



## Spotlight on Iran<sup>1</sup> (January 31 – February 14, 2016)

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### Overview

- ✓ Dozens of Iranians, including high-ranking officers, were killed in a ground offensive waged by Syrian regime supporters in the northern part of the city of Aleppo.
- ✓ In view of the heavy losses incurred by the Iranians in Syria, the Iranian media released statements made by Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei at a meeting held with the families of Iranian fighters killed in Syria and Iraq. Khamenei said that without the Iranians fighting in Syria and Iraq, Iran would have to fight its enemies on its own territory.
- ✓ After Saudi Arabia announced it was prepared to send military forces to Syria, senior Iranian officials warned the Saudi authorities not to carry out their intentions.
- ✓ The Iranian foreign ministry denied a report issued by a human rights organization claiming that the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) had recruited willing and unwilling Afghan refugees living in Iran to fight in the war in Syria.
- ✓ According to a report published by an Iranian website, all Iranian exports to Iraq and Syria in recent months passed through the hands of the IRGC and served as funding for their military activity in Syria and Iraq.
- ✓ The Palestinian Authority (PA) arrested five operatives of the pro-Iranian Al-Saberin movement who planned to establish a network in the West Bank to carry out terrorist attacks against Israel.

### General

- On February 5, 2016, the official website of Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei issued a report about a speech he gave at a recent meeting with the families of Iranian fighters who had been killed in Syria and Iraq. He said that if Iran did not fight in Syria and Iraq, its enemies would enter Iranian territory, and that if Iranian fighters had not

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

succeeded in halting the enemy's advance, Iran would have been forced to fight them in Kermanshah, Hamedan and other Iranian provinces. The release of Khamenei's statements at the current time is apparently related to the heavy losses Iran recently incurred in Syria.



**Khamenei at a meeting with the families of Iranians killed fighting in Syria and Iraq (Website of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, February 6, 2016).**

■ At a memorial service held for former Iranian chief of staff Mohammad Salimi, Hasan Firouzabadi, chief of staff of the Iranian armed forces, said that for a long time the Zionists and Americans had been planning to assassinate Qods Force commander Qasem Soleimani, but that he was completely protected from such assaults. Firouzabadi praised Soleimani, claiming he was beloved by all Muslims and revolutionaries, among them the Iranians, Afghans, Syrians and Yemenis (Tasnim News, February 4, 2016).



**Qasem Soleimani, commander of the IRGC's Qods Force, in a recent photo published on February 2, 2016 (Twitter account).**

■ Speaking before a conference of Basij students, Hossein Salami, deputy commander of the IRGC, spoke about Iran's increasing regional influence. He said Iran had impeded the West's political efforts to oust Bashar Assad and that the Palestinian jihadist groups, Hezbollah in Lebanon, the popular militias in Iraq and Syria and the Ansar Allah [Shi'ite Houthis] in Yemen were Iran's strategic depth (Fars, February 10, 2016).

■ An Iranian website reported that in recent months all Iranian exports to Iraq and Syria passed through the hands of the IRGC. According to the report, companies, both private and governmental, could receive a license to export merchandise to Iraq and Syria only if the IRGC served as their intermediary. That would ensure the IRGC received some of the funds it needed to finance its military activity in Syria and Iraq. The website also reported that at a meeting of the Iranian Food and Medicine Organization recently held in Tehran, one of the speakers criticized the issue, saying there was no reason IRGC Qods Force commander Qasem Soleimani had to be contacted in order to export medicines (Negaam.news, February 2, 2016).

■ The report, whose reliability is unclear, is another indication that the IRGC continues exploiting its military position to ensure itself sources of income independent of the government's budget, which is set by the government and authorized by the Majlis (the Iranian parliament). Former president Ahmadinejad accused the IRGC of involvement in smuggling merchandise into the country through illegal border crossings.

## Iranian Intervention in Syria

■ More than 40 Iranian fighters were killed in a ground offensive in the region of two Shi'ite towns, Nubul and Al-Zahra (north of Aleppo), waged by supporters of the Syrian regime. Among those killed were two brigadier generals: Mohsen Qajarian, commander of the IRGC's Imam Reza 21<sup>st</sup> Armored Brigade, and Hossein Rezaei, from the Imam Hossein 14<sup>th</sup> Brigade in Isfahan.

■ The large number of Iranian losses, including several officers, indicates that despite the recent reduction of the number of Iranians fighting in Syria, the IRGC continues playing an active role in the front lines of the Syrian army ground offensive.



**Mohsen Qajarian, high ranking IRGC commander, killed near Aleppo (Fars, February 3, 2016).**

■ Following the successful attack of the Syrian regime in the region of Nubul and Al-Zahra, senior Iranian officials issued communiqués praising the fighters. Mohammad-Reza Naqdi, commander of the Basij force of the IRGC, sent a message to Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah, and IRGC Qods Force commander Qasem Soleimani in which he wrote that he prayed to meet the resistance fighters at the gates of Jerusalem in the near future. He added that the mission of the "American-*takfiri*" terrorists to protect the Zionist regime would fail because of the resistance of the Islamic fighters, and that their continuing victories would pave the way to the complete destruction of the regime.



