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The Iranian Footprint in Syria

An inventory of Iranian military, political and economic Support to the Syrian Government

After the outbreak of the Syria popular uprisings in March 2011, and the subsequent militarization of the revolt, the alliance between Iran and Syria was put to the test. This article assesses the Iranian – Syrian alliance, and focuses on how Iran engaged through interstate, informal military support, and economic assistance to the Syrian Government during the first four years of the Syrian rebellion.

The previous article focused on the historical parameters that have consolidated the Iran-Syria alliance after the 1979 Iranian Islamic revolution¹. The Syrian civil uprising that broke out in 2011, and the subsequent militarization of the revolt, put the alliance between Iran and Syria to the test.

¹For more details, please check: <https://www.bic-rhr.com/research/syrian-iranian-nexus-historical-overview-strategic-cooperation>

While the motives of cooperation between the two states, whether they are based upon shared national interests, mutual regional security interests or common international enemies- remain speculative and are rarely publicly confirmed, this article concentrates on the *means* of cooperation in the context of the Syrian rebellion. This article illustrates how Iran engaged in the Syrian rebellion through interstate military support, informal military support with the help of proxy militias, such as Hezbollah, and how it has enhanced its degree of financial support to the Syrian government and other means of economic engagement.

Interstate Military Cooperation

Since the beginning of the popular uprising in 2011, Iran has tunneled state military support to the Syrian government. Although the Iranian government remains reluctant to give full openness about its operations in Syria, proof of its presence in Syria has trickled down through various local and international media accounts. Iran has, through the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and its subdivision, the Quds Force (QF), provided important logistical, intelligence and military assistance to the Syrian government. The Syrian General Intelligence Directorate (GID) that dealt with managing internal dissent was among the beneficiaries of this support.² As the popular uprising developed gradually into an insurgency, Iran was illegally supplying the Syrian government with weaponry, ammunition and military equipment transporting them through Iraq, Turkey and Lebanon.³ It equally increased Iranian military footprint by establishing a Revolutionary Guard Base in Damascus and Latakia.⁴ Accounts of Iranian unarmed drones⁵ and footage of an Iranian rocket

² In June 2011, the deputy chief of *Iran's Law Enforcement Forces* (LEF) Ahmad Reza Radan travelled to Damascus in 2011, where he "met with Syrian security services and provided expertise to aid in the Syrian government's crackdown on the Syrian people. See: <http://www.naameshaam.org/iran-in-syria-2016/4-iranian-weapons/index.html#crackdown>

³ From 2007 onwards, the UN forbade Iran from exporting any arms as part of its nuclear-program-related sanctions. See: Christopher Phillips, *The Battle for Syria* (Yale University Press, 2016), 149. Also see: Tisdall and staff, "Iran Helping Syrian Regime Crack down on Protesters, Say Diplomats."

⁴ Con Coughlin, "Iran Agrees to Fund Syrian Military Base," August 12, 2011, sec. World, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/iran/8699077/Iran-agrees-to-fund-Syrian-military-base.html>.

⁵ An unnamed U.S. official stated that Iran provided "unarmed drones that Damascus is using along with its own technology to monitor opposition forces," as well as "monitoring tools to help the regime suppress the opposition". Mark Hosenball, "Iran Helping Assad to Put down Protests: Officials," *Reuters*, March 23, 2012, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-syria-crackdown-idUSBRE82M18220120323>. See also: YouTube, *Spy Plane over Locals*, 2012, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KApA_VfNu6I, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qv1rJ-HC7BQ>.

and mortar shell crates further underlined the Iranian hand in Syria.⁶ When in 2012 the Syrian government faced increasing defeat, Iranian planes were flying from Iran to Syria via Iraq “on an almost daily basis”.⁷ They allegedly carried ICRG personnel and “tens of tons of weapons to arm the Syrian security forces and militias fighting against the rebels”.⁸ Iranian QF equally deployed military assistance to formalize and professionalize pro-Assad paramilitary forces. By the beginning of 2013, Iran and its proxy ally Hezbollah allegedly trained and supervised various local pro-Assad that were grouped under the banner of *Quwat al-Difa’ al-Watani*, or, National Defense Forces (NDF).⁹ Esmail Heydari, a senior commander of the Revolutionary Guards, confirmed in an interview in 2013 with the Netherlands Public Broadcasting network (NPO), that he has been “working with Syrian militias,” many of whose members “had been previously trained by us in Iran.”¹⁰ In 2014, a retired senior ICRG commander told Reuters that there were, at any given time, between 60 and 70 QF commanders in Syria who co-ordinate strategy and operational issues with Assad’s government, yet have no direct influence over the personnel of the Syrian army.¹¹

