



Spotlight on Iran

(November 22 - December 6, 2015)

Editor: Dr. Raz Zimmt



Overview¹

- ✓ More Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) and Shi'ite foreign fighters have been killed in Syria, among them an IRGC brigadier general.
- ✓ Iran denied reports that Qasem Soleimani, commander of the IRGC's Qods Force, was wounded in Syria. This past week Iran issued pictures, a video and an interview with Soleimani to refute the rumors.
- ✓ Iran continues to declare its commitment to Bashar Assad's Syrian regime. Russian President Putin and Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei met and stressed they would agree to no solution for Syria that would be unacceptable to the Syrian government.
- ✓ Two Kenyan nationals were arrested in Kenya on suspicion of having been sent by the Qods Force to recruit Kenyans as spies and terrorists.

Statements from Senior Iranian Officials about Iran's Regional Involvement

- Iranian supreme leader Ali Khamenei gave a speech before commanders of the IRGC's Basij on the occasion of Basij Week. He discussed regional developments and criticized the policies of the United States and its allies in Iraq and Syria, claiming they supported terrorism. He argued that Western countries had no right to make decisions for Syria.
- As to the situation in Bahrain, Khamenei said that all the Bahraini people wanted was democracy. He condemned the Bahraini government, which, he claimed,

¹ Spotlight on Iran is an Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center bulletin illuminating Iran's activities to establish its influence in the Middle East and beyond. It is based on reports in the Iranian media and written for the ITIC by Dr. Raz Zimmt, an expert on Iran's politics, society, foreign policy and social networks.

oppressed its citizens. He called it the dictatorship of a minority that followed the path of Yazid, the second Umayyad Caliph, despised by the Shi'ites.

■ Regarding the Palestinian arena, Khamenei said that the third Palestinian intifada had begun in the West Bank and that Iran supported the struggle of the Palestinians with everything at its disposal. He said that Palestine had been occupied for more than 60 years and while during that time several generations had come and gone, the Palestinian aspirations remained intact (Website of the supreme leader, November 25, 2015).



Ali Khamenei gives a speech before the Basij commanders.

■ Mohammad Reza Naqdi, commander of the IRGC's Basij, interviewed by Iranian TV for Basij Week, repeated the official Iranian position that the IRGC and the Basij provided the armies in Syria and Iraq with "military advice." They shared Iran's military experience, he claimed, but did not sent fighting forces to either country (Tasnim News, November 23, 2015).

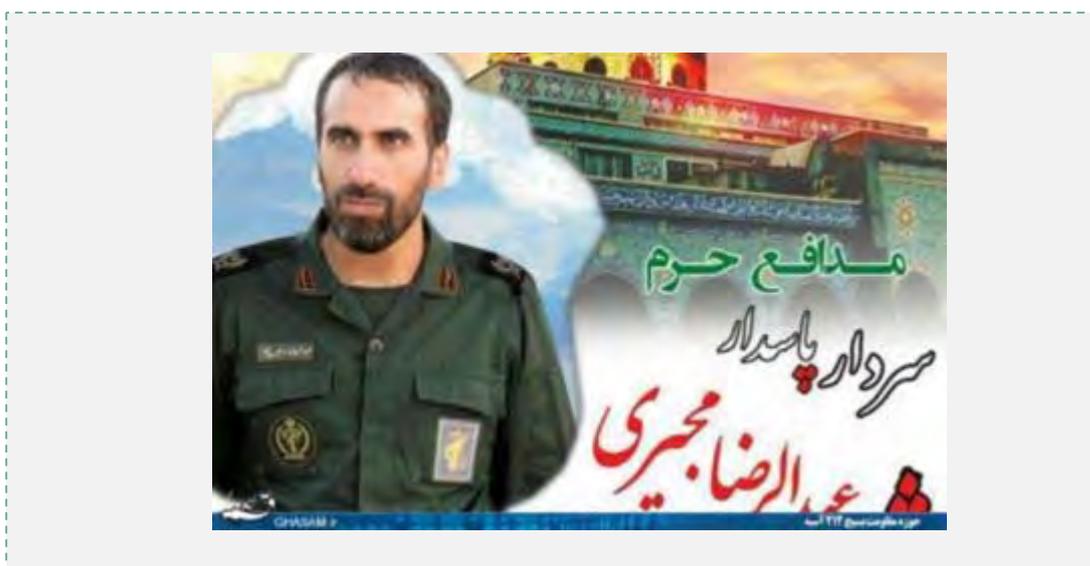
■ Hojjat ul-Islam Ali Sa'idi, the supreme leader's representative to the IRGC, told a Basij Week conference that the borders of Iran stretched Syrian army far as the Mediterranean Sea and the Straits of Bab al-Mandeb and continued to expand. He said that Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei was the standard bearer of the resistance and regional victories were the result of his strength and honesty (Fars News, November 25, 2015).

