



Spotlight on Iran

March 7, 2021 – March 21, 2021

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Overview

- ▶ Two fighters of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) were killed in a mine explosion in al-Mayadin, eastern Syria.
- ▶ The advisor on foreign affairs to the supreme leader of Iran met with the incoming Syrian ambassador to Tehran and passed on the wishes of speedy recovery from the supreme leader of Iran to the Syrian president, who recently contracted COVID-19. He also offered the ambassador to send an Iranian medical team to Damascus to take care of President Assad.
- ▶ In an extraordinary statement, a former Iranian Majlis member stated that it can not be ruled out that Syria will change its approach toward Iran in the future, and hence Iran must not place all its eggs in President Assad's basket. His statement was made against the backdrop of Iran's exclusion from a meeting between the foreign ministers of Turkey, Russia and Qatar in Doha, which convened to discuss the crisis in Syria.
- ▶ The Iranian ambassador to Baghdad met with the Iraqi minister of finance and discussed the issue of releasing Iranian funds frozen in Iraqi banks due to Western sanctions. Prior to this, Iranian President Rouhani spoke to the Iraqi Prime Minister al-Kazimi and called on him to act to immediately unfreeze the Iranian funds held in Iraq, which constitute a part of the Iraqi debt to Iran for the import of electricity and gas.
- ▶ In a letter to the UN secretary general, the Iranian ambassador to the UN denied any Iranian involvement in the attacks recently carried out against American targets in Iraq, which were attributed to Iranian-backed Iraqi Shia militias. The ambassador condemned the airstrikes carried out by the United States along the Syria-Iraq border on February 25.
- ▶ Esmail Qa'ani, the Commander of the IRGC's Qods Force, stated in a commemoration ceremony in the city of Mashhad that Israel is forced to wall itself off to protect itself, and

warned “the Zionists” that they should know that this wall too will be destroyed. Qa’ani also declared that the successors of Qasem Soleimani “will break the Americans’ bones.”

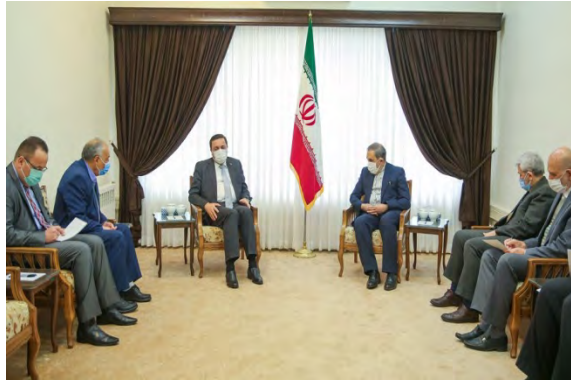
Iranian Involvement in Syria

► Two IRGC fighters were killed in a mine explosion in the al-Mayadin area in eastern Syria. Iranian media reported that the two fallen fighters are Mehdi Bakhtiari from Eslamshahr in Tehran Province, and Mojtaba Barsanji from Savadkouh in the Mazandaran Province of northern Iran (Fars, March 16).



Mehdi Bakhtiari (right) and Mojtaba Barsanji (left), who were killed in (Syria Jehan News, March 16 , 2021)

► On March 15, the Adviser on Foreign Affairs to the Supreme Leader of Iran, Ali-Akbar Velayati met with the incoming Syrian Ambassador to Tehran, Shafiq Dayoud, and passed on wishes of speedy recovery from the supreme leader to the President of Syria, Bashar al-Assad, who recently contracted COVID-19. Velayati stated that the Supreme Leader of Iran, Khamenei, sees Assad as one of the greatest and most admirable leaders within his country, the region and the “resistance front.” He expressed Iran’s willingness to send to Damascus a special and experienced medical team to treat the president of Syria. The Syrian ambassador congratulated the supreme leader of Iran, the Iranian people and government, on the occasion of the Iranian New Year (Nowruz), and thanked Khamenei for his wishes of good health to President Assad. He called for expanding ties between Iran and Syria in all spheres, stressed Iran’s important role in the “resistance axis” and expressed hope for additional victories, which will usher the defeat of the “American and Zionist forces” and lead to their expulsion (ISNA, March 15).



