



Spotlight on Iran¹ (May 22 – June 5, 2016)

Editor: Dr. Raz Zimmt



Main Points

- ✓ Qasem Soleimani, commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps' (IRGC) Qods Force, speaking at a conference of Iranian clerics in Qom held on May 23, 2016, said that without Iran's support for the Syrian regime, ISIS would today control all of Syria.
- ✓ Hossein-Amir Abdollahian, deputy foreign minister for Arab-African affairs, said Iran was determined to continue its "advisory" mission for the regional struggle against terrorism and regarded its support as vital for regional security and political stability.
- ✓ At least four more IRGC fighters were killed in Syria in the past two weeks.
- ✓ Iran welcomed the campaign to liberate Fallujah in Iraq, and stressed the participation of Qasem Soleimani and the Iraqi Shi'ite militias in the fighting. While the Shi'ite militias do in fact participate directly in the campaign, there is a discrepancy between the actual involvement of Iran and its proxies in the fighting, and the way that involvement is portrayed by the Iranian media. Meanwhile, senior Iranian officials rejected the criticism voiced by the Saudi Arabian foreign minister regarding Iranian meddling in Iraq. They claimed Iran's involvement in Iraq was at the Iraqi government's request.
- ✓ A spokesman for the Palestinian Islamic Jihad denied a report in the Saudi Arabian-financed London-based newspaper Al-Sharq al-Awsat that following a recent visit by a Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) delegation to Tehran, Iran promised to transfer the organization \$70 million from the IRGC's annual budget.

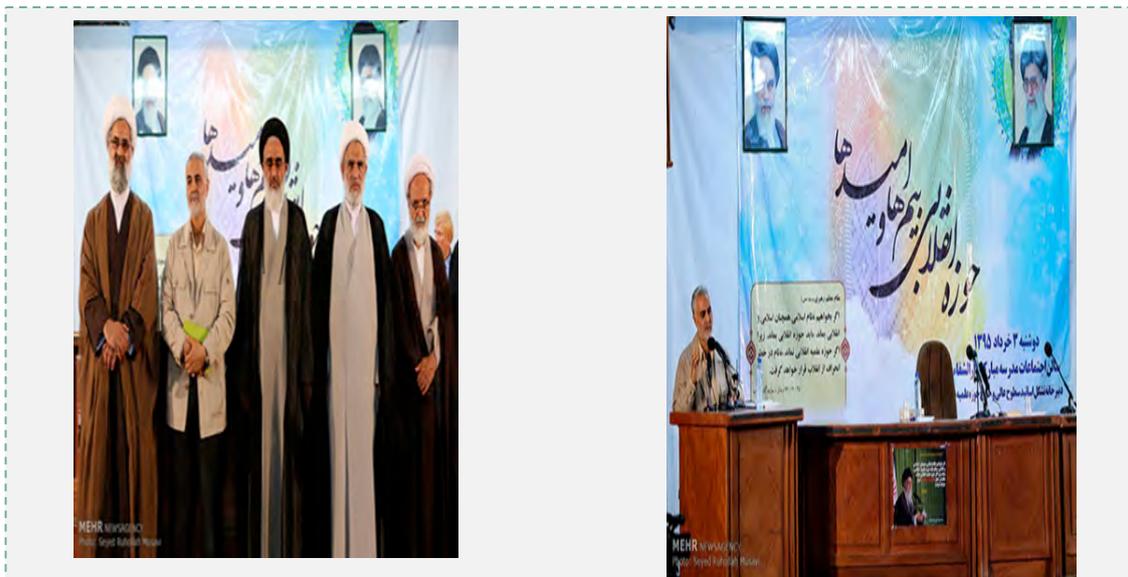
General Information

- Qasem Soleimani, commander of the IRGC's Qods Force, speaking at a conference of Iranian clerics in Qom held on May 23, 2016, said that without Iran's

¹Spotlight 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.

support for the Syrian regime, ISIS would today control all of Syria. As to the presence of the United States in the Middle East, he said that the Americans were of the opinion that the Islamic Revolution was the reason for the collapse of America's regional power, and therefore the United States sought to defeat Iran and undermine the Iranian revolution.

