



Doubling Down on Damascus

Iran's Military Surge to Save the Assad Regime

Max Peck



January 2016

Doubling Down on Damascus

Iran's Military Surge to Save the Assad Regime

Max Peck

January 2016



FDD PRESS

A division of the
FOUNDATION FOR DEFENSE OF DEMOCRACIES
Washington, DC

Table of Contents

Executive Summary.....	3
The Red Line in Damascus.....	3
Assad's Army in Retreat.....	4
Deployment of IRGC Ground Forces.....	6
Logistical Support and Training.....	8
Expansion of Proxy Militias.....	9
Weapons.....	12
Financial Support.....	13
Policy Recommendations.....	14

Executive Summary

Iran's support for Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in his country's civil war reached new heights in 2015. Alarmed by his regime's defeats over the previous year – the result of lightning advances by the Islamic State (IS) and increased foreign support for rebel groups – Iran undertook its most brazen endeavor yet to protect its strategic interests in Damascus.

With a recently concluded nuclear deal in hand, Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Quds Force leader Qassem Soleimani traveled to Moscow on July 24 to devise a plan to rescue their besieged ally. The joint offensive, which began in October, has focused on retaking territories in northwestern and southern Syria from Sunni rebels. Under the cover of Russian airstrikes, hundreds of IRGC ground forces joined Lebanese Hezbollah and expanded Shiite Iraqi, Afghan, and Pakistani militias on the frontlines to augment the regime's depleted army. During this period, Iran also increased the quantity and quality of arms it provided to Damascus via its national carriers and Russian military planes.

Since the beginning of the offensive, Iranian casualties have increased sharply, averaging more than one fatality per day. To date, 137 IRGC members have been killed, the most significant of them General Hossein Hamedani, Iran's top commander in Syria, on October 7. Following this high rate of attrition, Iran began winding down its surge in December by withdrawing most of its 2,000-strong force from the combat zones.

Although Iran has paid a high price in blood and treasure for its increased involvement, it has apparently won foreign acquiescence to its role in the country. In a major Western policy reversal, Iran was invited to join international peace talks for Syria weeks after the offensive began. Regrettably, however, Iranian

participation will prove counterproductive to resolving the conflict, as Tehran appears committed to preserving Assad's rule to the very end.

With the renewed urgency of fighting the Islamic State in recent months, the United States must recognize that destroying IS on the ground requires the support of Sunni rebels currently preoccupied with fighting the Syrian regime. To remove Assad from the equation, Washington and its partners must deprive him of his main source of support. Instead of cooperating with Iran for an elusive diplomatic solution, therefore, the United States and Europe should make Iran's engagement in Syria as costly as possible.

This report documents the various forms of Iranian assistance to Assad and how that support increased in the final months of 2015. It recommends that the United States and its European allies use their economic leverage to target Iranian airline carriers, the IRGC, and Tehran's proxy militias, while simultaneously increasing their support for Sunni rebel groups by creating safe zones and providing more training and equipment. These efforts will assume greater importance as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action is implemented in early 2016, which will lift the nuclear-related sanctions on Iran and enable it to expand its operations abroad. Finally, it argues that the best way to bring an end to the conflict is for the United States to commit itself to pursuing a Syria without Assad or his Iranian backers.

The Red Line in Damascus

In the unfinished history of the Syrian conflict, 2015 will be remembered as the year in which it evolved from a regional crisis into an international one. In September, the image of a Syrian child who had washed up dead on Turkey's shore shocked Western countries into more seriously addressing the worst refugee crisis since the Second World War. In

November, the Islamic State conducted the deadliest attack France has witnessed in half a century and, weeks later, inspired the worst terrorist violence perpetrated in the United States since September 11, 2001. In the month between, all the relevant outside powers came together for the first time to resolve the more than four-year civil war. One of those foreign participants, however, also spearheaded a campaign destined to prolong it.

Since its 1979 revolution, Iran has regarded Syria as a strategic partner and the lifeline to its proxy Hezbollah in Lebanon. In recent years that alliance has come more to resemble a client-patron relationship, transforming Damascus into an outpost of Iranian influence in the Levant. As Iran's top commander in Syria, Brigadier General Hossein Hamedani, stated in his last interview before his death in October 2015, "Syria is the key to the region and has a higher priority than Iraq, Lebanon, and Yemen for Iran."¹ Brigadier General Hossein Salami, deputy commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, declared similarly, "the national security of Syria and Iran are tied together, and understanding this reality is the philosophy of our presence in Syria."²

Despite the strength of this relationship, its depth is limited mainly to Syria's minority Alawite community and specifically to the regime of President Bashar al-Assad. The loss of its ally in Damascus, which Tehran

considers its "red line," would therefore spell a major defeat for Iran's regional ambitions.³ Accordingly, Iran has been the primary foreign supporter of the Assad regime since the Syrian civil war erupted in March 2011, furnishing it with money, arms, fighters, and military and intelligence assistance. This largesse proved critical in helping Assad weather the early years of war, enabling him to outlast most of his Arab Spring contemporaries.

A series of defeats in 2014, however, compelled the Islamic Republic to step up its involvement to an unprecedented degree. Since then, Tehran's role in Syria has grown from a major Assad patron into a leading combatant in its civil war. Acknowledging this reality is essential for any U.S. strategy intended to facilitate Assad's departure and bring an end to the conflict. Without addressing the facts that Iran is creating on the ground, the ongoing international negotiations will not only fail, but may prove counterproductive to the war's peaceful resolution.

Assad's Army in Retreat

Halfway through the third year of the Syrian civil war, Assad's fortunes took a turn for the worse. His government, long kept afloat by his Iranian ally and its proxies, could no longer hold back the armed rebel groups arrayed against it. In August 2014, the recently proclaimed Islamic State captured the strategic Tabqa air base and established its headquarters in Raqqa.⁴ Concurrently,

1. Ladane Nasser & Donna Abu-Nasr, "Iran's Syria Aid Deepens as it Jockey for Role in Talks," *Bloomberg*, October 26, 2015. (<http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2015-10-27/iran-says-syria-aid-deepens-to-include-army-revamp-recruitment>)

2. "Sardar Hamedani: Etaatzaziri-ye Bashar Assad az Rahbar-e Enghelab Bishtar az Barkhi Dolatmardan-e Mast (Commander Hamedani: Bashar Assad's Obedience of the Revolution's Leader is More than Some of our Statesmen), *Ghatreh* (Iran), October 10, 2015. (<http://www.ghatreh.com/news/n27987477/رئیس‌جمهور ایران: اطاعت از رهبر است بیشتر از برخی دولتمردان ماست>)

3. "Assad's Overthrow 'Red Line' for Iran: Supreme Leader's Aide," *Reuters*, January 20, 2013. (<http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/01/20/us-syria-crisis-iran-idUSBRE90J08320130120#ol0OL4OKMZ32W3ei.97>); "Velayati: Bashar al-Assad is Iran's 'Redline'," *Tehran Times* (Iran), October 12, 2015. (http://www.tehrantimes.com/index_View.asp?code=250033)

4. Sylvia Westall, "Assad's Army Stretched but Still Seen Strong in Syria's War," *Reuters*, September 18, 2014. (<http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/09/18/us-syria-crisis-military-idUSKBN0HD0M420140918>)

