



# Spotlight on Iran

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## Overview

- ▶ **Iran did not officially comment on the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) strikes in Syria on January 21, which targeted locations of the Qods Force of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), among others targets hit.** The strikes were carried out in retaliation to Iran's January 20<sup>th</sup> launch of a surface-to-surface missile against Israel from the environs of Damascus. Iranian media, too, only provided brief reporting on the incidents, mainly highlighting the response of Syria's air defense systems to Israel's activities. Iran did not confirm the report by the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights according to which 12 IRGC cadres were killed in the Israeli strike. **The absence of an official Iranian response and the meager coverage following the strikes reflect, in our assessment, Iran's desire to maintain a "space of deniability,"** to allow it to test its response without risking further escalation vis-à-vis Israel. Furthermore, Iran prefers to maintain ambiguity regarding its involvement in direct attacks against Israel, so as not to provide further justification for Israeli action or for Russian pressure on it to curtail such activities.
- ▶ Prior to the latest confrontation between Iran and Israel, senior Iranian officials reiterated that Iran will continue to maintain its military presence in Syria. The Commander of the IRGC, Mohammed Ali Jafari, declared that keeping the Iranian "military advisers" and weaponry in Syria is necessary to train and bolster the "Islamic Resistance" in the country. The Senior Adviser of the Supreme Leader, Hasan Firouzabadi, insisted that Iran's presence in Syria will remain for as long as "terrorists" continue to be present in the country and for as long as Syria requires Iran's assistance.
- ▶ In parallel, Iran is continuing to entrench its economic hold in Syria. A delegation led by the head of the Majlis National Security and Foreign Policy Committee visited Damascus and discussed with senior Syrian officials economic cooperation between the two countries, and the participation of Iranian firms in reconstruction projects in Syria. The joint Syrian-Iranian

car manufacturing company, Siamco, announced that it will soon resume its activities, after those were halted following the outbreak of unrest in Syria.

► In mid-January, Iranian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mohammad Javad Zarif, visited Iraq, a visit that served as a central event in Iran's recent diplomatic efforts in Iraq. During the visit, Zarif met with senior Iraqi officials, the leaders of the Kurdistan Regional Government in northern Iraq and senior commanders among the Shia militias. Zarif's visit in Iraq took place only a few days following the visit to Baghdad of U.S. Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, and reflects Iranian efforts to derail U.S. moves to create a fissure between Tehran and Baghdad and stymie Iranian attempts to increase its clout in Iraq.

## Iranian Involvement in Syria

► Iran did not officially comment on the IDF pre-dawn strikes in Syria on January 21, which targeted locations of the Qods Force, among other locations hit. The strikes were carried out in retaliation to Iran's January 20<sup>th</sup> launch of a surface-to-surface missile against Israel from the environs of Damascus. According to a statement issued by IDF Spokesperson, among the targets hit were weapons depots and military sites, one of them inside the Damascus International Airport, an Iranian intelligence base and a training site operated by Iran. Iranian media, too, only provided brief reporting, mainly highlighting the response of Syria's air defense systems to Israel's actions. Iran did not confirm the report by the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights according to which 12 IRGC cadres were killed in the Israeli strike. The military reporter of the Tasnim News Agency, which is affiliated with the IRGC, claimed on his Twitter account (January 22) that none of the Iranian "military advisers" or positions were damaged by the strikes. He described the reports about Iranian casualties as "a psychological warfare campaign of the Zionist enemy."

► Shortly after the Israeli strike, an Iranian news website published an interview with the Commander of the Iranian Air Force, Amir Nasirzadeh who declared that the current and future young generations of Iran are waiting impatiently and wholly willing to fight the "Zionist regime" and wipe it off the face of the earth (YJC.IR, January 21). In the interview, which mostly dealt with the preparedness of the Iranian Air Force to the challenges it faces, Nasirzadeh did not specifically address IDF activities in Syria, and it remain unclear whether his statement was before the attack or following it.

