



March 19, 2017

The head of the Iranian Martyrs Foundation admits that 2,100 fighters sent by Iran to Syria and Iraq have been killed so far

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Qods Force commander Qassem Soleimani, the prominent figure in the Iranian involvement in Syria, at the grave of an IRGC fighter killed in Syria (afsaran.ir, April 14, 2015)

Overview

1. In a conference held on March 6, 2017, to commemorate the Martyr Day in Tehran, **the head of the Martyrs Foundation Hojjatoleslam Seyyed Mohammad Ali Shahidi** said that **the number of fatalities among the fighters** sent by Iran to Syria and Iraq **had reached 2,100** (Mehr, March 6, 2017).¹ The number of fatalities announced by the Foundation director **does not refer only to fighters of Iranian nationality, but to all fighters sent on behalf of Iran to Syria and Iraq. These fighters include Lebanese Hezbollah operatives as well as Shiites of Afghan, Pakistani and Iraqi descent, handled by the IRGC.**²

¹ The Iranian Martyrs Foundation was established in the early 1980s on the order of Revolution Leader Ayatollah Khomeini. Its purpose is to assist families of the martyrs of the Islamic Revolution and the martyrs of the Iran-Iraq War that broke out in September 1980. Today, the Foundation also supports the families of fighters who died in the course of the Iranian involvement in Syria and Iraq. **The Foundation also has a Lebanese branch, which supports the families of Hezbollah martyrs, and a Palestinian branch, which also operates from Lebanon, supporting families of Palestinian martyrs.**

² It is not the first time that Shahidi cites the number of fatalities among the troops sent by Iran (referred to by Iran as the "Defenders of the Holy Sites"). In November 2016, Shahidi said that the number of fatalities



Hojjatoleslam Seyyed Mohammad Ali Shahidi, the head of the Iranian Martyrs Foundation (Mehr, March 6, 2017).

2. Ali Alfoneh, IRGC researcher at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, who monitors the involvement of Iran and its proxies in Syria and Iraq, has so far identified **2,603 fatalities** (thus, there is a discrepancy of 503 dead between his findings and the figure cited by the head of the Martyrs Foundation). From Ali Alfoneh's findings we learn that:

a. In Syria, 473 Iranian fighters, 1,045 Hezbollah operatives, and 801 operatives of the Shiite militias operating in Syria (Pakistanis, Afghans, and Iraqis) were killed. Thus, the total of fatalities among the Iranian forces and Iran's proxy organizations in Syria has reached 2,319.

b. In Iraq, Alfoneh identified 38 Iranian fighters and 246 operatives of the Iraqi Shiite militias. **Thus, the total of fatalities in Iraq has reached 248.**

c. The total of fatalities in Syria and Iraq is 2,603. Thus, there is a discrepancy of 503 dead between this figure and the figure cited by the head of the Martyrs Foundation, which, in the ITIC's assessment, stems from different database and methodologies for counting the dead (for instance, maybe the head of the Martyrs Foundation doesn't count the Iranian fatalities in Iraq).

3. Among the dead in Syria, particularly high is the percentage of Hezbollah operatives (about 40 percent of the total number of fatalities). In the ITIC's

among the Iranian forces in Syria alone exceeded 1,000 (Tasnim News, November 22, 2016). In both cases, Shahidi did not specify the breakdown of the fatalities and did not refer to their national affiliation. In the ITIC's assessment, this may partially account for the discrepancy between the two figures. It seems that the current figure also includes operatives of the proxy organizations handled by Iran in Syria and Iraq.

assessment, this stems from the fact that Hezbollah operatives **are a quality, available force, which has been involved in the most important, deadly battles** (such as the battle for Aleppo), and therefore sustained a large number of fatalities. **The number of the Iranian fatalities**, relative to the limited scope of the Iranian force in Syria, **is also relatively high** (with **more than ten high-ranking officers of the rank equivalent to a brigadier general**). The percentage of the Shiite militias in the total number of fatalities is small as they mainly serve as an auxiliary force rather than a quality military force sent to the front line in the important battle zones.