Shiite Iraqi militiamen who had been fighting alongside Syrian government forces were recalled to Iraq to fight IS in that country. Although Hezbollah, dispatched by Iran to buttress Assad, deployed more than 1,000 fighters to “defend the Sayyida Zaynab shrine,” Syrian government forces were unable to recover momentum.⁵

By September 2014, the Syrian army was showing signs of obvious strain, unable to launch large-scale operations and leaving areas of vital importance exposed to rebel advances.⁶ The following spring brought further territorial losses for the government, as Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Qatar intensified their support for Sunni rebel groups.⁷ That aid has come partially in the form of lethal weaponry such as American-made TOW antitank missiles, which began arriving in the region in 2013⁸ and which rebel groups deployed to great effect beginning in early 2015.⁹ The Sunni countries also helped create new powerful coalitions such as Jaysh al-Fatah, which conquered most of the contested Idlib province, forcing the regime to retreat to its coastal strongholds.¹⁰

In a rare televised statement in July 2015, Assad acknowledged the manpower shortage in his army, estimated to have shed around 50 percent of its pre-war strength of 300,000.¹¹ The address was a jarring public admission of the magnitude of his plight, breaking with his previous pattern of denying or minimizing setbacks.¹² He used the occasion to urge more Syrians to join the army, warning that the current number of soldiers was not enough to win a conflict fought on multiple battlefronts.¹³ The government has demonstrated its desperation by performing spot checks of young men in Alawite communities; those unable to provide a valid exemption from service are often immediately detained and conscripted.¹⁴

By August 2015, the Syrian government was in control of less than one-sixth of the country.¹⁵ Assad was consequently forced to cut his losses and consolidate his positions in the strategic redoubts of Damascus, Latakia, Tartous, and Homs, putting off the recovery of other major cities – such as Aleppo and Daraa – for another day.¹⁶

5. “Hezbollah Mobilizes to Defend Shiite Shrines in Syria,” *NOW Lebanon*, December 12, 2014. (<https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/lebanonnews/551145-hezbollah-announces-general-mobilization-in-syria>)

6. Sylvia Westall, “Assad’s Army Stretched but Still Seen Strong in Syria’s War,” *Reuters*, September 18, 2014. (<http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/09/18/us-syria-crisis-military-idUSKBN0HD0M420140918>)

7. Columb Strack, “Syrian Government No Longer Controls 83% of the Country,” *IHS Jane’s Intelligence Review*, August 23, 2015. (<http://www.janes.com/article/53771/syrian-government-no-longer-controls-83-of-the-country>)

8. Anne Barnard & Karam Shoumali, “U.S. Weaponry is Turning Syria into Proxy War with Russia,” *The New York Times*, October 12, 2015. (<http://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/13/world/middleeast/syria-russia-airstrikes.html>)

9. Ken Dilanian, “US Draws a Line on Protecting CIA-backed Rebels in Syria,” *Associated Press*, October 13, 2015. (<http://bigstory.ap.org/article/2c9bc3139ece47fb8da35873c27ed124/us-draws-line-protecting-cia-backed-rebels-syria>)

10. Kareem Shaheen, “Syrian Troops Launch Ground Offensive Backed by Russian Airstrikes,” *The Guardian* (U.K.), October 7, 2015. (<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/oct/07/russian-jets-pound-syrian-provinces-in-fresh-wave-of-attacks-says-watchdog>)

11. Columb Strack, “Syrian Government No Longer Controls 83% of the Country,” *IHS Jane’s Intelligence Review*, August 23, 2015. (<http://www.janes.com/article/53771/syrian-government-no-longer-controls-83-of-the-country>)

12. Maher Samaan & Anne Barnard, “Assad, in Rare Admission, Says Syria’s Army Lacks Manpower,” *The New York Times*, July 26, 2015. (<http://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/27/world/middleeast/assad-in-rare-admission-says-syrias-army-lacks-manpower.html>)

13. Ladane Nasser & Donna Abu-Nasr, “Iran’s Syria Aid Deepens as it Jockeys for Role in Talks,” *Bloomberg*, October 26, 2015. (<http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2015-10-27/iran-says-syria-aid-deepens-to-include-army-revamp-recruitment>)

14. Columb Strack, “Syrian Government No Longer Controls 83% of the Country,” *IHS Jane’s Intelligence Review*, August 23, 2015. (<http://www.janes.com/article/53771/syrian-government-no-longer-controls-83-of-the-country>)

15. Columb Strack, “Syrian Government No Longer Controls 83% of the Country,” *IHS Jane’s Intelligence Review*, August 23, 2015. (<http://www.janes.com/article/53771/syrian-government-no-longer-controls-83-of-the-country>)

16. Laila Bassam & Tom Perry, “How Iranian General Plotted out Syrian Assault in Moscow,” *Reuters*, October 6, 2015. (<http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/10/06/us-mideast-crisis-syria-soleimani-insigh-idUSKCN0S02BV20151006>)

These cumulative losses and Assad's growing sense of panic led to the most dramatic development to date in the civil war. In mid-September, Russia began sending advanced fighter jets to Syria¹⁷ and on September 30 launched its first airstrikes against rebel positions in the country.¹⁸ Russia's entry into the war was later revealed to be part of a combined offensive, solicited by Soleimani during his visit to Moscow two months prior. On July 24, with the ink barely dry on the nuclear deal, Soleimani unfurled a map of Syria before his Russian hosts, showing Assad's recent losses. As one senior regional official recounted, "The Russians were very alarmed, and felt matters were in steep decline and that there were real dangers to the regime. The Iranians assured them there is still the possibility to reclaim the initiative. At that time, Soleimani played a role in assuring them that we haven't lost all the cards."¹⁹

Deployment of IRGC Ground Forces

September 2015 thus heralded a new phase of Iranian involvement in the Syrian civil war. In the days leading up to the Russian intervention, Iran began deploying hundreds of IRGC ground forces under Soleimani's command for a coordinated operation. "It has always been understood in [the Pentagon] that the Russians would provide the air force, and the Iranians would provide the

ground force in Syria," one U.S. defense official said.²⁰ In contrast to previous deployments, the recent troops were "not advisers ... we mean hundreds with equipment and weapons," an unnamed Lebanese source told Reuters, adding "they will be followed by more."²¹

These observations were confirmed weeks later with reports of large Iranian troop movements preparing for offensives in Hama and Aleppo.²² "The big battle preparations in [Aleppo] are clear," said one regional official familiar with the plans. "There is a large mobilization of the Syrian army ... [as well as] elite Hezbollah fighters, and thousands of Iranians who arrived in stages."²³ The pro-Hezbollah Lebanese daily *Al-Akhbar* further reported on a "wide-ranging ground operation" in which Iranian troops were set to "join the Syrian armed forces and Hezbollah groups in carrying out a ground campaign, which aims, in its first phase, to recapture areas in northwest Syria." According to the daily, the Iranian force included units specialized in weaponry and assault operations, as well as infantry and reconnaissance units.²⁴

.....
20. "Iranian Troops Prepare to Aid Russia with Syrian Ground Assault, Officials Say," *Fox News*, October 1, 2015. (<http://www.foxnews.com/world/2015/10/01/cia-backed-rebels-civilians-reportedly-targeted-by-russian-airstrikes-in-syria/>)

21. Laila Bassam & Andrew Osborn, "Iran Troops to Join Syria War, Russia Bombs Group Trained by CIA," *Reuters*, October 2, 2015. (<http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/10/01/us-mideast-crisis-syria-idUSKCN0RV41O20151001>)

