

## ISSUE BRIEF

# Tehran Stands Atop the Syria-Iran Alliance

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The state that was once known as Syria has ceased to exist. The nominal central government of President Bashar al-Assad controls only sections of the country, with other portions in the hands, variously, of the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), al-Qaeda tied to Fatah al-Sham (otherwise known as Jabhat al-Nusra), People's Protection Units, the Democratic Union Party, and the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces. In addition, that which is in Assad's hands remains so thanks only to the combined intervention of Iranian conventional and Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and IRGC-Quds Forces, Hezbollah fighters, and the military support of the Russian Federation.

If Assad is ever again to sit atop his nation, whole and entirely under his heel as it once was, it will be only because of these outside forces. Despite the Kremlin's efforts to ensure a tactically advantageous military presence in Syria for the foreseeable future, Russia's role in controlling Syria's leadership going forward may be at least partly in question. Iran's role, however, is clear. Assad, or indeed any Alawite ruler that succeeds him, will serve solely at the pleasure of the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI).



**Pushback: Exposing and Countering Iran** is a project of the Middle East Peace and Security Initiative in the Atlantic Council's Brent Scowcroft Center on International Security. This series of reports examines the drivers, prospects, and constraints underpinning Iran's efforts to undermine US policy in the Middle East and restructure the regional order to its liking. Drawing on new digital forensic evidence and expert analysis, this effort offers strategic and policy recommendations to address the growing challenge Iran poses to stability in the Middle East.

## Beginning at the Beginning

After the ouster of the shah of Iran during the Islamic Revolution in 1979, the new regime in Tehran took a straightforward approach to its foreign relations: Everything the shah did was wrong, and the regime would do the opposite. While crude, this mnemonic serves well to understand the policies of today's Iran. Jerusalem and Mohammad Reza Pahlavi's Tehran enjoyed cozy ties; not so the IRI. The United States was one of the shah's greatest backers; after the Iran hostage crisis, the relationship was severed. Tensions were always high between the Baathist regime of Hafez al-Assad in Damascus and the shah's Tehran; that enmity died in 1979. Perhaps the only outlier was Iraq, with which Iran in all of its forms had consistently bad relations until the end of Sunni rule in Baghdad in 2003.

Coming as it did in a year of terrible turmoil—1979 also saw the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the disastrous attempted rescue of US hostages by the Jimmy Carter administration, and predictions of the end of American dominance—the rise of a revolutionary, interventionist

power like that of the Islamic Republic provoked an unsurprisingly antagonistic reaction in the Sunni Arab world. Tehran's campaign to export its revolution served only to alarm its Sunni Arab neighbors. On the reshuffled Middle East game board, then, an alliance between the staunchly secular, but minority, Alawite-led Assad regime and the activist Shia regime in Iran made complete sense, both for Iran and for Syria.

Syria was the first Arab country to recognize the post-shah government of the Islamic Republic. And after the Iraqi invasion of Iran in 1980, Assad proved an invaluable—and indeed, Tehran's only—Arab ally. Only two years later, the two made their alliance formal with a series of economic and military pacts, a harbinger of their future relationship. Syria's assistance was not purely symbolic: An Iraqi pipeline through Syria had been a vital source of income for Iraq's Saddam Hussein. Assad shut it down and, in exchange, Tehran supplied Syria with oil gratis for the remaining years of the conflict.<sup>1</sup>

Tehran returned the favor in other ways as well. After the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982, Iran assisted Syria in working to subvert the Israeli occupation in southern Lebanon and undermine Israel's alliance with Lebanon's Christian community. Although Syria's and Iran's intentions in Lebanon were occasionally at odds, cooperation between the two and the IRGC's development of and training and support for the new Shia terrorist group Hezbollah in Lebanon successfully drove first the United States and ultimately Israel from Lebanon's territory.

