



## Spotlight on Iran<sup>1</sup> (April 24 – May 8, 2016)

Dr. Raz Zimmt



### Main Points

- ✓ The deputy chief of staff of the Iranian army said the deployment of regular Iranian army forces to Syria had been authorized by the supreme leader and would continue as long as needed.
- ✓ At least fifteen additional Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) fighters were killed in Syria during the past two weeks. Most of them died fighting in the recent fierce battles south of the Syrian city of Aleppo. During the battles the Syrian rebels took control of the village of Khan Tuman, southwest of the city.
- ✓ Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei appointed Hojjat-ul-Islam Tabataba'i Ashkazari as his personal representative in Syria.
- ✓ The Majlis [Iranian parliament] passed a law enabling the government to grant Iranian citizenship to families of non-Iranian "martyrs" killed fighting for Iran in Syria and Iraq.
- ✓ Senior Iranian officials have criticized the violent protests held by the supporters of Iraqi Shi'ite cleric Muqtada al-Sadr who stormed and temporarily took over the Iraqi parliament building.
- ✓ In response to anti-Iranian slogans shouted by Iraqi demonstrators during a protest in Baghdad, pro-Iranian Internet users launched a social network campaign to show their esteem for Qasem Soleimani, commander of the IRGC's Qods Force. Soleimani recently toured the region of Aleppo (northwestern Syria).
- ✓ A Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) delegation headed by its leader, Ramadan Shallah, recently paid a visit to Tehran and met with senior Iranian officials, including the supreme leader. The Iranians reiterated Iran's commitment to continuing aid to the Palestinians.

### General Information

- Iraj Masjedi, senior advisor to the commander of the IRGC's Qods Force, said ISIS was on the verge of collapse, both ideologically and operationally. He said he hoped the coming year would see the end of the organization. He added that if the Syrian government fell, the entire region would fall to the radical Sunni Islamic organizations,

<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.

ties between Iran and the "resistance front" and ties between Lebanon and Palestine would cut off, and Hezbollah in Lebanon would be under siege.



**Iraj Masjedi, senior advisor to the commander of the IRGC's Qods Force  
(Tasnim News, May 2, 2016).**

- Regarding the situation in Iraq, Masjedi said that Iraq had also come close to falling to ISIS. He said that only by virtue of the IRGC support to the Iraqi army had extensive regions in Iraq (with the exception of the Mosul region and parts of Al-Anbar Province) been liberated from ISIS control and security restored. He added that today the Syrian and Iraqi fronts were Iran's front lines (Tasnim News, May 2, 2016).
- The Majlis passed a law allowing the government to grant Iranian citizenship to the families of non-Iranian "martyrs" who had died fighting in for Iran during the Iran-Iraq War and afterwards (Defa Press, May 2, 2016). The law's primary objective was to ensure the status of the families of Shi'ite fighters (especially Afghans and Pakistanis) killed in recent years fighting in the ranks of the IRGC in the Syrian civil war and in the campaign against ISIS in Iraq.

## Iranian Intervention in Syria and Lebanon

- At least 15 IRGC fighters were killed during the past two weeks. most of them died in the fierce battles fought in recent days to the south of Aleppo between forces of the Assad regime and supporters of the rebel organizations. The rebels, among them Al-Nusra Front, took control of the village of Khan Tuman, southwest of Aleppo on the Aleppo-Damascus road. At the end of last week the Iranian media reported that about 15 IRGC fighters had been killed or captured in the battles.



**IRGC fighter Qorban Mostafa Arefi, killed in Syria (ABNA, May 1, 2016).**

- Seyyed Abdolkarim Mousavi, deputy chief of staff of Iran's army, said that the deployment of regular Iranian forces to Syria would continue as long as necessary. He added that since the beginning of the fighting in Syria the Iranian army had stated its readiness to be deployed in the campaign to defend Shi'ite shrines. That was made known to Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and he agreed that some of the army's forces be deployed to Syria (Fars, April 25, 2016).
- Hossein Jaber Ansari, a spokesman for the Iranian foreign ministry, condemned the statement made by American President Obama about his intention to commit 250 American special operations forces to Syria to help combat ISIS. Ansari said that at the beginning of the Syrian crisis Iran had stated that any foreign intervention in Syria without Syrian government coordination would lead to an escalation (Press TV, April 25, 2016).
- Ali-Akbar Velayati, international advisor to the supreme leader, said that Syrian President Assad had to complete his term of office. He said Iran supported the legal Syrian government adding that Assad had been elected two years ago for a seven-year term, which he should serve to its end (Tasnim News, April 27, 2016).
- Hossein-Amir Abdollahian, deputy foreign minister for Arab-African affairs, speaking at Allameh Tabataba'i University in Tehran, said that without the actions of the Iranian security forces, ISIS would today be capable of carrying out terrorist attacks in the Tehran metro stations.
- Regarding the situation in Syria, Abdollahian said that without Iran's support of Syria, Damascus would have fallen to the terrorists. He stressed the importance of Syria's territorial integrity for Iran, adding that at the current time there were no Iranian

