



Spotlight on Iran¹

February 12-26, 2017

Editor: Dr. Raz Zimmt



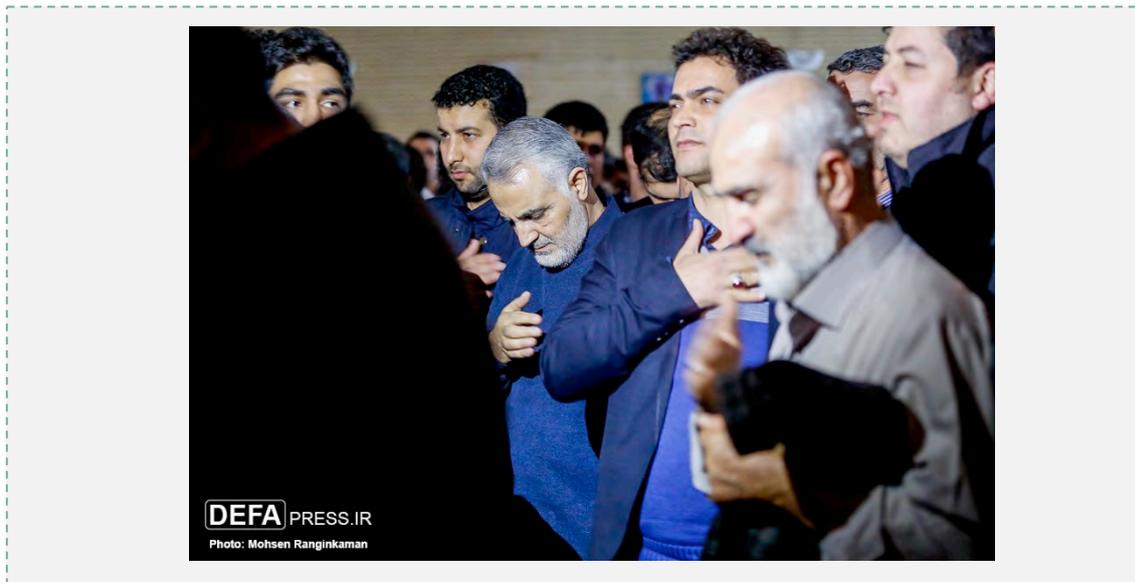
Main Points

- ✓ Fox News reported that during the second half of February 2017, Qasem Soleimani, commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) Qods Force, paid a visit to Moscow. He met with senior officials in the Russian administration to express Iran's dissatisfaction with the improvement in Russia's relations with Saudi Arabia and other Arab countries.
- ✓ Tension has surfaced between Iran and Turkey. The Iranian foreign ministry summoned the Turkish ambassador to Tehran for clarifications after senior Turkish officials criticized Iran's regional policies and accused Iran of Shi'ite subversion.
- ✓ Two Iranian fighters were killed in Syria during the past two weeks.
- ✓ Ali Shamkhani, the secretary of the Supreme Council for National Security, said Iran would continue to allow Russian planes to use Iranian airspace to attack in Syria.
- ✓ In the middle of February 2017, another round of talks was held between the Syrian opposition and the Syrian regime. The talks were held in Astana, the capital of Kazakhstan, under the aegis of Russia, Iran and Turkey.
- ✓ Na'im Qassem, Hezbollah deputy secretary general, said his organization was proud of its relations with Iran, and called on other regional countries to strengthen their relations with Iran which, he claimed, had changed the face of the Middle East.
- ✓ Interviewed by the Iranian news agency Tasnim News, Fuad Masum, president of Iraq, defended the presence of Qasem Soleimani, commander of the IRGC's Qods Force, in Iraq. He claimed it his presence natural, and that there were other foreign military advisors in Iraq.
- ✓ On February 21-22, 2017, the Sixth International Conference in Support of the Palestinian Intifada was held in Tehran.