22. Loveday Morris & Thomas Gibbons-Neff, "Hundreds of Iranian Troops Mass Near Aleppo, U.S. Official and Activists Say," *The Washington Post*, October 14, 2015. (https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/hundreds-of-iranian-troops-mass-near-aleppo-us-defense-official-and-activists-say/2015/10/14/0f63227e-7298-11e5-ba14-318f8e87a2fc_story.html)

23. Laila Bassam & Tom Perry, "Syria's Army, Allies Plan Offensive Against Insurgents in Aleppo," *Reuters*, October 13, 2015. (<http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/10/13/us-mideast-crisis-syria-idUSKCN0S71F820151013>)

24. "Pro-Hezbollah Daily: Iran to Launch Major Syria Ground Campaign," *NOW Lebanon*, October 13, 2015. (<https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/NewsReports/566042-pro-hezbollah-daily-iran-to-launch-major-syria-ground-campaign>)

.....
17. Jamie Crawford & Barbara Starr, "Russia Sends Fighter Jets to Syria after Talks with U.S.," *CNN*, September 18, 2015. (<http://www.cnn.com/2015/09/18/politics/russia-fighter-jets-syria-carter/>)

18. Patrick J. McDonnell, W.J. Hennigan, & Nabih Bulos, "Russia Launches Airstrikes in Syria amid U.S. Concern about Targets," *Los Angeles Times*, September 30, 2015. (<http://www.latimes.com/world/europe/la-fg-kremlin-oks-troops-20150930-story.html>)

19. Laila Bassam & Tom Perry, "How Iranian General Plotted out Syrian Assault in Moscow," *Reuters*, October 6, 2015. (<http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/10/06/us-mideast-crisis-syria-soleimani-insigh-idUSKCN0S02BV20151006>)

The backgrounds of the soldiers killed thus far also indicate the types of assets Tehran has brought to bear in this phase of the conflict. They include members of armored divisions,²⁵ engineering corps, artillery groups,²⁶ the IRGC navy,²⁷ airborne special forces, security for senior officials, and the Basij paramilitary force.²⁸ These units hail from nearly every province in Iran, indicating that the entire IRGC (as opposed to its Quds Force alone) has become an expeditionary force in Syria.²⁹

In early December 2015, the Kuwaiti newspaper *Al-Rai* reported that Iran was also preparing to deploy two squadrons of Sukhoi fighter jets to the Tiyas (T-4)

military airbase outside Homs.³⁰ A week later, IRGC ground forces chief Brigadier General Ahmad Reza Pourdastan publicly signaled his country's willingness to conduct aerial operations in Syria.³¹

Since the start of the October offensive, Iran's death toll in Syria had reached 137 fighters, bringing the total number of Iranian nationals killed in combat since January 2012 – all of whom served in the IRGC – to 262, according to research by Ali Alfoneh at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies.³² The locations of the deaths, when disclosed, are typically near cities under Russian bombardment, such as Aleppo, lending further credence to the existence of a joint operation between Tehran and Moscow. Indeed, some IRGC soldiers have even been killed by errant Russian shelling on the frontlines.³³

In response to these mounting casualties, Iran began withdrawing some of its soldiers from the combat zones in mid-December, according to U.S. and other Western military officials.³⁴ They reported that only

25. The 8th Najaf Ashraf Armored Division “operates Soviet-origin T-55 and T-72 tanks, BMP-2 infantry fighting vehicles, and 2S1 self-propelled artillery,” according to Galen Wright from the Armament Research Services. Adam Rawnsley, “Inside Iran’s Secret War in Syria,” *The Daily Beast*, November 13, 2015. (<http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/11/13/inside-iran-s-secret-war-in-syria.html>)

26. Ali Alfoneh, “Iran and the IRGC: Fueling Conflict in the Middle East,” *Testimony before the House Foreign Affairs Committee*, December 2, 2015, pages 14-15. (<http://docs.house.gov/meetings/FA/FA00/20151202/104244/HHRG-114-FA00-Wstate-AlfonehA-20151202.pdf>)

27. "Shahadat-e Sattar Mahmoudi Baradar-e Yek Shahid va Yek Nevisande-ye Defa-e Moghaddas dar Souriyeh (The Martyrdom of Sattar Mahmoudi, the Brother of a Martyr and a Sacred Defense Author, in Syria)," *Tasnim News Agency* (Iran), December 8, 2015. (<http://www.tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1394/09/17/938234>)

28. "Iran's Involvement in Syria, Units and Losses: October 2015," *Levantine Group*, October 30, 2015. (<http://www.levantinegroup.com/#/Iran-s-involvement-in-Syria-units-and-losses-October-2015/c21xo/563386180cf2ce5bf43459b7>); Adam Rawsley, "Inside Iran's Secret War in Syria," *The Daily Beast*, November 13, 2015. (<http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/11/13/inside-iran-s-secret-war-in-syria.html>)

29. Ali Alfoneh, "The IRGC Transforms into an Expeditionary Force," *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, October 29, 2015. (<http://www.defenddemocracy.org/media-hit/ali-alfoneh-the-irgc-transforms-into-an-expeditionary-force/>)

30. “Iran’s Air Force to Enter Syria Conflict: Report,” *NOW Lebanon*, December 3, 2015. (<https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/NewsReports/566325-irans-air-force-to-enter-syria-conflict-report>)

31. "Iran Open to Aerial Role in Syria," *NOW Lebanon*, December 9, 2015. (<https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/NewsReports/566352-iran-open-to-aerial-role-in-syria>)

32. @Alfoneh, "IRGC combat fatalities in Syria since January 2012: 262. Since October 1, 2015: 137.," *Twitter*, January 5, 2016. (<https://twitter.com/Alfoneh/status/684442128731246592>)

33. Salih Hamid, “*Maqatal 4 min Alharas Alththawri Al’Irani Bialqasf Alrrusi ‘Balkhata’* (4 Iranian Revolutionary Guard Members Killed by Russian Shelling ‘by Mistake’),” *Al Arabiya* (Saudi Arabia), December 13, 2015. (<http://www.alarabiya.net/ar/iran/2015/12/13/ماقتل-4-من-الحرس-الثوار-الاراني-بالقصف-الروسي-بالخطأ>.html)

34. Eli Lake, "Western Officials: Iran Retreating from Syria Fight," *Bloomberg View*, December 10, 2015. (<http://www.bloombergview.com/articles/2015-12-10/western-officials-iran-retreating-from-syria-fight>)

700 IRGC troops were still fighting in the offensive,³⁵ down from an estimated 2,000 in October.³⁶ Given Iran's vital interests in the country, however, it is more likely that the reduction constitutes a change in strategy rather than a retreat by Tehran.

