



Spotlight on Iran¹ (May 8 – May 22, 2016)

Editor: Dr. Raz Zimmt



Highlights of the week

- ✓ Senior Iranian officials reacted strongly to the rebel attack on Khan Tuman (south of Aleppo, Syria), during which the rebels took control of the village and caused heavy losses to Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) fighters and supporters of the Assad regime. The Iranian defense minister said "resistance" fighters would retake Khan Tuman.
- ✓ Senior Iranian officials reacted strongly to the death of senior Hezbollah operative Mustafa Badr al-Din, some of accusing Israel of responsibility for his death. On May 15, 2016, Qasem Soleimani, commander of the IRGC's Qods Force, paid a condolence call at the home of the Badr al-Din family in Beirut. While in Beirut Soleimani may also have consulted with the high ranking Hezbollah officials regarding the appointment of Badr al-Din's successor.
- ✓ General Ramazan Sharif, IRGC spokesman, said at a press conference that the IRGC was experiencing a growing wave of young volunteers who wanted to be deployed in the fighting in Syria and Iraq.
- ✓ An IRGC Basij militia fighter was killed by ISIS in Fallujah, Iraq.
- ✓ An international convention for solidarity with Al-Aqsa mosque was held in Tehran to mark Nakba Day.

General Information

- Speaking in Kerman Province in southeast Iran, President Hassan Rouhani praised the regional involvement of Qasem Soleimani, commander of the IRGC's Qods Force. He said that hallmarks of Soleimani's courage and fearlessness were

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

evident today throughout Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Palestine. He claimed that currently the IRGC had the burden not only of defending the security of Iran, but of responsibility for the security of other countries, which had asked Iran for its aid (ISNA, May 10, 2016).

■ Ahmad-Reza Pourdastan, commander of the Iranian army ground forces, said in an interview with the Iranian army's newsletter that a 40-kilometer (about 25 miles) red zone of deterrence had been designated. Forty kilometers, he said, was as close as Iran would permit terrorist groups operating in Iraq to approach the Iranian border. Crossing the 40-kilometer line would prompt a military response from Iran.

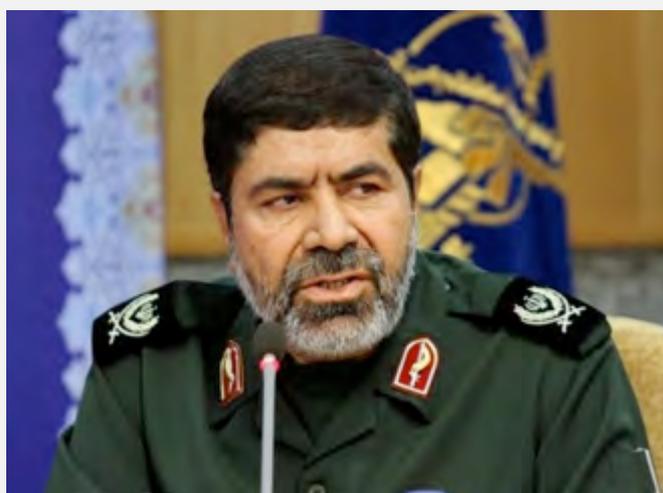
■ He said that during 2014 and 2015 ISIS, operating in Iraq's Anbar Province, had tried to come within 12 kilometers (about 7.5 miles) of Iran's western border. In response five Iranian army ground force brigades with helicopter air cover and intelligence support had been put on alert and were ready to initiate a military campaign in the event that ISIS came closer than 40 kilometers to the Iranian border (Mehr News Agency, May 11, 2016).



Ahmad-Reza Pourdastan (Seraj24.ir, May 11, 2016)

■ Morteza Saffari, commander of IRGC's Imam Hossein University for officer training, said that last year 100 of the university's commanders and instructors had been deployed on training and advisory missions to Iraq and Syria. He said some of them returned after two or three months, some had been wounded or killed and that others remained there according to need (Tasnim News, May 14, 2016).

- Ramazan Sharif, IRGC spokesman, said that IRGC was experiencing a growing wave of young volunteers from all over the country who asked to be deployed to fight in Syria and Iraq.
- Sharif held a press conference where he said that the progress of the Islamic nation had been halted during the past five years because of the actions of the Muslims' enemies and Arab rulers, but if the defeat of the Zionists at the hands of the fighters of Palestine and Lebanon continued, no trace of Israel would remain. The regional intervention of the United States and the West was intended, he claimed, to overthrow the Iranian regime, considered by the West to be the greatest threat to the Zionists' security. ISIS and Al-Qaeda, he claimed, were established by the West to fight against Iran (ISNA, May 18, 2016).