■ He claimed that thanks to Iran the United States had been forced to abandon its regional objectives and that despite all the pressure exerted on them to the contrary, the Sunnis, Shi'ites and Kurds in Iraq were proud to consider themselves as having friendly relations with Iran. Without a doubt, he said, Iran was the victor in every Middle Eastern arena, even in those where its role was marginal (Tasnim News, May 23, 2016).



Soleimani at the conference in Qom (Mehr News Agency, May 23, 2016).

■ On May 27, 2016, Soleimani briefed a meeting of the Velayat faction of the Iranian parliament (Majlis). He reiterated his previous statements that Iran's firm stand against the *takfiri* organizations in Syria had kept ISIS from taking over the country, which would have also influenced the Christians, Sunnis and Shi'ites in Lebanon. He said that Iran had succeeded where a coalition of dozens of countries had failed: it had halted the advance of ISIS in Syria.

■ Regarding developments in Iraq, Soleimani said that Iran played an important role in the establishment of the popular militias and in the fight against ISIS. Iran, he said, would only act against the terrorist groups operating in Iraq if the senior Iraqi Shi'ite clerics deemed it necessary.

- Regarding the situation in Lebanon, Soleimani said Hezbollah's enemies sought to destroy it, but it remained the most influential organization in the internal Lebanese arena and in the region.
- Soleimani also strongly attacked the continuing Saudi Arabian attacks on Yemen and compared them to Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait (Fars, May 28, 2016).



Soleimani (front row center, gray hair) at the Velayat faction conference (IRGC-affiliated Telegram channel, May 27, 2016).

- Ahmad-Reza Pourdastan, commander of the Iranian army ground forces, said that the ground forces were not limited to the borders of Iran in carrying out their missions. In recent weeks, he said, special "advisory" army forces had fought in Syria alongside the IRGC's Qods Force. He added that the forces were waiting for the order from the supreme leader to liberate Jerusalem. "ISIS and Al-Nusra Front are minor enemies," he said, "we consider the United States and Israel as our main enemies and we are prepared to fight the big Satan" [i.e., the United States] (Fars, May 23, 2016).
- Iraj Masjedi, senior Qods Force advisor, speaking at a memorial service held in Tehran for Iranians martyrs, said that ISIS and other Sunni Islamic terrorist organizations wanted to occupy Iraq and Syria to be able to reach Iran, the Shi'ite center of the world. Their objective, he added, was to occupy Iran and establish a unified Islamic Caliphate. He said the terrorist groups acting against the Shi'ites did not recoil from or hesitate to use any method to achieve their ends, including the murder of Shi'ite children, who would grow up to fight them. He said deploying forces to fight the radical Islamic organizations in Syria and Iraq was necessary for the defense of Iran's borders (Fars, May 24, 2016).

■ Hossein-Amir Abdollahian, deputy foreign minister for Arab-African affairs, said Iran was determined to continue providing its "advisory" assistance for the regional struggle against terrorism and regarded its support as vital for regional security and political stability. Interviewed by the IRNA news agency on May 30, 2016, he said that without Iran's support for the military and popular forces in Iraq and Syria in their struggle against terrorism, no place in the sensitive region of west Asia would be secure today.

■ Hossein Dehghan, Iranian minister of defense, told a meeting in Tehran that Iran was supporting Iraq and Syria to the best of its ability because it was committed to defending "any part of the Muslim community that was under attack." Iran, he said, sent military advisors to Syria and Iraq to defend Muslim countries because it considered Islam and Islamic states to be important .



Hossein Dehghan, Iranian minister of defense (Tasnim News, May 30, 2016).

Iranian Intervention in Syria and Lebanon

- At least four more IRGC fighters were killed in Syria in the past two weeks.
- Ali-Akbar Velayati, international advisor to the supreme leader, said Iranian-Russian collaboration in Syria was important because Iran opposed the plans of the United States and its coalition allies to oust Bashar Assad and/or divide Syria, which did not serve the interests of either the Syrians or the neighboring states. Meeting with the heads of the Russian center for strategic studies, Velayati reiterated Iran's position, which was that Bashar Assad was a sine qua non for Iran and he could not be replaced for the sake of solving regional problems (YJC.ir, May 23, 2016).

■ Ahmad-Reza Pourdastan, commander of the Iranian army ground forces, said he was of the opinion that in the near future the Syrian flag would fly over all of Syria. At a press conference held to mark the anniversary of the liberation of the city of Khoramshahr from Iraq in 1981, he said that the assistance the Iranian armed forces gave the Syrian army had made it possible for them to realize their objectives, and that developments in the fighting indicated that the Syrian army would soon be victorious (Mehr News Agency, May 25, 2016).



