



*Spotlight on Iran<sup>1</sup>*  
*(November 8 - 22, 2015)*  
*Editor: Dr. Raz Zimmé*



## Overview

- ✓ The Iranian forces continue to suffer heavy losses in the fierce battles being waged in northwestern Syria. During the past two weeks at least 17 more Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) fighters were killed, at least five of them officers. **Since the beginning of the ground offensive in northern Syria at least 57 Iranian IRGC fighters have been killed.**
- ✓ This past week the social networks posted recent pictures of Qods Force commander Qasem Soleimani in the region south of Aleppo, where the Syrian army has been clashing with rebel forces.
- ✓ An IRGC officer was killed in Iraq.
- ✓ The Iranian news agency Fars reported that Iran would provide \$2 million in financial support to the families of terrorists killed in the Gaza Strip.
- ✓ Muslim clerics from Cairo's Al-Azhar University issued a statement accusing Iran of investing huge sums of money in efforts to convert young Egyptians from Sunnah to Shi'a.

## *Statements from Senior Iranian Officials about Iran's Regional Involvement*

- Mohammad Reza Naqdi, commander of the IRGC's Basij militia, said that many young Iranians and Basij members had recently asked to be sent to Syria and Iraq, but that the organization did not intend to send groups of Basij fighters to those countries. He said that all the Iranian "advisors" sent to Syria were experienced and specialists, and that there were enough local fighters in Iraq, Syria, Palestine and Lebanon. That being the case, he said, there was no need to send groups of Basij fighters to those locations, because local fighters had a clear advantage over foreigners (Alef, November 9, 2015).

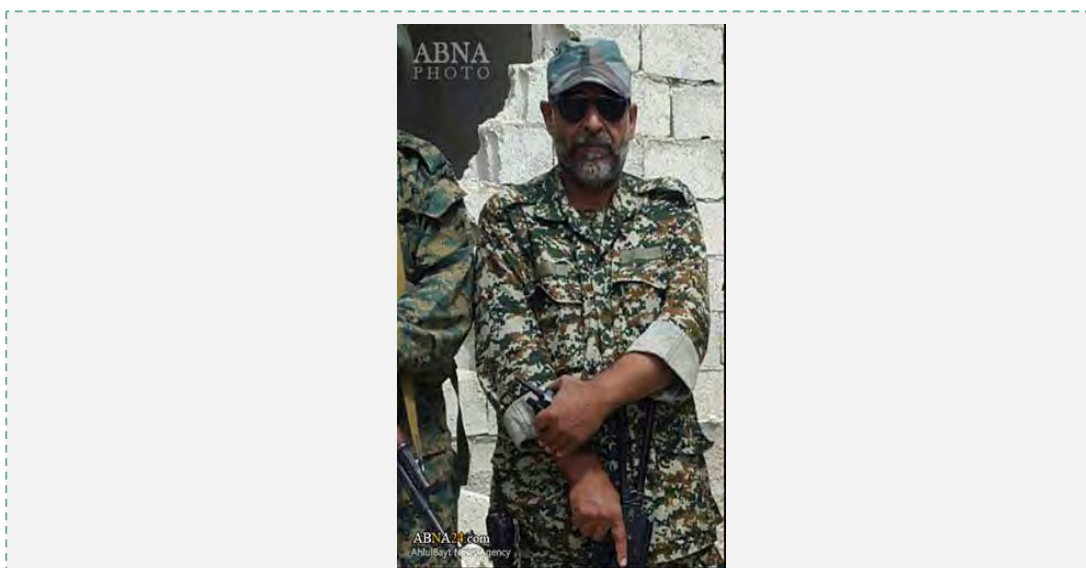
■ Hossein Amir Abdollahian, deputy foreign minister for Arab-African affairs, denied Iran intervened in the internal affairs of regional countries, and claimed some people could not distinguish between regional "Iranian influence" and "Iranian intervention." In a speech given at Sharif University of Technology in Tehran, he said that during the 30 years since the Iranian Islamic Revolution, Iran had achieved its regional influence by virtue of its "reasonable behavior and words," and it used that influence for the sake of its national security and the Muslim world. He added that without a doubt, Iran had "spiritual influence" in regional countries, but that did not mean it intervened in their internal affairs. He said Iran's success in the region was the result of the activity of all the regime's institutions, among them the foreign ministry and the IRGC (ISNA, November 16, 2015).

