



Spotlight on Iran¹

May 21 – June 4, 2017
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Overview

- ✓ Senior Iranian officials responded to remarks made by Donald Trump during his visit to Saudi Arabia by rejecting his claims about Iranian support for terrorism. They said Trump had gone to Saudi Arabia to form a new anti-Iranian coalition and redraw the regional map in Syria and Iraq. The deputy commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) said the statements Trump and the leaders of the Arab states made at the summit meeting in Riyadh were an admission of Iran's regional superiority.
- ✓ Iran and Russia continue coordinating the military campaign in Syria. Iranian President Rouhani spoke on the phone with Vladimir Putin, while Ali Shamkhani, secretary of the Supreme Council for National Security, met in Russia with Nikolai Patrushev, secretary of the Russian Security Council. Shamkhani told the Russian newspaper Kommersant that if requested, Iran would consider deploying its soldiers to the "safe zones" in Syria to preserve order and security.
- ✓ The Russian ambassador to Tehran told the Iranian Mehr news agency that Russia was satisfied with Iranian-Russian cooperation in Syria. He added that Russia was convinced the Syrian crisis could not be resolved without Iranian involvement.
- ✓ A high-ranking IRGC officer was killed in battle against ISIS in Mosul, Iraq.
- ✓ New photos circulated on the social networks showing Qasem Soleimani, commander of the IRGC's Qods Force, with Iraqi Shi'ite militia fighters on the Syria-Iraq border.
- ✓ Qasem Soleimani congratulated Ismail Haniyeh on being elected head of Hamas's new political bureau based in Qatar, and Yahya al-Sinwar as head of its political bureau in the Gaza Strip. The London-based Saudi Arabian newspaper al-Sharq al-Awsat reported that Hamas and Iran had recently reached an agreement to renew Iranian financial support for Hamas.

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

- Iranian President Hassan Rouhani rejected the claims of American President Trump regarding Iranian support for Hezbollah and terrorism. During the first press conference held since his recent reelection, Rouhani said Hezbollah was supported and respected by every Lebanese citizen, even Christians and non-Muslims, and calling it a terrorist organization would not solve anything. He defended Iranian involvement in regional affairs, and said Iran would continue supporting Iraq and Syria in their struggle against ISIS and terrorism, both diplomatically and by deploying military advisors (Fars News Agency, May 22, 2017).
- Hossein Amir Abdollahian, special international affairs advisor to the speaker of the Majlis (Iranian parliament), said on TV that the objectives of Trump's visit to the Middle East were to further American efforts to weaken the "resistance axis," form a new coalition against Iran to curb its regional influence, and redraw the regional map in Syria and Iraq. Regarding the IRGC fighters killed in Syria and Iraq, he said they had sacrificed their lives for the sake of Iran's national security and for regional security, which were one and the same (Mehr, May 22, 2017).
- Masoud Jazaeri, Deputy Commander in Chief of the Iranian army, said the only way to bring peace and security to the Middle East was through America's withdrawing its forces and ending its support for terrorism and aggression against independent states, carried out by "reactionary regimes dependent [on the West]" (Tasnim, May 22, 2017).



Masoud Jazaeri, Deputy Commander in Chief of the Iranian army (Tasnim News, May 22, 2017)

■ Hossein Salami, IRGC deputy commander, said the remarks made by Donald Trump and the Arab leaders at the summit meeting in Riyadh were an admission of Iran's regional superiority. "Fifty heads of state gathered in Saudi Arabia and the only thing they had to say was that Iran was so powerful it could not be restrained, which is a source of pride for us," said Salami (Tasnim, May 24, 2017).



Hossein Salami, IRGC deputy commander (Tasnim News, May 24, 2017)

Iranian Intervention in Syria and Lebanon

■ Iranian President Hassan Rouhani spoke on the phone with Russian President Vladimir Putin on May 27, 2017. They discussed bilateral relations and regional developments. Rouhani said their increasing cooperation in Syria was important, and that Iran was determined to continue its cooperation with Russia and Syria (Fars News Agency, May 27, 2017).

■ Ali Shamkhani, secretary of the Supreme Council for National Security, met in Russia with Nikolai Patrushev, secretary of the Russian Security Council, on May 23, 2017. They met on the sidelines of the international security conference and discussed Iranian-Russian cooperation in Syria and Iraq, and ways to increase intelligence sharing and improve military and diplomatic coordination. Shamkhani said the military and political successes in the struggle against terrorism, which made it possible to attain a ceasefire in Syria, led the terrorism-sponsoring countries to increase their efforts. He added that the American refusal to implement the Russian-Iranian proposal for an independent investigation into the chemical weapons attack in the town of Khan Shaykhun proved that the United States was looking for an excuse for military intervention in Syria (Asr-e Iran, May 23, 2017).



Ali Shamkhani (center right) at a meeting with Nikolai Patrushev (second from right) (Asr-e Iran, May 23, 2017).