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

- Ali-Akbar Velayati, 1. On February 15, 2017, Fox News reported that on February 14 Qasem Soleimani, commander of the IRGC's Qods Force, had arrived in Moscow to meet with senior Russian administration officials. The report was based on Western intelligence sources, which reported that the visit lasted a number of days and that its objective was to express Iran's dissatisfaction with the improvement in Russia's relations with Saudi Arabia and other Arab countries. Iran, according to the sources, was especially displeased by arms deals and increasing economic ties. Kremlin spokesman Dmitri Paskov refused to comment. During the past two years Soleimani has gone to Moscow at least twice for broadening Iranian-Russian security and political cooperation in Syria.
- On February 16, 2017, Soleimani attended a memorial service in Tehran for Hassan Shateri, a high-ranking IRGC officer killed in February 2013, when a convoy of weapons for Hezbollah was attacked on the Syrian-Lebanese border. At the time the attack was attributed to Israel.



Qasem Soleimani (center) at a memorial service for Hassan Shateri (Defa Press, February 16, 2017).

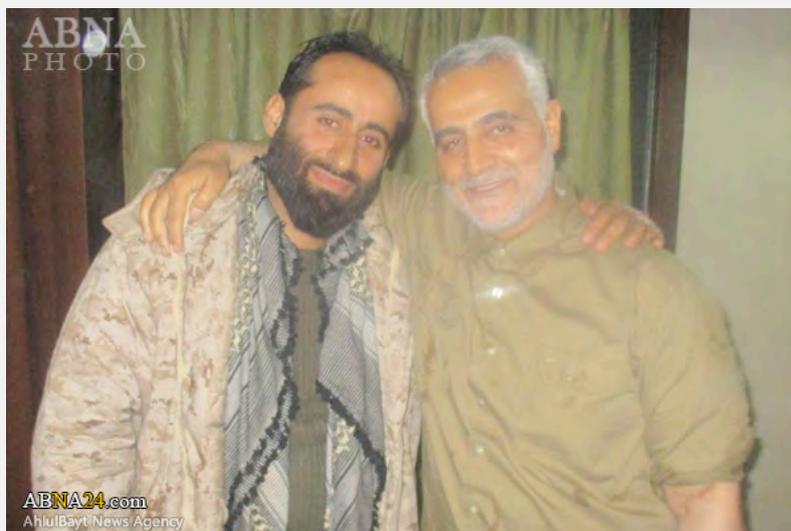
- The Iranian foreign ministry summoned the Turkish ambassador to Tehran for clarifications after senior Turkish officials criticized Iran's regional policies. While on a visit to Bahrain, Turkish President Erdogan accused Iran of seeking to spread Persian nationalism in Syria and Iraq. Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, the Turkish foreign minister, speaking at the security conference held in Munich last week, said Iran promoted regional Shi'ite separatism. Bahram Qasemi, spokesman for the Iranian foreign ministry, criticized the Turkish minister's

statements, saying there was a limit to Iran's patience with Turkey's positions. He said that anyone who supported terrorist groups and caused bloodshed, escalation and regional destabilization could not point a finger and accuse others (Mehr, February 20, 2017).

■ Ali-Akbar Velayati, advisor to the Iranian supreme leader for international affairs, said those who entered Syria or Iraq without an invitation or authorization were aggressors and had to leave. They could leave of their own volition or be forced to leave by the Syrian or Iraqi people. He made the remark in response to the anti-Iranian statements of senior Turkish and Saudi Arabian officials at the Munich security conference. At a press conference held after he met with Hadiya Abbas, speaker of the Syrian parliament, Velayati said Turkey had not achieved any of its goals in Syria (IRNA, February 21, 2017).

Iranian Intervention in Syria and Lebanon

■ Two Iranian fighters were killed in Syria during the past two weeks. They were Mostafa Zalnejad from Mazandaran Province, killed on February 14, 2017, and Mehdi Na'maei Aali from Alborz Province, killed on February 11, 2017.



Mostafa Zalnejad (left) with Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps commander Qasem Soleimani (ABNA, February 14, 2017).

■ Ali Shamkhani, the secretary of the Supreme Council for National Security, said Iran would continue allowing Russian planes to use its airspace to attack in Syria because Iran and Russia enjoyed full bilateral cooperation. He said Iran was willing to coordinate with Russia in every respect regarding Syria, and that Russian flights in Iranian airspace were carried out after having been planned and coordinated with Tehran. He said Russian bombers had recently flown over Iran but had not conducted

any refueling operations (Fars, February 11, 2017). In August 2016 Russian warplanes used the military airfield in Hamedan, Iran, for attacking targets in Syria. That stopped temporarily because of internal Iranian criticism, but senior Iranian officials have already announced that Iran may again allow the base to be used for operational needs.

