



# Spotlight on Iran

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## Overview

- ▶ In late March, the Iranian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Hossein-Amir Abdollahian, conducted a visit to Syria and Lebanon and met with senior officials in Damascus and Beirut, including President Assad, the Syrian minister of foreign affairs, the Lebanese president, the prime minister of Lebanon, and the secretary general of Hezbollah. During the visit, the minister discussed bilateral relations and regional and international developments.
- ▶ Following the visit of Syrian President Assad to the United Arab Emirates (UAE), the Iranian website Nour News, which is affiliated with the Supreme National Security Council of Iran, argued that this visit is a manifestation of the change in the Emirates' position with regards to the Assad regime. According to the website, this change is the result of Iran's unyielding support for Syria, and the recognition of the countries of the region that they can not rely on the United States and Israel.
- ▶ A pro-opposition Syrian news website reported that pro-Iranian militias completed the first phase in the establishment of a "camp of tunnels" in the desert east of Homs. According to this report, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) are striving to establish a base to carry out military training for thousands of fighters in conducting warfare in tunnels and channels.
- ▶ Iranian media outlets praised the Houthi attack on Saudi Arabia on March 25<sup>th</sup> and presented it as another strategic success of the Houthis in the ongoing campaign against Saudi Arabia.
- ▶ The spokesman of the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs condemned the Negev Summit and labeled it "a betrayal of the Palestinian cause." He remarked that Iran is willing to cooperate with the countries of the region to counter the "Zionist-American plot."
- ▶ The secretary general of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad organization stated in an interview to the Lebanese al-Ahed website that Iran is the only country that is paying a price for its support

for the Palestinian people. He added that Tehran has not spared any effort in its support for “the resistance” in all spheres.

►The deputy Iranian ambassador to Afghanistan met with the chairman of the council of Shia clerics in Afghanistan and discussed developments in the country, as well as the ongoing humanitarian assistance Iran is providing to Afghanistan’s residents. Prior to the meeting, the deputy ambassador declared ensuring the security of the citizens of Afghanistan, and particularly the Shia among them, is one of Iran’s central demands.

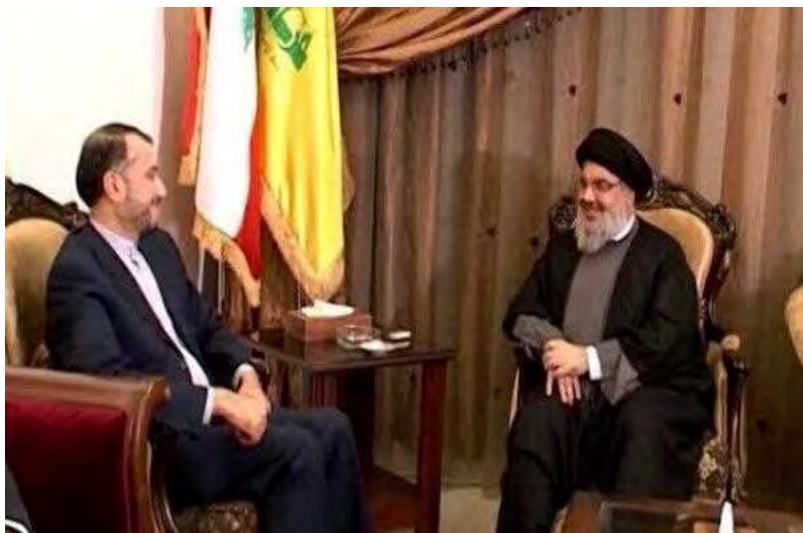
## Iranian Involvement in Syria and Lebanon

►On March 23, the Iranian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Hossein-Amir Abdollahian, arrived for visit in Syria. During his stay, the minister met with senior Syrian regime officials. Upon his arrival to Damascus, Abdollahian stated that the relationship between Iran and Syria is at an all-time high, and that the visit is intended to further bolster this excellent relationship in various spheres, particularly in the economic one. The Syrian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Faysal Miqdad, who welcomed Abdollahian at the Damascus airport, declared that the visit of the Iranian foreign minister presents another opportunity to discuss matters that concern both countries, as well as developments in the region. This is Abdollahian’s third visit to Syria since he assumed his position as Iran’s minister of foreign affairs (ISNA, March 23). During the meeting of the foreign minister with President Bashar al-Assad, the officials discussed the ongoing cooperation between the two countries and examined the implementation of bilateral agreements signed by the two countries, particularly those concerning trade and the economy. The two sides also discussed the cooperation between the two countries in “the war on terror,” the talks in Vienna concerning Iran’s nuclear program, and the war in Ukraine (SANA, March 23).



