



# Spotlight on Iran

August 9, 2020 - August 23, 2020

## Overview

- ▶ In mid-August, the Iranian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mohammad Javad Zarif, visited Lebanon following the explosion at the port of Beirut. Zarif discussed with senior Lebanese officials continued efforts to provide Iranian support to Lebanon following the disaster. Meanwhile, Iranian officials warned of attempts by international actors to exploit the explosion to impose political dictates on the Lebanese leadership.
- ▶ The special adviser on political affairs to the Iranian minister of foreign affairs visited Damascus and met with the Syrian president and Syrian minister of foreign affairs. The sides discussed the negotiations to settle the war in Syria, regional developments and bolstering bilateral ties.
- ▶ In mid-August, the Fatemiyoun Brigade of Afghan fighters, which operates under the guidance of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) in Syria held an international conference, the first of its kind, in the Iranian city of Mashhad. The event was attended by commanders and fighters in the brigade and senior Iranian clerics. During the conference, organizers broadcast special messages of support from senior officials of the “resistance axis.”
- ▶ On August 16, the Commander of the IRGC’s Qods Force, Esmail Qa’ani, arrived for a visit in Baghdad. The visit was likely conducted in anticipation of the departure of the Prime Minister of Iraq, Mustafa al-Kazimi, for a visit to Washington as part of the strategic dialogue between the United States and Iraq.
- ▶ As expected, Iran condemned the normalization agreement reached between the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Israel. Iranian officials presented the deal as betrayal of the Palestinian cause and of the Muslim world, and warned the Emirates of giving Israel a foothold in the Persian Gulf region. Following the conclusion of the agreement between the

UAE and Israel, the Iranian minister of foreign affairs spoke on the phone with the secretary general of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) and the leader of Hamas' Politburo, and stressed Iran's unwavering support for the Palestinians. In addition, the adviser on foreign affairs to the speaker of the Majlis met with representatives of Hamas and PIJ in Tehran,

## Iranian Involvement in Syria and Lebanon

- ▶ On August 13, the Fatemiyoun Brigade, comprised of Shia Afghan fighters operating under IRGC guidance in Syria, held an international conference, the first of its kind, in the city of Mashhad in Iran, in the presence of fighters and commanders of the Brigade, and senior Iranian clerics. Sayyed Elias, a senior commander in the Brigade, expressed in his speech at the conference total devotion to the Supreme Leader of Iran, Ali Khamenei, and declared that the Afghan force will continue to fight until the eradication of the “regime occupying Jerusalem [Israel]” and the establishment of “a new Islamic civilization,” in line with the vision of the Supreme Leader. He stressed that the Brigade with all of its might, alongside the other “resistance groups” and the governments supporting them, will avenge the death of the Commander of the Qods Force of the IRGC, Qasem Soleimani, who was assassinated by the United States in January 2020. He also vowed to continue the struggle until the removal of the “American terrorists” from the region.
- ▶ During the conference, special messages of support were voiced by Sheikh Issa Qassem, a leader in the Shia community of Bahrain; Sheikh Akram Barakat, the Deputy Secretary of Hezbollah for Cultural Affairs; Khaled Battash, a member of PIJ's Central Committee; and Nasr al-Shammari, the Spokesman of Harakat al-Nujabaa, an Iraqi Shia militia (IRNA; Fars, August 13).



**The Fatemiyoun Brigade conference in Mashhad (Fars, August 14, 2020).**

- ▶ A Syrian opposition source reported, based on local military sources, that Iran recently began establishing a new military force in the Quneitra governorate bordering on Israel, as part of its effort to expand its influence in the area, against the backdrop of its struggle for dominance vis-a-vis Russia in the region. According to the report, Iran is operating through Hezbollah and under the cover of Branch 220 (the Sa'sa' branch) of Syrian Political Security, an secret police organ. Iran is working to establish the new force under the command of former Syrian Army and "Fawj al-Jolan" militia, which fought alongside Assad regime forces. Thus far, about 175 fighters were recruited into the new force (Enab Baladi, August 12).
- ▶ The Speaker of the Iranian Majlis, Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf, sent a congratulatory telegram to the Syrian Speaker of Parliament, Hamouda al-Sabbagh, after his re-election to his position. Qalibaf congratulated al-Sabbagh, conveyed his best wishes to the President of Syria, Bashar al-Assad, and expressed Iran's ongoing support for Syria. He also stressed the importance of the backing offered by parliaments of both countries to expanding bilateral cooperation (IRNA, August 12).
- ▶ On August 17, the Special Adviser to the Iranian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ali-Asghar Khaji, met with the Syrian President, Bashar al-Assad, and the Syrian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Walid al-Muallem, and discussed expanding cooperation between the three guarantors of the Astana Process (Turkey, Russia and Iran) focusing on the settlement of the war in Syria. They also discussed regional developments, including the agreement reached between the UAE and Israel, and bolstering bilateral Syrian-Iranian ties (al-Ilam, August 17).



