



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

November 20 – December 4, 2016

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### Main Points

- ✓ Mohammad Ali Jafari, commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), said Iranian forces were not participating in the fighting in Mosul because the Shi'ite militias in Iraq did not need Iranian fighters. He said Iran had deployed a small number of advisors to Iraq. In a speech delivered for Basij Week, he criticized those who claimed Iran had to focus exclusively on its internal issues and not become involved in regional matters.
- ✓ Mohammad Hossein Bagheri, commander of the Iranian armed forces, said that in the future Iran might construct military bases along the Yemeni or Syrian coast to increase its naval capabilities in foreign waters.
- ✓ During the past two weeks three IRGC fighters were killed in combat in Syria. The director of the Iranian Shaheed Foundation said more than 1,000 fighters from Iran had been killed in Syria. The number apparently refers to IRGC fighters who lived in Iran and were deployed to Syria, among them citizens of Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan.
- ✓ Senior Iranian officials expressed satisfaction with the military successes of the Syrian regime supporters in the eastern part of Aleppo during the past week.
- ✓ Hossein Dehqan, the Iranian defense minister, said that if necessary, Iran would again allow Russian fighter planes to carry out attacks in Syria from the Iranian air force base in Hamedan.
- ✓ Dozens of Iranian pilgrims returning to Iran from Iraq were killed in an ISIS attack at a gas station in the city of Hilla (about 100 kilometers, or 60 miles) south of Baghdad on November 24, 2016.
- ✓ Mohammed Reza Naqdi, commander of the IRGC's Basij militia, told students in Tehran that Iran would liberate Palestine within ten years.

<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.

## General Information

■ Iranian President Hassan Rouhani, meeting with Turkish Defense Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, said that regional stability and security, especially in Iraq and Syria, had to be founded on Iranian-Turkish cooperation. He said that if the important regional powers cooperated, the problems of Iraq and Syria could be solved without the intervention of foreign powers. He said Iran and Turkey agreed on the basic principles for solving the regional crises: preservation of the territorial integrity and national unity of Iraq and Syria, establishment of a government determined by the people, the prevention of mass murder and of the destruction of the infrastructure, and assisting the refugees and wounded to return to the homes (Tasnim, November 28, 2016).



**Rouhani meets with Çavuşoğlu (Tasnim, November 26, 2016).**

■ Mohammad Ali Jafari, commander of the IRGC, said the Shi'ite militias in Iraq did not need Iranian fighters for the Mosul campaign. He said Iran had deployed a limited number of advisors to Iraq, but Iranian forces were not participating in the fighting in Mosul. In a speech for Basij Week, he justified Iranian intervention in regional countries, saying the Islamic Revolution was based on defending oppressed Muslims. Therefore, those who claimed there was no reason for Iran to operate in Lebanon, Syria or Yemen, and that Iran had to focus exclusively on internal problems, were wrong (Tasnim News and Fars, November 24, 2016).

■ Mohammad Hossein Bagheri, commander of the Iranian armed forces, said that in the future Iran might construct military bases along the Yemeni or Syrian coast. He told a meeting of Iranian naval commanders that in the future Iran might need to increase its naval capabilities in foreign waters (Fars, November 26, 2016).

■ Following this statement, Mehdi Mashat, one of the Yemeni Houthi leaders, strongly criticized Bagheri. On November 27, 2016, he wrote on his Facebook page that if the commander of the Iranian armed forces knew anything about the history of Yemen, which over the years had become a graveyard for invaders, he would not have dared to say what he did about Iran's intention to build a naval base in Yemen.

## Iranian Intervention in Syria and Lebanon

- Three IRGC fighters were killed in combat in Syria over the past two weeks
- Hojjat-ul-Islam Shahidi Mahallati, director of the Iranian Shaheed (martyr) Foundation, told a meeting of Basij members last week that more than 1,000 fighters from Iran had been killed in Syria (Tasnim, November 22, 2016). The number apparently relates to IRGC fighters who lived in Iran and were deployed to Syria, including citizens of Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan.