- ▶ A commentary published by the website Tabanak (January 21) following the Israeli strike warned that a dangerous confrontation between Iran and Israel may develop in Syria. The opinion article argued that the unwritten rules of the game that existed between Iran and Israel in Syria were recently altered by Israel. The commentary claimed that in the past, Israel avoided taking responsibility for strikes on Iranian targets and warned Iran ahead of time about its strikes in Syria, to avoid casualties and a possible Iranian retaliation. The commentary warned that a change in the rules of the game may lead to a fierce Iranian response and increase tensions between the two countries.
- ▶ The Commander of the IRGC, Mohammad Ali Jafari, declared that Iran will continue to maintain the presence of military advisers and materiel in Syria. Jafari labeled the threats of the Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, to continue acting against Iranian efforts to entrench itself in Syria as “ridiculous.” He insisted that Iran will continue to maintain the presence of its military advisers, as well as equipment and weaponry, which are used to train and bolster the “Islamic Resistance” in Syria. He warned Israel “not to play with the tail of a lion,” and declared that it should fear the day when Iran’s high-precision missiles fall on its head and avenge the blood of Muslims spilled by it. Jafari addressed the statement of the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs claiming that Iran does not have military presence in Syria, clarifying that the ministry meant that Iranian military units are not present in Syria. He asserted that Israel knows well that Iran’s military units are so powerful and impressive that if even one of them reaches Syria, Israel will have to surrender (Fars, January 16).
- ▶ The Senior Adviser to the Supreme Leader of Iran and the former Chief of Staff of Iran’s Armed Forces, Hasan Firouzabadi, asserted that the presence of Iranian advisers in Syria will remain in place as long as “terrorists” continue to operate there and for as long as Syria requires Iranian assistance. He emphasized that it was Syria that asked Iran to send its military advisers to fight terrorism (IRNA, January 14).



**Hasan Firouzabadi (IRNA, January 14 2019).**

► The joint Iranian-Syria car manufacturing company, Siamco, intends to restart operations soon. The company halted its production about eight years ago, following the outbreak of unrest in Syria. The company was launched in 2007 in cooperation with the Iranian car-manufacturing company, Iran Khodro. The company manufactures cars in Syria under the brand “Sham” and two other types of vehicles in cooperation with a Chinese car-manufacturing plant. A senior official in the company reported that the company intends to inaugurate a manufacturing line for trucks and public transportation vehicles as well (Fars, January 13).



**The joint Iranian-Syrian Siamco company (IRNA, January 12 2019).**

► A delegation headed by the chairman of the Majlis Foreign Policy and National Security Committee visited Syria in mid-January. The Chairman of the Committee, Heshmatollah Falahatpisheh, stated in a meeting with the Chairman of the Syrian Parliament’s Committee on National Security, Faysal al-Khouri, that Iran is ready to transfer advanced technologies to

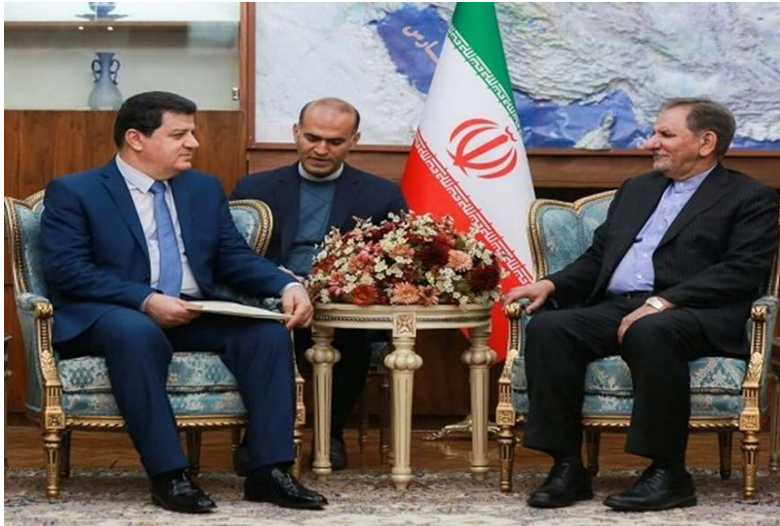
Syria, which would assist in the country's reconstruction. Falahatpisheh remarked that the visit of the Iranian delegation to Damascus is intended to bolster the ties between the two countries and expedite the implementation of the agreements signed between them. He expressed hope that the victory achieved in the campaign against "terrorism" will also yield victories in the economic arena.

