



Spotlight on Iran¹ (February 28 – March 13, 2016)

Editor: Dr. Raz Zimmt



Main Points

- ✓ At least three Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) and several more Shi'ite foreign fighters were killed in Syria.
- ✓ The deputy chairman of the Iranian Martyrs Foundation said the foundation provided for more than 80% of the families of Iranian fighters killed in Syria.
- ✓ Strong criticism in Iran over the decision of the Gulf Cooperation Council to designate Hezbollah as a terrorist organization.
- ✓ Senior Palestinian officials were critical of the Iran announcement of its intention to transfer funds to the families of Palestinian shaheeds and families whose houses had been destroyed by Israel.
- ✓ The Al-Arabiya TV channel reported that Qasem Soleimani, commander of the IRGC's Qods Force, recently visited Iraq for the first time in several months.
- ✓ The Australian navy seized a boat that had apparently sailed from an Iranian port and carried weapons for the Shi'ite Houthi rebels in Yemen.

Overview

■ Iranian President Hassan Rouhani held a press conference at the beginning of last week where he spoke about recent developments in Syria and Yemen. Asked by an Al-Jazeera correspondent about Iranian's support for the Russian proposal to turn Syria into a federation, he answered that relations between Iran and Russia were very good and that they regularly coordinated and consulted regarding the situation in Syria. However, that did not mean the Iranians always agreed with the Russians, and Iran supported the preservation of Syria's territorial integrity and unity. As to the situation in

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.

Yemen, Hassan Rouhani said Iran would continue sending humanitarian support to Yemen, but admitted that the severing of diplomatic relations between Iran and Djibouti made it difficult to transfer assistance. He criticized Saudi Arabia's continuing attacks in Yemen (ISNA, March 6, 2016).

■ Esmail Qa'ani, deputy commander of the IRGC's Qods Force, speaking in the Shi'ite holy city of Qom, noted the military capabilities of the "resistance front" against the United States and Israel. At a memorial service for IRGC and Afghan Fatemiyoun Brigade fighters killed in Syria, he said that three years ago the Americans were convinced that the crisis in Syria had to be resolved by military means. Today, he said, they were forced to accept the Iranian position and negotiate a resolution. Regarding the "Islamic resistance" against Israel, he claimed that in the past no one could prevent Israel from advancing to Tripoli in Lebanon, but today Hezbollah "had Israel very worried," both in Lebanon and Syria.



Esmail Qa'ani (Fars, March 3, 2016).

Regarding the activities of the "Islamic resistance" in the Gaza Strip, he said the Fajr-5 missiles fired from the Gaza Strip at Tel Aviv during clashes between Israel and Hamas had been launched from areas fully under siege. That indicated, he claimed, that the operatives of the "Islamic resistance" had found ways to manufacture the missiles it needed for years, even under siege (Fars, March 3, 2016).

Iranian Intervention in Syria and Lebanon

- This past week three Iranian fighters were reported killed in Syria.



Mehdi Sameni-Rad, IRGC operative killed near Aleppo in Syria (ABNA, March 2, 2016).

- It was also reported that a number of Shi'ite foreign fighters (Afghans and Fatemiyoun Brigade fighters) operating under the aegis of the IRGC had been killed. On March 2, 2016, six Fatemiyoun fighters from the Zaynabioun Brigade were buried in the Shiite holy city of Qom in Iran. They had recently been killed in Syria. In addition, a funeral was held for at least nine Afghan Fatemiyoun Brigade fighters killed in Syria.



The funeral held in Qom for the Zaynabioun Brigade fighters (ISNA, March 2, 2016).

- A new video was posted on social networks showing Qasem Soleimani, commander of the IRGC's Qods Force, distributing candy to children in the Shi'ite towns of Nubul and Al-Zahra north of Aleppo. The video was apparently intended to dispel the

continuing reports and rumors that Soleimani had been wounded in Syria. The two Shi'ite towns were recently liberated in a ground offensive waged by the Syrian army with the support of the IRGC.



Qasem Soleimani distributes candy to Syrian children (ABNA, February 29, 2016).

■ On March 3, 2016, the Iranian news agency IRNA published pictures of a reception held for 180 IRGC fighters upon their return from Syria. The pictures show the fighters being welcomed by the residents of the city of Bojnord, the capital of North Khorasan Province. The reception was held on March 2, 2016. The pictures corroborate reports issued by the Western media during the past few weeks of the return of at least some of the IRGC forces to Iran. They had been deployed to Syria in early October 2015, at the beginning of the ground offensive in the region of Aleppo.

