

Iran in Syria

From an Ally of
the Regime
to an Occupying
Force

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Foreword

The first edition of this report, released in November 2014, was the result of a year of Naame Shaam's work. It drew largely on information gathered from monitoring Syrian, Iranian and the international media's coverage of events in Syria. The majority of the information and sources found in this report are thus in the public domain. The author drew on private sources only on a few occasions. This was the case, for instance, with the Syrian 'crisis cell' assassination story towards the end of chapter II. Even in such cases, however, the author did his best to verify and corroborate the information conveyed to him from other, publicly available sources. This second edition of the report follows the same pattern.

Readers will notice that the author has made a special effort to reference almost every piece of information mentioned in the report. This is because he wants readers to be able to verify the information and to expand on it if necessary. The references should also be useful for legal practitioners and organisations wishing to use the original sources as evidence in any future lawsuits against war criminals in Syria.

Naame Shaam has backed up and made copies of all the web pages referenced in the report, just in case they 'disappear', as many Iranian news reports concerning Syria have done in the past.

While drawing on a wide range of sources in a variety of languages, the author has deliberately avoided using many Syrian opposition groups and media outlets as a source, except when that was unavoidable. The reason for this is to avoid accusations of bias and unreliability.

A note on language and spelling: The author has mostly used the Iranian English spelling of names and places, even when these are originally Arabic. Thus, he uses 'Hezbollah' rather than 'Hizbullah', and 'Sepah Qods' rather than 'Quds'. The reason is that numerous quotes from Iranian reports originally in English are used throughout the report, so the author opted for keeping the spelling of such words consistent as much as possible.

The author would like to thank all his Syrian, Iranian and Lebanese correspondents, colleagues and friends who provided him with the information and news that formed the core and basis of this report.

This report was written by Shiar Youssef, the head of Naame Shaam's Research and Advocacy Team.

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Naame Shaam is a group of Iranian, Syrian and Lebanese activists and citizen-journalists which focuses on uncovering the role of the Iranian regime in Syria. For more information, see: www.naameshaam.org.

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Introduction to 2nd Edition

A lot has changed in Syria and the wider region since the first edition of this report was published in November 2014. But a lot has also remained unchanged.

Major developments over the past months include the expansion of Daesh (the so-called Islamic State) in Iraq and Syria; signing a comprehensive nuclear deal with Iran in July 2015; the Iranian-backed coup by the Houthi militias in Yemen and the subsequent military campaign led by Saudi Arabia against them; and the Russian military intervention in Syria.

Yet none of these developments seem to have prompted the US administration and its allies to change their strategy towards Iran – and now toward Russia – in Syria. This report describes it as a policy of slowly bleeding Iran and Hezbollah in Syria at the expense of continued bloodshed in the country and rising extremism and instability in the region.

This second edition provides detailed updates on some of the key issues raised in the first edition:

- A new section on restructuring the notorious Syrian militia known as the National Defence Forces (NDF) provides an overview of reports about Iranian plans to merge and restructure pro-Assad militias, both local and foreign, and turn them more disciplined and more loyal ones. The motivation behind this move appears to be an attempt by the Iranian regime to control these militias that have partly gone out of control and become mafia-style gangs riddled with crime and corruption. Particular attention is paid to efforts to form 'Hezbollah Syria', sometimes also called the National Ideological Resistance, which would be similar to Hezbollah Lebanon: a parallel army that is intended to safeguard the Iranian regime's interests in Syria even after fall of the Assad regime.

- An update on Hezbollah Lebanon's involvement in Syria details how the group's role in the war has grown in significance and scale at the expense of Syrian regime forces. The section particularly focuses on key strategic battles in the Qalamon region, along the Lebanese border, and in the south, near the borders with Israel and Jordan. It examines Sepah Pasdaran's and Hezbollah's efforts to establish a foothold in southern Syria, which could gradually grow into another front with Israel that

would serve as a deterrent against any possible attacks on Iran's military nuclear facilities, much like the Hezbollah stronghold in southern Lebanon was established in 1980s. The section describes these strategic areas as 'useful Syria' and argues that the Iranian military strategy in Syria revolves around defending and securing these areas in order to serve the Iranian regime's interests in a post-Assad Syria.

- A subsection about Hezbollah's recruitment efforts in Lebanon provides previously unknown details about the formation, arming and training of various pro-Iranian non-Shia militias in Lebanon with the help of Hezbollah. The section argues that all these sub-militias, which are described among Hezbollah circles as a "reserve pool", are being prepared to secure the group's 'home front' in Lebanon in the event of escalation there. Some of them could also be deployed to Syria in the future if Hezbollah and other Iranian-controlled militias fighting there become 'overstretched'.

- An update on Iraqi Shia militias' involvement in Syria examines the increasing geographical distribution and the more prominent role played by these militias in key battles. Among other things, this has meant that these Iraqi militias can no longer justify and recruit for their fight in Syria solely on the basis of defending holy Shia shrines. Fighting Daesh in Syria as a motive is increasingly found in their literature offline and online. Meanwhile in Iraq, under the pretext of fighting Daesh, Iranian-controlled Shia militias have expanded and consolidated their influence throughout the country to such an extent that they have practically replaced the army and security forces in many areas. Dozens of them recently united, under the auspice of Haider al-Abadi's government, under the name The Popular Mobilisation Forces. Details of the ways in which these militias cooperate with Baghdad and Tehran, and the role that Iranian 'advisers' play, both inside these groups and on the frontlines, are also provided.

- An update on Afghan Shia fighters' involvement in Syria traces how their number and role in Syria has become more prominent and more open, thanks to concerted propaganda and recruitment efforts by the Iranian regime and its media outlets. The section provides new details of the origins and development of the Fatemiyoun Brigade, and new details about Iranian recruitment efforts among Afghan refugees and migrants in Iran. It also

provides an overview of Afghan casualties in Syria and the official funerals held for them in Iran. It then sheds light on new legislative reforms in Iran allowing Afghan and other non-Iranian fighters fighting in Syria to apply for permanent residency permits and Iranian citizenship, which is being used by Sepah Pasdaran as a recruitment incentive besides monthly salaries.

- A new section on Pakistani Shia fighters in Syria provides an overview of their numbers and role in the war. It also provides an overview of Pakistani casualties in Syria and the official funerals held for them in Iran. The formation of the Zaynabiyoun Brigade suggests that the number of Pakistani fighters deployed to Syria is increasing and may increase even further in the future. The section warns that the Shia community in Pakistan is larger than in Afghanistan, and most of the Pakistani Shia live in border areas, making their potential recruitment by Sepah Pasdaran easier.

- An update on the relationship between Daesh and the Syrian and Iranian regimes provides an overview of new reports and evidence that both regimes have infiltrated, collaborated and used Daesh and al-Qaeda-affiliated groups to serve their own interests. This includes releasing Islamist extremists from prison in both countries, facilitating the movement of foreign fighters into Syria, secret oil and arms deals, and a consistent strategy of targeting moderate rebels while largely ignoring Daesh. The section also criticises the Obama administration for overlooking Iran's relationship with al-Qaeda and its de facto partnership with the Iranian regime and Iranian-controlled militias in Iraq in the battle against Daesh, despite various official reports recommending that this relationship should be investigated.

- An update on Iranian fighters in Syria provides estimates of Iranian Sepah Qods and Basij members killed in Syria and reported by Iranian media as such. Their ranks and the timing and places of their death clearly indicate that Sepah Pasdaran commanders are not only acting as 'advisors' to Syrian regime forces, as the Iranian regime claims, but that they are actively leading and fighting battles on various fronts in Syria. The section also provides details of the arrival of hundreds of new Iranian fighters in Syria at the end of 2015 to take part in a major Iranian-led ground offensive, backed by Russian air strikes, in the northern parts of the country.

- A new case study on the death of Iranian Brigadier-General Hossein Hamedani, who was killed near the Syrian city of Aleppo on 8 October 2015, provides details and admissions about his role in Syria, particularly in setting up the notorious National Defence Forces, also known as the *shabbiha*.

- As with Iranian fighters, an update on Iranian weapons provides an overview of new evidence of Iranian-made weapons being used in Syria, despite international sanctions on Iran and Syria and despite losing control over all of Syria's border crossings to the Free Syrian Army or to Daesh. The section also provides details of new types of Iranian weapons being used in the ongoing war as a result of the changing nature of the battles. These include Iranian Sukhoi-22 fighter-bombers, which have been at the forefront of the aerial bombardment campaigns against rebel and civilian areas across Syria. New details about Iranian connections to the manufacturing and use of barrel bombs and chemical weapons in Syria are also provided.

- An update on the role of Iranian general Qassem Soleimani, the commander-in-chief of Sepah Qods and the de facto ruler of Syria, provides an overview of his recent activities and appearances in Syria, which have become less secretive as the Iranian propaganda machine attempts to create a legend or a hero that embodies the Iranian regime and its fight against its many enemies in the region. The section also reveals that Jihad Moghniyeh, the Lebanese Hezbollah operative who was killed in an Israeli strike in southern Syria in January 2015, was Qassem Soleimani's nephew, and that Soleimani was accompanying his father, Imad Moghniyeh, Hezbollah's former chief of international operations, when this was reportedly assassinated by Israel in Damascus in 2008. The American and Israeli operatives "had a chance" to kill Soleimani too but did not do so as they did not apparently have the authorisation to kill him.

- An update on the economic costs of the war in Syria to Iran and Hezbollah provides new, up-to-date figures and details of how much the war in Syria is costing Iran and the impact this is having on the Iranian economy, ordinary Iranians and Hezbollah. However, the section argues that financial difficulties are unlikely to significantly affect Sepah Pasdaran's and Hezbollah's military operations in Syria in the short term, and that it is unlikely that

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the Iranian regime will reduce its economic and military support to the Syrian regime for reasons to do solely with economic hardship.

- Similarly, an update on the human costs of the war in Syria to Iran and Hezbollah provides an overview of recent Iranian and Hezbollah casualties, which have been mounting in recent months due to a significant increase in the numbers of Sepah Pasdaran and Hezbollah fighters deployed to Syria over the past year, and to the more prominent role they have been playing in key battles there. The section is supplemented with appendices at the end of the report listing the names of hundreds of Iranian, Hezbollah, Afghan and Pakistani Shia fighters killed in Syria documented by Naame Shaam. The section also provides an overview of Hezbollah's intensified recruitment efforts among Shia and non-Shia communities in Lebanon, and the new rhetoric it has been using to recruit ever-younger fighters, to make up for its growing losses in Syria. A new case study examines in detail the exceptionally high number of Iranian high-ranking commanders killed in Aleppo in October and November 2015.

- An update on the US policy on Iran and Syria provides an overview of recent developments and statements by US officials, including President Obama, and concludes that, despite major developments, little has changed in the US administration's strategy on Syria, which this report describes as a policy of slowly bleeding Iran and Hezbollah in Syria at the expense of continued bloodshed in the country and rising extremism and instability in the region.

- Finally, a new section on the Russian military intervention in Syria discusses its motivations, aims and possible outcomes. It shows that it was Qassem Soleimani who dragged Putin into the Syrian quagmire, not Bashar al-Assad, as many commentators claimed at the time. The section examines claims of disagreements and divergence between Moscow's and Tehran's stance on al-Assad and argues that the Russian intervention has in fact consolidated the Iranian regime's control in Syria, rather than countering it. The section also provides an overview of the human and financial costs to Moscow, and concludes that Syria is likely to become Russia's second Afghanistan, just as it has become Iran's and Hezbollah's Vietnam.

Executive Summary

The core argument of this report is that the Syrian regime of President Bashar al-Assad would have collapsed a long time ago if it were not for the enormous military and economic support provided to it by the Iranian regime since March 2011, following the outbreak of the Syrian revolution. This unprecedented level of support was driven, first and foremost, by the strategic interests of the Iranian regime in keeping arms shipments flowing to Hezbollah in Lebanon via Syria, so as to keep Hezbollah a strong deterrent against any attack on Iran's military nuclear programme.

One result of this heavy Iranian involvement in the war in Syria has been a qualitative change in the nature of the relationship between the Syrian and the Iranian regimes. From being historically mutually beneficial allies, the Iranian regime is now effectively an occupying force in the regime-held areas of Syria, and the Syrian regime is little more than a puppet in the hands of Sepah Pasdaran (the Iranian Revolution Guards) and its foreign operations arm, Sepah Qods. The latter's commander-in-chief, Major-General Qassem Soleimani, is the *de facto* ruler of 'Iranian-occupied Syria'.

Moreover, the author argues that the Iranian regime's influence in Syria is likely to continue even after the fall of the Assad regime because it is now exercised primarily through Iranian-backed and controlled militias fighting in Syria on behalf of the Syrian regime. Many of these militias, both local and foreign, are likely to outlive Bashar al-Assad and his inner circle.

The Iranian Regime in Syria

With this in mind, chapter I tracks the Iranian regime's military involvement in the current war in Syria, showing how it gradually grew from providing strategic and technical support to Syrian regime forces against the mass popular protests to being in overall control of the Syrian regime's military strategy and directing all its major military campaigns.

In early 2011, Sepah Qods and several Iranian intelligence agencies formed a top-level 'advisory mission' to assist the Syrian regime in its 'crisis' following the start of the revolution. The mission was said to be headed by the former commander of Sepah Pasdaran's Greater Tehran unit, Brigadier-General Hossein Hamedani, and the commander-in-chief of Sepah Qods, Major-Gen. Soleimani. They reportedly dispatched several Sepah Pasdaran commanders skilled in urban and guerrilla warfare to supervise and direct military operations in Syria.

One of the first steps in this Iranian effort was creating the Syrian National Defence Forces (NDF), which were modelled on the paramilitary Iranian Basij force and its experience in suppressing Iran's own dissident movements, particularly the 2009 pro-democracy protests known as the Green Movement. The NDF, which is commonly known among Syrians as the *shabbiha*, was thus charged with doing the 'dirty work' of the regime in suppressing the anti-regime protests instead of the regular armed forces, just like in Iran.

The chapter details various pieces of evidence to support this claim about the 'Iranian connection', ranging from rare admissions and revelations by Iranian officials to testimonies by regime insiders and Syrian militiamen who served under Iranian commanders or were trained in Iran. Indeed, the chapter shows that the Iranian role in creating the *shabbiha* was not confined to advice but included training, arming and funding this notorious militia.

As the revolution was pushed towards militarisation and opposition armed forces started to achieve military advances on the ground around mid-2012, the Iranian regime made a strategic decision to send some of its loyal militias in Lebanon and Iraq to fight in Syria alongside, and even on behalf of, the Syrian regime forces.

Chapter I details various pieces of evidence to counter repeated denials by Iranian and Hezbollah officials of the role played by these Sepah Pasdaran-controlled militias. It also tracks the gradual development of the role of these militias from supporting Syrian regime forces to assuming a leading role in all major, strategic battles (al-Qusayr, Homs, Yabroud, etc.). The chapter looks in detail at the role of Hezbollah Lebanon, Iraqi Shia militias, Afghan and other Shia fighters trained, armed and directed by Sepah Pasdaran.

The author argues that the battle of al-Qusayr in spring 2013 was a major turning point in the Syria war. It reflected a noticeable shift in the Iranian regime's military strategy in Syria: conceding, or perhaps losing interest in, the possibility of regaining control of the eastern and northern parts of the country that were then mostly under the rebels' control. Instead, the focus from Spring 2013 on would be on defending and consolidating the Syrian and Iranian regimes' control in Damascus and its surroundings, Homs and its surroundings (which connect the capital with the coastal region) and the Qalamon region (which connects the first two and connects both with Lebanon).

The aim, the author adds, was to secure the capital, whose fall would have been seen as a fall of the regime, and to secure the Damascus-Homs corridor in order to provide both a geographical and demographic continuity of regime-held areas and to secure arms shipments to Hezbollah in Lebanon, while at the same time cutting off those of the rebels coming from or through eastern Lebanon.

The leading role in these key battles would be assigned to Hezbollah and other Iranian-backed militias, who were seen as more reliable and better organised than the regular Syrian army. Meanwhile, the regime's air force would continue its bombardment of rebel-held areas in the north and the east to perpetuate a state of war in those areas and make life there unbearable. The barrel bombs campaigns on cities like Aleppo is an obvious example of this.

Moreover, this leading role assigned to these Iranian-backed militias is likely to continue even after Bashar al-Assad falls. Indeed, many analysts have argued that the Iranian regime's strategy in Syria goes beyond saving the Assad regime and includes preparations for a post-Assad era in which Iranian-controlled militias still exert influence on the ground and serve the Iranian regime's interests.

The chapter provides numerous examples of human rights violations, war crimes and crimes against humanity committed in Syria by all these Iranian-controlled militias and forces, highlighting ways of bringing possible lawsuits against the Iranian regime. The author argues that there is sufficient evidence – some of which is indeed detailed in the report – to try the Iranian regime's military and political leadership for complicity in many of these crimes at various levels, ranging from 'inciting' and 'endorsing and adopting' specific acts to 'aiding and abetting' war crimes and crimes against humanity.

One of the examples included in the chapter, and perhaps the most significant, is the Ghouta chemical massacre near Damascus in August 2013. The case study details three types of evidence that strongly indicate a possible role for Sepah Pasdaran in this and other chemical massacres committed in Syria in 2013 and 2014, raising the following questions:

- Was the Iranian regime aware of the plan to carry out the attack?
- Were Iranian weapons used?

- Did Sepah-controlled Iraqi militias play a role in the Ghouta massacre?

Naame Shaam therefore calls for international investigations to examine the possible complicity of the Iranian regime, particularly Major-Gen. Solemani, in the massacre that led to a controversial international deal concerning Syria's chemical weapons.

