



Spotlight on Iran¹

(March 13 – 27, 2016)

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Main Points

- ✓ At least four more Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) fighters have been killed in Syria, one of them a lieutenant colonel.
- ✓ Responding publicly to Russia's decision to withdraw some of its forces from Syria, senior Iranian officials tried to minimize its importance, stressing that the decision would not influence the continuing collaboration of Iran, Russia and Syria.
- ✓ The Hamas ministry of the interior in the Gaza Strip ordered Al-Saberin movement, which operates under Iranian aegis, to close the offices of its charitable association on the grounds that its activities were political and funded by Iran.
- ✓ Qasem Soleimani, commander of the IRGC's Qods Force, meeting with a Hamas delegation in Tehran last month, said Iran's position on the question of Palestine had not changed after the nuclear agreement, and that Iran was determined to continue its support of the Palestinians. However, he expressed dissatisfaction with recent criticism of Iran from senior Hamas officials.
- ✓ Saudi Arabia arrested nine Iranian nationals on accusations of involvement in terrorism.

Overview

■ Speaking in the city of Kerman, Qasem Soleimani, commander of the IRGC's Qods Force, rejected claims made by Iran's rivals that its regional activity was "adventurous." He said it was Saudi Arabia that was behaving adventurously towards Islam and Iran, and that all of Iran's activities were meant to protect the lives and property of Muslims. He also said that Iran sought solidarity and brotherhood between Sunnis and Shi'ites and that it had never tried to covert Sunnis to Shi'a. He accused Iran's enemies of

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.

setting up radical (takfiri) Sunni organizations, ISIS among them, to defeat Iran and Shi'a Islam (IRNA, March 13, 2016).



Qasem Soleimani on vacation for the Iranian New Year (Nowruz (Iranian Telegram messaging app)).

■ Speaking in Tehran for Iranian "Shaheed Day," Iranian President Hassan Rouhani defended Iran's military involvement in Syria and Iraq, saying the terrorist attacks on the shrines of Shi'a in both countries were considered by Iran as having crossed a red line. He said Iran would not stand for terrorists' attempts to harm the sites sacred to Shi'a regardless of where they were located, Iraq, Syria or any other country (Press TV, March 12, 2016).



Hassan Rouhani in Tehran (Press TV, March 12, 2016).

■ Speaking at the graduation exercises of a training course for Iranian army special forces, Amir Ali Arasteh, deputy chief liaison of the Iranian army's ground forces, said the fighters of the special forces and snipers of the regular army's rapid intervention force could, in certain instances, be deployed to Syria and Iraq as "advisors" (Tasnim News, March 16, 2016). So far, only IRGC fighters have been deployed to Syria and Iraq, not soldiers in the regular army. Deploying them would signal a change in Iran's military strategy, but would be insufficient to cause a significant change in the situation on the ground. Amir Ali Arasteh's statement might reflect the desire of the regular army to become involved in the ongoing military campaigns in Syria and Iraq as a way of raising their status in Iran vis-à-vis the IRGC.

Iranian Intervention in Iraq

■ At least four more IRGC fighters were killed in Syria during the past two weeks, one of whom was a lieutenant colonel. The Iranian media also reported the deaths of several Afghan and Pakistani fighters of the Fatemiyoun and Zaynabioun Brigades, fighting in Syria under IRGC aegis.



Lieutenant Colonel Mohsen Mandani, killed in Syria (ABNA, March 22, 2016).

■ Iranian officials publicly responded to the Russian decision to withdraw some of its forces from Syria in an attempt to minimize its importance. Mohammad Javad Zarif, the Iranian foreign minister, said the Russian decision was a "positive sign" and proof that Russia did not see an immediate need to use force to preserve the ceasefire in Syria. "We have to wait and see," he said (Press TV, March 15, 2016).

■ Ali-Akbar Velayati, international advisor to the supreme leader, after meeting with Syrian Deputy Foreign Minister Faysal Mekdad in Tehran, said that reducing the

number of Russian forces in Syria would not influence the collaboration of Iran, Russia, Syria and Hezbollah. He added that senior Russian officials, among them President Putin, had stated that if Russia limited the presence of its air force in Syria it would be able to renew and increase its involvement in the campaign against the terrorists, as necessary (IRIB, March 15, 2016).

■ Ali Shamkhani, the secretary of the Supreme Council for National Security, said that the withdrawal of the Russian forces from Syria had been planned in advance and was expected. He said Iranian and Russian support of Syria's army would continue even after the Russian withdrawal from regions where "terrorist groups" continued to threaten national security (Fars, March 16, 2016).

■ The Iranian media also dealt with the Russian withdrawal from Syria. A editorial published in the daily reform newspaper Arman on March 16, 2016, noted that the hasty and surprising Russian decision to withdraw its forces from Syria could indicate the Iranian-Russian partnership in Syria was "not strategic" and that Russian had made the decision based exclusively on its own interests.

■ Hassan Firouzabadi, chief of staff of the Iranian armed forces, said that the demand of Saudi Arabia and the opposition groups in Syria to remove Bashar Assad from the presidency was dictated by the "Zionists" and would lead to an ISIS takeover of Syria. He added that only Syrian citizens had the right to decide who would lead them, and that political insistence on choosing or ousting a leader or head of state was undemocratic (Sepah News, March 15, 2016).



