



Spotlight on Iran

March 23 – April 2, 2023

Author: Dr. Raz Zimmt

Overview

- ▶ The Greek police detained two Pakistanis on suspicion of planning terrorist attacks against Israelis in Athens, directed by the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps' (IRGC) Qods Force. The Iranian embassy in Athens denied the reports, claiming their objective was to deflect attention from Israel's internal political crisis.
- ▶ Two IRGC officers were killed in an attack attributed to Israel which was carried out in the Damascus area on the night of March 30, 2023. The IRGC threatened retribution.
- ▶ Iran condemned the March 24, 2023, American attack in eastern Syria which led to the deaths of pro-Iranian militia operatives. The American attack was a response to a UAV attack on an American base in northeastern Syria the previous day, in which an American contractor was killed.
- ▶ The Iranian authorities announced that World Jerusalem Day, usually held annually on the last Friday of Ramadan, would be held on April 14, 2023. The original date was changed because of its proximity to Eid al-Fitr, which ends Ramadan. The IRGC spokesman also related to Israel's internal political crisis, claiming that "the liberation of Jerusalem and the liberation of the Palestinian people are closer today than ever before."
- ▶ At the end of March the IRGC's Qods Force commander arrived in Iraq for a visit and met with Iraqi leaders and senior commanders of the pro-Iranian Shi'ite militias.

Iranian-Directed Terrorist Attacks in Greece

- ▶ The Greek police detained two Iranian-born Pakistani Shi'ites on suspicion of planning terrorist attacks against Israelis in the center of Athens. They had received instructions from the IRGC's Qods Force and the attacks were in the final stages of planning. The local media reported that they planned to recruit others to help them attack a kosher Jewish restaurant frequented by Israelis in the Chabad center in the Psyrrri neighborhood. The Mossad said in a

statement that the terrorist network which had been exposed was "part of a vast Iranian network, operated from Iran spanning many countries," calling it another Iranian attempt to promote terrorism against Israeli and Jewish targets. The statement added that the Mossad had helped the Greek authorities prevent the attacks. According to a statement from the prime minister's office, "... the Mossad rendered intelligence assistance in unraveling the infrastructure, its work methods and the link to Iran."

► The Greek police announced that the terrorist network, which planned to carry out terrorist attacks on instructions "from abroad," had been dismantled (Haaretz, March 28, 2023). On March 29, 2023, the names of the terrorists were made public. They were Heidar, 27 years old, who lived on the island of Zakynthos; and Hussein, 29 years old, who lived in Sparta. They had been living in Greece illegally for the past five years, worked in agriculture and had been promised between \$10,000 and \$15,000 for every Israeli they killed.

► The Iranian embassy in Athens denied the reports. On March 29, 2023, the embassy tweeted the claim that the reports were "baseless accusations against Tehran," and that "the fabricated claims were meant to deflect attention from the internal crises of the Zionist entity."



Two Pakistanis suspected of planning the terrorist attack at the direction of Iran (Greek media, March 29, 2023).

Iranian Intervention in Syria

► Milad Heydari, a captain in the IRGC who served as a military advisor, was killed in an attack in the Damascus area on the night of March 30, 2023, which has been attributed to Israel. The IRGC said in a statement that without a doubt, "the fake, criminal Zionist regime will be punished for its crime" (Tasnim, March 31, 2023). On March 31, 2023, the Saudi Arabian TV station al-Hadath reported that Heydari had trained the pro-Iranian militias in Syria and worked on the precision of their missiles, and that he was not the target of the attack. Al-

Hadath also claimed that the real target of the attack was a shipment of computer chips which would be used to improve missile precision. However, on March 31, 2023, the Syrian news channel Ayn al-Furat reported the attack targeted warehouses used to store missiles and UAVs, as well as a tunnel used by the pro-Iranian militias and Hezbollah. On the night of April 1, 2023, the Iranian media reported that another Iranian officer, Miqdad Mehqani, who had been wounded in the attack attributed to Israel, had died (Asr-e Iran, April 2, 2023).



Milad Heydari, IRGC officer killed in Syria (IRNA, March 31, 2023).

► Nasser Kanani, spokesman for the Iranian foreign ministry, condemned the two attacks attributed to Israel in the Damascus region on the nights of March 29 and March 30, 2023. He called the "aggression action" an "ongoing, gross violation of international law," claiming their objective was to deflect attention from Israel's deep political crisis and to express dissatisfaction with Syria's internal stabilization and improved foreign relations. He demanded that international institutions, especially the UN Security Council, take action to prevent Israel from continuing its attacks and prevent the repeated violations of Syria's sovereignty and territorial integrity (Fars, March 31, 2023).