Many of these crimes could also be regarded as terrorist acts (they were pre-planned, politically motivated, targeted civilians rather than militants, and were carried out by militia groups rather than regular armed forces). All related Iranian officials and entities should therefore be added to terrorism black lists and sanctioned accordingly.

Indeed, a whole section of chapter I is dedicated to examining the links between the Syrian and the Iranian regimes and extremist Islamist groups such as the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (Daesh, now known as the Islamic State) and Jabhat al-Nusra. After detailing various pieces of evidence, the author concludes that both the Syrian and the Iranian regimes have infiltrated, collaborated and used these al-Qaeda-affiliated groups to derail the Syrian revolution towards militarisation and sectarianism and to justify their military actions against Syrian protesters and rebels.

This is quite significant as both regimes have been attempting, since the second half of 2014, to sell themselves as 'partners' in the international campaign against Islamist terrorist groups, following the UN Security Council resolution on Daesh and Jabhat al-Nusra in August 2014 and the US President's declaration of war against Daesh in Iraq and Syria in September 2014.

Finally, chapter I also examines the role of Iranian fighters and Iranian weapons sent to Syria and tracks their journey – like other aspects of the Iranian military involvement in Syria – from initial denial by Iranian officials, through intermittent admissions, to the gradual emergence of undeniable evidence.

Syria Under Military Occupation

Chapter II builds on these details and presents a case for treating the war in Syria as an international conflict that involves a foreign occupation (by the Iranian regime) and a liberation struggle by Syrian people against this foreign occupation.

Executive Summary

The chapter starts with a legal discussion of what constitutes a military occupation, as defined by the 1907 Hague Regulations and the Fourth Geneva Convention of 1949, and whether the Iranian regime's presence in Syria can be defined as a military occupation.

After outlining various pieces of evidence and case studies to back up this claim, including statements by Iranian officials, the author concludes that the war in Syria today has all the characteristics of an international conflict. Alternatively, he proposes that the Syrian case is treated as what is sometimes called 'occupation with an indigenous government in post'.

The author also highlights the possibility of invoking Article 1 of the 1977 Additional Protocol I to the Geneva Conventions, which provides that conflicts shall be qualified as international when they occur between a state and an authority representing a people "fighting against colonial domination and alien occupation and against racist regimes in the exercise of their right of self-determination."

The author then examines how this Iranian occupation is enforced, both directly, through its armed forces and militias, and indirectly, through the puppet Syrian regime. The first requires a clear and identifiable Iranian command structure in Syria, which the author attempts to construct based on available information.

Another crucial question in this regard is who in the Syrian regime and in Bashar al-Assad's inner circle has been liaising with the Iranian commanders and whether the latter's involvement resulted in any changes in the Syrian command structure.

To answer this question, the author examines the exclusion and inclusion of senior Syrian government and army officials in accordance with Iranian desires or orders. As a case study, he re-examines the assassination of a number of top military and security officials from what was known as the Syrian regime's 'crisis cell' in July 2012.

Based on information relayed to Naame Shaam by a prominent and reliable source in the Syrian opposition, quoting Western intelligence officials, as well as various pieces of circumstantial evidence, the author concludes that the high-profile operation had nothing to do with the

Free Syrian Army or other opposition armed groups, as media reports claimed at the time. It was, rather, carried out by Sepah Pasdaran, possibly with direct orders from Major-Gen. Soleimani himself.

The reliable Syrian opposition source told Naame Shaam that some members in the 'crisis cell' had opened communication channels with Arab Gulf states and the US with the aim of making a deal behind Iran's back. Sepah Pasdaran thus struck to prevent such a deal. Since then, Bashar al-Assad appears to be under the full control of the Iranian regime. He is practically their hostage.

Naame Shaam then proposes a new narrative about the Syrian revolution and the current situation in Syria, as well as a new set of demands in light of this new reality. The war in Syria, it says, should be regarded as an international conflict that warrants the application of the four Geneva Conventions and the regime-held areas of Syria should be considered occupied territory – not metaphorically but in the strict legal sense of the word.

Recognising the war in Syria as an international conflict that involves a foreign occupation and a people struggling for liberation may also provide a powerful 'legal weapon' against the Iranian regime, namely that it is committing "grave breaches" of the Fourth Geneva Convention, which are considered serious war crimes. This is because, as an occupying force, Iran has certain "duties" towards the Syrian population under its occupation.

There is abundant evidence, some of which is outlined in this report, that the Iranian regime and its forces and militias fighting in Syria have repeatedly violated many of these duties since March 2011.

For instance, the mass destruction of private and public properties in vast areas of Syria has not always been necessitated by the war (against the rebels) and is a clear and repeated breach of Article 53 of the Fourth Geneva Convention. Similarly, the mass evacuations of entire villages and districts in Homs and elsewhere, and reports of evacuated properties being registered to Syrian and Iranian regime supporters from elsewhere (including foreigners such as Afghan fighters) are a clear and repeated breach of Article 49 and may even amount to ethnic cleansing.

Based on this new narrative, Naame Shaam proposes a new set of demands addressed to the European Union, the US and their allies in the Friends of Syria group, as well as the UN and other international bodies.

It is the view of the author that, unless the Syrian opposition is united in pushing for the war in Syria to be recognised as an international conflict, the US and other Western powers are likely to continue with their 'slow bleeding' policy towards Iran and not publicly admit that the war in Syria is one against the Iranian regime, so as to avoid being pressured into taking concrete steps to end the bloodshed in Syria and the wider region.

Iran's Vietnam

The third and last chapter sheds light on two main aspects of what is described as 'Iran's Vietnam' in Syria, namely the economic and human costs to Iran of the war in Syria and what sort of impact it has on the Iranian economy and ordinary Iranians.

The author tracks the massive financial and economic support provided by the Iranian regime, which has prevented the Syrian regime from economic collapse, as many analysts were expecting it to do. In addition to the costs of the Iranian weapons, fighters and militias sent to Syria, particular attention is paid to Iranian financial loans and credit lines, worth billions of dollars, and how they have been used.

The author then looks at the impact of this expenditure on the Iranian economy and ordinary Iranians, coupled with the cost of international sanctions on Iran and Iran's nuclear programme. As the author argues at length, this is because the three issues cannot be separated.

One indicator of this enormous burden on the Iranian economy is the inflation rate, which has more than tripled between 2009 and 2014 and has increased by about 10 per cent since the start of the war in Syria in 2011. As a result, almost a third of all families in Iran (31 per cent) lived below the poverty line in 2014.

Yet, while phasing out energy subsidies, Iran has been sending millions of barrels of oil to Syria at discount prices, paid for by Iranian credit. While winding down social assistance payments to nearly 60 million Iranians, Iran has been sending millions of tonnes of food and cash to Syria.

Despite the Iranian media's celebration of President Hassan Rouhani's economic 'achievements', the author argues that Iran's economic problems are unlikely to go away any time soon unless there are fundamental shifts in its foreign policies. And that is certainly not in the president's power. The same applies to Hezbollah Lebanon.

Another aspect of 'Iran's Vietnam' is the mounting death tolls of Sepah Pasdaran, Hezbollah Lebanon and Iraqi militia commanders and fighters. The chapter examines available information on their casualties, which is admittedly limited.

The reason is that, right from the start, both Sepah Pasdaran and Hezbollah Lebanon have been very cagey about their casualties in Syria. Both have been doing all they can to keep this information hidden from the public because it would show how heavily involved they are in the war there. It would also reveal how much they are losing, which could be damaging to the morale of their supporters. Suppressing such evidence is a classic war tactic aimed at avoiding public pressure to 'bring the boys back home' before they too die out there.

While the Iranian regime has made a choice to 'go for it' in Syria at any cost, this 'Syrian Vietnam' is not just a consequence of this choice. It is also a policy by the US administration and its allies, which the author describes as the strategy of 'slowly bleeding Iran in Syria.'

Chapter III examines and assesses this strategy, quoting President Barak Obama and other US officials at length. The author argues that this 'bleeding' policy is being implemented at the disproportionate expense of the people of Syria and the wider region, and will inevitably lead to more instability and extremism in the region and beyond.

In other words, hopes that a proxy war with the Iranian regime in Syria, coupled with crippling economic sanctions, would eventually lead to the weakening and even collapse of the Iranian regime ('winning the Syria war in the streets of Tehran') are, at best, wishful thinking.

As the author puts it, it may be true that Syria has become 'Iran's Vietnam' and that Iran is 'bleeding' in Syria. But the Iranian regime may be capable of bleeding for a long time to come, much longer than the Syrian people can endure.

I. The Iranian Regime in Syria



Syrian President, Bashar al-Assad, and Iranian Spiritual Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, in 2010. © AP

I. The Iranian Regime in Syria

With the outbreak of the Syrian revolution in March 2011, the relationship between the Syrian and the Iranian regimes started to change from one of mutually beneficial partnership to one of dependency and dominance. The reason: The Syrian regime would not have been capable of suppressing the mass popular protests in Syria on its own, and would have probably fallen a long time ago if it were not for the Iranian regime's support. In the words of Iranian Defence Minister Ahmad Vahidi, "Syria is managing this situation very well on its own. But if the government can't resolve the crisis on its own, then, based on their request, we will fulfil our mutual defense-security pact."¹

This part of the report discusses the main aspect of this support: Sepah Pasdaran's military involvement in the Syrian war, both direct and indirect, which has effectively kept Bashar al-Assad's regime in power by force since March 2011, when the Syrian revolution started. It details the role of Iranian commanders and fighters and their possible complicity in war crimes and crimes against humanity committed in Syria. It also looks at Sepah's role in creating, arming and directing the militias fighting alongside Syrian regime forces, both local and foreign, from the notorious *shabbiha* to Hezbollah Lebanon and Iraqi Shia militias. Finally, it looks at the supply of Iranian weapons to Syrian regime forces and militias and whether they have been used in known crimes committed in Syria.

Another aspect of the Iranian support to the Syrian regime, spreading pro-regime propaganda through Iranian state-controlled media, is not tackled in this report but

has been examined by Naame Shaam extensively elsewhere.² Economic and financial support are discussed in detail in chapter III.

Of course Iran is not the only regional and international power that has been intervening in Syria. There is also Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey, the US and so on. There is no point in having chicken-or-egg arguments about what was in response to what, but it is worth noting the crucial differences between the Iranian intervention in Syria and that of the so-called Friends of Syria (or of the Syrian opposition, to be more accurate). Unlike the latter, the Iranian intervention is in support of a repressive, murderous regime against people demanding freedom and dignity. It is also much larger in scale and consequences, and is more direct, culminating in a *de facto* occupation of the country, which is the subject of the next chapter.

1. Sepah Pasdaran 'advisors'

As mass anti-regime protests started to spread across Syria in the spring of 2011, the Syrian regime's leadership decided to create a paramilitary force charged with attacking and terrorising protesters in an attempt to quell them. The goal was to form an 'effective' and locally based force of pro-regime militias that were more loyal and more reliable than regular army conscripts, many of whom would indeed desert the army later and join the Free Syrian Army (FSA).



The commander-in-chief of Sepah Qods, Gen. Qassem Soleimani, who is the *de facto* ruler of Syria.



Sepah Qods commander, Ismail Haydari, in Syria in 2013, shortly before he was killed near Aleppo.

Initially known as the Popular Committees, the force later became officially known as the National Defence Forces (NDF), which comprised at least 70,000 men and women as of mid-2014. Although commonly referred to by most Syrians as '*shabbiha*', the two are slightly different in that NDF members receive regular salaries and military equipment from the regime, while 'normal' *shabbiha* reportedly only receive a few hundred Syrian pounds as 'rewards'.

The term *shabbiha*, which is derived from the Arabic word for ghost (*shabah*), originally referred to shadowy smugglers and racketeers, operating mostly in the coastal province of Latakia.³ In 2011, these gangsters, along with other criminals released from prison, mercenaries and Ba'athist volunteers, were converted into a militia.

Creating the shabbiha

In March 2014, the British newspaper *The Telegraph* published an interview⁴ with a former member of the Assad family's inner circle on how the *shabbiha* forces were created. Abdul Salam, a pseudonym for a former business partner of Rami Makhlouf, the Syrian president's cousin who controls a huge business empire in Syria, described how he and seven other 'allies' from around the country were invited to secret meetings in Damascus in Summer 2011, in which Makhlouf and Maher al-Assad, the president's brother who commands the elite fourth armoured division of the military, planned "the making of the shabiha" to do the "dirty work" of the regime to counter the anti-regime protests.

"They told us they were worried that the army, in front of the world's media, couldn't use the necessary force to stop the protests," he said. "They couldn't be seen to be shooting the protesters. So their idea was: 'Let's keep our hands clean and create a paramilitary group to do the dirty work'." Their plan included appointing leaders for local militia forces across the country; releasing death-row prisoners held in Homs and Tartous jails to join the force; and providing them with money and weapons. "They told us to kill protesters, armed or unarmed, and torture those you capture," he added.

Abdul Salam describes Rami Makhlouf and Maher al-Assad as "the brains behind the *shabbiha* operation" and says they were the ones who provided the money and arms. But later revelations would show this story to be incomplete, as discussed in the next section.

Various other testimonies seem to confirm Abdul Salam's account of how and why the NDF was created. For example, in April 2013, *Reuters* quoted a Syrian military commander from Damascus saying: "After the events began, our leadership started to lose faith in the army and its effectiveness on the ground in a war like this... So we got the idea to make the National Defence Forces. They started out as popular committees patrolling their neighborhoods. Then they became armed groups. And in late 2012, they were legitimized under the name National Defence Forces (NDF)."⁵

Another article published in *The Wall Street Journal* in August 2013 tells a similar story: "The genesis of the Defense Force goes back to [summer 2012] when the regime hastily organized so-called popular committees among loyalist communities in Damascus to help fend off a major rebel offensive in the capital... By the fall, the Syrian regime had decided to create a national force similar to the Basij – the paramilitary group created by Iran's clerical regime in the 1980s to fight in the Iran-Iraq war – government officials said at the time."⁶

¹ 'Defence agreement between Iran and Syria still in place' (in Persian), *Fars News*, 22 August 2012, available: <http://www.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=13910601000629> For English, see: Farnaz Fassihi, *The Wall Street Journal*, 27 August 2012, available: <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10000872396390444230504577615393756632230>.

² See Naame Shaam's 'propaganda' tag page (<http://www.naame-shaam.org/en/tag/propaganda/>) which has various examples of monitoring and debunking Iranian state-controlled media's propaganda on Syria, including some in-depth case studies.

³ For a brief history and insight into the inner workings of the *shabbiha*, see: 'Who are the *shabbiha*?' (in Arabic), available: <http://syrianleaders.com/history/145/154>. See also this *Telegraph* article: 'The Shabiha: Inside Assad's death squads', 2 June 2012, available: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/9307411/The-Shabiha-Inside-Assads-death-squads.html>.

⁴ Salwa Amor, Ruth Sherlock, 'How Bashar al-Assad created the feared shabiha militia: an insider speaks', *The Telegraph*, 23 Mar 2014, available: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/10716289/How-Bashar-al-Assad-created-the-feared-shabiha-militia-an-insider-speaks.html>

⁵ Erika Solomon, 'Insight: Battered by war, Syrian army creates its own replacement', *Reuters*, 21 April 2013, available: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/04/21/us-syria-crisis-paramilitary-in-sight-idUSBRE93K02R20130421>.

⁶ Sam Dagher, 'Syria's Alawite Force Turned Tide for Assad', *The Wall Street Journal*, 26 August 2013, available: <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424127887323997004578639903412487708>.



Basij members shooting at protesters in Tehran in 2009.

Source: <http://images.google.de/imgres?imgurl=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.payvand.com%2Fnews%2F10%2Fjan%2FBasij-shooting-at-protesters-Dec27-Tehran-3-highres.jpg&imgrefurl=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.payvand.com%2Fnews%2F10%2Fjan%2F1005.html&h=533&w=800&tbnid=cl892Cf5SQYiqM%3A&docid=EECcPpbKycbScM&ei=LeTbVpalF-8Ti6ASCs5vgDQ&tbn=isch&iact=rc&uact=3&dur=208&page=6&start=57&ndsp=12&ved=0ahUKEwjW0tWzzKvLahVEMZoKHYLZBtwQrQMI4wEwQA>

It is worth noting that *shabbiha* members are not only Alawis, as they are often portrayed in Western media reports. They also include Sunnis, Druze and other ethnic and religious backgrounds depending on the region. In Aleppo, for example, many *shabbiha* come from powerful local families, the most notorious of which being the Berri family, which is known for drugs and arms smuggling and its close ties to the regime. In Rukin al-Deen in Damascus, many belong to Damascene-Kurdish families; in Deir al-Zor, to Arab Sunni families and clans... and so on and so forth.⁷

The Iranian connection

These and other testimonies seem to omit one crucial element: the role of the Iranian regime in creating the *shabbiha* force. It may be that, at the time, little was known about the Iranian regime's role in Syria. But this is no longer the case.

Almost three years after the NDF was first thought of, a high-ranking Iranian general admitted that Sepah Pasdaran had played an important role in setting it up. During a speech in April 2014, Brigadier-General Gholam Ali Rashid, the Deputy Head of the General Staff of Iran's Armed Forces, reiterated the Iranian regime's official line that "we are not fighting in Syria" but admitted "advis-

ing the commanders who formed the National Defence Force," which he described as "organisationally similar to Basij."⁸

The Basij, officially known as the Organisation for Mobilisation of the Oppressed, is an Iranian paramilitary militia established by Ayatollah Khomeini in 1979 and is often used by the Iranian regime to terrorise and suppress protests and dissident movements in Iran, such as the so-called Green Movement in 2009.

