



# Spotlight on Iran

July 12, 2020 - July 26, 2020

## Overview

- ▶ For the first time since signing an agreement for military and security cooperation with Syria on July 8, Iranian officials made comments with regards to the agreement. Under the deal, Iran will provide Syria with advanced air defense systems. The spokesman of the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated that the ongoing military cooperation between the two countries is particularly important at the current moment, when Syria is facing “external aggression and terrorism.” The spokesman of the Iranian government declared that the agreement proves that the two countries are standing united in one front in the war on terror in the region. Iranian media provided extensive coverage of the agreement’s signing and presented it as evidence of Iran’s enduring commitment to Syria and the “resistance front”, as a step that will result in a change in the balance of power between Israel and Syria and as a message to Israel and the United States in light of the ongoing Israeli strikes in Syria and the intensification of American economic pressure on Syria.
- ▶ The spokesman of the Iranian Armed Forces threatened that if Israel persists with its “criminal acts,” it will experience Iran’s mighty response. In addressing the reports about Iranian casualties in Israeli strikes in Syria in recent years, the spokesman claimed that since Iran began dispatching “advisers” to Syria nine years ago, a total of eight Iranians have been killed in Israeli strikes in Syria, seven of them in the IDF strike on the Syrian T4 air base in April 2018.
- ▶ At the center of Iranian political efforts over the past week were the first visit of the Iraqi Prime Minister, Mustafa al-Kazimi, to Tehran, and the visit of the Iranian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mohammad Javad Zarif, to Baghdad. During his visit, the Iraqi prime minister with senior Iranian officials, chief among them Supreme Leader Khamenei, President Rouhani, the speaker of the Majlis and the secretary of the Supreme National Security Council. Both sides stressed their desire to promote relations between the two countries, particularly in the economic sphere. During his meeting with al-Kazimi, the Supreme Leader declared that Iran

does not intend to meddle in Iraqi domestic affairs, or its relationship with the United States. Tehran does expect, however, that Baghdad recognize the grave consequences of the ongoing presence of American forces in Iraq, and will seek to remove them. During his visit to Iraq, Foreign Minister Zarif met with senior Iraqi officials, commander of the Shia Iraqi militias and the leaders of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

► The Israeli General Security Service (Shin Bet) uncovered and arrested a cell of the Palestinian Popular Front, which intended to carry out attacks with Iranian financing and involvement.

## Iranian Involvement in Syria

► On July 13, the Spokesman of the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Abbas Mousavi, issued a first statement on the Syrian-Iranian agreement signed on July 8, which committed both countries to expanding military and security cooperation. Under the agreement, Iran is set to provide Syria with advanced air defense systems: a long-range surface-to-air missile system of the Bavar-373 model (an Iranian copy of the Russian S-300 systems), and the Khordad-3 mid-range surface-to-air missile system, and also to improve the performance of the Russia air defense systems operating in Syria under the guidance of Russian advisers. Mousavi commented that the military cooperation between Iran and Syria is hardly a new development, and that the two countries have maintained political, economic, security and military ties for many years. He remarked that the military cooperation between the two countries is particularly important at the current stage, when Syria is facing “external aggression and terrorism” under the guidance of global and regional powers. Mousavi stressed that Iran’s presence in Syria is predicated on the invitation of the Syrian government, and that the expansive cooperation between the two countries in all fields will persist until the defeat of the “terrorist groups” operating in the country (ISNA, July 13).

► Ali Rabiei, the Spokesman of the Iranian government, declared that the signing of accord on military and security cooperation between Iran and Syria proves that the two countries are standing in one united front in the war on terror in the region. He remarked that the campaign against terrorism has not concluded, and without increasing the military might of the “resistance front,” the terrorists may return to the region. Rabiei added that although the agreement focuses on the military, security and technological cooperation between the two countries, economic cooperation is on the agenda too. He mentioned that during his

meetings in Syria, the Chief of Staff of Iran's Armed Forces, Mohammad Hossein Baqeri, also discussed the participation of Iranian firms and experts from Iran's armed forces in the economic reconstruction of Syria (Mehr, July 14).



**The meeting between the Iranian chief of staff of the armed forces and the Syrian President Assad (Fars, July 10, 2020).**

► Iranian media outlets provided extensive coverage of the signing of the agreement, which it presented as testament to Iran's enduring commitment to Syria and the "resistance front." Iranian media also portrayed the deal as a step that will result in a shift in the balance of power between Israel and Syria, and as a message to Israel and the United States in light of the continuous Israeli strikes in Syria and intensification of American economic pressure on Syria. In a commentary published by the website *Asr-e Iran* (July 12), the author stated that the most important component of the deal is the agreement concerning bolstering Syria's air defense systems by Iran, which means a direct confrontation with Israel. Syria alone does not have the capacity to deal with the ongoing Israeli strikes, prevent them or retaliate against them, which led Israel to intensify its attacks against targets used by Iran, forces supported by it and Lebanese Hezbollah. If Iran manages to upgrade Syria's air defense systems and provide Damascus with its capabilities relating to missiles and air defense, the balance of power between Syria and Israel is to be altered. In addition, the augmentation of the Syrian systems by Iran may serve as a model for other countries in the region, which may express interest in Iranian military assistance.