### *Iranian Intervention in Syria*

■ The fierce battles in northwestern Syria continue taking a heavy toll of Iranian fighters. During the past two weeks at least 17 IRGC fighters were killed, among them five officers, bringing the total number of Iranians killed since the beginning of the ground offensive to at least 57 (as of November 16, 2015).

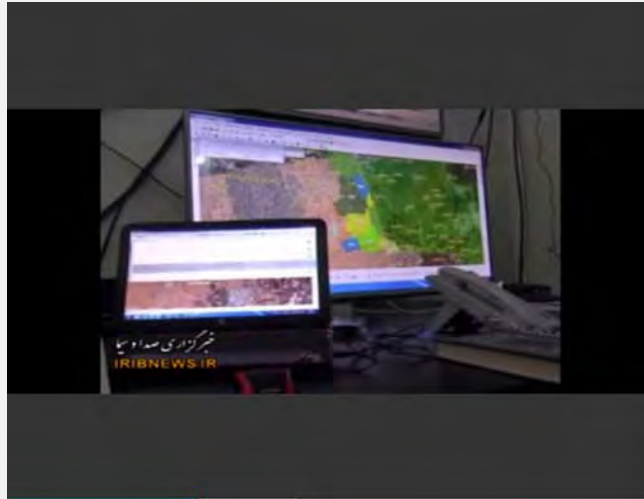
■ On November 7, 2015, an Iranian hardline news site reported on the fighting in Syria near the city of Al-Safira in the Aleppo Governate. According to the report, about 2,000 elite fighters from six IRGC brigades and from the Fatemiyoun Brigade, composed of Afghan fighters, participated in the battle, which was supposed to liberate the city from ISIS. They included Saber special forces Brigade, fighters from the Imam Hassan Mojtaba 15<sup>th</sup> Brigade, the 33<sup>rd</sup> Al-Mahdi Airborne Al-Mahdi Brigade, the Imam Sadeq 83<sup>rd</sup> Brigade, and the Hazrat Hojjat Armored Brigade from Ahvaz (Yalsarat, November 7, 2015).

■ The prominence of special unit fighters among the Iranian forces indicates Iran's efforts to send into battle trained soldiers with special skills to carry out special missions, including, in all probability, gathering intelligence.



**Brigadier General Farshad Hasounizadeh, former commander of the Saber special forces brigade, killed on October 12, 2015, near Aleppo.**

- On October 22, 2015, Fars News Agency broadcast a video taken by an Iranian broadcasting authority reporter permitted to enter the joint Syrian army-Iranian operations room in the Aleppo region. The video showed maps, aerial photographs and communications equipment used in the operations room to command the forces waging the ground offensive. On the wall was a poster of Ayatollah Khomeini, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, and a third person who could not be identified but might be Syria President Bashar Assad.
- A comparison of the names of the villages on the maps with media reports issued the same day indicated that the operations room commanded the Syrian army attack (with support from Iranian fighters) waged on October 22, 2015, in the rural areas south of Aleppo. According to the televised report, drones were used to take real-time pictures of the positions and movement of the jihadist rebel organizations.
- The video boasted that "the Syrian army reaps victory after victory south of Aleppo," and was liberating areas occupied by the jihadist forces (referred to as "infidels" and "terrorist enemies"). It also praised the great experience gained by the Syrian army and its military capabilities. However, in retrospect, it would appear that the optimistic reports were exaggerated, as evidenced by the large number of losses among the Iranians who fought in the attack in support of the Syrian army.

