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Iranian Participation in the Liberation of Fallujah

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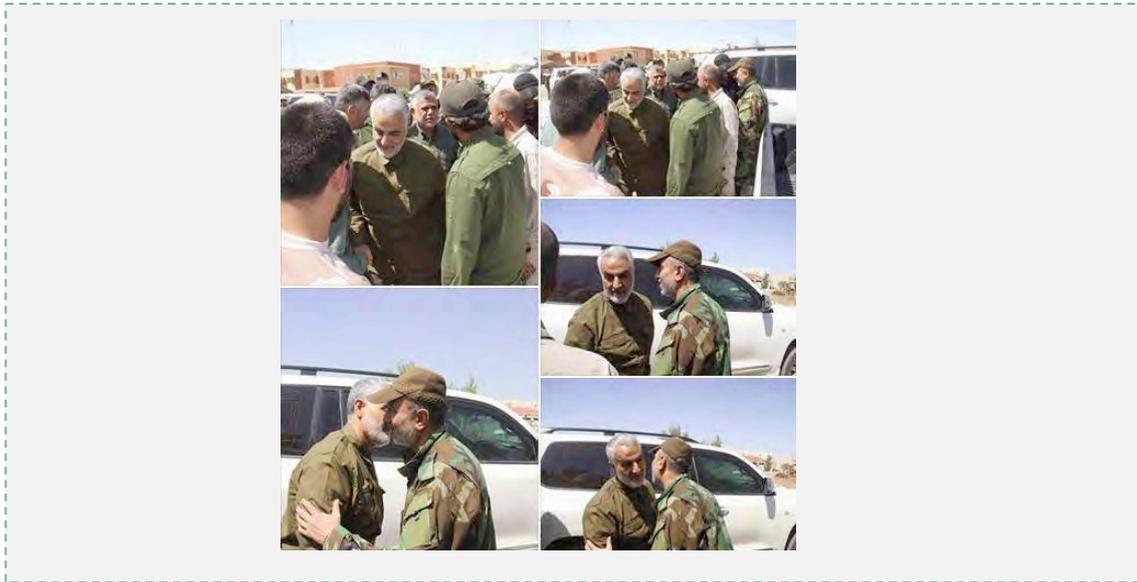


Qasem Soleimani, second from left, in the operations room of the Shi'ite militias engaged in fighting alongside the Iraqi army¹ to take control of Fallujah (Qasemsoliemani.ir, May 23, 2016).

Overview

1. On May 22, 2016, **Iraqi Prime Minister Haydar al-Abadi** announced the beginning of a campaign to liberate the city of Fallujah from ISIS. Fallujah, located 54 kilometers (about 33.5 miles) west of Baghdad, is the most important stronghold still held by ISIS in the Sunni Anbar Province (western Iraq). The campaign is being carried out by the Iraqi security forces with the participation of Shi'ite and Sunni militias, and with American support.
2. Since the beginning of the Fallujah campaign reports published by **the Iranian media have emphasized the participation of Iran and the Iraqi Shi'ite militias operating under Iranian direction in the fighting**. According to the reports, **Qasem Soleimani, commander of the IRGC's Qods Force, is present in the Fallujah area and plays a central role in conducting the campaign**.

¹ Al-hashd al-shaabi ("the popular mobilization forces"), an umbrella organization of Shi'ite militias supported by Iran.



Qasem Soleimani in the Fallujah region after the campaign to liberate Fallujah began (Twitter, May 25, 2016).

3. **The Iraqi Shi'ite militias, operating with the support and direction of Iran, are in fact participating in the Fallujah campaign.** However, **there is a significant disparity between the degree of involvement of Iran and its proxies in the fighting, and the way that involvement is represented by the Iranians.** While the Iraqi security forces (especially the counterterrorism forces) have a main role in the fighting, **Iranian reports give prominence to the role played by Qasem Soleimani and the Shi'ite militias.** In effect, it would seem that **the role of the Shi'ite militias is limited to besieging the city, and apparently the Iraqi regime does not intend to allow them to enter it.** That is mainly because of American objections and **Iraqi regime concern that the Shi'ite militias might take revenge on Fallujah's local Sunni population,** which is liable to deepen the Sunni-Shi'ite schism and have repercussions for the continuation of the campaign against ISIS.