► The Head of the Center for Strategic Studies and International Relations in Tehran, Seyyed Amir Mousavi, stated in an interview to the ISNA news agency (July 12) that the agreement concerning military and security cooperation between Iran and Syria should have been signed even earlier. He stated that although most of the details of the agreement are yet to be published and remain confidential, the agreement will have a significant impact on

developments in the Middle East. According to him, placing Iranian air defense systems in Syria may engender substantive changes in the regional balance of power and provide Syria with strategic military capabilities. He added that by signing the agreement, Iran was able to “crack” the American Caesar Act and proved that it is committed to its allies, and that the United States is unable to create a rift between Iran and its partners, including Syria and Lebanon.

► The Mehr news agency (July 12) presented the agreement as a manifestation of the strategic depth of the relationship between Iran and Syria. In a commentary published by the agency, the author argues that one of the central goals of the pressures brought to bear against Iran in recent months was to force it to withdraw from Syria and allow the “Zionists” to harm the “axis of resistance.” The signing of the strategic agreement between Tehran and Damascus serves as a crushing blow to the maximum pressure strategy brought to bear on Iran and the Caesar Act, which is intended to thwart cooperation between Syria and other countries.

► The website Nour News, which is affiliated to the Supreme National Security Council of Iran, assessed (July 14) that the importance of the agreement stems from its role in increasing Syria’s capability to counter the Israeli strikes, and to expose the lies of the propaganda of Israel, the West and some Arab countries, which in recent months has tried to circulate a false narrative about an alleged agreements between Russia and the United States concerning an Iranian withdrawal from Syria. The agreement proves that the long-term cooperation between Iran and Syria will continue, and that the uninterrupted support for the “resistance front” is at the top of the agenda for the Syrian government, which remains committed to its strategic partnership with Iran. In addition, the agreement provides further proof of Iran’s efforts to bolster the defensive capabilities of the countries of the region, in an effort to pave the way for the removal of forces of foreign countries from the region.

► On July 16, the President of Iran, Hassan Rouhani, spoke on the phone with the President of Russia, Vladimir Putin. During the call, the two leaders discussed bilateral relations, the future of the Iranian nuclear accord and developments in Syria. President Rouhani stressed the need to maintain cooperation between Iran, Russia and Turkey as part of the Astana Process concerning the settlement of the crisis in Syria (Fars, July 16).

► The Spokesman of the Iranian Armed Forces, Abolfazl Shekarchi, warned that if the “Zionists” persist with their “criminal acts,” they will experience the wrath of Iran and the “resistance axis.” Shekarchi addressed reports recently published in Israeli and Western

media alleging that hundreds or thousands of Iranians have been killed in Israeli strikes in Syria. He rejected these reports, claiming they are fabrications. According to him, over the past nine years, since Iran began dispatching advisers to Syria as part of the “campaign against the terrorists of ISIS,” a total of eight Iranians were killed in the Israeli strikes on Syria, seven of them in the IDF strike on the T4 air base on April 9, 2018 (Tasnim, July 16).



**The Spokesman of the Iranian Armed Forces, Abolfazl Shekarchi  
(Tasnim, July 16, 2020).**

► The Spokesman of the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Abbas Mousavi, welcomed the election of the new Syrian parliament, which were held on July 19. He remarked that Iran hopes that the parliamentary elections will serve as a positive step toward peace, stability and promotion of an intra-Syrian dialogue (Tasnim, July 20).

## Iranian Involvement in Iraq

► On July 19, the Iranian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mohammad Javad Zarif, arrived for an official visit in Baghdad. During his visit, Zarif met with the Iraqi President, Barham Salih; the Iraqi Prime Minister, Musrafa al-Kazimi; the Iraqi Foreign Minister, Fuad Hussein; the Speaker of Parliament, Mohammed al-Halbousi; the Head of the Judiciary, Faik Zaidan, and discussed enhancing bilateral relations, particularly in the economic sphere, continuing the campaign against ISIS’ terrorism in Iraq and cooperation to fend off the COVID-19 outbreak. In addition, Zarif met with Faleh al-Fayyad, the commander of the Popular Mobilization Units (al-Hashd al-Shaabi, the umbrella organization of the Shia militias in Iraq), with Hadi al-Ameri, the leader of the al-Fath political bloc that unites the Shia militias, with Omar al-Hakim, the Head of the Iraqi Shia National Wisdom bloc, and the leaders of the Kurdistan region in northern Iraq. Upon his landing in Baghdad, Zarif paid his respects to Qasem Soleimani and Abu Mahdi

al-Muhandis at the location where they were assassinated by the United States in January 2020.