► During the visit of the delegation to Damascus, the chairman of the committee met with President Bashar al-Assad and discussed with him expanding ties between the two countries. President Assad remarked that relations between Iran and Syria are based on principles, morals and respect to the will of nations to determine their own fate and build their future without foreign intervention, an approach that contributed to the independence of both countries (Mehr; Fars, January 14).



**The meeting between the Syrian president and the chairman of the Majlis Foreign Policy and National Security Committee (Fars, January 14 2019).**

► During its visit to Syria, the delegation met with the Syrian Prime Minister, Imad Khamis, who called on Iranian companies to take part in reconstruction projects in Syria. In the meeting, the two sides emphasized the need to hold more meetings between representatives of the public and private sectors of the two countries to foster opportunities for mutual investments. The Chairman of the Committee, Falahatpisheh. Stated in the meeting that Iran will continue to improve the economic cooperation with Syria (IRNA, January 15).



**The meeting between the Iranian deputy president and Syria's ambassador to Tehran (Mehr, January 23 2019).**

► On January 23, Iranian Deputy President, Eshaq Jahangiri met with Syria's Ambassador to Tehran, Adnan Mahmoud, and stated before him that Iran will stand by Syria and support it during the reconstruction phase as well. He referred to his impending visit to Damascus, remarking that the visit may have a positive effect on furthering the political and economic ties between the two countries. The Syrian ambassador stated that Syria is interested in the participation of the Iranian government and private sector in its economic reconstruction (Mehr, January 23).

## Iranian Involvement in Iraq

► On January 13, Iranian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mohammad Javad Zarif, arrived for a visit in Iraq, heading a political and economic delegation. . During his visit, Zarif met with the Iraqi Prime minister, Adel Abdul Mahdi; Iraq's President, Bahram Salih; Iraqi Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mohammad Ali al-Hakim; and the Speaker of Parliament, Mohammad al-Halbousi. Zarif also visited Shi'ite holy sites in Najaf and Karbala and met with the leadership of the Kurdish Regional Government.

► At a press conference with his Iraqi counterpart, Zarif stressed that relations between the two countries are stable and that no one is allowed to intervene in them. He remarked that the positions of the two countries on regional and bilateral issues are very close, and that his visit is intended to bolster relations between the countries in various spheres, including the political sphere, trade, tourism and transportation (Fars, January 13).



**The Iranian and Iraqi ministers of foreign affairs (IRNA, January 13 2019).**

- ▶ During his visit to Iraq, Zarif also met with Akram al-Kaabi, the Secretary General of the Iraqi Shi'ite pro-Iranian militia, “Harakat al-Nujabaa” (the Movement of the Noble Ones) and discussed developments in Iraq and the region. Al-Kaabi stated that his movement is ready for economic cooperation with Iran (Fars, January 14).
- ▶ Iran opened a permanent exhibition in Baghdad. The opening ceremony of the exhibition was attended by Iran’s Ambassador to Iraq, Mousa Alizadeh Tabatabaei, the Iraqi Deputy Minister of Trade, Walid Habib al-Mousawi, and businesspeople from both countries. This is the first permanent exhibition Iran has established beyond its borders, and it will display exhibitions of different Iranian products every week, with the aim of promoting trade between the two countries and assist in exporting and marketing of Iranian goods in Iraq (IRNA, January 21).



**The Iranian exhibition in Baghdad (IRNA, January 21 2019).**

## Iranian Involvement in the Palestinian Arena

► Early last week, an international conference in support of Gaza gathered in Tehran, under the headline “Gaza, a Symbol of Resistance.” Iranian Deputy President and the Head of the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran, Ali-Akbar Salehi, stated in his speech at the conference that “the Zionist regime” adopts a brutal and oppressive policy, and there is no other way but to destroy it. He added that there is no doubt about the victory of the “Resistance” against Israel (Tasnim, January 21).



**The conference “Gaza, a Symbol of Resistance” in Tehran (Mehr, January 20 2019).**