



Spotlight on Iran

(December 20, 2015 - January 3, 2016)

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Overview¹

- ✓ Iran condemned the killing of Samir Kuntar near Damascus, calling it "governmental terrorism" carried out by the "Zionist regime." Senior Iranian officials noted that his killing would not harm the "resistance front." More than 200 members of the Majlis (the Iranian parliament) signed a letter to Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah calling on him to take revenge on Israel.
- ✓ Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) forces in Syria continue to suffer heavy losses. During the past two weeks more than 15 of its fighters were killed in battles south of Aleppo. Since October 2015, when the ground offensive in Syria began, more than 120 IRGC fighters have been killed.
- ✓ Senior Iranian officials continue denying reports that the IRGC is reducing its numbers in Syria, stressing Iran's commitment to support the Syrian regime. Both the deputy Iranian chief of staff and the deputy commander of the IRGC claimed the presence of IRGC fighters in Syria changes according to the needs of the combat zones.
- ✓ Iran congratulated the Iraqi army on retaking the city of Ramadi from ISIS. The Iranian media highlighted the involvement of Shi'ite Iraqi militias in the battle for the liberation of Ramadi, waged by Iraqi army special forces in collaboration with the Western anti-ISIS coalition.

Reactions to the Killing of Samir Kuntar

- Iran condemned the killing of Samir Kuntar, who died on December 20, 2015, in an aerial strike near Damascus. Kuntar was a notorious Lebanese Druze terrorist who headed a terrorist network in the Golan Heights. His killing was attributed to Israel. Jaber Ansari, a spokesman for the Iranian foreign ministry, claimed his death was another example of the organized governmental terrorism employed by the "Zionist

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.

regime." He called Kuntar "a symbol of resistance to the occupation and aggression of the Zionist regime" (ISNA, December 20, 2015).

- Ramazan Sharif, IRGC spokesman and head of the Council of Islamic Propaganda for the Intifada and Jerusalem, also condemned the killing, claiming it clearly showed it was impossible to distinguish between the Zionists and the "Takfiri" terrorist movements and ISIS. He claimed the deaths as martyrs of Hezbollah and Islamic resistance fighters, such as Kuntar, would not deter the Islamic resistance front from their path against "global arrogance" [the West], the "Zionist regime" and their "Takfiri puppets." Rather, they would strengthen their resolve and determination to struggle against the "Zionist regime" and would infuse the resistance with "new blood" (Fars, December 22, 2015).

- Mahmoud Alavi, Iranian minister of intelligence, sent a communiqué to Hassan Nasrallah, secretary general of Hezbollah, expressing his condolences on the death of Samir Kuntar (IRNA, December 20, 2015).

- In a letter sent to Hassan Nasrallah, secretary general of Hezbollah, 212 members of the Majlis (the Iranian parliament) called to avenge Kuntar's death.



Samir Kuntar (fourth from left) at a meeting with Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, February 2009 (Alef, December 20, 2015).

Statements from Senior Iranian Officials about Iran's Regional Involvement

- On December 23, 2015, Yadollah Javani, senior political advisor of the supreme leader's representative in the IRGC, told the Iranian news agency Mehr that the "Islamic awakening" was expanding in several Islamic countries, for example in the

Arabian Peninsula, Eastern Asia, the Caucasus, Central Asia and Africa, thanks to the "success of the Islamic Republic as a religious government in current era" He claimed the West, the Zionists and the governments dependent on the West were worried by the wave of Islamic awakening, which had led to an increase in the oppression of Muslims in Pakistan, Nigeria, Bahrain and Azerbaijan. He added that Iran was the standard bearer of Islamic awakening and therefore had the responsibility of defending it and the rights of Muslims around the globe.



Yadollah Javani (Mehr News Agency, December 23, 2015).

- On December 27, 2015, the International Islamic Unity Conference was held in Tehran. Senior Iranian officials used it to reiterate Iran's official position that it did not differentiate between Shi'ites and Sunnis, but promoted an Islamic unity that transcended the differences between the various schools of Islam. Such declarations notwithstanding, Iran's policies actively encourage Shi'ite separatism in the Middle East..

- Speaking before conference participants, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani rejected the claims that an Iranian-led "Shi'ite crescent" had been created in the Middle East, saying that as far as Iran was concerned there was no "Shi'ite crescent" or "Sunni crescent," but only the "Islamic full moon." Iran, he said, supported the unity of all Islam, and Muslims had only one identity, their Islamic identity. As to the developments in the Middle East, he claimed the destruction of Syria and the war in Iraq benefitted only Israel and were contrary to the interests of the Islamic world (Fars, December 27, 2015).