**Residents of Nubul and Al-Zahra wave the Iranian flag after supporters of the Syrian regime take control of the towns (Twitter account of @Goftaniha, February 4, 2016).**

■ Hossein-Amir Abdollahian, deputy foreign minister for Arab-African affairs, sent a message congratulating the Syrian people and government on the "liberation of the towns which had been under siege for four years" (Fars, February 4, 2016).

■ At the beginning of February 2016, Ali-Akbar Velayati, international advisor to the supreme leader, paid a four-day visit to Moscow. During a meeting with the chairman of the Russian parliament, he said the victory over the "terrorists" in Syria was a common Iranian-Russian goal and vital for regional political interests, especially the preservation of the territorial integrity of Iraq and Turkey (Fars, February 2, 2016).



**Ali-Akbar Velayati (Fars, February 2, 2016).**

■ Senior Iranian officials ridiculed the Saudi Arabian announcement regarding its willingness to join a ground offensive against ISIS in Syria if the American-led coalition decided to wage one. Mohammad Ali Jafari, commander of the IRGC, said Saudi Arabia did not have the courage to send its forces to Syria because it had a "classic army," and history had shown that such armies could not fight against irregular resistance forces.

■ At the funeral held for Brigadier General Mohsen Qajarian and five other Iranians killed in Syria, Mohammad-Ali Jafari said that the defense of Syria was in fact the defense of the Islamic resistance, and prevented threats from reaching Iran's borders. He said the various IRGC fighting units competed with one another for the right to be sent to Syria, and that they were displeased with the restrictions on the number of Iranian "advisors" who could be sent (Fars, February 6, 2016).



**Mohammad Ali Jafari, commander of the IRGC (Sepah News, February 6, 2016)**

- Mohsen Rezaei, secretary of the Iranian Expediency Council and former IRGC commander, also responded to the Saudi statement, warning Saudi Arabia that by joining the campaign in Syria it was liable to ignite the entire region (Asr-e Iran, February 6, 2016). Hossein Salami, deputy commander of the Revolutionary Guards, called Saudi Arabia's intention to send troops to Syria a "political joke," and said that from a military point of view it would not change the situation (Defa Press, February 6, 2016).
- Ali Shamkhani, the secretary of the Supreme Council for National Security, also responded to the Saudi Arabian statement. Meeting with Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras in Tehran last week, he said that the military intervention of regional countries in Syria without the agreement of the legitimate Syrian government would have dangerous consequences for the Middle East and Europe (IRNA, February 8, 2016).
- The Iranian foreign ministry denied Iran sent Afghans living in Iran to fight in Syria, calling the reports "propaganda." According to a source in the Iranian foreign ministry, there was unverifiable information that Afghans were fighting in Syria on both sides, and that some of them had previously lived in Syria, while others had come from Afghanistan, sometimes via Iran (ISNA, feb2, 2016).
- The foreign ministry announcement was made in the wake of the publication of a Human Rights Watch (HRW) report which stated that the IRGC was recruiting Afghan refugees living in Iran and forcibly sending some of them to fight in Syria. More than 20 Afghan refugees interviewed by HRW reported that the Iranian authorities had forced them or their relatives to choose between going to fight in Syria or being deported back

to Afghanistan. Others reported having volunteered to go to Syria out of religious conviction or to receive a permanent residence permit.

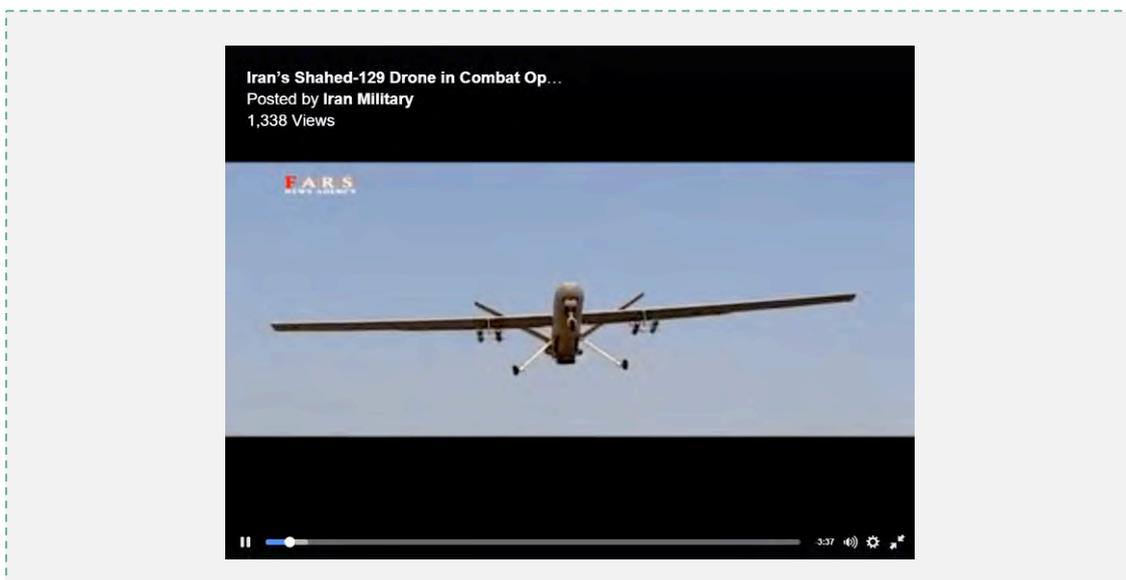
- Since 2012, through the IRGC Iran has enlisted several thousands of Shi'ite volunteers from among the Afghan refugees living in Iran. They have been sent to fight in Syria in the Fatemiyoun Brigade.