4. **This is not the first time that there have been differences between the actual involvement of Iran and the Shi'ite militias in the fighting and exaggerated reports in the Iranian media.** After the liberation of Ramadi (the capital of Anbar Province) in December 2015 the Iranian media gave prominence to the involvement of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) and Shi'ite militia forces in the fighting, even though their role in taking control of the city was marginal. After the liberation of Ramadi the Iranian-backed Shi'ite militias attempted to ensure their inclusion in the campaign against ISIS. However, **the central government in Baghdad opted to continue relying on American support and non-Shi'ite forces.**

5. In recent months there has been an increase in internal Iraqi criticism of Iran's involvement, on the grounds that Iran encourages the sectarian schism between Shi'ites and Sunnis and meddles in Iraq's internal affairs. Criticism reached new heights during the political crisis of April 2016 between Prime Minister Al-Abadi and the Iraqi parliament over the prime minister's proposed reform program. During the temporary takeover of the Iraqi parliament building by supporters of Muqtada al-Sadr, a Shi'ite cleric with political clout, **Iraqi demonstrators shouted extreme anti-Iranian slogans and protested Iran's meddling in their country's politics.**

6. The limited involvement of Iran and the Shi'ite militias in the fighting in Fallujah is also the result of the decline of Iraq's strategic importance to Iran and the subsequent downgrading of Iraq as an Iranian priority over the past year. While ISIS has clearly become weaker in Iraq and its threat to Iran has decreased, **in Syria Iran has been forced to cope with the continuing predicament of the Assad regime, and the addition of Russian involvement in the fighting. Thus Iran has become more attentive to Syria than Iraq.** Despite the achievements of the Assad regime's supporters in recent months, the war in Syria continues and Iran and the IRGC are still faced with **a significant challenge, whose importance in Iranian eyes is currently greater than Iraq's.**

7. However, despite the constraints and difficulties, **Iran is still determined to position itself as a central factor in the continuing campaign against ISIS in Syria and Iraq.** The involvement of the IRGC and the personal involvement of Qasem Soleimani in the campaign in Iraq **are intended to signal that Iran still plays an important role in Iraq. They are also intended to signal that Iran is the most influential country in the Middle East and continues operating against its enemies in the Middle East, i.e., ISIS, the United States and Israel.** Qasem Soleimani has personally become a symbol of Iran's regional power. **The Iranian regime has, therefore, a vested interest in glorifying him both at home and abroad,** even when the degree of his actual involvement in conducting the war in Iraq has significantly decreased.

8. With respect to **Iraqi politics**, the Iranian attempt to magnify the role of the Shi'ite militias, even if their role is marginal, **increases both the sectarian schism** and Sunni alienation towards the central government, and makes it difficult to proceed with the campaign against ISIS. It also magnifies the concerns of the Iraqi administration and the Shi'ites regarding **Iran's influence on Iraq's internal affairs.** That could be seen in the reactions of both Sunni and Shi'ite Iraqi politicians to

Qasem Soleimani visit to Fallujah.² The reactions came at a time when Sunni support for the Iraqi regime was considered of paramount importance, **especially with the upswing of the campaign to rid Anbar Province of ISIS operatives, and with the campaign to liberate the ISIS stronghold in Mosul on the horizon.**

² Three Sunni Iraqi lawmakers who related to Qasem Soleimani's visit to Fallujah claimed it could fuel sectarian tension and cast doubt on Baghdad's assertions that the offensive was an Iraqi-led effort to defeat ISIS (Reuters, May 28, 2016). However, the deputy chairman of the popular mobilization forces (the Shi'ite militias operated by Iran) told the Al-Sumaria News network that Iranian advisors had been fighting alongside popular mobilization forces since the beginning of the struggle, and that Soleimani was [in Fallujah] at the request of the Iraqi government and with the authorization of the Iraqi chief of staff (ISNA, May 29, 2016).

