



Spotlight on Iran¹

March 27 – April 10, 2016

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Main Points

- ✓ Speaking before commanding officers of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), IRGC Commander Mohammad Ali Jafari reiterated Iran's support for the Syrian regime, Lebanon, the Palestinians and Iran's allies in Yemen. He said the IRGC was waiting for the order to respond to the "impudence and stupid behavior" of regimes like Saudi Arabia and Bahrain.
- ✓ This past week at least ten more IRGC fighters, two of them officers, were killed in the Aleppo region of Syria, an increase in the number of Iranians killed in comparison with previous weeks.
- ✓ A high-ranking officer in the regular Iranian army ground forces reported that fighters from special forces Brigade 65 and other units had so far been deployed to Syria. The move reflected a change in Iran's combat strategy in Syria, which until recently had been based on IRGC fighters. However, the deployment will not make a significant change in the fighting on the ground. Apparently the change was related to the rivalry between the IRGC and the regular army over prestige.
- ✓ Senior Iranian officials congratulated the heads of the Syrian regime following the liberation of the Syrian city of Palmyra from ISIS.
- ✓ The US Navy said in a statement that it had intercepted a weapons ship in the Arabian Sea en route from Iran to the Shi'ite Houthi rebels in Yemen. It was the third time in recent months an Iranian ship apparently carrying arms for the rebels in Yemen had been seized.

General Information

- Speaking before the Supreme Council of IRGC commanding officers, IRGC Commander Mohammad Ali Jafari reiterated Iran's support for the Syrian regime, Lebanon, the Palestinians and Iran's allies in Yemen. He strongly criticized the

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.

leaders of some Arab states, especially Saudi Arabia, whom he claimed supported Israel and the killing of innocent victims in Yemen and Palestine, endangering the honor the Arab nation. He said that in the future the people of the Arab states would wreak vengeance on leaders for the policies they pursued, and that the IRGC was waiting for the order to respond to the "impudence and stupid behavior" of Saudi Arabia and Bahrain.

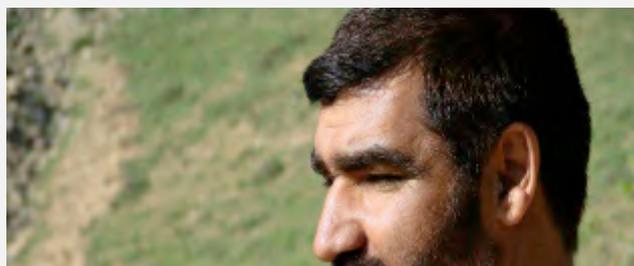
■ Jafari said Iran supported the Syrian regime and Syria's territorial integrity, and would never permit the division of even one Muslim country. Iran, he said, regarded such a strategy as British, American and Zionist, and was intended to weaken the Muslim nations. He added that Iran would not abandon the people of Palestine and Yemen and would continue supporting the Palestinians with all of its capabilities and power (Tasnim News, April 5, 2016).



Mohammad Ali Jafari, commander of the IRGC (Tasnim News, April 5, 2016).