The meeting between the adviser to the supreme leader of Iran and the Syrian ambassador to Tehran (ISNA, March 15 , 2021)

► The March 11 meeting between the Turkish, Russian and Qatari foreign ministers in Doha, which discussed ending the crisis in Syria, aroused criticism in Iran, which was not invited to the gathering. The website Iranian Diplomacy argued (March 12) that the meeting of the three foreign ministers in Doha may exclude Iran from the negotiations to settle the war in Syria. In an interview to this website (March 12), the former Majlis Member and commentator on political and international affairs, Jalal Mirzaei, stated that Qatar, Russia and Turkey do not want and can not ignore Iran's role in shaping Syria's future, and that the Astana Talks to settle the war in Syria (in which Iran is included) plays a central role in shaping developments on the ground in the country. He remarked that he does not justify excluding Iran from the meeting, but that this omission does not indicate ignoring Iran's role in Syria on the part of Qatar, Turkey and Russia. He stressed that any meeting held without Iranian presence can not be fruitful, and that it is important to ensure that conditions do not emerge in the region in a way that would lead to ignoring Iran in shaping the political map in Syria and the entire region, which will lead to a curtailment of Iran's regional influence.

► Mirzaei added that over the past decade, Russia and Turkey adopted different approaches than the Iranian one concerning Syria's future and the Assad government, and that even as part of the Astana Talks, disagreements arose between the three countries, although all of them wish to see an end to the war in Syria, and the return of stability and security to the country. When addressing the possibility that President Assad himself may change his approach toward Iran, Mirzaei stated that this scenario can not be ruled out, although thus far, Bashar al-Assad did not adopt any steps that may indicate an intention to halt cooperation with Iran. He added, however, that Iran should not place all of its eggs in Syria in one basket and become dependent on the survival of Assad alone. Such a policy is irrational and impractical, he argued.

- ▶ In an official response to the meeting of the three foreign ministers in Doha, the Spokesman of the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Saeed Khatibzadeh, stated that Iran’s position vis-à-vis Syria is crystal clear. During his weekly press conference Khatibzadeh remarked that the Astana Talks are the most successful negotiations track concerning the Syrian file, and that the meeting in Doha was intended to supplement it and not replace it (ISNA, March 15).
- ▶ The Syrian pro-opposition website Sada al-Sharqiya reported (March 17) that the pro-Iranian militias based in the Albu Kamal region have recently began using civilian cars to move their forces between these towns and from and to the Syria-Iraq border. The use of civilian cars (agricultural vehicles or rented taxis) instead of military vehicles, is intended to prevent air strikes by Israel or the United States. According to this report, the militias pay the car owners for their use, and also provide them with documents allowing them to pass unhindered through the checkpoints located in the area.



Members of a pro-Iranian Iraqi Shia militia riding in an agricultural vehicle from Albu Kamal to the Syria-Iraq border (Sada al-Sharqiya, March 17 , 2021)

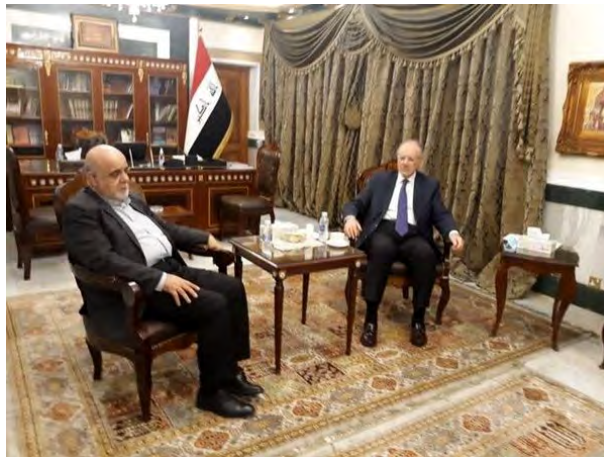
- ▶ On March 15, the Iranian Ambassador to Russia, Kazem Jalali, met with a parliamentary delegation of Hezbollah members, which visited Moscow in mid-March. The sides discussed developments in Lebanon, Syria and the “resistance front.” The Iranian ambassador stressed Iran’s support for Hezbollah and the “resistance axis,” and declared that steadfastness and resistance are the only way to defeat the “Zionist enemy.” The head of the Hezbollah delegation, the Lebanese parliament member Mohammad Raad, thanked Iran for its support for the organization, and stressed the need to persist in the path of resistance until “the final victory.” The meeting was held in the Iranian embassy in Moscow in the presence of Shawki Bou Nassar, the Lebanese ambassador to Russia (Tasnim, March 16).