As Lebanon settled down and the Cold War drew to a close, the relationship between Damascus and Tehran grew from a tactical alliance into a strategic partnership invaluable to both states. Syria was indispensable to the Iranian resupply of Hezbollah, its main proxy force; it also lent territory for training Palestinian terrorist groups like Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, both almost entirely dependent on Iranian support for their continued war on Israel.<sup>2</sup>

But the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 meant that Tehran and Damascus were facing a world in which the sole superpower appeared bent on their demise. Each pondered better relations with the United States, and each ultimately decided the risk to their regimes was not worth it. The United States, while an attractive potential ally, may well have required changes in both Syria and Iran that were unacceptable to their respective leaders. And anti-Americanism has been a staple of the ideology of both the Iranian regime and Syria's Baath party.

Notwithstanding Iran's superior size and power, it is nonetheless fair to assess the Syria-Iran relationship as a balanced one during the Hafez al-Assad era. The Syrian dictator—a shrewd, respected, and powerful, if ruthless, head of state—was a match for the Iranian leadership, and enjoyed his own stature throughout the region. But his death in 2000 left the country in the hands of his substantially less respected son, Bashar.

### After Hafez al-Assad

Hafez al-Assad's death marked what many believed would be a turning point in Syria's dealings with the world. His son Bashar—not the favored son who had been groomed to succeed the father, but the belated stand-in after his brother Basil was killed in an accident—had been educated in England. He was younger, appeared more Western oriented, and occasional stories about his desire to turn Syria into a tech hub<sup>3</sup> indicated hopeful signs to the West of new winds in Damascus. If that were ever so (and it is doubtful), then the 9/11 attacks on the United States and the subsequent US invasion of Iraq changed everything.

For many regimes hostile to the United States, the only question in the wake of the US invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq was, "When are you coming for us?" The Islamic Republic took the threat so seriously that it stepped back from its aggressive nuclear weapons program.<sup>4</sup> But Tehran also hedged its bets, positioning itself and its ally Syria to undermine the American effort in Iraq at every turn. Indeed, though

1 Jubin Moazami Goodarzi, *The Formative Years of the Syrian-Iranian Alliance: Power Politics in the Middle East 1979-1989*, The London School of Economics, 2002, published by ProQuest LLC in 2014, 89.

2 Phil Alito, "Iran-Lebanese Hezbollah Relationship Tracker," Critical Threats Project, February 17, 2009, <https://www.criticalthreats.org/briefs/iran-lebanese-hezbollah-relationship-tracker/iran-lebanese-hezbollah-relationship-in-2008>.

3 Max De Haldevang, "The Enigma of Assad: How a Painfully Shy Eye Doctor Turned into a Murderous Tyrant," Quartz, April 21, 2017, <https://qz.com/959806/the-enigmatic-story-of-how-syrias-bashar-al-assad-turned-from-a-painfully-shy-eye-doctor-into-a-murderous-tyrant/>.

4 Shreeya Sinha and Susan Campbell Beachy, "Timeline on Iran's Nuclear Program," *New York Times*, March 21, 2013, [https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2014/11/20/world/middleeast/iran-nuclear-timeline.html#/#time243\\_7211](https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2014/11/20/world/middleeast/iran-nuclear-timeline.html#/#time243_7211).



Members of a pro-Assad militia in Nubl and al-Zahraa, Syria man a checkpoint. The rightmost fighter is waving a Hezbollah flag and standing in front of a picture of Ayatollah Khomeini. *Photo credit:* Mohammad Reza Jofar/Raja News.

neither Tehran nor Damascus mourned the demise of their common enemy Saddam Hussein, the prospect of a US-allied Shia Arab regime in Baghdad was almost more unappealing.