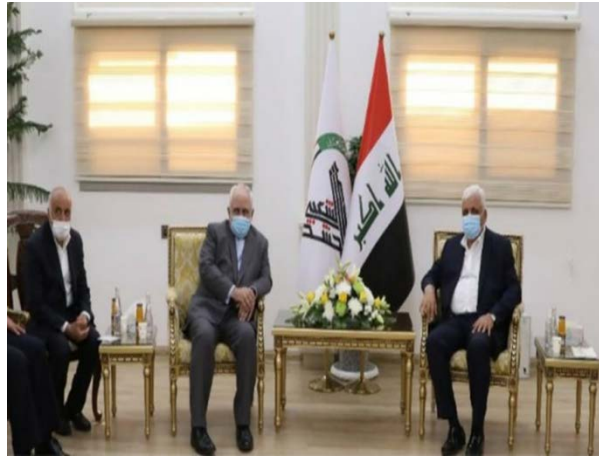
► Upon his arrival in Baghdad, Zarif declared that he is pleased to be visiting Baghdad for the first time since the formation of the new Iraqi government and ahead of the visit of the Iraqi prime minister to Tehran. At a joint press conference with the Iraqi foreign minister, Zarif declared that the assassination in January 2020 of the Commander of the Qods Force of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), and of the Commander of Kataeb Hezbollah, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, by the United States caused a significant setback to the war on terror. He remarked that Iran sees great importance in preventing violations of Iraq's sovereignty, and wishes to see a strong and confident Iraq, which maintain good ties with all of its neighbors and plays a positive role in the region. He added that Iran and Iraq maintain strong economic ties, including in the spheres of energy and trade, despite the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. He expressed hope that the volume of trade between the two countries could be increased to \$20 billion annually. The Iraqi foreign minister stated at the press conference that his country wishes to maintain balanced relations with all of its neighbors, and concurred with his Iranian counterpart with regards to the need to preserve Iraqi sovereignty (Fars, July 19).

► In the meeting with the Iraqi prime minister, Zarif stated that Iran sees al-Kazimi's visit to Tehran as marking a new stage in the bilateral cooperation of the two countries. Al-Kazimi stressed the importance of ties between Iran and Iraq and the need to expand them in various spheres to serve the interests of both countries, as well as to increase the security of the region (Fars, July 19).



**The meeting between the Iranian minister of foreign affairs with the Iraqi prime minister (Fars, July 19, 2020).**

► In his meeting with the Commander of the Popular Mobilization Units (PMU, al-Hashd al-Shaabi), Falah al-Fayyad, the Iranian minister of foreign affairs discussed the relationship between Iran and the Shia militias in Iraq, the ramifications of the assassination of Soleimani and al-Muhandis, and the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq (Fars, July 19).



**The meeting of the Iranian minister of foreign affairs with the commander of the Popular Mobilization Units (Fars, July 19, 2020).**

► On July 21, the Iraqi Prime Minister, Mustafa al-Kazimi, arrived for a visit to Tehran, his first official visit since being elected as prime minister in May 2020. During the visit, al-Kazimi met with senior Iranian regime officials, chief among them the Supreme Leader of Iran, Ali Khamenei, President Hassan Rouhani, the Speaker of the Majlis, Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf, and the Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council, Ali Shamkhani. The Iraqi prime minister was accompanied on his visit by senior politicians and economic figures. According to the Lebanese newspaper al-Akhbar (July 22), which has good access to Hezbollah sources, al-Kazimi also met in Tehran with the Commander of the IRGC's Qods Force, Esmail Qa'ani.

► At a joint press conference of the Iranian president and Iraqi prime minister, President Rouhani stated that the two countries will seek to expand their trade to an annual volume totaling in \$20 billion. The two countries will also work to implement all agreements signed between them during Rouhani's visit to Baghdad in March 2019. He mentioned that Iran is willing to stand by Iraq to ensure the stability of Iraq and the region and to provide it with medical equipment in light of the COVID-19 outbreak. The Iraqi prime minister stated that his visit is intended to enhance bilateral ties in light of the challenges facing them, and particularly the COVID-19 pandemic and the collapse in the global prices of oil. He added that the Iraqi people wish to maintain excellent ties with Iran and cooperate with it, based on the principle of non-interference in the domestic affairs of both states. He thanked Iran for the

assistance it offered to Iraq in the campaign against ISIS, adding that Iraq will not forget Iran's support for the struggle against terrorism, and this is why it has assisted Iran to overcome the economic challenges it is facing. He added that Iraq will not allow its soil to become a staging ground for any threat to Iran (IRNA, July 21).