Logistical Support and Training

Over the past year, Iran has also stepped up its training and assistance for Assad's forces and its allied militias. Since the beginning of the conflict, IRGC military advisers have played a crucial role in helping Syrian forces confront the various rebel groups. Hamedani had organized the Alawite *shabiha* militia³⁷ and trained it for domestic crackdowns using tactics from the IRGC's battles with separatist Kurdish and Azeri movements in Iran.³⁸ As a U.S. defense official explained, Hamedani was "an expert in how to fuse the operations of regular forces with militias."³⁹ In hailing

Assad's receptiveness to this advice, Hamedani had tellingly boasted that the Syrian president was "more obedient to the leader of the revolution [Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei] than some of our statesmen."⁴⁰ Similarly, in 2012 Soleimani had set up the National Defense Forces (NDF), a grouping of loyalist Syrian militias under the umbrella of the army, upon which Assad has grown increasingly dependent.⁴¹ Members of that force, believed to number close to 100,000, are licensed, armed, and paid by the state.⁴²

In October 2015, Iran announced that it would be sending more military advisers to Syria. "The army has been involved for four years in a draining war; it needs a structural change," IRGC Deputy Commander Salami said. He also acknowledged that Iran has provided Syrian forces strategic and operational advice, including training on maintaining and repairing equipment.⁴³ In December, the IRGC leadership appointed Brigadier General Gholam Hossein Gheibparvar to replace Hamedani as director of Iranian operations in the country.⁴⁴

35. Eli Lake, "Western Officials: Iran Retreating from Syria Fight," *Bloomberg View*, December 10, 2015. (<http://www.bloombergvew.com/articles/2015-12-10/western-officials-iran-retreating-from-syria-fight>)

36. "Iran has Over 1,000 Troops in Iraq, Less than 2,000 in Syria - U.S. General," *Reuters*, October 27, 2015. (<http://www.trust.org/item/20151027151512-2bvkq>)

37. The term *shabiha*, possibly derived from the Arabic word for "ghost," is believed to have first appeared in relation to the uprising against Assad after a crackdown was launched in the port city of Latakia, where a notorious mafia-like organized crime syndicate called the *shabiha* has existed since the 1970s. Membership of the *shabiha* gangs is drawn largely from Assad's minority Alawite sect, with many members from the Assad family itself. In late March 2011, the *shabiha* gangs appear to have come to the aid of Assad when major anti-government protests erupted in the country. ("Syria Unrest: Who are the Shabiha?" *BBC* (U.K.), May 29, 2012. (<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-14482968>))

38. Farnaz Fassihi & Jay Solomon, "Top Iranian Official Acknowledges Syria Role," *The Wall Street Journal*, September 16, 2012. (<http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10000872396390443720204578000482831419570>)

39. Farnaz Fassihi & Jay Solomon, "Top Iranian Official Acknowledges Syria Role," *The Wall Street Journal*, September 16, 2012. (<http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10000872396390443720204578000482831419570>)

40. "Sardar Hamedani: Etaatzpaziri-ye Bashar Assad az Rahbar-e Enghelab Bishtar az Barkhi Dowlatmardan-e Ma Ast (Commander Hamedani: Bashar Assad is More Obedient to the Leader of the Revolution than Some of our Statesmen)," *Ghatreh News* (Iran), October 10, 2015. (<http://www.ghatreh.com/news/nn27977760/سردار-امدانی-بیشتر-از-بانی-دولت-مردمان-ما-است>)

41. Jacob Siegel, "The Myth of Iran's Military Mastermind," *The Daily Beast*, June 5, 2015. (<http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/06/05/the-myth-of-iran-s-military-mastermind.html>)

42. Sam Dagher, "Syria's Alawite Force Turned Tide for Assad," *The Wall Street Journal*, August 26, 2013. (<http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424127887323997004578639903412487708>)

43. Ladane Nasserri & Donna Abu-Nasr, "Iran's Syria Aid Deepens as it Jockeys for Role in Talks," *Bloomberg*, October 27, 2015. (<http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2015-10-27/iran-says-syria-aid-deepens-to-include-army-revamp-recruitment>)

44. "Sardar Qeibparvar Jaygozin-e Sardar Hamedani Shod (Commander Qeibparvar Replaces Commander Hamedani)," *Mehr News Agency* (Iran), December 9, 2015. (<http://www.mehrnews.com/news/2995885/سردار-قهبهار-جایگزین-سردار-امدانی-شد>)

Expansion of Proxy Militias

Lebanese Hezbollah

As Iran's most important proxy and the largest foreign militia operating in Syria, Hezbollah has been leading the fight against rebel forces. Like the IRGC, Hezbollah initially served in an advisory role to the Syrian army before deploying its first combat forces in June 2013.⁴⁵ Inside the country, its fighters wear National Defense Forces' camouflage uniforms and are asked to speak with a Syrian dialect to avoid attracting attention.⁴⁶ Western officials and analysts believe the group has as many as 8,000 fighters on the ground,⁴⁷ and that between 1,300 and 1,500 fighters have been killed and 5,000 injured.⁴⁸ Its combat fatalities since the October offensive numbered 105 by early January.⁴⁹

In addition to its battlefield losses, Hezbollah has also suffered blowback inside Lebanon for its involvement in Syria. Twin suicide bombings on November 12, 2015 – claimed by the Islamic State – targeted a Hezbollah stronghold in south Beirut, killing at least 43 people.⁵⁰

The violence was only the latest in a series of attacks against the Shiite militia at home. In January 2014, a powerful car bomb killed at least five people near a Hezbollah security zone in the capital.⁵¹

Despite the high costs, Hezbollah sees the battle in Syria as an existential one. Should Assad fall, the Lebanese group would lose its land bridge to Iran – the source of its weapons, finances, and training. Hezbollah's leader, Hassan Nasrallah, acknowledged on October 18 that his group was fighting a "critical and definitive battle" in Syria, and with a greater presence than ever before.⁵² On November 8, the head of Hezbollah's Executive Committee, Nabil Qawooq, underscored that Hezbollah has no intention of withdrawing from the fight until it achieves victory: "We will finish the war in Syria. We insist on defeating the terrorists and gaining victory against the *takfiri* plots ... because if Syria turns into a center or passage for the [Islamic State] and other terrorist groups, they will not show mercy to Lebanon either."⁵³

Attesting to its prominence in the civil war, Hezbollah joined a "counterterror alliance" with Russia, Syria, Iran, and Iraq in September 2015.⁵⁴ As part of this agreement, the "P4+1 alliance" set up two joint operations centers in Damascus and Baghdad to coordinate its campaign.⁵⁵

45. Dan de Luce, "Syrian War Takes Rising Toll on Hezbollah," *Foreign Policy*, July 9, 2015. (<http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/07/09/syrian-war-takes-rising-toll-on-hezbollah/>)

46. Bassem Mroue, "A Hezbollah Recruiting Drive Comes amid Losses, Deeper Involvement in Syria," *Associated Press*, December 18, 2015. (<http://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2015-12-18/a-hezbollah-recruiting-push-covers-its-deeper-role-in-syria>)

47. Sam Dagher, "Syria's Alawite Force Turned Tide for Assad," *The Wall Street Journal*, August 26, 2013. (<http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424127887323997004578639903412487708>)

48. Avi Issacharoff, "A Third of Hezbollah's Fighters Said Killed or Injured in Syria," *The Times of Israel*, December 15, 2015. (<http://www.timesofisrael.com/a-third-of-hezbollahs-fighters-said-killed-or-injured-in-syria/>)

49. @Alfoneh, "Lebanese Hezbollah combat fatalities in Syria since October 1, 2012: 854. Since October 1, 2015: 105. (ongoing data collection)," *Twitter*, January 5, 2016. (<https://twitter.com/Alfoneh/status/684470334607769600>)

50. Mariam Karouny & Laila Bassam, "Two Suicide Bombers Hit Hezbollah Bastion in Lebanon, 43 Killed," *Reuters*, November 12, 2015. (<http://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-crisis-hezbollah-blast-idUSKCN0T121P20151113#bPyW8kL4HUc5h5Xh.97>)