Appendix

The Campaign to Liberate Fallujah – the Situation on the Ground

1. On May 22, 2016, **Iraqi Prime Minister Haydar al-Abadi** announced the beginning of a campaign to liberate Fallujah from ISIS. Fallujah, located 54 kilometers (about 33.5 miles) west of Baghdad, is ISIS's most important remaining stronghold in the large Sunni Anbar Province. It has great symbolic value, as it was a jihadist stronghold when the American army was in Iraq. Most of its almost 360,000 inhabitants fled, but between 50,000 and 70,000 remain, and are currently under siege.
2. The main thrust to liberate the city is being carried out by Iraqi security forces, including the special counterterrorism forces. They are supported by Shi'ite and Sunni tribal militias, **who have a secondary role in the fighting**. The Iraqi fighting forces have American air support and American advisors for their ground forces. A spokesman for the American State Department recently confirmed that the United States was giving air and intelligence support to the Iraqi forces fighting in Fallujah (Alaraby.co.uk. May 24, 2016).
3. During **the first stage of the campaign** (May 23, 2016) the Iraqi army focused on taking control of the towns and villages surrounding Fallujah, and attacked the city with artillery fire. On May 23, 2016, the commander of operations of the Iraqi army announced the occupation of Al-Karamah, a city located 16 kilometers (about 10 miles) northwest of Fallujah. That gave the Iraqi army a good forward position from which to continue the campaign. During **the second stage, which began on May 24, 2016**, the Iraqi army, with support from the Shi'ite militias, advanced to the outskirts of Fallujah, **tightened the siege around it and reinforced its control of the surrounding area**.



Iraqi army forces on the outskirts of Fallujah (Al-Jazeera, May 29, 2016).

Iranian Participation in the Campaign to Liberate Fallujah

4. With the beginning of the Iraqi army campaign to conquer Fallujah, Iran rushed to announce its support. **Hossein Jaber Ansari, a spokesman for the Iranian foreign ministry**, said at his weekly press conference that Iran supported actions in Syria and Iraq to liberate areas conquered by Islamic "terrorist organizations." Asked about Iranian support for the campaign to liberate Fallujah, he claimed all Iranian actions were carried out in accordance with Syrian and Iraqi demands (Fars, May 23, 2016).

5. Reports issued by the Iranian media and Shi'ite militia sources supported by Iran **emphasized the participation of Iran and its proxies in the campaign to liberate the city**. The Iranian media recently reported that **Qasem Soleimani, commander of the IRGC's Qods Force, had gone to the battle zone to participate in conducting the campaign to liberate Fallujah**. On May 25, 2016, the Mehr news agency reported that "Soleimani visited Fallujah to command the campaign to liberate the city," and that while there **he met with commanders of the Shi'ite militias to discuss strategy**.

6. To reinforce Iran's self-aggrandizing propaganda, sources affiliated with the IRGC posted pictures to the social networks **showing Qasem Soleimani in the Fallujah area**. In one he appears with senior Iraqi Shi'ite militia commanders and several Iranian media claimed the pictures were taken in the operations room from which the Fallujah campaign was being conducted. However, all the commanders seen in the pictures belong to Shi'ite militias, which indicate **it was not the operations room used for the entire military operation, but rather only for the**

missions carried out by the Shi'ite militias. Qasem Soleimani returned to Tehran, apparently on May 27, 2016, and briefed a meeting of the Velayat faction of the Iranian parliament. Regarding developments in Iraq he said that Iran had an important role to play in the campaign against the terrorist groups operating in Iraq and stood behind the establishment of many "popular factions" [i.e., Shi'ite militias] supported by Iran (ISNA and ILNA, May 27, 2016).

7. The Iraqi Shi'ite militias operated by Iran do participate actively in the campaign in Fallujah. However, **there is a discrepancy in the media reports between the degree of the participation of Iran (and its proxies) in the fighting and the way that participation is represented by Iranian officials and media.** The Iraqi army, **especially its elite counterterrorism unit,** apparently bears the main brunt of the fighting, as it did in the liberation of Ramadi (see below). This time as well **the Shi'ite militias apparently have a marginal role and are limited to enforcing the siege around the city.**

8. On May 22, 2016, the London-based newspaper Al-Araby Al-Jadeed reported that a commander of the Iraqi army said fifteen Shi'ite militias were supposed to join the campaign to take control of Fallujah. He noted, however, that they would probably not enter the city **in view of American objections and concerns regarding revenge attacks directed against the Fallujah's Sunni population.** Fadel al-Issawi, a member of the Sunni tribal council in the Fallujah region and an opponent of ISIS, warned against pro-Iranian Shi'ite militia involvement in the liberation of the city. He claimed militia presence might lead to repeated acts of retribution against the Sunnis, as had occurred in the past. **Hadi al-Amiri,** commander of the Badr Shi'ite militia, also said the **Shi'ite militias did not intend to enter Fallujah and that their role was limited to maintaining a siege around the city.** He said that when control was taken of the city it would be turned over to the Iraqi security and counterterrorism forces (Fars, May 25, 2016).