About a month after Rashid's admission, another senior Iranian commander boasted of establishing a "second Hezbollah" in Syria, in reference to the NDF, which he claimed comprised some 70,000 young Alawi, Shia and Sunni fighters organised in 42 groups and 128 battalions.⁹

Around the same time, another prominent Iranian official, Hojjat al-Islam Mehdi Taeb, the head of Ayatollah Khamenei's think-tank, Ammar Strategic Base, made similar remarks: "Syria had an army, but did not have the ability to manage a war inside Syria's cities. It is for this reason the Iranian government suggested that 'in order to manage an urban war you must form a Basij... The Syrian Basij was formed with 60,000 [members] of the Party of God [religious zealous] who took over the war in the streets from the army."¹⁰

Coupled with the above-mentioned testimonies, these three admissions are crucial pieces of evidence regarding the Iranian regime's role in creating the NDF, and therefore its complicity in the crimes committed by NDF members. The fact that the force was modelled on the Iranian Basij suggests that there was more to the Iranian role than general advice; Iranian commanders helped their Syrian counterparts *organise* the force. In the words of Victoria Nuland, a US State Department spokeswoman, "The Iranians have clearly supplied support and training and advice to the Syrian army, but this *Shabbiha* thug force mirrors the same force that the Iranians use. The Basij and the Shabbiha are the same type of thing and clearly reflect the tactics and the techniques that the Iranians use for their own suppression of civil rights."¹¹

A 2013 study by the Institute for the Study of War and the American Enterprise Institute's Critical Threats Project, entitled *Iranian Strategy in Syria*, claims that Sepah

Pasdarán's Qods Force and elements of the conventional Sepah Pasdarán Ground Forces, as well as several Iranian intelligence agencies, formed a "top-level advisory mission" to support the Syrian regime since early 2011.¹² Although the two think-tanks that produced the report are known for their close ties with US 'hawks' and neoconservatives, the report's authors provide a great deal of credible information and back up their claims with verifiable sources.

Among these sources are the periodical sanction designations produced by the US Treasury Department. One of these designations, released in June 2011, claimed that the deputy chief of Iran's Law Enforcement Forces (LEF), Ahmad-Reza Radan, travelled to Damascus in April 2011, where he "met with Syrian security services and provided expertise to aid in the Syrian government's crackdown on the Syrian people."¹³ Another report, from September 2012, claimed that Brigadier-General Hossein Hamedani, the former commander of the Greater Tehran unit in Sepah Pasdarán who led the 2009 crackdown on the Green Movement protesters in Tehran, was leading this 'advisory mission'.¹⁴ We will have more to say about Hamedani and his colleague Gen. Qassem Soleimani later in the report.

According to a former senior Iranian official "with close links to Sepah Pasdarán," in February 2014 there were "a few hundred" commanders from Sepah Pasdarán and Sepah Qods in Syria.¹⁵ A recently retired senior Sepah Pasdarán commander also told *Reuters* that "top" Sepah Qods commanders in Syria numbered between 60 to 70 at any given time.¹⁶ Their role, according to these sources, was to "direct and train Syrian forces",

"assist in the gathering of intelligence" and "direct the fighting on the instructions of the Qods Force commanders." While many lower-ranking officers went in and out of Syria by land through Turkey and Iraq, the senior commanders were reportedly flown directly to and from Damascus. Many apparently did not carry Iranian passports but Syrian ID cards and wore Syrian military uniforms.¹⁷

For over a year after the outbreak of the revolution, Iranian officials kept denying any involvement in Syria. In May 2012, however, in one of the first official admissions of its kind, the deputy chief of Sepah Qods, Ismail Qani, said in an interview with the Iranian Students News

9 Brig. Gen. Hossein Hamedani's comments were reported by Iranian state-controlled news agency *Fars News* on 4 May 2014, but the report was later removed from the agency's website. A screen shot and an English summary of the report are available at <http://www.naameshaam.org/en/sepah-pasdarán-commander-al-assad-is-fighting-syria-war-as-our-deputy/>.

10 'Head of Ammar Base: Our priority is to keep Syria rather than Khuzestan', *BBC Persian*, 14 February 2013, available: http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/iran/2013/02/130214_nm_tayeb_syria_basij.shtml. For an English translation, see: 'Head of Ammar Strategic Base: Syria is Iran's 35th Province; if we lose Syria we cannot keep Tehran', *Iran Pulse*, 14 February 2013, available: <http://iranpulse.al-monitor.com/index.php/2013/02/1346/head-of-ammar-strategic-base-syria-is-irans-35th-province-if-we-lose-syria-we-cannot-keep-tehran/>.

11 Chris McGreal, 'Houla massacre: US accuses Iran of 'bragging' about its military aid to Syria', *The Guardian*, 29 May 2012, available: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/may/29/houla-massacre-us-accuses-iran>.

12 Fulton, Joseph Holliday and Sam Wyer, *Iranian Strategy in Syria*, AEI's Critical Threats Project and Institute for the Study of War, May 2013, available: <http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/IranianStrategyinSyria-1MAY.pdf>

13 US Department of Treasury, 'Treasury Sanctions Syrian, Iranian Security Forces for Involvement in Syrian Crackdown', 29 June 2011, available: <http://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/tg1224.aspx>.

14 Farnaz Fassihi and Jay Solomon, 'Top Iranian Official Acknowledges Syria Role', *The Wall Street Journal*, 16 September 2012, available: <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10000872396390443720204578000482831419570>.

15 Jonathan Saul and Parisa Hafezi, 'Iran boosts military support in Syria to bolster Assad', *Reuters*, 21 February 2014, available: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/02/21/us-syria-crisis-iran-idUSBREA1K09U20140221>.

16 *Ibid.*

17 *Ibid.*

7 For more on this, see for example: Yassin al-Haj Saleh, 'On the *shabbiha* and *tashbeeh* and their state' (in Arabic), *Kalamon* 5, Winter 2012, available: <http://www.kalamon.org/articles-details-122#axzz3BIVV8l9Q>. An English translation is available: <http://lb.boell.org/en/2014/03/03/syrian-shabiha-and-their-state-statehood-participation>.

8 Brigadier-General Rashid's admission was made during a speech in Dezful, Khuzestan at an official commemoration of the city's liberation from Iraqi forces in 1982. The speech was reported by the *Dezful Emrooz* news website in Persian, available at <http://www.deztoday.ir/?p=246669>. For an English translation and commentary, see: <http://www.naameshaam.org/en/iranian-general-admits-advising-syrian-regime-on-establishing-shabbiha-paramilitary-force/>.

Agency (ISNA): “If the Islamic Republic was not present in Syria, the massacre of people would have happened on a much larger scale... Before our presence in Syria, too many people were killed by the opposition but with the *physical and non-physical presence* of the Islamic Republic, big massacres in Syria were prevented.”¹⁸ (emphasis added)

The interview was immediately removed from ISNA's website but it had already been reposted all over the internet. For about another year after that, the official Iranian line was: Iran is only providing ‘advice’ to the Syrian regime and is not involved militarily. For instance, a few months after Qani's ‘slip of the tongue’, Sepah Pas-daran's chief commander Brigadier-General Mohammed Ali Jafari acknowledged at a news conference in Tehran in September 2012 that members of Sepah Qods were present in Syria to assist the Syrian regime but insisted that this did not constitute military presence. “We assist Syria, the circle of resistance, with ideas and consultancy, and Iran is proud of such help,” he said. “Sepah is offering assistance in planning, as well as financial help, but does not have a military presence [in Syria].”¹⁹

Training

But, of course, it was never just advice and consultancy. At the above-mentioned news conference, Jafari also mentioned a 50,000-strong militia of ‘volunteers’ called al-Jaysh al-Shaabi, or The Popular Army, another old name that was sometimes used for the NDF. “Currently, 50,000 people are being prepared and trained,” he added. “It is an honor for the Islamic Republic of Iran to share its experience and provide any kind of consultation to help defend Syria.”²⁰

Back in May 2011, the US Department of Treasury had announced the designation of ten Syrian and Iranian individuals and entities targeted with sanctions for their involvement in human rights abuses, including the repression of Syrian people. Among them, and alongside Qassem Soleimani, was Mohsen Shizari, whom the US Treasury describes as a “senior [Sepah Qods] officer who serves as the [force's] Commander of Operations and Training”.²¹

The US Treasury does not provide details of why Shizari was added to its sanctions list but it is safe to assume that it had to do with his role in directing Sepah Qods’

training efforts in Syria, as his title suggests. Note also the early date of this designation: 18 May 2011, barely two months after the outbreak of the revolution and well before it was pushed into militarisation.

The US Treasury has also sanctioned Iranian airlines, such as Mahan Air, for providing “travel services for [Sepah Qods] personnel flown to and from Iran and Syria for military training,” in addition to “secretly ferrying operatives, weapons and funds on its flights.”²²

Other pieces of evidence about the Iranian regime's role in training Syrian regime forces include leaked videos and reports of Syrian regime commanders referring to such a role. In one video, a Brigadier-General from the elite Syrian Republican Guards is addressing his troops in the aftermath of the siege and destruction of the Baba Amr district in Homs in Spring 2012.²³ Throughout the video, the soldiers are heard shouting pro-Assad slogans, including “*Shabbiha* forever, we are your soldiers, O Assad.” At 07:10, the general is heard saying: “I have some things to tell you. We are now forming the 416th Battalion of commandos for special missions, and they are being trained by trainers from inside and outside the country.”

Again, the general does not specify who these foreign trainers are, nor where the training is taking place. But it is safe to assume that they were Iranian, as there is no evidence to suggest that any other country has provided such a service to the Syrian regime. The Special Forces training has traditionally taken place at a complex in al-Dreij, near Damascus.

In April 2013, the Free Army's Shuhadaa Idlib Brigade captured an Iranian trainer in the suburbs of Idlib. In a video posted online, the captive says in broken Arabic that he had been in Syria for five months training pro-regime snipers.²⁴ What is alleged to be his identification documents are also displayed. In a televised interview a few days before, the commander of the brigade, who interrogates the Iranian captive in the video, claims they had also killed another Iranian fighter, whose documents are shown on camera.²⁵

One relevant question here is whether these foreign trainers were only training regular army soldiers or irregular paramilitary forces too. There is enough, concrete

evidence of the first, and it can be seen as a continuation of 'normal' international relations under long-standing military cooperation agreements between Syria and Iran. For example, in February 2012, two Iranian Navy ships docked at the Syrian port of Tartus, having sailed through Egypt's Suez Canal. This was the second time that an Iranian naval fleet passed through the canal since 1979. According to Iranian state-controlled media, the aim of this high-profile mission was "to provide maritime training to naval forces of Syria under an agreement signed between Tehran and Damascus a year ago."²⁶

But what about training the *shabbiha*? A rare news report in a local Syrian opposition news site from July 2013 claims that, not very far from the above-mentioned Special Forces complex in al-Dreij, a new, closed training camp for the NDF had been established.²⁷ Two people on average are selected from each area of Syria (the report focuses on al-Swaidaa in the south) and sent there to undergo a special training course, after which they 'qualify' to lead local militia forces and receive a monthly salary of 15,000 to 25,000 Syrian pounds. Four of the al-Swaidaa trainees had been identified by the reporters and their families had been contacted in an attempt to dissuade them from "taking this step."

The report – which is primarily about another training course for Political Security personnel administered by Hezbollah Lebanon trainers, three of whom are named in the report – appears to be authentic and credible but cannot be independently verified. Neither can be occasional reports of opposition forces launching attacks on what they describe as *shabbiha* training camps, particularly in the coastal region and in the suburbs of Damascus and Homs.²⁸

Another alleged location for training the *shabbiha*, particularly a division called the Capital's Streets Protection Force, is said to be the compound of the Political Security branch in al-Mezzeh in south-western Damascus, not far from the Mezzeah military airport and Hezbollah Lebanon's Damascus headquarters.²⁹ But whether Iranian trainers and advisors are based at these locations is difficult to confirm.

18 Saeed Kamali Dehghan, 'Syrian army being aided by Iranian forces', *The Guardian*, 28 May 2012, available: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/may/28/syria-army-iran-forces>.

19 Radio Farda, 'Sepah chief confirms presence of Sepah Qods members in Syria' (in Persian), 16 September 2012, available: http://www.radiofarda.com/content/f4_iran_revolutionary_guards_iran_syria_admitt/24709851.html. A summary in English is available at: <http://iranmilitarynews.org/2012/09/16/qods-force-present-in-syria-to-help-irgc-commander-says/>.

20 'Shahed 129' 'drones capable of launching missiles have been manufactured – US bases in Sepah's gun reach' (in Persian), *Fars News*, 16 Sep. 2012, available: <http://www.farsnews.com/news-text.php?nn=13910626000660>. For English, see: Farnaz Fassihi and Jay Solomon, 'Top Iranian Official Acknowledges Syria Role', *The Wall Street Journal*, 16 September 2012, available: <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10000872396390443720204578000482831419570>. For a discussion about the accuracy of media coverage of Jafari's quote, see: Scott Lucas, 'Syria & Iran Follow-Up: The Real Story of "Syria's Iran-Hezbollah 50,000-Man Militia" in 3 Easy Steps', *EA WorldView*, 12 February 2013, available: <http://www.enduringamerica.com/home/2013/2/12/syria-iran-follow-up-the-real-story-of-syrias-iran-hezbollah.html>

21 US Department of Treasury, 'Administration Takes Additional Steps to Hold the Government of Syria Accountable for Violent Repression Against the Syrian People', 18 May 2011, available: <http://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/tg1181.aspx>.

22 US Department of Treasury, 'Treasury Designates Iranian Commercial Airline Linked to Iran's Support for Terrorism', 12 October 2011, available: <http://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/tg1322.aspx>.

23 'Republican Guards criminals boast about their achievements in destroying Baba Amr' (in Arabic), *Youtube*, 4 April 2012, available: <http://youtu.be/voBwOwYnOX4>.

24 'Suhadaa Idlib Brigade: Full confessions of an Iranian fighter captured by the Free Army' (in Arabic), 3 April 2013, available: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ienaxw5mAY>.

25 'Orient News coverage of Idlib checkpoints battle' (in Arabic), 31 March 2013, available: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NGxeQbNH8Oc>.

26 'Iranian ships docked at Syrian port lead to Israeli worries', *Press TV*, 20 February 2012, available: <http://www.presstv.com/detail/227611.html>.

27 'Hezbollah training 'shabbiha' from al-Swaidaa in al-Dreij in Damascus suburbs' (in Arabic), *Swaida Voice*, available: <http://swaidavoice.net/archives/866>.

28 See, for example, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=whs61_Llda8; <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ysINbZ6NSYA>; <http://tinyurl.com/pe9ftuo>; <https://www.zamanalwsl.net/read-News.php?id=34643>; http://orient-news.net/?page=news_show&id=78898.

29 'Why Darayya and Why is it important for the regime?' (in Arabic), *Youkal.net*, available: <http://www.youkal.org/2012-12-02-14-05-23/24-26/7911-2013-02-20-15-41-04>.

The most direct evidence of Iranian involvement in training the *shabbiha* comes from rare revelations by Iranian officials. In February 2014, Iranian MP Seyyed Mahmoud Nabavian boasted during a speech that Iran had trained some 150,000 Syrian regime fighters on Iranian soil, and another 150,000 in Syria, in addition to 50,000 Hezbollah Lebanon fighters.³⁰ These 300,000 Syrian fighters cannot have all been regular army soldiers, whose training was organised by the Ministry of Defence. Other available information on who is fighting and who is undergoing military training does not seem to support such a conclusion.

The revelation caused a storm in Iran, suggesting it may have been true. One MP demanded that Nabavian should be prosecuted, adding that disclosing such details paints Iran as a “supporter of terrorists” and would harm the country’s “national interests.”³¹ But Mansour Haghighatpour, who is affiliated with the ruling conservative block, did not deny the Iranian regime’s role in training and supporting Baschar al-Assad’s forces; he only said that revealing such details would harm Iran’s ‘national interests’ and should therefore be kept secret.

In April 2013, *Reuters* interviewed four Syrian regime fighters who claimed they had been on an “urban warfare course” at a “secret base in Iran.”³² They were all flown from an air base in Latakia to Tehran International Airport, then put on buses, whose windows were covered by curtains, and driven to an undisclosed location about an hour and a half drive from the airport.

The interviewees were all militiamen from minority backgrounds; they were not regular army soldiers. One of them is quoted saying their Iranian trainers told them the course, which lasted 15 days, was “the same course that Hezbollah operatives normally do.” Other interviewees said volunteers would assemble in groups of around 400 before being flown to Iran in smaller numbers, while others were trained by Iranians inside Syria.

In September 2013, *The Wall Street Journal (WSJ)* published a similar investigation about a base near Tehran, where Iranian forces were training Shiite militiamen from across the Arab world to go and fight in Syria.³³ In addition to fighters and local residents, the WSJ had interviewed an Iranian military officer briefed on the training

camp, which is said to be 15 miles outside Tehran and called Amir al-Momenin, or Commander of the Faithful (a traditional title for Muslim Caliphs). Amir al-Momenin is a famous Sepah Pasdaran military base and is home to the force’s ballistic missiles arsenal, among other things.³⁴

In another report from August 2013, members of the National Defence Forces told the WSJ they had received “boot camp and more advanced combat training in Syria from Hezbollah operatives or have been flown to Iran for similar purposes.”³⁵ Hezbollah confirmed providing such training, while a spokesman for Iran’s mission to the United Nations declined to comment, according to the paper.

