



Spotlight on Iran

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Overview

- ▶ Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi paid an official visit to Syria on May 3 and 4, 2023, heading a delegation of high-ranking officials, among them the ministers of oil, defense and transportation. Fifteen agreements for bilateral cooperation were signed at a meeting with Syrian President Bashar Assad. While in Syria Raisi also met with families of pro-Iranian militia fighters, the heads of the Palestinian factions in Damascus and a delegation of Hezbollah officials. At a meeting with the Syrian defense minister, Iran's defense minister expressed Iran's willingness to supply Syria with advanced weapons.
- ▶ The head of Iran's Civil Aviation Organization announced that Iran was prepared to repair and renovate Syria's airfields, including the international airport in Damascus.
- ▶ Sources in eastern Syria reported the recent formation of two new pro-Iranian militias. This development serves as more evidence for Iran's efforts to strengthen the local Syrian militias and rely, to a growing extent, on Syrian fighters as a replacement for a direct Iranian presence.
- ▶ At the end of April the Iranian foreign minister visited Lebanon, where he met with high-ranking government officials and the secretaries general of Hezbollah and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ). He also toured south Lebanon.
- ▶ Iran condemned Israel's targeted killings of three leading PIJ terrorists and issued an urgent call for the Muslim world to undertake measures that would deter Israel.
- ▶ At the end of April the Iranian foreign minister spoke on the phone with Yahya al-Sinwar, head of the Hamas political bureau in the Gaza Strip, and Isma'il Haniyeh, head of Hamas' political bureau, whom he invited to visit Tehran to meet with the Iranian leadership.

► On April 29, 2023, the president of Iraq arrived in Tehran for a visit, during which he met with the heads of the Iranian administration, including Supreme Leader Khamenei and President Raisi.

Iranian Involvement/ in Syria and Lebanon

► On May 3, 2023, Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi arrived in Syria for a two-day visit. It was the first visit of an Iranian president in Damascus since 2010. His entourage included Iran's defense, foreign, oil and transportation ministers. On April 28, 2023, the Syrian pro-establishment newspaper *al-Watan* reported that during the visit Raisi would focus on strengthening strategic bilateral cooperation, especially with regard to economic aspect. On the eve of Raisi's visit, Hossein Akbari, the Iranian ambassador to Syria, said it would be "a turning point with regional consequences" and would also have a positive impact outside the region. Interviewed by IRNA, the government news agency, on April 30, 2023, Akbari said the visit would contribute to the development of relations between Iran and Syria in many fields. He added that Tehran and Damascus bore the heavy costs of "resistance to the Zionist entity" and if they increased their cooperation they could make the "resistance" more powerful. Interviewed by Hezbollah's al-Mayadeen TV on the eve of his visit, Raisi said Iran openly supported all the "resistance axis" fronts and his visit was part of that support (al-Mayadeen, May 2, 2023).

► At a meeting with Syrian President Assad, Raisi said Syria had overcome many obstacles and today it could be said that it was victorious, despite the sanctions imposed on it. He added that the positions of Iran and Syria, which were based on reason, "resistance" and a firm stance, had proved themselves, and even those who had doubted their position were now convinced that it was correct and just. He said as Iran had stood by Syria in its struggle against terrorism, it would stand with it for reconstruction and development. President Assad thanked Iran for supporting his country and said the relations between them were stable despite all the political and security storms that had struck the Middle East. During the visit the two presidents signed 15 agreements for bilateral cooperation in various fields including agriculture, natural resources, transportation, free-trade zones, oil, earthquakes, communication and technology. Raisi emphasized that Iran was determined to develop its relations with the regional states and that the memoranda of understandings, especially in the economic-commercial field, would serve the interests of both countries (Tasnim, May 3, 2023). Before returning to Iran Raisi met with Assad again to discuss the implementation of the economic agreements, including the

construction of a power plant, mutual investments and the establishment of a joint bank for the two countries (Mehr, May 4, 2023).

