



Spotlight on Iran

May 17, 2020 - May 31, 2020

Overview

- ▶ Senior Iranian officials denied reports about alleged agreements between Tehran and Moscow concerning deposing the Syrian President, Bashar al-Assad. A senior adviser to the speaker of the Majlis called these reports “a big lie and a game of the American and Zionist media.” The spokesman of the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs declared that the ties between Iran and Syria are strategic and that only the Syrian people will determine the future of their government.
- ▶ In a rare reference to the extent of Iranian support to Syria in recent years, the outgoing chairman of the Majlis’ National Security and Foreign Policy Committee, declared that Iran provided Syria between 20 to 30 billion dollars and that it should demand those sums back.
- ▶ Iran continues to closely follow developments in Iraq following the formation of the new government headed by Mustafa al-Kazimi. Of particular concern are reports about an understanding reached during the visit to Saudi Arabia of the Iraqi minister of finance concerning Riyadh’s willingness to provide Iraq with a three billion dollar loan and provide it with a greater amount of electricity and a reduced price than currently provided by Iran.
- ▶ Due to the outbreak of COVID-19, International Qods Day was marked in Iran through propaganda on media outlets and online rather than public rallies. In a speech marking the day, the Supreme Leader of Iran, Ali Khamenei, repeated his well-known positions on Israel, which it called “a cancerous tumor” and a “virus,” and insisted that it must be fought until its eradication. In two recent interviews, the Secretary General of Palestinian Islamic Jihad, Ziad Nakleh, praised Iran’s assistance to bolstering the “resistance” including the transfer of weapons to Gaza.

Iranian Involvement in Syria

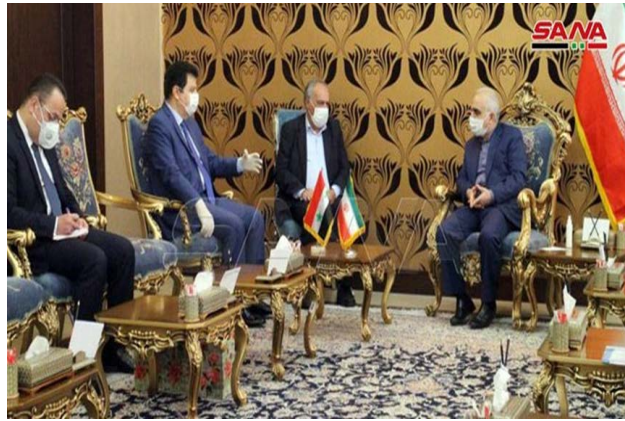
- The Senior Adviser to the Speaker of the Majlis on International Affairs, Hossein Amir Abdollahian, denied the reports about an alleged agreement between Iran and Russia to bring about the removal of the Syrian President, Bashar al-Assad, from power. In a tweet on his Twitter account (May 17) Abdollahian wrote that Assad is the legitimate president of Syria and the great leader of the war on terror in the Arab world. According to him, the rumors about the Iranian-Russian agreement to depose Assad from power is “a big lie and a game of the Zionist and American media.” He stressed that Iran supports the sovereignty, national unity and territorial integrity of Syria.
- In an interview to the TV channel al-Alam (May 17), Abdollahian described the relationship between Iran and Syria as strategic, adding that the Iranian “advisers” came to Syria based on the invitation of the Syrian government, and they continue to operate along the Syrian armed forces and the Russian air force in the war on terror. Therefore, there is no justification for reducing the presence of Iranian forces in the country, as long as it is needed for maintaining the country’s security.



Hossein Amir Abdollahian
(Al-Alam, May 17, 2020)

- During the interview, Abdollahian also addressed developments in Iraq, stating that Iran welcomes the formation of the new government in Baghdad. He denied reports about direct or indirect contact between Tehran and Washington concerning the formation of the Iraqi government. He claimed that the support expressed by the United States to al-Kazimi’s government is not real, and that the Americans are acting to advance their own interests and not Iraq’s. Addressing the Palestinian issue, the adviser to the speaker of the Majlis expressed Iran’s unending support for the Palestinians, declaring that it will continue despite American pressures, until the liberation of Palestine.