4. What is the impact of the Iranian fatalities on the decision makers in Tehran?

In the ITIC's assessment, **decision makers in Iran are highly sensitive to fatalities**. At least in the past, this sensitivity drew internal criticism and raised questions as to whether the campaign in Syria is worthwhile. The Iranian fatalities, which were high relatively to the scope of the force stationed in Syria, required the Iranian leadership to provide explanations as to the benefit and legitimacy of the Iranian involvement in Syria. These explanations included the use of Shiite religious symbols, glorification of the value of sacrifice and defending the Shiite holy sites, and emphasizing the importance of involvement in Syria for protecting Iran's interests and national security. On the other hand, **the level of sensitivity in Tehran to Hezbollah's fatalities and all the more so to fatalities of the Shiite militias is much lower**.

5. The large number of fatalities among the Iranian fighters and the concern that the fatalities would draw criticism of the involvement in Syria were apparently what led to a significant decrease of the Iranian order of battle in Syria. The order of battle decreased from about 1,500-2,000 at its peak to several hundred fighters and advisors at present. Today, the Iranians prefer to conduct their involvement in the fighting by proxy organizations, among which Hezbollah is the most prominent in its performance (see Appendix: Milestones of the Iranian involvement in the civil war in Syria). The modus operandi of a widespread use of proxies and limited direct Iranian involvement also characterizes the network of subversion and terror which Iran employs in the Middle East for promoting its interests and regional influence.³

³ Iran employs proxy organizations in the various arenas in the Middle East: **In Lebanon**, it operates through Hezbollah; **In Iraq**, through Shiite pro-Iranian militias; **In Yemen**, through the Houthi rebels; **In the Palestinian arena**, the organization which is most clearly affiliated with Iran is the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ).

Affiliation of the fatalities of Iran and its proxy organizations in Syria and Iraq

6. As a rule, the Iranian media does not refrain from reporting on fatalities among the Iranian fighters and the forces operating on behalf of Iran in Syria and Iraq. These reports also include details of senior officers who died in the fighting. Yet, the Iranian media does not always provide full information regarding the identity, rank and organizational affiliation of the dead.

7. Ali Alfoneh, an IRGC researcher at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, has been closely monitoring the IRGC fatalities in Syria and Iraq. His findings are based on official reports published in Iranian media regarding the dead as well as on media reports about funerals of fighters killed in Syria and Iraq. Until mid-February 2017, Alfoneh estimated that 473 Iranian fighters had been killed in Syria since the beginning of 2012, of which 466 belonged to the IRGC and seven to the Iranian regular army. In addition, since April 2014, a total of 38 IRGC fighters had been killed in Iraq. Thus, the total of Iranian fatalities in Syria and Iraq, according to Alfoneh, reaches 511.

8. According to Alfoneh's findings, **the number of fatalities among Iran's proxy organizations** in Syria and Iraq has reached **2,092 fighters**. Following is their breakdown:

