



Spotlight on Iran¹

August 14-28, 2016
Editor: Dr. Raz Zimmt



Main Points

- ✓ Iran allowed the Russian air force to use its base at Hamedan (western Iran) for air strikes in Syria. The Iranian defense minister said Iran would allow Russian planes to use the airfield as long as necessary, but had reservations about the publication of Russian planes' deployment by the Russian ministry of defense. Iranian foreign ministry's spokesman said that the Russian presence in Hamedan was temporary and had ended for the time being. The chairman of the Majlis (Iranian parliament) committee for national security and foreign policy said the Russian planes were stationed in Hamedan within the Iranian-Russian cooperation drawn up by the joint operations room which has been operating during the past year in Damascus and Baghdad.
- ✓ Ali-Akbar Velayati, international advisor to the Iranian supreme leader, claimed that ousting Syrian President Bashar Assad was no longer on the Western agenda. He claimed that increased Iranian, Russian and Turkish cooperation would strengthen the Syrian government in its fight against terrorism.
- ✓ A high ranking commander in the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) claimed Iran had established a "Shi'ite liberation army" operating in Syria, Iraq and Yemen under the command of Qasem Soleimani, the commander of the IRGC's Qods Force. He said the objective of the "liberation army" was to ensure that Israel would not exist within 23 years. .
- ✓ The secretary of Iraq's supreme national security council, the speaker of the Iraqi parliament and the minister of the interior of Iraqi Kurdistan paid a visit to Tehran. Senior Iranian officials told them Iran was committed to supporting Iraq, stressing that its territorial integrity was important to Iran. The office of Iraqi Kurdistan's President Masoud Barzani announced that he had accepted Tehran's invitation to visit Iran and planned a visit in the near future.
- ✓ Osama Hamdan, responsible for Hamas' international relations, claimed the relations between Iran and Hamas had improved. He denied a report in a Saudi Arabian-sponsored newspaper that Tehran had conditioned Iran's continued financial support of Hamas on a pledge of loyalty to Iran.

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 Amir-Abdollahian, parliamentary director general for international affairs, told the visiting Norwegian foreign minister that Iran would continue to "advise" Iraq and Syria in their fight against terrorism. He said President Assad was prepared to negotiate with the opposition but that he could not be expected to turn the reins of government over to his opponents and remain apathetic to the violation of the security and stability of his country and to the ongoing terrorist attacks carried out by foreign elements. Hossein Amir-Abdollahian also noted developments in Bahrain and strongly criticized the decision of the Bahraini authorities to revoke the citizenship of senior Shi'ite cleric Sheikh Issa Qassem (Fars, August 18, 2016).

Iranian Intervention in Syria and Lebanon

■ On August 16, 2016, the Russian ministry of defense confirmed that Russia had stationed bombers at the Iranian air force base in Hamedan (western Iran) and had begun using them in air strikes in Syria. Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoygu told the Russian media that on August 16, 2016, the first Russian planes had taken off from the airfield in Hamedan to attack terrorist targets in Syria. He said Tu-22M3 strategic bombers and Su-34 strike fighter jets had attacked ISIS and Jabhat Fateh al-Sham targets in Aleppo, Deir al-Zor and Idlib Governates, destroying headquarters and training camps, and killing many terrorists (Sputnik, August 16, 2016).



Russian bombers deployed in Iran (Fars, August 16, 2016).

■ According to Russian, Iranian and Arab reports, the planes were too large to be accommodated by the Russian air base in Syria and the objective of stationing them

in western Iran was to shorten flights to Syrian targets. There was no report of the number of Russian planes at Hamedan. Ali Shamkhani, the secretary of the Supreme Council for National Security, confirmed that permission had been given for Russian bombers to use the base at Hamedan. In answer to questions from Iranian journalists/, Shamkhani said Tehran-Moscow cooperation in fighting terrorism in Syria was strategic and the two countries shared their capabilities and facilities (Fars, August 16, 2016). Hossein Dehqan, the Iranian defense minister, told in a televised interview that Iran would permit Russian planes to use the airfield in Hamedan as long as necessary. However, he expressed reservations regarding an announcement made by the Russian ministry of defense confirming the deployment of Russian planes to Hamedan (Fars, August 20, 2016). On August 22, 2016, Bahram Ghasemi, Iran's foreign ministry's spokesman, said the presence of the Russian planes in Hamedan had been temporary and that they were no longer there (Tasnim, August 22, 2016).