**The meeting of the special adviser to the Iranian minister of foreign affairs with the Syrian President (al-Ilam, August 17, 2020).**

- ▶ On August 13, the Iranian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mohammad Javad Zarif, arrived for a formal visit to Lebanon following the explosion at the port of Beirut. During a press conference with his Lebanese counterpart, Charbel Wehbe, Zarif remarked that the two

discussed cooperation between the two countries in the reconstruction of Beirut following the disaster. He mentioned that not only the government of Iran is willing to assist the reconstruction of Beirut, but also private Iranian companies. Zarif declared that no international party has the right to exploit Iran's needs to dictate to it any demands, and that only the government and the people of Lebanon have the right to decide their country's future (ISNA, August 14).

► In his meeting with the outgoing Lebanese Prime Minister, Hassan Diab, who resigned from his position, Zarif stressed Iran's support for those harmed in the Beirut explosion. He remarked that those who wish to exploit the explosion in the port are not interested in Lebanon's stability and unity (Tasnim, August 14). During his visit to Lebanon, Zarif also met with the Lebanese President, Michel Aoun, as well as the Lebanese Speaker of Parliament, Nabih Berri. In an interview to the Lebanese al-Mayadin channel (August 14), Zarif revealed that he also met with the Secretary General of Hezbollah, Hassan Nasrallah, and discussed developments in Lebanon and the region, and the assistance that Iran could provide to Lebanon.



**The meeting of the Iranian minister of foreign affairs with the outgoing Lebanese prime minister (Khabar Online, August 14, 2020).**

► Abbas Mousavi, the Spokesman of the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, called to avoid politicizing the explosion in Beirut. He declared that it is incomprehensible that groups and foreign countries would exploit the event for political ends, and that Lebanese authorities should be allowed to handle the situation themselves. He called to investigate the circumstances of the explosion and remove sanctions that he alleges were placed on Lebanon (IRNA, August 11).



**Caricature published by Tasnim, presenting U.S. President, Trump, French President, Michel Macron, and the Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, inciting the fire in Lebanon, against the backdrop of calls for their resignation in their own countries (Tasnim, August 10, 2020)**

## Iranian Involvement in Iraq

- ▶ Political sources in Iraq reported that the Commander of the IRGC's Qods Force, Esmail Qa'ani, arrived on August 16 for a secret visit in Baghdad, during which he met with the Iraqi Prime Minister, Mustafa al-Kazimi, ahead of al-Kazimi's departure to Washington as part of the Strategic Dialogue between Iraq and the United States (Rudaw, August 17).
- ▶ The Iraqi Member of Parliament, Hussein Arab, who serves as the spokesman of the Shia bloc al-Iraqiyun led by Omar al-Hakim, claimed, on the other hand, that Qa'ani arrived for a visit in Iraq as part of a formal delegation, to hold discussion with Iraqi officials and leaders of Iraq's political blocs about the security and economic situation in the country, as well as bilateral relations. He reported that Qa'ani's visit had nothing to do with the planned visit of the Iraqi prime minister to Washington, and that this topic did not come up during his meetings in Baghdad (Shafaq News, August 18).
- ▶ The Iranian Ambassador to Iraq, Iraj Masjedi, met with the Iraqi Minister of Agriculture, Muhammad Karim al-Khaffaji, and discussed expanding cooperation between the two countries in the agricultural sphere. Masjedi expressed Iran's willingness to share technology and agricultural know-how with Iraq. In the meeting, the two agreed that the Iraqi minister of agricultural will soon pay a visit to Tehran (IRNA, August 12).



**The meeting between the Iranian ambassador to Baghdad with the Iraqi minister of agriculture (IRNA, August 12, 2020).**

- ▶ In addition, Ambassador Masjedi met with the Iraqi Minister of Trade, Ahmad Hussein Abid, and discussed expanding the volume of trade between the two countries to 20 billion dollars annually. The two also discussed using Iran’s foreign exchange reserves that are held by the Iraqi central bank from export of electricity and gas from Iran to Iraq, for the purpose of paying for exported goods from Iraq to Iran. The two also discussed executing agreements previously signed by the two countries, joint investments in border regions, and promoting commercial deals and joint trade fairs (IRNA, August 13).
- ▶ The Iranian airline Mahan Air announced resumption of its flights to give destinations in Iraq: Baghdad, Najaf, Basra, Erbil and Suleimaniyyeh. In the statement published by the company, it was stated that passengers must present negative tests results for the COVID-19 virus, which was carried out at most 48 before the flights. Passengers from Iraq to Iran will be asked to produce negative COVID-19 test, one carried out within a maximum of 96 hours before the flights (IRNA, August 16).