Both Iran and Syria began to systematize attacks on US forces in Iraq. Syria became a gateway for both foreign fighters and Iraqi Baathists through which to build the insurgency against the US-allied Iraqi government.<sup>5</sup> In addition to taking a profound toll on US servicemen, the joint Iran-Syria efforts in Iraq deepened the relationship between the two still further. Bashar al-Assad was the first head of state to visit with then Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad after the firebrand's 2005 inauguration. By 2007, the two had sealed a weapons agreement predicated on Syria continuing to shun peace talks with Israel.<sup>6</sup> Then, following the 2009

demonstrations that threatened to topple the regime in Tehran, Syria stood firmly by the IRI.<sup>7</sup>

Yet, despite the aforementioned examples of cooperation, the interval between 2008 and 2011 provides a fascinating window into the question of whether the Tehran-Damascus axis is severable. Certainly, the Barack Obama administration entered office believing it was so. And as a theoretical matter, the notion seems rational. After all, while Tehran has been a lifeline to the Assads, a force multiplier for Syrian influence in the region, and a vital source of cash (particularly with the fading of the Soviet alliance system, which Syria benefited from in the form of economic and military assistance), it also carries with it the stain of terrorism, Islamist extremism, and global

5 Yoel Guzansky, "Iraq's Reintegration into the Arab World," INSS Insight, no. 130, September 16, 2009, <http://www.inss.org.il/index.aspx?id=4538&articleid=2091>.

6 David Schenker, "Syria's Role in Regional Destabilization," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, October 2007, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/syrias-role-in-regional-destabilization-an-american-view>.

7 The Middle East Media Research Institute, "Syria Welcomes Iranian Election Results," Special Dispatch No. 2409, July 8, 2009, <https://www.memri.org/reports/syria-welcomes-iranian-election-results>.



“The collapse of the American option, and the beginning of the unraveling of Syria, meant that Assad’s options for allies had narrowed dramatically.”

pariah status. Setting aside the West’s calculus, for Bashar, a realignment may once have made sense.

### The American Option and Its Collapse

Beginning in late 2007, there appeared to be an opening to hive off Assad from his Iranian friends as the latter seemed on the precipice of an all-out fight with Israel. The Israelis struck Syria’s al-Kibar nuclear reactor, a raid deep into Syrian territory that appeared to excite neither interest from Syria’s erstwhile Arab League friends, nor any meaningful defense from Iran. Things spiraled from there: Iranian officials made unilateral announcements about their use of Syrian territory against Israel; Syria pushed back on Tehran’s presumptuousness; secret talks in Turkey opened between Israel and Syria. A leaked US cable laid bare the tensions:

[Redacted] said Iranian officials were in Syria ‘to round up allies’ in anticipation of an Israeli military strike. ‘It [an Israeli strike on Iran] is not a matter of if, but when,’ [redacted] said, reporting what Syrian officials had heard from their Iranian counterparts. The Syrian response, he continued, was to tell the Iranians not to look to Syria, Hezbollah or Hamas to ‘fight this battle.’ ‘We told them Iran is strong enough on its own to develop a nuclear program and to fight Israel,’ he said, adding, ‘We’re too weak.’ The Iranians know Syria has condemned Israeli threats and would denounce Israeli military operations against Iran. ‘But they were displeased with [Syrian President Bashar al-] Assad’s response. They needed to hear the truth,’ [redacted] said.<sup>8</sup>

8 *Iran Times International*, “Assad Told Iran He Won’t Help Out If Israelis Attack,” December 24, 2010, available through LexisNexis.

Syria appeared to be doubtful about the wisdom of becoming embroiled in the Israeli-Iranian conflict many felt was in the cards. Iran sensed Damascus was wavering; and thus, throughout the course of 2009 and 2010, a steady stream of Iranian ministers and emissaries arrived in Damascus demanding reassurance. On a visit to Tehran in 2010, Assad was publicly lavished with love, the “Islamic Republic Medal,” and kudos for his resistance to the United States’ “global arrogance.”<sup>9</sup> Certainly, it appeared that both Assad and his Tehran interlocutors agreed that the Syrian president was now more in the driver’s seat in the relationship than he had ever been before.

