



## Spotlight on Iran<sup>1</sup>

(July 4-17, 2016)

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### Main Points

- ✓ Mohammad Bagheri, newly appointed commander in chief of the Iranian armed forces, held a press conference where he said that improving Iran's military capabilities and supporting "the oppressed peoples of the region" were at the top of the Iranian military's priority list.
- ✓ A new group of snipers from the Afghan Fatemiyoun Brigade, operating under the aegis of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), was deployed to the front in Syria after receiving advanced training from Hezbollah.
- ✓ Abbas Araghchi, deputy Iranian foreign minister, said Iran would not agree to sacrifice Hezbollah in the negotiations conducted with the Financial Action Task Force (FATF), an inter-governmental body combatting money laundering and terrorist financing.
- ✓ Seyyed Ammar al-Hakim, chairman of the Iraqi Supreme Islamic Council, paid a visit to Tehran and met with senior Iranian officials. The officials stressed Iran's commitment to continued support of Iraq in its battle against ISIS.
- ✓ Ayyub Faleh Hassan al-Rubaie (Abu-Azrael), a prominent Iraqi Shi'ite militia commander, visited Iran during the second week of July 2016. Interviewed by the Iranian media, he noted the collaboration between the IRGC and the Shi'ite militias. Seyyed Hamed al-Jazayeri, another senior Iraqi Shi'ite militia commander interviewed by the Iranian media, stressed the importance of the presence of Qasem Soleimani, commander of the IRGC's Qods Force, on the fighting front in Iraq.
- ✓ The senior advisor of the IRGC denounced Hamas' willingness to negotiate with Israel. In the wake of his remarks, which were criticized by Hamas, the IRGC issued a clarification, saying his remarks reflected only his personal opinion, and that Hamas was still in the forefront of the resistance to Zionism in Palestine.

### General Information

- Ali Shamkhani, the secretary of the Supreme Council for National Security, briefing the Majlis (Iranian parliament) on July 5, 2016, said Iran's political and military involvement had reduced to a minimum the destabilizing influence and activities of

<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.

various regional countries and groups. He briefed a closed Majlis session on the challenges facing Iran and on recent regional and international developments. He said the *takfiri* terrorist organizations in Iraq were on the brink of collapse and that the operation in Fallujah had transferred the military initiative to the Iraqi government. As to developments in Syria, Shamkhani said that the military-political coalition of Iran, Russia and Syria was currently the most important influence on the balance of power (ISNA, July 5, 2016).

■ Mohammad Bagheri, the newly-appointed commander in chief of the Iranian armed forces, told a press conference that improving Iran's military capabilities and defending "the oppressed peoples of the region" against aggression and terrorist attacks were the Iranian military's top priority. He said currently regional conditions were "special," and that despite Iran's unprecedented military might, various enemies posed threats to its security.



Mohammad Bagheri (ISNA, July 4, 2016).

## Iranian Intervention in Syria and Lebanon

■ At least three more IRGC fighters were killed in the fighting in Syria during the past two weeks, one of them a lieutenant colonel. More than ten Afghan and Pakistani fighters operating under IRGC in Syria were also killed.

■ Hossein Almasi, commander of the IRGC's 23<sup>rd</sup> (Hazrat-e Khatam) battalion in Tehran, said the war in Syria was more difficult than the Iran-Iraq War because the *takfiri* organizations were inspired by ideology and enjoyed the support of the United States, Saudi Arabia and the Arab countries. He called for volunteers for the fighting in Syria or Iraq to enlist at Basij centers and receive the necessary training before being

deployed on "advisory missions." He added that the rebels were very familiar with the battlefields in Syria and that gave them an advantage, but in locations where the fighters supporting the Syrian regime were familiar with the terrain the rebels were incapable of repelling them. He said that the presence of many villages throughout Syria made the fighting very difficult (Shaheed News, date, 2016).

■ Sheikh Mokhtar, commander of the Iraqi Shi'ite al-Nujaba militia in Aleppo, said the militia was prepared to fight in any location Iran thought necessary because it was committed to Iran's supreme leader, Ali Khamenei (Fars, July 9, 2016).



**Sheikh Mokhtar, commander of the Iraqi Shi'ite al-Nujaba militia (Fars, July 9, 2016).**

■ On July 9, 2016, Tasnim News reported that a new group of snipers from the Afghan Fatemiyoun Brigade, operating under the aegis of the IRGC, had recently been deployed to the front in Syria, after having been trained by Hezbollah. Their training included firing various arms, sniping with guns provided with cameras, using weapons mounted with night-vision cameras, and various types of camouflage and concealment tactics.



**An Afghan Fatemiyoun Brigade sniper (Tasnim News, July 9, 2016).**

■ Iranian President Hassan Rouhani paid a condolence call to the family of Hamid Reza Asadollahi, an IRGC fighter killed in Syria in December 2015. He told them that in some respects the sacrifice of Iranian martyrs in Syria was more difficult than in the Iran-Iraq War. The war with Iran, he said, was fought to defend the homeland and country, while the war in Syria was being fought in a foreign country to defend Muslims and Shi'ite shins. He said that the Iranian fighters in Syria were also defending Iran. He added that the terrorists' barbaric acts proved they were worse than former Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein (Website of Hassan Rouhani, July 13, 2016).