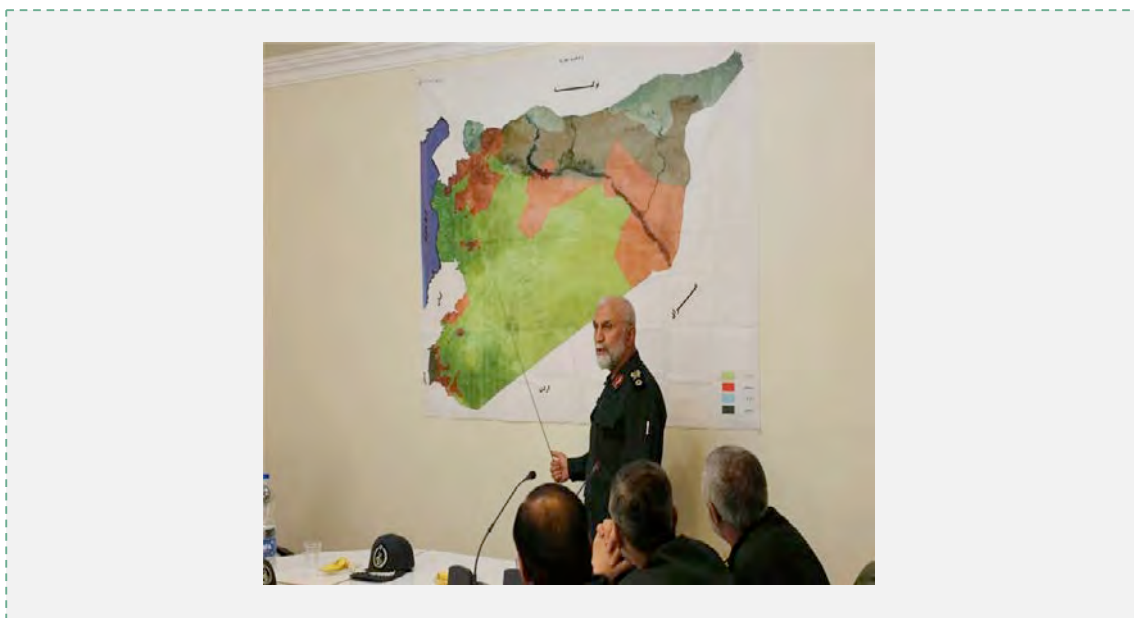
- a. **1,045 Hezbollah operatives** have been killed in Syria since October 2012.
- b. **584 Afghan fighters**, operating in Syria as part of the Fatemiyoun Brigade, have been killed in Syria since September 2013.
- c. **136 Pakistani fighters**, operating in Syria as part of the Zainabiyoun Brigade, have been killed in Syria since November 2014.
- d. **81 Iraqi fighters**, from among the Shiite pro-Iranian militias in Iraq, have been killed in Syria since October 2012
- e. **246 Iraqi fighters**, from among the Shiite pro-Iranian militias in Iraq, have been killed in Iraq since July 2014.

9. Among the Iranian fighters killed since the outbreak of the civil war in Syria, **there are more than ten senior Iranian officers in a rank equivalent to brigadier general**. Among the dead, there is a senior officer who was killed at the **Syrian-Lebanese border** (in an attack attributed to Israel), and another officer killed in the

Golan Heights (also in an attack attributed to Israel). Several other officers were killed in **northern Syria** (in the areas of Aleppo and Hama), where the Iranian and their proxies sustained the heaviest losses.

10. Following are details on the senior Iranian officers killed:

- a. **Hassan Shateri** – killed in February 2013 at the Syrian-Lebanese border in an attack attributed to Israel.
- b. **Abdollah Eskandari** – former head of the Martyrs Foundation in Fars Province, killed in May 2014.
- c. **Mohammad Ali Allahodadi** – killed in an airstrike attributed to the Israeli Air Force in the Quneitra area, in January 2015.
- d. **Hadi Kajbaf** – killed in April 2015 in the Daraa area
- e. **Hossein Hamedani** – served as a senior military advisor in Syria, on behalf of the IRGC, and was killed in the Aleppo area in October 2015.



Hossein Hamedani, killed in the Aleppo area in October 2015 (Tasnim News, October 9, 2016)

- f. **Reza Khavari** – killed in the Hama area in October 2015.
- g. **Farshad Hassounizadeh** – former commander of the **Saberin** Special Forces Brigade, killed in October 2015.
- h. **Hamid Mokhtarband** – former commander of the IRGC Brigade in **Ahvaz**, killed in October 2015.

- i. **Sa'id Sayyah Taheri** – killed in January 2016 in the Aleppo area.
- j. **Hassan Ali Shamsabadi** – killed in March 2016.
- k. **Gholam-Reza Samaei** – killed in October 2016.
- l. **Gholam-Reza Qollizadeh** – killed in January 2017.

Appendix

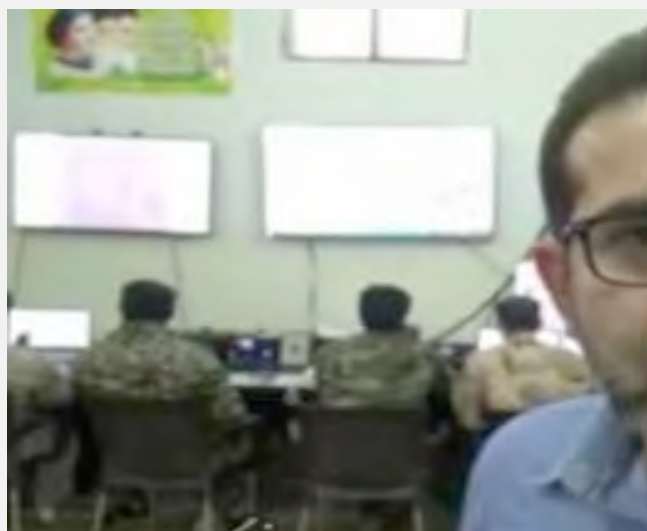
Milestones of the Iranian involvement in the civil war in Syria