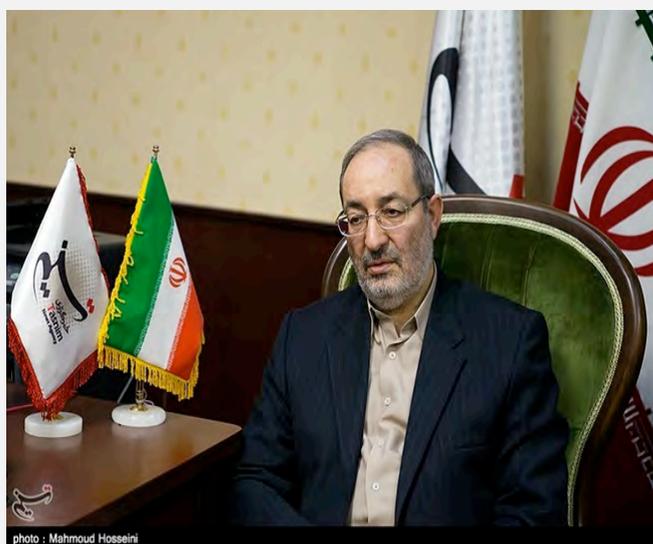


The reception for the returning IRGC fighters in Bojnord (IRNA, March 3, 2016).

■ Mohsen Ansari, deputy chairman of the Iranian Martyrs Foundation, said the foundation was responsible for providing for the families of Iranian shaheeds and wounded fighters, and for non-Iranian shaheeds living in Iran and killed in the fighting in Syria. He said today the foundation provided for more than 80% of the families of the shaheeds killed in Syria. The Iranian Martyrs Foundation was established by Ayatollah Khomeini to support the families of the shaheeds of the Iran-Iraq War. The foundation has two branches in Lebanon, one which supports Hezbollah and the other which sends funds to the Palestinians. In 2007 the United States Treasury Department designated the Iranian Martyrs Foundation and its branches supporters of terrorism because they transfer funds to Hezbollah, Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad.

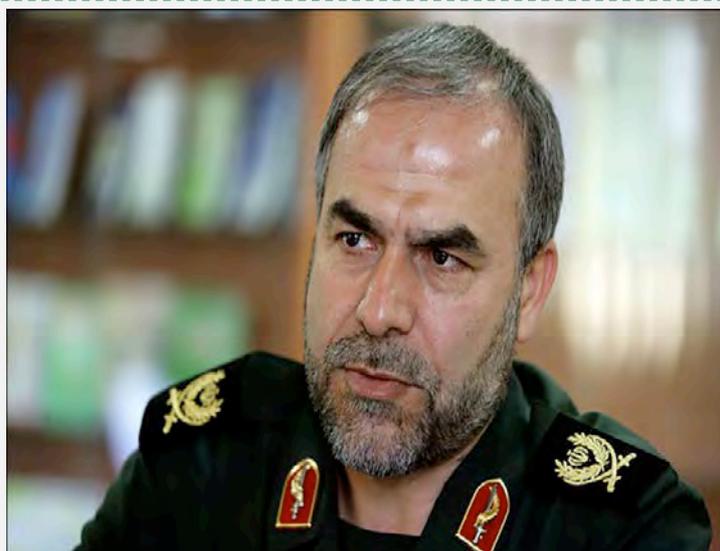
■ Ali-Akbar Velayati, international advisor to the supreme leader, said the Americans wanted to replace the Assad regime and that the ceasefire in Syria was just an excuse to implement the plan. At a meeting in Tehran, Velayati, who heads Iranian Discernment Council's Center for Strategic Studies, said any decision regarding Syria's future depended exclusively on the will of the Syrian people and not on UN resolutions or the decisions of foreign governments (Tasnim News, March 1, 2016).

■ Masoud Jazaeri, Deputy Commander in Chief of the Iranian army, told an interviewer there was no place for great optimism regarding the ceasefire in Syria. Regarding the involvement of the Iranian army in Syria, he said that as long as the legitimate Syrian government asked Iran for help, Iran would provide it (Tasnim News, March 8, 2016).



Masoud Jazaeri (Tasnim News, March 8, 2016).

■ Iran condemned the decision of the Gulf Cooperation Council designating Hezbollah a terrorist organization. Hossein-Amir Abdollahian, deputy foreign minister for Arab-African affairs, claimed the decision threatened regional peace and stability, and its objective was to harm Hezbollah and Lebanon's security. He claimed Hezbollah fought on the front line in the struggle against "the forces of the Zionist regime's occupation" and that Iran was proud of its relations with the organization (IRNA, March 3, 2016). Ayatollah Ahmad Khatami, who delivered the Friday sermon at the University of Tehran, also attacked the decision of the Gulf Cooperation Council. He accused it of following the explicit instructions of the "Zionists," adding that without Hezbollah, today Lebanon would be under Israeli control (Fars, March 4, 2016). Yadollah Javani, senior advisor to the supreme leader's representative in the IRGC, interviewed by the Mehr News Agency on March 5, 2016, said that when the Gulf Cooperation Council designated Hezbollah a terrorist organization, it clearly was not taking into consideration the rights of Muslims, the interests of the Islamic world or even of the Arab states, but was operating according to the needs of the Americans and the Zionists.



Yadollah Javani (Mehr, March 5, 2016).

■ Javani said those who had created the crisis in Syria and collaborated with the Zionists in various regional wars were today calling Hezbollah a terrorist organization. He added that Iran's support and aid to Hezbollah served Iran's national interests and security. Mohammad Javad Zarif, the Iranian foreign minister, and Hassan Firouzabadi, Chief of Staff of the Iranian Armed Forces, also condemned the Gulf Cooperation Council's decision.