By the end of 2010, however, the American option appeared to be disappearing. The United States publicly expressed dissatisfaction with Assad’s increased support for Hezbollah, the ever-greater flow of arms through Syria to Lebanon, and Syrian unwillingness to go the extra mile for a better relationship with Washington.<sup>10</sup> If there had been a moment the Americans and Syrians might have made beautiful music, it was close to done. The subsequent outbreak of the Arab Spring and the March 2011 demonstrations against the Assad regime were the nails in the coffin. Suddenly, the regime’s survival was at stake. Even Barack Obama finally owned that Assad should go.

The collapse of the American option, and the beginning of the unraveling of Syria, meant that Assad’s options for allies had narrowed dramatically. Suddenly the Syrian leader was in the fight of his life. Western punters were predicting that he would step down within days, weeks, or months, and there were occasional reports that he and his family had been seen fleeing the country.<sup>11</sup> Many underestimated the Syrian leader’s stamina and will to power. Apparently he was not his father’s son for nothing.

But if Assad’s will was underestimated, his military’s skill was not. Long derided by both regional and Western analysts as a weak fighting force—though

9 Al Arabiya, “Syria’s Assad Rebuffs US by Courting Iran,” October 1, 2010, [www.alarabiya.net/articles/2010/10/02/120993.html](http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2010/10/02/120993.html).

10 Frederick Kagan, Ahmad Majidiyar, Danielle Pletka, and Mari-sa Cochrane Sullivan, *Iranian Influence in the Levant, Egypt, Iraq and Afghanistan*, American Enterprise Institute and the Institute for the Study of War, May 2012, [http://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/-iranian-influence-in-the-levant-egypt-iraq-and-afghanistan\\_171235465754.pdf](http://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/-iranian-influence-in-the-levant-egypt-iraq-and-afghanistan_171235465754.pdf).

11 Reuters, “U.S. Certain Assad Is ‘On His Way Out’: Official,” August 18, 2011, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-usa-assad-certain-idUSTRE77H4S620110818>.

more loyal than many might have supposed given the army's sectarian makeup<sup>12</sup>—the Syrian army quickly proved itself no match for the growing array of fighters flowing into the country.

## The Arab Spring

To understand better the Islamic Republic's reaction to the outbreak of civil conflict in Syria, it is important to appreciate Iran's perception of itself as a revolutionary government. More than three decades after the 1979 revolution, many inside the region and out have come to view the government in Tehran as a standard bad actor, seeking to destabilize its Sunni neighbors, expand its power and reach, and defend regime stability, the IRI's primary concern. But that ignores the compelling narrative Iran drills into its people—that of a guardian of resistance, a stalwart *against* the status quo. Setting aside the irony of a “revolutionary” regime seeking above all to preserve its own status quo, Tehran's posture explains a certain ambivalence with which it greeted the outbreak of “spring” in Damascus.<sup>13</sup>

If the previous three years had laid bare Iranian reliance on Assad's Damascus as its only trustworthy ally in the Middle East, the vicious Assad onslaught against initially peaceful domestic foes left Tehran conflicted about how to respond: As a revolutionary power that supported like-minded movements or as an establishment force interested in preserving vital alliances? Interestingly, both impulses were on clear display in early 2011.

In the immediate aftermath of violent clashes between the Syrian regime and its domestic opponents, the Ahmadinejad government imposed a media blackout in late 2012 on reporting the story at home.<sup>14</sup> But Iran's aloofness was unsustainable over the long term. Theoretically, had Assad delivered on reforms promised early in the fighting, Iranian leaders may well have been able to balance their support for the Sunni-led opposition and Alawite government. But as it was,

a growing consensus began to form behind the idea that Assad's days were numbered. Indeed, early on in 2011, Iranian leaders went so far as to meet with the Syrian opposition to discuss options.<sup>15</sup> Ahmadinejad also publicly voiced dissatisfaction with the escalating violence on both sides.<sup>16</sup>

But as Arab League and other international condemnations of the Syrian regime grew louder, Iran likely weighed the odds of losing Assad and gaining an angry, Sunni-led, Sunni Arab-backed regime in its place, and concluded supporting the Alawite Assad regime was in its interest. While it is easy to overstate the sectarian factors in this calculation—the roots of Iranian-Syrian alliances have rarely been based solely upon the Shia-Alawi angle (Alawites are not Shias, though they are closer to that sect than to Sunnis, and the ruling Baathist regime in Syria has always been staunchly secular)—the growing Sunni-Shia divide in the Middle East and Iran's growing international isolation dictate Iran's interest in Assad's survival.