The most conclusive evidence of the Iranian regime’s involvement in training Syrian regime militias is perhaps a video broadcast by the Netherlands Public Broadcasting network (NPO) and other media outlets around the world in September 2013.³⁶ It was shot by an embedded Iranian cameraman who died in battle in Syria shortly after he filmed this footage in August that year. Syrian rebels (the Dawood Brigade) obtained the footage after overrunning a group of Iraqi and Iranian fighters from Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas Brigade and handed it to Dutch Journalist Roozbeh Kaboly.

The video shows members of a Sepah Pasdaran unit living in a school in a village near Aleppo and meeting with local Syrian regime commanders and fighters, with whom they say they have “good relations.” A Sepah commander tells the camera he had been, for over a year, “working with Syrian militias,” many of whose members “had been previously trained by us in Iran.” Another NPO report, a few days before, showed other parts of the footage showing Syrian regime troops receiving instructions from Iranian commanders.³⁷

Around that same time, Iranian media reported the death of the commander who appears in the above-mentioned footage. Ismail Haydari was reportedly killed in battle near Damascus. Most Iranian state-controlled media reports claimed he was a ‘filmmaker’ and was in Syria to make a documentary, lumping his story with that of the Iranian filmmaker, Hadi Baghbani, who shot the footage and who died in Syria at or around the same time (on 20 August 2013).³⁸ However, pictures of Haydari’s mass

funeral published by some Iranian sites clearly show a military-style funeral, where many Sepah Pasdaran officers in military uniform are seen saluting the coffin.³⁹ Haydari is also described in some of these reports as a Sardar, a military rank in Persian equivalent to Field Marshal. It is likely that Haydari was the subject of Baghbani's special documentary (more on this below, in the 'Iranian Fighters' section).

It is worth pointing out that creating and training the Syrian *shabbiha* on suppressing protests and dissidents may have also provided Sepah Pasdaran itself with valuable experience. In October 2011, Sepah announced the creation of a new force of 31,000 members called the Imam Ali Security Battalion, whose task is to "defend the [Islamic] revolution and absorb people [s anger]."⁴⁰ In his inauguration speech, the chief of Sepah Pasdaran Mohammad Ali Jafari said: "Our task is not limited to physically [responding to] the events. We have to realize how to counter those people who have attended such scenes [protests]." "The nature of the threats is changing," he added. "It is the art of Sepah and Basij to match itself to the changes and to realize the threats which are aimed at the future of the revolution."

War crimes and crimes against humanity

Over the past three years, the Iranian-trained *shabbiha* have "reigned with violence and impunity," as *the Telegraph* interview mentioned above puts it. There have been numerous reports about *shabbiha* members looting houses and setting them on fire; about them destroying entire villages and raping, torturing and slitting the throats of inhabitants suspected of opposing the regime. The *shabbiha* are also often charged with finding, torturing or killing anti-regime activists. They now have their own detention centres and torture facilities across the country. Their presence and checkpoints are often feared by Syrians more than those of the regular army due to their infamous brutality.

The *shabbiha* have come to be particularly associated with two types of 'routine crimes': looting and rape. Unlike army soldiers, NDF fighters are allowed, and even encouraged, to loot houses and take 'spoils' after battles, which they then sell on the black market in regime-held areas or in Lebanon. In fact, this has been used by the regime as an incentive to recruit for the NDF. A number of captured *shabbiha* members have admitted

to this. For example, in April 2013, an NDF fighter from Homs told *Reuters*: "I get 15,000 lira (\$158) a month, and I am allowed to keep a percentage of the loot from any battle I fight in."⁴¹

Similarly, many NDF fighters have admitted, and even bragged about, raping the 'enemy's women', in what appears to be a systematic practice. In July 2012, a captured *shabbiha* member admitted receiving 30,000

30 'Nabavian: 300,000 Syrian troops trained by Iran' (in Persian), *Emrooz u Farda*, <http://emroozofarda.ir/?p=3047>. An English report is available at: <http://en.trend.az/regions/iran/2241820.html>.

31 'Vice chair of National Security Committee: Do not speak so other countries say Iran is breeding terrorists' (in Persian), *Khabar Online*, 16 February 2014, available: <http://khabaronline.ir/%28X-%281%29S%28zv0jvfqnirzv02vdv33nlcia%29%29/detail/338638/Politics/parliament>. An English translation and commentary is available at: <http://www.naameshaam.org/en/iranian-mp-revealing-details-of-irans-military-support-of-syrian-regime-against-national-interests/>.

32 Erika Solomon, 'Insight: Syrian government guerrilla fighters being sent to Iran for training', *Reuters*, 4 April 2013, available: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/04/04/us-syria-iran-training-insight-idUSBRE9330DW20130404>.

33 Farnaz Fassihi, Jay Solomon and Sam Dagher, 'Iranians Dial Up Presence in Syria', *The Wall Street Journal*, 16 September 2013, available: <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424127887323864604579067382861808984>.

34 See, for example, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/tehranbureau/2011/11/news-at-least-27-dead-after-irgc-depot-blast.html>.

35 Sam Dagher, 'Syria's Alawite Force Turned Tide for Assad', *The Wall Street Journal*, August 2013, available: <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424127887323997004578639903412487708>.

36 The video with English subtitles is available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z2J02DutU2c>.

37 'Iran steps up fight in Syria' (in Dutch), 11 September 2013, NPO, available: <http://nieuwsuur.nl/video/550232-iran-voert-strijd-in-syrie.html>.

38 See, for example, <http://www.tasnimnews.com/Home/Single/135870>, http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/iran/2013/08/130822_syria_iranian_heydari.shtml.

39 'Funeral of the martyr Sardar Ismail Haji Heydari + Photos' (in Persian), 21 August 2013, available: <http://tinyurl.com/14lsgrt>.

40 'Imam Ali security battalions are being inaugurated', *Digarban*, 7 October 2011, available: <http://www.digarban.com/en/node/2584>.

41 Erika Solomon, 'Insight: Battered by war, Syrian army creates its own replacement', *Reuters*, 21 April 2013, available: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/04/21/us-syria-crisis-paramilitary-insight-idUSBRE93K02R20130421>.

Syrian pounds per month and an extra 10,000 for each person he captured or killed. He also admitted raping one woman, a student at Aleppo University, before killing her. “My commander raped many times,” he added. “It was normal.” As to the reason, he had this to say: “I didn’t care about Bashar al-Assad. All I cared about was that I got the power.”⁴²

At the beginning of the revolution, in Spring 2011, the role of the *shabbiha* was limited to beating and shooting protesters. Gradually, as they became more organised and better trained and armed – thanks to Sepah Pasdaran and Hezbollah Lebanon – they started to join the regime’s armed forces in major military campaigns against various towns and cities around the country, and even organise their own campaigns of terror. In April 2013, a Syrian army officer in Homs told *Reuters* that the army was “increasingly playing a logistical and directive role, while NDF fighters act as combatants on the ground.”⁴³

Case study: The Houla and Bayda massacres

The most well-known and well-documented massacre committed by the *shabbiha* is perhaps the massacre of Houla, north of Homs, in May 2012. Almost 100 civilians, nearly half of them children, were executed by *shabbiha* armed men.⁴⁴ Survivors described how gunmen entered their homes, fired indiscriminately and slit the throats of men, women and children.⁴⁵

The UN Independent International Commission of Inquiry subsequently released a 102-page report⁴⁶ accusing the *shabbiha* fighters who carried out the Houla summary executions of “committing the crimes against humanity of murder and torture, war crimes and gross violations of international human rights and humanitarian law, including unlawful killing, indiscriminate attacks against civilian populations and acts of sexual violence.” Furthermore, the report said that these crimes were committed “pursuant to state policy,” pointing the finger at the “highest levels of the Syrian armed and security forces.”

Other famous massacres committed by the *shabbiha* include the al-Bayda and Banyas massacres in May 2013, where army and *shabbiha* forces rounded up and executed at least 248 civilians, including women and children, after clashes had ended and opposition fighters had retreated. In September 2013, Human Rights Watch

published a 68-page report summarising its investigation into the massacre, based on witness accounts and video evidence.⁴⁷ The report described the massacre as “one of the deadliest instances of mass summary executions since the start of the conflict in Syria.”⁴⁸

Case study: The *shabbiha* in Homs

A particularly notorious *shabbiha* force has reportedly been that of Homs. Various leaked internal documents and testimonies reveal a world of violence, crime and mafia-style networks that do not appear to have any guiding values or principles other than money and power.⁴⁹

In one document, leaked in February 2014 to an independent Syrian opposition newspaper,⁵⁰ a letter submitted by an anonymous resident of Homs to the Presidential Palace details what it describes as the “non-patriotic” practices of the local NDF in the city, which the document describes as “worse than the practices of the terrorists” and even equates them to “systematic war crimes.” The letter names a number of local militia leaders but focuses mainly on the force’s chief in Homs, Saqr Rustum, who it claims is personally in charge of a special unit within the force responsible for “special missions” such as assassinations, kidnappings, robbery and so on.

The document gives detailed and well-informed examples of these ‘non-patriotic’ practices, including selling weapons and ammunition to armed opposition forces for extortionate prices; the bombing of a NDF arms depot in the Wadi al-Dahab district in August 2013 to avoid an inspection that would have revealed stolen and sold-off weapons and ammunition; and even smuggling in and detonating car bombs in regime-loyalist areas to send a message to the leadership in Damascus that “the Military Security is incapable of controlling its check point so it should be taken from it and handed over to the NDF.”

The letter also reveals that up to 8,500 of the 18,500 NDF members in Homs are in fact inactive. They are only NDF members on paper because they wanted to avoid the compulsory military service. Saqr Rustum, the document claims, submits their names to the General Staff Command as having joined the NDF so they do not have to do the military service, in exchange for keeping their salaries (25,000 Syrian pounds a month) for himself.

Other criminal practices mentioned in the document include robbing people and vehicles at checkpoints and kidnapping men and women to blackmail their families for ransom. Other reports based on insider testimonies have also talked about this practice (the kidnapping of civilians, including women, in regime-held areas, especially among the Alawite and Christian communities).⁵¹ Pro-regime media have often accused the 'sectarian terrorists' of the opposition armed forces for such incidents.

Following an increasing number of complaints and demonstrations by residents in Homs about these practices, the governor of Homs, in collaboration with the military security, arrested 330 NDF members in January 2014. In retaliation, the NDF attempted to assassinate the governor by firing mortars on his house, according to the letter.

Significantly, the document blames the regular army for these criminal practices, which it says are "very widespread" and "have gone too far." That is because the army has been handing over entire areas to the NDF after finishing its operations there. This scenario, the letter adds, is repeated in all the areas that fall under the control of regime forces. The NDF would then surround the area, set up checkpoints, and the 'special missions unit' would then comb the area and rob houses of everything they can put their hands on, then load the 'spoils' into trucks and take them to be sold elsewhere.

These reports should not be surprising given the composition of the NDF, whose members include many convicted criminals who were released from prison at the start of the revolution to form the force, not to mention the original *shabbiha* racketeers and gangsters. For example, Saqr Rustum, the leader of the NDF in Homs, was a civil engineer who occupied the position of the vice-president of the Hasyaa industrial zone in Homs, but was fired after it was found out that he had been involved in large-scale corruption. A few months after the outbreak of the mass protests in Homs, his maternal uncle, a brigadier-general who served as a military advisor to president Bashar al-Assad, put him in charge of forming a local pro-regime militia (or Popular Committee, as it was known then) in Homs.⁵²

There has not been much concrete evidence of a direct link between the Homs *shabbiha* and Iranian commanders, but it is safe to assume that such a link does exist,

especially given the strategic importance of Homs to the Iranian regime and Hezbollah Lebanon and their presence and activity in the city and the surrounding areas since mid-2012, which will be discussed in detail in the next section.

Unfortunately, none of these reports documenting the crimes committed by the *shabbiha* and the NDF point out the Iranian connection. When Iranian officials kept repeating, throughout the first two years of the revolution, that they were only present in Syria as 'advisors' – as a way to deny direct military involvement – what that meant was advising, among other things, on setting up,

42 'Confessions of an Assad 'Shabiha' loyalist: How I raped and killed for £300 a month', *World Observer*, 17 July 2012, available: <http://worldobserveronline.com/2012/07/17/confessions-assad-shabiha-loyalist-i-raped-killed-300-month/>.

43 Erika Solomon, 'Insight', *idem*.

44 Stephanie Nebehay, 'Most Houla victims killed in summary executions: U.N.', *Reuters*, 29 May 2012, available: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/05/29/us-syria-un-idUSBRE84S10020120529>.

45 'Syria crisis: Most Houla victims were executed', *BBC*, 29 May 2012, available: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-18249413>.

46 The report is available at: http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/RegularSession/Session21/A-HRC-21-50_en.pdf.

47 Human Rights Watch, *"No One's Left": Summary Executions by Syrian Forces in al-Bayda and Baniyas*, September 2013, available: <http://www.hrw.org/node/118645/>.

48 Human Rights Watch, 'Syria: Mass Executions by Government Forces', 13 September 2013, available: <http://www.hrw.org/news/2013/09/13/syria-mass-executions-government-forces>.

49 See, for example, the series of leaked documents about the "*shabbiha society*" obtained by *Zanam al-Wasl*, a Syrian opposition news site, published in Arabic in April 2014: <https://zamanalwsl.net/news/48553.html>.

50 Amer Mohammad, 'Saqr Rustum, the absolute ruler of Homs – The National Defence tried to assassinate Homs governor, bombed Wadi al-Dahab and robbed [regime] loyalists' (in Arabic), *Souriatna* 125, 9 February 2014, available: <http://www.souriatnapress.net/?p=5630>.

51 See, for example, 'Aref Hamza, 'Who kidnapped the Alawites and Christians in Homs?' (in Arabic), *Al-Mustaqbal* 5062, 15 June 2014, p.10, available: <http://www.almustaqbal.com/v4/article.aspx?Type=NP&ArticleID=621134>; 'Clear prostitution in Homs, the shabbiha kidnap 'Alawite women' (in Arabic), *Zaman al-Wasl*, 13 June 2014, available: <https://zamanalwsl.net/news/50761.html>.

52 Amer Mohammad, 'Saqr Rustum', *Souriatna*, *idem*.

training and arming one of the most notorious militia forces that has been responsible for war crimes and crimes against humanity committed in Syria. As a US Treasury sanctions designation from December 2012 put it, “Iran has helped establish and train the Jaysh al-Sha’bi militia in Syria [another early name for the NDF] to support the Assad regime and relieve pressure on Syrian government forces. Since mid-2012, Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Qods Force (IRGC-QF) and Hezbollah have provided training, advice, and weapons and equipment for Jaysh al-Sha’bi. Iran has also provided routine funding worth millions of dollars to the militia.”⁵³

We now know that Major-Gen. Soleimani, the commander-in-chief of Sepah Qods and Ayatollah Ali Khamenei’s man in Syria, deployed top Sepah commanders to Syria to help the Assad regime suppress the mass popular protests. Among these were experienced Sepah commanders who had supervised counter-insurgency campaigns against Iran’s own anti-regime movements, as well as the brutal crackdown on Iranian pro-democracy protests in 2009 known as the Green Movement. Among them were Gen. Hossein Hamedani, Yadollah Javani, Mohsen Shizari, Ismail Haydari and others. All these commanders, along with their superiors (Soleimani and Khamenei), should also be implicated in the crimes committed by the *shabbiha* and the NDF, because evidence suggests it was with their full knowledge and complicity, if not their direct orders, that these crimes were committed. The continuation of Iranian training, advice and financial and military support to these militia forces, even after some of these crimes came to light, only goes to prove such complicity.

Update: Restructuring the NDF and forming ‘Hezbollah Syria’

In late 2014, various Arab media outlets reported that the Syrian Ministry of Defence was planning to disband the National Defence Forces (NDF) across the country and transfer its members to the Ministry under two-to ten-year contracts.¹

Around the same time, pro-regime media outlets revealed another new proposal, “in its final stages,” to merge the National Defence Forces and Popular Committees into what would be called the National Security Committees, which would be “more organised and better supervised.”²

The motivation behind these moves, according to the reports, is an attempt by the regime to control these militias that have gone out of control and become mafia-style gangs riddled with crime and corruption. As one report put it, “the Ministry of Defence intends to disband [the NDF] due to their repeated breaches and because they have gone out of control and their harm has reached members of the security and the army.”³

As detailed above, the NDF had come to reign with violence and impunity because this impunity was, from the beginning, used by the regime as an incentive to recruit for the force.⁴ So much so that, in 2013, President Bashar al-Assad issued a decree allowing the NDF to control towns and villages ‘liberated’ by the army.⁵

Meanwhile, a new conscription campaign in late 2014 targeted reservists, students and state employees in regime-held areas with sweeping arrests and new regulations to stop desertions,⁶ amid increased cases of regime loyalists dodging the draft.⁷ Many observers attributed the new campaign to the regime’s military losses and to attempts to shore up its dwindling army.⁸ But the developments appear to be also related to Iranian plans to restructure the NDF and replace it with more disciplined and more loyal ideological militias.

According to other media reports from the same period (November-December 2014), the Iranian regime had embarked on merging its foreign militias fighting in Syria into one force under a unified leadership that would serve as a “parallel army” to the regular Syrian army.⁹ The new organisation would be similar to Hezbollah Lebanon, the reports add, and will fight under the name of The National Ideological Resistance.¹⁰ A person called Abu Yaser was allegedly sent by Tehran to accomplish this mission and “eliminate individual leaderships.”

An anonymous source cited in the above-mentioned reports is quoted saying the ‘parallel army’ is intended to “safeguard Iran’s interests in Syria even if the Assad regime falls,” adding that the army would be “similar to Hezbollah in Lebanon and will gradually work on recruiting Syrians in order to guarantee its continued presence on Syrian soil.” The plan explains the new conscription campaign by the Syrian regime, the source adds, claiming the latter was carried out “on direct Iranian orders.”