Iranian Intervention in Iraq

- On March 7, 2016, Al-Arabiya TV reported that Qasem Soleimani, commander of the IRGC's Qods Force, had visited Baghdad the previous week for the first time in a number of months. He met with the commanders of the Iraqi Shi'ite militias and with senior Shi'ite political officials to discuss developments in Iraq and Syria.
- According to pictures and reports posted on an Iraqi Twitter account that updates developments in Iraq, Iran has begun transferring Iranian Toophan anti-tank missiles to the Shi'ite militias (<https://twitter.com/IraqLiveUpdate>, March 3, 2016).



Iranian-made Toophan anti-tank missile used by Shi'ite militias in Iraq
(<https://twitter.com/IraqLiveUpdate>, March 3, 2016).

- On January 31, 2016, the Iranian ABNA news agency reported that Hezbollah fighters were also using Toophan missiles in the fighting in Syria. The Toophan is a long-range guided missile, a variant of the American TOW anti-tank guided missile. It has a range of up to 3,750 meters (2.33 miles), carries a warhead of 3.6 kilograms (7.4 pounds) and can penetrate steel armor 550 millimeters thick (21.6 inches). It is manufactured by the Iranian aviation industry.

Iranian Intervention in the Palestinian Arena

- The Palestinian Authority strongly criticized Iran's announcement that it intended to donate \$7,000 to the family of every Palestinian shaheed and \$30,000 to every family whose house Israel destroyed. The funds, according to the announcement, would be transferred through the Palestinian branch of the Iranian Martyrs Foundation. The criticism was probably prompted by the Palestinian concern the Iranians intended to advance their interests in the internal Palestinian arena, and strengthen the Authority's rivals in the West Bank (especially Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad). Anonymous sources in the Palestinian leadership told the Lebanese newspaper Al-

Mustaqbal that the Iranian announcement was another attempt to intervene in internal Palestinian affairs, as Iran had intervened in the internal affairs of Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Yemen and Bahrain (Lebtime, February 28, 2016). Nabil Abu Rudeina, spokesman for Mahmoud Abbas, was quoted by the Iranian media (Asr-e Iran, February 28, 2016) as saying that the Palestinian Authority knew nothing of funds donated by Iran to help Palestinian prisoners or families whose houses had been destroyed by Israel. He made it clear that the Palestinian Authority opposed any attempt to circumvent its authority on the matter, and that the PLO was the main legitimate body of the Palestinian people (Wafa, February 28, 2016).

■ Speaking before an extraordinary meeting of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation in Jakarta, the capital of Indonesia, held to discuss developments in Jerusalem, Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif said Iran would continue supporting the Palestinians. He said Muslims had to put aside their disagreements so they could organize themselves to liberate Palestine and end the illegal efforts of the "Israeli occupation" to change the nature of Jerusalem (Fars, March 7, 2016).

Iranian Intervention in Yemen

■ The Australian navy recently seized a fishing boat about 300 kilometers (about 162 nautical miles) from Oman. It was en route to Somalia and carried about 2,000 weapons, including assault rifles and RPG launchers. A spokesman for the American navy assessed the boat had sailed from Iran and the weapons were bound for the Shi'ite Houthis in Yemen (NBC, March 7, 2016). It was not the first time in recent months that an Iranian fishing boat was used to transport weapons from Iran to the Houthi rebels. In September 2015 the Arab coalition forces fighting in Yemen stopped an Iranian fishing boat off the coast of Oman whose cargo included weapons apparently in transit to the Houthi rebels in Yemen. The weapons included shells, anti-tank missiles and weapons systems. In January 2013 the Yemeni coast guard and Yemeni security forces boarded a ship called the *Jihan-1*, which was carrying weapons, explosives and military equipment, some of it manufactured in Iran, from Iran to the Houthi rebels.



Banner of Abdul-Malik al-Houthi, the leader of the Ansarallah Movement (the Houthi Shi'ites) in Yemen, in Mashhad, Iran (Iranian Telegram channel, March 3, 2016).

- Masoud Jazaeri, Deputy Commander in Chief of the Iranian army, told an interviewer that Iran might expand its military involvement in Yemen. Asked about the possible deployment of Iranian "military advisors" in Yemen, he answered that Iran considered it a duty to support the government and people in Syria, regarded itself as responsible for the people of Yemen, and would do its utmost to give Yemen whatever support it needed (Tasnim News, March 8, 2016).
- Yemeni President Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi harshly criticized Iran's intervention in his country and said that two Iranians had recently been killed in Yemen. Interviewed by the Saudi Arabian daily paper Okaz on March 2, 2016, he said that Iran was using fishing boats to bring weapons to its Houthi Shi'ite allies fighting in Yemen. He said the Yemeni authorities had arrested six Iranian nationals. They were planning to establish a plant for manufacturing Grad missiles with a range of 70 kilometers (almost 44 miles), but were released after the Shi'ite Houthis took control of Sanaa, the capital city of Yemen.