The meeting between the Iranian ambassador to Moscow and the delegation of Hezbollah members, which visited Moscow (Tasnim, March 16 , 2021)

Iranian Involvement in Iraq

► On March 8, the Iranian Ambassador to Baghdad, Iraj Masjedi, met with the Iraqi Minister of Finance, Abdul-Amir Allawi, and discussed the unfreezing of Iranian funds held in Iraq. The Iraqi minister of finance said that paying out Iran’s fund is at the top of the priorities for Iraq (ILNA, March 8).



The meeting between the Iranian ambassador to Baghdad with the Iraqi minister of finance (ILNA, March 8 , 2021)

► On March 6, the Iranian President, Hassan Rouhani, spoke with the Iraqi Prime Minister, Mustafa al-Kazimi, and complained about the delays in releasing the Iranian funds in Iraq, and called on them to be unfrozen immediately (ISNA, March 6). An Iraqi official was quoted by the al-Jazeera network (March 5) stating that the United States permitted to use some of the Iranian funds held in the Trade Bank of Iraq (TBI) to finance purchasing of humanitarian goods. Senior Iraqi officials told al-Jazeera (March 8) that Iraq is willing to repay Iran its debts in Iraqi dinars, but Iran is demanding that they be paid back in dollars. A Member of the Board of Governors of the Iranian-Iraqi Joint Chamber of Commerce, Hamid Hosseini, reported that

the United States gave the green light for the release of only three billion dollars out of the Iranian funds frozen in Iraq, South Korea and Oman. According to Iran, Iranian accounts in the Trade Bank of Iraq hold about 3.5 billion dollars, which make up a share of the debts of the Iraqi government to Iran for the import of electricity and gas (Fars, March 8). Iran has not yet provided an official confirmation concerning the unfreezing of some of the funds.

► The Iranian Ambassador to the UN, Majid Takht Rayanchi, denied in a letter to the UN Secretary General, António Guterres, any Iranian involvement in the attacks carried out recently against American targets in Iraq. The letter was sent in a response to a letter sent by the US ambassador to the UN on February 27, to the president of the UN Security Council, which accused Iranian-back Iraqi militias for the attacks against American forces in Iraq. In his letter, Takht Ravanchi claimed that Iran was never involved, directly or indirectly, in any attack against the United States in Iraq, and that any effort to attribute such attacks to it is baseless and lacks any legal grounding. The letter also condemned the military strikes carried out by the United States along the Syria-Iraq border on February 25, which according to Iran, represents a violation of the sovereignty of the countries of the region, as well as international law, and serves the interests of the terrorist groups operating in these countries (IRNA, March 15).

► The Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs passed to the review of the government a proposal to abrogate the visa requirements between Iraq and Iran. The proposal was forwarded following an initial agreement reached between the governments of the two countries on this matter. The discussion of the proposal was forwarded to the Committee on Political and Security Affairs of the Iranian Cabinet (IRNA, March 14). Meanwhile, the Civil Aviation Organization of Iran announced on March 14 the suspension of all flights of Iranian and Iraqi airlines from Iran and Iraq for a week. The decision was made in an effort to halt the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, and particularly the British variant of the virus (IRNA, March 14).

► Iran filed a *démarche* to the Iraqi government after the authorities at the Kurdistan Regional Government issued a stamp to mark the visit of the Pope to Kurdistan on March 7. The *démarche* was made after the map of the Kurdistan region as it appeared on the stamp, included regions that are part of Iran, Turkey and Syria. The Spokesman of the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Saeed Khatibzadeh, condemned the issuance of the stamp, saying that it is in opposition to international law, and constitutes an “unfriendly step.” Iranian authorities demanded that the Iraqi government confiscate the stamps and immediately

rectify them. The Turkish government, too, filed a démarche due to the issuance of the stamp (ISNA, March 10).



**The stamp issued following the Pope's visit to Iraqi Kurdistan
(ISNA, March 10 , 2021)**

Iranian Involvement in the Palestinian Arena

► In a commemoration ceremony in Mashhad for fighters killed in the Iran-Iraq War, the Commander of the Qods Force of the IRGC, Esmail Qa'ani, declared that despite all the capabilities at Israel's disposal, it had been forced to surround itself in a wall, six-meters-tall and one-meter wide, to feel safe, but the Zionists must know that this wall too shall fall. In addition, Qa'ani warned the United States of the repercussions of the assassination of Qasem Soleimani. He remarked that the United States faces a multitude of domestic problems that those continuing down the path charted by Qasem Soleimani will break the Americans bones, and that the sound of the bone-breaking will be heard at the appropriate time (Tasnim, March 12).



**The commander of the IRGC's Qods Force
(Tasnim, March 12, 2021)**