The Secondary Role of the Shi'ite Militias: the Precedent of Ramadi

9. **It is not the first instance of a disparity between the actual involvement of Iran and the Shi'ite militias in the fighting and the involvement as represented by Iran.** On December 28, 2015, after seven days of fighting against ISIS, the Iraqi army, with air support from the United States and the coalition countries, took control of the center of Ramadi, an important city in the middle of Anbar Province. Ten

thousand Iraqi soldiers participated in the fighting, including operatives of the counterterrorism unit, with the support of about 5,000 Sunni militiamen. **The Shi'ite militias did not participate in campaign for Ramadi.**³

10. Nevertheless, Iran welcomed the liberation of Ramadi and managed to insinuate the Shi'ite militias into the success of the Iraqi army and Sunni militias: **Hassan Firouzabadi, chief of staff of the Iranian armed forces**, called the liberation "a great victory for the Iraqi army and the Sunni and Shi'ite popular militias," one that promised future victories (Fararu, December 28, 2015). The Iranian news websites and social networks posted **a picture of Qasem Soleimani in the eastern part of Anbar Province**. They represented the picture as current although it was clearly old (since one of the Shi'ite militia commanders photographed with Soleimani had been killed in July 2015). **Apparently the picture was deliberately issued at that time to give prominence to Qasem Soleimani and the role of the Shi'ite militias in the campaign to liberate Ramadi.**



Qasem Soleimani in the Sunni Anbar Province (Entekhab, December 26, 2015).

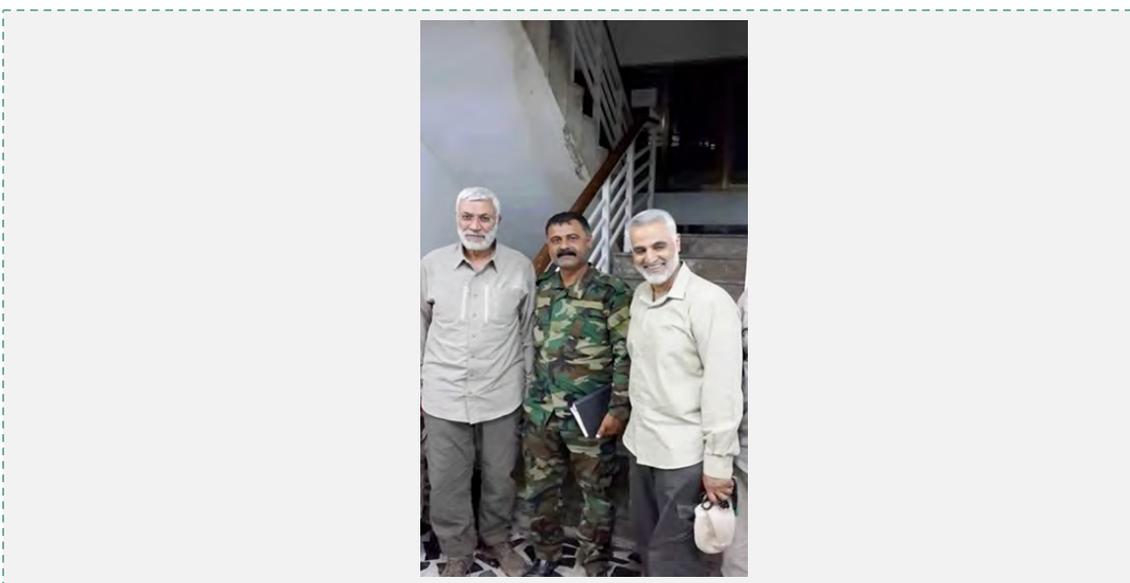
11. After the takeover of Ramadi and in preparation for continuing the campaign against other ISIS strongholds in Anbar Province (especially Fallujah), the Shi'ite militias operating under Iranian aegis tried to ensure their participation in the future campaigns. However, despite their stated interest, **the central government in Baghdad chose to rely mainly on non-Shi'ite fighters and the support of the United States** (which strongly objected to the participation of Shi'ite militias subordinate to Iran in the fighting). The tension between the Iraqi Shi'ite militias and

³ For further information, see the January 4, 2016 bulletin "The Liberation of Ramadi: The situation on the ground and significance," <http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/en/article/20932>.

the central government in Baghdad was manifested by **Hassan al-Sari**, a senior member of an Iraqi Shi'ite militia, who said, after the takeover of Ramadi, that the militias were determined to take control of Fallujah despite the pressure exerted on the Iraqi government by the United States and pro-American Iraqi politicians to keep them from entering the city (Fars, February 20, 2016).