- On January 31, 2016, the Iranian news agency ABNA published a picture of a Hezbollah operative using an Iranian-made Toophan anti-tank missile in the fighting in Syria. According to the report, Hezbollah operatives use the missile against ISIS. The Toophan is an advanced, long-range guided missile identical with the American-made TOW. It has a range of up to 3,750 meters (about 2.3 miles), a warhead of 3.6 kilograms (almost 8 pounds) and can pierce armor 550 millimeters (almost 22 inches) thick. It is manufactured by the Iranian aviation industry.



**A Toophan anti-tank missile, used by Hezbollah in Syria (ABNA, January 31, 2016).**

- Iranian television reported that the Iranian-made Shahed-129 drone was being used in the fighting in Syria (Fars, February 4, 2016). According to the report, the Shahed-129 has range of 2,000 kilometers (about 1,240 miles) and can fly for 24 hours without refueling. It is also capable of carrying missiles and can serve as an attack drone. It was unveiled in September 2012 and serial manufacture began about a year later.



**The Shahed-129 drone (Fars, February 4, 2016).**

■ Mohammad Javad Zarif, the Iranian foreign minister, said that since the beginning of the Syrian civil war Iran had sent Syria humanitarian aid worth \$2.8 billion, including ambulances, tents, blankets and basic equipment. At a conference held in London on February 4, 2016, to raise money for Syria, Zarif said that a political resolution reached through internal Syrian dialogue was the only solution for the crisis in Syria (Press TV, February 4, 2016).

## Iranian Intervention in the Palestinian Arena

■ According to a Palestinian security source, the Palestinian Authority recently arrested five operatives of the pro-Iranian Al-Saberin movement in Bethlehem, who had planned to establish a network in the West Bank to carry out terrorist attacks against Israel. They were directed from the Gaza Strip, and received funds and instructions to carry out attacks. They were arrested two weeks ago (Voice of Israel Radio, February 3, 2016).

■ Al-Saberin Movement is a terrorist organization established in 2014 by operatives who left the Palestinian Islamic Jihad. It is affiliated with Hezbollah and Iran, which apparently also finances its activities in the Gaza Strip. On December 16, 2015, it claimed responsibility for attacking an IDF patrol with an IED near the border security fence in the southern Gaza Strip. The organization is headed by Hisham Salem, a former Palestinian Islamic Jihad operative. In July 2015 the Hamas administration in the Gaza Strip announced it had dismantled the movement, which operated a number of Shi'ite charitable organizations funded by Iran, but its operations apparently continue.

- In an interview held in January 2016, Hisham Salem said the movement received money from Iran but the funds were intended primarily to finance its *da'wah* [religious proselytizing] activities. He declined to say if the movement also received military support from Iran, but did say that its activists did not receive salaries (Ma'an, January 14, 2016).
- Iran's support for the organization is part of its efforts to regain a significant position in the Palestinian arena, in view of the crisis in its relations with Hamas since the outbreak of the Syrian civil war. After Operation Protective Edge (July-August 2014) Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei ordered an increase in Iranian support for the Palestinians and for the arming of the West Bank.



The logo of Al-Saberin in the Gaza Strip

## Iranian Intervention in Sudan

- Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir said the tension between Sudan and Iran was caused by Iran's efforts to spread Shi'a Islam. Speaking before an Organisation of African Unity conference in Addis Ababa, the capital of Ethiopia, he said that the relations between Sudan and Iran had been good until the government realized that the Iranians were spreading Shi'a Islam in Sudan. He said Sudan had to deal with many internal problems and was not prepared to allow a new element to invade Sudan's societal struggle (ISNA, February 2, 2016).
- During the past month Sudan followed Saudi Arabia and a number of other Arab countries and broke off diplomatic relations with Iran. The Sudanese announcement was preceded by a continued worsening of relations between the two countries, which began in the summer of 2014 when Sudan expelled the Iranian cultural attaché and

ordered the closing of Iran's cultural centers. The reason given was Iran's spreading of Shi'a in Sudan, which is a Sunni country.