■ Mohammad Pakpour, commander of the IRGC's ground forces, told a conference of clerics and senior Sunni and Shi'ite tribal leaders in Sistan va Balochestan

Province that the presence of the Iranian "advisors" on the front lines in Syria and Iraq was reasonable and necessary. Without it, he said, Iran would have to fight *takfin* terrorism within its own borders. He also said that all the capabilities of young Muslims had to be turned toward liberating Jerusalem and "cleansing Palestine of the filth of the Zionist regime," which was the main enemy of the Muslim nation. However, he said, the internal struggle currently being waged in the Muslim countries against terrorists made that impossible (Sepah News, December 1, 2015).

Iranian Intervention in Syria

■ During the past two weeks at least ten IRGC fighters were killed in Syria, one of them a brigadier general. He was Abolreza Majiri, from the Imam Hossein 14th Division in Isfahan Province, killed in Aleppo. Also killed in Syria was Abdolrashid Reshvand, commander of a battalion in Karaj, Alborz Province.



Brigadier General Abolreza Majiri

■ In addition, this past week at least nine Iranian and Pakistani fighters, who were recently killed in Syria, were buried. The dates of their deaths were not reported. The Iranian media emphasized the fact that three of the Iranians were Sunnis (Asr-e Iran, November 29, 2015). The recent deaths raised the number of Iranians killed since the ground offensive in Syria in October to more than 70.

■ This past week the Iranian media and social networks issued pictures and a video of Qasem Soleimani, commander of the IRGC's Qods Force to refute the rumors in the Western and Arab media that he was wounded or killed in Syria. The video shows him in the operations room with Akram Abbas al-Ka'bi, commander of the Harakat

Hezbollah al-Nujaba Iraqi Shi'ite militia. The dates of the video and photos were not reported.



Qasem Soleimani

■ Iran strongly denied reports that Qasem Soleimani had been wounded. IRGC spokesman Ramazan Sharif said Soleimani had not been wounded at all and was continuing to assist the "Islamic resistance in Syria and Iraq in their struggle against terrorists." He claimed the reports of his having been wounded were lies spread by the media affiliated with "global Zionism" in order to influence public opinion and the fighters in the front lines of the resistance in view of the resistance's recent victories in Syria (Sepah News, November 24, 2015).



Source: Facebook page affiliated with the IRGC, November 25, 2015

- On November 30, 2015, the Iranian media publicized an interview given by Soleimani to an Iranian news website in which he scorned rumors of his wounding and death. He smiled and said, "I have been seeking martyrdom in the plains and on the mountains" (Tasnim News, November 30, 2015).
- In the meantime, an Iranian website quoted a report published by the Russian website "Sputnik" about Soleimani's alleged involvement in a mission to rescue the pilot from the Russian plane shot down by Turkey on November 24, 2015.
- The website reported that according to a Syrian officer who participated in the action, Soleimani personally commanded the mission, in which Hezbollah and Syrian army commandos took part. According to the report, after the Russian plane crashed Soleimani contacted the Russians, informing them that a unit of special Hezbollah and Syrian army forces was ready for the extraction. He suggested the unit be put in charge of the mission because it was familiar with the geography of the region where the plane had crashed [in the Turkman mountains, northeast of Latakia]. The unit was in fact sent to carry out the mission with Russian aerial and intelligence support. According to the Syrian officer, Soleimani was present in the operations room until the mission had been successfully completed (Tasnim News, November 26, 2015).

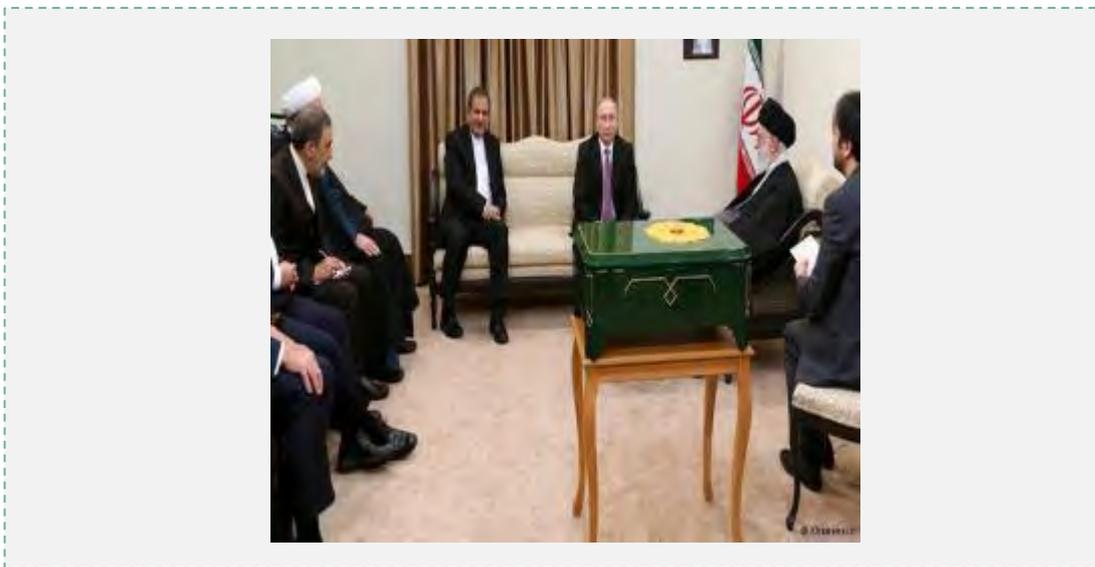


Qasem Soleimani says his prayers aboard a plane (Qasem Soleimani's website, November 30, 2015).

