



Spotlight on Iran

May 31, 2020 - June 14, 2020

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Overview

- ▶ Sources tracking the movement of freighter planes reported intensive activity between Iran and Syria, which included both Syrian and Iranian cargo planes.
- ▶ The spokesman of the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs lambasted the tightening of sanctions against Syria ahead of the entry into force of the Caesar Act, which places sanctions against any company and actor that will maintain economic ties with Syria in several sectors of the economy.
- ▶ Ahead of the start of the strategic dialogue between Iraq and the United States, the Commander of the Qods Force of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), Esmail Qa'ani, visited Baghdad, likely to coordinate a united front with senior commanders of the Iraqi factions loyal to Iran. The Lebanese newspaper al-Akhbar reported that Qa'ani called on the senior commanders not to escalate tensions in Iraq at the current moment.
- ▶ In early June, the Iranian minister of energy arrived for an official visit to Iraq, during which the two countries agreed to extend the contract for the export of electricity from Iran to Iraq for two more years.
- ▶ The Iranian ambassador to Baghdad congratulated the Iraqi prime minister for completing the formation of his government, after the Iraqi parliament approved the appointments of seven additional ministers. The Iranian news agency Fars, on the other hand, expressed oblique criticism of the appointment of Fouad Hussein as the incoming minister of foreign affairs, given his pro-American positions.
- ▶ Senior Iranian officials, chief among them the Supreme Leader of Iran, Ali Khamenei, published condolence messages after the passing of the former Commander of Palestinian Islamic Jihad, Ramadan Shalah. The commander of the Qods Force sent a message of condolences to the Secretary General of the group, Ziad al-Nakhleh, in which he called to maintain the struggle until the liberation of Palestine and Jerusalem.

Iranian Involvement in Syria

► Abbas Mousavi, the Spokesman of the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, strongly condemned the tightening of sanctions on Syria, with the entry into force of the Caesar Civilian Protection Act on June 17. The Act, passed by the U.S. Congress in 2019, places stifling sanctions on any country, company and individual maintaining economic ties with the regime in the sectors of construction, engineering, gas and oil production, as well as military aviation. Mousavi called for lifting all sanctions placed by the United States and the European Union on Syria, and called them “inhumane and illegal.” He remarked that the sanctions mostly harm ordinary civilians and endanger their human rights. He also stressed Iran’s continued support for the people and government of Syria (IRNA, June 5).

Iranian Involvement in Iraq

► According to Iraqi sources, on June 3, the Commander of the IRGC’s Qods Force, Esmail Qa’ani, arrived for a visit in Baghdad. According to these reports, the goal of the visit was to develop a united front with senior officials in the pro-Iranian groups in Iraq, ahead of the start of the strategic dialogue between the United States and Iraq concerning, among other things, the future of U.S. military presence in Iraq (al-Araby al-Jadeed, June 3).

► The Lebanese paper al-Akhbar, which is politically affiliated with Hezbollah reported (June 6), that in the meetings held between Qa’ani and senior commanders of the Shi’ite militias during his two-day visit, he called on them not to escalate the situation, maintain calm and solve problems based on sound judgement. He stressed that the Popular Mobilization Units (PMU), the umbrella uniting Iraq’s Shia militias, is Iraqi, and that Tehran supports it, but that it has no desire to meddle in domestic disagreements in Iraq. Qa’ani also stated that the election of Mustafa al-Kazimi as the Iraqi prime minister is an Iraqi decision, and not an Iranian one, and that his success will serve the interests of both countries. According to reports in Iraq, Qa’ani entered Iraq as part of an official Iranian delegation headed by the Iranian minister of energy, and not as a clandestine visit, as was the prior norm.

► A commentary published by the reformist paper E’temad (June 7) argued that the only issue that is of great interest to Iran with regards to the strategic dialogue between Iraq and the United States is the activity of the American bases in Iraq. These bases, according to President Trump, are intended to keep track of Iranian activities in the region, and particularly in Iraq, reminded the author. Other than this matter, Tehran does not display

“particular sensitivity” with regards to a possible deal between Iraq and the United States, and does not intend to oppose it.

► On June 3, the Iranian Minister of Energy, Reza Ardakanian, arrived for an official visit to Iraq, during which he met senior Iraqi officials, including the Prime Minister, Mustafa al-Kazimi; the President of Iraq, Barham Salih; the Minister of Electricity, Majid Mahdi Hantoush; and the Minister of Finance, Ali Allawi. The meetings concerned expanding cooperation between the two countries in the electricity and water sectors. At the end of his visit, Ardakanian announced that the two countries decided to extend the contract concerning the export of electricity from Iran to Iraq by two additional years. He also mentioned that Iraq paid Iran a debt amounting to about \$400 million for the provision of electricity from Iran, about half of the sum demanded by Tehran (IRNA; Tasnim, June 3).

