



Spotlight on Iran¹ (June 20 – July 3, 2016)

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Main Points

- ✓ On June 19, 2016, Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif removed Hossein-Amir Abdollahian, deputy foreign minister for Arab-African affairs, from his post and replaced him with Hossein Jaber Ansari, the Iranian foreign ministry spokesman. The move raised speculations about possible changes in Iran's regional policies, especially regarding Syria.
- ✓ At least four more Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) fighters were killed in Syria during the past two weeks.
- ✓ The Iranian media reported that Qasem Soleimani, commander of the IRGC's Qods Force, had recently returned to southern Aleppo in the wake of intensified fighting. His arrival is apparently related to the battles between the Syrian army and the Al-Nusra Front-led Al-Fateh Army, currently being waged in the villages south of the city. Soleimani returned to Iraq in the last few days.
- ✓ Last week Ali Shamkhani, the secretary of Iran's Supreme Council for National Security, went to Moscow, where he met with senior Russian officials to discuss recent developments in Syria.
- ✓ In a speech marking 40 days since the death of Hezbollah operative Mustafa Badr al-Din, Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah said the organization received its funding from Iran, as it received the missiles it used to threaten Israel. In response, a spokesman for the IRGC said Iran's support for the struggle against Israel was not a secret.
- ✓ On July 1, 2016, Iran marked Global Jerusalem Day. The event was initiated in 1979 by Ayatollah Khomeini, and its objective is to express the support of Iran and the entire Muslim world for the Palestinian cause and the "liberation of Jerusalem." On the eve of Global Jerusalem Day senior Iranian officials called on Iranian citizens to participate in the rallies held in city centers.
- ✓ Iran strongly criticized Bahrain's decision to revoke the citizenship of senior Shi'ite cleric Sheikh Issa Qassim. Bahrain claimed the sheikh exploited his status as Bahraini citizen to "serve foreign interests" and preach separatism and violence. In a strongly worded and exceptional statement, Qasem Soleimani, commander of the IRGC's Qods Force, warned the Bahrain authorities that continued "mistreatment" of the sheikh was liable to lead to an armed uprising and the overthrow of the regime.

General Information

- On June 19, 2016, Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif removed Hossein-Amir Abdollahian, deputy foreign minister for Arab-African affairs, from his

¹Spotlight 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.

spokesman. In recent years Abdollahian had been in charge of the Iranian foreign ministry's regional and international relations concerning the situation in Syria. Abdollahian was also involved in attempts to find a solution for the crisis in Yemen. He is considered as a hard-liner, and removing him from office may be indicative of disagreements among senior Iranian officials regarding Iran's regional policies, especially concerning Syria, or of the foreign minister's intention to increase his ministry's involvement in the Syrian issue.

- Iranian hardliners were critical of Abdollahian's removal. The students' Basij in six Tehran universities issued a statement claiming that removing Abdollahian weakened the "resistance front" and was a surrender to the US lobby and some of the Arab leaders, who wanted him replaced because of his "revolutionary and anti-imperialistic" views (Basij News, June 20, 2016).

- Alaeddin Boroujerdi, chairman of Iran's parliament's Foreign Policy and National Security Committee, also criticized the removal of Abdollahian. He said his committee was displeased with the removal of an "effective" individual, but noted that no change was expected in Iran's regional policies, especially with regard to its support of the "resistance front" (Mehr, June 21, 2016).

- Foreign Minister Zarif said in response that the decision to replace Abdollahian had been taken several months ago. He categorically rejected claims that it the outcome of external pressures, and said such claims weakened the "resistance camp" and insulted Iran (ISNA, June 21, 2016).

- Meeting with the families of IRGC and Afghan fighters killed in Syria, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei claimed the main reason for the formation of ISIS and its activity in Iraq and Syria had been to defeat Iran, but thanks to the great strength of the Iranian regime, the organization had been halted.