1. Since the outbreak of the civil war in Syria in 2011, **the IRGC's Qods Force under the command of Qassem Soleimani has led the Iranian involvement in Syria**. In the first stage of the civil war, when the existence of the Assad regime was in jeopardy, **the Iranian involvement was intended to prevent the fall of Damascus and strategic outposts in northern Syria in the hands of the rebels and the collapse of the Syrian regime**. Subsequently, the involvement of Iran and its proxies was intended **to assist the Syrian regime to expand its control territories, stabilize its rule in the areas taken over, defend Shiite population and Shiite holy sites, secure the Syrian-Lebanese border area, and prevent the "spillover" of the global jihad to Lebanon**. In the long run, the Iranian involvement was intended **to secure Iran's hold on Syria and its influence on the Syrian regime**, and allow the use of Syrian territory as a launching pad for Iranian presence and activity in the Middle East.

2. The Iranian involvement in the various stages of the civil war in Syria has been expressed in several ways: At first, in the **transfer of weapons, providing economic assistance and sending Iranian advisors**, who operated in close coordination with the Syrian Army and the Syrian security forces. Then, the indirect Iranian involvement has turned into **direct involvement through an Iranian force which was dispatched to Syria**. Side by side with this force, **Iran employed proxy organizations**. Among these proxy organizations, the most professional has been the Lebanese Hezbollah, while organizations of lesser quality have been units of Shiite fighters of Iraqi, Afghan and Pakistani descent.

3. Until September 2015, the Iranian involvement in Syria had been conducted by **several hundred Iranian advisors and several thousand Shiite fighters** belonging to military frameworks handled by the Qods Force. The IRGC's military presence on Syrian soil was intended in the first place mainly for advisory missions. **At that stage, the Iranians refrained from employing organic army units** against the rebel organizations, and usually were not directly involved in the fighting. However, the IRGC operatives were caught from time to time in the crossfire between the Syrian forces and the rebel organizations and thus died in the fighting.

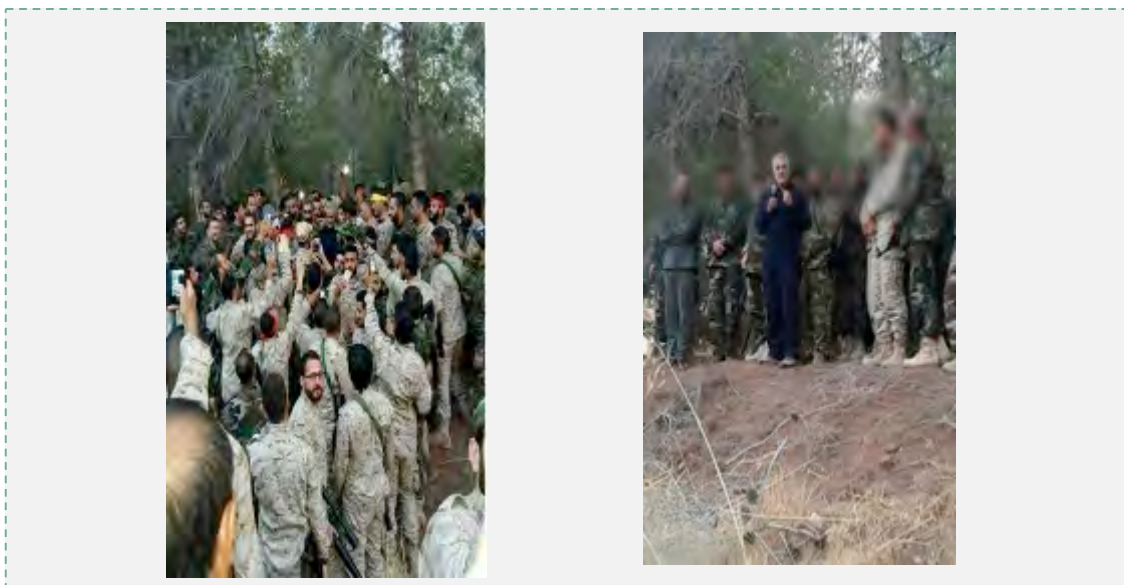
4. The cumulative achievements of ISIS, the Al-Nusra Front and other rebel organizations in northwestern Syria during 2014-2015 raised **doubts among the Iranians** as to President Bashar Assad's ability to remain in power in the long run. **This required Iran to substantially increase its support of the Assad regime and change its modus operandi in Syria.** In view of the Syrian regime's predicament, in **mid-September 2015 Iran reinforced its troops in Syria, apparently adding 1,500-2,000 fighters, some of whom took an active part in the fighting.** The Iranian reinforcement, which consisted of IRGC operatives and Shiite fighters from Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iraq, was intended to assist the Syrian Army in the attack started in northern Syria in early October 2015. At the same time, **the scope of Hezbollah's force operating in Syria increased,** as did its involvement in the various fighting zones.