► Fahd Darwish, head of the joint Iranian-Syrian commercial office, interviewed on May 4, 2023, by the Syrian daily newspaper *al-Watan*, said the agreements signed by the presidents of Iran and Syria paved the way for unprecedented economic and commercial cooperation. He said they would make it possible for them to form joint companies, by means of which Syria would be able to pay its debts to Iran with credit lines from the profits of the joint projects.



Raisi (left) and Assad meet (Tasnim, May 3, 2023).

► President Raisi also visited the shrine of al-Sayyidah Zaynab south of Damascus and met with relatives of the pro-Iranian militia fighters killed during the fighting in Syria. He told them that after 12 years of "oppression, conspiracies and crimes" Syria had emerged strong and proud. He said the "resistance of the Syrian people and the resistance of the Palestinian people" had created conditions which were good for the "resistance front" and bad for the "Zionist regime." He said Syria had stood firm for 12 years and won, and as Iran had stood with Syria during difficult times it would stand with Syria during its rehabilitation. He added that the ties between Iran and Syria were not ordinary political or diplomatic relations between two countries but rather deep, strategic bonds between two peoples and two governments (Tasnim, May 3, 2023).

► On May 4, 2023, Raisi met in Damascus with the heads of the Palestinian factions led by PIJ Secretary General Ziyad al-Nakhalah and leading Hamas official Khalil al-Hayya. Raisi said that the liberation of Jerusalem was the most important mission of the Islamic world today and that all its "equations" were defined by that objective. He also met with Sunni clerics (IRNA,

May 4, 2023). Before returning to Tehran he met with a delegation of high-ranking Hezbollah figures led by Ibrahim Amin al-Sayed, Hussein al-Khalil and Nabil Kaouk (al-Manar, May 5, 2023).



Iranian President Raisi meets in Damascus with the leaders of the Palestinian factions (IRNA, May 4, 2023).

- ▶ Towards the end of his visit he met with Syrian Prime Minister Hussein Arnous, to whom he said that the comprehensive plan for long-term strategic cooperation signed by the two countries was the beginning of a new chapter in their relations. The Syrian prime minister said Syria intended to implement to their full extent the agreements signed during the visit (Fars, May 4, 2023).
- ▶ A week before President Raisi's visit to Damascus the Joint Iran-Syria Economic Committee held deliberations chaired by Muhammad Samer al-Khalil, the Syrian economic minister, and Mehرداد Bazarpash, the Iranian transportation minister, after which they signed an agreement for Iranian-Syrian economic and transportation cooperation (Fars, April 27, 2023).



Signing the agreement for Iranian-Syrian economic and transportation cooperation (Fars, April 27, 2023).

► Amir Mohammad-Reza Ashtiani, the Iranian defense minister, met in Damascus with Ali Mahmoud Abbas, the Syrian defense minister, and said Iran was prepared to supply Syria with advanced weapons. He added that Iran was also prepared to collaborate with Syria in constructing factories and production lines for strategic weapons to improve the country's security (Fars, May 8, 2023).



The Syrian and Iran decision makers meet (Fars, May 8, 2023).

► Mohammad Mohammadi-Bakhsh, head of the Syrian Civil Aviation Organization, said Iran had expressed willingness to rehabilitate and renovate Syria's airfields, including the international airport in Damascus, and to have a joint working group install the equipment. He also announced that the number of flights between Iran and Syria would increase for the sake of pilgrims and traders (Tasnim, May 7, 2023).

► On April 26, 2023, *al-Quds al-Arabi* reported that according to sources in eastern Syria, a new, local, pro-Iranian militia had been formed in the city of al-Mayadin in eastern Syria, called The Union of the Imam Ali Battalions. According to the report, the militia was formed on the initiative of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps' (IRGC) Qods Force after the round of aerial attacks by Western Coalition planes in eastern Syria a month ago. The militia is led by Abu-Ali al-Karawi and has 60 armed Iraqi volunteer operatives. It held its first activity on Eid al-Fitr, holding the holiday prayer in a religious center belonging to the IRGC. The newspaper also reported that according to its sources, this past August (2023) an additional pro-Iranian militia was formed in al-Mayadin called Al-Ahزاب, and has 300 armed Iranians and Iraqis. According to the sources, Iran is exploiting the severe economic distress of the residents of the Deir ez-Zor district to recruit fighters to the pro-Iranian militias, paying them between 70,000 and 100,000 Syrian pounds (between approximately \$28 and \$40).

