syrian rebel commander, the Shi'ite militias established at least 17 new command posts, most of them in areas recaptured by these militias and the Syrian army in

battles in southern Aleppo and eastern Idlib. The source estimated that between 2,000 to 2,500 IRGC, Hezbollah and Shi'ite militia personnel operate along these frontlines (Zaman al-Wasl, April 26).

► In recent days, Syrian sources reported about an increase in the activities in the Syria-Iraq border area of Iranian-backed Shi'ite militias, and particularly the Afghan Fatemiyoun Brigade, an IRGC proxy. On April 24, Syrian opposition sources reported that **hundreds of Fatemiyoun Brigade fighters crossed into Syria and were deployed in areas across the country**, and particularly the Homs desert and the areas of Aleppo, Idlib and Deir Ezzor. According to this report, some of the fighters arrived with their families intending to settle in areas under the control of the Syrian regime and the Shi'ite militias in northern and eastern Syria (Syria TV, April 24). On April 29, the pro-opposition Syrian outlet, Ayn al-Furat, reported that about 30 military vehicles arrived from Iraq to the Albu Kamal border crossing, carrying about 100 Fatemiyoun Brigade fighters. According to this report, the fighters were deployed in positions near the Albu Kamal bridge on the banks of the Euphrates River. These positions were prepared ahead of time and reinforced with various types of weaponry.

► In addition, a Syrian opposition website reported that the Head of the IRGC's Aerospace Force, Amir-Ali Hajizadeh, visited the town of al-Qaem on the Iraq-Syria border, following which he crossed into Syria through the Albu Kamal crossing and toured the area along with Iranian officers. According to the report, all roads to Albu Kamal were blocked ahead of the visit (Sada al-Sharqiya, April 29, 202).

► However, some of Iran's military resources are still being directed to dealing with the pandemic, for example, by employing fighters of the Fatemiyoun Brigade to manufacture protective masks and gloves. The Telegram channel of the Brigade updated (April 12, 2020) that fighters of the Brigade are manufacturing protective masks and gloves as part of the efforts to stem to outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. According to this report, the fighters of the Brigade were employed in a factory producing several thousands of masks and gloves per day. Some of this personal protective equipment was distributed among the fighters, but the largest share was exported to Afghanistan.



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

► In mid-April, the movement of Iranian and Syrian freighter jets resumed along the Iran-Syria axis. Following the outbreak of COVID-19, Iranian cargo planes, including those of Fars Qeshm Air and Mahan Air, which were previously used to ferry weapons from Iran to Syria, were repurposed for transferring medical equipment from Xinjiang in China to Iran (Akhbar al-Aan, March 26, 2020).



**Shipment of medical equipment by Mahan Air
(Fars, March 20, 2020)**

► **In late March, Iranian flights were spotted between Tehran and Damascus, probably for the transfer of equipment and materiel.** Regular cargo flights along this route were resumed in mid-April. Flight watchers who track the movement of aircrafts in the Middle East identified in recent days several flights of Iranian cargo planes used by the Fars Qeshm Air airline company between Tehran and Damascus. In addition, these sources reported about the resumption of flights by Syrian cargo planes from Lattakia to Tehran, for the first time since the outbreak of COVID-19. On April 20, the Syrian Air Force's Ilyushin IL-62, which took off from the Mehrabad Air Base in Tehran, landed in Lattakia in Syria, the first such flights since March 12, 2020. On April 22, an Ilyushin IL-76 freighter of the Syrian Air Force took off to Istanbul and returned to Damascus, possibly via Lattakia. Two additional cargo runs of the

Ilyushin IL-76 of the Syrian Air Force from Damascus to Tehran and back to Damascus through Lattakia were spotted on April 27th and April 29th (FlightRadar24, April 20, April 22, April 27, April 29). Meanwhile, the Syrian Ministry of Transportation announced the renewal of international cargo flights to and from the country (the website of the Syrian Ministry of Transportation, April 20).

► **Meanwhile, the movement of cargo ships between Iran and Syria was also resumed after a three-months break.** The SHIBA container ship docked in the Lattakia Port on April 15, after a 19-day journey from the Bandar Abbas Port in Iran, traversing the journey for the first time since January 28, 2020. During its voyage through the Red Sea, the container ship approached within a distance of about 2,000 meters the Iranian general cargo ship Saviz. The SHIBA container ship is under American sanctions due to its connection to Iranian shipping lines (Akhbar al-Aan, April 26).

