



# Spotlight on Iran

February 7, 2021 – February 21, 2021

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## Overview

- ▶ The Senior Adviser to the Iranian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ali-Asghan Khaji, met with the Syrian president and discussed with him developments in the country and the ongoing negotiations concerning the settlement of the war. In an interview to the Russian Sputnik news agency, Khaji stated that Iran has not received any request from Syria concerning the removal of Iranian forces from the country. He also warned that if Israel crosses “red lines” in its activity in Syria, it will be countered with a forceful response.
- ▶ The American Arabic TV channel al-Hurra reported, based on foreign intelligence sources, about the smuggling of heavy weaponry by the Qods Force of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) across the Syria-Iraq border. According to this report, the Albu Kamal crossing is used to smuggle light and heavy weaponry concealed inside trucks carrying supplies, food and goods that cross it on a monthly basis.
- ▶ The Head of the Iranian Judiciary, Ibrahim Raisi, arrived for a visit in Iraq, lasting a number of days, during which the two countries signed three memoranda of understanding concerning cooperation in the legal sphere, prisoner exchanges and combatting corruption.
- ▶ The spokesman of the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs denied any Iranian involvement in the rocket attack on the Erbil International Airport and its environs, which killed a contractor of the U.S. armed forces. An Iraqi group, likely linked to one of the Shia militias in Iraq, claimed responsibility for the attack.
- ▶ Activities in the economic sphere: the head of the Joint Iranian-Syria Chamber of Commerce reported that next month, Iran intends to launch a new shipping route connecting the Bandar Abbas Port in southern Iran to the Lattakia Port in Syria; a delegation led by the head of the chamber of commerce recently visited Damascus and met with the Syrian prime minister, who welcomed the establishment of Iran’s trade center in Damascus; the Iraqi ambassador to Tehran met with the head of Tehran’s Chamber of Commerce and Industry and agreed to

establish a joint commission for the Tehran Chamber of Commerce and the trade department at the Iraqi embassy in Tehran.

► On the occasion of the 42nd anniversary of the Islamic Revolution, the Head of Hamas' Politburo, Ismail Haniyeh, sent a message to the Supreme Leader of Iran, thanking him for Iran's ongoing support for the Palestinians.

## Iranian Involvement in Syria

► On February 10, the Senior Adviser to the Iranian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ali-Asghar Khaji, met with the Syrian President, Bashar al-Assad, and discussed with him developments in Syria, the ongoing Astana Talks concerning the settlement of the war in Syria, and bolstering economic cooperation between the two countries. Assad voiced his appreciation for Iran for its support to Syria and stressed the need to maintain deliberations and coordination talks between the two countries. During his visit to Damascus, the adviser to the minister of foreign affairs also met with the Syrian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Faysal Miqdad (Fars, February 10).



**The meeting between President Assad and the senior adviser to the Iranian minister of foreign affairs (Fars, February 10, 2021)**

► In an interview to the Russian news agency, Sputnik, Khaji stated that Iran has not received any request from the Syrian leadership to remove its forces from the country, stressing that Iran's presence in Syria is based on the request of its government, and it intended to combat ISIS and the "terrorist groups" and will remain in place as long as Damascus so desires. He remarked that those who need to leave Syria are those who intervened in the country illegally and occupied its land. Khaji added that if Israel crosses "red lines" in its activities in Syria, it will be met with a forceful response (ISNA, February 14). On February 16 – 17, Khaji headed the Iranian delegation to another round of Astana Talks concerning the settlement of the war

in Syria, which were held in Sochi, Russia, and attended by working-level representatives of Turkey, Russia and Iran.

► The American Arabic-language TV channel al-Hurra reported (February 9) based on foreign intelligence sources about the transfer by the IRGC's Qods Force of heavy weaponry that can alter the balance of power in the region. The smuggling was carried out from Iraq to Syria, activities that occur particularly around the Abu Kamal border crossing, and is overseen by Hajj Mehdi, who is responsible for the main smuggling crossing in Abu Kamal, and his assistant, Hajj Kamil, who is responsible for logistical and administrative affairs. These two members of the Qods Force operate under the command of Hajj Ghafari, who was responsible, according to the report, for the attempted attack on Israel in August 2019, which utilized unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs). The report detailed that the Abu Kamal crossing is used to smuggle heavy and light weaponry in trucks carrying supplies, food and goods that cross it on a monthly basis. In addition, the intelligence sources identified another point, located several kilometers south of the official Abu Kamal Crossing, which is used by the Qods Force to move weaponry and foreign fighters, without any interference from the Syrian or Iraqi state authorities.