Another report from January 2015 claims that, in Hama, it was Iranians who actually supervised the conscription and recruitment, not the Syrian army.¹¹ Local sources are quoted saying the office of Sepah Pasdaran in the town of Qamhaneh had been offering the young conscripts a monthly salary of up to 50,000 Syrian pounds if they joined its militias, and that some 600 ‘volunteers’ aged between 15 and 22 had already taken up the offer.

Other media reports went further and claimed the new merged force is actually called ‘Hezbollah Syria’, and that the person behind the plan is Major-Gen. Soleimani himself.¹² In November 2014, French intelligence website *Intelligence Online* reported that Iran’s Sepah Pasdaran was “building a Syrian Hezbollah” based in the Shia area of Sayyeda Zaynab in Damascus to serve as a direct military link between Tehran, Damascus and Beirut in the event of a collapse of the Assad regime or the failure of the nuclear negotiations with Western powers.¹³ The plan was being implemented in direct coordination with Maher al-Assad, the brother of President Bashar al-Assad, the report added.

A few months later, in May 2015, Syrian opposition media claimed the NDF was being “restructured” at the proposal of the Iranian regime, following “intensive visits” by Iranian officials to Damascus.¹⁴ Not many details or sources were provided but the reports claimed the restructuring was proposed by Tehran as a precondition for providing further financial and military assistance to the Syrian regime. The main reason behind the move is said to do with the growing frustration among regime supporters with the actions of the NDF. The only detail provided is that the notorious Fadi Saqr (see above) would be replaced by a Christian called Bshara al-Yaziji as the leader of the new force. In November 2015, Syrian opposition media reports claimed that Qassem Soleimani held a “heated meeting” with Maher al-Assad, in which they discussed the Syrian regime’s plans to disband and restructure the NDF.¹⁵

Meanwhile, reports started to emerge about new Shia and Alawi militias in various parts of Syria: the Rida Brigade in the northern countryside of Homs,¹⁶ the Popular Mobilisation Forces in Deir al-Zor and Hama,¹⁷ the Bustan Association owned by Rami Makhlouf in al-Swaidaa,¹⁸ the Coastal Shield Brigade and Self-Defence Factions in Latakia,¹⁹ and so on.

In Hama, a new militia training camp supervised by Iranian military officers had been set up at Brigade 47 in the southern suburbs of the city.²⁰ Young volunteers, aged between 16 and 18, from Hama and other parts of regime-controlled areas were being recruited into new “sectarian militias” and trained in these camps for a short while, then dispatched to frontlines, according to media reports. Others are reportedly trained at the Hama military airport. In addition to weapons and equipment, the volunteers are allegedly given a monthly salary of up to 100,000 Syrian pounds and report directly to Iranian officers. Another media report from the same period stressed that the new militias were “completely supervised by Iranian officers and had no direct relationship with Bashar al-Assad’s regime.”²¹

Even in Lebanon, Sepah Pasdaran, in collaboration with Hezbollah Lebanon and “without the knowledge of the Lebanese government,” has allegedly been recruiting among Syrian refugees for the new Syrian Hezbollah.²² Recruitment offices are reportedly offering salaries ranging between 35,000 and 45,000 Syrian pounds for a service of 20 days per month, exploiting the refugees’ harsh conditions in Lebanon. In the event of death, the family of the ‘martyr’ is offered a payment and a continuation of the monthly salary.

The first known ‘martyr’ from Hezbollah Syria reportedly died in Aleppo in December 2014.²³ Ridwan Mohammad al-‘Abeid was killed during fighting in the Hanano area. Posters carrying his picture and a logo similar to that of Hezbollah Lebanon described him as an “honorary lieutenant” from the “Qamhaneh Group” of the “Islamic Resistance in Syria (Hezbollah).”

While resorting to sectarian militias is nothing new, it appears that the Iranian regime is intensifying its efforts to consolidate its reliance on loyal, ideologically driven Shia and Alawi militias to consolidate its control in regime-held areas in Syria. Similar efforts in Iraq led to the formation of the so-called Popular Mobilisation Forces (see below). On the one hand, this may be a response to the unruliness of the *shabbiha*. But it may also be a

53 US Department of Treasury, ‘Treasury Sanctions Al-Nusra Front Leadership in Syria and Militias Supporting the Assad Regime’, 11 December 2012, available: <http://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/pages/tg1797.aspx>.

longer-term plan to secure Iranian interests in Syria even after the fall of the Assad regime. As one local activist from Hama put it, “Iran is getting new trained volunteers on a sectarian basis who would serve its agendas in the region even if the Assad regime leaves.”²⁴

Footnotes

1 See, for example, ‘Regime disbands National Defence Forces’ (in Arabic), *Al-Hayat*, 1 December 2014, available: <http://goo.gl/uHFKbZ>.

2 See, for example, ‘Merging National Defence Forces and *shabbiha* militias with the National Security’ (in Arabic), *All4Syria*, 3 November 2014, available: <http://www.all4syria.info/Archive/176514>.

3 *Ibid.*

4 See, for example, this article in Arabic on how this was done in Deir al-Zor more recently: <http://www.enabbaladi.org/archives/24267>.

5 Robert Fisk, ‘Assad sends his feared militia squads to the battlefield’, *The Independent*, 29 April 2013, available: <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/comment/robert-fisk-assad-sends-his-feared-militia-squads-to-the-battle-front-8595464.html>.

6 See, for example, ‘Desperate for soldiers, Assad’s government imposes harsh recruitment measures’, *Washington Post*, 28 December 2014, available: https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/desperate-for-soldiers-assads-government-imposes-harsh-recruitment-measures/2014/12/28/62f99194-6d1d-4bd6-a862-b3ab46c6b33b_story.html; Syrian regime pursues draft dodgers’, *Al-Monitor*, 22 December 2014, available: <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/12/syria-regime-measures-evade-military-conscription.html>.

7 See, for example, Adnan Ali, ‘Regime supporters dodge military service’ (in Arabic), *Al-Arabic Al-Jadid*, 1 June 2013, available: <http://goo.gl/BQTH0b>.

8 For more on the conscription campaign and its drives and ramifications, see these two reports: Christopher Kozak, ‘*The Assad Regime Under Stress: Conscription and Protest among Alawite and Minority Populations in Syria*’, Institute for the Study of War, 16 December 2014, available: <http://iswvsyria.blogspot.fr/2014/12/the-assad-regime-under-stress.html>; ‘*Syria without Youth Conscription campaigns target about half a million youth*’, Syrian Network for Human Rights, 24 December 2014, available: http://sn4hr.org/wp-content/pdf/english/Syria_Without_Youth_en.pdf.

9 See, for example, ‘Iran merges its mercenaries in Syria under the name ‘Ideological Resistance’ and plans to send 100,000 more fighters’ (in Arabic), *Siraj Press*, 4 November 2014, available: <http://goo.gl/3lQvQ4>; ‘Iran heading towards forming ‘parallel army’ in Syria’ (in Arabic), *Al-Hayat*, 5 November 2014, available: <http://goo.gl/0xnbcz>. For English, see <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2014/11/06/Report-Iran-building-new-Hezbollah-in-Syria.html>.

10 For some background on the National Ideological Resistance, see: Ayman Jawad al-Tamimi, ‘The National Ideological Resistance in Syria: A “Syrian Hezbollah” Brand’, *Syria Comment*, 11 October 2014, available: <http://www.joshualandis.com/blog/national-ideological-resistance-syria-syrian-hezbollah-brand/>.

11 ‘Iran’s arm reaches Hama: Revolutionary Guards recruit 600 youth for 50,000 lira’ (in Arabic), *Al-Souria Net*, 27 January 2015, available: <https://goo.gl/KVEacs>. For English, see <http://syriadirect.org/news/hama-media-office-irgc-presence-%E2%80%98noticable%E2%80%99/>.

12 See, for example, these reports in Arabic: <http://all4syria.info/Archive/186035> and <http://goo.gl/ngJ0iX>.

13 ‘Tehran builds Syrian Hezbollah’, *Intelligence Online*, 12 November 2014, available: <http://www.intelligenceonline.com/government-intelligence/grey-areas/2014/11/12/tehran-builds-syrian-hezbollah,108047492-ART>.

14 ‘On Iranian proposals: The National Defence to be restructured and new leadership and military policies soon’ (in Arabic), *All4Syria*, 20 May 2015, available: <http://all4syria.info/Archive/215297>.

15 See, for example, <https://goo.gl/dKDRPV>. See also: <https://goo.gl/6QA9Oz>.

16 See, for example, this report in Arabic: <http://goo.gl/PFI4P>.

17 See, for example, this report in Arabic: <http://www.enabbaladi.org/archives/29107>.

18 See: <http://goo.gl/dS9zjH>.

19 See: <https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/NewsReports/566353-syria-regime-training-new-fighting-force>.

20 ‘Under Iranian supervision, a training camp for new militias in Hama’ (in Arabic), *Enab Baladi*, 30 November 2014, available: <http://www.enabbaladi.org/archives/23229>.

21 ‘Suspicious movements by Iranian Revolutionary Guards [in Hama countryside] aimed at penetrating northern countryside of Homs’ (in Arabic), *Zaman al-Wasl*, 3 January 2015, available: <https://www.zamanalwsl.net/news/56793.html>. See also this report (in Arabic) about Sepah Pasdaran conducting background checks on Syrian soldiers in Hama before agreeing to work with them: <https://goo.gl/oG7yGc>.

22 ‘Iran Launches Syrian Hezbollah to Recruit Unemployed’, *The Syrian Observer*, 10 December 2014, available: <http://syrianobserver.com/EN/News/28272/Iran+Launches+Syrian+Hezbollah+to+Recruit+Unemployed>.

23 ‘The latest from Hezbollah Syria: Lieutenant killed and a number of fighters injured in Aleppo’ (in Arabic), *All4Syria*, 11 December 2014, available: <http://www.all4syria.info/Archive/183350>.

24 Quoted in ‘Under Iranian supervision’, *Enab Baladi*, *idem*.



Iraqi Shia militiamen in Baghdad preparing to depart for Syria, June 2013 (Newscom). Source: http://www.weeklystandard.com/articles/iraq-war-not-over_736876.html

2. Foreign militias

Providing advice, training and money to the Syrian regime's armed forces and militias was not enough. As the revolution was pushed towards militarisation and opposition armed forces started to achieve military advances on the ground, the Iranian regime made a strategic decision to send some of its loyal militias in Lebanon and Iraq to go and fight in Syria alongside, and even on behalf of, the Syrian regime forces. This was because, in the words of Mohsen Sazegara, a founding member of Sepah Pasdaran, "One of Iran's wings will be broken if Assad falls. They are now using all their contacts from Iraq to Lebanon to keep him in power."⁵⁴

According to some observers, another factor behind this decision may have had to do with Iranian commanders' views of the *shabbiha*'s practices – although the author of this report believes this issue is rather exaggerated and not as crucial as it is presented in the following quote. The Iranian regime may have well been pursuing apparently conflicting parallel strategies in Syria.

According to the American intelligence think-tank Stratfor, Iranian officials privately describe the *shabbiha* as "unruly and grossly undisciplined." One Iranian source

reportedly described the *shabbiha*'s use of violence as "misguided" and explained how Sepah Pasdaran "unsuccessfully attempted to convey to the Syrian militiamen that violence must be employed strategically so as to suppress and not proliferate unrest." For this reason, the source claims, Sepah Pasdaran "has given up on training the *shabbiha* and has instead deployed Hezbollah Lebanon members to work with them and, in some cases, even defend *shabbiha* who have more recently become targets of attacks by the rebel Free Syrian Army."⁵⁵

As the previous section has shown, the claim (made in January 2012) that Sepah Pasdaran has "given up" on training the *shabbiha* and the NDF is unfounded. There is plenty of evidence to the contrary, although Sepah may have well delegated some of this responsibility

⁵⁴ Farnaz Fassihi, 'Iran said to send troops to bolster Syria', *The Wall Street Journal*, 27 August 2012 9, available: <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10000872396390444230504577615393756632230>.

⁵⁵ Stratfor, 'The Use of Mercenaries in Syria's Crackdown', Ocnus. Net, 15 January 2012, available: http://www.ocnus.net/artman2/publish/Defence_Arms_13/The-Use-of-Mercenaries-in-Syria-s-Crackdown_printer.shtml.

to Hezbollah, whose members and commanders are trained by Sepah Pasdaran in the first place. Language barriers may have been a factor in this, as Hezbollah commanders, being native Arabic speakers, would find it easier to communicate with Syrian trainees than their Iranian counterparts.

A report by the news agency AFP in April 2014, based on interviews with Hezbollah Lebanon members, revealed details of the training programmes that the group's fighters undergo before going to fight in Syria: "Initial training for those who pass scrutiny of their religious credentials and background checks, is carried out in Lebanon, where courses last from 40 days to three months. Additional training is provided in Iran for about two months, with a focus on heavy weaponry and preparing members for command positions." This experience is then also conveyed to Syrian regime forces and militias, whom Hezbollah fighters criticise as being "woefully unprepared."⁵⁶

In any case, the "strategic employment of violence to suppress and not proliferate the unrest" does provide a partial explanation for the Iranian regime's motivation behind sending Hezbollah Lebanon and Iraqi militias to go and fight in Syria. According to Stratfor emails leaked by WikiLeaks in March 2012, members of Sepah Pasdaran and Hezbollah Lebanon were deployed in Syria in the early days of the revolution to "stand behind Syrian troops and kill Syrian soldiers immediately if they refuse to open fire."⁵⁷

Early involvement

Rumours and reports of Hezbollah Lebanon and Iraqi militias' presence inside Syria have been around at least since mid-2011. One of the earliest videos of Hezbollah's presence in Syria, published in July 2011, shows Hezbollah fighters with machine guns and tanks in Horan in southern Syria.⁵⁸ In January 2012, *The Times* reported that the Syrian regime was deploying "large numbers of Hezbollah and Iranian snipers" to shoot anti-regime protesters.⁵⁹ The report's source was a Syrian Treasury auditor at the Ministry of Defence who had defected and fled Syria the month before. According to him, the salaries of these snipers, who were imported as 'military consultants', were paid through a "slush fund replenished with US dollars flown in from Iran." It was the same fund used to pay the *shabbiha*, he claimed.

In February 2012, Syrian regime forces, supported by Hezbollah fighters, regained control of the town of al-Zabadani, north-west of Damascus, after rebels had taken over it the previous month. A few days before, *Al-Arabiya* TV channel had quoted a Sepah Pasdaran commander saying Hezbollah forces took part in the al-Zabadani battle, on Iranian orders, in order to protect a Sepah Pasdaran military base in the nearby town of Madaya.⁶⁰ According to media reports, al-Zabadani, which is situated on the way between Damascus and Beirut, has served as Sepah Qods's "logistical hub" for supplying Hezbollah Lebanon with arms at least since June 2011.⁶¹ According to US estimates, Hezbollah was at the time receiving \$100 million a year from Tehran in supplies and weaponry, which were transported through Syria.⁶²

In October 2012, a senior Hezbollah Lebanon commander was reported to have been killed in Syria.⁶³ Hezbollah said Ali Hussein Nassif had died while "performing his jihadist duty," without specifying where.⁶⁴ Syrian rebels said Nassif and several of his men had been killed in an ambush by the Free Syrian Army. Other reports said they had died in clashes on the border. Nassif was the second senior Hezbollah military commander to have reportedly been killed in Syria. Musa Ali Shahimi died in August 2012 and a public funeral attended by two Hezbollah MPs was held for him in Beirut.⁶⁵

A few months before, in March 2012, Hezbollah held funerals for two other, less senior members who, according to the Syrian opposition, had been killed in al-Mazzeah, Damascus.⁶⁶ After Nassif's death, however, many more public funerals followed. Syrian rebels also published a number of videos of Hezbollah fighters they had captured or killed in Syria.⁶⁷ It was no longer a secret, especially after the US Treasury added Hezbollah Lebanon to its sanctions list in August 2012 for "supporting the Assad regime," not only for being a "terrorist group."⁶⁸ In a special briefing on the designation, the Treasury's Under-Secretary for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence claimed that Hezbollah, in addition to training Syrian regime forces and providing them with logistical assistance, had also played "a substantial role in efforts to expel Syrian opposition forces from areas within Syria."⁶⁹

The following month, in September 2012, the US Treasury targeted with sanctions Hezbollah Lebanon's leader Hassan Nasrallah himself for his role in support-

ing the Assad regime. Nasrallah has personally “overseen Hezbollah’s efforts to help the Syrian regime’s violent crackdown on the Syrian civilian population,” the department said in a press release.⁷⁰ Yet Nasrallah and other Hezbollah Lebanon spokespeople kept denying at this point that the group had any involvement whatsoever in Syria and accused the Syrian opposition and its backers of fabricating ‘lies’ to undermine the ‘resistance’.

Send in the Hezbollah boys

Like Nasrallah, Iranian officials also kept publicly denying that Iran had any direct military involvement in Syria and insisted they had nothing to do with what ‘other groups’ were doing there. In a famous statement about two years later, Iranian foreign minister Mohammad Javad Zarif told the World Economic Forum in Davos: “We are not sending people. Hezbollah has made its own decision.”⁷¹

But others, including Hezbollah and Iranian regime insiders, disagree. Sheikh Subhi al-Tufayli, who led Hezbollah Lebanon between 1989 and 1991 before he fell out with the Iranian regime, told *Reuters* in an interview in 2013⁷² that Hezbollah’s decision to intervene in Syria had been entirely down to Iran: “I was secretary-general of the party and I know that the decision is Iranian, and

the alternative would have been a confrontation with the Iranians... I know that the Lebanese in Hezbollah, and Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah more than anyone, are not convinced about this war.”