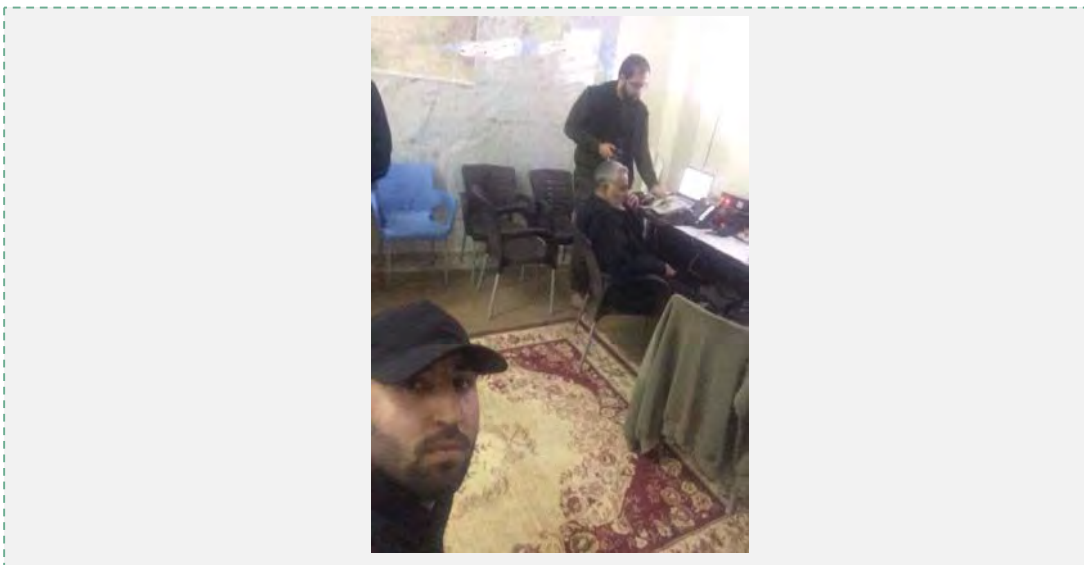


**The joint Syrian army-Iranian operations room (Fars News, October 22, 2015).**

■ This past week the social networks posted recent photos of Qods Force commander Qasem Soleimani in the area south of Aleppo. The pictures showed him with fighters from the Iraqi Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba militia in the town of Al-Hader, south of Aleppo, where the Syrian army clashed with rebel forces. They also showed him in the operations room south of Aleppo, in the company of Akram Abbas al-Ka'bi, the commander of the Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba.



**Qasem Soleimani with Iraqi Shi'ite fighters from Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba (Twitter, November 13, 2015).**



**Qasem Soleimani in the operations room south of Aleppo. Standing next to him is Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba commander Akram Abbas al-Ka'bi (Twitter, November 14, 2015)**

- On November 11, 2015, several Iranian media and social networks posted pictures of Iranian Safir jeeps in use by the Syrian army.



**(From Asr-e Iran, November 11, 2015)**

- The social networks also posted a video of a Tau anti-tank missile launched at a Safir jeep by the Suqour al-Jabal rebel organization, which belongs to the Free Syrian Army in the region south of Aleppo (Facebook.com/Persian.war.news, November 11, 2015).