## Iran All In for Assad

At the outset of fighting in Syria in spring 2011, Tehran was publicly hedging its bets, but privately it was already extending a helping hand to Assad. By June 2015, estimates from the United Nations suggested Tehran was investing in Syria to the tune of about \$6 billion per year.<sup>17</sup> Thousands of Quds Forces, Hezbollahis, Iranian-organized foreign fighters, and others have joined the fight for Assad. And more than one thousand Iranian forces of one kind or another have died, including, astonishingly, those in the regular army, which rarely deploys outside Iranian territory.

In addition, thousands of Hezbollah forces have deployed from Lebanon, some reluctantly press-ganged by their Iranian masters.<sup>18</sup> Iran has also masterminded the creation of the National Defense Forces, modeled on its own Basij paramilitary, and

12 Kheder Khadour, “Assad's Officer Ghetto: Why the Syrian Army Remains Loyal,” *Stratfor Worldview*, November 20, 2015, <https://www.stratfor.com/the-hub/assads-officer-ghetto-why-syrian-army-remains-loyal>.

13 Jubin Goodarzi, “Iran, Syria, & the Arab Spring: Whither the Tehran-Damascus Nexus?” *Muftah*, September 13, 2012, [http://muftah.org/iran-syria-the-arab-spring-whither-the-tehran-damascus-nexus/#.WRm\\_DPnyuCG](http://muftah.org/iran-syria-the-arab-spring-whither-the-tehran-damascus-nexus/#.WRm_DPnyuCG).

14 “A Light in Syria's Internet Blackout,” *Syria Deeply*, November 30, 2012, <https://www.newsdeeply.com/syria/articles/2012/11/30/a-light-in-syrias-internet-blackout>.

15 Jubin Goodarzi, “Iran and Syria at the Crossroads: The Fall of the Tehran-Damascus Axis?” *Viewpoints*, Woodrow Wilson Center, no. 35, August 2013, [https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/iran\\_syria\\_crossroads\\_fall\\_tehran\\_damascus\\_axis.pdf](https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/iran_syria_crossroads_fall_tehran_damascus_axis.pdf), 3.

16 *Ibid.*

17 Eli Lake, “Iran Spends Billions to Prop Up Assad,” *Bloomberg*, June 9, 2015, <https://www.bloomberg.com/view/articles/2015-06-09/iran-spends-billions-to-prop-up-assad>.

18 Jesse Rosenfeld, “Prolonged Conflict in the Region Makes Hezbollah Battle Weary,” *The National*, January 25, 2016, <http://www.thenational.ae/opinion/comment/prolonged-conflict-in-the-region-makes-hizbollah-battle-weary>.





Pro-Assad march in Raqqa, Syria, August 2010. *Photo credit:* Beshr Abdulhadi/Flickr.

recruited Iraqi, Pakistani, and Afghani Shias to join the militia.<sup>19</sup> Without these forces, the late 2016 reconquest of Aleppo by the Assad regime would have been nigh on impossible.

Finally, Iran and Syria have reportedly been contemplating rebalancing Syria's sectarian makeup, pushing Shias to the north. This reconfiguration has been interpreted as part and parcel of larger Iranian efforts to ensure secure land routes for itself through to Lebanon in the event the conflict continues to rage.<sup>20</sup>

### The Evolution of Iran's Fight for Syria

Turkish jets forced down an Iran Air flight to Syria in March 2011; the flight was allegedly carrying rocket launchers and Kalashnikovs meant for pro-government

forces.<sup>21</sup> Soon thereafter, IRGC and Hezbollah fighters were identified in opposition YouTube videos fighting on the side of the regime.<sup>22</sup>

As 2011 spiraled into a year of growing violence, Iran accelerated its support for Assad, sending "IRGC personnel, trainers and advisers."<sup>23</sup> In addition to military support, Tehran shared technology long used by the regime in Tehran for population control, including tools to monitor Twitter, YouTube, and other communication methods preferred by rebel groups.