51. Oliver Holmes & Stephen Kalin, "Car Bomb Kills at Least Five in Hezbollah District of Beirut," *Reuters*, January 2, 2014. (<http://www.reuters.com/article/us-lebanon-explosion-idUSBREA010IK20140102>)

52. "Hezbollah Says Presence in Syria Greater than Ever Before," *Agence France-Presse*, October 18, 2015. (<http://news.yahoo.com/hezbollah-says-presence-syria-greater-ever-003659257.html>)

53. "Official: Hezbollah Stays in Syria until Final Victory," *Fars News Agency* (Iran), November 8, 2015. (<http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.aspx?nn=13940817001246>)

54. "Hezbollah is Joining a Formal Alliance with Russia, Iran, and the Syrian Regime," *Business Insider*, September 23, 2015. (<http://www.businessinsider.com/hezbollah-is-joining-a-formal-alliance-with-russia-iran-and-the-syrian-regime-2015-9>)

55. "Moscow Coordinating with Iran, Hezbollah: Report," *NOW Lebanon*, October 1, 2015. (<https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/NewsReports/565992-moscow-coordinating-with-iran-hezbollah-report>)

Fatimiyoun Brigade

As the second largest foreign military contingent fighting in Syria, Iran's Fatimiyoun Brigade has also been instrumental in executing Tehran's strategy on the ground since 2014.⁵⁶ The brigade draws its members mainly from Shiite Afghan refugees of the Hazara minority living in Iran. Their participation in Assad's war effort, however, may stem more from exploitation than commitment to his cause. Iran entices the thousands of refugees it recruits with \$500 monthly salaries, school registration for their children, and Iranian residency permits.⁵⁷ Their families are similarly promised permanent residency in Iran on condition that their members stay to fight in Syria for more than six months.⁵⁸ A recent Swedish report found that 11,000 Afghan refugees, the majority of whom are children, fled Iran for fear that they would be recruited to fight in Syria.⁵⁹

Iranian state-affiliated agencies reported in May 2015 that at least 200 Fatimiyoun members had been killed in Syria since the beginning of the war,⁶⁰

with an additional 60 killed since the start of the October offensive.⁶¹

Zaynabiyoun Brigade

Members of the Zaynabiyoun Brigade, reportedly established by Shiite Pakistanis fighting in Syria, have also been killed fighting alongside Iranian-backed forces.⁶² As with their Afghan counterparts, the Pakistanis' funeral processions take place in Iran in the presence of their families, indicating that they had been residing there prior to deployment.⁶³ According to Alfoneh, 43 Pakistani nationals from the brigade have been killed since November 2014, 16 of whom were killed since October 1, 2015.⁶⁴

Iraqi Shiite Militias

Iran has deployed Iraqi Shiite militias to the Syrian frontlines as well. These volunteers began arriving in Syria in the spring of 2012, entering the country via Damascus International Airport on Iranian flights or by road from Iraq.⁶⁵ Militants told *Reuters* in 2013 that around 50 Iraqi Shiites were flying to Damascus every

56. Saeed Kamali Dehghan, "Afghan Refugees in Iran being Sent to Fight and Die for Assad in Syria," *The Guardian* (U.K.), November 5, 2015. (<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/nov/05/iran-recruits-afghan-refugees-fight-save-syrias-bashar-al-assad>)

57. Farnaz Fassihi, "Iran Pays Afghans to Fight for Assad," *The Wall Street Journal*, May 22, 2014. (<http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052702304908304579564161508613846>)

58. Jacques Neria, "Iran Deploys Afghan Shiite Brigade to Spread its Control in Southern Syria," *Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs*, March 4, 2015. (<http://jcpa.org/iran-shiite-brigade-syria/>)

59. Salah Jamid, "11 'Alf' Afghani Farru min Iran Khashyat Tajnidihim fi Suria (11 Thousand Afghans Fled Iran Fearing Recruitment in Syria)," *Al Arabiya* (Saudi Arabia), November 3, 2015. (<http://www.alarabiya.net/ar/iran/2015/11/03/11-ألف-افغان-ي-فرو-من-إيران-خشيت-التجنيد-في-سوريا>)

60. Saeed Kamali Dehghan, "Afghan Refugees in Iran being Sent to Fight and Die for Assad in Syria," *The Guardian* (U.K.), November 5, 2015. (<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/nov/05/iran-recruits-afghan-refugees-fight-save-syrias-bashar-al-assad>)

61. @Alfoneh, "Shiite Afghan combat fatalities in Syria since September 2013: 198. Since October 1, 2015: 60.," *Twitter*, January 5, 2016. (<https://twitter.com/Alfoneh/status/684442774989586432>)

62. "Increasing Number of Afghans, Pakistanis Killed in Syria Buried in Iran," *Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty*, April 25, 2015. (<http://www.rferl.org/content/persian-letters-afghans-pakistanis-killed-fighting-in-syria-for-iran/26977907.html>)

63. Ali Alfoneh, "Analysis: Shiite Pakistani Casualties of the Wars in Syria and Iraq," *The Long War Journal*, March 17, 2015. (<http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/03/analysis-shiite-pakistani-casualties-of-the-wars-in-syria-and-iraq.php>)

64. @Alfoneh, "Shiite Pakistani combat fatalities in Syria since November 2014: 43. Since October 1, 2015: 16.," *Twitter*, December 9, 2015. (<https://twitter.com/Alfoneh/status/674502253072523264>)

65. Michael Knights, "Iran's Foreign Legion: The Role of Iraqi Shiite Militias in Syria," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, June 27, 2013. (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/irans-foreign-legion-the-role-of-iraqi-shiite-militias-in-syria>)

week to fight, often in small groups of 10 to 15 from Baghdad and the Shiite holy city of Najaf, sometimes disguised as pilgrims.⁶⁶

University of Maryland analyst Phillip Smyth estimates that these fighters number between 800 and 2,000 and come primarily from three Iraqi groups: *Asa'ib Ahl al-Haqq* (which splintered from Shiite firebrand Muqtada al-Sadr's movement in 2006 with support from the IRGC Quds Force and Lebanese Hezbollah); *Kata'ib Hezbollah* (an elite cadre of experienced Iraqi Shiite fighters reporting directly to the Quds Force); and *Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada* (led by Abu Mustafa al-Sheibani, an Iraqi Shiite who has worked under the Quds Force since the late 1980s).⁶⁷ Members of the Badr Organization, the armed wing of the Shiite-dominated Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq political party, are also fighting in the country.⁶⁸

Many of these Iraqi fighters joined the Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas Brigade, formed in 2013 in coordination with the Syrian government,⁶⁹ and which fights mainly around the shrine of Sayyida Zaynab on the southern outskirts of the Syrian capital. The brigade was reportedly set up in response to the perceived

danger to the shrine and adjoining mosque from Sunni fighters who have desecrated similar places of worship elsewhere.⁷⁰ Initially, even experienced Iraqi militants reportedly had to join the brigade and fight under *shabiha* command as a condition for being equipped by the Syrian government. Later on, the Iraqi Mahdi Army (al-Sadr's former militia), *Asa'ib Ahl al-Haqq*, and *Kata'ib Hezbollah* began fighting under the command of Lebanese Hezbollah.⁷¹

