



Spotlight on Iran¹

July 31 – August 14, 2016

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Main Points

- ✓ At least six Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) fighters and one regular army officer were killed during the past two weeks battling Syrian rebels in the Aleppo region.
- ✓ Qasem Soleimani, commander of the IRGC's Qods Force, recently paid a visit to the family of the commander of the Afghan Fatemiyoun Brigade who was killed in Syria in February 2015. Soleimani praised the brigade, which so far has lost about 400 of its fighters in combat in Syria.
- ✓ A delegation of members of the Majlis (Iranian parliament) national security and foreign policy committee visited Lebanon and Syria. Meeting with senior Lebanese and Syrian officials they stressed Iran's continuing support for the "resistance front" in the fight against radical Sunni Islamic organizations and Israel.
- ✓ A spokesman for the Iraqi Shi'ite militias said that Qasem Soleimani, commander of the IRGC's Qods Force, was expected to participate in the campaign for the liberation of Mosul from ISIS, noting that his presence on the battlefield was vital. The London-based newspaper Al-Sharq al-Awsat reported that Soleimani had recently toured Nineveh Province in northern Iraq in preparation for the campaign.
- ✓ Iran strongly condemned the meeting held by Mahmoud Abbas and Maryam Rajavi, the leader of the Iranian opposition organization Mojahedin-e-Khalq. They met in Paris at the end of July 2016.
- ✓ The Iranian foreign ministry denied the claim of a spokesman for the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office, who said that Iran had sent arms to Yemen.
- ✓ Ahmad Vahidi, the former Iranian defense minister, who is wanted by Interpol for involvement in blowing up the Jewish community center (the AMIA building) in Argentina in 1994, was recently appointed head of Iran's Supreme National Defense University.

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.

General Information

- Hossein Sheikholeslam, advisor to the Iranian foreign minister interviewed by Tasnim News, said that Iranian-Syrian military cooperation had existed since 1982, and that in certain instances Syria supported Iran and in others Iran supported Syria. He stated that Iran operated a factory in Syria for the production of missiles that had been used by Hezbollah against Israel in the Second Lebanon War. He claimed that Iran's involvement in the current Syrian crisis only began after foreign terrorists had arrived to fight the Syrian regime.
- Hossein Sheikholeslam, formerly the Iranian ambassador to Damascus, said that one of the most significant events during his tenure as advisor to the speaker of the Majlis for international affairs was the convening of the international conference in support of the intifada in Palestine, at which the supreme leader had been present. The committee responsible for organizing the conference, he claimed, had five members. Its chairman was appointed by the Majlis speaker, two members were nominated at the Majlis open session and two others by the Majlis committee for national security and foreign policy. He stated that Iran was investing efforts to implement the supreme leader's instructions regarding the necessity of arming the West Bank (Tasnim, August 3, 2016).



Hossein Sheikholeslam (Tasnim, August 3, 2016).

- Iranian president Hassan Rouhani, meeting with clerics during a visit to the Azeri capital of Baku last week, said Iran regarded it as its duty to rescue the Islamic world from terrorism and that if a request were made, Iran would offer support to Muslims

anywhere they were affected by terrorism. He claimed Iran had been quick to support the Iraqis and had not allowed Baghdad and Irbil to fall (Tasnim, August 8, 2016).

■ Mohammad Hossein Bagheri, commander of the Iranian armed forces, recently appointed Ahmad Vahidi, former Iranian defense minister, as head of Iran's Supreme National Defense University. The university is located in Tehran and is a subsidiary of the Army of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Its objective is to increase the research ability of high-ranking commanders and managers in the armed forces and defense and security officials, and prepares skilled manpower for holding command and management positions at high levels in the Iranian armed forces² (Mehr, August 3, 2016). At the time of the AMIA attack in Argentina (1994) Ahmad Vahidi was commander of the IRGC's Qods Force. He is wanted by Interpol for his involvement in the attack, and the warrant for his arrest is still outstanding.

■ Mohammad Ali Jafari, commander of the IRGC, gave a speech in the northern Iranian city of Orumiyeh. He claimed Iran alone was capable of taking a stand to fight the *takfiri* organizations that enjoyed the support of the West. He said that for Iran's enemies the coordination between Iran and Syria, Iraq and Yemen was unbearable, and that as long as Muslims continued resisting their enemies could not achieve their goals (Tasnim, August 9, 2016).

■ Hossein Salami, deputy commander of the Revolutionary Guards, said at a conference in Kermanshah that the Iranians fighting in Syria and Iraq ("the defenders of the shrines") had taken up positions against the plots of their enemies and had turned the lands of Islam into a graveyard for the aspirations of "arrogance" [i.e., the West] (Fars, August 4, 2016).

² <http://www.iranwatch.org/iranian-entities/supreme-national-defense-university>



Hossein Salami (Fars, August 4, 2016).