► On February 11, websites linked to the Shia militias in Iraq reported that unidentified UAVs struck a vehicle inside Syrian territory, near the border crossing connecting the two countries. According to these reports, the vehicle was transferring logistic equipment to one of the Iraqi militias operating in Syria. The origin of the shipment was in Iran.

► Sources that track flights reported on mid-February about two unusual freighter flights of 747-Boeing jets of the Qeshm Fars Air, used by the IRGC, taking off from Tehran and landing in Beirut, on February 15th and February 16th.

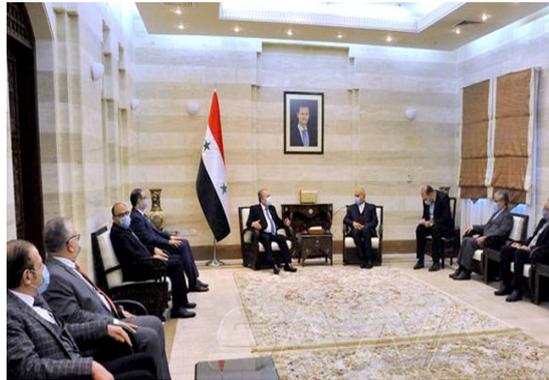
► The 42nd anniversary of the Islamic Revolution was marked in Syria through ceremonies organized by the Representative of the Supreme Leader to Damascus, Hojjat-ul-Islam Hamid Saffar Haranji. In the ceremony to mark the occasion in the Qatana region in the Damascus countryside, clerics, tribal leaders and prominent local personalities were in attendance (website of the Supreme Leader in Arabic, February 11).



**A ceremony marking the 42nd anniversary of the Islamic Revolution led by the representative of the Supreme Leader to Syria (website of the Supreme Leader in Arabic, February 11, 2021)**

- ▶ The Head of the Joint Iranian-Syrian Chamber of Commerce, Keyvan Kashefi, reported that on March 10, Iran intends to inaugurate a shipping lane connecting the Bandar Abbas Port in southern Iran with the Lattakia Port in Syria. He remarked that the necessary coordination was carried out by the Joint Chamber of Commerce and the Islamic Republic of Iran Shipping Line Group (IRISL) to facilitate one or two shipments per month from Iran to Syria, based on the needs that arise. Kashefi asserted that the operation of the shipping line will positively affect the volume of Iranian exports to Syria, and the trade between the two countries (Tehran Times, February 12).
- ▶ The pro-opposition Syrian economic news website Eqtesad reported (February 6) that a large delegation of Iranian businessmen and owners of food production factories arrived for a visit to Syria to discuss fulfilling the food needs of the Syrian market. According to this report, the visit of the delegation was carried out against the backdrop of limitations placed by Syrian authorities on the transfer of food products from Iran to the country, owing to their poor quality, which makes most of them unfit for human consumption. During its visit to Damascus, the delegation headed by Keyvan Kashefi, the Head of the Joint Iranian-Syrian Chamber of Commerce, met with the Syrian Minister of Internal Supplies, Talal al-Barazi, and asked him to lift the limitations on export of Iranian goods, and particularly food items, to the Syrian market. The head of the delegation expressed the willingness of his country to fulfil the needs of the Syrian market when it comes to food and raw material, and take part in rebuilding factories and restoring companies that had been harmed during the civil war. Al-Barazi expressed willingness to permit the limited supply of food, for a test period, but hinted to members of the Iranian delegation that thus far, Syria has not been pleased with the quality of Iranian goods, adding that Syrian authorities even had to remove from the markets and destroy some of the goods, which caused large losses.