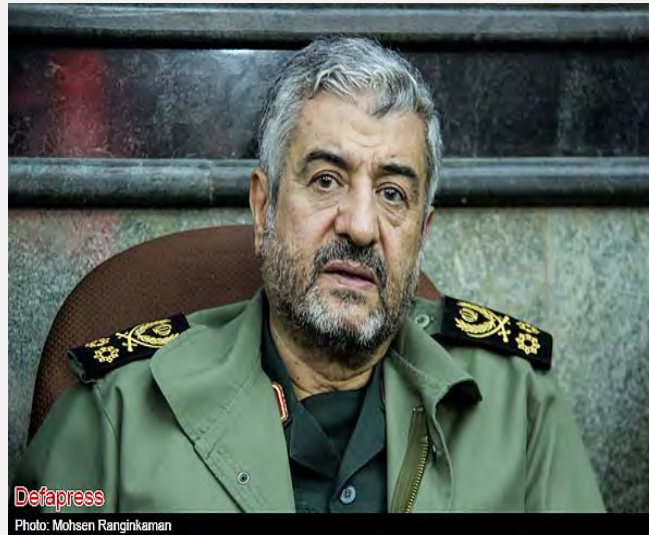
- On November 11, 2015, Ali Shamkhani, secretary of the Supreme Council for National Security, told the Iranian Arabic TV channel Al-Alem that "fewer than 50" Iranians had been killed in Syria, and that the reason for the large number of was the increase in the extent of fighting, which had led to more fatalities among the "Iranian advisors." He added that Iran had not been and was not interested in sending ground forces to Syria because the Syrians were capable of defending themselves.
- Asked about Iran's position on Assad's political future, Shamkhani said Iran would support the results of any election held by the Syrians. He said for the past three and a half years the Western countries had unsuccessfully tried to topple the Assad regime, and were now trying to achieve with diplomacy what they had not been able to achieve militarily. He denied reports of differences of opinion between Iran and Russia regarding President Assad's political future.





**Ali Shamkhani, secretary of the Supreme Council for National Security**

■ At a ceremony marking 40 days since the death of Hossein Hamedani, senior Iranian military advisor killed in Syria in October, IRGC commander Mohammad-Ali Jafari said that Syria's security had a direct influence on Iran's security. He said had it not been for Hamedani, Damascus would have fallen to the rebels during the last two or three years (Tabnak, November 17, 2015).



**Mohammad-Ali Jafari, commander of the IRGC**

■ At the end of the talks held in Vienna about Syria's future, Hossein Amir Abdollahian, deputy foreign minister for Arab-African affairs, said only the Syria people would choose their president and the future of their country. He said Iran had not allowed the final statement of the conference to include a reference to the ousting of the Syrian president, and stressed that only the Syrian people had the right to make such a decision (IRNA, November 14, 2015). On another occasion, Abdollahian

said Iran had proposed to Bashar Assad that he move his family to Iran, but Assad had rejected the proposal, claiming he and his wife would remain in Syria until the last minute (Asr-e Iran, November 17, 2015).

■ On November 14, 2015, Mohammad Reza Sheybani, Iranian ambassador to Syria, spoke to the conservative daily newspaper Khorasan about developments in Syria. He said Aleppo was currently under Syrian regime control, but the regions around it were still controlled by "terrorists." He said during the past few days supporters of the Syrian regime had advanced about 50 kilometers (30 miles) beyond Aleppo.



**Mohammad Reza Sheybani, Iranian ambassador to Syria**

■ As to increasing Iranian forces in Syria, he repeated Iran's official position that Iran's presence in Syria was limited to "advisors" and Iran opposed sending military forces to fight in foreign countries. He said that because of the increase in the fighting, the Iranian advisors were forced to provide more support for the Syrian forces, according to developments, and that was the reason for the rise in the number of Iranians killed. He also said, however, that the number of Iranians killed could not be compared with the number of Syrians killed.

■ Sheybani said there were three groups playing a major role in the fighting: the Syrian army, whose capabilities had been degraded; the "forces of resistance" operating in coordination with the Syrian regime, who bore the main weight of military operations in the combat zone; and Syria's "national defense forces," composed of Syrian and foreign volunteers from Pakistan and Afghanistan who operated in similar fashion to the Basij units in Iran.



■ He also said Iran regularly cooperated and consulted with Russia about the situation in Syria, and that therefore there was no reason for concern that in the future Russia would operate contrary to Iran's interests.

### *Iranian Intervention in Iraq*

■ Jalil Khademi, an IRGC officer from Fars Province, was killed in Iraq (Fars News, November 17, 2015).