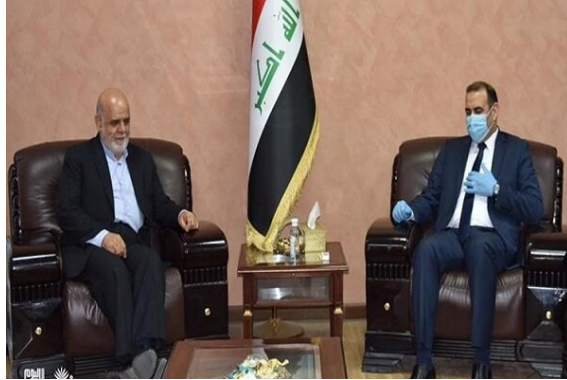


The meeting between the Iranian minister of energy with the Iraqi minister of electricity (IRNA, June 3, 2020)

► Seyyed Hamid Hosseini, a member of the board of governors of the Joint Iranian-Iraqi Chamber of Commerce stated that in April and May 2020, the volume of exports to Iraq increased, after witnessing a drop following the outbreak of the Corona virus. He mentioned that about 50 Iraqi trucks entered Iran last month to transfer to Iraq Iranian goods, which were stored in Iranian customs, and 500 additional trucks will enter Iran to ferry additional goods. Hosseini added that the southern border crossing of Shalamcheh will soon re-open, and following the necessary coordination, the rest of the border crossings will be reopened, which have been closed since the outbreak of COVID-19 led to their shuttering (Fars, June 9).

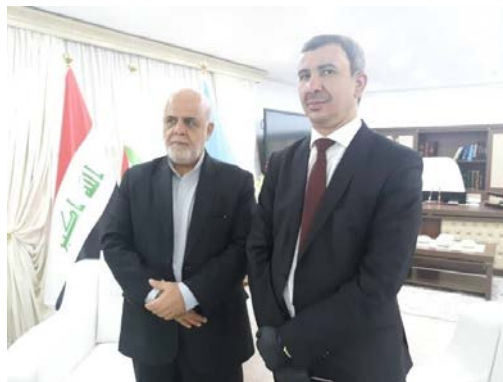
► In early June, the Iranian Ambassador to Iraq, Iraj Masjedi, met with the Iraqi Minister of Planning, Khaled Battal, and discussed with him expanding the trade ties between the two countries, as well as cooperation in the sectors of energy, science and research, facilitating

investments, dealing with COVID-19, and reaching a trade balance between the two countries (Mehr, June 1).



**The meeting in Baghdad between the Iranian ambassador and Iraqi minister of planning
(Mehr, June 1, 2020)**

► On June 10, Masjedi met with the incoming Iraqi Minister of Oil, Ihsan Abdul Jabbar. The two discussed cooperation between the two countries in the oil sector. The news agency IRNA reported (June 10), that since the formation of the new government of Mustafa al-Kazimi last month, Masjedi has met with the prime minister, as well as the ministers of interior, defense, transportation, works and social affairs, development, finance, higher education and oil.



**The meeting of the Iranian ambassador in Baghdad with the Iraqi minister of oil
(IRNA, June 10, 2020)**

► The Iranian Ambassador to Baghdad, Iraj Masjedi, congratulated the Prime Minister of Iraq, Mustafa al-Kazimi, for completing the formation of his government, after the Iraqi parliament

approved the appointment of seven additional ministers to the cabinet. In a tweet on his Twitter account (June 6), Masjedi wished success to the new government ministers and expressed hope that upon the formation of the new government, it will be possible to expand the ties between Iraq and Iran, benefiting the national interests of both countries.

► The hardline Fars news agency, on the other hand, expressed oblique criticism about the appointment of Fouad Hussein, a member of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), as the Iraqi minister of foreign affairs. A report published by the agency (June 7) provided details about some of the Twitter accounts that the new foreign minister is following, including the Twitter accounts of the British and American embassies in Baghdad, of the U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM), and of senior officials in the Kurdistan region of northern Iraq. According to Fars, the accounts followed by Hussein may indicate his political leanings.

Iranian Involvement in the Palestinian Arena

► Senior Iranian officials issued condolence notices following the passing of the former Secretary General of Palestinian Islamic Jihad, Ramadan Shalah. In a statement issued by the Supreme Leader of Iran, Ali Khamenei, he stated that the “Palestinian resistance” lost “an important element.” Khamenei expressed hope that Jihadi efforts of his predecessors will be able to compensate for the loss (Tasnim, June 8). The Iranian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mohammad Javad Zarif, praised the role Shalah played in the Palestinian “resistance” against the “Zionist regime” in a statement he issued. He also lauded Shalah’s role in bolstering the unity of the Palestinian people and the Muslim world. He proclaimed that in the conscience of the people, and particularly the people of Palestine and Iran, Shalah will remain a symbol of resistance and struggle (Tasnim, June 7).



The meeting between the Iranian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Zarif, with Ramadan Shallah in Tehran in May 2016 (Tasnim, June 7, 2016).

- ▶ The Secretary of the Iranian Supreme National Security Council, Ali Shamkhani, sent a condolence message to the Secretary General of Palestinian Islamic Jihad, Ziad al-Nakhleh, writing that Shallah's struggle is a precious equity for his comrades, who will follow his path until the full liberation of Jerusalem and complete elimination of the "Zionist regime" (Mehr, June 7). The Commander of the IRGC's Qods Force, Esmail Qa'ani, praised Shallah in a condolence missive addressed to Ziad al-Nakhleh, and the struggle he waged against the "Zionist regime." The letter called on the fighters of Palestinian Islamic Jihad to continue down his path until the liberation of Jerusalem and Palestine. He insisted that Iran will continue to stand by the Palestinians and bolster the "axis of resistance," as did Qasem Soleimani (ISNA, June 7).
- ▶ The Commander of the IRGC, Hossein Salami, also sent a condolence message to al-Nakhleh, in which he proclaimed that the "resistance" will never forget Shallah's lofty values in the struggle for the liberation of Jerusalem and removing the "cancerous tumor that is Israel" from the region (Fars, June 8).