Iraq vs. Syria: Iraq Loses Iranian Priority

12. Iran's involvement in the fighting in Fallujah is **limited** not only by American opposition and the reservations of the central government in Baghdad, **but also because Iraq's strategic importance for Iran declined significantly in 2015-2016**. ISIS's dramatic victories in Iraq, beginning in 2014, were a significant strategic challenge for Iran. The occupation of Mosul and the takeover of extensive areas in **Iraq threatened Iraq's territorial integrity and placed a hostile, violent force on Iran's border**. ISIS's victories forced Iran to deploy both weapons and advisors to Iraq. The chief advisor was Qasem Soleimani, who coordinated with the Iraqi regime and led the military campaign in Iraq using the Shi'ite militias. He paid frequent visits to Iraq in an effort to halt ISIS's relentless expansion, led in planning the campaign, supervised the delivery of military support and intelligence from Iran to Iraq, coordinated the joint fighting effort of the Iraqi army and the Shi'ite militias directed by the IRGC, and maintained constant contact with senior Iraqi officials both in the central government in Baghdad and the Kurdish leadership in northern Iraq.⁴



Qasem Soleimani (right) and Jamal al-Ibrahimi (Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis) (left), commander of the Shi'ite Hezbollah Brigades militia (Qasemsoleimani.ir. June 7, 2015).

⁴ For further information, see the October 29, 2015 bulletin, "Portrait of Qasem Soleimani, commander of the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps' Qods Force, Instigator of Iranian Subversion and Terrorism in the Middle East and around the Globe," <http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/en/article/20899>.

13. However, while 2014 was a year of victories for ISIS, **in 2015 it suffered a series of setbacks in Iraq that led to extensive loss of territory.** In 2015 the Iraqi army, with support from the Sunni and Shi'ite militias, took control of several key cities north and west of Baghdad and in the surrounding areas. They included Tikrit (April), the oil city of Baiji (October) and Ramadi (end of December), while in November the Kurdish forces, primarily the Peshmerga, took control of Sinjar and its environs in northern Iraq.

14. **The weakening of ISIS in Iraq in 2015 made it possible for Iran to divert some of its attention to the Syrian arena of the battle against ISIS.** The combined military successes of ISIS, Al-Nusra Front and other rebel organizations in northern and northwestern Syria in 2015 **raised doubts in Iran as to Assad's ability to remain in power over time.** That forced Iran to significantly increase its support for the Assad regime, whose territorial control had dwindled to vital areas known as "little Syria." In mid-September the Syrian regime's predicament led Iran to deploy more forces to Syria, apparently between 1,500 and 2,000 fighters, some of whom actively participated in the fighting.⁵ In October 2015 the Syrian army began a ground operation in the northern part of the country, supported by Iranian fighters and Hezbollah operatives, and with Russian air support. **The fighting in Syria, which had claimed the lives of about 400 Iranians, led to the increased personal involvement of Qasem Soleimani, to a great extent at the expense of Iraq.**

15. Despite the involvement of the Russian army (which also poses a challenge for Iran) and despite the impressive achievements in recent months of the forces supporting Assad, **the war in Syria has not been won.** For Iran, **the campaign in Syria is a serious challenge, far more acute and extreme than the one posed by Iraq.** The rebel attack on Khan Tuman, south of Aleppo, at the beginning of May 2016, **caused heavy losses to the IRGC and the Assad regime's supporters.** In addition, the death of Mustafa Badr al-Din, the commander of the Hezbollah forces in Syria, under circumstances which are still unclear, forced Iran to devote most of its attention the Syrian arena, again, at the expense of Iraq.

⁵ In recent months Iran reduced the number of its fighters in Syria as part of a redeployment of its forces. Today Iran's military activities in Syria are mainly conducted through Hezbollah operatives and Shi'ite militias of fighters from Afghanistan, Iraq and Pakistan who fight in Syria under the direction of the IRGC.

Increasing Iraqi Criticism of Iran

16. The problematic nature of Iran's intervention in Iraq is also **the result of growing internal Iraqi criticism of Iran**. Initially, while ISIS retained its power and the weak Iraqi army found it difficult to combat it, **the contribution of Qasem Soleimani and the IRGC to the campaign was greatly appreciated by senior Iraqi officials**. For example, in August 2015, **Ammar al-Hakim, chairman of the Supreme Iraqi Islamic Council**, said that without Soleimani's support, Iraq would not have been able to successfully resist ISIS (ABNA, August 18, 2016). However, **when the situation on the ground changed to the detriment of ISIS**, the political winds in Iraq changed as well.