**The meeting between the Iranian minister of foreign affairs with the president of Syria.  
(Fars, March 23)**

►After concluding his visit to Syria, Abdollahian moved on to Lebanon. Upon arrival in Beirut, Abdollahian stated that Iran is willing to maintain its commercial and economic cooperation with Lebanon, and to establish two power stations, each producing 1,000 megawatts. During his visit to Beirut, the Iranian minister of foreign affairs also met with President Michel Aoun, Prime Minister Najib Miqati, the Speaker of Parliament Nabih Berri, Secretary General of Hezbollah, Hassan Nasrallah, and with representatives of Palestinian factions operating in Lebanon. During his meetings with senior Lebanese officials, Abdollahian discussed political developments in Lebanon, bilateral relations between the two countries, and developments in the regional and international arena (Fars, March 24-25).



**The meeting of the Iranian minister of foreign affairs with the secretary general of Hezbollah. (IRNA, March 25)**

►The Iranian website Nour News, which is affiliated with the Iranian Supreme National Security Council, responded positively to the visit of the Syrian President, Bashar al-Assad, to the UAE. The visit, conducted on March 18, was the first one Assad carried out in the UAE since

the outbreak of the Syrian uprising in 2011. The website presented the visit as a manifestation and proof of Iran's successful regional policy. A commentary published on the website (March 20) addressed the change that occurred in the position of the UAE toward the Assad regime after years of what the website described as a policy of backing the Syrian opposition and demanding the fall of the Assad regime. According to the website, the change in the UAE's position and its willingness to normalize ties with Syria indicate that it had no choice but to abandon its previous policy, which was based on running proxy organizations in Syria and using its oil wealth. The commentary assessed that in Yemen too, the "aggressor states" will have to forego their hegemonic policy and conduct negotiations with the real representatives of the Yemeni people [meaning, the Houthis]. The article further argued that the change in the Emirates' position toward Syria was clearly affected by the support Iran offered to independent countries in the region, and its opposition to efforts by foreign countries and their allies to impose their will on the independent countries. The hegemony of the United States and its allies in the region are facing significant challenges, and the countries of the region have come to realize they can not place all their eggs in the basket of Washington and Tel Aviv.

► The pro-opposition Syrian outlet Ayn al-Furat reported (March 23) that pro-Iranian militias completed the first stage of establishing the "camp of tunnels" in the desert area east of Homs. This stage encompassed digging tunnels over 3 kilometers long inside the town al-Zaghroutiyeh, which is located 35 km east of Homs. According to this report, the residents of the town were forced to abandon it due to the drought and lack of governmental support for the livestock sector, which was the source of livelihood for most of the locals. As a result, the area has been almost entirely abandoned, which allowed the militias operating under the patronage of the IRGC to take over the town and surrounding areas. The IRGC plans to carry out military trainings to thousands of fighters in conducting war in tunnels and canals. The report also stated that Hezbollah commanders are behind this project, which is the first of its kind in Syria, and are overseeing its execution.

## Iranian Involvement in Iraq and Yemen

► Seyyed Hamid Hoseini, a Member of the Board of Governors of the Joint Iranian-Syrian Chamber of Commerce, stated that the volume of Iranian exports to Iraq will likely reach about

nine billion dollars by the end of the current Iranian year (March 20, 2022). In an interview to the Fars news agency (March 18), Hoseini stated that the ebbing of the COVID-19 pandemic has facilitated the increase in the volume of trade between the two countries. Additionally, the increase in the income of the Iraqi government has allowed it to increase imports from Iran. Finally, Hoseini reported that the volume of Iranian imports from Iraq reached one billion dollars this year.

► Talib al-Husseini, the Executive Director of the Iraqi Railway Company, stated that the project to connect Iraq and Iran's railways is in its feasibility phase. He remarked that connecting Iraq's railways those of neighboring countries, including Iran's, requires presidential approval because this concerns Iraq's sovereignty, and that it is the government's authority to set the timeline for the implementation of the project. Al-Husseini added that discussions and information exchange between Iran and Iraq concerning the project are ongoing. He stressed that Iraq sees great importance in linking its railways to those of Iran due to the large number of Iranian pilgrims visiting Shia holy sites in Iraq, as well as the volume of trade between the two nations (Tasnim, March 25). A memorandum of understanding between Iran and Iraq concerning laying a 35-kilometer-long railway connecting Shalamcheh in western Iran to Basra in southern Iraq was signed back in March 2019, during the meeting of former President of Iran, Hassan Rouhani, and the Iraqi Prime Minister at the time, Adel Abdul Mehdi. However, no progress has been made in the implementation of the plan.

► Iranian media outlets welcomed the attack carried out by the Houthis in Yemen on March 25, which hit the facilities of the oil company Aramco in Jeddah in Saudi Arabia, and infrastructure in the capital Riyadh. The attack, which entailed the deployment of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) and ballistic missiles, was presented by Iranian media as yet another strategic success of the Houthis in their ongoing campaign against Saudi Arabia. A commentary on the website Alef argued that the decisive role of the Ansar Allah Movement (the Houthis) in defending Yemen against the Saudi-American aggression resulted in a shift in the balance of power. According to this analysis, it is now up to the Yemenis to decide when and how to end the war. In recent years, the Houthis have managed to move from defense to offense and respond to the Coalition's aggression. After eight years of war, not only has Saudi Arabia failed to achieve any of its goals in the war on Yemen, but it has sunk into a quagmire from which it can not extract itself. Ansar Allah has become a force that possesses a great deal of deterrence, and is considered a major threat to the interests of the United States and Israel in the region, the

commentary argued. The most important and influential factor, which made the movement into a major and strong force in the region, is the ballistic missile capability of the Movement, which allowed it to move the war deep into the territory of Saudi Arabia and the UAE (Alef, March 27). Shortly after the Houthi attack on Saudi Arabia, the Azadi Tower in Tehran was lit with the images of the Houthi leaders in Yemen, to mark seven years since the start of the war in the country.