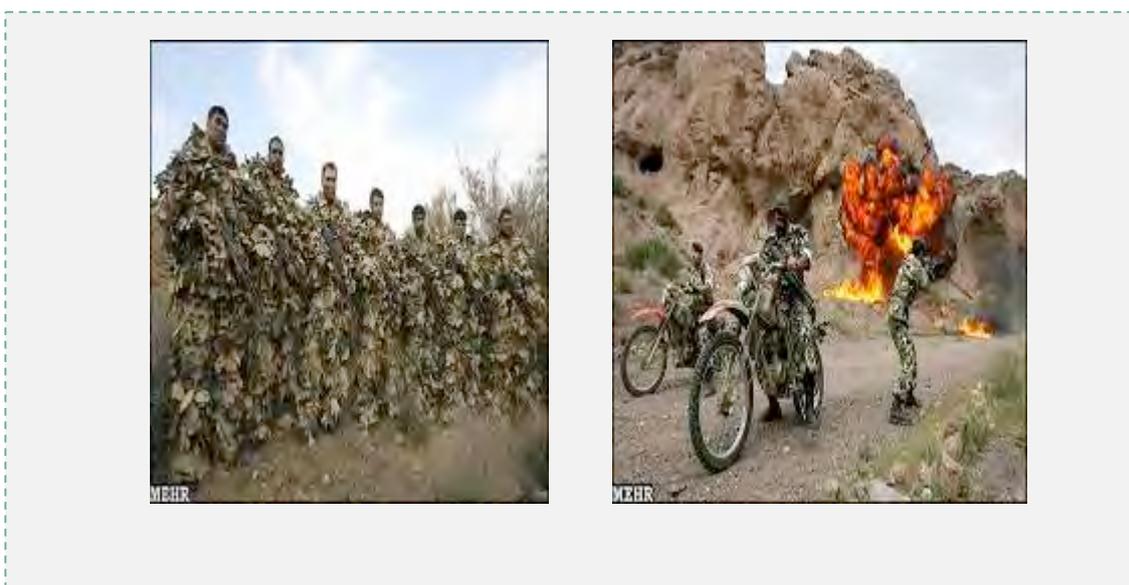
Iranian Intervention in Syria and Lebanon

■ This past week at least ten more IRGC fighters, two of them officers, were killed in the Aleppo region of Syria. Several Pakistanis and Afghan fighting in the ranks of the IRGC in Syria were also killed. Their deaths marked an increase in the number of Iranians killed in comparison with previous weeks. The deaths can be explained by the recent confrontations in the Aleppo region between supporters of the Syrian regime and the rebel organizations, especially Al-Nusra Front, and by the Al-Nusra Front and other organizations' takeover of the town of Al-Eis, south of Aleppo.



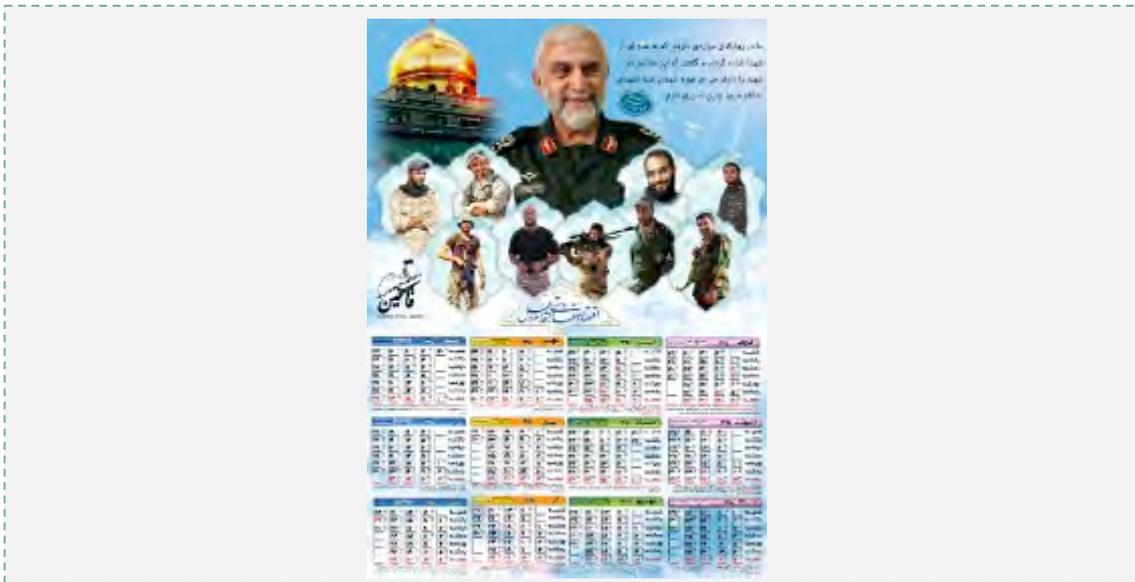
IRGC officer Mashollah Shamsheh, killed in Syria (Iranian Telegram channel, April 3, 2016).