► Iran condemned the attack carried out by the United States in Deir al-Zor on March 24, 2023, which led to the deaths of at least eight operatives of local pro-Iranian militias. The attack came as a response to the UAV attack of the previous day on an American base in northeastern Syria, in which an American contractor was killed and five American soldiers and another contractor were wounded. According to US assessment, the UAV had been manufactured in Iran. Keyvan Khosravi, spokesman for the Iranian Supreme National Security Council, said the attacks on the bases, which had been established at the request of the Syrian government to combat terrorism and fight ISIS operatives, would have a resolute response. He denied Iranian involvement in the attack on the American bases in eastern Syria and claimed Washington could not, by creating artificial crises and lying, link the legitimate,

legal "resistance" of countries occupied by the American army to other countries. He said Iran had paid a high price for combatting terrorism and objected to any action that endangered Syrian stability. He accused the United States of creating and supporting ISIS, and claimed that American helicopters had recently transported ISIS terrorists to Syria to further undermine the country's stability (Mehr, March 25, 2023). Nasser Kanani, spokesman for the Iranian foreign ministry, also condemned the American attack. He said the continuing American military presence and occupation of parts of Syria were a violation of international law and national sovereignty. He denied the American claims about Iranian involvement in the attack on the American base, saying that the Iranian military advisors were operating in Syria at the request of the Syrian government and would remain in the country to combat terrorism and "establish peace, stability and security" (Tasnim, March 25, 2023).

► On March 29, 2023, Hossein-Amir Abdollahian, Iranian foreign minister, met in Moscow with Sergey Lavrov, the Russian foreign minister. Abdollahian said that on April 3 and 4, 2023, a meeting would be held of the deputy foreign ministers of Syria, Iran, Turkey and Russia. He said that if the meeting bore fruit, the next meeting would be held by the countries' foreign ministers. On March 28, 2023, a highly-placed Turkish source told Reuters that the meeting of the deputy foreign ministers in Moscow would deal with the situation in Syria and no important decisions were expected to be made. The meeting had been scheduled for the middle of March and was postponed.

► On March 26, 2023, Hossein-Amir Abdollahian, Iranian foreign minister spoke with his Syrian counterpart, Faisal Meqdad. They discussed bilateral relations and regional and international developments (al-Alam, March 26, 2023).

► On March 27, 2023, Hossein Akbari, the incoming Iran ambassador to Damascus, met with Hossein-Amir Abdollahian, Iranian foreign minister, before he left for Syria. Akbari, who in the past served as ambassador to Libya and is considered an expert in Arab affairs, will replace outgoing Mehdi Sobhani, who served as ambassador to Damascus for almost two years and has been appointed Iranian ambassador to Yerevan (the capital of Armenia) (Iran, March 27, 2023).



The incoming Iranian ambassador to Damascus meets with the Iranian foreign minister (IRNA, March 27, 2023).

Iranian Intervention in the Palestinian Arena

- ▶ Ramazan Sharif, IRGC spokesman, said of the Israeli political crisis that the "liberation of Jerusalem and the liberation of the Palestinian people" were closer today than ever before. Speaking at a memorial ceremony for IRGC martyrs, he said the "Zionist regime" was facing an extremely difficult, complex political and social crisis and that all the "occupied territories" were battle fields for the "struggle" to liberate Jerusalem. He added that the Palestinian "fighters" now had a golden opportunity because there was no security in any location occupied by the "Zionist regime" (Tasnim, March 28, 2023).
- ▶ Ramazan Sharif, who is also the head of the Intifada and Jerusalem headquarters of the Islamic coordination council said that this year World Jerusalem Day would be held on April 14. World Jerusalem Day has been held annually on the last Friday of Ramadan since 1979, instituted by the founder of the Islamic Revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini. The objective of the event is to show the support of Iran and the Muslim world for the Palestinian cause and the "liberation of Jerusalem." This year the Iranian authorities decided to hold World Jerusalem Day earlier than usual to keep it from clashing with Eid al-Fitr, which ends Ramadan (Mehr, March 29, 2023).



Ramadan Sharif, IRGC spokesman and head of the "intifada and Jerusalem headquarters" (Mehr, March 29, 2023).

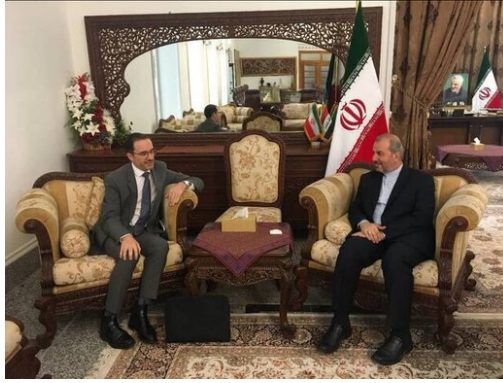
Iranian Intervention in Iraq

► On March 30, 2023, IRGC commander Esmail Ghaani arrived in Iraq for a visit. Shafaq News reported that he came to participate in a memorial service for Shi'ite cleric Sayyid Sadiq Hakim, son of senior Iraqi Shi'ite cleric Sayyid Mohammed Baqir al-Hakim, in Najaf. A "knowledgeable source" told Shafaq News that Ghaani would hold discussions with government and political officials, led by Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shaya al-Sudani, and the "coordination framework" regarding political and security issues, and the renewal of diplomatic relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia.



Esmail Ghaani in Iraq (al-Alam, March 31, 2023).

► On March 26, 2023, Mohammad Kazem Al-e Sadegh, the Iranian ambassador to Baghdad, met with the Mark Bryson Richardson, the British ambassador to Baghdad. They discussed issues relating to bilateral relations, internal Iraqi political developments, and regional and international developments (ISNA, March 26, 2023).



Meeting of the Iranian and British ambassadors to Baghdad (ISNA, March 26, 2023).