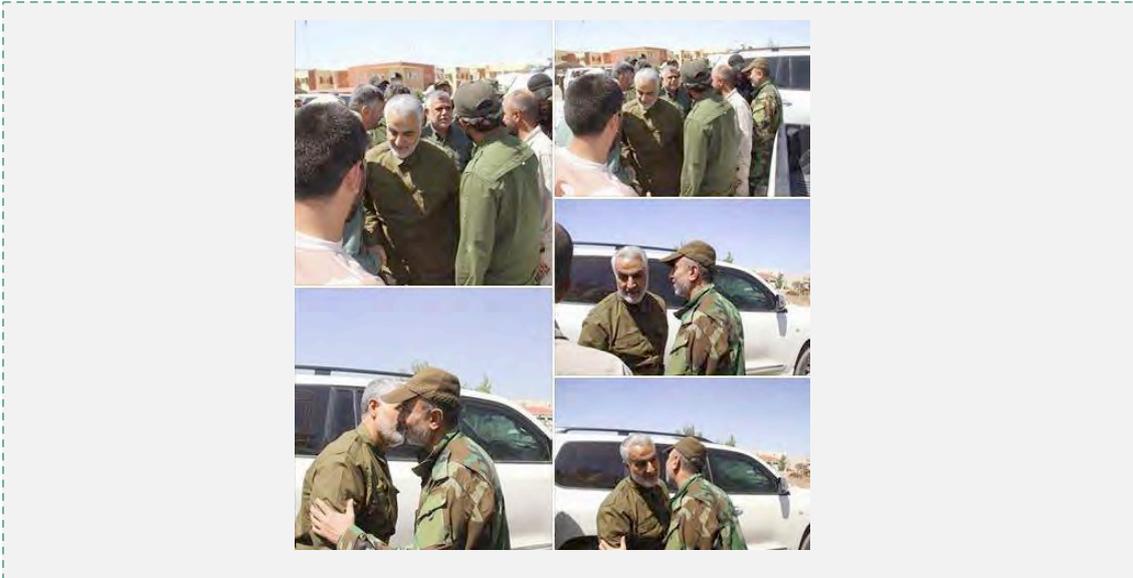
Ahmad-Reza Pourdastan (Mehr News Agency, May 25, 2016).

Iranian Intervention in Iraq

■ With the onset of the Iraqi army's campaign to liberate Fallujah, Iran rushed to announce its support. At his weekly press conference, Hossein Jaber Ansari, spokesman for Iran's foreign ministry, said Iran supported actions in Syria and Iraq to liberate the territories occupied by the Islamic "terrorist organizations." Asked about Iranian support for the campaign to liberate Fallujah, Ansari claimed that every action undertaken by Iran was carried out at the request of Iraqi and Syrian governments (Fars, May 23, 2016).

■ Reports issued by the Iranian media and Shi'ite militia sources backed by Iran gave prominence to Iran and its proxies in the campaign to liberate Fallujah. The Iranian media recently reported that Qasem Soleimani, commander of the IRGC's Qods Force, had arrived in the battle zone to help conduct the campaign for its liberation. On May 25, 2016, the Iranian news agency Mehr reported that Soleimani had visited the region of the town of al-Karameh, which lies to the northwest of Fallujah and which was occupied by the Iraqi army. According to the Mehr report,

"Soleimani went to Fallujah to command the campaign for its liberation," and that while there he met with the commanders of the Shi'ite militias to discuss strategy with them.



Qasem Soleimani in the region around Fallujah (Twitter, May 25, 2016).

- One of the recent pictures shows Soleimani in the Fallujah area accompanied by Mohammad Pakpour, commander of the IRGC's ground forces.



Soleimani (left) and Pakpour (arrow) in the Fallujah area (Jahan News, June 1, 2016).

- To reinforce Iranian propaganda, sources affiliated with the IRGC posted pictures to the social networks of Qasem Soleimani in the Fallujah region. One of the pictures shows him in the company of senior Iraqi Shi'ite militia commanders. Several Iranian media outlets claimed he was photographed in the operations room conducting the campaign to liberate Fallujah. However, the fact that all the commanders shown in

the pictures belonged to Shi'ite militias indicates that it was not the main operations room for the entire campaign, but rather only for missions carried out by the Shi'ite militias.