Hassan Firouzabadi (Sepah News, March 15, 2016)

■ On March 19, 2016, Kamal Kharrazi, former Iranian foreign minister and today head of Iran's Strategic Council on Foreign Relations, met in Syria with President Bashar Assad. Kharrazi stressed that the Syrian people had to determine their own fate and that no foreign entity had the right to interfere in Syria's internal affairs. He also met with the heads of the Palestinian organizations operating in Syria (Mehr News Agency, March 19, 2016). From Syria Kharrazi went to Iraq where he met with Iraqi Prime Minister Haidar al-Abadi (ISNA, March 23, 2016).



Kamal Kharrazi (Mehr News Agency, March 19, 2016).

■ On March 19, 2016, Mohammad Javad Zarif, the Iranian foreign minister, met in Turkey with Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, the Turkish foreign minister. They discussed bilateral affairs and regional developments. Zarif said the two countries had agreed on the need to preserve the territorial integrity of Iraq and Syria, and to strengthen their cooperation (ISNA, March 19, 2016).

Iranian Intervention in the Palestinian Arena

■ The Hamas ministry of the interior in the Gaza Strip ordered Al-Saberin movement, which operates under Iranian aegis, to close the offices of its charitable association Bakiyat Salihat on the grounds that its activities were political and it was funded by Iran. According to the ministry, its activities violated the law governing charitable associations. Bakiyat Salihat, which operates in the northern Gaza Strip, was established in 2004 to provide Gazans with humanitarian aid. The head of Al-Saberin movement in the Gaza Strip, Hisham Salem, issued a strong statement condemning the decision of Hamas' ministry of the interior and accusing it of political persecution and ignoring the humanitarian needs of the Gazan population. He said the movement intended to take all legal steps to revoke the decision (Asr-e Iran, March 14, 2016).



Al-Saberin logo

- Al-Saberin movement is a terrorist network established in 2004 by operatives who left the Palestinian Islamic Jihad. It is affiliated with Hezbollah and Iran, which apparently finances its activities in the Gaza Strip. On December 16, 2015, it claimed responsibility for detonating an IED to attack an IDF patrol near the border security fence in the southern Gaza Strip. In July 2015 the Hamas administration in Gaza announced the dissolution of the movement, which ran a series of Shi'ite religious charitable associations funded by Iran, but the movement apparently continues its activities. Interviewed in January 2016, Al-Saberin leader Hisham Salem said the movement received money from Iran, but it was mainly intended to fund da'wah activities. He refused to say whether the movement also received military support from Iran, but did say movement activists did not receive salaries from the Islamic Republic (Ma'an, January 16, 2016).
- Support for Al-Saberin is part of Iran's efforts to regain an important role in the Palestinian arena, given the ongoing crisis in its relations with Hamas since the outbreak of the Syrian civil war.
- In an interview with the French news network France24 on March 15, 2016, Khaled Mashaal, head of Hamas' political bureau, said Iran was no longer Hamas' greatest supporter, and that Hamas was trying to vary the sources of its support. According to Mashaal, who was also quoted by the Iranian media, Hamas' relations with Iran had not been completely cut off, but had deteriorated because of the Syrian civil war.
- Hezbollah-affiliated Al-Mayadeen TV reported a recent meeting in Tehran of Hamas representatives and Qasem Soleimani, commander of the IRGC's Qods Force, held against the backdrop of continuing Hamas-Iran tensions.

- According to the report, Soleimani expressed dissatisfaction with remarks critical of Iran made by several senior Hamas officials. He said that Iran's position on the question of Palestine had not changed either before or after the nuclear agreement, and that Iran's support of the Palestinians would have continued even if the sanctions imposed on Iran had been significantly increased.
- He said that Iran had never agreed to discuss its Palestinian policies with the United States. He added that Iran was determined to continue its support of the Palestinians, even if at times its support was reduced somewhat because of financial or other considerations. He told the Hamas delegation that Iran did not object if other Muslim countries supported the "Palestinian resistance." According to Soleimani there was no internal disagreement in Iran over support for Palestine. He added that those who, a number of years ago, had reservations about Iran's support for Gaza or Lebanon [i.e., the reformist opposition, which had reservations about Iranian support for the Palestinians and Hezbollah at the expense of Iran's internal economic woes], were no longer relevant (Asr-e Iran, March 17, 2016).

Iranian Intervention in Yemen and the Persian Gulf

- The Saudi Arabian media reported that 13 Iranian nationals had been arrested on charges of involvement in terrorism. A Saudi security spokesman said that nine Iranian nationals had been arrested during the past two weeks and four others were already in jail. One of them had belonged to a 32-man network of civilians, most of them Saudis, who, according to the Saudi authorities, had spied for Iran in 2013, met with Iran intelligence agents in Iran and Lebanon and with Iranian diplomats in Riyadh and Jeddah, and provided Iran with classified military information about Saudi Arabia (Saudi Gazette, March 21, 2016).
- Amir Hossein Abdollahian, deputy Iranian foreign minister for the Arab states and Africa, said Iran was in favor of negotiations to end the war in Yemen. Meeting with Islamil Walad al-Sheikh Ahmad, the UN secretary general's envoy for Yemeni affairs, Abdollahian said he supported the secretary general's efforts to institute political talks between the rival sides in Yemen (Tasnim News, March 21, 2016).