► Sources tracking the movement of oil tankers in the region reported that Iran significantly stepped up the export of crude oil to Syria in recent weeks. According to this report, at least six Iranian oil tankers reached the Banyas Post during the month of April, carrying 6.8 million barrels of oil (TankerTrackers; MEES, April 28).

Iranian Activities in Iraq Since Late March 2020

In Iraq, Iranian involvement continues as well, manifesting in an effort to preserve Iran's political, military and economic influence. This comes against a backdrop of ongoing tensions between the United States versus Iran and the Shi'ite Iraqi militias, the ramification of the assassination of Qasem Soleimani and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis in January 2020, and stepped up efforts by Iran and its proxies to accelerate the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Iraq, and the ongoing talks concerning the formation of a new government in Baghdad.

► In late March, Iranian media highlighted reporting on possible U.S. preparations for significant military action against pro-Iranian Shi'ite militias in Iraq. These reports were preceded by an escalation of tensions between the Shi'ite militias and U.S. forces, which culminated in a series of mortar and rocket attacks by pro-Iranian militias against bases hosting U.S. troops in Iraq. Following the reports about a possible American attack against the Shi'ite militias in Iraq, the Commander of the IRGC, Hossein Salami, warned the United States against such action. In a television interview on the occasion of IRGC Day, Salami stated that the only option the Americans have is to leave the region, since their presence in

the region harms them and the peoples of the Middle East. Salami called on the leaders of the United States to focus on ensuring the wellbeing of their own citizens who are dying of COVID-19 in New York and other American states, instead of thinking about “Hollywood scenarios” and killing citizens in Iraq (Defa’ Press, March 28, 2020).

► The Secretary of the Expediency Council, Mohsen Rezaei, also addressed the possibility of an American military strike in Iraq and claimed that any military action in Iraq is akin to an attack by ISIS, and that there is no difference between the aggression carried out by a state or a militant organization. In a tweet on his Twitter account (March 31), Rezaei wrote that all Americans must leave Iraq, and if they do not do so, the Iraqi people will force them to do so.

► Although tensions between the United State and the Shi’ite militias in Iraq subsided during April, senior Iranian officials continued to call for the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq. The Speaker of the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Abbas Mousavi, demanded the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Iraq. He claimed that U.S. military actions in Iraq are a violation of Iraqi sovereignty and contravene the official and public demand of the government, the parliament, and the Iraqi people, and may escalate the situation in the region (Tasnim, April 1, 2020). The Senior Security Adviser of the Supreme Leader of Iran and former Commander of the IRGC, Seyyed Yahya Rahim Safavi warned that if the United States ignores the demand of the Iraqi parliament to remove its forces from Iraq, it will have to face the consequences for its illegal presence in Iraq. He stated that the economic and political situation in the United States, in light of the COVID-19 outbreak and upcoming presidential elections, are hindering its ability to oversee a military campaign in the region. Safavi called on the U.S. government and military leaders to examine the repercussions of any action they decide to take, and warned that the Iraqi people, the Iraqi youth and resistance groups are willing to act against any American military action (Tasnim, April 1, 2020).

► Iran appears to be encouraged by reports in Iraq concerning progress that is being made in the talks between the Iraqi government and the U.S. administration as part of the strategic dialogue between the two countries concerning the gradual withdrawal of U.S. forces from Iraq. Tehran was also pleased with the announcement of the Pentagon about the redeployment of U.S. forces in Iraq, including the evacuation of three small bases and concentration of forces in larger bases. Iran has avoided, however, direct action against U.S. forces in Iraq since January 2020, which may result in an American military retaliation against Iranian targets.

► In light of growing tensions in Iraq and the ongoing talks concerning the formation of a new government in Baghdad, Arab media outlets reported that in late March, a senior Iranian delegation, led by the Commander of the Qods Force of the IRGC, Esmail Qa'ani, arrived in Baghdad. According to several reports, Qa'ani met with the heads of the Shi'ite blocs in the Iraqi parliament, Hadi al-Ameri, Nouri al-Maliki and Omar al-Hakim, in an effort to find an alternative compromise candidate for the Iraqi premiership, due to the opposition of some Iraqi Shi'ite factions and Iran to the nomination of Adnan al-Zurfi for prime minister (al-Marsad news, March 31; al-Akhbar, April 1). Shortly prior to this, the Secretary of the Iranian Supreme National Security Council also visited Baghdad and met with senior Iraqi officials, including leaders of the various political blocs. Through its involvement in the political negotiations in Iraq, Tehran achieved a significant victory, after Adnan al-Zurfi failed in his effort to form a government, and the task of forming a new government was assigned to Mustafa al-Kazimi.