■ Alaeddin Boroujerdi, chairman of the Majlis committee for national security and foreign policy, told a press conference that the presence of the Russian planes at Hamedan was within the Iranian-Russian cooperation drawn up by the joint operations room. The room, he said, had operated during the past year in Damascus and Baghdad and had been set up by Iran, Russia, Syria and Iraq to fight terrorism (Tasnim, August 24, 2016).



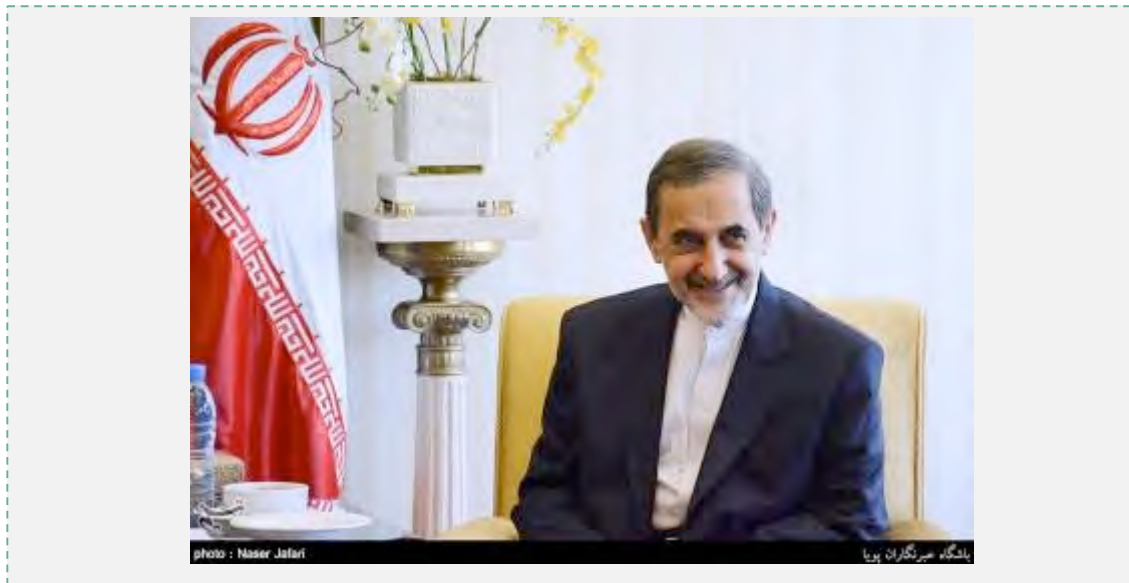
Alaeddin Boroujerdi, chairman of the Majlis committee for national security and foreign policy (Tasnim, August 24, 2016).

■ As part of the increasing Russian-Iranian cooperation in the campaign in Syria, Mikhail Bogdanov, the Russian president's special envoy for Middle Eastern affairs,

visited Tehran in the middle of August and met with Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif to discuss developments in Syria (Asr-e Iran, August 16, 2016).

■ 3. On August 23, 2016, Hossein Jaber Ansari, deputy foreign minister for Arab-African affairs, visited Ankara to discuss developments in Syria with Turkish officials (IRNA, August 23, 2016). The visit was preceded by a surprise visit of Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, the Turkish foreign minister, in Tehran on August 18, 2016, also held to discuss developments in Syria.

■ 4. After meeting with the Norwegian foreign minister in Tehran, Ali-Akbar Velayati, international advisor to the Iranian supreme leader, told a press conference that ousting Syrian President Bashar Assad was no longer on the Western agenda. He claimed that without a doubt, the Iranian-Russian-Turkish cooperation would strengthen the Syrian government, expel the terrorists from Syria, and prevent the country from being divided (Tasnim, August 17, 2016).



Ali-Akbar Velayati (Tasnim, August 7, 2016).

■ 5. On August 18, 2016, the Iranian website Mashreq News posted an interview with Mohammad Ali Falaki, a senior Iranian commander sent to the Syrian fighting front during the last year. During the Iran-Iraq War he commanded a division of IRGC special forces.