- Khamenei strongly criticized the decision of the Bahraini authorities to revoke the citizenship of Sheikh Issa Qassim (see below), saying any further mistreatment would only increase the struggle of young Bahrainis against the government (Tasnim News, June 25, 2016).



Khamenei speaking before the families of IRGC fighters killed in Syria (Fars, June 25, 2016).

- In an interview with Al-Alam, Iran's Arabic-language TV station, Hojjat ul-Islam Ali Saedi, representative of the supreme leader to the IRGC, strongly attacked Saudi Arabia and justified the presence of Iranian "advisors" in Syria and Iraq. He said Saudi Arabia's military involvement in Yemen and Bahrain aided terrorist groups in Syria, while Iran's involvement was limited to providing advice to countries requesting it. He claimed that if Saudi Arabia stopped meddling in Iraq and if the country were secure, the presence of Qasem Soleimani, the commander of the Qods Force, would no longer be necessary. He added that it was not Iran's intention to harm Iraq's Sunnis, but rather to help the Iraq forces fight terrorism (Farda News, June 19, 2016).
- On June 21, 2016, Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif addressed a gathering at the International Diplomatic Academy in Paris. He said that establishing a federal government would not solve the Syrian crisis. He said Iran supported a comprehensive political solution and that the question of Bashar Assad's future was not the only issue that needed to be addressed. As to events in Bahrain, he said Iran was concerned about the situation, where a minority oppressed the majority of the country's population. The opposition in Bahrain, he claimed, did not want to overthrow the government, but the measures taken by the government of Bahrain blocked the way to a political solution (Fars, June 25, 2016).
- In a long interview with the Mehr News Agency on June 25, 2016, in preparation of Global Jerusalem Day, Iraj Masjedi, senior advisor to the commander of the IRGC's Qods Force, discussed regional developments. He said that Qasem Soleimani, commander of the Qods Force, was responsible for implementing Iran's policy, aid and military support in Iraq. He said many Iraqis had pictures of Soleimani hanging on

their walls next to pictures of high ranking clerics, an indication of the strong bond between the Iraqis and the Qods Force commander, based upon Iran's support of the Iraqi people.



Iraj Masjedi (Mehr, June 25, 2016).

- Masjedi said he hoped the battle against the takfiri organizations in Iraq would be won in the near future, thanks to the joint efforts of the Iraqi government, the Iraqi army, the Shi'ite militias and the support of Iran. In his assessment the fight against those organizations in Syria might take a long time, but they would continue to be weakened there as well.
- As to the importance of Global Jerusalem Day, he said it symbolized the rebirth of the Islamic values of the fight against Zionism and the obligation of all Muslims and Iranians to carry out their "revolutionary Islamic mission." He added that the essence of the Islamic Revolution and the Iranian regime was to support oppressed Muslims and fighters struggling against oppression, Zionism and imperialism.
- Asked about Iran's relations with Hamas, he said Hamas deserved respect as one of revolutionary Palestinian movements fighting Zionism. He said that after the outbreak of the Syrian civil war, Hamas adopted policies unacceptable to Iran which led to a cooling of relations. Now, however, relations between Hamas and Tehran had improved.

Iranian Intervention in Syria and Lebanon

- At least four more Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) fighters were killed in Syria during the past two weeks.
- On June 20, 2016, the Mehr News Agency reported that Qasem Soleimani, commander of the IRGC's Qods Force, had recently returned to the region of southern Aleppo after battles in the area intensified. His arrival is apparently related to the fighting between the Syrian army and the Al-Nusra Front-led Al-Fateh Army, currently being waged in the villages south of the city. The Syrian army, supported by Hezbollah operatives and Shi'ite militiamen supported by Iran, tried to reestablish their control over the area. The focal point of the fighting is the village of Khalsa, south of Aleppo, where the Syrians and their allies suffered heavy losses. In recent weeks Soleimani spent most of his time in the the Iraqi city of Fallujah and participated in coordinating the battle for its liberation. Soleimani has recently returned to Iraq. A picture published by social media (Iranian Telegram channels, June 30, 2016) shows him visiting the home of former Iraqi prime minister, Nouri al-Maliki, for a Ramadan fast-breaking meal (Iftar).



