



Spotlight on Iran

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Overview

- ▶ Iranian threats toward Israel: the chief of staff of Iran's Armed Forces threatened with Iranian retaliation if Israel persists in striking Iranian interests in Syria and at sea. In addition, the commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) threatened that Iran will respond to any "evil action" by the "Zionists" against it, with a force equal to the blow it is dealt, or even with greater force.
- ▶ The Russian news agency Sputnik reported that Iran, Russia, and Syria reached an agreement that Russian warships will accompany Iranian tankers ferrying oil and natural gas to Syria through the Suez Canal and the Mediterranean Sea.
- ▶ In late April, Mohammad Javad Zarif, the Iranian Minister of Foreign Affairs, arrived for a two-day visit in Iraq, during which he met with senior Iraqi government officials, the head of the Shia political blocs and senior officials of the Kurdistan Regional Government in northern Iraq. Throughout the visit, Zarif discussed bilateral ties and developments in the region with the senior Iraqi officials. A few days prior to Zarif's visit in Baghdad, the Iranian deputy minister of defense also visited Baghdad and met with the Iraqi minister of interior and with the commander of the Popular Mobilization Units (al-Hashd al-Shaabi, the umbrella force of the Shia militias operating in Iraq).
- ▶ The Iraqi government approved the plan to lay the railway connecting the city of Shelamcheh in western Iran to Basra in southern Iraq. The memorandum of understanding between the two countries was signed back in 2019, but thus far, the plan did not advance despite repeated appeals on the matter from Iranian officials to their Iraqi counterparts.
- ▶ The commander of the IRGC's Qods Force spoke on the phone with the head of the Hamas Politburo, who expressed his condolences for the death of the Deputy Commander

of the Qods Force, Mohammed Hejazi, who died of a heart attack. Meanwhile, the leadership of Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad sent condolences messages to the Supreme Leader of Iran, Khamenei.

► For the second year in a row, the International al-Qods Day processions that take place in Iran annually since the Islamic Revolution, on the last Friday of the month of Ramadan, were canceled due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Iranian Involvement in Syria

1. Mohammad Baqeri, the Chief of Staff of Iran's Armed Forces, threatened that Iran will retaliate to the ongoing Israeli attacks on Iranian interests in Syria and at sea. In a ceremony commemorating the Deputy Commander of the IRGC's Qods Force, Mohammad Hejazi, who died of a heart attack, Baqeri stated that the "Zionists" believe they can continue to carry out attacks on Syrian territory and in other places and at sea, and not face any retaliation. Baqeri proclaimed that the actions carried out in recent days, and future Israeli actions, will jeopardize Israeli interests and force it to act more wisely. He declared that Iran does not provide any information concerning the perpetrators of the latest attacks, and does not know who is behind them, but the "resistance front" will retaliate directly at the Zionists. The Iranian chief of staff mentioned that it is still unclear how exactly Iran will respond to Israel's continued aggression against Iran, but that the "Zionist regime" will not enjoy any calm (Tasnim, April 25).

2. The Iranian news agency Mehr reported (April 18), based on original reporting by the Russian Sputnik news agency that Iran, Russia, and Syria established a joint operations' room, which is focused on ensuring the protection of Iranian and Russian vessels sailing the Mediterranean to guard ships ferrying oil and food to Syria. According to this report, the representatives of the three countries met recently and discussed ways to "break the economic siege" placed by the United States and Europe on Syria and ensure the transfer of fuel and wheat to Syria's ports, despite the sanctions (to clarify, no sanctions placed on Syria ban the supply of wheat). Following these discussions, the sides agreed that Russian warships will accompany Iranian tankers once they enter the Mediterranean through the Suez Canal, until they reach

Syrian territorial waters, to protect them from attacks. Sputnik also reported that four Iranian tankers carrying oil and natural gas to Syria have arrived at Syria's ports in recent days, accompanied by Russian warships.

3. A pro-opposition Syrian news site reported that the Iranian PFK company signed an agreement with the Public Directorate of Water and Sanitation in al-Hassakeh governorate to supply four devices for desalination of groundwater, to allow them to be used as drinking water for residents of the water-starved region. According to this report, the Iranian company is working to advance a similar project in the Haouch Chaier region in the Damascus countryside (Enab Baladi, April 27).

4. The Iranian news agency Tasnim reported (April 19) about the activities to promote Iranian culture in Syria, which are mostly focused on expanding the teaching of the Persian language. The Chairwoman of the Persian department at the University of Damascus, Nur al-Huda Mahfouz, told the Tasnim reporter about a great deal of interest among Syrian students to learn Persian. The Head of the Arab Writers Association, Mohammad al-Hourani, called for bolstering cooperation between Iranian and Syrian writers to promote Iranian and Arab culture.