17. During the past year **the Iraqi political-religious leadership has been showing increasing signs of aversion to Iran's growing influence, especially to Soleimani's personal intervention in the country's internal affairs**. Their aversion is based on **a genuine desire not to turn into an Iranian satellite, Iraq's fundamental desires for continued American support in the campaign against ISIS, and for maintaining correct relations with the Sunni Arab countries**.

18. In September 2015 there were a number of reports in the Arab press about **confrontations between Iraqi Prime Minister al-Abadi and Qasem Soleimani**. On September 12, 2015, the Lebanese daily Al-Nahar reported there had been two serious clashes between the two in August 2015. According to the reports, **the first clash** occurred after al-Abadi ordered the Iraqi security forces to examine the cargo of Iranian planes in Baghdad's airport in order to prevent weapons from reaching the Syrian regime and the Shi'ite militias in Iraq. **The second clash** occurred during a meeting al-Abadi held in the middle of August 2015 with former Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki and other senior Iraqi officials after al-Maliki returned from a visit to Tehran. Soleimani was also present at the meeting, and he criticized the political reforms al-Abadi proposed after public protests against corruption. Al-Abadi sharply asked Soleimani if he was speaking on behalf of the Iranian government or expressing his personal opinion. Soleimani answered that he was speaking as the advisor of the Iraqi popular militias. Al-Abadi said his own decisions were consistent with the will of the Iraqi people and the Shi'ite religious leadership in Najaf. He said there was no justification for Soleimani's presence at the meeting, after which Soleimani left the room.

19. Reservations regarding Qasem Soleimani's meddling in Iraq's internal affairs have not been limited to the political leadership, but **have been voiced by the Shi'ite religious leadership as well**. For example, **senior Shi'ite cleric Ayatollah Ali Sistani**, considered the senior Shi'ite religious authority in Iraq, expressed reservations over Soleimani's growing importance in Iraqi politics. An Iraqi politician told the Saudi-financed London-based daily Al-Sharq al-Awsat that Sistani had sent a letter to Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei asking if Soleimani's political intervention in Iraq was the result of orders from the supreme leader or carried out on his own initiative (Al-Sharq al-Awsat, September 7, 2015).

20. Iraqi criticism of Iranian intervention in Iraq's internal affairs recently increased with **the crisis that began in April 2016 between Prime Minister al-Abadi and the Iraqi parliament over the reform program the prime minister is trying to promote**. At the end of April supporters of **Muqtada al-Sadr** (a cleric and an politician influential among Iraqi Shi'ites) rioted and temporarily took control of the Iraqi parliament building. **They shouted anti-Iranian slogans and protested Iran's attempts to meddle in Iraqi politics**. In rebuttal, pro-Iranian Internet users, apparently encouraged by or with direct instructions from Iran, initiated a campaign on the social networks entitled "Thank you, Soleimani." They said their objective was to thank him for his activity and support for the campaign to expel ISIS from Iraq and Syria.



"Thank you, Soleimani" (Facebook, May 2, 2016).

What Do the Iranians Hope to Achieve in Iraq?

21. While the campaign against ISIS in Syria and Iraq is a strategic challenge for Iran, **it also creates attractive political opportunities. It allows Iran to represent itself as a key factor in restraining ISIS and to continue its efforts to increase its regional influence, whether through direct military intervention or by using proxies.** Thus even if Iran gives preference to Syria, and despite the difficulties it faces in Iraq, **Iran is determined to continue its involvement in Iraq by means of the Shi'ite militias, despite the price it will be forced to pay** (deepening the Sunni-Shi'ite schism, an increase in Iraqi regime concerns and even Shi'ite concerns regarding Iran).

22. The prominence given to the participation of the IRGC in Iraq, and Qasem Soleimani's personal involvement in the campaign against ISIS are not incidental. **Their objective is to reinforce the image of Iran and the IRGC as the strongest and most determined deterrent forces operating in the Middle East against the enemies of Iran, especially ISIS, the United States and Israel. Qasem Soleimani has personally become a symbol of Iran's regional power.** The Iranian regime clearly wants **to inflate his image both at home and abroad**, despite the fact that his involvement in conducting the fighting in Iraq and his influence in events on the ground have significantly decreased.



Qasem Soleimani (right) and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, commander of the Hezbollah Brigades Shi'ite militia, in the Fallujah region (Twitter, May 26, 2016).