19 "Iran Sending Thousands of Afghans to Fight in Syria," Human Rights Watch, January 29, 2016, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/01/29/iran-sending-thousands-afghans-fight-syria>.

20 "UN Special Envoy for Syria Welcomes Ceasefire Understanding; Pledges UN Support," United Nations News Centre, September 9, 2016, [http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=54896#.WRn\\_h-vyu00](http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=54896#.WRn_h-vyu00).

21 United States Department of Treasury, "Treasury Designates Syrian Entity, Others Involved in Arms and Communications Procurement Networks and Identifies Blocked Iranian Aircraft," news release, September 19, 2012, <https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/tg1714.aspx>.

22 Elizabeth Palmer, "Video Reveals Iranian Forces Fighting Inside Syria," in *CBS Evening News*, CBS, October 31, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gvhU113mVpw>.

23 Joby Warrick, "Iran Sends Advisers to Syria to Help Quell Unrest," *Washington Post*, May 27, 2011, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/iran-reportedly-aiding-syrian-crackdown/2011/05/27/AGUJe0CH\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.bc362be86d1d](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/iran-reportedly-aiding-syrian-crackdown/2011/05/27/AGUJe0CH_story.html?utm_term=.bc362be86d1d).

That May, the *Washington Post* reported that “Iranian-assisted computer surveillance is believed to have led to the arrests of hundreds of Syrians seized from their homes.”<sup>24</sup> At the time, the Obama administration sanctioned Mohsen Chizari, a leading Quds Force commander who was reportedly in Syria to manage the crackdown.<sup>25</sup>

By June of 2011, the IRGC was fully vested in Assad’s fight, providing \$23 million for the construction of a military base in Latakia, Syria, in order to facilitate direct arms shipments from the Islamic Republic to Syria.<sup>26</sup>

Nor was Iran’s escalation in Syria complete: Iranian advisers were on the front lines, and in January of the next year, Tehran admitted for the first time it had suffered a combat fatality during the Syrian conflict.<sup>27</sup> Indeed, 2012 should be considered the year Iran stopped hedging its bets and threw its support completely behind Assad. In early 2012, perennially cash-strapped Tehran extended Assad a \$9 billion lifeline,<sup>28</sup> continued the flow of weaponry into the country, and initiated its first major show of force with warships docking at the Tartous naval base.<sup>29</sup> In July of 2012 the *Washington Post* reported that,

Syria has expanded its chemical weapons arsenal in recent years with help from Iran and by using front organizations to buy sophisticated equipment it claimed was for civilian programs, according to documents and interviews.<sup>30</sup>

24 Ibid.

25 Kagan, Majdyar, Pletka, and Cochrane Sullivan, *Iranian Influence in the Levant, Egypt, Iraq and Afghanistan*.

26 Will Fulton, “Syria-Iran Foreign Relations,” *Critical Threats*, July 15, 2010, <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/syria-iran-foreign-relations>.

27 Ali Alfoneh and Michael Eisenstadt, “Iranian Casualties in Syria and the Strategic Logic of Intervention,” *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, March 11, 2016, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/iranian-casualties-in-syria-and-the-strategic-logic-of-intervention>.

28 “The Long Road to Damascus,” *The Economist*, February 11, 2012, <http://www.economist.com/node/21547305>.

29 “Iran Warships ‘Dock in Syria’s Tartous Port,’” *Al Jazeera*, February 19, 2012, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middle-east/2012/02/2012197221461654.html>.