Informal Military Support

When it became clear that there were insufficient Syrian forces to fight rebel groups, Iran supported the Syrian government also through informal military means.¹² Through proxy militia's, in which Hezbollah appears most prominently, Iran has been providing parallel military support aiming at keeping President Assad in power. Early Hezbollah presence was announced in 2012, by an ICRG commander on Al-Arabiya TV channel, saying Hezbollah forces took part in the al-Zabadani battle on

⁶ Brown Moses, “Brown Moses Blog: Evidence Of Iranian arms provided to Syria in the past 18 months,” *Brown Moses Blog* (blog), May 20, 2013, <http://brown-moses.blogspot.com/2013/05/evidence-of-iranian-arms-provided-to.html>.

⁷ Iranian Weapons « Naame Shaam – نامه شام,” accessed March 4, 2019, <http://www.naameshaam.org/iran-in-syria-2016/4-iranian-weapons/index.html#crackdown>. See also: Louis Charbonneau, “Exclusive: Western report – Iran ships arms, personnel to Syria via Iraq, Reuters, 19 September 2012.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹Shahir ShahidSaless, “Iran’s Plan to Confront a Post-Assad Era,” *Huffington Post* (blog), November 9, 2015, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/shahir-shahidsaless/irans-plan-to-confront-a_b_8510186.html. See also: Tabrizi, Edited Aniseh Bassiri, and Raffaello Pantucci. “Understanding Iran’s Role in the Syrian Conflict,” 2016, 4.

¹⁰ Nieuwsuur, *Syrian Militia Trained in Iran* (Dutch National Television, 2013), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z2J02DutU2c>.

¹¹ Jonathan Saul and Parisa Hafezi, “Iran Boosts Military Support in Syria to Bolster Assad,” *Reuters*, February 21, 2014, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-crisis-iran-idUSBREA1K09U20140221>. See also: Tabrizi, Edited Aniseh Bassiri, and Raffaello Pantucci. “Understanding Iran’s Role in the Syrian Conflict,” 2016,5.

¹² Tabrizi, Edited Aniseh Bassiri, and Raffaello Pantucci. “Understanding Iran’s Role in the Syrian Conflict,” 2016,5

Iranian orders, in order to protect an ICRG military base in the nearby town of Madaya.¹³ Over the course of 2012, different accounts in Lebanese media reported funerals for slain Hezbollah fighters, accounts that were later confirmed by Hezbollah.¹⁴ A Hezbollah fighter interviewed in June 2013 stated that: “Hezbollah is leading operations in Qusayr; the Syrian army is only playing a secondary role, deploying after an area is completely ‘cleaned’ and secured”.¹⁵ ¹⁶ Iran also facilitated the deployment of foreign Shia militias and provided Iraqi Shia groups with training and weapons. One of the first Iraqi militias to announce its presence there was the *Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas* Brigade (AFA), which observers describe as “the primary front group [of] Iranian-backed combatants and organizations based in Iraq.”¹⁷ Another prominent Iraqi Shia militia fighting alongside Damascus in Syria is ‘*Asa’eb Ahl al-Haq*, or Leagues of the Righteous (AAH), which shares a similar origin and composition to those of the AFA.¹⁸ Other key Iraqi Shi’a militia groups that have sent fighters to Syria include; *Kataib Hizb Allah* (Brigades of the Party of God, KH), *Kataib Sayyid al-Shuhada* (Sayyid of Martyrs Battalions, KSS) *Harakat Hizb Allah al-Nujaba* (Movement of the Party of God’s Nobles, HHN) and the *Munazzama Badr* (Badr Organisation).¹⁹ In 2014, the Syrian government faced increasing defeat.

The onset of the American-led intervention in Syria, inter-rebel conflict increased and an advancing ISIS coincided with the fall of Mosul into IS hands in June 2014. The threat to Baghdad created an internal crisis that forced Tehran to urge several thousands of their Shia Iraqi militiamen to return home and protect their homes and their pro-Iranian government. Qassem Suleimani, commander of the Quds Force and IRGC Commander General Mohammad Ali Jafari, aimed at filling the vacuum by recruiting Shia fighters from Afghanistan and Pakistan, respectively constituting the *Fatemiyun* and the *Zaynabiyun* Brigades.²⁰

¹³ Will Fulton, Joseph Holliday, and Sam Wyer, “Iranian Strategy in Syria” (critical threats project & Institute for the Study of War, 2013), 23. See also: “Tabrizi and Pantucci - Understanding Iran’s Role in the.Pdf,” 5.