"fighting forces" in Syria, only "advisors" deployed by the IRGC and regular army. Some of the advisors, he said, secured the Shi'ite shrines in Syria, and without them the shrines would be in ruins. He also said that Iran was prepared to send additional advisors to Syria if necessary. (ISNA, April 27, 2016).

■ A delegation of Syrian tribal leaders paid a visit to Iran and met with senior Iranian officials, including Ali-Akbar Velayati, international advisor to the supreme leader; and Mohammad Hassan Akhtari, chairman of the Ahl al-Bayt World Assembly. The Iranians stressed Iran's support for President Assad's Syrian regime and the fight against the takfiri groups operating in the country. Velayati was asked by one of the tribal leaders about statements made by Mehdi Ta'eb, an Iranian cleric affiliated with Iran's radical right, who had referred to Syria as an "Iranian province." Velayati said the remark did not reflect Iran's official position (ABNA, April 26; Tasnim News, April 27, 2016).



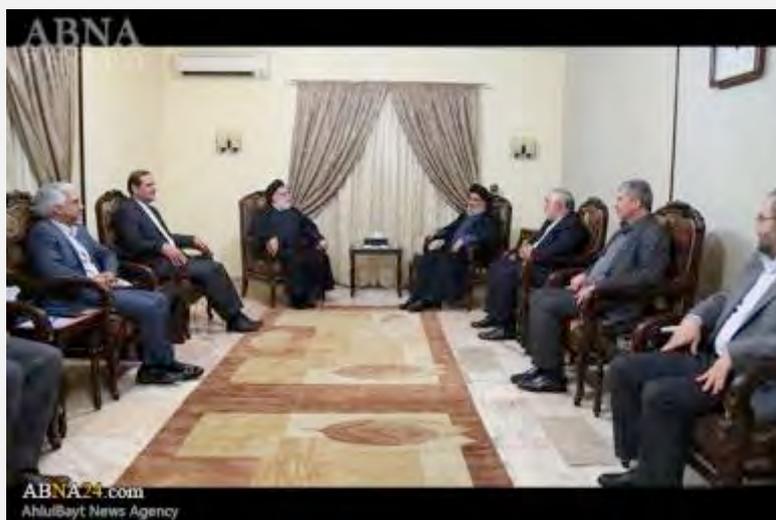
**Syrian tribal leaders meet with Ali-Akbar Velayati (Tasnim News, April 27, 2016).**

■ Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei appointed Hojjat-ul-Islam Tabataba'i Ashkazari as his representative in Syria. Ashkazari held various positions in the religious establishment, including in the Islamic Propagation Organization, providing religious instruction and delivering Friday prayers (Dana.ir, May 1, 2016).



**Hojjat-ul-Islam Tabataba'i Ashkzari (Dana.ir, May 1, 2016).**

■ Hojjat ul-Islam Seyyed Mohammad Ali Shahidi, chairman of the Iranian Shaheed Foundation, met in Beirut with Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah. Mohammad Fathali, Iranian ambassador to Lebanon, was also present at the meeting, as were several senior Hezbollah officials. At the meeting they discussed regional and Lebanese developments. While in Lebanon Ali Shahidi also met with Lebanese Prime Minister Tammam Salam, and speaker of the parliament Nabih Berri. In addition, he paid a visit to the house of Imad Mughnieh, a senior Hezbollah terrorist operative assassinate in 2008 (Modafeon.blog.ir, April 27, 2016).



**The chairman of the Iranian Shaheed Foundation meets with the leader of Hezbollah (ABNA, April 27, 2016).**

■ The Iranian Shaheed Foundation was established in 1980 during the Iran-Iraq War to support the families of the killed and wounded. It has a branch in Lebanon that

supports Hezbollah and a Palestinian branch, also located in Lebanon. The Foundation and its branches were designated as sponsors of terrorism by the American Treasury Department in 2007 because they provide financial support for Hezbollah, Hamas and the PIJ.