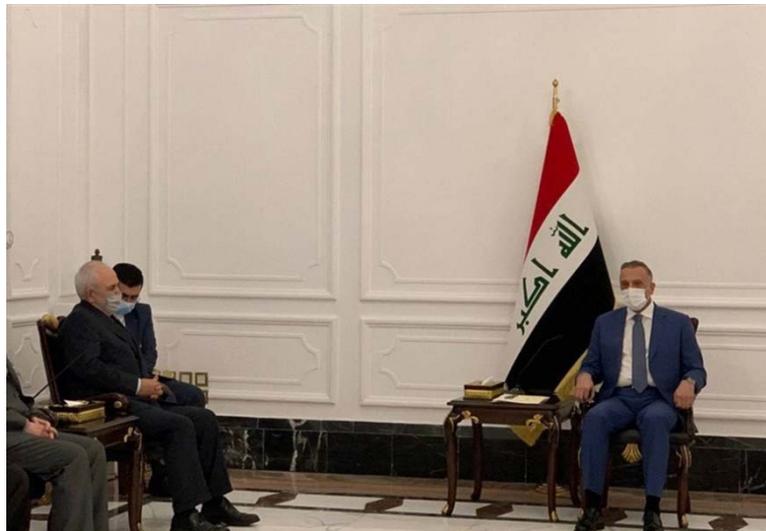


Persian language classes at Damascus University. Source: Tasnim, April 19

Iranian Involvement in Iraq

5. On April 26, the Iranian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mohammad Javad Zarif, arrived for a visit in Iraq, during which he met with senior Iraqi government officials,

including Barham Salih, Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kazimi, and Foreign Minister Fouad Hussein. Zarif discussed bilateral relations and developments in the region with the Iraqi officials. Against the backdrop of reports on talks between Iran and Saudi Arabia through Iraqi mediation, Zarif thanked his Iraqi counterpart for Baghdad's efforts to promote a regional dialogue. At the joint press conference of the two foreign ministers, Zarif called for expanding ties between the two countries in the spheres of the economy, energy, and transportation. In his meeting with Zarif, Iraqi Prime Minister al-Kazimi stated that Iran is a strategic partner for Iraq and stressed Iran's support to Iraq in the campaign against ISIS. Zarif thanked al-Kazimi for Iraq's support for the lifting of American sanctions imposed on Iran and asked him to assist in solving financial issues pertaining to the work of Iranian companies in Iraq in the sphere of commerce, transportation and engineering (Tasnim, April 26). During the visit, Zarif also met with the heads of the Shia political blocs in the Iraqi parliament and also visited Erbil in northern Iraq, where he met with the leadership of the Kurdistan region, chief among them Masoud Barzani, the leader of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) (ISNA, April 27).



The meeting between the Iranian foreign minister and the Iraqi prime minister.

Source: Tasnim, April 26

6. The Iranian Deputy Minister of Defense Seyyed Hojjatollah Qureishi, met in Baghdad with Faleh al-Fayyad, the Commander of the Popular Mobilization Units (the umbrella structure of the Shia militias in Iraq) and discussed regional developments, cooperation between Iran and the Shia militias, and continuing the war on terror (al-

Alam, April 21). During his visit to Iraq, the Iranian deputy of the minister of defense also met with the Iraqi Minister of Interior, Othman al-Ghanemi, and discussed security cooperation between the two countries, border security, and combatting crime, including drug trafficking (ISNA, April 22).



The meeting of the Iranian deputy minister of defense with the commander of the Popular Mobilization Units. Source: al-Alam, April 21

7. The Iraqi government approved the plan to lay a railway connecting the city of Shalamcheh in western Iran to Basra in southern Iraq. The government empowered the Ministry of Transportation to sign a deal concerning the project with the Iranian side. The Executive Director of the Iraqi Railway Company, Talib Jawad al-Husseini, reported that talks will soon commence with Tehran concerning beginning the implementation of the project (IRNA, April 28). A memorandum of understanding between Iraq and Iran concerning laying the railway was signed in May 2019, during a meeting of the Iranian President, Hassan Rouhani, with the former Iraqi Prime Minister, Adel Abdul Mahdi, but no progress has been achieved thus far in the implementation of the project despite repeated appeals by Iranian officials to their Iraqi counterparts concerning the matter.

8. The Chairman of the Joint Iranian-Iraqi Chamber of Commerce, Hamid Hosseini, warned in an interview to the website Khabar Online (April 28), about the continuous decline in the declared volume of trade between the two countries, and the rise in smuggling of goods between them, including foodstuffs, medical equipment,

electronic and home appliances. Addressing the talks concerning the unfreezing of Iranian assets in Iraq, Hosseini reported that in the past three months, multiple discussions were held between Iranian and Iraqi officials on the matter, and it was agreed that part of the Iraqi debt to Iran for the purchase of electricity from Iran will be paid in Iraqi dinars. He remarked that despite the sanction waivers the United States granted to Iraqi companies for cooperation with Iran, many of them avoid trading with Iran due to concern of being sanctioned. He expressed hope that the ongoing talks in Vienna between Iran and the other signatories of the Iranian nuclear deal (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, JCPOA), will lead to the removal of economic restrictions placed on Iran. Hosseini stated that in the past Iranian year (March 2020 – March 2021), Iran exported 4.5 million tonnes of goods to Iraq, worth 7.3 billion dollars, while in the previous Iranian year, Iran exported goods totaling in nine billion dollars. Most of the Iranian exports to Iraq were electricity, gas, fuel, oil products and petrochemicals.