Ramazan Sharif (Sepah News, May 18, 2016)

- Ali-Akbar Velayati, international advisor to the supreme leader, meeting Iraqi with clerics and thinkers, said that if Syria disintegrated and the extremist Islamic (*takfiri*) organizations with ties to Israel, Saudi Arabia and the United States took over the country, it would influence both Lebanon and Iraq, and Iran would no longer be immune to their aggression.
- Velayati praised the role played by Hezbollah in Syria, saying that without its presence it would not be possible to establish an effective resistance there. Concerning the death of senior Hezbollah operative Mustafa Badr al-Din, he said his death would increase the motivation of those fighting the *takfiri* and Zionist organizations in Syria and the rest of the region (Mehr News Agency and IRNA, May 18, 2016)

Iranian Intervention in Syria and Lebanon

- An Iranian cleric was killed in Syria. The circumstances of his death were not made public (Qasemsoliemani.ir, May 17, 2016).
- Senior Iranian officials reacted strongly to the rebel attack on Khan Tuman (south of Aleppo, Syria), during which the rebels took control of the village and caused heavy losses to IRGC fighters and to supporters of the Assad regime. Mohsen Rezaei, former IRGC commander and secretary of the Iranian Expediency Council, said the *takfiri* organizations would pay a high price for the attack on Khan Tuman (Tasnim News, May 9, 2016). Ali Shamkhani, the secretary of the Supreme Council for National Security, said Iran and its allies Russia, Syria and Hezbollah would not leave the attack on Khan Tuman without a response. He said it showed that Iran's concerns about the ceasefire in Syria were completely justified and it only served as an opportunity for the governments supporting the terrorist groups to rehabilitate them (Asr-e Iran, May 9, 2016).
- Hossein Dehqan, Iranian minister of defense, speaking at a memorial service held for Mustafa Badr al-Din said that "resistance" fighters would retake Khan Tuman (Fars, May 14, 2016).
- Hassan Firouzabadi, chief of staff of the Iranian armed forces, said that the United States' continuing support for the terrorist groups in Syria would not lead to the country's surrender and that in the coming year as well the Americans would not achieve their objectives and Bashar Assad would remain in power. The United States, he claimed, wanted to prolong the war in Syria to influence the upcoming presidential elections (Fars, May 12, 2016).
- Mohsen Rezaei, secretary of the Iranian Expediency Council, strongly denied reports published in social media that the supreme leader had put him in charge of the military campaign to liberate the Syrian city of Aleppo. He said the rumors were untrue but that he was prepared to do everything in his power to help the military effort (Tasnim News, May 13, 2016).
- Mohammad Javad Zarif, the Iranian foreign minister, speaking at the talks held in Vienna this past week about the future of Syria, said they had to prevent the terrorist organizations from exploiting the ceasefire to recruit additional forces. He said that despite the efforts of the "terrorist groups and their regional and global supporters," there was no military solution for the Syrian crisis. The campaign against such groups

was vital, he said, and they could not be allowed to exploit the ceasefire to escalate their terrorist attacks on Syrian civilians (Fars, May 17, 2016).

- Senior Iranian officials reacted strongly to the death of senior Hezbollah operative Mustafa Badr al-Din, some of them accusing Israel of responsibility for his death.

- Mohammad Javad Zarif said Badr al-Din's death would strengthen the determination of the "resistance forces" in their struggle against "the Zionist regime and terrorism." In a letter of condolence he sent to Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah, he wrote that Badr al-Din had exemplified dedication to defending the values of Islam, the Lebanese people and the struggle against terrorism (Fars, May 13, 2016). Letters of condolence were also sent to Nasrallah by Ali Larijani (speaker of the Majlis), Mahmoud Alavi (minister of intelligence) and Hossein Dehqan (defense minister). Hossein Dehqan wrote that the blood of Badr al-Din and other shaheeds killed in the fight against the "Zionist regime" and ISIS would end regional terrorism (Tasnim News, May 14, 2016).