The Azadi Tower in Tehran lit with the images of the Houthis' leaders. (Alef, March 27)

## Iranian Involvement in the Palestinian Arena

- ▶ The Spokesman of the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Saeed Khatibzadeh, condemned the Summit of the Negev, labeling it “a betrayal of the cause of the liberation of Palestine.” He asserted that normalization and establishment of relations with the “terrorist Zionists and occupiers of Jerusalem” are akin to stabbing the Palestinian people in the back and a gift for the “Israeli child-killing regime.” He added that the historical record shows that compromise and surrender will only lead to the defeat and humiliation of those who support this path, and that Palestine will only be liberated through the resistance of the Palestinian people and the support of Islamic governments and people. Khatibzadeh declared that Iran is willing to cooperate and expand its ties with the countries of the region to counter the “Zionist-American plot,” which is intended to sow disagreements and instability in western Asia (ISNA, March 28).
- ▶ The Commander of the IRGC’s Qods Force, Esmail Qa’ani, sent a conciliatory telegram to the Commander of Hamas’ Military Wing, Mohammad Deif, following the passing of Deif’s father. In the message, Qa’ani praised Deir father, who “sowed the seeds of resistance and jihad in the hearts of his sons and grandchildren” (Tasnim, March 19).

► On March 22, the Spokesman of the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Saeed Khatibzadeh, participated in the 48<sup>th</sup> summit of the minister of foreign affairs of Organization of Islamic Cooperation, which took place in Islamabad, Pakistan. In a tweet on his Twitter account (March 22), Khatibzadeh, who represented Iran at the conference, wrote that Palestine is and will remain the top priority of the Muslim world, and that no one can compromise on the Palestinian question with the “Israeli Apartheid regime.” In his speech at the conference, Khatibzadeh proclaimed that the Organization of Islamic Cooperation must prevent the increasing penetration by the “Zionist regime” into the Muslim world, and take a clear stance against normalization with Israel, which bolsters its aggression toward the Palestinians. He repeated Iran’s position that the solution to the question of Palestine ought to be solved through conducting a referendum among the pre-1948 inhabitants of Palestine and the Palestinian refugees concerning the future of the land (Tasnim, March 23).



**Saeed Khatibzadeh at the conference of foreign minister of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation.  
(Fars, March 22)**

► The Secretary General of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad organization, Ziad al-Nakhleh, stated in an interview to the al-Ahed website, which is affiliated with Hezbollah, that Iran is the only country that has paid a price, including of being subjected to sanctions, for its support to the Palestinian people (March 26). Despite this, he added, Iran insists on continuing to support the Palestinians. He remarked that Iran did not spare any effort in its support for the “resistance” and the Palestinian people, in the political, military and moral spheres, in the confrontation against “the Zionist project.”

## Iranian Involvement in Afghanistan

► Iran transferred another shipment of humanitarian aid to the Nangarhar Province in eastern Afghanistan. This is the second such shipment from Iran to this Province, after in November 2021, Iran provided humanitarian assistance to the Province, totaling in five tonnes of food and four tonnes of medicine. The additional shipment included 500 baskets of flour, rice and oil, which were distributed among the province’s residents. In mid-March 2022, the Deputy Iranian Ambassador to Afghanistan, Seyyed Hassan Mortazavi, met with the Governor of Nangarhar Province, Mola Mohammad Naim Akhund, and discussed Iran’s humanitarian assistance to the province. A statement of the governor’s office read that the two officials discussed “the historical friendship between Afghanistan and Iran, diplomatic relations, education, the economy and humanitarian assistance” and stressed the need to maintain cooperation between the two sides (Tasnim, March 18).



**Distribution of assistance delivered from Iran to Nangarhar Province. (Tasnim, March 18)**

► In late-March, the Deputy Iranian Ambassador to Kabul, Seyyed Hassan Mortazavi, met with Ayatollah Mohammad Hashem Salehi, the Chairman of the Council of Shia Clerics in Afghanistan, and discussed developments in the country and the Iranian humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan. Salehi asked the deputy ambassador to continue providing assistance to the Afghan people. Prior to the meeting, the deputy Iranian ambassador took part in Friday prayers in western Kabul and declared that ensuring the security of the people of Afghanistan, and particularly the Shia, is one of Iran’s basic demands (Tasnim, March 27).