Iranian Intervention in Syria

- The IRGC forces in Syria continue suffering heavy losses. During the past two weeks more than 15 of its fighters were killed in battles south of Aleppo. One of them was Abbas Ali Alizadeh, from Mazandaran Province, a retired IRGC officer who had volunteered to join the fighting in Syria (Fars, December 24, 2015). Daoud Javanmard, an Iranian TV reporter, was also killed in the fighting near Aleppo (IRNA, December 26, 2015).
- Since October 2015, when the ground offensive in Syria began, more than 120 IRGC fighters have been killed, including several dozen officers. During the past month at least 35 Iranian fighters were killed, and the number continues to rise steadily despite reports that the number of Iranian forces in Syria declined from between 1,500 and 2,000 fighters to less than 1,000. The large number of Iranians killed would seem to indicate that IRGC fighters are still in the front lines along with the Syrian army forces in the ground offensive, which is currently stalled and has not had any particularly dramatic achievements.



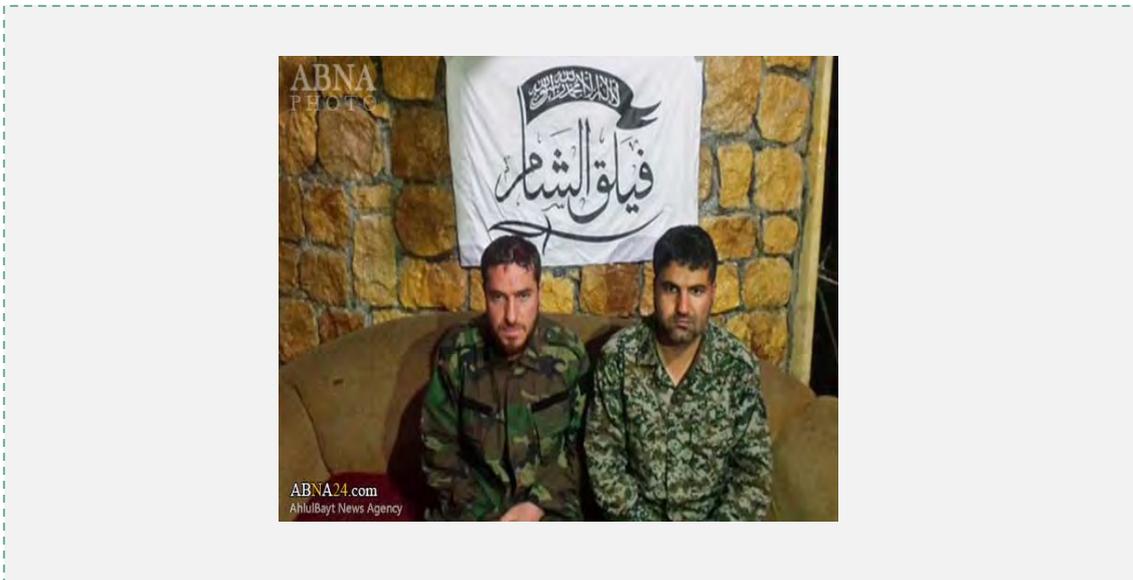
Retired IRGC officer Abbas Ali Alizadeh (Qasemsoleimani.ir, December 24, 2015)

- This past week the Iran news sites and social networks published allegedly recent pictures of IRGC Qods Force commander Qasem Soleimani in army uniforms, apparently in the region of Aleppo. They were probably issued to refute recent reports that he had been wounded in Syria.



Qasem Soleimani (Qasemssoleimani.ir, December 24, 2015).

- Faylaq al-Sham, an Islamist rebel group in Syria, claimed it had captured two Iranian fighters in southern Aleppo, and published pictures, allegedly of the two captives. The group also claimed that three weeks ago the Al-Nusra Front (the branch of Al-Qaeda fighting in Syria) had captured another Iranian fighter (ABNA News, December 21, 2015).



Two Iranian fighters allegedly captured by Faylaq al-Sham (ABNA News, December 21, 2015)

- High-ranking Iranian military officials continue to deny reports that the IRGC is withdrawing its forces from Syria. Masoud Jazaeri, deputy Iranian chief of staff, claimed "Iranian advisors" would remain in Syria until the final victory against the Islamist terrorists.