- ▶ The Spokesman of the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Abbas Mousavi, also denied the reports about agreements reached between Iran and Russia concerning the possibility of removing President Assad from power. During his weekly press conference, Mousavi stated that the relationship between Iran and Syria is close and strategic and that Iran or any other country can not decide for the Syrian people its future government (Entekhab, May 18).
- ▶ The Iranian news website Mashregh News, reported (May 27) that Iranian unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) recently killed two commanders of the Syrian opposition. According to this report, Hisham Abu Ahmed a Commander with National Liberation Front and Maher Kojak, a commander in the Free Syrian Army were killed in recent weeks in attacks carried out by a Sahed-129 UAV and a Mohajed-6 UAV.
- ▶ The outgoing Chairman of the Majlis' National Security and Foreign Policy Committee, Heshmatollah Falahatpisheh, stated in an interview to the Iranian daily E'temad (May 20) that Iran provided Syria between 20 to 30 billion dollars and that it must demand that money back.
- ▶ On May 23, the Iranian Minister of Economy, Farhad Dejpasand, met with the Syrian Ambassador to Tehran, Adnan Mahmoud, and discussed measures to expand economic ties and investments between the two countries. The two decided to continue taking steps to realize the agreements signed between the two countries concerning the establishment of a joint Iranian-Syrian free trade zone (SANA, May 23). It should be mentioned that last month, an adviser to the president of Iran and the Chairman of the Supreme Council on Free Trade Zones, Morteza Bank, met with the Syrian ambassador to Tehran and discussed bolstering joint investments of the two countries by establishing common industrial and free trade zones. Bank stressed the willingness of Iran and Iranian companies, including private firms, to cooperate with Syria in the realm of free trade zones to further the trade cooperation between the two countries (SANA, April 14).



The meeting between the Iranian minister of the economy and the Syrian ambassador to Tehran (SANA, April 14, 2020)

Iranian Involvement in Iraq

- ▶ On May 18, the President of Iran, Hasan Rouhani, spoke on the phone with the President of Iraq, Barham Salih. President Rouhani stated political stability in Iraq is of paramount importance to the region and called for expanding economic and trade ties between the two countries, to overcome the problems facing them, including the drop in the prices of oil, the COVID-19 pandemic, security challenges and American meddling in the domestic affairs of countries of the region. He emphasized Iran's support for Iraq and its sovereignty. The Iraqi president also stressed the importance of the relations between the two countries and expressed opposition to the meddling of foreign states in his country's affairs (Asr-e Iran, May 18).
- ▶ On May 23, the outgoing Speaker of the Majlis, Ali Larijani, spoke on the phone with the Speaker of the Iraqi Parliament, Mohammad al-Halbousi, and congratulated him on the occasion of Eid al-Fitr. Larijani stated during the call that Iran is prepared to bolster economic cooperation with Iraq (ISNA, May 23).
- ▶ Meanwhile, Iran continues to track the ongoing talks between Iraq and Saudi Arabia, in light of the visit of the Iraqi Minister of Finance, Ali Allawi, to Riyadh. Following the visit, it was reported that Saudi Arabia intends to grant Iraq a three billion dollar loan and provide Iraq with electricity in greater quantity and for a lower price than the electricity currently being provided to Iraq from Iran. A commentary published on the website Khabar Online (May 24) argued that Saudi Arabia is determined to use the formation of the new government to bolster its ties with Iraq and the expense of the relationship between Iran and Iraq. The author assessed that the financial challenges faced by Iraq will be exploited by Riyadh to

improve the ties between the two countries. However, the article concluded, due to Saudi Arabia's conduct vis-a-vis Iraq during the years of the campaign against ISIS and the competition between the two countries in the oil market, the Saudis have never been considered by Iraq as partners on whom they can count.

► On May 24, the Iranian Ambassador to Baghdad, Iraj Masjedi, and the Iranian Military Attache to Baghdad, Mostafa Moradian, met with the Iraqi Minister of Interior, Othman al-Ghannami, and spoke about maintaining cooperation between the two countries in the war on terror, the COVID-19 crisis, consular affairs and the closure of the border crossings connecting the two countries. The Iraqi minister of interior declared that his country is willing to maintain cooperation with Tehran in various spheres, including the struggle against terrorism (IRNA, May 24). In addition, Ambassador Masjedi met with Nabil Abd a-Sahab, the Iraqi Minister of Higher Education and Scientific Research. Masjedi expressed Iran's willingness to expand scientific and academic cooperation between the two countries (IRNA, May 24).