The news agency also quotes a Lebanese security official saying: “Even if Hezbollah has its wise men, the decision [to fight in Syria] is not theirs. The decision is for those who created and established [Hezbollah]. They are obliged to follow Iran’s orders.” In another interview in July 2013, al-Tufaili said: “Although Iran does not get involved in all the little details [of Hezbollah Lebanon], political decisions are always 100% Iranian.”⁷³

56 ‘Hezbollah shifts tactics, narrative for Syria fight’, *AFP*, 14 April 2014, available: <https://uk.news.yahoo.com/hezbollah-shifts-tactics-narrative-syria-fight-091321505.html>.

57 ‘Some details on IRGC and HZ presence in Syria – ME1’, The Global Intelligence Files, *WikiLeaks*, 8 March 2012, available: https://wikileaks.org/gifiles/docs/96/962665_insight-iran-syria-some-details-on-irgc-and-hz-presence-in.html.

58 Available: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9YscLuq4_vA.

59 James Hider and Nate Wright, ‘Assad pays snipers “to murder protesters”’, *The Times*, 26 January 2012, available: <http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/news/world/middleeast/article3298307.ece>.

60 Najah Mohammad Ali, ‘Hezbollah entered Syria to protect Iranian base’ (in Arabic), *Al-Arabiya*, 22 January 2012, available: <http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/01/22/189816.html>.

61 ‘Evidence grows Iran aiding Syria’s Assad’, *UPI*, 2 June 2011, available: http://www.upi.com/Top_News/Special/2011/06/02/Evidence-grows-Iran-aiding-Syrias-Assad/UPI-72061307024479/.

62 Geneive Abdo, ‘How Iran keeps Assad in power in Syria’, *Foreign Affairs*, 25 August 2011, available: <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/68230/geneive-abdo/how-iran-keeps-assad-in-power-in-syria>.

63 ‘Hezbollah military commander “killed in Syria”’, *BBC*, 2 October 2012, available: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-19801884>.

64 ‘Hezbollah held funeral for martyr Ali Nassif in Bawadi’ (in Arabic), official site of the Islamic Resistance – Lebanon, 1 October 2012, available: <http://www.moqawama.org/essaydetails.php?eid=26429&cid=199>.

65 ‘Hezbollah held funeral for martyr Musa Shahimi in Rawdat al-Shahidayn’ (in Arabic), *Al-Ahd News Website*, 10 August 2012, available: <http://www.alahednews.com.lb/essaydetails.php?eid=64614&cid=7>.

66 ‘Hezbollah’s participation in Syria and the names of its fighters who have died so far’ (in Arabic), *Lebanon Files*, 27 April 2013, available: <http://www.lebanonfiles.com/news/538003>.

67 See, for example, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0SJ-zWSMcX1Y>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RI70ZmevDyk>; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K_D3eIC_Nrg.

68 US Department of Treasury, ‘Treasury Targets Hizballah for Supporting the Assad Regime’, 10 August 2012, available: <http://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/tg1676.aspx>.

69 US Department of State, ‘Briefing on the designation of Hezbollah for supporting the Syrian regime’, 10 August 2012, available: <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2012/08/196335.htm>.

70 US Department of Treasury, ‘Treasury Designates Hizballah Leadership’, 13 September 2012, available: <http://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/tg1709.aspx>.

71 “They make up their own mind”, *Naame Shaam*, 27 January 2014, available: <http://www.naameshaam.org/en/they-make-their-own-mind/>.

72 Samia Nakhoul, ‘Special Report: Hezbollah gambles all in Syria’, *Reuters*, 26 September 2013, available: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/09/26/us-syria-hezbollah-special-report-idUSBRE98POAI20130926>.

73 ‘Iran plunged Hezbollah into Syrian war, Tufaili’, *Ya Libnan*, 3 July 2013, available: <http://yalibnan.com/2013/07/03/iran-plunged-hezbollah-into-syrian-war-tufaili/>.

The 'tipping point' behind the Iranian regime's decision to adjust its Syria strategy (from an indirect, supervisory and supporting role to heavy, direct involvement) appears to have occurred in Summer 2012, after Syrian rebels captured large sections of Aleppo and of the suburbs of Damascus. Fearing that the Assad regime would soon collapse, Tehran dispatched senior Sepah Pasdaran commanders skilled in urban warfare to supervise and direct military operations. According to US and Iranian officials, Sepah Qods established "operation rooms" to control cooperation between Sepah Pasdaran, Syrian regime forces and Hezbollah Lebanon.⁷⁴ In June 2013, Syrian rebels in Aleppo intercepted and recorded what appears to be a radio transmission between an Iranian commander and another from Hezbollah (judging by their language and accent), in which the first gives the second military instructions.⁷⁵ Sources in the Free Army in Aleppo reported clashing with Hezbollah fighters for the first time in July 2012.⁷⁶ The month before, media reports claimed Hezbollah fighters were involved in the Douma and Saqba massacres near Damascus.⁷⁷

It is worth noting at this point that at least some of these reports originating from the Free Syrian Army or the Syrian opposition about Hezbollah's activities in Syria in 2011-12 appear to have been exaggerated for political purposes. But this does not mean they were entirely without basis. Many reports that were initially discredited by 'experts' turned out to be true later, when more evidence, admissions and confessions regarding Hezbollah's operations in Syria came to light.

As early as June 2011, the countryside of al-Qusayr, near Homs, along the Syrian-Lebanese border, had witnessed the first clashes between Hezbollah fighters and Syrian rebels. Hezbollah fighters, supported by Syrian regime rocket launchers, allegedly attempted to cross the border and enter the strategic Syrian village of Ra-bleh. They subsequently captured eight border villages inhabited by mixture of Sunni, Shia, Alawi and Christian residents.⁷⁸ The following year, in May 2012, Hezbollah invaded more villages in the area and established fortified bases for itself there.

In a speech on 11 October 2012, Hezbollah's leader Hassan Nasrallah justified these actions by claiming the fighters were Lebanese nationals who had lived in these Syrian villages for many years (there are 23 of these

villages and 12 farms, whose population is estimated to be around 30,000). Many of them, he claimed, "decided to stay in their homes, bought weapons... to defend themselves and their properties" against armed groups who attacked them.⁷⁹ "Some of the youth among them happened to be Hezbollah members," he added. "We did not tell them what to do... and this has nothing to do with the fighting between the Syrian government and the armed groups."

This was the first in a series of justifications that Nasrallah and other Hezbollah officials would reiterate in front of their supporters, the other main one being "defending holy Shia shrines" in Damascus (more on this below).⁸⁰ It was also the first official half-admission of Hezbollah's involvement in Syria and a signal for a later, full-scale military campaign starting from the Syrian villages that the group had occupied.

What Nasrallah 'forgot' to mention in his speech was the open secret that the Qusayr-Hermel region has historically been a main route for Iranian arms shipments to Hezbollah Lebanon via Syria, and is also close to some of Hezbollah's main arms depots in the Beqaa Valley in Lebanon. Moreover, Hezbollah would not have been able or willing to intervene in Syria without Iranian training, weapons, money and orders.

The battle of al-Qusayr

A major turning point in Hezbollah Lebanon's involvement in the Syria war was the battle of al-Qusayr in April-June 2013.⁸¹ The strategic town, located close to the Lebanese border and on the highway connecting Damascus to Homs and the coastal region, had been held by Syrian rebels and besieged by the army since November 2011, with sporadic fighting since February 2012. On 11 April 2013, a full-scale, well-planned military campaign, led by Hezbollah Lebanon and Sepah Pasdaran, was launched with the aim of capturing all villages around al-Qusayr and ultimately al-Qusayr itself. One journalist reported seeing Iranian military commanders inside the city.⁸²

On the first day of the operation, a large force of Hezbollah fighters, backed by the Syrian army, attacked and captured the hilltop village of Tell al-Nabi Mando. Over the next few weeks, heavy bombardment and fierce fighting between rebels and Hezbollah and Syrian army

fighters continued in various villages around al-Qusayr. For example, on 18 May, the rebels ambushed Hezbollah fighters along the banks of the al-Assi river on the Syrian side of the Lebanese border while they attempted to enter Syria. Ten Hezbollah fighters were reportedly killed. The next morning, a new Hezbollah force was seen heading towards al-Qusayr.

In the early hours of 19 May, planes, artillery and mortars bombarded al-Qusayr. Later in the day, hundreds of Hezbollah fighters, accompanied by Syrian regime troops, stormed the city from several directions. The rebels fought back and initially managed to push them back to their starting positions on the outskirts of the city. Hezbollah reinforcements were reportedly sent across the border to back them up. On 5 June, Syrian state TV reported that the Syrian army had gained full control of the city. The rebels stated they had pulled out of the city and retreated north to the village of Dabaa, which was still partially under the rebels' control. One Hezbollah fighter was quoted saying they took al-Qusayr in a rapid overnight offensive, allowing some of the rebels to flee.⁸³

More than 500 rebels were killed and some 1,000 wounded during the battle. Well over 100 Hezbollah fighters were also killed, according to opposition sources, of whom some 100 were confirmed by Hezbollah. The number of Syrian army soldiers who were killed is unknown.

One reason for the high number of Hezbollah casualties was that the group played a leading role in the battle of al-Qusayr. According to one Hezbollah fighter interviewed in June 2013, "Hezbollah is leading operations in Qusayr; the Syrian army is only playing a secondary role, deploy[ed] after an area is completely 'cleaned' and secured. Hezbollah officers coordinate with the People's Army [NDF] but fighters never interact. The People's Army is usually last to [be] deploy[ed] after the Syrian army, as they have a better understanding of the area and its residents."⁸⁴

It was during this time that Hezbollah Lebanon's leader made his first official admission of sending fighters to Syria. In a televised speech broadcast by Hezbollah's TV station *Al-Manar* on 25 May 2013, Hassan Nasrallah described Syria as the "back of the resistance," so "the resistance cannot stand arms folded while its back is

80 For more on Hezbollah's involvement in Syria and how it justified it at different stages, see, for example, International Crisis Group, *Lebanon's Hizbollah Turns Eastward to Syria*, May 2014, available: <http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/Iraq%20Syria%20Lebanon/Lebanon/153-lebanon-s-hizbollah-turns-eastward-to-syria.pdf>

81 The battle has been well documented and extensively analysed. See, for example, <http://understandingwar.org/backgrounder/syria-update-fall-al-qusayr>; <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-qusayr-rules-the-syrian-regimes-changing-way-of-war>; <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/06/05/us-syria-crisis-town-idUSBRE95406220130605>; <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-22586378>; <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/20/world/middleeast/syrian-army-moves-to-rebel-held-qusayr.html>; <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424127887323864604579067382861808984>; <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2013/0605/Hezbollah-marks-major-triumph-as-Qusayr-tips-back-into-Assad-camp>. For an Iranian state view, see, for example, this *Press TV* documentary about the al-Qusayr battle: <http://vimeo.com/72141870>.

82 Farnaz Fassihi, Jay Solomon and Sam Dagher, 'Iranians Dial Up Presence in Syria', *The Wall Street Journal*, 16 September 2013, available: <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424127887323864604579067382861808984>.

83 Erika Solomon, 'Syrian army captures strategic border town of Qusair', *Reuters*, 5 June 2013, available: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/06/05/us-syria-crisis-town-idUSBRE95406220130605>.

84 Mona Alami, 'Hezbollah fighter details ops in Qusayr', *Now*, 4 June 2013, available: <https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/interviews/hezbollah-fighter-details-ops-in-qusayr>.

74 Farnaz Fassihi, Jay Solomon and Sam Dagher, 'Iranians Dial Up Presence in Syria', *The Wall Street Journal*, 16 September 2013, available: <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424127887323864604579067382861808984>.

75 'Intercepted radiotransmission - Iran troops in Syria 2013', 8 June 2013, available: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C03FDXqkOKl>.

76 'Hezbollah's participation in Syria', *Lebanon Files*, *idem*.

77 Fadi Shamiyyeh, 'Not only in Qusayr is Hezbollah fighting' (in Arabic), *Middle East Online*, 27 April 2013, available: <http://www.middle-east-online.com/?id=154054>.

78 'Hezbollah fighters, Syrian rebels killed in border fighting', *Al-Arabiya*, 17 February 2013, available: <http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2013/02/17/266843.html>.

79 'Sayyed Nasrallah: Drone Is Ours, It Won't Be the Last', *Al-Manar*, 1 November 2012, available: <http://www.almanar.com.lb/english/adetails.php?fromval=3&cid=33&frid=23&sec-catid=14&eid=71210>. The actual speech is available in English at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bGc_4M0iCWw (the talk about Syria starts at 22:25).

[being] broken.” Hezbollah had entered a new phase a few weeks ago, he added, a phase he described as “the phase of fortifying the resistance and protecting its backbone.” As to sending fighters to Syria, Nasrallah claimed Hezbollah does not force anybody to go to fight in any battle. “We don’t need to declare jihad,” he added, “but with two words you will find tens of thousands of fighters who are ready to take [to] all fronts.”⁸⁵

After falling into their hands, al-Qusayr was run by Hezbollah as “independent territory,” according to media reports. The group’s commanders were in charge of “maintaining discipline” among Syrian regime forces. They also established an operations base in the town’s northern section that is off-limits to most Syrians. According to one Hezbollah commander who patrolled the town with his fighters in a pickup truck, only regime loyalists were allowed back into al-Qusayr, and only after they were “vetted” by him personally.⁸⁶

From a supporting to a leading role

The battle of al-Qusayr was viewed by most observers as a major turning point in the Syria war.⁸⁷ It reflected a noticeable shift in the Iranian regime’s military strategy in Syria: conceding, or perhaps losing interest in, the possibility of regaining control of the eastern and northern parts of the country that were now under the rebels’ control. Instead, the focus from now on would be on defending and consolidating the Syrian and Iranian regimes’ control in Damascus and its surroundings, Homs and its surroundings (which connect the first with the coastal region), and the Qalamon region (which connects the first two and connects both with Lebanon).⁸⁸

The aim was to secure the capital, whose fall would have been seen as a fall of the regime, and to secure the Damascus–Homs–Coast corridor in order to both provide a geographical and demographic continuity of regime-held areas and secure arms shipments to Hezbollah in Lebanon, while at the same time cutting off those of the rebels coming from or through eastern Lebanon.⁸⁹ The leading role in these key battles would be assigned to Hezbollah and other Iranian-backed militias, who were seen as more reliable and better organised than the regular Syrian army. Meanwhile, the regime’s air force would continue its long-range bombardment of rebel-held areas in the north and the east

to perpetuate a state of war in those areas and make life there unbearable. The barrel bombs campaign on Aleppo is an obvious example of this.⁹⁰

This new strategy and the leading role assigned to Hezbollah are best reflected in a number of key, strategic battles in which the group took part.⁹¹ One of these was the two-year-long campaign to retake Homs and its countryside, of which the al-Qusayr battle was but a part, and in which Hezbollah played a key role.

Homs

In May 2011, as mass protests spread to Homs and the city was dubbed “the capital of the revolution”, regime forces and militias carried out a brutal crackdown against the protesters in an attempt to quell them, and the city was placed under a suffocating siege that would last for three years (until May 2014). An increasing number of army defectors were joined by some of the protesters who picked up light arms to defend themselves. In October and November 2011, the rebels resisted repeated attempts by the regime forces to enter the district of Baba Amr.

In February 2012, Syrian regime forces launched an offensive against Baba Amr, shelling the entire district and blocking all supply routes. In early March, ground troops pushed their way into the neighbourhood, forcing the rebels to withdraw. By early May 2012, following a UN-brokered ceasefire, only sporadic street fighting and shelling was taking place and regime forces and militias were in control of most of the city (75–80 per cent). A brigadier-general who defected was quoted by the media saying that the Syrian regime forces and militias were led by Iranian military ‘advisors’.⁹²

In December 2012, regime forces also captured the district of Deir Baalba, leaving only the Old City, the al-Khalidiyya district and a few other areas of Homs under rebel control. In early March 2013, they launched an assault into several rebel-controlled neighborhoods but the rebels, reinforced by units arriving from al-Qusayr, managed to repel the attacks. On 2 May 2013, however, the Syrian army, along with Hezbollah, Iraqi and Iranian fighters, pushed into Wadi al-Sayegh in the heart of the city and regained control of the strategic neighbourhood, cutting off all links between the Old City and the al-Khalidiya district. On 26 July, regime and Hezbollah

forces advanced further into al-Khalidiya and eventually captured 60 percent of the district, including the historic mosque of Khalid Ibn al-Walid.

It is worth noting that almost none of the early reports documenting the crimes committed in Homs at this stage mentioned Hezbollah's or the Iranian regime's role.⁹³

Reports by the Syrian opposition or the Free Army talking about such a role were often dismissed as 'fabrications', 'exaggerations', 'propaganda' or 'conspiracy theories'. Yet, later reports revealed that at least some Syrian regime forces and militias were fighting under Hezbollah and Iranian commanders. In September 2013, *The Wall Street Journal* quoted a 19-year-old Syrian militiaman who "fought under a Hezbollah commander in a district called Khalidiya."⁹⁴ "If we take back all of Homs," he added, "the revolution is going to be completely finished."