**The meeting of the Iraqi prime minister with the Iranian president  
(Fars, July 21, 2020).**

► During the visit between the Iraqi prime minister with the Supreme Leader of Iran (his first with foreign guests since the outbreak of COVID-19 in Iran about five months ago), Khamenei claimed that Iran has never had the intention and it does not currently harbor the intention to meddle in Iraq's domestic affairs. He averred that Iran wishes to see a strong and independent Iraq that maintains its territorial integrity and unity. He remarked that the position of the United States with regards to Iraq is completely contrary to that of Iran, since according to him, Washington opposes a strong and independent Iraq. He claimed that the United States does not see great importance with regards to the identity of the Iraqi prime minister, since it wishes to establish a government that will be similar to that of Paul Bremer, who served as the high commissioner in Iraq after the U.S. occupation of the country in 2003. Khamenei added that Iran does not intervene in the relationship between Iraq and the United States, but expects Iraq to recognize that the presence of the United States in any country is a source of corruption, destruction and ruin, and that it will seek to remove the Americans from its soil. He stressed Iran's support for al-Kazimi's government and called for expanding ties between the two countries, despite the opposition of the United States. Khamenei added that Iran will never forget the killing of Soleimani by the United States and will strike it in a similar manner (Fars, July 21).





**The meeting between the Iraqi prime minister and supreme leader of Iran (the website of the supreme leader, July 21, 2020).**

► On the eve of al-Kazimi’s visit to Tehran, the Tasnim news agency, which is affiliated with the IRGC, published a commentary titled “what expectations does Tehran have of al-Kazimi?” (July 20). The article stated that Iran expects that the prime minister of Iraq will maintain the policy of his predecessor, Adel Abdul Mahdi, especially when it comes to the relationship between his country and Iran. In the economic sphere, Iran wishes to expand trade with Iraq to an annual volume of trade of \$20 billion, and expects Iraq to facilitate the movement of goods through border crossings, which were negatively impacted by the American sanctions and the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Iran also expects Iraq to develop a mechanism to settle its debt to Iran. In the political arena, Tehran expects the Iraqi prime minister to advance the implementation of the decision of the Iraqi parliament with regards to the withdrawal of American forces from Iraq, and to assist it in tamping down the tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia, by conveying a message to Riyadh that Saudi Arabia’s foreign policy in recent years has destabilized the region.

► The Iranian Ambassador to Baghdad, Iraj Masjedi, announced that Iran sent a tonne of medical equipment to Iraq to assist it in dealing with the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. The assistance was delivered while the Iranian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mohammad Javad Zarif, was visiting Baghdad. Masjedi remarked that the health ministries of both countries are maintaining a good degree of cooperation in responding to the public health crisis (IRNA, July 19).

## Iranian Involvement in the Palestinian Arena

► On July 21, the Israeli General Security Service (Shin Bet) declassified information about a joint operation with the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) that exposed and arrested members of a militant cell, which operated under the guise of a civilian organization named “al-Shabbab al-

Qawmi al-Araby” (the nationalist Arab youth). According to the Shin Bet, the work of the cell was unraveled during the investigation of Yazan Abu Saleh, a member of the Palestinian Popular Front, a resident of the town of Arabeh in the West Bank. In the interrogation, Abu Saleh provided information about his involvement in planning attacks on Israeli targets and exposed his ties to an organization that operates a military wing in Syria named “al-Haras al-Qawmi al-Araby” (the national Arab guard). In light of the findings of Abu Salah’s interrogation, his cousin, Mohammad Abu Salah, a resident of Bir Zeit, was also arrested. He in turn provided information that the organization participated in training courses with Iranians, as well as members of Hezbollah and the Syrian Army. The organization is headed by As’ad al-’Ameli (code-named “Zulfiqar), who operates out of Lebanon and serves as the point of contact of the Palestinian group with Iran and Hezbollah (Ynet, July 21).

► On July 21, the former Iranian President, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, met in his office with the Palestinian Ambassador to Tehran, Salah al-Zawai. In the meeting, the Palestinian ambassador reviewed before the former Iranian president developments in the Palestinian arena and the Israeli annexation plan in line with the Deal of the Century of President Trump. Ahmadinejad proclaimed that the question of Palestine is not related merely to the people of the region or the Muslim world, but the entire world and that all of humanity must work to solve it, including Muslims and Christians (the Twitter account of the former President Ahmadinejad, July 21).



**The meeting between the former Iranian president and the Palestinian ambassador to Tehran (Twitter account of Ahmadinejad, July 21, 2020).**