■ Last week Hadiya Abbas, speaker of the Syrian parliament, paid a visit to Tehran on the eve of the conference supporting the "Palestinian intifada." She met with President Hassan Rouhani, who told her that Syria was in the front lines of the "resistance" to Israel and that Iran would support the Syrian people until the final victory over terrorism. Abbas thanked Rouhani for Iran's support of Syria, and said strengthening relations with Iran was of special importance to Syria (Fars, February 22, 2017).

Meeting with Nabih Berri, the speaker of the Lebanese parliament, on the sidelines of the conference, Rouhani said that had Iran and Lebanon not coordinated with Syria, Damascus would have turned into the capital of ISIS in the region (Tasnim, February 22, 2017).



Hassan Rouhani meets with Hadiya Abbas (Website of the Iranian president, February 22, 2017).

■ On February 16, 2017, another round of talks was held in Astana, the capital of Kazakhstan, between the Syrian opposition and the Assad regime, under the aegis of Russia, Iran and Turkey. The Iranian delegation was headed by Hossein Jaber Ansari, deputy foreign minister for Arab-African affairs. He gave a speech in which he reiterated Iran's official position, which stressed the preservation of Syria's territorial integrity as a principle for the political resolution of the Syrian crisis (Mehr, February 16, 2017).

■ At the security conference held in Munich, Mohammad Javad Zarif, the Iranian foreign minister, met with Staffan de Mistura, UN envoy to Syria. He also met with

Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov, with whom he discussed developments in Syria and bilateral relations (IRNA, February 18, 2017).



Mohammad Javad Zarif meets with Sergey Lavrov on the sidelines of the Munich conference (IRNA, February 18, 2017).

■ Na'im Qassem, Hezbollah deputy secretary general, said Hezbollah was proud of its ties to Iran, and called on other countries to strengthen their ties with Tehran to promote increased regional stability. At a conference in Beirut he said Iran had changed the face of the Middle East, breathed new life into the Palestinian cause and provided support for Hezbollah and Syria. He added that in 2000 Iranian support had made it possible for Hezbollah to achieve its first victory over the "Zionist enemy" and liberate south Lebanon (Fars, February 18, 2017).

Iranian Intervention in Iraq and the Gulf

■ Interviewed by Tasnim News on February 12, 2017, Iraqi president Fuad Masum defended the presence of Qasem Soleimani, commander of the IRGC's Qods Force, in Iraq. He claimed Soleimani's presence was "natural" and that there were other foreign military advisors in the country from the United States, Britain, France and other European countries. He said Iran could not be denied the right to deploy military advisors to Iraq. He also said that the historical ties between Iran and Iraq served Iraqi interests, adding that strategic relations with Iran were important and had to be fostered because of Iranian support for Iraq in various areas, including the supplying of arms and the deployment of military advisors.