- Amir Ali Arasteh, Deputy Chief Liaison of the Iranian Army's Ground Forces, interviewed by Tasnim News on April 4, 2016, said that commandos from the regular Iranian army's special forces' Brigade 65 and other units had recently been sent to Syria as "advisors."



Special forces' Brigade 65 in training (Tasnim News, April 4, 2016).

- At an Iranian army special forces' graduation exercise last month, Amir Ali Arasteh said special force fighters and snipers from the regular army's rapid response force might, in certain circumstances, be deployed to Syria and Iraq. So far only IRGC fighters have been deployed to fight in Syria and Iraq, and not the regular army. Deploying regular army fighters would signal a change in Iran's combat strategy, but would not make a significant change in the fighting on the ground. It is likely that deploying regular army commandos is intended to improve its internal status vis-à-vis the IRGC, which so far have borne the burden of the fighting.



Calendar for the new Iranian year with pictures of IRGC fighters killed in Syria (Iranian Telegram channel, April 4, 2016).

- On March 28, 2016, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani and Russian President Vladimir Putin held a telephone conversation dealing with developments in Syria. On March 28 Iran's ISNA news agency reported that President Rouhani had stressed the importance of continued collaboration and coordination between Russia and Iran to pursue the struggle against the terrorist organizations operating in Syria. He added that only the Syrians could decide the future of their country.
- Ali Shamkhani, the secretary of the Supreme Council for National Security, congratulated President Assad on the liberation of the city of Palmyra from ISIS, calling it a "historic victory." In his communiqué to Assad, Shamkhani wrote that the determination of the Syrian people, government and army to liberate the territories occupied by the terrorist groups was praiseworthy and a source of pride, and he expressed Iran's commitment to continue its support for Syria and the "axis of resistance" (Fars, March 28, 2016).
- Hossein-Amir Abdollahian, deputy foreign minister for Arab-African affairs, also congratulated Syria after the liberation of Palmyra. Interviewed by the Iranian TV channel Al-Alam on March 27, 2016, he said that in the future there would be no place for terrorists in the region and that with Iran's determined support, Syria would continue its struggle against terrorism.
- Hossein Dehqan, Iranian minister of defense, held a phone conversation with Fahd Jassem al-Freij, the Syrian minister of defense, to congratulate him on retaking Palmyra. Al-Freij told Dehqan that the support of Syria's friends, especially Iran, had played an important role in the victory. He asked him to convey the esteem of the

Syrian armed forces to the Iranian people and the supreme leader. Dehqan stressed the need for continued military activity to "uproot the cancer of terrorism" from the region and liberate the other locations occupied by terrorists (Defa Press, March 29, 2016).

■ IRGC commander Mohammad Ali Jafari said conditions were currently good for the "resistance front" in Syria. Speaking to journalists in the city of Gilan, he said that after the liberation of Palmyra emphasis would be put on continuing to repel ISIS. He added that coordination between Russia and the resistance front would continue after the ceasefire in Syria (Fars, March 28, 2016).

■ An Iranian parliamentary delegation headed by Amir Khojasteh, deputy speaker of the Majlis (Iranian parliament), paid a visit to Lebanon where they met with senior Lebanese officials. The delegation members stressed the need to expand parliamentary relations between the two countries, and also stressed Iran's support for the "resistance front" against Israel. They also said Iran was prepared to provide Lebanon with military support (IRNA, March 31, 2016).

Iranian Intervention in Iraq

■ Jawad al-Attar, formerly a member of the Iraqi parliament, said in an interview that Qasem Soleimani, commander of the IRGC's Qods Force, was advising the Shi'ite militias in Iraq. He said he was not aware of any upcoming meeting planned for Soleimani and representatives of the Shi'ite militias operating in Iraq, but that since ISIS's occupation of Mosul Soleimani had provided the Shi'ite militias with advice and guidance (Ycr.ir, April 2, 2016).