The meeting between the Iranian ambassador and military attache to Baghdad and the Iraqi minister of interior (IRNA, May 24, 2020)

Iranian Involvement in the Palestinian Arena

► In a recorded speech on the occasion of International Qods Day, the Supreme Leader of Iran repeated his well-known positions about Israel and the need to continue the struggle against it until its eradication. Khamenei proclaimed that “the occupation of Palestine and the establishment of the cancerous tumor of Zionism” is the gravest crime against humanity in modern history. He criticized the abnegation by most Arab countries of their responsibility toward the Palestinian struggle and stressed the central role Iran has been playing in the struggle against Israel since the Islamic Revolution. He claimed that the “Resistance camp” is

growing stronger and stronger, while the camp of oppression and “arrogance” is growing weaker by the day. Israel, which managed to defeat two Arab armies within days [in the 1967 war] is being forced to withdraw and acknowledge its defeat by Hezbollah and Lebanon and Palestinian organizations in Gaza. Khamenei stressed that the goal of the struggle is the liberation of all Palestinian lands from the river to the sea, and returning all Palestinians to their homeland. He argued that the country of the West and international organizations can not be relied upon in the struggle for Palestinian rights, but only on the internal forces in the Muslim world. He again rejected any possibility of normalization with Israel, and declared that similarly to how the existence of the Corona virus can not be accepted, neither should be “virus of Zionism” and that it should be fought until it is eradicated. Khamenei called to expand the struggle in the Palestinian territories and provide whatever possible assistance to the Palestinian fighters. According to him, when Iran reached the conclusion that what the Palestinians are missing is weapons, it made the necessary preparations and the result was a change in the balance of power in Palestine (Fars, May 22). Due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the mass rallies held annually were not conducted across Iran this year, and International Qods Day was marked mostly through online and media propaganda.

► On May 18, the plenum of the Iranian parliament (the Majlis) passed an anti-Israeli bill. The legislation bans any political, intelligence, cultural or economic cooperation with the “Zionist regime,” directly or indirectly, and prohibits the use of Israeli software and hardware and obligates the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to establish a “virtual embassy or consulate” representing Iran in Palestine. The legislation also imposes heavy penalties on those violating the law. The original bill included an article prohibiting meetings between Iranian and Israeli athletes, but it was dropped due to fears that it will lead to Iran’s expulsion from international competitions (Tasnim, May 18).



A poster published on the website of the Supreme Leader of Iran on the occasion of Qods Day.

Source: the website of the Supreme Leader, May 19

► On the occasion of International Qods Day, in an interview to the Lebanese TV channel, al-Mayadin (May 18), which is affiliated with Hezbollah, the Secretary General of Palestinian Islamic Jihad, Ziad al-Nakhleh, declared that Iran is playing a significant role in bolstering the “Resistance.” He remarked that the Iranian military assistance continues to reach the organization and that Iran assists the “Resistance” with every opportunity it gets. According to him, Iran’s mere opposition to the American and Zionist policies are a significant form of assistance. Al-Nakhleh praised Qasem Soleimani, who realized Iran’s support for the “Resistance” and mentioned that upon his death, the Palestinians lost a man with whom they have worked for many years, who played a great and prominent role. He stressed, however, that Iran’s position has not changed after his death, and in fact his killing only increased Iran’s resolve to support “Resistance” movements in the region. Al-Nakleh stated that Soleimani’s successor, Esmail Qa’ani, played a central role in supporting the “Resistance,” back when he served as Soleimani’s deputy, and now his importance has increased.

► In another interview, al-Nakhle stated that the connection between the Qods Force of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) and the “Resistance” has existed for a long time, and predates the appointment of Soleimani to the position of the commander of the force (in late 1997). According to him, Soleimani played a key role in assisting and bolstering the “Resistance,” mentioning that Soleimani personally tracked all matters, including the matter of operatives to left for training, and oversaw the transfer of weaponry into the Gaza Strip. Al-Nakhleh added that Soleimani turned the Palestinian revolution from a collection of military factions to a strong military that possesses all types of weaponry and all the capabilities (Palestine al-Youm, May 21).

► On the occasion of International Qods Day, the Lebanese TV channel al-Mayadin revealed (May 19), a letter sent by the Commander of the IRGC's Qods Force, Qasem Soleimani, prior to his assassination in January 2020, to the Head of Hamas' Military Wing, Mohammad Deif. In the letter, Soleimani called Deif "the brave living martyr," and stressed that Iran will not abandon Palestine to its own devices, regardless of the tightening of pressures and siege. He wrote that the support for Palestine is a source of honor and pride for Iran, and that it will never give up on this religious duty. "The friends of Palestine and the friends of Iran and the enemies of Palestine and the enemies of the Iranians," wrote Soleimani.



**The letter sent by Soleimani to Mohammad Deif
(al-Mayadin, May 19, 2020)**