► On May 5, 2023, the Syrian opposition channel Sada al-Sharqiya reported that two IRGC commanders, Hajj Mehdi and Hajj Hussein, had met with a Russian delegation in Albukamal in eastern Syria on May 3, and rejected their request to allow Russian forces to enter the city. According to the report, the Russian delegation demanded the pro-Iranian militias allow Russian forces to establish a headquarters in Albukamal and posts in the town of al-Baghuz on the Syria-Iraq border, and to renovate the Albukamal bridge. The Iranian representatives rejected the Russian demand, replying that the pro-Iranian militias would be responsible any activity in Albukamal.

► On April 26, 2023, Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein-Amir Abdollahian arrived in Lebanon for a two-day visit, and on April 27 met with Lebanese Foreign Minister Abdallah Bou Habib. They discussed developments in "Palestine," Ukraine, Afghan, Sudan and Libya. Bou Habib praised the agreement for the renewal of relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Abdollahian said Iran would support any choice or agreement made by the Lebanese to choose a new president. Bou Habib reported that Iran had offered Lebanon help with the issue of electricity and would transmit the offer to officials in Beirut.

► During the visit Abdollahian also met with Lebanese Prime Minister Najib Makai and Nabih Berri, the speaker of the Lebanese Parliament. He met with PIJ Secretary General Ziyad al-Nakhalah as well, and the two discussed developments in the Palestinian arena and the "aggression of the Zionist occupation against the oppressed Palestinian people and holy sites

in Jerusalem." Abdollahian noted Iran's continuing support for the "Palestinian resistance" and said effective deterrent measures had to be put in place against "the Zionists' aggressive activities against the Palestinians and the sites sacred to Islam." Al-Nakhalah expressed his esteem for Iran's political support of the Palestinians in regional and international forums, saying that the growing internal crises of the "Zionist regime" were a sign of the "Zionist occupiers' " weakness in facing the "resistance" and "struggle" of the "resistance" operatives and fighters in the "Palestinian state."

► Abdollahian also met with Hezbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah. The two discussed recent regional developments, especially the Iranian-Saudi Arabian agreement and its influence on regional countries, as well as recent developments in Lebanon and the Palestinian arena. Also present at the meeting was Mojtaba Amani, the Iranian ambassador to Lebanon (Tasnim, April 28, 2023).



Abdollahian meets with Nasrallah (Tasnim, April 28, 2023).

► On April 28 Abdollahian arrived in the south Lebanon village of Maroun al-Ras and was taken on a tour along the Israel-Lebanon border. He gave a speech at the site saying that at their meeting Nasrallah had given him precise assessments which proved the condition of the Palestinian and Lebanese "resistances" was extremely good and they were very strong. He said Iran supported the "resistance against the Zionist enemy" and would continue to maintain friendly relations even in difficult circumstances. He said the "resistance" had proved that the "Zionist entity" understood only force and that regional positive developments would lead to its collapse (Fars, April 28, 2023).



Abdollahian in Maroun al-Ras (Tasnim, April 28).

Iranian Activity in the Palestinian Arena

► Iran condemned Israel's targeted killings of three leading PIJ commanders.¹ Nasser Kanaani, a spokesman for the Iranian foreign ministry, claimed that "the Zionist entity's terrorist attack on different areas in the Gaza Strip, which led to the deaths of three ranking PIJ operatives and to the deaths and wounding of dozens [sic] of civilians, women and children among them, was a measure taken to draw public opinion away from the Zionists' fragile, tense internal situation." He added that the international community's silence and lack of activity regarding the "Zionist escalation against the Palestinian people" in recent months were important factors in the "apartheid regime's" crimes. Kanaani noted the need for urgent deterrent action, coordinated by the Muslim states, to halt "the Zionist killing and crime machine" (ISNA, May 9, 2023).