- Ahmad Vahidi, former Iranian minister of defense and current head of Iran's center for strategic defense studies, threatened to take vengeance on Israel for the death of Mustafa Badr al-Din, claiming the response against the "Zionist regime" would come at the "right time." He praised Badr al-Din, saying he had devoted his life to the defense of the Islamic nation and the Lebanese people (Mehr News Agency, May 13, 2016).

- On May 15, 2016, Qasem Soleimani, commander of the IRGC's Qods Force, paid a condolence call to the Badr al-Din family in Beirut. On May 16, 2016, the Lebanese newspaper Al-Akhbar reported that he had praised Badr al-Din saying "we have lost a commander and dear brother." Soleimani called on Badr al-Din's son to continue in the footsteps of his father. It is also possible that during his visit to Beirut Soleimani met with Hezbollah leaders to discuss Badr al-Din's successor as commander of the Hezbollah forces fighting alongside the forces of the Syrian regime.



Qasem Soleimani (at right, head down, wearing glasses) at an operational center, apparently in the region of Aleppo, Syria (IRGC-affiliated Telegram channel, May 17, 2016; date of original photo unknown).

- On May 14-15, 2016, Hossein-Amir Abdollahian, deputy foreign minister for Arab-African affairs, paid a visit to Lebanon where he met with Hassan Nasrallah and paid a condolence call to the family of Badr al-Din in Beirut.



Hossein Amir Abdollahian (third from left) pays a condolence call to the family of Badr al-Din (Nasim Online, May 14, 2016).

- While in Lebanon Abdollahian said Iran was serious about its support for the "resistance forces" in their struggle against *takfiri* terrorism. He said the terrorist groups presented security threats to the resistance fighters and that their actions serve the "Zionist regime" and its objectives. *Takfiri* terrorism and the Israeli occupation were two sides of the same coin, he claimed (Fars, May 15, 2016).

Iranian Intervention in Iraq

- An IRGC Basij military fighter was killed by ISIS in Fallujah, Iraq.



Alireza Baba'i, killed in Iraq (Qasemsoleimani.ir, May 16, 2016)

- Mohammad Saleh Jokar, a member of the Iranian Majlis committee for national security and foreign policy, claimed Iraq should establish its own revolutionary guards corps. He said the IRGC was a good model for other regional countries and that Iran was prepared to advise any country wanting to establish its own revolutionary guards corps. Today, he said, the Basij militia serve as a successful model in Iraq, Syria and Yemen. Jokar made the remark in response to Seyyed Ali Yaseri, the commander of a Shi'ite militia in Iraq, who recently suggested establishing a revolutionary guards corps in Iraq (YCR.ir, May 16, 2016).
- Last week Mahmoud Alavi, Iranian minister of intelligence, paid a visit to Iraq where he met with senior Iraqi officials, including Haydar al-Abadi, the Iraqi prime minister; Fouad Massoum, the Iraqi president; Ibrahim al-Jaafari, the defense minister; Salim al-Jabouri, the speaker of the Iraqi parliament; and Sayid Amar al-Hakim, head of the Iraqi supreme Islamic council. They discussed regional and Iraqi developments and the ongoing campaign against ISIS. Al-Hakim noted the importance of sharing security information to continue the struggle against terrorism, and expressed his great regard for the support Iran gave Iraq in its war against ISIS (IRNA, May 14 Press TV, May 16, 2016).

Iranian Intervention in the Palestinian Arena

- On May 14-15 an international conference was held in Tehran whose theme was "We are all Al-Aqsa [mosque]." It was held for Nakba Day, marked every year on Israel's Independence Day, and was attended by 30 representatives from the Arab-Muslim world. It opened with a video-taped message from Hassan Nasrallah, the secretary general of Hezbollah.
- Ayatollah Sadegh Amoli Larijani, head of Iran's Judiciary, who was the main speaker, said that the issue of Palestine was the most important issue for the Muslim world and that it demanded the involvement of every Muslim. He said the situation in Palestine exposed the lies of the West regarding human rights, and that the "crimes" of Israel against the Palestinians demanded the attention of Western countries that professed to defend human rights throughout the world. The question of Palestine was, he said, also a yardstick by which it was possible to measure the treason of the heads of the Islamic regimes in the struggle for the sake of the Palestinians against the Zionists. He accused several Arab-Muslim governments which were supported by "imperialism" of turning Iran (instead of Palestine) into the most important regional issue (Fars, May 15, 2016).



The Al-Aqsa mosque conference in Tehran (ILNA, May 15, 2016).