Iranian Involvement in the Palestinian Arena

9. On April 19, the Commander of the Qods Force of the IRGC, Esmail Qaani, spoke on the phone with the Head of Hamas' Politburo, Ismail Hanniyeh, who expressed condolences due to the passing of the Deputy Commander of the Qods Force, Mohammad Hejazi. Hanniyeh declared that Hejazi served the "resistance" for many years, and thanked Iran for its unyielding support for the Palestinians. At the same time, Hanniyeh sent a message of condolences to the Supreme Leader of Iran, Ali Khamenei, in which he praised Hejazi's support for the Palestinian people and the "resistance" in Palestine. The Secretary General of Palestinian Islamic Jihad, Ziad al-Nakhleh, also sent a message of condolences to the commander of the Qods Force following the passing of Hejazi, in which he praised his support for the "resistance" in Lebanon and Palestine (Mehr, April 19). In Hejazi's place, the Supreme Leader of Iran appointed Mohammad Reza Falahzadeh as the Deputy Commander of the Qods Force. Prior to this role, Falahzadeh served as the deputy for coordination inside the Qods Force (Tasnim, April 19). In response to the condolences message, the supreme leader of Iran sent a telegram to Ismail Hanniyeh in which he stressed that Iran stands

in one united front by the side of Palestine and the Palestinian people (Mehr, April 27).

10. In light of the violence that erupted in Jerusalem, the Spokesman of the Iranian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Saeed Khatibzadeh, condemned the “aggression of the Zionist regime and the occupying settlers against the holy sites and residents of Jerusalem.” Khatibzadeh praised the “resistance and perseverance” of the residents of Palestine, and particularly the residents of Jerusalem and its youth, in the face of the “criminal Zionists.” He stressed the need for the international community to come together to bring an end to the Israeli actions against the Palestinian people. The spokesman of the Iranian Ministry of Foreign affairs called for an end of the “occupation and crimes of the Zionists against the Palestinian people,” and highlighted the need to support the “resistance” until Palestine’s liberation. He declared that the only way to solve the crisis in Palestine is to hold a referendum among the original inhabitants of Palestine (Fars, April 24).

11. Following the escalation between Israel and the Palestinians, the Commander of the IRGC, Hossein Salami, threatened that if the “Zionists” persist in their actions, it will lead to their downfall. In an interview to the Lebanese TV channel al-Mayadin (April 26), Salami proclaimed that the actions of the “Zionists” will expose them to real dangers in the future. He added that Iran will respond to any malevolent action against it with equal or even greater force.



The Commander of the IRGC, Hossein Salami. Source: al-Mayadin, April 26

12. The pro-Hezbollah Lebanese TV channel, al-Mayadin, aired (April 16) a three-part series titled “Qasem Soleimani, the Martyr of al-Quds,” which discussed the work of Qasem Soleimani, the former Commander of the Qods Force of the IRGC, and his assistance to the Palestinian armed struggle. The program claimed that Soleimani was responsible for the synchronization of efforts between the Qods Force and Palestinian factions through a coordinating committee. In addition, the program claimed that Iran assisted the Palestinians in sparking the first Intifada by distributing videos on how to assemble improvised explosive devices. The program featured interviews with senior Palestinian officials who praised Iran’s support for the Palestinian struggle, including Ismail Hanniyeh, the Head of Hamas’ Politburo; Mousa Abu Marzouq, a senior Hamas official; Abdullah Zaki, a senior Fatah official; Ziad al-Nakhleh, the Secretary General of Palestinian Islamic Jihad; and Akram al-Ajouri, a senior commander in Palestinian Islamic Jihad.

13. A senior official in the coordination committee of the Islamic Development Organization announced that the International Qods Day processions will not be held in Iran this year, due to limitations imposed to combat the spread of COVID-19 (Fars, April 20). In the prior year as well, International Qods Day was marked in Iran mostly through propaganda effort through the media and online, without holding the traditional mass processions, due to the outbreak of COVID-19. The events of International Qods Day are held annually since 1979 on the last Friday in the month of Ramadan, in accordance with a decision of the founder of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Ayatollah Khomeini, and is intended to express the support of Iran and the Muslim world for the Palestinian cause and “the liberation of Jerusalem.”