In early May 2014, following two months of negotiations, the Iranian regime brokered an unprecedented deal with the Homs rebels that was hailed as a "victory for al-Assad."⁹⁵ The terms of the deal included a ceasefire in the Old City of Homs, which had been under siege for over two years, and the safe withdrawal, under UN supervision, of some 2,000 opposition fighters with their light arms from all the besieged areas of Homs to the northern parts of the country. In return, 45 hostages and prisoners of war held by the rebels in Aleppo and Latakia were released. The rebels also agreed to ease their siege on Nubl and Zahraa, two predominantly Shia, pro-regime towns north of Aleppo.⁹⁶

Earlier reports had claimed that the deal would involve the release of a disputed number of Sepah Pasdaran and Hezbollah Lebanon fighters who had been captured by the Islamic Front, an alliance of several Syrian Islamic rebel groups. Some said this referred to a Sepah Qods commander held by the Baydaa Martyrs Battalion in Homs, but could be expanded to include the release of other Iranian prisoners of war, as well as ten Hezbollah fighters held by the Islamic Front. French news agency AFP then quoted one of the Syrian opposition's negotiators saying the negotiations had entered "a new phase" that involved the Liwa al-Tawhid brigade, which was negotiating the release of "two Iranian officers" held by the group in Aleppo. Other media reports mentioned a Russian military officer who had been held by the Islamic Front in the suburbs of Latakia. But later media

reports gave conflicting accounts of whether all of these foreign hostages were actually released as part of the deal. Moreover, some of the evacuated rebels were later arrested and executed by the regime, according to the opposition.⁹⁷

85 'Sayyed Nasrallah: As I promised you victory in July, I renew my promise today', *Al-Manar*, 29 May 2013, available: <http://www.almanar.com.lb/english/adetails.php?eid=95030&cid=23&from-val=1&frid=23&seccatid=14&s1=1>.

86 Farnaz Fassihi *et. al.*, 'Iranians Dial Up Presence in Syria', *The Wall Street Journal*, *idem*.

87 See, for example, Anne Barnard and Hwaida Saad, 'Hezbollah Aids Syrian Military in a Key Battle', *The New York Times*, 19 May 2013, available: <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/20/world/middleeast/syrian-army-moves-to-rebel-held-qusayr.html>.

88 Isabel Nassief, *The Campaign for Homs and Aleppo*, Institute for the Study of War, January 2014, available: <http://www.understandingwar.org/report/campaign-homs-and-aleppo>

89 Nicholas Blandford, 'Hezbollah close to cutting off key route for Syrian rebels, refugees', *The Christian Science Monitor*, 14 March 2014, available: <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Security-Watch/2014/0314/Hezbollah-close-to-cutting-off-key-route-for-Syrian-rebels-refugees>

90 For more on the use of barrel bombs in Aleppo, see, for example, Human Rights Watch, 'Syria: Unlawful Air Attacks Terrorize Aleppo', 24 March 2014, available: <http://www.hrw.org/news/2014/03/24/syria-unlawful-air-attacks-terrorize-aleppo>.

91 For a list of Syria battles involving Hezbollah Lebanon, see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category:Battles_involving_Hezbollah.

92 'Iranian officers led Syrian regime militias in Homs: defected general', *Al-Arabiya*, 13 August 2012, available: <http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/08/13/231945.html>.

93 See, for example, the *Periodic Reports* of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, e.g. <http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/SpecialSession/CISyria/PeriodicUpdateCISyria.pdf>.

94 Farnaz Fassihi *et. al.*, 'Iranians Dial Up Presence in Syria', *The Wall Street Journal*, *idem*.

95 See, for example, 'Syrian rebels withdraw from Homs, marking key victory for Assad', *The Christian Science Monitor*, 7 May 2014, available: <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Latest-News-Wires/2014/0507/Syrian-rebels-withdraw-from-Homs-marking-key-victory-for-Assad>.

96 For more details about these two towns, see: 'Leaked documents confirm Syrian regime's infiltration of Al-Qaeda offshoot', *Naame Shaam*, 1 May 2014, available: <http://www.naameshaam.org/en/leaked-documents-confirm-syrian-regimes-infiltration-of-al-qaeda-offshoot/>.

97 'Opposition Coalition accuses government of executing 20 Homs fighters who were evacuated in the truce deal' (in Arabic), *Al-Qods Al-Arabi*, 8 June 2014, available: <http://www.alquds.co.uk/?p=177906>.



A video by Syrian rebels in April 2014 shows the IDs and militia card of Hezbollah fighter Mohammad Hassan al-Mokdad.
Source: www.youtube.com/watch?v=fnA15-JLUiE

Whatever the truth is, it is certain that Iranian officials played a prominent role in brokering the deal on behalf of the Assad regime.⁹⁸ According to Syrian opposition sources, the negotiations took place at al-Safir hotel in Homs in the presence of representatives from the UN. The opposition side was represented by a few rebel commanders and community leaders from the besieged areas of Homs. The regime side was represented by a high-ranking Syrian officer (the head of the Political Security branch in Homs), the governor of Homs, in addition to the Iranian ambassador to Damascus and a “senior Iranian commander” believed to be from Sepah Qods. The Iranian embassy in Damascus had been handling negotiations to secure the release of Sepah Pasdaran personnel held in Aleppo. According to media reports, a similar deal that was negotiated, without success, in the besieged, rebel-held district of al-Wa’r in Homs the following month included a clause about “opening an office for the Iranian mediator to deal with any breach of the agreement.”⁹⁹

As the then vice-president of the National Coalition, the main Syrian opposition body, put it, the Homs deal “reflects al-Assad regime’s subordination to Iran and the fact that it has become the main importer of terrorism in the region... It has shown that [the Syrian regime] is little more than a tool in the hands of external forces [Iran and Russia] that are trying to impose their dominance over Syria.”¹⁰⁰ One activist from Homs also told WSJ, “Without the Iranian prisoners, we couldn’t have reached this life-saving deal. The regime never cared about its people, even its own soldiers.”¹⁰¹

Yabroud

Another strategic battle in which the Iranian regime and Hezbollah were heavily involved was that of Yabroud in February-March 2014.¹⁰² Following a month of fierce resistance by opposition fighters, this strategic town in the Qalamon region fell into the hands of Hezbollah and Syrian regime forces. The main reason for this was that Hezbollah Lebanon had thrown in its full force behind the campaign. Media reports claimed the group had sent at least 2,000 of some its best fighters to fight in Yabroud,¹⁰³ in addition to fighters from the notorious Iraqi Shia militia known as the Badr Legion, which was set up by Sepah Pasdaran during the Iranian-Iraqi war.¹⁰⁴

All sorts of weapons were used to pave the way for the ground troops, from Russian and Iranian missiles (Scud and Burkan) to cannons and barrel bombs.¹⁰⁵ As one local activist from the Yabroud Coordination Committee put it, “the amount of missiles fired on Yabroud, and the number of troops amassed, would have been enough to destroy large parts of Israel or take over Washington DC.” Significantly, it was not just the Syrian air force firing rockets and barrels; Hezbollah Lebanon was also firing its own missiles.¹⁰⁶

The fall of Yabroud was portrayed by Hezbollah, Syrian and Iranian state-controlled media as a ‘victory’, even though the huge, month-long military campaign had cost Hezbollah and Iran a great deal of money, weapons and souls – not to mention the obvious question of whether flattening a whole historical town and displacing its entire population can ever be regarded as a victory. Like the battle of al-Qusayr, Hezbollah and Sepah Pasdaran seemed to have underestimated how long and how much it would take to ‘conquer’ Yabroud.

Meanwhile, a growing number of people living in Hezbollah strongholds in Lebanon were growing increasingly “tired of the war” as the human and economic costs of Hezbollah’s adventures in Syria continued to climb, not to mention growing fears that their areas were becoming part of the Syria war (as targets for suicide bombs). In fact, such fears were used by Hassan Nasrallah and other Hezbollah leaders in their public speeches to justify the Yabroud campaign and the group’s involvement in Syria more generally. In a speech in February 2014, Hezbollah’s Deputy Secretary-General Naim Qassem claimed that Yabroud was “the main source” of the explosive-rigged cars that had targeted civilian areas in Lebanon, mainly Hezbollah strongholds, in recent weeks.¹⁰⁷

Testimonies

Various testimonies by Hezbollah fighters confirm the leading role of Hezbollah Lebanon in Syria, where it reportedly had thousands of fighters on the ground by mid-2014. For example, an AFP report in April 2014 quoted a Hezbollah fighter saying the Syrian army soldiers “have no experience in urban warfare or how to deal with a guerrilla force, so we lead the way in battle and have trained them on how to conduct themselves and use certain weapons.”¹⁰⁸

In another article, published in *The Lebanon Debate* in February 2014, Hezbollah fighters who participated in battles inside Syria were quoted saying:

“There are some soldiers in the Syrian army who are sympathetic to the opposition, and others who would sell information to anyone who pays for it.”

98 Brooklyn Middleton, ‘Homs truce underscores high degree of Iranian involvement’, *Al-Arabiya*, 9 May 2014, available: <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/views/news/middle-east/2014/05/09/Homs-truce-underscores-high-degree-of-Iranian-involvement.html>.

99 Ibrahim Himeidi, ‘A permanent office for Iranian mediator in al-Wa’r district, the last rebel stronghold in Homs’ (in Arabic), 7 June 2014, available: <http://tinyurl.com/myujb7g>.

100 ‘Opposition: Homs truce confirms Assad’s subordination to Iran and his exclusive sponsorship of terrorism’ (in Arabic), *CNN Arabic*, 5 May 2014, available: <http://arabic.cnn.com/middleeast/2014/05/05/syria-homs-iran>.

101 Maria Abi-Habib, ‘Syrian Government, Rebels Agree to Cease Fire in Homs’, *The Wall Street Journal*, 2 May 2014, available: <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424052702303678404579537793811103878>.

102 For a detailed account of the battle and why Hezbollah won it, see: ‘Why Yabroud fell to al-Assad and Hezbollah forces’, *Naame Shaam*, available: <http://www.naameshaam.org/en/why-yabroud-fell-to-al-assad-and-hezbollah-forces/>.

103 ‘Hezbollah sends 2,000 fighters to Yabroud... and rebels resist’ (in Arabic), *Orient News*, 19 February 2014, available: http://www.orient-news.net/index.php?page=news_show&id=7839.

104 ‘Yabroud battles intensify... and news of Badr Legion fighters sent to support regime forces in the battle’ (in Arabic), *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 3 March 2014, available: <http://classic.aawsat.com/details.asp?section=4&article=763334&issueno=12879>.

105 See, for example, these videos: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uwN9EG4ppMQ>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LfVwusRHljg>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1ep4-KruYLs>.

106 See, for example, these two videos, in which one can clearly hear a distinct Lebanese accent: http://www.liveleak.com/view?i=bf0_1393772640 and <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LO-6S5KKP8o>.

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108 ‘Hezbollah shifts tactics, narrative for Syria fight’, *AFP*, 14 April 2014, available: <https://uk.news.yahoo.com/hezbollah-shifts-tactics-narrative-syria-fight-091321505.html>.



Residents of the besieged Palestinian camp of Yarmouk, queuing to receive food supplies, in Damascus, Syria. The photo was released on Jan. 31, 2014 by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA).

“We got to a point where we, in Hezbollah, could no longer go to sleep altogether. One or two people would stay up to ensure that we won’t be betrayed one night.”

“During the Qusayr battle, it became necessary that one Hezbollah member would accompany every Syrian army tank. And this procedure is still followed to date in all the battles in which Hezbollah fighters participate.”

“This issue [untrustworthy Syrian army officers] is being dealt with by bringing in non-Syrian pilots in order to ensure the precision of air strikes against target sites.”

“The fighters of the National Defense [Forces] do not betray. They fight to the last moment and follow orders. These we trust a lot, and the [Hezbollah] leadership now prefers to fight battles jointly with them rather than with any other Syrian armed formation.”¹⁰⁹

The *Lebanon Debate* interviewees’ account of the Qusayr and Eastern Ghouta battles corroborate previous accounts by other Hezbollah fighters published in the past.¹¹⁰ It is therefore reasonable to believe that what they say in this interview is accurate and reliable.

In addition to its leading role in battles, Hezbollah also expanded its presence in Syria geographically. According to one Hezbollah fighter, “At the beginning of the war, elite forces were initially responsible for protecting Shiite shrines. They have now been deployed in

different Syrian areas. Besides Qusayr, we are now fighting in Aleppo and rural areas surrounding it, as well as the suburbs of Damascus, Hama, and Idlib. In the Damascus suburbs and Aleppo, we are leading similar operations than those launched in Qusayr due to the nature of the terrain.”¹¹¹

Case study: Hezbollah and the al-’Otaibeh massacre

On 26 February 2014, more than 175 Syrians were executed by Hezbollah Lebanon and Syrian regime forces near the town of al-’Otaibeh in the eastern suburbs of Damascus.¹¹² The high-profile operation was described by Syrian, Lebanese and Iranian state-controlled media as a “tight, pre-planned ambush” of “heavily armed al-Qaeda terrorists.” But evidence suggests the victims were either unarmed civilians or prisoners of war who were executed en masse in breach of international laws and conventions. Moreover, pictures of how their corpses were treated afterwards – using bulldozers to dump them in the wild – caused shock and outrage across the world.

A short video posted on YouTube,¹¹³ which activists claimed was obtained from a member of Hezbollah Lebanon, shows two officers in military uniform on the scene joking about the corpses of the ’Otaibeh massacre with a distinctive Lebanese accent. One of them also appears to be wearing a badge that looks similar to the distinctive yel-

low badge worn by Hezbollah Lebanon fighters. The quality of the video is bad (it seems to have been taken with a mobile phone) but both things can nonetheless be noticed.

Moreover, Hezbollah Lebanon's official TV channel Al-Manar broadcast on the same day "exclusive footage" of the first moments of the 'ambush'.¹¹⁴ A night-vision camera shows a row of people marching before two mines explode and heavy gun shots are heard.

Both pieces of evidence suggest that Hezbollah Lebanon was not only involved in carrying out the 'Otaibeh massacre' but was also involved in planning and preparing for it. This begs the question: were Iranian Sepah Qods commanders, who are known to coordinate and direct Hezbollah's key operations in Syria, also involved in the orchestration and implementation of this and other massacres?

Case study: Hezbollah in al-Yarmouk

Like many other densely populated areas across the country, and under the pretext of harbouring opposition armed groups, the al-Yarmouk Palestinian refugee 'camp' in Damascus was placed under a suffocating siege for over a year by Syrian regime forces, aided by members of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine – General Command and members of Fatah al-Intifada. As a result, over 150 Syrian-Palestinians had died from starvation and malnutrition by the end of May 2014, according to the Action Group for the Palestinians of Syria.¹¹⁵ Almost 1,000 more had been killed by regime shells, snipers or under torture.

In April 2014, the spokesperson of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) described the situation in Yarmouk as follows: "It is unprecedented in living memory for a UN-assisted population to be subject to abject desperation in this way... the sheer humanitarian facts cry out for a response."¹¹⁶

Even though it is not recognised by UNRWA as an official refugee camp, al-Yarmouk is the largest Palestinian residential area in Syria. Before its near-complete destruction by the Syrian regime, it stretched over 2 square kilometres and housed over 170,000 registered refugees, according to official 2013 statistics. Unofficial statistics put the number higher. Tens of thousands of internally displaced Syrians had also come to the camp from neighbouring areas targeted by regime forces.

One controversial aspect of the siege of al-Yarmouk has been the alleged involvement of the Iranian regime and Hezbollah Lebanon, given their rhetoric in support of Palestinian rights. In June 2014, activists published a video from al-Yarmouk¹¹⁷ showing members of Hezbollah Lebanon participating in the beating and humiliation of Syrian-Palestinians queuing for food parcels, along with members of the General Command and Syrian *shabbiha*, and in the presence of UNRWA staff. Previous, unconfirmed reports had claimed Hezbollah fighters were taking part in fighting against opposition armed groups inside the camp.

These and other reports have led many Palestinians and Syrians to accuse Hezbollah Lebanon and the Iranian regime of 'hypocrisy', particularly after their fiery statements about Palestinian rights in the wake of the Israeli attack on Gaza in July 2014.

109 'The Syrian regular army against Hezbollah?', (in Arabic), *Lebanon Debate*, 2 February 2014, available: <http://www.lebanondebate.com/details.aspx?id=162256>. For an English translation, see <http://www.naameshaam.org/en/hezbollah-fighters-dont-trust-the-assad-army-prefer-to-fight-in-syria-on-their-own/>.

110 e.g. Mona Alami, *idem.*; 'Exclusive interview with a Hezbollah fighter' (in Arabic), *Now*, 15 November 2013, available: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eXpZ9kC1auk>.

111 Mona Alami, *idem.*

112 For a detailed report about the massacre and Hezbollah's involvement, see: 'Hezbollah accused of another massacre near Damascus, treating dead with "utmost disrespect"', *Naame Shaam*, 5 March 2014, available: <http://www.naameshaam.org/en/hezbollah-accused-of-another-massacre-near-damascus-treating-dead-with-utmost-disrespect/>.

113 Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LgBRGTZz-vrE>.

114 'Scenes of the moment when armed groups are ambushed by Syrian army in Eastern Ghouta' (in Arabic), *Al-Manar*, 26 February 2014, available: <http://www.almanar.com.lb/adetails.php?from-val=1&cid=21&frid=21&eid=761770>.

115 Action Group for the Palestinians of Syria, *Report on the conditions of Palestinian refugees in Syria*, March 2014, available: <http://tinyurl.com/qdbey36>.

116 Terrence McCoy, 'Thousands starving on outskirts of Damascus; situation "unprecedented in living memory," U.N. says', *The Washington Post*, 21 April 2014, available: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2014/04/21/thousands-starving-in-outskirts-of-damascus-situation-unprecedented-in-living-memory-un-says/>.

117 Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qzOX-P3wk8> or <http://syrianpc.com/?p=16517>.