## Iranian Involvement in the Palestinian Arena

- ▶ On August 14, the Iranian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mohammad Javad Zarif, spoke on the phone with the Secretary General of Palestinian Islamic Jihad, Ziad al-Nakhle, and condemned the normalization deal reached between the UAE and Israel. Zarif declared that the “treacherous act” will not have any impact on the Palestinian resistance and will, in fact, increase the hostility of the peoples of the region and Palestine toward this policy. Al-Nakhle expressed his appreciation for Iran’s ongoing support for the Palestinians and proclaimed that the deal between Israel and the UAE will not have any impact on the resistance of the Palestinian people. In addition, Zarif held a phone call with the leader of Hamas, Ismail

Hanniyeh, in which he stressed Iran's support for the Palestinians and denounced the agreement between Israel and the UAE. Hanniyeh called the agreement "a knife in the back of the Palestinian people," adding that the struggle against the occupation will persist and will not be impacted by these "treasonous acts" (Tasnim, August 14).

► Prior to this, the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a statement condemning the agreement between the UAE and Israel, in which the agreement was labeled as "strategic foolishness on the part of Abu Dhabi and Tel Aviv" which will bolster the "resistance axis in the region." The statement also argued that the Palestinian people and all peoples supporting freedom around the world will never forgive the normalization of relations with the "occupying and criminal regime of Israel" and that Iran sees the "shameful step" by the UAE to normalize its relations with the "fake, illegal and inhumane Zionist regime" as a dangerous step. Iran warned of any intervention by the "Zionist regime" in the balance of power in the Persian Gulf and placed the responsibility for the consequences of this decision on the UAE (ISNA, August 14).

► The President of Iran, Hassan Rouhani, also condemned the agreement, labeling it "a betrayal of the aspirations of the Palestinian people, the Muslims and a betrayal of Jerusalem." He declared that the leaders of the UAE are mistaken if they think they can ensure their security by becoming closer to the enemies of Islam and Iran, and warned them not to allow Israel to gain a foothold in the Persian Gulf (Tasnim, August 15).

► In a statement of condemnation of the IRGC, the agreement between the UAE and Israel was described as a "treacherous act," "strategic foolishness," and "a poisonous sword in the back of the Muslim nation [umma]." The statement claimed that not only will the agreement fail to accomplish anything for the United States, "the Zionist regime" and the Saudi royal family, but it will in fact accelerate the elimination of the "Zionist regime." In their statement, the IRGC called on the leadership of the UAE to reconsider their decision, warning against the decisive response of the citizens of their country, due to the "historic humiliation." The conclusion stated that the United States and supporters of the deal must know that the agreement will not serve the interests of the "Zionist regime" and will even derail the vision of the "new Middle East" and will usher a dangerous future for them, and particularly for the residents of the "glass palace of the Emirates" (Fars, August 15).

► The Chief of Staff of Iran's Armed Forces, Mohammad Baqeri, declared that Iran's approach toward the UAE will undergo a fundamental shift. He warned that Iran will see the Emirates

responsive for anything that will occur in the Persian Gulf that will threaten Iran’s national security (Fars, August 16).



**“The shameful agreement between the Emirates and the fake Zionist government is the greatest historic betrayal against the aspirations of Jerusalem” (Tasnim, August 15, 2020).**

- ▶ On August 16, the Adviser on Foreign Affairs to the Speaker of the Majlis, Amir Abdollahian, met separately with the representative of Hamas in Tehran, Khaled Qaddumi, and with the representative of PIJ in Tehran, Nasser Abu Sharif, and discussed with them the agreement reached between Israel and the UAE. Abdollahian argued that the normalization of relations between the UAE and Israel will not bring peace and stability to the region but will reinforce the “brutal and criminal essence of the Zionists.” He called the agreement “a strategic mistake,” which is unjustified and will gravely harm the UAE.
- ▶ The representative of the PIJ in Tehran expressed appreciation for the positions of the Islamic Republic of Iran, condemned the “treacherous act” of the UAE, and stressed that the Palestinian people are committed to the struggle to liberate Palestine. The representative of Hamas in Tehran also condemned the agreement between the Emirates and Israel, and mentioned that it was not surprising, since the secret relations between the two countries started earlier (the website of the Iranian Majlis, August 16).



**The meeting between the adviser on foreign affairs to the speaker of the Majlis with the head of Hamas' representative office in Tehran (website of the Majlis, August 16, 2020)**