As Smyth notes, in preparation for the 2015 offensive in Syria, these Iraqi Shiite groups intensified their online recruitment and deployments. The spike in recruitment was discernible in July, coinciding with Soleimani's meeting with Russian officials. These Shiite fighters are now conducting operations across Syria in support of the regime.⁷²

Other Foreign Fighters

Iran may also be recruiting fighters from farther afield. In March 2015, reports emerged that Yemeni Houthi fighters were receiving training in Syria and taking part in battles on behalf of the Syrian government. As the Italian news agency *Adnkronos* reported, "The IRGC brings installments of Houthi fighters from Yemen, [with] each installment coming to around one hundred fighters. They train in camps in southern Syria – in Izraa and Bosra – and participate in engagements taking place there in order to gain combat skills and

66. Suadad al-Salhy, "Iraqi Shi'ites Flock to Assad's Side as Sectarian Split Widens," *Reuters*, June 19, 2013. (<http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/06/19/us-iraq-syria-militants-idUSBRE95I0ZA20130619#CsT3IbjapqUfgCzZ.99>)

67. Michael Knights, "Iran's Foreign Legion: The Role of Iraqi Shiite Militias in Syria," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, June 27, 2013. (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/irans-foreign-legion-the-role-of-iraqi-shiite-militias-in-syria>)

68. Suadad al-Salhy, "Iraqi Shi'ites Flock to Assad's Side as Sectarian Split Widens," *Reuters*, June 19, 2013. (<http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/06/19/us-iraq-syria-militants-idUSBRE95I0ZA20130619#CsT3IbjapqUfgCzZ.99>); "Syria: Iraqi Volunteer Forces Take Part in Mop-Up Operation in Southern Aleppo," *Fars News Agency*, December 24, 2015. (<http://en.farsnews.com/imgrep.aspx?nn=13941002000879>)

69. Suadad al-Salhy, "Iraqi Shi'ites Flock to Assad's Side as Sectarian Split Widens," *Reuters*, June 19, 2013. (<http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/06/19/us-iraq-syria-militants-idUSBRE95I0ZA20130619#CsT3IbjapqUfgCzZ.99>)

70. Mariam Karouny, "Shi'ite Fighters Rally to Defend Damascus Shrine," *Reuters*, March 3, 2013. (<http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/03/03/us-syria-crisis-shiites-idUSBRE92202X20130303#IcSelueW2rHCfzFg.99>)

71. Suadad al-Salhy, "Iraqi Shi'ites Flock to Assad's Side as Sectarian Split Widens," *Reuters*, June 19, 2013. (<http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/06/19/us-iraq-syria-militants-idUSBRE95I0ZA20130619#CsT3IbjapqUfgCzZ.99>)

72. Phillip Smith, "Iran's Iraqi Shiite Proxies Increase their Deployment to Syria," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, October 2, 2015. (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/irans-iraqi-shiite-proxies-increase-their-deployment-to-syria/>)

experience. Then they return to Yemen and a new installment comes.”⁷³

Similarly, the secretary general of the Islamic League in Nigeria warned in September 2015 that “Iran has trained 3,000 Nigerian youths to join Assad’s forces and the militias fighting on its side, including Hezbollah.” He added that the recruitment of fighters was overseen by the Iranian embassy and consulate in his country.⁷⁴

Weapons

In addition to manpower, Iran has provided the Syrian government with significant firepower, despite a 2010 UN Security Council ban on Iranian weapons exports.⁷⁵ In 2012, a UN report identified Syria as the top destination for Iranian arms shipments – one such delivery seized by Turkish authorities contained assault rifles, machine guns, explosives, detonators, and 60-mm and 120-mm mortar shells.⁷⁶ In 2013, Middle East intelligence officials stated that Tehran and Moscow were providing sophisticated technology to the Syrian government, including Iranian-made surveillance drones and anti-mortar systems similar to those used by U.S. forces. Syrian military units also have received monitoring equipment to gather intelligence about rebel positions and jamming devices

to block rebel communications.⁷⁷ In February 2014, Nic Jenzen-Jones, a military arms specialist and director of Armament Research Services, stated that Falaq-1 and Falaq-2 rocket launchers had arrived from Iran, along with small-arms ammunition.⁷⁸

Iran is known to transfer these arms by land through Iraq and via its national airline carriers, Iran Air and Mahan Air.⁷⁹ As a result, the U.S. Treasury Department designated Mahan Air for its supporting role in IRGC weapons shipments to Syria and Hezbollah in 2013⁸⁰ and blacklisted its new aircraft in 2015.⁸¹ The airline’s website no longer includes Damascus among its destinations, but flights destined for the Syrian capital continue, with aircraft landing in the regime stronghold of Latakia or at military airfields. Flight information available at PlaneFinder reveals that Mahan Air flies to Damascus several times a month.⁸²

77. Joby Warrick, “Russian, Iranian Technology is Boosting Assad’s Assault on Syrian Rebels,” *The Washington Post*, June 1, 2013. (https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/russian-iranian-technology-is-boosting-assads-assault-on-syrian-rebels/2013/06/01/aefad718-ca26-11e2-9f1a-1a7cdee20287_story.html)

78. Jonathan Saul & Parisa Haefzi, “Iran Boosts Military Support in Syria to Bolster Assad,” *Reuters*, February 21, 2014. (<http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/02/21/us-syria-crisis-iran-idUSBREA1K09U20140221>)

79. Louis Charbonneau, “Exclusive: Iran Steps up Weapons Lifeline to Syria’s Assad – Envoys,” *Reuters*, March 14, 2013. (<http://uk.reuters.com/article/2013/03/14/uk-syria-crisis-iran-idUKBRE92D11W20130314>)

80. U.S. Department of the Treasury, Press Release, “Treasury Designates Syrian Entity, Others Involved in Arms and Communications Procurement Networks and Identifies Blocked Iranian Aircraft,” September 19, 2012. (<http://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/tg1714.aspx>)

81. U.S. Department of the Treasury, Press Release, “Treasury Department Targets Those Involved in Iranian Scheme to Purchase Airplanes,” March 21, 2015. (<http://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/jl10061.aspx>)

82. Emanuele Ottolenghi & Benjamin Weinthal, “The Wings of War,” *Politico*, September 16, 2015. (<http://www.politico.eu/article/iran-mahan-air-sanctions-nuclear-deal-aviation-air-safety/>); PlaneFinder accessible at: <http://www.planefinder.net/>

73. “Houthi Receiving Syria Training,” *NOW Lebanon*, September 30, 2015. (<https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/NewsReports/564939-houthis-receiving-syria-training>)

74. Fahad al-Theyabi, “Iran Tudarrib 3 Alaf Nayjiri Lilailtihaq Wamilishiatih fi Suria (Iran Trains 3,000 Nigerians to Join its Militias in Syria),” *Asharq Al-Awsat* (U.K.), October 1, 2015. (<http://aawsat.com/home/article/464526/الاف-3-تدريبات-لليوم-الاحد-في-سوريا>)

75. United Nations Security Council, Press Release, “Security Imposes Additional Sanctions on Iran, Voting 12 in Favour to 2 Against, with 1 Abstention,” June 9, 2010. (<http://www.un.org/press/en/2010/sc9948.doc.htm>)

76. “Iran ‘Sending Arms to Syria Despite Ban’,” *Al Jazeera* (Qatar), May 17, 2012. (<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/americas/2012/05/20125175553158930.html>)