► During the visit of the Iranian delegation to Syria, its members met with the Syrian Prime Minister, Hussein Arnous, who called on Iranian companies to participate in rebuilding Syrian factories that had been damaged during the civil war in the country. Arnous welcomed the establishment of the Iranian trade center in Damascus and expressed the full support of the Syrian government for the operation of the center. Keyvan Kashefi stressed the need to solve the banking and customs issues to expand the volume of trade between the two countries. He also called to implement the agreements signed previously between the Syrian prime minister and the first deputy to the president of Iran (Donya-e Eqtesad, February 9).



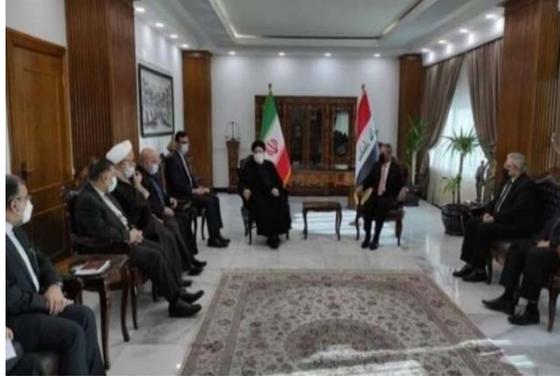
**The meeting between the Syrian prime minister and the Iranian business delegation (otagh24.org, February 8, 2021)**

## Iranian Involvement in Iraq

► On February 8, the Head of the Iranian Judiciary, Ayatollah Ibrahim Raisi, arrived for a visit lasting a number of days in Iraq. A statement published by the Iranian embassy in Baghdad on the eve of the visit stated that the visit is taking place following the invitation of the Chairman of the Supreme Judicial Council of Iraq, Faik Zaidan, as part of an effort to expand judicial cooperation between the two countries. During his visit, Raisi and the delegation he headed, comprised of high-ranking officials in Iran's judiciary, met with the Iraqi leadership, including the President Barham Salih, the Prime Minister, Mustafa al-Kazimi, and the Speaker of Parliament, Muhammad al-Halbousi. Raisi concluded three memoranda of understanding with senior officials in Iraq's judiciary concerning cooperation in the judicial sector, prisoner exchanges and combatting corruption (IRNA, February 7; Mehr, February 10).

► During his meeting with the head of Iraq's Supreme Judicial Council, the two discussed cooperation between the two countries on judicial and legal matters, including combatting drug smuggling and financial corruption, the handling of Iranian citizens detained in Iraq, legal issues pertaining to Iranian pilgrims in Iraq (such as the policy of visa issuance to

pilgrims), establishment of special tribunal to handle disputes between traders from both countries, and the ongoing investigation into the circumstances of the assassination of Qasem Soleimani and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis by the United States in January 2020 (Alef, February 9).



**The meeting between the head of the Iranian judiciary with the head of Iraq's Supreme Judicial Council (Alef, February 9, 2021)**

► The Spokesman of the Shia Iraqi militia, Harakat al-Nujabaa', Nasr al-Shammari, gave an interview to the English-language Iranian state television channel, Press TV, during which he addressed the deep commitment of the militia to Iran, the Supreme Leader of Iran, Ali Khamenei, and the Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist (Velayet-e Faqih) doctrine. Al-Shammari praised Khamenei's leadership, proclaiming that the Supreme Leader managed to turn the "axis battling the United States" into a global force. He remarked that although the resistance movements in the region, and particularly those in Palestine, were established before the Islamic Revolution in Iran (1979), those groups were incredibly weak. It was Iran's support that bolstered them and allowed them to defeat Israel in Palestine and Lebanon, and the American forces in Iraq. The spokesman of Harakat al-Nujabaa' stated that Khamenei is the religious leader and the source of emulation for many Iraqis, including the fighters of the Islamic resistance in Iraq, and that the Shias see themselves as obligated to follow his guidance. He estimated that the end of the American occupation of Iraq is near, adding that the United States is unable to defend itself in Iraq (Telegram channel of the Harakat Nujabaa' militia, February 8).