Iranian Intervention in Syria and Lebanon

- At least six Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) fighters and one regular army officer were killed during the past two weeks in combat against Syrian rebels in the Aleppo region.



Mohamed Maradi, Iranian regular army officer, killed in Syria (Qassemsoleimani.ir, August 1, 2016).

- On August 2, 2016, the Tasnim news agency reported that Qasem Soleimani, commander of the IRGC's Qods Force, had recently paid a visit to the family of Ali Reza Tavasoli, the commander of the Afghan Fatemiyoun Brigade who was killed in Syria in February 2015. Soleimani praised Tavasoli and the activities of the Fatemiyoun Brigade in Syria, saying their fighting was particularly influential in the Syrian campaign and important in defending the Muslim world. "The Fatemiyoun

Brigade," he said, "is a blessing, not only for the Muslims here, but for the entire Muslim world." He added that the Fatemiyoun Brigade fighters had changed the way Iranians perceived Afghans living in Iran, and they were now respected. About 400 Afghan fighters have been killed in Syria since the beginning of the Syrian civil war.



Soleimani at the house of Fatemiyoun commander Tavasoli, killed in Syria (Tasnim, August 2, 2016).

■ At the beginning of August 2016 a delegation of members of the Majlis' national security and foreign policy committee visited Lebanon and Syria. They met with the Lebanese prime minister, foreign minister, speaker of the Lebanese parliament and Hassan Nasrallah, secretary general of Hezbollah. In Syria they met with President Assad, the Syrian prime minister, foreign minister and speaker of the Syrian parliament. In Beirut Alaeddin Boroujerdi, chairman of the Majlis committee, said that Lebanon's security, unity, independence and stability were very important for Iran. He told journalists that Iran was still prepared to provide Lebanon with military support to fight against "Zionists and *takfiri* terrorists" (IRNA, August 1 and 2, 2016). At a press conference in Damascus he said the visit to Syria was an expression of Iran's policy of supporting the "resistance axis" against the "Zionist entity." He stressed Iran's support of Syria, saying that the attacks in the countries that supported terrorism in Syria proved terrorism had no borders (SANA, August 4, 2016).



Alaeddin Boroujerdi meets with Hassan Nasrallah (Fars, August 2, 2016).

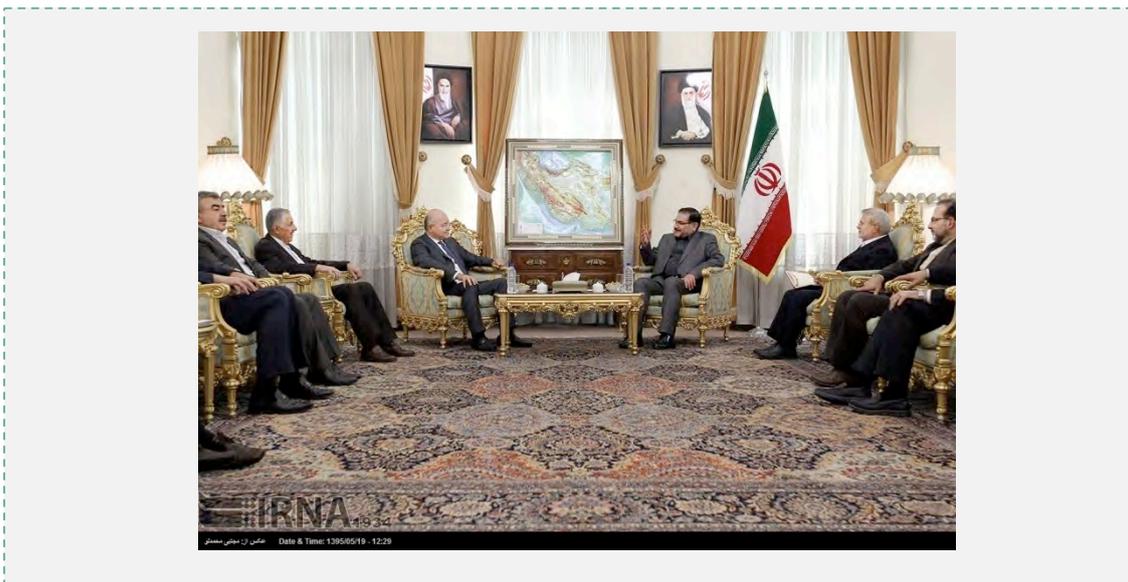
- Shahrouz Barzegar, a member of the Majlis national security and foreign policy committee delegation visiting Syria and Lebanon, said Iran was prepared to collaborate in rebuilding Syria. He said Syrian and Iranian officials had examined ways of repairing the damages caused by the Syrian civil war. He said Iran would not provide financial support but wanted to integrate the Iranian private sector in the construction projects (IRNA, August 8, 2016).