**Hojjat-ul-Islam Shahidi Mahallati, director of the Iranian Shaheed Foundation (Tasnim, November 22, 2016).**

- Mohammad Hossein Bagheri told a conference in Tehran that with authorization from the supreme leader, hundreds of thousands of Basij fighters could be deployed to Syria. He said that so far only a limited number had been deployed to Syria in order to guard and defend Shi'ite shrines (Tasnim, November 24, 2016).



**Mohammad Hossein Bagheri (Tasnim, November 24, 2016)**

- Hossein Dehqan, Iranian minister of defense, said that if necessary, Iran would again allow Russian fighter planes to attack Syria from the Iranian air force base in Hamedan. As to information published in the Russian media, Dehqan said that in supporting the Syrian government, Iran was cooperating with its friends, especially Russia, and would do anything necessary to defend Syria (Tasnim, November 26, 2016).
- In August 2016 the Russians used the Iranian air force base at Hamedan (western Iran) for aerial strikes in Syria. Following the stationing of Russian planes at Hamedan, the Iranian defense minister confirmed Iran would allow Russian planes to use the air field as necessary, but had reservations about the Russian ministry of defense's publicizing the information.
- Hossein Amir Abdollahian, special international affairs advisor to the speaker of the Majlis (the Iranian parliament), congratulated the Syrian leadership, people and army for the "recent victories in the Aleppo region." In view of the Syrian army's takeover (with the Russian air support) of more neighborhoods in northeastern Aleppo, Abdollahian said Aleppo was about to be liberated from the control of terrorist groups and Iran would continue to provide support by advising the Syrian and Iraqi people and governments (Mehr, November 28, 2016).



**Hossein Amir Abdollahian (Mehr, November 28, 2016).**

■ Rasoul Sanaeirad, deputy IRGC commander for political matters, also expressed satisfaction with the military achievements of Assad's supporters in the eastern part of Aleppo. Interviewed by Tasnim News on November 30, 2016, he said the recent successes of the Syrian army in eastern Aleppo were clear proof of the complete defeat of the terrorists in Syria. He criticized Turkey's interference in Syria, saying that instead of interfering in Syria, President Erdogan would do better to answer to public opinion in his own country regarding the results of Turkey's interference in Syria in past years. He said Erdogan was incapable of toppling the Assad regime. His remarks came in the wake of a statement made by Erdogan the previous week to the effect that the objective of the Turkish forces in Syria was to end Assad's rule.

## Iranian Intervention in Iraq

■ Dozens of Iranian pilgrims were killed in an ISIS attack on a gas station in the city of Hilla (about 100 kilometers, or 60 miles) south of Baghdad on November 24, 2016. The explosions set fire to five buses of pilgrims parked near the restaurant at the gas station. The pilgrims were returning to Iran from Karbala, where they had marked Arba'een,<sup>2</sup> the annual pilgrimage to the Hussein mosque.

■ Senior Iranian officials strongly condemned the terrorist attack. President Rouhani called on the Iraqi government to intensify the fight against the terrorists and declared Iran's commitment to continue fighting terrorism (Tasnim, November 26, 2016). Hossein Salami, deputy commander of the IRGC, said the attack was a response to

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<sup>2</sup> The Arba'een is the 40<sup>th</sup> day of mourning for the death of the Shi'ite Imam Hussein, Muhammad's grandson, who was buried in Karbala in 680 AD.

the terrorists' defeats in Iraq and that the response to the attack would come on the battlefield.



The funeral held in the city of Ahvaz for the pilgrims killed in Hilla (ycr.ir, November 30, 2016)

## Iranian Intervention in the Palestinian Arena

■ Mohammed Reza Naqdi, commander of the IRGC's Basij militia, speaking before students in Tehran, said Iran would liberate Palestine during the next ten years. He said that 35 years ago Iran had been under American control but the Islamic Revolution liberated Iran from the Americans, and after that rescued it from Iraq ruler Saddam Hussein. Today, he said, Iran had rescued capital cities from the Americans and would liberate Palestine in the near future as well (Fars, November 21, 2016).