► At the end of April Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein-Amir Abdollahian held a telephone conversation with Yahya al-Sinwar, head of the Hamas political bureau in the Gaza Strip, and blessed the "resistance" and the Palestinian people for Eid al-Fitr. Al-Sinwar thanked Iranian Republic for its political support of the Palestinian people (Tasnim, April 28, 2023). On April 28, 2023, Abdollahian also spoke with Isma'il Haniyeh, head of Hamas' political bureau and the two discussed recent political developments. Abdollahian praised the "firm stance of the Palestinian people" and said he was proud of the "Palestinian resistance which attacked the

¹ The three were killed on May 9 in Israel's Operation Shield and Arrow against the PIJ in the Gaza Strip. For further information see the May 9, 2023 report, "Operation Shield and Arrow in the Gaza Strip – Initial Reactions as of May 9, 4 p.m."

occupation." He noted the importance of the issue of Jerusalem and the fact that Iran was monitoring the "Zionist acts of aggression." He invited Haniyeh to visit Tehran and meet with the Iranian leadership. Haniyeh confirmed he would visit Iran in the near future. He noted the role of the "resistance" in repelling [Israel's] "aggression" and its ability to enforce "equations" in the service of the Palestinian people's interests (qudspres.com, April 28, 2023).

► At a meeting with clerics on May 3, 2023, Esmail Ghaani, commander of the IRGC's Qods Force, said Israel had reached such a low point it had to surround itself with barbed wire and radars to ensure that no one entered its territory. He claimed that on some days more than 30 "actions" were carried out in the West Bank, which the Israeli media tried to conceal. He alleged that before the West Bank had been "armed" there had been no more than 10 actions a year. Today, however, young Palestinians were prepared to die as martyrs in every activity they carried out. He added that Jerusalem was not the final objective, it was an interim objective, and that the "criminal Zionist regime" had never been as humiliated as it was currently being humiliated by young Palestinians. He said he was certain that the statement made by the Iranian supreme leader according to which young Palestinians would worship in Jerusalem, would come true and lead to resistance and the formation of a Basij [wing] of soldiers from the Muslim world (Fars, May 4, 2023).

Iranian Activity in Iraq

► On April 29, 2023, Iraqi President Abdul Latif Rashid arrived in Tehran for a visit. At a joint press conference held by the two presidents, Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi said both countries wanted broader relations between them. He related to the importance of the security memorandum of understandings signed by Iran and Iraq, and said Iran viewed the undermining of Iraq's security as the undermining of its own. He added that the presence of American forces in the region undermined regional security, and that the relations between Iran and Iraq and the other regional countries contributed to improving security. The Iraqi president said relations between Iraq and Iran were improving and action should be taken to develop them at every level (IRNA, April 29, 2023). While in Tehran Rashid also met with Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, and the Majlis Speaker Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf. Khamenei told him that Iraq's progress, happiness and independence were very important to Iran and that expanding bilateral cooperation and implementing their agreements was in the interests

of both countries. He added that the presence of even one American soldier in Iraq was too many (Tasnim, April 29, 2023).



Joint press conference held by the president of Iraq and Iran (IRNA, April 29, 2023).

- ▶ On May 2, 2023, Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein-Amir Abdollahian spoke on the phone with Iraqi Foreign Minister Fuad Hussein to discuss regional and international developments (Fars, May 3, 2023).
- ▶ On May 6, 2023, Iranian Energy Minister Al-Akbar Mehrabian met with Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shia' al-Soudani. They discussed ways to strengthen bilateral cooperation in the areas of water and energy. The Iranian minister went to Iraq to participate in the Third International Water Conference in Baghdad (IRNA, May 6, 2023).