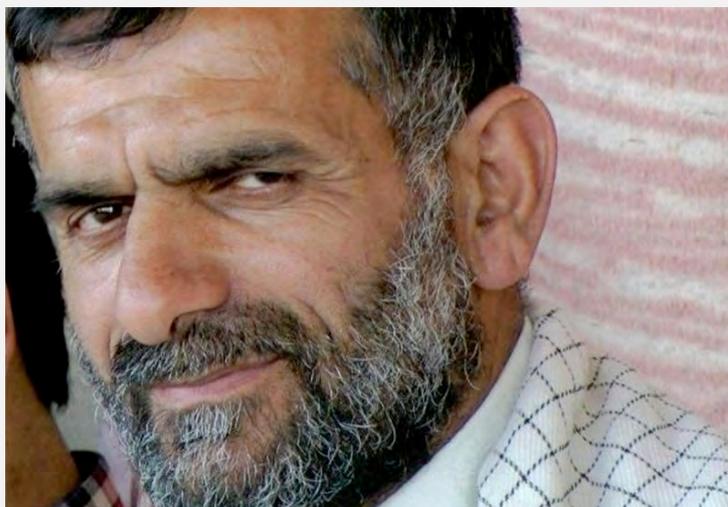


Qasem Soleimani in Fallujah (Qassemsoleimani.ir, May 23-24, 2016).

- The Iraqi Shi'ite militias operated by Iran do in fact participate actively in the campaign in Fallujah. However, there is a discrepancy in media reports between the degree of the participation of Iran (and its proxies) in the fighting and the way that participation is represented by Iranian officials and media. The Iraqi army, especially its elite counterterrorism unit, apparently bears the main brunt of the fighting, as it did in the liberation of Ramadi. This time as well the Shi'ite militias apparently have a marginal role and are limited to enforcing the siege around the city.²
- Hossein Jaber Ansari, a spokesman for the Iranian foreign ministry, responded to the criticism of Iran's continuing intervention in Iraq voiced by Adel Jubeir, the Saudi Arabian foreign minister, on Russian TV. Ansari said that the Iranian military advisors commanded by Qasem Soleimani in Iraq were there at the request of the Iraqi government to support the struggle against terrorists (Tasnim News, May 27, 2016).
- Ali-Akbar Velayati, international advisor to the supreme leader, also responded harshly to the criticism of the Saudi Arabian foreign minister. He accused the Saudis of destabilizing the region by supporting the *takfiri* organizations in Iraq (ISNA, May 30, 2016).

² For further information, see the May 30, 2016 bulletin "Iranian Participation in the Liberation of Fallujah," <http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/en/article/21012>.

■ Qorban Najjafi, a Basij fighter from Golestan Province, who was wounded by ISIS fire in Iraq last month, died on May 24, 2016, in a hospital in Tehran (Tasnim News, May 25, 2016).



Qorban Najjafi (Tasnim News, May 25, 2016).

Iranian Intervention in the Palestinian Arena

■ On May 25, 2016, the Saudi-financed London-based newspaper Al-Sharq al-Awsat reported that according to Palestinian sources, Iran had promised to transfer \$70 million from the annual IRGC budget to the Palestinian Islamic Jihad. The decision to renew Iranian financial aid to the organization, after a hiatus of two years, was made, according to the report, after a PIJ visit to Tehran at the end of April 2016. The money is supposed to be transferred to the Jerusalem Battalions, the PIJ's military-terrorist wing. Khaled Mansour, considered as having close relations with the IRGC, was appointed as commander of the Jerusalem Battalions in the Gaza Strip.

■ PIJ spokesman Da'ud Shihab denied the report, but said that Iran's support for the organization was not grounds for accusations. According to a statement posted to websites affiliated with the PIJ on May 26, 2016, the author of the report was trying to represent the PIJ as taking sides in regional conflicts. That, according to the statement, was contradictory to PIJ policy, which always dealt exclusively with Palestine. In addition, the statement continued, the timing of the report, which was issued during the visit of a PIJ delegation to Egypt, was intended to block PIJ efforts to convince Egypt to ease the suffering of the Palestinian people in the Gaza Strip.