■ Falaki praised the courage and determination of the Fatemiyoun Brigade Afghans fighting in Syria under the aegis of the IRGC. He said the brigade had an important role in defending Damascus. He added that its orders came from the IRGC and its fighters were mostly Shi'ite Afghans, with some Sunnis. Some of the commanders, he

said, were Iranians and others were Afghans. As to language difficulties, he said most of the Afghans were fluent in Persian so there were no problems.

- Falaki said the number of Iranians fighting in Syria was relatively small because most of the Iranians were sent there in advisory capacities to train and direct the Syrian army and militias, which bore the main brunt of the fighting.



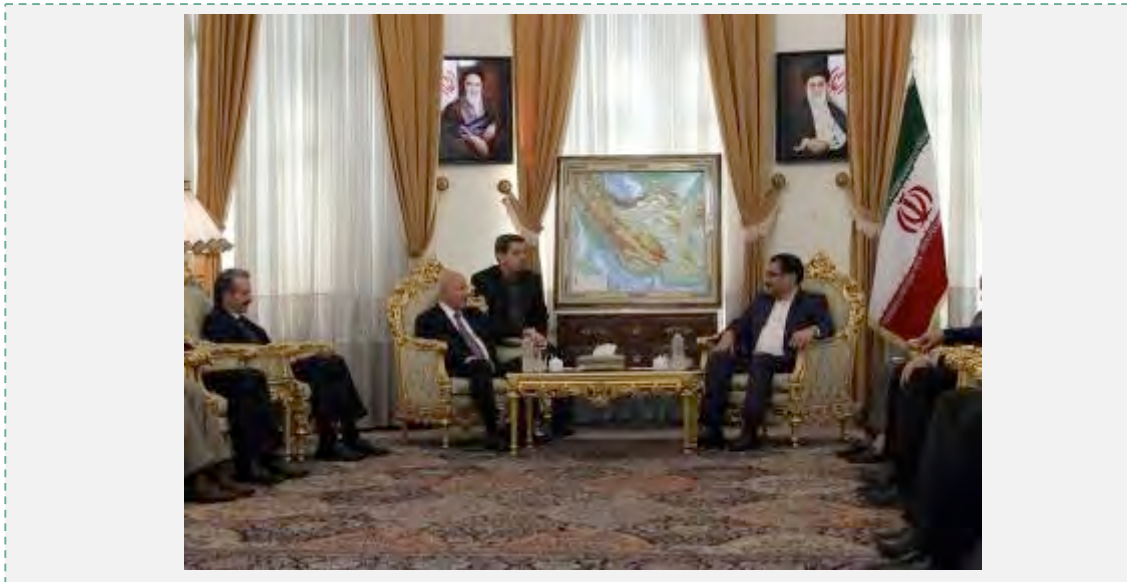
Mohammad Ali Falaki (Mashreq News, August 18, 2016).

- He said that after ISIS took over Iraq in the summer of 2014 he volunteered to join the war alongside 50 other senior IRGC commanders who had fought in the Iran-Iraq War, but in the end he went to Syria in the spring of 2015 after the escalation of the battles in the Aleppo region. He said the Iranian public had shown great willingness to join the campaign in Syria, whether actively or by giving donations. The desire to fight in Syria, he said, was also evident among soldiers in the regular army, who had appealed to Qasem Soleimani, commander of the IRGC's Qods Force, to be allowed to participate with the IRGC in the campaign. Soleimani received permission from the supreme leader, and in February 2016 regular army volunteers and units were deployed to Syria. He said the death and wounding of many fighters in Syria did not have a negative influence on the fighting spirit and motivation.

- Falaki denied Western claims that Iranians who volunteered to fight in Syria received high salaries, claiming they were paid only \$100 a month. He also claimed that the establishment of the "Shi'ite liberation army" operating in Syria, Iraq and Yemen under the command of Qasem Soleimani and composed of Afghans, Iraqis, Pakistanis and Lebanese was intended to insure that in 23 years Israel would no longer exist.