**President Rouhani at the home of the family of Hamid Reza Asadollahi  
(Website of Hassan Rouhani, July 13, 2016).**

■ On the occasion of the first anniversary of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), Abbas Araghchi, deputy Iranian foreign minister, told Iranian TV that Iran would not agree to sacrifice Hezbollah in the negotiations with the Financial Action Task Force (FATF). He said Iran regarded its national security and interests as a "red line," and that its priority was to provide support for the "resistance axis," and that could not be changed. He said there were other countries that did not agree with FATF about the definition of "terrorism" (Fars, July 12, 2016).

■ Araghchi's remarks reinforce our assessment that no significant change can be expected in the quality and quantity of Iran's support for Hezbollah, despite its effort to lift the international economic restrictions imposed on the country in recent years. Iran will be prepared to continue paying the diplomatic, media and even financial price in its relations with the United States and the West for continued fostering of Hezbollah as a military-political force and Iranian proxy.

### Iranian Intervention in Iraq

■ Iraj Masjedi, senior advisor to the commander of the IRGC's Qods Force, said in an interview that in the wake of the liberation of Fallujah, a comprehensive plan was necessary that would include the Iraqi army, the Shi'ite militias, the Kurds and "advisory help" from Iran for liberating Nineveh Province in northwestern Iraq. He said ISIS had a large force in Mosul and that the city's liberation was important to "closing the ISIS file" in Iraq (Yjc.ir, July 8, 2016).



Iraj Masjedi Yjc.ir, July 8, 2016).

■ Ali Shamkhani, the secretary of the Supreme Council for National Security, meeting in Tehran with Sayyid Ammar al-Hakim, chairman of the Iraqi Supreme Islamic Council, said Iran would continue providing "advice" to Iraq and Syria until the threat of terrorism had been eliminated. Shamkhani praised al-Hakim for the successful liberation of Fallujah, saying the collaboration of Iran, Russia, Syria and the "resistance front" would put an end to terrorism in Syria as well. Al-Hakim briefed Shamkhani on recent political and military developments in Iraq and thanked Iran for its support of Iraq in the battle against ISIS. While in Tehran, al-Hakim also met with Iranian President Rouhani and Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif.

■ Ayyub Hassan Faleh al-Rubaie (Abu-Azrael), a prominent Iraqi Shi'ite militia commander, visited Iran during the second week of July 2016. In an interview he expressed his great esteem for Iran, saying that when he visited Iran he did not feel like a foreigner. He said that for centuries British imperialism had tried to sow discord between the peoples of Iran and Iraq, but their efforts had failed and today Iran stood shoulder to shoulder with Iraq in the war on terrorism. He praised the joint struggle of the IRGC, the Iraqi militias and the Iranian and Afghan fighters against the takfiri organizations. He issued a warning to Saudi Arabia, saying that once the struggle against ISIS had been completed in Iraq and Syria, the fighters would also go to Yemen and liberate the holy places in Saudi Arabia from the Saudi rulers.



**Basij commander Mohammad Reza Naghdi (right) and Ayyub Hassan Faleh al-Rubaie (Abu Azrael), commander of the Iraqi Shi'ite militia (second from right) in Mashhad in Iran (Iranian Telegram Channel, July 8, 2016).**

■ Seyyed Hamed al-Jazayeri, commander of a brigade in the Iraqi Shi'ite militias, was interviewed by the Iranian Mizan website on July 12, 2016, and spoke about Iranian involvement in Iraq. He said Iran sent "advisors" to Syria and Iraq, but since the battle

zone was small, the Iranian forces could not be prevented from taking an active part in the fighting.

■ In response to a question about the presence of Qasem Soleimani, the commander of the IRGC's Qods Force, in Iraq, al-Jazayeri said he raised the fighters' morale. Soleimani's presence on the front, he said, was no less important than that of Iraqi Prime Minister Haidar al-Abadi, because he served as the main advisor and executor of battle strategy, and had the authority to deploy and replace forces. Al-Jazayeri said Soleimani had only a small number of body guards (no more than one or two) even when he was in dangerous battle zones. However, all the fighters on the ground defended him, and they were all prepared to sacrifice their lives for him.

### Iranian Intervention in the Palestinian Arena

■ Khosrow Arouj, senior advisor to the IRGC commander, interviewed by the Iranian news agency Mehr on July 9, 2016 on the occasion of Global Jerusalem Day, criticized the willingness of the Palestinian organizations, among them Hamas, to negotiate with Israel. He said Ayatollah Khomeini, the founder of the Islamic Revolution, had strongly stated that no one had the right to sit at a negotiating table with "the oppressor," that is, with Israel. Arouj also criticized the contacts Hamas and Fatah had with Turkey and Saudi Arabia, which, he claimed, collaborated with Israel. "We thought Hamas would be the standard bearer of the struggle against Israel until its destruction, but now we see they speak differently," he said. He also noted Iran's involvement in Syria and Iraq, saying Iranian fighters were not limited by geographical boundaries and could operate anywhere in the world where Muslims were oppressed, from Bosnia and Azerbaijan to Africa.



**Khosrow Arouj (Mehr, July 9, 2016).**

■ Following the statements made by Arouj, which were condemned by Hamas, the IRGC issued a clarification noting that Arouj did not represent official IRGC positions. Rather, the Palestinian struggle against "the occupying Zionist regime" proved that negotiations with Israel only intensified the oppression of the Palestinians and "resistance" was the only valid strategy against Israel. The IRGC praised Hamas' ongoing struggle against Israel, and Hamas, according to the clarification, was still in the front line of the resistance to Zionism in Palestine. The IRGC, it was noted, expressed their position only through official statements or by means of the IRGC commander, the supreme leader's representative in the IRGC, and the spokesmen of the organization, and any other statement expressed only private, unofficial opinions (Sepah News, July 11, 2016).