Recent photo of Qasem Soleimani in the Iranian city of Mashhad (Iranian Telegram channel, March 28, 2016).

■ Al-Attar's statements follow an Iraqi army announcement issued at the end of March, according to which a campaign had begun to liberate Nineveh Province and the city of Mosul from ISIS. In February Iraqi Prime Minister Haidar al-Abadi said he intended to integrate the Iraqi Shi'ite militias [operating under the aegis of the IRGC] into the campaign to liberate the city. After the liberation of the city of Ramadi at the end of December 2015, Iran tried to emphasize the involvement of the IRGC and Iraqi Shi'ite militias, although the liberation was in fact led by the Iraqi army's special forces in collaboration and coordination with the Western coalition forces fighting ISIS in Iraq.

Iranian Intervention in the Palestinian Arena

■ Hossein-Amir Abdollahian, deputy foreign minister for Arab-African affairs, said Iran would continue to support the Palestinians. In a statement issued for Palestinian "Land Day," he said support for Palestine and the struggle against terrorism were two important regional issues and that the regional "terrorist crises" should not distract the Muslim world from the issue of Palestine and Jerusalem.



Hossein Amir Abdollahian (Mehr News Agency, April 1, 2016).

■ He added that the "Zionist terrorist regime" was the main source of regional insecurity and that the continuation of the settlements and the "Judaizing" of Jerusalem increased the hatred of regional people for the conduct of the "occupiers of Palestine." The third intifada of the Palestinian people, he said, was the "natural response" of the original proprietors of Palestine to the continuing aggression of the "Zionist regime" (Mehr News Agency, April 1, 2016).

Iranian Intervention in Yemen and the Persian Gulf

■ The US Navy said in a statement that on March 28, 2016, it had intercepted a weapons ship in the Arabian Sea en route from Iran to the Shi'ite Houthi rebels in Yemen. The ship was carrying a cache of weapons that included 1,500 Kalashnikov assault rifles, 200 RPG launchers and 21 .50-caliber submachine guns (Washington Post, April 4, 2016). It was the third time in recent months an Iranian arms ship had been seized. On February 27, 2016, the Australian Royal Navy intercepted a craft about 300 kilometers off the coast of Oman en route to Somalia carrying nearly 2,000 Kalashnikov rifles and 100 RPG launchers. On March 20, 2016, the French Navy intercepted an Iranian ship carrying 2,000 AK-47 assault rifles, 64 Dragunov sniper rifles, nine anti-tank missiles and other military equipment.

■ In September 2015 Arab coalition forces fighting in Yemen stopped an Iran fishing boat off the coast of Oman also carrying weapons for the Houthi rebels. The boat was carrying a large quantity of weapons, including shells, anti-tank missiles and weapons systems.

- In an interview for the first anniversary of the Saudi Arabian attack on Yemen, Morteza Abedini, the Iranian chargé d' affaires, said the position of the Ansarullah, the Shi'ite Houthi movement in Yemen, had become such that no regional army was capable of confronting it. He said the Saudi attack on Yemen would have no results other than the destruction of the Yemeni infrastructure, the killing of almost 27,000 civilians and a severe shortage of food.
- He rejected claims of the Saudi forces and their coalition allies regarding the liberation of the provinces in southern Yemen, saying the Saudis had failed in Yemen despite their great investment in the military campaign. He said most of the Yemenis were furious about the Saudi attack, evident in the demonstrations held for its first anniversary. Yemeni hatred for Saudi Arabia, he claimed, would pass from generation to generation and lead to a decrease in Saudi influence (Mehr News Agency, April 2, 2016).



**Morteza Abedini, Iranian chargé d' affaires in Yemen
(Mehr News Agency, April 2, 2016).**