► On the economic front, Iran continues to strive to reopen all the border crossings between Iran and Iraq to allow for the free movement of Iranian goods to Iraq and thus ensure Iran's vital economic interests. The Head of the Joint Iranian-Iraqi Chamber of Commerce, Yahya al-Eshaq, stated in a media interview that the southern border crossings between Iraq and Iran, which were closed due to the COVID-19 outbreak, remain shuttered, since Iraqi authorities are yet to ensure the required measures are in place to allow the crossings to reopen without endangering public health, but that the border crossings between Iran and the Iraqi Kurdistan region in northern Iraq are open and allow for the passage of between 700 to 800 trucks daily. He added that the two countries are in dialogue in an effort to ensure that the crossings are open for at least two days per week to allow for the movement of Iranian goods. (Tasnim, April 29, 2020).

Iranian Activities in the Persian Gulf and Augmenting of Its Military Capabilities

In the Persian Gulf too, Iran reverted to its defiant behavior vis-à-vis the American naval forces stationed in the region. Tensions between Iran and the United States spiked on the night of April 15, when 11 warships of the IRGC's Navy approached six American warships within a 10-meter distance before retreating. This incidence was preceded by several other incidents in the Persian Gulf involving Iranian vessels and ships of the U.S. Navy, as well as

the takeover (April 13) by Iranian forces of a Chinese oil tanker, which was towed to the Bandar-e Jask Port and released shortly after.



**IRGC vessels near a U.S. Navy ship in the Persian Gulf
(Fars, April 19, 2020)**

- ▶ Following the significant escalation on April 15, U.S. Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, announced that the U.S. administration is examining how to respond to the incident. The U.S. President, Donald Trump, tweeted on his account (April 22) that he ordered U.S. naval forces to shoot at any Iranian ship harassing them.
- ▶ In response to the American statements, the Commander of the IRGC, Hossein Salami announced that Iranian vessels will open fire at any American ship that threaten their security in the Gulf. He declared that Iran is determined to use all resources at its disposal to protect its territorial waters and sovereignty, and that the Iranian response to any American action against the IRGC will be decisive, crushing, and quick. He blamed the U.S. for the April 15 incident (Tasnim, April 23). The Commander of the IRGC's Navy, Ali-Reza Tanksiri, also addressed the growing tensions in the Gulf, warning that the Naval Force of the IRGC possesses anti-ship missiles with a range of about 700 kilometers (Tasnim, April 20, 2020).
- ▶ Iran announced a further upgrade in its military capabilities. The Commander of the Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV) Unit of the IRGC's Ground force, Akbar Karimlou, announced that the Unit will soon begin using new Fortos long-range UAVs, which can operate for a range of up to 2,000 kilometers. The commander also reported that the IRGC intends to update the capabilities of the Qods Mohajer-6 UAV, which is currently being used by the IRGC, by upgrading the capacity of its motor (Tasnim, April 26).
- ▶ On April 22, the IRGC launched into space the Nour-1 military satellite. Following the successful launch, the IRGC's Commander, Salami, announced that the launch improves Iran's defensive capabilities and is an enormous achievement for the IRGC, which can expand

the realm of strategic intelligence, electronic warfare and intelligence warfare (Fars, April 22, 2020)

► It should be noted that the COVID-19 outbreak is being exploited by the IRGC on the domestic arena to increase its involvement in running the response to the crisis and assisting the sick, for example by sanitizing streets, establishing hospitals, carrying out tests to detect the virus, and supplying medical assistance, logistical support and manpower. This is part of an ongoing effort of the organization to expand its role in domestic affairs, attempt to maintain their domestic political and economic interests, and improve their public image, which was significantly damaged due to their role in suppressing popular protest in Iran over the past two years and the accidental downing of the Ukrainian passenger plane by the IRGC in January 2020.



**A field hospital established by the IRGC in Gilan Province
(Mashreq News, March 14, 2020)**