Iranian Intervention in Iraq

- Ahmad al-Assadi, spokesman for the Iraqi Shi'ite militias, said Qasem Soleimani, commander of the IRGC's Qods Force, was expected to participate with the Iraqi militias in the campaign to liberate Mosul from ISIS and that his presence on the battlefield was vital. He said every region where Soleimani had been present was rapidly liberated and that ISIS suffered heavy losses. He claimed Soleimani's participation in the war on ISIS expressed Iran's overall support. He added that Soleimani was the military advisor of all the Iraqi forces fighting ISIS, among them the popular militias, the army, counterterrorism headquarters and the federal police. Soleimani's participation in the campaign, he said, could remove all the obstacles on the road to victory. As to the sensitivity of the inhabitants of Mosul to the presence of an Iranian advisor in the liberation of the city, al-Assadi said a distinction had to be made between the desire of most of the civilians who were held hostage by ISIS and the desire of those who wanted to keep the campaign from succeeding (ISNA, August 1, 2016).

■ On August 3, 2016, the London-based, Saudi Arabian funded newspaper Al-Sharq al-Awsat quoted an Iraqi parliament member as saying that Qasem Soleimani, commander of the IRGC's Qods Force, had recently toured Nineveh Province in northern Iraq in preparation for the campaign to liberate Mosul from ISIS. According to the report, Soleimani had crossed the border between Iran and Iraqi Kurdistan and reached Nineveh Province by passing through Kirkuk. His passage, according to the report, had been coordinated with the Iraqi security authorities and did not require a passport.

■ A delegation of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) from northern Iraq visited Tehran last week. Ali Shamkhani, the secretary of the Supreme Council for National Security, met with the members of the delegation. He told them Iraq's interests and regional standing required unity, and that only a strong, united Iraq could defeat the *takfiri* terrorist groups operating in the country. Regarding the continuing cooperation between Iran and the Kurdish groups in Iraq, he said the abiding friendship between Iran and the Kurds in Iraq was the foundation for their cooperation and long-time common struggle. He added that Iran was prepared to broaden its economic and political collaboration with the Kurdish Autonomous Region in northern Iraq within the framework of the central Iraqi regime (Tasnim, August 9, 2016).



Ali Shamkhani and the PUK delegation meet in northern Iraq (IRNA, August 9, 2016).

Iranian Intervention in the Palestinian Arena

■ Iran strongly condemned the meeting held by Mahmoud Abbas and Maryam Rajavi, the leader of the Mojahedin-e Khalq Iranian opposition organization, in Paris on July 30, 2016. Hossein Sheikholeslam, advisor to the Iranian foreign minister, said

Mahmoud Abbas' conduct showed he was a puppet of the Americans. He added that documents found in the American embassy in Tehran clearly indicated Abbas was a CIA agent. He said it was not surprising that the Palestinian faction pressured by the United States to surrender to Israel had met with [Iranian] terrorists. According to Hossein Sheikholeslam, in view of Abbas' weak, disturbed personality, Iran did not have to relate seriously to the meeting (Asr-e Iran, July 31, 2016).



Mahmoud Abbas meets with Maryam Rajavi (Asr-e Iran, July 31, 2016).

■ Hossein-Amir Abdollahian, advisor to the Majlis speaker for international affairs and a former deputy foreign minister, said that without a doubt the Palestinians were displeased that Mahmoud Abbas supported terrorists instead of fighting against them. Abbas' problem, he said, was that he was not focused on restoring the Palestinians' rights. Supporting terrorists instead of fighting them would not lead to the liberation of Jerusalem and weakening of the "Zionist regime," making the meeting a source of regret for the Palestinians (Mehr, August 2, 2016). On August 7, 2016, Hossein Amir Abdollahian met in Tehran with Sallah al-Zawawi, the Palestinian ambassador, to discuss regional developments and ways of "strengthening the resistance axis" (Tasnim, August 7, 2016).



Abdollahian meets in Tehran with al-Zawawi (NASNIM, AUGUST 7 2016).

Iranian Intervention in the Gulf States

■ Bahram Qasemi, spokesman for the Iranian foreign ministry, rejected the claims of a senior British official who said Iran had sent arms to Yemen. Edwin Samuel, a spokesman for the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office for Middle Eastern and African affairs, recently accused Iran of sending arms to Yemen and meddling in the country's internal affairs. The accusation was made in an interview with a Saudi Arabian newspaper. Qasemi claimed the accusation was a bald-faced lie and called it "clear meddling in the internal affairs of regional [i.e., Middle Eastern] countries and a continuation of divisive British policy." He added that Iranian policies were based on regional stabilization and security, but unfortunately the military presence of foreign countries contributed to regional instability, extremism and the spread of terrorism (Fars, August 3, 2016).