■ Shamkhani told the Russian newspaper Kommersant that he rejected Trump's claims that Iran undermined regional stability and sponsored terrorism. He said Iran had been fighting terrorism for the past 40 years, while Trump had chosen to begin his first overseas trip by visiting Saudi Arabia, which sponsored and financed terrorists. Shamkhani said the terrorists in Syria and Iraq served as tools of American foreign policy, and that the only group genuinely fighting terrorism was the Iranian-Russian-Syrian-Iraqi coalition. He claimed Iran sought peace and stability for Syria and that if requested, Iran was prepared to consider deploying its troops to preserve order and security in Syrian "safe zones." He objected to American participation in preserving Syrian security because, he said, only the Syrian government was authorized to decide who could be allowed into the country. The Americans, he claimed, supported terrorism and instability in Syria, and the Syrian government therefore had no interest in an American presence (Fars News Agency, May 27, 2017).

■ Levan Jagarian, the Russian ambassador to Tehran, told the Iranian Mehr news agency on May 28, 2017 that Russia was very pleased with its cooperation with Iran in Syria. He said senior Russian and Iranian officials constantly coordinated their Syrian policies. He said Russia rejected the claims made by the United States and some of the Arab leaders that Iran supported regional terrorism. He claimed Iran was itself a victim of terrorism and a serious partner in the fight against it, especially in Syria. He added that according to Russia, Iran played an important role in preserving regional stability and that the crisis in Syria could not be resolved without Iranian involvement. As to the possibility that the Russian air force would again make use of the Iranian

military airfield in Hamedan, Jagarian said it could happen if future developments in Syria warranted it.

■ Several Iranian news websites reported that when high-ranking hardline cleric Ayatollah Mohammad Taqi Mesbah Yazdi visited Lebanon in April, Hassan Nasrallah, secretary general of Hezbollah, presented him with a uniform he claimed had belonged to an Israeli soldier captured during the Second Lebanon War. The uniform was for display in a museum (Mashreq News, May 24, 2017).



IDF uniform presented to Ayatollah Mohammad Taqi Mesbah Yazdi during a visit to Lebanon (Mashreq News, May 24, 2017)

Iranian Intervention in Iraq

■ Sha'aban Nasiri, a senior IRGC officer and a veteran of the Iran-Iraq War, was killed fighting ISIS in Mosul, Iraq, on May 26, 2017.



Sha'aban Nasiri, senior IRGC officer, killed in Mosul, Iraq (Twitter, May 26, 2017).

■ New photos circulated on the social networks show Qasem Soleimani, commander of the IRGC's Qods Force, standing next to Iraqi Shi'ite militia fighters on the Syria-Iraq border. Last week Hadi al-Ameri, secretary general of the Shi'ite military Badr movement, said that the militias had advanced to the Syrian border in their fight against ISIS.



Qasem Soleimani (third from right) with Iraqi Shi'ite militia fighters (Twitter, May 29, 2017).

Iranian Intervention in the Palestinian Arena

■ Qasem Soleimani congratulated Ismail Haniyeh on his election to the head of the new Hamas' political bureau in Qatar and Yahya al-Sinwar as head of the political bureau's branch in the Gaza Strip. He wrote that Iran wished for strengthened unity with its friends in Hamas, who were allies in the "resistance axis." He said he hoped

Hamas' new leadership would continue strengthening its chosen path of "resistance" and jihad to restore the Palestinian cause to the heart of the Muslims' global struggle to liberate Jerusalem and all of Palestine. He added he also hoped Hamas would counteract the attempts made by "global arrogance" [i.e., the West] and the Zionists to remove jihad from the path of Islam and seize Jerusalem (Fars, May 24, 2017).

■ The London-based Saudi Arabian-sponsored newspaper al-Sharq al-Awsat reported on May 30, 2017 that in recent talks held in Lebanon by senior Hamas officials and representatives of the IRGC and Hezbollah, Iran and Hamas agreed, in principle, that Tehran would renew its financial support for Hamas and strengthen bilateral cooperation. The paper, quoting "Palestinian sources," also reported that in the near future Ismail Haniyeh, head of the new Hamas political bureau, would head a Hamas delegation to Tehran to settle disagreements between Iran and Hamas, and strengthen ties following the crisis in relations that began with the outbreak of the Syrian civil war. Senior Hamas official Musa Abu Marzouq, speaking to the Palestinian newspaper al-Quds, denied the al-Sharq al-Awsat report, calling it false and baseless. He said there had been no changes in Iran-Hamas relations.

■ On May 28, 2017, Hossein Amir Abdollahian, special international affairs advisor to the speaker of the Majlis, met with Khaled al-Qaddumi, Hamas representative in Tehran (Mehr, May 28, 2017).



Khaled al-Qaddumi meets with Hossein Amir Abdollahian (ircana.ir, May 28, 2017)