### **The spokesman of Harakat al-Nujabaa' in his interview to Press TV**

- ▶ The Spokesman of the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Said Khatibzadeh, denied Iranian involvement in the rocket attack on the Erbil International Airport and its environs in the Kurdistan region in northern Iraq (February 15). The strike killed one contractor of the U.S. military and six were injured. A base near the Airport is used by the U.S. military, and American soldiers and permanently stationed there. An unknown Iraqi group, calling itself Saraya Awliya al-Dam (the Guardians of the Blood), which is likely linked to one of the Shia Iraqi militias, claimed responsibility for the attack. Khatibzadeh forcefully rejected and condemned the claims about Iranian involvement in the attack, proclaiming that Iran sees the stability and security of Iraq as a central issue for the region and its neighbors, and rejects any actions that disturb the order and peace in the country. He called on the Iraqi government to publicize the necessary instruction to investigate the event, and to take steps against those who perpetrated the attack (Fars, February 16).
- ▶ A commentary published by the Iranian website Tabnak (February 16), assessed that the rocket attack on the Erbil Airport was meant to send a message to Turkey and the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) regarding Tehran's displeasure with their activity in northern Iraq, and the growing ties between them, as well as a message to the United States with regards to its activities in the Kurdish region. The author speculated that the attack may signal the beginning of a new geopolitical game between Iran and Turkey, following the start of the term of the new administration in Washington.
- ▶ On February 8, the Iraqi Ambassador to Tehran, Nadir Abdul Mohsin Abdullah, met with the Head of Tehran Chamber of Commerce, Industry, Mine and Agriculture, Masoud Khonsari, and discussed expanding commercial ties between the two countries, and solving issues that impede the promotion of trade between them. During the meeting, the two sides agreed to establish a joint commission for the Tehran Chamber of Commerce and the trade department at the Iraqi embassy to Tehran, which would discuss complaints and requests of traders from

both countries, and ways to facilitate economic cooperation. The head of Tehran's Chamber of Commerce stated that traders in both countries still encounter problems and impediments, and those can be addressed and removed through the establishment of a joint committee, which will act similarly to other joint committees of Tehran's Chamber of Commerce and a number of neighboring countries, including Pakistan and Afghanistan. He expressed the willingness of Tehran's Chamber of Commerce to open a representative office in Baghdad's Chamber of Commerce, and asked the Iraqi ambassador to facilitate issuing of visas for Iranian traders wishing to operate in Iraq. The Iraqi ambassador expressed his willingness to cooperate with the Tehran Chamber of Commerce to solve the issues hindering the expansion of economic and trade relations between the two countries. He remarked that the challenges relating to issuing of visas for Iranian traders stem from the COVID-19 pandemic, but mentioned that the embassy is willing to issue commercial visas for Iranian traders recognized by Tehran's Chamber of Commerce. In addition, the ambassador stressed the importance of holding joint commercial trade shows in both countries (website of Iran's Chamber of Commerce and Industry, February 8).



**The meeting between the head of the Tehran Chamber of Commerce and Industry with the Iraqi ambassador to Tehran (website of the Tehran Chamber of Commerce, February 8, 2021)**

► In mid-February, senior officials in the Iranian Hajj and Pilgrimage Organization of Iran held online discussions with senior officials at the Iraqi Supreme Pilgrimage Council concerning the organization of pilgrimages in the coming year. During the talks, the option of allowing the Iranian pilgrims to reach Saudi Arabia for the Hajj through Iraq was raised. The Head of the Iranian Pilgrimage Organization, Alireza Rashidian, and the Head of the Iraqi Pilgrimage Council, Sheikh Sami al-Massoudi, called for implementing health measures to facilitate the pilgrimage season in July 2021 (IRNA, February 15).

## Iranian Involvement in the Palestinian Arena

► On the occasion of the 42nd anniversary of the Islamic Revolution, marked on February 10, the Head of the Hamas Politburo, Ismail Haniyeh, sent a congratulatory message to the Supreme Leader of Iran. Haniyeh thanked Khamenei for its ongoing support to the Palestinians, their “brave resistance” and struggle to defend their legitimate rights. He added that Hamas strives to maintain its resistance in light of the dangers and challenges facing the Palestinian question (Fars, February 11).