



Spotlight on Iran¹

June 18 – July 2, 2017

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Overview

- ✓ On June 18, 2017, in response to the June 7 ISIS attacks on the Majlis building and the Khomeini shrine, the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) attacked ISIS targets in the Deir al-Zor region in eastern Syria. They attacked with six Zulfaqr surface-to-surface medium-range¹ missiles, launching them from bases in Kermanshah and Kurdistan in western Iran. Iran exploited the event for domestic and foreign purposes to present its military might. Iranian officials emphasized that the missile attack was merely the first warning, and in the future Iran's response would be far stronger.
- ✓ In response to the White House threat to take measures against the Syrian regime if it carried out another chemical attack, senior Iranian officials warned the United States against escalating in Syria.
- ✓ Iraqi Prime Minister Haidar al-Abadi paid a visit to Tehran where he met with Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and President Hassan Rouhani. Khamenei told al-Abadi not to trust the Americans, and to prevent US forces from entering Iraq. He said the arrival of the Iraqi Shi'ite militias on the Iraq-Syria border was strategic and important, and expressed his opposition to holding an referendum on independence in Iraqi Kurdistan.
- ✓ On June 23, 2017, the Iranians marked the annual Global Jerusalem Day. Given the continuing diplomatic crisis between Iran and Saudi Arabia, at this year's rallies anti-Saudi Arabian slogans accompanied the traditional condemnation of and incitement against Israel and the United States. The concluding statement issued by the organizers of the rallies restated the need to "liberate" Jerusalem and the efforts to destroy Israel and wipe out the "region's cancerous growth" as the Muslim world's top priority.

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.

The Iranian Missile Attack on ISIS Targets in Syria

■ On June 18, 2017, in response to the June 7, 2017 ISIS attacks on the Majlis (Iranian parliament) building and the Khomeini shrine, the IRGC fired six Zulfaqr surface-to-surface missiles. The missiles were launched from two bases in Kermanshah and Kurdistan in western Iran, attacking ISIS targets in the Deir al-Zor region in eastern Syria. According to the statement issued by the IRGC, the missiles hit ISIS command and logistic centers, killing dozens of terrorists (one of whom was senior commander ISIS Sa'ad al-Husseini) and destroying weapons, equipment and systems (Tasnim, June 18-19, 2017). On June 21, 2016, the IRGC issued another statement claiming that the intelligence for the attack had been gathered by the IRGC's Qods Force and provided to the IRGC's Aerospace Force (Fars, June 21, 2017). Iran exploited the event for domestic and foreign purposes to present its military might. Iranian officials emphasized that the missile attack was merely the first warning, and in the future Iran's response would be far stronger.



Missiles launched at eastern Syria from western Iran (@Kermanshah19 Twitter account, June 18, 2017).

■ Amir Ali Hajizadeh, commander of the IRGC Aerospace Force, said Iran's enemies should be aware that Tehran was not London or Paris, and that if they made another mistake they would be struck even harder. He said Iran's missiles had passed through Iraqi airspace and hit targets in Syria. He claimed drones that took off from the region of Damascus had sent Iran pictures of the attack in Deir al-Zor in real time, adding that all six missiles had hit their targets (Fars, June 19, 2017). Amir Ali Hajizadeh told a press conference that reports published in Israel claiming most of the missiles had not hit their targets were false. He said all the missiles had hit their

targets, and only their engines, which disengaged about 100 kilometers (60 miles) before the strike, had fallen in Iraqi territory (Fars, June 24, 2017).

■ Ahmad-Reza Pourdastan, deputy commander of the Iranian army, said the world should be aware that Iran's defensive power was not limited to its geographical borders and that it would act at any place under threat (Defa Press, June 19, 2017).

■ Ramazan Sharif, IRGC spokesman, said the objective of the missile attack was to punish those who had carried out the terrorist attack in Tehran. He said the missiles has been launched in coordination with Syria, Iraq and Russia, adding that the attack was also intended to send the message to the terrorists and their regional and international sponsors not to attempt to undermine Iran's national security (ycr.ir, June 19, 2017).

■ Yadollah Javani, senior advisor to the supreme leader's representative in the IRGC, said that by attacking Syria Iran had proved it could turn every threat into an opportunity and to destroy the source of any threat. He said it showed the might of Iran's missiles was genuine and not mere propaganda, and that Iran was determined to preserve its national security. The IRGC, he added, had kept their promise to retaliate for the terrorist attack on Tehran, and the missiles were only a small part of the punishment Iran intended to inflict on the terrorists (Asr-e Iran, June 19, 2017).

■ Yahya Rahim Safavi, senior military advisor to the Supreme Leader, said firing the missiles had sent a message to the United States and certain regional countries which thought they could attack Iran without fear of reprisal for their aggression (Fars, June 21, 2017).

■ Iranian President Hassan Rouhani called the attack "justified and essential." He said the decision to attack had been made by the Iranian Supreme National Security Council (which he chairs) and not by an individual person or single military body. He said every attempt to harm Iran would be met with an uncompromising response and that if there were another attack, Iran would respond more decisively (website of the Iranian president, June 20, 2017).

■ Mohammad Baqer Nobakht, spokesman for the Iranian government, praised the attack in Syria, saying the IRGC's response to the attacks on Tehran symbolized Iran's national might and proved that regional security was Iran's number one priority in its fight against terrorism.