■ On May 4, 2016, Ali-Akbar Velayati, international advisor to the supreme leader, went to Beirut, where he met with senior Lebanese officials and participated in a conference of the International Union of Resistance clerics (Asr-e Iran, May 4, 2016).

## Iranian Intervention in Iraq

■ Ali-Akbar Velayati told Jan Kubis, the UN special envoy to Iraq who was visiting Tehran, that the conspiracy of the West and some of the Arab states to divide regional countries, among them Syria and Iraq, would never come to fruition. As to the worsening political crisis in Iraq, Velayati said the political situation was sensitive and that a great effort would be required to institute democracy and establish stable government institutions, because Iraq had no experience with a democratic tradition. He indirectly criticized the violent protest initiated the previous week by supporters of Iraqi Shi'ite cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, who stormed and temporarily took over the Iraqi parliament building. He said Iraqis would fight against every infraction of law and security undertaken by any group. He said Iran supported the preservation of Iraq's territorial integrity and the restoration of stability and security.

■ At his weekly press conference, Hossein Jaber Ansari, a spokesman for the Iranian foreign ministry, referred to the political crisis in Iraq. He said Iran was prepared to promote a dialogue between the various political factions in Iraq to settle their differences. He called on all the political factions to show restraint and create an atmosphere conducive to resolving the various issues facing Iraq through dialogue and political understanding. He added that Iran's position was that preserving political achievements and the rule of law would ensure stability, development and Iraq's national unity (Press TV, May 2, 2016).

■ This past week pro-Iranian web users, primarily in Iraq, launched a social network campaign called "Thank you, Soleimani." Its objective, according to those who initiated it, was to acknowledge their appreciation of Qasem Soleimani, commander of the IRGC's Qods Force, for his actions and support of the campaign to fight ISIS in Iraq and Syria.

■ The campaign, launched with direct Iranian encouragement or guidance, is meant to counterbalance the anti-Iranian slogans shouted during the rallies held by thousands of Iraqis protesting corruption in the government and demanding reforms. The demonstrators protested Iranian attempts to meddle in Iraq's internal political developments. The slogans shouted by Shi'ites, some of them supporters of Muqtada al-Sadr, indicated that even some Iraqi Shi'ites had reservations about Iranian meddling in the country's internal affairs.



"Thank you, Soleimani" (Facebook, May 2, 2016).

■ Soleimani himself reportedly visited Aleppo area in Syria in recent days to supervise the battlefield (ABNA, May 4, 2016).



Qasem Soleimani in Aleppo (ABNA, May 4, 2016).

■ Sources in Iraqi Kurdistan reported Iranian attempts to mediate the violent conflicts that broke out again between the Shi'ite militias and the Kurdish fighters in Tuz Khurmatu (south-central Iraq, south of Kirkuk) in Salah ad-Din Province. According to reports in the Kurdish media, Iranian representatives were holding talks with senior commanders of the Kurdish Peshmerga forces and the Iran-supported Shi'ite militias in an effort to have the two sides reach an agreement (Rudaw, April 27, 2016).

### Iranian Intervention in the Palestinian Arena

■ A PIJ delegation headed by organization head Ramadan Abdallah Shallah paid a visit to Iran last week. The delegation met with senior Iranian officials, including Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif, chairman of the Supreme National Security Council Ali Shamkhani, chairman of the Expediency Discernment Council, Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, and Majlis Speaker Ali Larijani. The Iranians and PIJ delegates discussed developments in the Gaza Strip and West Bank. The Iranians reiterated their country's commitment to continue its support for the Palestinians. Khamenei told Shallah that in the current situation defending Palestine was a symbol of defending Islam (IRNA, May 1 and 2, 2016).



Ramadan Shallah at a meeting with Ali Khamenei (Website of the supreme leader, May 1, 2016).

### Iranian Intervention in Yemen

■ The Iranian embassy in Kuwait denied reports in the daily newspaper Al-Watan that the embassy was in contact with the Houthi Shi'ite delegation sent to Kuwait as part of negotiations between the groups fighting in Yemen. The embassy said in a statement that the claim made by the paper, that Iranian advisors were allegedly

helping the Houthi delegation conduct negotiations, was baseless (IRNA, May 2, 2016).