Iranian Intervention in Iraq

■ Ali Shamkhani, the secretary of the Supreme Council for National Security, met with Karim Sinjari, the Interior minister of Iraqi Kurdistan . Shamkhani claimed that Iran had always supported Iraqi Kurdistan within "the central Iraqi government's strategy." Shamkhani praised Kurdish President Masoud Barzani for his role in establishing and broadening the ties between Iran and the Kurdish Autonomous Region. He reiterated the importance of preserving Iraq's territorial integrity against Islamist terrorism which, he said, threatened all religious and ethnic groups in Iraq. He said Iran was concerned about the increasing activities of the Iranian Kurdish groups along the Iran-Iraq border, and called the preservation of security on its borders a "red line" for Iran. Sinjari thanked Iran for its continuing support of the Kurds in Iraq and said Iraqi Kurdistan would not allow any group to carry out hostile acts on the border with Iran (ISNA, August 14, 2016).



Ali Shamkhani meets with Karim Sinjari (Tasnim, August 14, 2016).

■ The office of Masoud Barzani, the president of the Autonomous Kurdish Region in northern Iraq, said in an announcement that Barzani had been formally invited by the Iran government and would visit Tehran in the near future. The date has not yet been set (ISNA, August 22, 2016).

■ On August 17, 2016, Mohammad Bagheri, chief of staff for the Iranian armed forces, met with Faleh al-Fayad, Iraqi national security advisor, to discuss regional developments and bilateral relations. Bagheri said the activities of the Iraqi Shi'ite militias alongside the Iraqi army ensured Iraq's security and stability. He said the

Iranian armed forces were prepared to cooperate with the Iraqi army in various matters (Mehr, August 17, 2016).



Mohammad Bagheri (Mehr, August 17, 2016)

- Iranian President Hassan Rouhani and Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif met with Salim al-Jabouri, the speaker of the Iraqi parliament, who visited Tehran on August 20, 2016. They stressed Iran's commitment to supporting Iraq. President Rouhani said that Iran would continue its support of the Iraqi people and government in their fight against terrorism. He said that the period after the nuclear agreement was a good opportunity to broaden economic cooperation between Iran and Iraq.
- Zarif said that Iraq was stationed on the front line in the fight against terrorism and extremism, and that Iran would unconditionally stand shoulder to shoulder with Iraq. He expressed confidence in Iraq's ability to successfully overcome terrorism in the approaching campaign to liberate the city of Mosul from ISIS. He stressed the need to preserve Iraq's unity and territorial integrity.
- Al-Jabouri thanked Iran for supporting his country in its fight against terrorism, which, he said, was a clear and immediate danger threatening the entire region. He added that there was no substitute for the regional role played by Iran and that Iraq appreciated Iran's firm stance in support of the Iraqi government and people (Fars, August 20, 2016).



Mohammad Javad Zarif and Salim al-Jabouri (center) (Fars, August 20, 2016).

Iranian Intervention in the Palestinian Arena

■ On August 15, 2016, Khaled al-Qadoumi, Hamas representative in Iran, told the Iranian Mehr news agency that the relations between Hamas and Iran were based on many parameters, among them the "resistance" to the "Zionist regime." He claimed Iran had supported Hamas from the beginning with both political and military aid. The relations between Iran and Hamas, he claimed, had their ups and downs, especially during the past five years, but had never been severed.



Khaled al-Qadoumi, Hamas representative in Tehran (Mehr, August 15, 2016)

■ Osama Hamdan, in charge of Hamas' international relations, interviewed by the Hezbollah-affiliated Al-Mayadeen TV channel, claimed the relations between Iran and

Hamas were good and improving every day. He denied a report recently published by the London-based Saudi Arabian-sponsored Al-Sharq al-Awsat which quoted Turkish-based Hamas leader Saleh al-Arouri as saying Tehran demanded that Hamas pledge loyalty to Iran in return for financial aid (Tasnim, August 21, 2016).

Iranian Intervention in the Gulf States

■ Hossein Nikham, the Iran ambassador to Yemen, met in Kuwait with Mohammad Abdulsalam, spokesman for the Ansarullah movement, the political wing of the Shi'ite Yemeni Houthis, to discuss the peace talks currently being held in Kuwait between the Yemeni groups with UN oversight. The meeting was also attended by the head of the Persian Gulf department of the Iranian foreign ministry (Fars, August 22, 2016).