Joint Syrian-Iranian operations room set up in Aleppo before the Syrian Army attack in October 2015, with the participation of Iranian fighters. The poster in the upper left-hand corner shows Khomeini, Khamenei and an unidentified person. The Iranian correspondent who reported about the activity of the operations room is seen on the right (Fars, October 22, 2015)

5. **The fierce battles in northwestern Syria in late 2015 caused heavy losses to the Iranian fighters,** who were at the front lines of the attack. **During the first months of the attack, over a hundred Iranian fighters were killed, with a large number of officers, including senior officers.** The majority of the dead belonged to the IRGC's regular combatant units. **Qods Force Commander Qassem Soleimani led the attack in northwestern Syria, coordinating the activity of the Syrian Army, the IRGC, and Hezbollah.** Most of the military effort was based on fighters who belonged to the IRGC's regular units (infantry, armor, and Special Forces). The relative size of these units (compared to the Qods Force, relatively limited in scope)

allowed them to send larger numbers of fighters to the battlefield and address Iran's constraint at that time in Syria.⁴



Qods Force Commander Qassem Soleimani briefing fighters, apparently in the Latakia area in Syria (Facebook, October 13, 2015)

6. In the spring of 2016, Iran sent to Syria **forces of the Iranian regular army limited in scope** (probably several hundred fighters), with the objective of reinforcing the IRGC forces. This was the first time since the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988) that fighters belonging to the Iranian regular army were sent to a military campaign outside the borders of Iran. **Within a short while, the regular army troops also sustained losses.**

7. The heavy losses among the Iranian fighters required the Iranian leadership to reassess the deployment of Iranian troops in Syria. In late 2015, there were widespread Western media reports that Iran had started to withdraw its military troops from Syria due to its heavy losses. These reports were denied by senior Iranian officials, who stressed that Iran's "military advisors" continued to operate along with the Syrian regime to assist it in its campaign against terrorism. The ITIC believes that even though Iran had not withdrawn its forces from Syria, **it significantly decreased its order of battle in Syria, which is currently estimated at several hundred advisors and fighters.**

⁴ For further details, see the ITIC's Information Bulletin from November 16, 2015: "Profile of IRGC fighters Killed in Syria during the Past Month (Updated to November 16, 2015)", www.terrorism-info.org.il/en/article/20909.

8. The military achievements of **the Syrian forces with Russian support** during the recent year, which culminated in the takeover of Aleppo once again from the rebel organizations in late 2016, **allowed Iran to once again rely mainly on Hezbollah fighters** and the Shiite foreign fighters operating along with the Syrian Army, and content itself with a limited cadre of advisors. The return to the previous modus operandi **reduced Iranian fatalities. However, in the ITIC's assessment, it also compromised Iran's ability to impact events on the ground and Iran's political influence in Syria.** Iran's role as the main superpower on which the Syrian regime relies **was now taken by Russia, while Iran had to content itself with a secondary role in the military and political moves that took place during recent months.**