- Alaeddin Boroujerdi, chairman of the Majlis committee for national security and foreign policy, said Iran's missile attack had begun a new phase in Iran's strategy of fighting against terrorism, and had sent a message to the sponsors of terror in the region, including the United States and its allies. He praised the IRGC, saying Iran preserved the right to launch more missiles at terrorist positions at any time when circumstances demanded. Terrorists should be aware, he said, that Iran would not tolerate attacks on its security (Tasnim, June 19, 2017).
- Bahram Qasemi, spokesman for the Iranian foreign ministry, said the missile launch had been a "warning" to the terrorists, adding that Iran would use every means to defend its security and stability, and that as opposed to other states, it relied only on itself when it came to security (ISNA, June 19, 2017).
- Hossein Sheikholeslam, advisor to the Iranian foreign minister and former Iran ambassador to Damascus, said the targets of the missile attack were the sites where the terrorist attacks in Tehran had been planned. He added that the attack would improve the balance of power in Syria, tilt the scales in favor of the Syrian army and the forces of the resistance, and send the message to the enemies of the Islamic Revolution, to the United States and to Saudi regime that Iran could destroy any target anywhere (Tasnim, June 19, 2017).
- On June 18, 2017, Amir Hossein Abdollahian, deputy foreign minister for the Arab states and Africa, tweeted that the missile attack had been a "soft warning" for the terrorists in Syria. Mohsen Rezaei, former IRGC commander, tweeted that it had been "the beginning of revenge against ISIS," and a message to the sponsors of terrorism.

Iranian Intervention in Syria

- IRGC fighter Hamid Qanadian was killed in Syria on June 18, 2017. He was in charge of head of field hospitals on the Syrian front.



Hamid Qanadian (left), killed in Syria (Mashregh News, June 19, 2017).

- In view of the growing tension between the United States and the Assad regime, and the White House threats to act against the Syrian regime if it carries out another chemical attack, Mohammad Javad Zarif, Iranian foreign minister, warned that escalation in Syria would help ISIS. He tweeted that support for the terrorist groups in Syria should be stopped, and claimed that the current American approach served the extremists, especially ISIS, at a time when the organization had been expelled from Iraq and Syria. Instead of implementing policies to strengthen extremists, he claimed, the United States should join the "real war" against them (IRNA, June 27, 2017).

- Ali Shamkhani, secretary of the Supreme Council for National Security, also warned the United States against escalating the crisis in Syria. In response to American threats against Syria, he said that with its reckless behavior in Syria, America was playing with fire and that its threats were meant to prevent the advance of the Syrian army. He said that if the United States had evidence that the Syrian regime was planning to use chemical weapons, such evidence had to be presented to the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, which would examine it in cooperation with the Syrian government (Tasnim, June 28, 2017).

Iranian Intervention in Iraq

- On June 20, 2017, Iraqi Prime Minister Haidar al-Abadi arrived in Tehran for a visit. While there he met with Iranian supreme leader Ali Khamenei, President Hassan Rouhani, and Ali Larijani, speaker of the Majlis. He had arrived in Iran from Saudi Arabia (Mehr, June 20, 2017). Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei advised al-Abadi not to trust the Americans, because, he claimed, they opposed Iraq's independence, identity

and unity. He said the Americans should not be given an opportunity to penetrate more deeply into Iraq under the pretext of training. He claimed the Americans had no interest in destroying ISIS, which they had established, or in expelling it from Iraq. Khamenei also said that the arrival of the Iraqi Shi'ite militias along the Iraq-Syria border was strategic and important. He emphasized the need to preserve Iraq's territorial integrity, adding that Iran opposed holding an referendum on independence in Iraqi Kurdistan (website of the supreme leader, June 20, 2017).



Khamenei and al-Abadi meet in Tehran (website of the supreme leader, June 21, 2017).

- Meeting with al-Abadi, Iranian President Rouhani also said he opposed a divided Iraq, claiming that geographical changes and division would not serve the interests of any regional country, and that Iran supported a unified Iraq. He said there was nothing to prevent increased cooperation between Iran and Iraq, and stressed the need to implement the financial and commercial agreements they had signed (website of the Iranian president, June 20, 2017).

Iranian Intervention in the Palestinian Arena

- On June 23, 2017, Iran marked the annual World Jerusalem Day, which has been held since 1979, according to a decision made by Ayatollah Khomeini, the founder and leader of the Islamic Revolution. The objective of World Jerusalem Day is to show the support of Iran and the Muslim world for the Palestinian cause and the "liberation of Jerusalem." Given the continuing diplomatic crisis between Iran and Saudi Arabia, at this year's rallies anti-Saudi Arabian slogans accompanied the traditional condemnation of and incitement against Israel and the United States. According to the concluding statement issued by the organizers of the rallies, the

"liberation" of Jerusalem and efforts to destroy Israel and wipe out the "region's cancerous growth" are the Muslim world's top priority. The statement condemned the détente among several regional states, especially Saudi Arabia and Israel, and their sponsorship of terrorism. It also expressed support for the forces of "resistance" in Syria, Iraq, Yemen and Bahrain, and called the United States the "number one enemy" (IRNA, June 23, 2017).



World Jerusalem Day processions in Tehran (ISNA, June 23, 2017).

- On the eve of World Jerusalem Day Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei said it did not only signify the defense of oppressed people who had been expelled from their houses and homeland. Today the defense of Palestine was tantamount to defending the truth, which was bigger than the Palestinian cause. The fight against the "Zionist regime" was the fight against "arrogance" [i.e., the West] and the hegemonic system, said Khamenei (Fars, June 21, 2017).
- A statement published by the IRGC on the anniversary of World Jerusalem Day said that the "liberation of Jerusalem" and the rescue of the Palestinian people could only be accomplished by means of "resistance" and with the overall support of the Islamic nation for the intifada. The statement criticized the willingness of some of the regional countries to compromise and normalize relations with the "Zionist regime" (Tasnim, June 22, 2017).