Since October 2015, Iran has stepped up its arms shipments and provided new weapons such as explosives-laden unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs).⁸³ For example, an Iraqi minister claimed that 39 Iranian and Russian cargo planes had transited Iraqi airspace carrying weapons, hardware, and fighters to support the Syrian regime in October alone.⁸⁴ On October 29, Western intelligence sources reported that Russia had helped Iran deliver weapons into Syria twice a day over the previous ten days. The intelligence source further claimed that Mahan Air was flying military personnel into Syria several times each day from Tehran to Latakia.⁸⁵

Iran had initially denied providing this material support to the Assad regime. A foreign ministry official in 2014 said, "We always have said that we support our Syrian brothers ... Iran has never got involved in Syria by providing arms or financially or by sending troops."⁸⁶ Today, Tehran no longer makes a secret of these arms transfers. In October 2015, the head of the Iranian parliament's national security and foreign policy committee acknowledged that Tehran provides weapons and military experts to Syria and Iraq.⁸⁷ In an interview with Russian media in September 2015,

Assad similarly admitted that Iran had sent Syria military equipment and provided it with expertise.⁸⁸ In five years, these arms transfers will likely become even easier for Tehran as the UN ban on its purchase and sale of conventional weapons is lifted, pursuant to UN Security Council Resolution 2231 endorsing the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).⁸⁹

Financial Support

Finally, Iran's financial assistance has been critical to keeping Assad in power. In addition to releasing billions of dollars of loans and credit for imports of oil and other commodities,⁹⁰ Iran has provided \$6 to \$20 billion per year, according to open-source estimates. The UN special envoy for Syria estimates that Iran spends \$6 billion annually on Assad's government, whereas Steven Heydemann of the United States Institute of Peace assesses Iran's total support for Assad at between \$15 and \$20 billion annually.⁹¹ Assad will also likely benefit from the terms of the JCPOA – the sanctions relief will provide Iran with access to at least \$90-120 billion, a portion of which may be used to support the Syrian regime, Hezbollah, and Tehran's war effort.⁹²

83. "Iran Attacking Syria Rebels with Explosive Drones," *NOW Lebanon*, October 21, 2015. (<https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/NewsReports/566091-iran-attacking-syria-rebels-with-explosive-drones>)

84. Uthman al-Mukhtar, "39 Tayirat Shahm Rusiat Iraniat Lidaem Al'Asad Eabbarat Aliraq (39 Russian-Iranian Transport Planes to Support Assad Transited Iraq)," *Al-Araby Al-Jadeed* (U.K.), October 28, 2015. (<http://www.alaraby.co.uk/politics/2015/10/27/رسالة-اسم-عبد-قار-ع-ار-ب-ع-ي-ن-ا-ري-ا-ي-س-ور-ي-وج>)

85. Jennifer Griffin, "Russia Flying Iranian Weapons Shipments into Syria, Sources Say," *Fox News*, October 29, 2015. (<http://www.foxnews.com/world/2015/10/29/exclusive-russia-flying-iranian-weapons-shipments-into-syria-sources-say/>)

86. Jonathan Saul & Parisa Hafezi, "Iran Boosts Military Support in Syria to Bolster Assad," *Reuters*, February 21, 2014. (<http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/02/21/us-syria-crisis-iran-idUSBREA1K09U20140221>)

87. "Iran Lawmaker Says Provides Syria, Iraq with Weapons, Military Experts," *Xinhua* (China), October 15, 2015. (http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2015-10/15/c_134716810.htm)

88. "Assad: Iran is Sending Arms to Syria," *Al Arabiya* (Saudi Arabia), September 16, 2015. (<http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2015/09/16/Assad-Iran-is-sending-arms-to-Syria.html>)

89. United Nations Security Council, "Resolution 2231 [on endorsing the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action on Iran's nuclear program]," S/RES/2231, July 20, 2015. (<http://www.un.org/en/sc/inc/pages/pdf/pow/RES2231E.pdf>)

90. Ian Black, "How Iran's Shadowy Role in Syria Fuels Paranoia and Wariness," *The Guardian* (U.K.), September 21, 2015. (<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/sep/21/irans-shadowy-influence-in-syrias-maelstrom-fuels-paranoia-and-wariness>)

91. Eli Lake, "Iran Spends Billions to Prop Up Assad," *Bloomberg*, June 9, 2015. (<http://www.bloombergview.com/articles/2015-06-09/iran-spends-billions-to-prop-up-assad>)

92. Mark Dubowitz, Annie Fixler, & Rachel Ziemba, "Iran's Mysterious Shrinking Reserves: Estimating the Value of Tehran's Foreign Assets," *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, September 2015. (http://www.defenddemocracy.org/content/uploads/publications/FDDRoubini_Report_Irans_mysterious_shrinking_reserves.pdf)

Although their financial relationship existed long before the JCPOA, the nuclear deal will reduce the financial burden of Iran's activities abroad.

Policy Recommendations

In an interview in March 2014, President Barack Obama offered a sanguine view of Iran's involvement in Syria:

I'm always darkly amused by this notion that somehow Iran has won in Syria. I mean, you hear sometimes people saying, "They're winning in Syria." And you say, "This was their one friend in the Arab world, a member of the Arab League, and it is now in rubble." It's bleeding them because they're having to send in billions of dollars. Their key proxy, Hezbollah, which had a very comfortable and powerful perch in Lebanon, now finds itself attacked by Sunni extremists. This isn't good for Iran. They're losing as much as anybody.⁹³

More than a year later, it appears President Obama was correct in recognizing the escalating costs of Iran's strategy in Syria, though he underestimated its benefits. By intensifying its support for Assad and deploying hundreds of ground troops to join in the fight, Iran finally won an invitation to join the Syria negotiations at the end of October.⁹⁴ This policy reversal by the Western powers represents an implicit recognition of Tehran's influence and puts Iran in a better position to protect Assad diplomatically.

93. Jeffrey Goldberg, "Obama to Israel – Time is Running Out," *Bloomberg*, March 2, 2014. (<http://www.bloombergview.com/articles/2014-03-02/obama-to-israel-time-is-running-out>)

94. Thomas Erdbrink, Sewell Chan, & David E. Sanger, "After a U.S. Shift, Iran has a Seat at Talks on War in Syria," *The New York Times*, October 28, 2015. (<http://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/29/world/middleeast/syria-talks-vienna-iran.html>)

Yet Iranian participation in the Vienna talks will make a peaceful resolution harder to achieve given Tehran's commitment to keeping Assad in power – a nonstarter for the Syrian opposition and its Sunni backers. A wiser policy would focus on eroding Iran's support of Assad to allow a transfer of power to take place in Damascus. To rollback Tehran's influence in Syria, the following steps are thus needed:

Interdict Arms Shipments

The United States can interdict the transshipment of Iranian weapons into Syria by sharing intelligence with Turkey and Kurdish groups in Iraq and Syria. Because Russia is willing to transport Iranian weapons and because Iraq is dependent on Tehran in its own fight against IS, cutting off these pathways will yield only limited results.