- Mohammad Javad Zarif, Iranian foreign minister, denied the existence of a disagreement between himself and Qasem Soleimani regarding Iran's policies in Syria. Speaking at a Dutch think tank in The Hague during a trip to Europe, he said he had spoken with Soleimani and they were both of the opinion that the solution to the Syrian crisis was political (Alef, June 23, 2016).



Soleimani (left) in Syria (Tabnak, June 20, 2016).

- Ali Shamkhani, secretary of the Supreme Council for National Security, went to Moscow last week. Shamkhani, who is a senior coordinator for political, military and security affairs with Russia and Syria, met with Sergey Shoygu, the Russian defense minister, Nikolai Patrushev, the secretary of the National Security Council, and Alexander Lavrentyev, the Russian president's envoy for Middle Eastern affairs. They discussed regional developments, especially in Syria, and bilateral matters (Mehr, June 28, 2016).
- Ali-Akbar Velayati, international advisor to the supreme leader, said in an interview that Iranian support had prevented the disintegration of Syria . Western countries, he said, especially the United States, had tried to topple the government of Syria, which was Iran's strategic partner. They wanted to set up a government that would follow forced American policy and had no problems with Israel. Iran opposed the move because it conflicted with Iran's strategic interests. Without Iran's support, the Syrian government would have collapsed within a few weeks, which in all probability would have led to Syria's disintegration (Fars, June 28, 2016).
- Hossein Sheikholeslam, former Iranian deputy foreign minister, denied that Iran had changed its Syrian policy. Sheikholeslam, who was Iran's ambassador to Syria and is currently advisor to the Iranian parliament (Majlis) for international affairs, said there were people who thought Iran had changed its Syrian policy or that Russia's presence there was detrimental to Iran's status, but that was mere speculation. He said Iran's Syrian policy was unwavering and its influence was growing stronger.

Russia's airstrikes, he said, were very important, but the ground activities of the Syrian army and resistance forces were far more important (Fars, June 20, 2016).

■ In a speech marking 40 days since the death of Hezbollah operative Mustafa Badr al-Din, Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah admitted that Hezbollah received its funding from Iran, as it received the missiles it used to threaten Israel. He thanked Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, the Iranian government and President Hassan Rouhani for their support of Hezbollah, and said that thanks to Iran's direct support, the measures taken by Lebanese banks against Hezbollah and the American sanctions imposed on the banks in Lebanon would not damage the organization's operational capabilities (Al-Alam, June 24, 2026).



Qasem Soleimani (left) and Mustafa Badr al-Din (Al-Manar, June 25, 2016).

■ Following the speech, Ramazan Sharif, IRGC spokesman, said Iran had no reason to be concerned by Nasrallah's remarks about Iranian support for Hezbollah. He said that so far the Zionists and the West had done everything they could against Iran and there was now nothing left for them to do.

■ Iran's support for Palestine, he said, and the fight against the "Zionist regime" were not a secret. He said that Iran's position had been made clear by declarations of Ayatollah Khomeini, the leader of the Islamic Revolution, and of the supreme leader, and that "Zionist regime" was the number one enemy of the Muslim countries in general and Iran in particular. He added that Nasrallah's remarks about Iranian support for Hezbollah were also aimed at the Arab states, so that the inexperienced rulers of Saudi Arabia and the takfiris would be aware of the results of their efforts to turn Iran and the Shi'ites into the number one enemies of the Arab countries and the

Sunnis, while the "Zionist regime" was still the real main enemy (ISNA, June 26, 2016).

■ Last week Hossein Jaber Ansari, the new deputy foreign minister for Arab-African affairs, paid his first official visit to Lebanon, where he met with Lebanon's prime minister, its foreign minister and with Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah, to discuss regional developments (Tasnim, June 28, 2016).