- This past week Ali-Reza Zakani, a conservative member of the Majlis (the Iranian parliament) revealed details of the conversation between Qods Force commander Qasem Soleimani and Russian President Vladimir Putin held when Soleimani was in Moscow last July. Zakani, speaking before students, said Soleimani told Putin that the main problem facing Russian was that the 16,000 Chechens fighting in Syria and

Iraq could return to Russia and become a serious threat together with the 30 million other Muslims in the Caucasus. He said Soleimani had convinced Putin, who had taken Iran's advice to intervene militarily in Syria (Fars News, November 24, 2015).

■ Russian President Vladimir Putin and Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei met on November 23, 2015, and discussed the situation in Syria. Ali-Akbar Velayati, the supreme leader's advisor on international affairs, was also present, said that President Putin had stressed that no agreement would be reached at the talks held in Vienna concerning the future of Syria without coordinating with Iran. The two leaders also said they would not agree to a solution in the Syrian government found unsatisfactory (Tasnim News, November 24, 2015).



Russian President Putin and Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei meet in Tehran

■ On November 29, 2015, Ali-Akbar Velayati, the supreme leader's advisor on international affairs, paid a visit to Syria and met with Syrian President Bashar Assad. Velayati said that Iran considered itself committed to continuing its support for Syria and President Assad under conditions in which the West and several regional countries had declared "a world war" against Syria. Velayati said that Iran's relations with Syria and Iraq were strategic and that Iran would not accept any peace agreement that had not been authorized by the Syrian government (Alef, November 29, 2015; Mehr News Agency, November 30, 2015). Velayati also met with Hezbollah secretary general Hassan Nasrallah in Beirut.



Ali-Akbar Velayati meets with Bashar Assad (IRNA, November 29, 2015).

Iranian Intervention in Iraq

- A video was recently posted to the social networks of Ayyub Hassan Faleh al-Rubaie, aka Abu-Azrael, commander of the Ali Imam Battalions, one of the Iraqi militias fighting ISIS, swearing allegiance to Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. He appeals to Khamenei, says he respects and esteems him, and wishes he can meet him soon and pray with him.



Ayyub Hassan Faleh al-Rubaie, aka Abu-Azrael (Qasemssoleimani.ir, November 23, 2015).

- Mohammad Hossein Sepehr, the supreme leader's deputy representative, told a conference of Basij commanders at Tehran University that without the IRGC's Qods Force to defend Iraq against ISIS, it would have fallen within less than a week (Basij Press, November 30, 2015).

Iranian Intervention in Yemen and around the Globe

■ The Iranian media reported that the Shi'ite Houthi Ansarollah movement in Yemen had developed a Zalzal-2 missile system and used it against the Al-Qarn military base in western Saudi Arabia (ISNA, November 24, 2015). No mention was made of collaboration between Iran and the Shi'ite Houthi movement in developing the missile, but a connection between them and the Iranian surface-to-surface Zalzal missiles cannot be ruled out.



Iranian Zalzal missiles

■ On November 28, 2015, the Kenyan media reported that two Kenyans had recently been arrested by the police on suspicion of having been sent by the Iranian IRGC to recruit Kenyan nationals for purposes of espionage and terrorism.

■ The two were Abu-Bakr Sadiqlou, 69, a Shi'ite from Nairobi, who was arrested on October 29, 2015, after confessing to police that he had recruited young Kenyans to spy and carry out acts of terrorism in Nairobi. According to the Nairobi police, he was working for the IRGC's Qods Force. The other Kenyan was Yassin Sambai Juma, 29, arrested on November 19, 2015. He was a student recruited by Sadiqlou. During interrogation he told the police that his operator had organized a trip for him to Iran and introduced him to a Qods Force liaison person named "Parsa." Parsa instructed him to gather intelligence about Western targets in Nairobi (Reuters, November 28, 2015).



The two Kenyans arrested for working for the Qods Force (Al-Jazeera, November 28, 2015).

■ The Iranian embassy in Kenya denied any connection to the two Kenyans arrested. It said in a statement that Iran considered its relations with African countries to be very important, especially with Kenya, and was prepared to cooperate with the Kenyan government to clarify the affair (ISNA, November 30, 2015). In May 2013 a Kenyan court found two Iranian nationals guilty of having 15 kilograms (33 pounds) of explosives in their possession, which according to the authorities were meant to be used to attack Israeli and Western targets.

Iranian Religious and Propagation Activities around the Globe

■ The Iranian cultural center in Pakistan is planning to organize a Qur'an competition in December for "Islamic Unity Week." Islamic Unity Week which will be held at the end of December on the occasion of the Prophet Mohammad's birthday. Participants will compete in two categories: Qur'an recitation and Qur'an memorization. The competition is open to Pakistani citizens between the ages of 18 and 40 (IRNA, November 20, 2015).