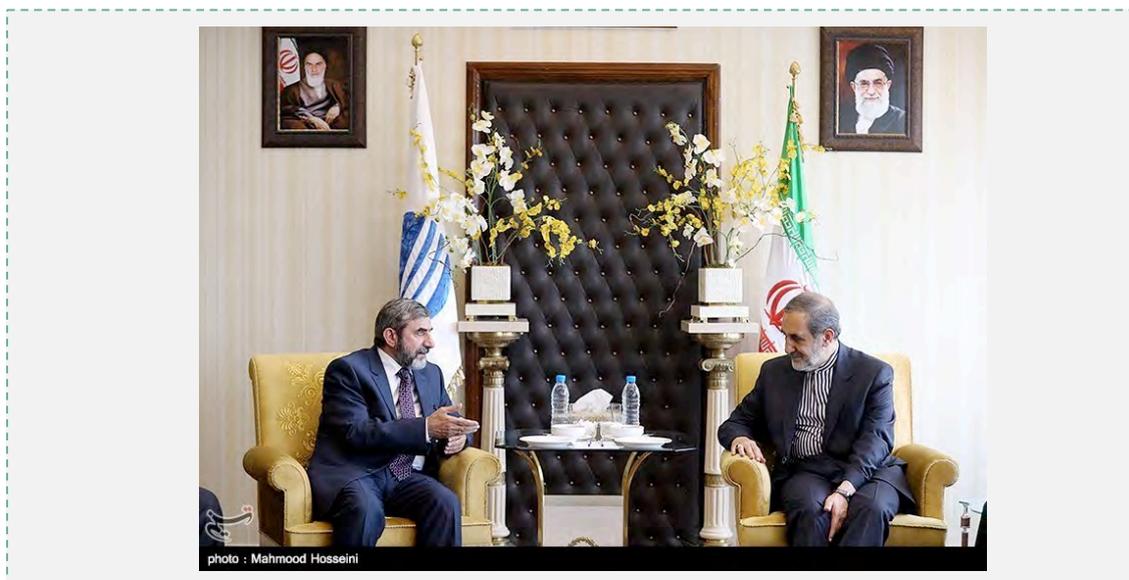


Iraqi president Fuad Masum interviewed by Tasnim News, February 12, 2017

■ Iraq's national consensus party accused Iran of violating the sovereignty of Iraq's territorial waters. On February 15, 2017, former Iraqi vice president Ayad Allawi said in a statement that Iran was seeking to take control of areas subject to a historical dispute between the two countries. They included the Shatt al-Arab waterway in the Persian Gulf and the al-Fao peninsula on the Iraqi side. The statement called on the Iraqi government and parliament to respond quickly and with determination to "Iran's aggression" and to reach agreements with Iran to prevent the loss of Iraqi access to international waters, which would endanger its security and economy (Baghdad Post, February 15).

■ In the middle of February, Saleheddin Bahaeddin, the secretary general of the Islamic Unity Party of Iraqi Kurdistan, paid a visit to Tehran where he met with senior Iranian officials. Ali Larijani, speaker of the Majlis (parliament), meeting with Bahaeddin, stressed the importance of preserving Iraq's territorial integrity. He called on the Kurdish parties in Iraq to reach an agreement among themselves, claiming that reducing disagreement in Kurdistan and increasing cooperation between Kurdistan and the central government in Baghdad would support stability and security in Iraq.

Bahaeddin also met with Ali-Akbar Velayati, advisor to the Iranian supreme leader for international affairs, who also stressed the need to preserve Iraq's territorial integrity. Velayati warned that splitting Iraq between Shi'ites, Sunnis and Kurds served the "plots of the enemies of the Iraqi people" and contradicted Baghdad's policies (IRNA and Tasnim, February 15, 2017).



Velayati meets with Bahaeddin (Tasnim, February 15, 2017)

- On February 17, 2017, Ayatollah Kazem Sedighi, Tehran's provisional Friday Prayers Leader, said the defeat of the Bahraini regime was close, and that the fate of the rule of the House of Khalifa would be the same as the fate of the deposed Shah. As to the ongoing protests in Bahrain, Sedighi said the citizens of Bahrain wanted free elections and independence, and were not prepared to accept a dictator. There was no doubt, he said, of their victory (Fars, February 17, 2017).

Iranian Intervention in the Palestinian Arena

- On February 21-22, 2017, the Sixth International Conference in Support of the Palestinian Intifada was held in Tehran to express the support of Iran and the Muslim world for the Palestinian cause and the "liberation of Jerusalem." There were 700 participants from 80 countries, including representatives of parliaments, NGO activists, activists from pro-Palestinian organizations and leaders of Palestinian organizations. Ali Larijani presided over the conference, and the closing speech was given by Iranian president Hassan Rouhani.
- Heads of the Iranian regime gave speeches attacking Israel ("the cancerous tumor") and its policies towards the Palestinians, called for the continuation of the "resistance" until the complete liberation of Palestine, stressed Iran's commitment to its continued support of the Palestinians and their struggle, criticized the willingness of several Middle Eastern states to establish relations with Israel, and warned of distracting the attention of the Arab-Muslim world from the Palestinian cause to focusing on internal regional problems. In the opening speech, supreme leader Ali Khamenei said Palestine had to be the axis on which Muslim unity turned, despite the internal disagreements in the Muslim world. He said the path of "resistance" had curbed the expansion of the

"Zionist regime" and kept it from realizing its plot to take over the Middle East (Tasnim, February 21, 2017).



Khamenei speaking at the conference (Tasnim News, February 21, 2017)