¹⁴ Such as the one on Oct. 3, 2012, that announced the killing of Ali Nassif, a veteran Hezbollah commander, by the Free Syrian Army near al-Qusayr in Syria. See: Elizabeth A. Kennedy, “Official: Hezbollah Fighters Killed in Syria,” Daily Star, October 2, 2012

¹⁵ Mona Alami, “Hezbollah Fighter Details Ops in Qusayr,” April 6, 2013, <https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/Interview/hezbollah-fighter-details-ops-in-qusayr>.

¹⁶ During the battle of al-Qusayr in June 2013, opposition sources reported that well over 100 Hezbollah fighters were killed. Hezbollah later confirmed some 100 of them. See: Naame Shaam, “Iran in Syria; From an Ally of the Regime to an Occupying Force,” September 2014, 28.

¹⁷ Phill Smyth, “From Karbala to Sayyida Zaynab: Iraqi Fighters in Syria’s Shi’a Militias,” Syria Special Issue, August 2013, 30. See also: Hashmatallah Moslih, ‘Iran “Foreign Legion” Leans on Afghan Shia in Syria War’, Al Jazeera, 22 January 2016.

¹⁸ Smyth, 28.

¹⁹ Smyth, 29.

²⁰ The Wall Street Journal claimed that the IRGC had been recruiting “thousands of Afghan refugees to fight in Syria, offering them \$500 a month and Iranian residency permits”. See: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/iran-recruiting-afghan-refugees-to-fight-for-regime-in-syria-1400197482> also see: AlArabiya العربية, *Afghan Fighters*

Financial Support and Economic Engagement

As the armed rebellion expanded, sanctions and the loss of trade and productivity had severe consequences for the Syrian, domestic economy. Besides its military expenditures, it needed support in paying state salaries and provide public services. Iran stepped in and strengthened its financial share in the Syrian economy, as well as credit provider and providing loans. Through a trade agreement implemented in 2012, bilateral trade grew from \$300 million in 2010 to 41 billion in 2014, making Iran Syria's largest trade partner.²¹ While foreign companies were leaving the Syrian markets, like France's Total which suspended operations in Syria,²² Iranian companies were quick to fill a vacuum in the Syrian economy and was able to boost its share in Syrian reconstruction with agreed contracts to rebuild Syria's damaged infrastructure.²³ Halfway through 2013, most of the oil fields and the agricultural lands in the North and the East had been lost, which forced Damascus to rely on Tehran for loans resulting in two credit facilities in 2013- \$1 billion for imports of food and to give an impulse to its foreign reserves, and \$3,6 billion for oil.²⁴

Conclusion

For the first four years of the Syrian conflict, Iran was Syria's most important ally on the ground. Tehran was strengthening its 'deep state' in Syria, aiming to establish control over strategically valuable regions of Syria through its support to the government, its paramilitaries and armed non-state actors.

By 2015, the IRGC and its Quds Force were directing both key aspects of Syria's military strategy within the Syrian Military forces, while bringing in and directing foreign Shia militias and Hezbollah. Simultaneously, Iran deepened economic ties and the increased Iranian capital invested in Syrian

Join Al-Assad Forces for \$500 a Month', accessed February 11, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OzsGopANvxc>.

²¹ Salam Al-Saadi, "Iran's Stakes in Syria's Economy," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, June 2, 2015, <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/60280>.

²² Eric Watkins, "Total exits Syria following tightened EU sanctions," Oil & Gas Journal, December 7, 2011, www.ogj.com/articles/2011/12/total-exits-syria-following-tightened-eu-sanctions.html.

²³ "جلسة مباحثات بين سورية وإيران لمناقشة خطوات تنفيذ اتفاقية التعاون الاقتصادي المشترك" | SANA, accessed February 21, 2019, <http://sananeews.sy/?p=793>.

²⁴ Suleiman Al-Khalidi, "Iran Grants Syria \$3.6 Billion Credit to Buy Oil Products," Reuters, July 31, 2013, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-crisis-iran-idUSBRE96U0XN20130731>.

assets, strengthened the Iranian footprint in Syria even more and transformed it to a key foreign actor which will likely facilitate privileged access to the Syrian market and future reconstruction efforts.

However, the fact that Russia's game changing intervention in September 2015, that strengthened the Syrian military in the north-west, and not the foreign militias that were mainly based around Damascus airport and on the main supply routes to Hezbollah in Lebanon, might be a sign of joint Russian-Syrian attempts to reduce Iranian ambitions in Syria. In the next article, an assessment will be made of the Iranian attitude and strategy regarding the upgraded, strategic Russian presence in Syria.

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