Therefore, the United States should target the mode of transport for these shipments as well. As FDD's Emanuele Ottolenghi notes, the Obama administration could sanction the front companies of Mahan, Meraj, Iran, and Caspian Air in Europe and fine foreign companies that conduct business with them. It could also initiate legal action to impound their aircraft landing at European airports and pressure U.S. carriers that use the same companies employed by these airlines to drop their contracts.⁹⁵

Designate the IRGC and its Proxies

As the line becomes increasingly blurred between the expeditionary Quds Force and other Iranian units operating in Syria, it would be appropriate to designate the IRGC as a terrorist organization and to sanction those Iranian entities and foreign companies that do

95. Emanuele Ottolenghi, "Why isn't the Obama Administration Going after Iran's Mahan Air?" *The Hill*, November 16, 2015. (<http://thehill.com/blogs/pundits-blog/international/260227-why-isnt-the-obama-administration-going-after-irans-mahan>)

business with it.⁹⁶ The Treasury Department already designated the Quds Force under Executive Order 13224 in 2007 for providing material support to terrorist organizations, but this designation has not been applied to the entire organization. Doing so will be all the more necessary when the JCPOA is implemented and the IRGC begins to benefit from sanctions relief.⁹⁷ In addition, the United States should call on the United Nations to punish Qassem Soleimani for violating its 2007 travel ban by visiting Russia, Syria, and Iraq on several occasions.

The United States can similarly increase efforts to weaken the Iranian proxies fighting alongside regime forces in Syria. In December 2015, President Obama signed into law a bill that allows the U.S. government to sanction any bank knowingly working with Hezbollah or supporters of the group.⁹⁸ This approach should be extended to other militias fighting in Syria, such as *Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq*, which is not yet designated by the United States or Europe. In addition, Washington could devote greater intelligence capabilities to thwart Iran's attempts to recruit Shiite fighters in other countries and transfer them to Syria or Iran for training. This would require working with local governments to dismantle these cells and expel Iranian agents.

96. Mark Dubowitz, "Iran Terror Financing and the Tax Code," *Testimony before the House Ways and Means Committee Subcommittee on Oversight*, November 4, 2015. (http://www.defenddemocracy.org/content/uploads/documents/Dubowitz_Iran_Terror_Financing_and_the_Tax_Code.pdf)

97. "The JCPOA's Economic Benefits for Iran's Revolutionary Guards," *Iran Task Force*, December 2015. (http://taskforceoniran.org/pdf/The_JCPOA%E2%80%99s_Economic_Benefits_for_Iran%E2%80%99s_Revolutionary_Guards.pdf)

98. Rebecca Shimoni Stoil, "Obama Signs Hezbollah Sanctions Bill into Law," *The Times of Israel*, December 19, 2015. (<http://www.timesofisrael.com/obama-signs-hezbollah-sanctions-bill-into-law/>); Hizballah International Financing Prevention Act of 2015, H.R. 2297, 114th Congress (2015). (<https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/BILLS-114hr2297cas/pdf/BILLS-114hr2297cas.pdf>)

Publicize Iran's Role

Congress should require the administration to report every 90 days on Iran's activities in the following areas: provision of arms, financial support, intelligence sharing, military support, and IRGC and foreign fighter deployments. Similarly, the Treasury Department should issue a regular report on Iran's financial, technological, and material support to the Assad regime, including energy credits, loans, cash, and all other financial assistance. These reports will help inform the American public and the international community of the depth of Iranian involvement in Syria and provide the basis for additional Treasury designations.

Bleed Iran in Syria

Tehran has repeatedly vowed to support Assad to the very end, thus presenting an opportunity for the United States to weaken the IRGC in Syria and fuel dissent inside Iran. Though Washington's goal should be to end the Syrian war, it could also increase the costs of Iran's engagement by maintaining the pressure on Assad and his Iranian allies through its support for the armed opposition. It should do so by revamping its train-and-equip programs, creating safe zones inside Syria or across the border in Jordan for rebel groups to organize and stage operations, and supporting anti-Assad fighters with additional military advisers and increased airpower. Reports that Iran has withdrawn most of its IRGC soldiers from the frontlines may suggest that it is feeling the pain of its heavy casualties.

Codify in Law the Policy that Assad Must Go

Congress should legislate that it is the policy of the United States that Assad, in his capacity as a state sponsor of terrorism, may not play a role in the future of Syria and that he should be held to account for his crimes against humanity. Though it has expressed its desire to see Assad step down, the Obama administration has

thus far been noncommittal on the timeline and process of Assad's departure, partly for fear of alienating his other major backer, Russia, which is a key player in the international negotiations.⁹⁹ Enshrining this position in law, however, would signal American support for the Sunni opposition and reassure Turkey and the Gulf states of U.S. intentions in the region. It would also communicate to Moscow that the next U.S. president has limited flexibility on this issue. This step entails recognizing that the focus of U.S. efforts in Syria should not be solely fixed on the Islamic State, as ruthless as it has shown itself to be. The reality is that Assad's oppression of Syria's Sunni population has strengthened IS, and Iran's activities have abetted Assad's brutality. The renewed resolve to destroy IS following the attacks in Paris should not obscure this logic.

The above policy recommendations alone will not end the conflict in Syria, but they could produce an environment more conducive to its resolution. The international talks as currently formulated, on the other hand, risk legitimizing Iran's activities and prolonging Assad's rule. Only by reversing Tehran's gains on the ground can the United States and its allies promote a peaceful resolution of the civil war and undercut Iran's hegemonic ambitions in the region.

99. Nathan Hodge & Jay Solomon, "Kerry Softens Position on Syrian President Assad," *The Wall Street Journal*, December 15, 2015. (<http://www.wsj.com/articles/john-kerry-in-russia-in-effort-to-keep-syria-talks-on-course-1450183175>)

Acknowledgements

I wish to thank Jonathan Schanzer, Ali Alfoneh, Toby Dershowitz, Ray Takeyh, Ilan Berman, Emanuele Ottolenghi, Reuel Marc Gerecht, and Mark Dubowitz for their substantive feedback and contributions to this report. I would also like to express my gratitude to Oren Kessler, Amir Toumaj, Nicole Salter, and Annie Fixler for their copy edits and research assistance.

Photo Credits

Cover Photos Left to Right:

AP Photo/Vahid Salemi

AP Photo/Vahid Salemi

Reuters/Corbis/Sharif Karim

About The Author

Max Peck is a research analyst at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies (FDD) where he serves as a Public Interest Fellow.

Previously, Max worked at the Defense Department as a counterterrorism analyst focusing on the Middle East. He has a Master's degree in American Foreign Policy and International Economics from the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS) and a Bachelor's degree from Princeton University, where he concentrated in the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs. He has also studied in Morocco on a Critical Language Scholarship from the State Department.



About the Foundation for Defense of Democracies

The Foundation for Defense of Democracies is a non-profit, non-partisan policy institute dedicated exclusively to promoting pluralism, defending democratic values, and fighting the ideologies that drive terrorism. Founded shortly after the attacks of 9/11, FDD combines policy research, democracy and counterterrorism education, strategic communications, and investigative journalism in support of its mission.

FDD focuses its efforts where opinions are formed and decisions are made, providing cutting-edge research, investigative journalism and public education - transforming ideas into action and policy.

FDD holds events throughout the year, including the Leading Thinkers series, briefings on Capitol Hill, expert roundtables for public officials, diplomats and military officers, book releases, and panel discussions and debates within the policy community.



For more information, please visit www.defenddemocracy.org.



P.O. Box 33249
Washington, DC 20033-3249
(202) 207-0190
www.defenddemocracy.org