**Jalil Khademi (Lesannews.com, November 17, 2015)**

### *Iranian Intervention in the Palestinian Arena*

■ On November 9, 2015, the Iranian news agency Fars reported Iran had transferred \$2 million to the families of "martyrs" in the Gaza Strip. Nafez al-Araj, who heads the Palestinian Al-Shaheed institution, said the funds would be distributed among approximately 4,700 families of Palestinians killed between the beginning of the second intifada in 2000 and June 2014.

■ Accordingly, the family of a terrorist, if he was single, would receive three installments of \$100. If he was married, the family would receive three installments of \$200. Al-Araj claimed the funds were intended to ease the distress of the families of shaheeds living under the Israeli siege and suffering from the Gaza Strip's depressed economy. He expressed his gratitude to Iran for its continuing support of the Palestinian people.



Iranian funds distributed to Gazans (Fars News Agency)

■ Nafez al-Araj, who heads Al-Shaheed, is a Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) activist. He also heads a PIJ-affiliated "charitable organization" in the Gaza Strip called Al-Ansar. It was founded in 2001, during the second intifada, and serves Iran as a conduit for funneling terrorist funds into the Gaza Strip and as a means of increasing Iranian influence within the Gazan population. Al-Ansar helps the families of terrorists who were killed (shaheeds), families whose houses were destroyed, and families of terrorists imprisoned in Israel. In the past it also helped families of shaheeds in the West Bank, with the authorization, patronage and full compliance of Mahmoud Abbas (Abu-Mazen).

■ So far, the Iranians have transferred several million dollars a year to Al-Ansar. The money is sent through the Palestinian branch of the Iranian martyrs' foundation (an institution established in Iran by Ayatollah Khomeini to support families of Iranians killed in the Iran-Iraq War). The foundation has two branches in Lebanon, one which supports Hezbollah and the other that supports Hamas and the PIJ. In 2003 Israel outlawed Al-Ansar. In 2007 the United States Treasury Department designated the Iranian martyrs' foundation and its Lebanese branches as sponsors of terrorism because they provided money for Hezbollah, Hamas and the PIJ.

### Iranian Intervention in Egypt

■ Muslim clerics from Cairo's Al-Azhar University issued a statement accusing Iran of investing huge sums of money in efforts to convert young Egyptians from Sunnah to Shi'a. They warned that Iran's activities were liable to lead to internal wars and bloodshed in the Sunni countries. The Sheikh of Al-Azhar Ahmad al-Tayeb argued

that Iranian officials had to exclude religion from their political games and invest their resources in helping the needy and the poor (Fars News, November 7, 2015).

■ The Egyptian media recently reported that Sabry Mohamed, who taught in the geography department at Al-Azhar University, was suspended after he invited guests from Iran to a conference he had organized in his department. It was also reported that the Egyptian ministry of endowments (*waqf*) closed the Imam Hussein mosque in Cairo between October 22 and 24, 2015 to prevent Ashura Day ceremonies from being held (Ashura Day mourns the death of Hussein bin Ali and is marked by Shi'ites) (The Cairo Post, October 29, 2015)

■ The Egyptian measures taken against Shi'ites indicate the failure of Iranian religious establishment efforts to improve its ties with the Egyptian religious establishment. A few months ago Ayatollah Nasser Makarem-Shirazi, a senior Iranian cleric, sent a letter to Sheikh Al-Azhar proposing a conference of Shi'ite and Sunni clerics to discuss obstacles to Islamic unity and suggest ways to strengthen unity between Shi'ites and Sunnis (Press TV, August 4, 2015). The letter was an expression of the ongoing effort of the Iranian clerical establishment to promote a dialogue between Shi'ites and Sunnis. Since the revolution in Egypt in 2011 senior Iranian clerics have made efforts to strengthen cooperation between the Shi'ite religious establishment in Iran and Cairo's Al-Azhar. The efforts manifest Iran's growing recognition that its regional involvement deepens the distrust of the Sunni states for Iran and makes it difficult for Iran to achieve regional hegemony.