■ Regarding reports of a decrease in the number of IRGC forces in Syria, Jazaeri said the Iranian strategy in support of the resistance of the Syrian government and people was unchanging and that Iranian policy was fixed and stable, determined by religious concerns and national interests. He said reports of the withdrawal or decrease in the number of Iranian forces in Syria were part of the psychological warfare being waged against the resistance front. He added that the Western media, controlled by the Zionists in support of the terrorists and opposition to the legitimate Syrian government, were responsible for the reports. He also said that Iranian military advisors in Syria would continue providing the Syrians with strategic, tactical, operational and technical advice in accordance with the needs of the battle against terrorism being fought in Syria. He noted that Syria was strategically very important for Iran and its security was tied to that of Syria (Defa Press, December 22, 2015).



Masoud Jazaeri (Defa Press, December 22, 2015)

■ Hossein Salami, deputy commander of the IRGC, also denied that Iran had reduced the number of its forces in Syria. Interviewed by the Defa Press news agency on December 22, 2015, he said it was only natural to increase and decrease forces in battle zones. However, he said Iran's strategy in Syria had not changed and its involvement on the battlefield and in the political arena had not lessened, and continued as in the past, according to need. He said that the number of IRGC advisors in Syria might decrease temporarily, but that would have no connection to Iran's overall strategy.



Hossein Salami (Fars, December 22, 2015).

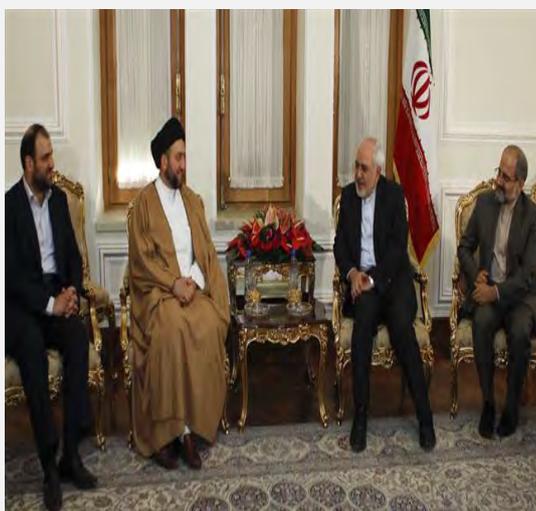
Iranian Intervention in Iraq

- Iran praised the Iraq army's liberation of the ISIS-held city of Ramadi. Hassan Firouzabadi, commander of the Iranian armed forces, called it a great victory for the Iraqi army and the Sunni and Shi'ite popular militias, which would ensure additional victories in the future. He said that Fallujah, currently controlled by ISIS, was under siege and that ISIS's commanders had fled the city (Fararu, December 28, 2015). Javad Zarif, the Iranian foreign minister, also congratulated his Iraqi counterpart, Ibrahim al-Ja'fari, on the liberation of Ramadi from ISIS (IRNA, December 29, 2015).
- This past week Iranian news sites and social networks issued a picture, allegedly recent, of Qasem Soleimani, commander of the IRGC Qods Force, in the eastern part of Iraq's Anbar Province. The picture cannot be new, however, because one of the Shi'ite militia commanders standing next to Soleimani was killed in July 2015.
- Apparently the picture was issued to give the IRGC and the Iraqi Shi'ite militias credit for the successful campaign to liberate Ramadi from ISIS. However, the campaign was actually led by Iraqi army special forces in collaboration with the Western coalition forces operating against ISIS in Iraq.



Qasem Soleimani in Anbar Province, Iraq (Entekhab, December 26, 2015).

■ On December 28, 2015, Mohammad Javad Zarif, the Iranian foreign minister, met in Tehran with Ammar Hakim, the chairman of the Islamic Supreme Council in Iraq. Zarif told him that the tribes and ethnic groups in Iraq should strengthen the ties between them and unite in the struggle against extremism and terrorism (Press TV, December 28, 2015).



Mohammad Javad Zarif meets with Ammar Hakim in Tehran (IRNA, December 28, 2015).

Iranian Intervention in the Palestinian Arena

■ Interviewed by the reformist daily newspaper Etemaad on December 24, 2015, Khaled al-Qaddumi, Hamas representative in Tehran, claimed a secret meeting had recently been held in a neighboring Arab country between Iran and Hamas representatives, who had agreed to improve relations. He said he hoped for improved

relations between Hamas and Iran, which had deteriorated because of the civil war in Syria and the ongoing war in Yemen, in the near future. He said that as far as Hamas was concerned, relations with Iran were strategic and the main objective was the liberation of Jerusalem and Palestine. He claimed Hamas did not, given current conditions, intend to move its political bureau to Tehran.