



IRAN DEMOCRACY MONITOR

The American Foreign Policy Council's Review of
Radicalism and Reform in Islamic Republic of Iran

Iran Democracy Monitor No. 207

June 11, 2020 **Ilan I. Berman**

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HOW IRAN'S STRATEGY IN SYRIA IS SHIFTING

In recent weeks, stepped-up aerial raids by Israel have steadily eroded Iran's strategic position in Syria, where the Islamic Republic has entrenched forces in support of the Assad regime. In early May, outgoing Israeli defense minister Naftali Bennett announced publicly that Iran had begun to "significantly" reduce its forces in Syria, even going so far as to begin to evacuate a number of the military installations it had erected in the south of the country. Israeli military intelligence has subsequently confirmed that assessment.

But as Iran has scaled down its presence, the Iranian regime's most trusted terror proxy has begun to ramp up its involvement. Lebanon's Hezbollah militia is now said to be training a detachment of the Syrian Army for future conflict with Israel, and deploying it for intelligence-gathering purposes on the Syrian-Israeli border. The training of the Army's 1st Corps, experts say, is intended to give Hezbollah augmented capabilities and personnel in the event of a conflict with Israel. Officials in Jerusalem worry that the activities are designed to give the group the ability to activate a new front against Israel in the event of renewed hostilities with Hezbollah itself, or of a further broadening of the ongoing conflict between Israel and Iran. (*Jerusalem Post*, May 21, 2020)

STILL MORE IRANIAN CYBERWAR

The race to develop a vaccine for the coronavirus pandemic is underway, but at least some work in this domain is facing an unexpected hurdle: Iranian cyber operations. Last month, suspected Iranian hackers executed cyber network operations against a number of Israeli medical research centers working on COVID-19 vaccines. The attacks, Israeli officials say, were fundamentally destructive in nature, and aimed at disrupting Israeli efforts to produce a COVID-19 vaccine rather than stealing vaccine research data and exploiting it for the benefit of the Iranian regime, which is weathering its own protracted national health crisis.

Meanwhile, new details are emerging about Iran's previous attempts to target Israel. The late April cyberattack against the Israeli Water Authority appears to have been far more sinister than originally thought, and was intended to increase chlorine levels in water systems supporting residential areas. The ultimate goal of the attack appears to have been either to poison Israeli civilians directly or to cause water shortages by tripping chlorine sensors and activating fail-safes that would have shut down access to water in multiple cities. Either scenario, however, represents a serious escalation in Iran's asymmetric conflict with Israel. (*Jerusalem Post*, May 26, 2020; *Times of Israel*, June 1, 2020)

THE GUARDS BEEF UP THEIR NAVAL MIGHT

Amid renewed maritime tensions between Iran and the U.S., the IRGC Navy has unveiled a new naval contingent of some 112 gunboats. The move is a clear signal of defiance vis-a-vis the United States, as President Trump recently ordered the U.S. Navy to destroy Iranian vessels harassing U.S. ships in the Strait of Hormuz. The new capabilities include *Ashura* fast-attack speedboats, *Heidar* search and rescue boats and *Zolafghar* coastal patrol boats, all of which are indigenously manufactured by the Iranian Marine Industries Organization. (*Radio Farda*, May 28, 2020; *Bloomberg*, May 28, 2020)

A MEETING OF THE MINDS OVER THE KURDS

Iran's clerical regime and the government of Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan have long viewed the Kurds as a common foe, and have collaborated to target the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) and other associated Kurdish groups like the U.S.-backed Syrian Defense Force (SDF). This collaboration, however, has intensified in recent weeks, with the two countries sharing intelligence in efforts to target Kurdish militants in Syria, Iraq, and Iran. The most recent sign of this cooperative effort took place in late May, when Turkish airstrikes killed members of the Kurdistan Free Life Party (PJAK) - an Iranian Kurdish dissident group - in northern Iraq, near that country's common border with Iran. (*Jerusalem Post*, May 30, 2020)