Hossein Jaber Ansari meets with Hassan Nasrallah (Tasnim, June 28, 2016).

Iranian Intervention in Iraq

■ Ahmad Hamal, spokesman for the Iraqi foreign ministry, said the intelligence cooperation of Tehran, Moscow, Baghdad and Damascus had played a crucial role in the liberation of Fallujah. He claimed the anti-terrorism headquarters established by Iran, Russia and Iraq in Baghdad had provided the fighters with important information needed for the liberation of Fallujah (Fars, June 21, 2016).

Iranian Intervention in the Palestinian Arena

■ On July 1, 2016, Iran marked Global Jerusalem Day, which has been held since 1979, instituted by Ayatollah Khomeini, the leader of the Islamic Revolution. Its objective is to express the support of Iran and the rest of the Muslim world for the Palestinian cause and the "liberation of Jerusalem." On the eve of Global Jerusalem Day senior Iranian officials called on Iranian citizens to participate in the rallies held in city centers.

- A statement released by the general staff of the Iranian armed forces asserted that the "liberation of Jerusalem" and the destruction of "the fake regime of Israel" were the most important issues facing the Muslim world today (Fars, June 8, 2016).
- The organizers of Global Jerusalem Day issued a summation of the day saying that the Iranian nation regarded the liberation of Jerusalem and the destruction of "the cancerous growth of Israel" as the Islamic Revolution's highest priority, and as of supreme importance for the Muslim world. According to the announcement, all the Palestinian groups had to unite in the struggle against Israel, and international and regional organizations and institutions had to act against the "Israeli plots" to "Judaize the occupied Palestinian lands and destroy the national and historical identity of Palestine."
- The announcement also condemned the "crimes carried out by the takfiri Islamic organizations and the Saudi authorities. It expressed support for the struggle being waged in Syria and Iraq against Islamic terrorism, and for the support of Iran's support through the IRGC in Syria and Iraq. The announcement called the United States enemy number one of the Iranian people and warned against attempts to increase its infiltration into Iran in the wake of the nuclear agreement (Fars, July 1, 2016).
- Given the ongoing crisis in the relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia, Global Jerusalem Day processions this year included slogans condemning Saudi Arabia and the royal house of Saud, alongside the usual condemnation and anti-Israeli, anti-American slogans and incitement.



**Iranian President Hassan Rouhani in a Global Jerusalem Day procession in Tehran
(Fars, July 1, 2016).**

Iranian Intervention in the Persian Gulf

- Iran strongly criticized Bahrain's decision to revoke the citizenship of senior Shi'ite cleric Sheikh Issa Qassim. Bahrain claimed he exploited his status as a Bahraini citizen to "serve foreign interests" and preach separatism and violence. The decision was made only a week after Bahrain suspended the activity of al-Wifaq, Bahrain's central Shi'ite opposition group.
- The Iranian foreign ministry said in a statement that the measures taken by the Bahraini authorities had destroyed hopes for a peaceful, negotiated solution (Mehr, June 20, 2016). In a strongly-worded and exceptional statement, Qasem Soleimani warned the Bahrain authorities that continued "mistreatment" of the sheikh was liable to lead to an armed uprising and the overthrow of the regime (Fars, June 20, 2016). Another statement released by the IRGC asserted that revoking Issa Qassim's citizenship was inhuman and anti-religious and would ignite an Islamic revolution in Bahrain that would lead to the regime's collapse.



Sheikh Daqqaq, Sheikh Issa Qassim's representative, holds a press conference in Tehran (Tasnim, June 22, 2016).

- Ali Larijani, speaker of the Majlis, said that revoking the citizenship of a senior Shi'ite cleric signaled "the last gasp" of the Bahraini regime. He said Bahrain should learn the lesson of the Islamic Revolution in 1979: when the Shah threatened to revoke the citizenship of those who refused to join the ruling party Rastakhiz, it was a sign that his rule was nearing