30 James Ball, “Syria Has Expanded Chemical Weapons Supply with Iran’s Help, Documents Show,” *Washington Post*, July 27, 2012, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/syria-has-expanded-chemical-weapons-supply-with-irans-help-documents-show/2012/07/27/gJQAjJ3EEX\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.d1a12a237db3](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/syria-has-expanded-chemical-weapons-supply-with-irans-help-documents-show/2012/07/27/gJQAjJ3EEX_story.html?utm_term=.d1a12a237db3).

In August of that same year, the Free Syrian Army captured IRGC members masquerading as Iranian pilgrims,<sup>31</sup> and US Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta asserted Iran was busy building pro-Assad militias designed to stabilize the Syrian despot.<sup>32</sup> Even the IRGC admitted to a growing presence on the ground in Syria, though, of course, they claimed it was limited to only “consultancy and economic assistance.”<sup>33</sup>

Iranian investments in Lebanon and Iraq serve as useful models by which to understand the nature of Tehran’s support for Syria. Despite senior-level IRGC involvement and the high political stakes, the chosen strategy in those two countries was also the creation of local proxy armies. Following the success of Hezbollah in Lebanon and Shia militias in Iraq, it should come as no surprise that Iran looked to those groups and to its own Basij, which has been highly effective at suppressing political dissent at home, as it sought to develop pro-regime militias to prop up Assad. At the end of 2012, the US Treasury sanctioned Iranian-supported Jaysh al-Sha’bi and Shabiha militias in Syria:

Today, the Treasury Department also took action against Jaysh al-Sha’bi and the Shabiha. These militias have been instrumental in the Assad regime’s campaign of terror and violence against the citizens of Syria. Jaysh al-Sha’bi was created, and continues to be maintained, with support from Iran and Hizballah and is modeled after the Iranian Basij militia, which has proven itself effective at using violence and intimidation to suppress political dissent within Iran.<sup>34</sup>

The next year saw yet another massive cash infusion from Tehran,<sup>35</sup> and regular transfers of Syrian oil by

31 “U.S. Officials Confirm Captured Iranians in Syria Are ‘Active’ Military: Report,” *Al Arabiya*, August 15, 2012, <http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/08/15/232401.html>.

32 “Iran Accused of Setting Up Pro-Assad Militias,” *Al Jazeera English*, August 15, 2012, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/america/2012/08/20128154537913351.html>.

33 Ali Alfoneh, “What Is Iran Doing in Syria?” *Foreign Policy*, September 21, 2012, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2012/09/21/what-is-iran-doing-in-syria/>.

34 United States Department of Treasury, “Treasury Sanctions Al-Nusra Front Leadership in Syria and Militias Supporting the Assad Regime,” news release, December 11, 2012, <https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/pages/tg1797.aspx>. Assad is an alternate spelling of Assad, and Hizballah is an alternate spelling of Hezbollah.

35 David Butter, “Fueling Conflict: Syria’s War for Oil and Gas,” *Carnegie Middle East Center*, April 2, 2014, <http://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/55195?lang=en>.



Iranian tankers, perhaps for cash for Syria or perhaps to offset Tehran's burdensome grants and loans to Damascus.<sup>36</sup> That same year, Iranian personnel in Syria skyrocketed, with some reporting plans to send up to four thousand IRGC personnel<sup>37</sup> and Hezbollah investing thousands of its own members as well.<sup>38</sup> It was also reported that two high-ranking IRGC generals—Mohammad Jamali-Paqaleh and Hassan Shateri—were killed in Syria. Iran also stepped up infiltration of outside militias via Turkey, with foreigners from far afield pressed into the battle for Assad.

And the next year, an Iranian member of parliament boasted,

We brought 150,000 Syrians to Iran and trained them militarily and trained 150,000 over there and sent 50,000 Hezbollah forces there, and Hezbollah declared that 80,000 missiles were ready to be launched at Israel and that caused the U.S. to fail in Syria.<sup>39</sup>

Incredibly to many Iran observers, Iranian Artesh, or regular army forces whose mission has historically been limited to protecting Iran's territorial integrity, were also being ordered onto the battlefield.<sup>40</sup> A testament to Iran's investment in Assad and its strong sense of security at home, an IRGC commander trumpeted the 130,000 Iranian reservists headed for Syria (almost certainly a major exaggeration).<sup>41</sup> Nonetheless, Iranian commanders are in clear control in certain theaters

of the conflict, going to the point of executing Syrian officers who withdrew from the battlefield in 2015.<sup>42</sup>

Also, by the end of 2015, Russian forces were present in Syria, and Tehran and Moscow began coordinating operations. (Note, however, that for Russia this was less a strategic investment in Assad, but rather an exploitation of the opportunity afforded by a vacuum of Western power in the region. To date there are still hopes Moscow will jettison the Syrian regime.) By July of that year, Iranian and Iranian-backed ground troops, assisted by Russian air cover, began taking more ground. The *Wall Street Journal* reported on October 2, 2015, that the IRGC had some seven thousand members and Iranian paramilitary volunteers operating in Syria, with expansions planned.<sup>43</sup>

"It is not simply that Tehran stands atop Assad's Syria; it is that without Tehran, there is no Assad."

Yet, by the end of that year, Iran was drawing down its forces in Syria in response to more and more senior IRGC commanders on the ground—Hossein Hamadani in Aleppo in October, for example<sup>44</sup>—and other Iranians perishing at the hands of ISIS.<sup>45</sup> During the first week of February 2016 alone, over forty IRGC members were reportedly killed north of Aleppo.<sup>46</sup> Dozens more were

36 Will Fulton, Joseph Holliday, and Sam Wyer, "Iranian Strategy in Syria," AEI's Critical Threats Project and the Institute for the Study of War, May 2013, <http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/IranianStrategyinSyria-IMAY.pdf>.

37 Robert Fisk, "Iran to Send 4,000 Troops to Aid President Assad Forces in Syria," *The Independent*, June 16, 2013, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/iran-to-send-4000-troops-to-aid-president-assad-forces-in-syria-8660358.html>.

38 Isabel Kershner, "Israel Watches Warily as Hezbollah Gains Battle Skills in Syria," *New York Times*, March 10, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/11/world/middleeast/israel-watches-warily-as-hezbollah-gains-battle-skills-in-syria.html>.

39 "Iran: MP admits regime's involvement in Syria," National Council of Resistance of Iran, February 15, 2014, <http://www.ncr-iran.org/en/news/terrorism-fundamentalism/15983-iran-mp-admits-regime-s-involvement-in-syria>.

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killed in March and April, and for the first time, Artesh fighters were reported killed as well.<sup>47</sup>

Despite these heavy casualties, in December 2016 Syrian regime forces, backed by Russian air power, Iran, and Iranian-sponsored militias, recaptured Aleppo, a vital urban rebel stronghold. This victory marked a watershed in the conflict, swinging the advantage clearly back to the Syrian regime and its Iranian backers.

## The Future of Syria

Thus far, 2017 has promised little in terms of a resolution to the Syrian conflict. Different plans for a peaceful settlement, including so-called de-escalation zones,<sup>48</sup> decisions in Washington to arm Kurdish forces,<sup>49</sup> and

the taking of territory by regime forces, have all failed to set out a clear path to the end of the Syria problem.

But after over six years of fighting one thing is abundantly clear: Iran is all in for the Assad regime. Tehran has not taken the easy road in jettisoning Assad in favor of another Alawite leader, nor has it accepted the notion of a resolution to the conflict that eases Assad from power.

In addition, Iran has positioned Hezbollah to continue to use routes through Syria for weapons resupply, to ensure a corridor of power that will ease weapons transfers for its continued operations against Israel, and to dominate Syria from without and within for the foreseeable future.

For all intents and purposes, Assad has ceased to exist but for his relationship with Tehran. And while Russia has been key to ensuring his hold on limited power, he can have confidence only that Tehran—despite ample temptation—will not betray him. It is not simply that Tehran stands atop Assad's Syria; it is that without Tehran, there is no Assad.

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