Update on Hezbollah Lebanon's involvement in Syria

As predicted in the first edition of this report (November 2014), Hezbollah Lebanon's role in the Syria war, as well as that of other Iranian-controlled militias, has grown in significance and scale at the expense of Syrian regime forces.¹ A series of military defeats and losses suffered by the latter in the northern and southern parts of the country, most notably in Idlib and Daraa, only boosted this role. Indeed, Hezbollah now leads and directs the fight on many fronts across the country.²

Like the battles of al-Qusayr and Yabroud detailed above, this prominent role of Hezbollah Lebanon is most obvious in key, strategic battles, namely those in the Qalamon region, along the Lebanese border, and in the south, alongside Israel and Jordan. The high-profile coverage given to these battles by Hezbollah and Iranian state-controlled media is a clear indication of the importance ascribed to these battles. Smaller groups of Hezbollah fighters and commanders have also frequently been reported elsewhere in Syria, such as Aleppo³ and Latakia.⁴ In the words of Hezbollah's leader Hassan Nasrallah, "We are present today in many places [in Syria], and I tell you we will be present wherever this battle requires. We are up to it and we are the men for it."⁵

Of course, Nasrallah would not admit that the decision to send Hezbollah fighters to "wherever this battle requires" is not his own. It is Sepah Pasdaran that pulls the strings. In June 2015, during his speech at a commemoration in Tehran for the Iranian and Hezbollah commanders who were killed by an Israeli attack in al-Qunaytira, south Syria (see below), Sepah Pasdaran's Deputy for Culture, General Mohammad Hossein Nejat, said: "Hezbollah and us work with a single hand. Whatever they do means we have done it."⁶

In May 2015, an Iranian military source told *Al-Monitor* that "Hezbollah's role in Syria was part of its resistance role on the borders with Palestine, yet this is going to change."⁷ As a result of changes in the battlefield and developments in the region, the source added, "the resistance bloc as a whole is going to assume responsibility wherever there is a need for help across Syria — it doesn't matter if it's Raqqa, Deir ez-Zor, Aleppo, Idlib. Even the number of fighters on the ground will witness a surge. There are thousands of volunteers waiting to join this holy war."

Even Hezbollah's deputy leader, Naeem Qasem, admitted during a Friday prayer ceremony in Tehran in August 2015 that "all of Hezbollah's victories in the region and the prestige its forces enjoy are indebted to Imam Khamenei's guidance."⁸

The battle for al-Qalamon

Much for Hezbollah's celebrations of its 'decisive victories' in al-Qalamon in 2013 and 2014, Jabhat al-Nusra and other Islamist and Free Army factions made advances again and regained some territory in the area in late 2014 and early 2015, following months of sporadic guerilla warfare along the 65 km stretch of the Qalamon mountains between Syria and Lebanon.

In May 2015, Hezbollah launched a major military campaign in al-Qalamon, which Nasrallah had 'heralded' back in February that year.⁹ A Lebanese website reported at the time, quoting a source "from the field," that the group had sent 15,000 of its members to fight there.¹⁰ The number reportedly included technicians, medics and other logistical support workers.

On 13 May, Hezbollah took control of the Hill of Mousa, a strategic post overseeing the Syrian-Lebanese border. Footage aired by Hezbollah's *Al-Manar* TV showed the group's fighters raising their yellow flag on top of the hill.¹¹ Yet, despite claiming victory, many analysts argued that Hezbollah was attempting to "oversell the battle of al-Qalamon in order to make up for the string of losses the regime had suffered in Syria in recent months," and that it was more of "a media battle needed to raise morale."¹² Even Nasrallah, while claiming Hezbollah had made significant advances in the ongoing clashes, admitted that the battles there were "far from over."¹³

Al-Zabadani

About two months later, in early July 2015, Hezbollah Lebanon and the Fourth Division of the Syrian army launched a major offensive against the town of al-Zabadani, south-west of al-Qalamon, close to the Lebanese border.¹⁴ Fierce fighting with local opposition fighters was accompanied by heavy aerial bombardment of the town that had practically been under siege for over two years,

About three weeks into the campaign, as little advances were achieved and great losses among their fighters and equipment were incurred, Hezbollah and regime forces

changed their tactics from seeking a quick, decisive victory to imposing a prolonged, suffocating siege – a tactic that has previously been used against many rebel-held towns and cities throughout Syria.¹⁵

A few days before, Daesh had also entered the scene with a video broadcast by the group's news agency, *A'maq*, claiming that its fighters were present in al-Zabadani. But observers were quick to point out that Daesh has not had any presence in the area and that this was a media game to help the Syrian regime and Hezbollah claim in front of the international community that they were targeting al-Zabadani to fight the terrorists of Daesh.¹⁶ Moreover, according to local activists, the Daesh video appears to be old as it shows buildings that have recently been destroyed in the bombardment.¹⁷

Indeed, unlike many other parts of Syria, al-Zabadani is known for the fact that its fighters and Free Syrian Army factions are still all local. No foreign or Islamist armed groups are known to have had armed presence in the town. It was also one of the first towns to be liberated from regime control in the early days of the revolution in 2011, so it has a great symbolic significance for many Syrians. It subsequently became a supply route for the fighters in al-Qalamon. As pointed out above, it is also close to a Sepah Pasdaran base and to Hezbollah depots and training camps. This, coupled with its location between the motorway connecting Damascus and Homs and the motorway connecting Damascus and Beirut, and being only 8 km away from the Lebanese border, makes it strategically important for both sides.

In August 2015, ceasefire negotiations between the two warring sides in al-Zabadani collapsed. The deal would have stopped the Iranian-Hezbollah-regime military operation against the city in return for the opposition forces stopping their attacks on al-Fo'a and Kifrayya, two Shia towns and regime strongholds in rural Idlib in the north.¹⁸

Significantly, what was supposed to be the regime's side in the Turkish-mediated negotiations was represented by an Iranian delegation. The rebels side was represented by a delegation from Ahrar al-Sham, one of the strongest and biggest armed factions in Syria today. According to Ahrar al-Sham's Political Office, the main reason why the difficult negotiations collapsed

was the Iranian delegation's insistence on "emptying al-Zabadani," not only of all opposition fighters, but also of its inhabitants, in what was described as a plan for "demographic change" in the area.¹⁹ In other words, the rebels accused the Iranian regime of seeking to sneakily implement a process of demographic and property exchange whereby the Syrian Shia of the north are moved to the south, and the Sunnis of al-Zabadani and al-Qalamon are moved to the north.

The rebel umbrella group in al-Qalamon, which includes the armed factions fighting in al-Zabadani, subsequently withdrew the authorisation from Ahrar al-Sham to negotiate on behalf of the rebels, stressing its "absolute rejection" of the Iranian proposals so as not to "repeat the Homs and al-Qusayr scenario."²⁰ A number of personalities from al-Zabadani also issued a statement stressing that they "will not sell out our sacrifices with a humiliating exit that ends with the forced displacement of our families," adding that the inhabitants of al-Zabadani had not delegated anyone to negotiate with "the occupation state of Iran" on "being forced out of our homes and repeating what happened with the people of Homs."²¹

Another statement by a group of Lebanese Shia and Syrian Alawis highlighted the fact that Iran "no longer feels any embarrassment in pushing to the side its local agents and negotiating directly on behalf of 'the Shia' and 'the Alawis' and all those it sees as its 'subjects' and its 'minorities'," adding that the fight today is "between Syrian rebels and Iran."²² In this sense, the statement added, the Fo'a-Zabadani negotiations were "a clear declaration of what Iran is seeking" and that the Iranian intervention in Syria has "not only made the option of partitioning [Syria] a reality, but also put all minorities in Syria, particularly the Alawis and the Shia, in front of one of two options, each more suicidal than the other: either die in sectarian massacres, or live in sectarian ghettos that make it easy for Iran to control them, either directly or through local agents." In this light, the statement continues, "the war waged by Hezbollah along the Syrian-Lebanese border in al-Qalamon, of which the siege and assault on al-Zabadani is but a chapter, is aimed at completing the process of partitioning Syria." A six-month truce between the two sides was finally reached in late September 2015 and many of the controversial measures mentioned above were implemented under the supervision of the UN.²³

A new front in the south

The other big front in Syria for Hezbollah and Sepah Pasdaran has been that of Daraa and al-Qunaytira in the south. In February 2015, Hezbollah, accompanied by Iranian commanders and Afghan and Pakistani fighters, launched a major military campaign aimed at regaining control over a 7km triangle between Daraa, al-Qunaytira and the southern countryside of Damascus, which borders Jordan from the south and the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights from the west. The number of Iranian-led fighters amassed was reportedly between 4,000 and 5,000, including an estimated 2,000 from Hezbollah and a few Syrian militiamen.²⁴

Various Syrian and Arab commentators argued at the time that the aim of this Iranian-Hezbollah military operation was to “eliminate the last bastions of the Syrian revolution” by defeating what remains of the Free Syrian Army units there, leaving the door open for Daesh and/or Jabhat al-Nusra to take over, as happened in other parts of Syria in the past.²⁵ Daesh has indeed failed to infiltrate the area and Jabhat al-Nusra has had a limited presence. Most of the latter’s members there are reportedly locals who have good relationships with the other armed factions. The Free Army in Daraa is praised by most Syrians for its principled, nationalist discourse and for focusing on fighting the regime.²⁶

However, the author of this report believes that this was not just another typical offensive led by Sepah Pasdaran and Hezbollah on behalf of the Syrian regime against opposition fighters. Judging by the high-profile, detailed coverage given to the offensive by Hezbollah and Iranian state-controlled media,²⁷ and the fact that Syrian regime forces were hardly involved, it is more likely that the operation had more strategic dimensions, such as establishing an Iranian-Hezbollah foothold in southern Syria, along the borders with Israel and Jordan, which could gradually grow into another front with Israel that would serve as a deterrent against any possible attacks on Iran’s military nuclear facilities, much like the Hezbollah stronghold in southern Lebanon was established in 1980s. At the same time, it will enable Hezbollah and the Iranian regime to regain some legitimacy in Lebanon and the Arab world as an ‘axis of resistance’ against Israel, a legitimacy largely lost as a result of their interference in Syria on the side of the Assad regime.

The operation was dubbed by Iranian and Hezbollah media “The Operation of Revenge for the Martyrs of al-Qunaytira,” in reference to six Hezbollah fighters and a senior Iranian general killed in the Israeli strike near al-Qunaytira on 18 January 2015. The Iranian general, Mohammad Ali Allahdadi, was said to have been one of Major-Gen. Qassem Soleimani’s right hands in Syria.²⁸ The Hezbollah members killed, who were apparently ‘visiting’ the area for undisclosed reasons, included Jihad Mughniyeh, the son of Hezbollah’s former military commander Imad Mughniyeh, who was killed in a car bomb in Damascus in 2008. Jihad, in his 20’s, was apparently “very close” to Nasrallah and Qassem Soleimani (more on this in the section on Soleimani in Chapter III). Soleimani reportedly visited Beirut a couple of weeks before the Qunaytira offensive.²⁹ The high-profile nature of this secret convoy indicates that something unusual was going on.

Back in May 2013, Nasrallah had vowed, in a defiant response to an Israeli air strike on an Iranian arms shipment in Syria, that Hezbollah would not only continue receiving advanced weaponry from Iran and Syria, but would also respond to these Israeli attacks by “opening the Golan front.”³⁰ “We announce that we stand by the popular resistance in the Golan and we offer military and moral support for it to liberate the occupied Golan,” he added. “The resistance will operate freely in the Golan, which frightens Israel and [is why it] began to send messages [to restore] calm.”

In October 2014, Syrian opposition sources revealed to the *CNN* that Hezbollah had appointed Jihad Mughniyeh as the commander responsible for the ‘Golan file’, indicating plans for a possible escalation on this front.³¹ The revelation followed Syrian opposition fighters’ taking over a Hezbollah position in Tall al-Hara in Daraa, where they apparently found documents and evidence indicating such plans. In November 2015, Al-Jazeera obtained hundreds of similar Hezbollah documents, revealed in a documentary titled ‘The Documents of Busra al-Sham’, detailing the group’s efforts in Daraa and al-Swaidaa to recruit fighters in the region.³²

This was confirmed by Israeli intelligence sources, which claimed Sepah Pasdaran and Hezbollah had been silently working on establishing ‘operational infrastructure’ near the Syrian-Israeli border for months.³³ Their plans allegedly

included planting rockets and explosives near the border. The unit responsible for this mission, according to these reports, was headed by Jihad Mughniyeh and Samir al-Quntar, a Lebanese member of the Palestine Liberation Front who was released from Israeli prisons in a prisoner exchange deal with Hezbollah in 2008.³⁴ According to media reports, sources close to Hezbollah have confirmed that al-Quntar had also been appointed by Hezbollah Lebanon to oversee the formation of 'Hezbollah Syria' (see above).³⁵ On 29 July 2015, another Israeli drone strike targeted a car in the village of Hadar near al-Qunaytira, killing two Hezbollah fighters. Initial reports claimed al-Quntar was one of them, but this was later denied by the family.³⁶ Al-Quntar was killed in an overnight Israeli strike on a residential area in Damascus on 20 December 2015.³⁷

Another aim of the Iranian-Hezbollah military offensive in the south may have been to prevent the establishment of a 'safety belt' or a no-fly zone along the Jordanian border and to block the influx of weapons and anti-regime fighters from Jordan. This was indeed mentioned by some Iranian and Hezbollah media reports as one of the motives behind the military campaign.³⁸

In any case, the operation appears to have failed to achieve its aims, at least for now, partly due to the geographical nature of the area attacked and partly because Syrian opposition fighters adopted effective guerrilla warfare tactics rather than attempting to maintain control over territory. It is highly likely, however, that Sepah Pasdaran and Hezbollah Lebanon will repeat their attempt to conquer the south in the future to achieve the strategic objectives mentioned above.

'Useful Syria'

Hezbollah Lebanon's focus on key battles in Syria's Qalamon region and the south has meant that the group and its leaders had to also change their rhetoric and the justifications they present to their supporters. From fighting Israel to defending Shia shrines to preventing 'takfiris' (Sunni jihadis) from attacking Lebanon, the focus has now shifted to 'defeating terrorists' supported by Israel and the West in certain areas in Syria.³⁹ This shift was perhaps most obvious in Nasrallah's speech in July 2015, in which he claimed that "the road to al-Qods (Jerusalem) passes through al-Qalamon, al-Zabadani, Homs, Aleppo, Daraa, al-Hasakeh and Swaida, because if Syria is lost, Palestine would be lost too."⁴⁰

In another interview with Syrian state TV channel *al-Ekhabariyya* in April 2015, Nasrallah was more forthcoming: "There is no discussion that it [the struggle in Syria and the region] is a political struggle. But many people use religion and religious slogans in it. They exploit religion in these battles." Nasrallah also admitted in the interview that Hezbollah went to Syria knowing full well that "the battle would be tough, big and long."⁴¹

Away from propaganda and rhetoric, it seems that there is indeed a shift of focus reflecting the Iranian regime's strategy in Syria, namely that the Iranian regime has conceded, or perhaps lost interest in, the possibility of regaining control over the eastern and northern parts of the country, so the focus is now on defending and consolidating its control in Damascus and its surroundings, Homs and its surroundings (which connect the first with the coastal region), and the Qalamon region (which connects the first two and connects both with Lebanon). To this we may now add the southern front, which may provide another strategic advantage besides securing arms shipments to Hezbollah in Lebanon, namely, a new Hezbollah-type deterrent on Israel's eastern border. A number of commentators have started referring to these parts of the country as "useful Syria." Various Western analysts and officials also appear to be thinking along these lines.⁴²

In June 2015, French newspaper *Le Monde* published an article arguing that losing Daraa, and before it Idlib, Jisr al-Shughour and Palmyra, and not sending reinforcements to retake them, was a sign that the Assad regime no longer has the will or the ability to defend the 'peripheries', which many interpreted as a sign that al-Assad has changed his strategy. "Instead of scattering his army throughout the country," the article added, "he has chosen to confine his forces to what could be called 'useful Syria'."⁴³

The article then quotes an intelligence source claiming that the main official within the Syrian regime's inner circle who is supportive of this Iranian strategy is General Ali Mamlouk, and that Bashar al-Assad does not (yet) appear to be very fond of the idea. The article also quotes Noah Bonsey from the International Crisis Group saying: "Since the victories of the rebels in the region of Idlib, [Bashar al-Assad] has been hesitant to withdraw his forces to the axis of Damascus-Homs-Latakia, the spine of the country, like his Iranian allies have been advising him to do."

However, in a televised speech on 26 July 2015, President al-Assad admitted for the first time that “It was necessary to specify critical areas for our armed forces to hang on to, so that other areas don’t fall... These areas may be important militarily, politically or economically... The leadership’s priority now is military importance... Concern for our soldiers forces us sometimes to abandon some areas,” adding that there is “a lack of human resources... Everything [else] is available [for the army], but there is a shortage in human capacity.”⁴⁴ He then made this startling statement: “The homeland does not belong to those who inhabit it or those who carry its passport or nationality. Homeland belongs to those who defend and protect it.”

Although al-Assad was talking about Syrians who are allegedly ‘volunteering’ to join his forces, today ‘useful Syria’ seems to indeed belong to those who ‘defend and protect’ it, namely, the Iranian regime, Hezbollah Lebanon and the other militias fighting under their command in certain parts of Syria.

In Lebanon too

A number of media reports in 2015 talked about intensive Iranian and Hezbollah efforts to set up a network of loyal non-Shia militias in Lebanon known as Saraya al-Muqawama, or Resistance Brigades, similar to the Popular Mobilisation Forces in Iraq, but not many details are provided.⁴⁵

Highly trusted and knowledgeable sources in Lebanon have confirmed to Naame Shaam that Hezbollah has indeed been setting up numerous militias among non-Shia communities in several parts of Lebanon. The new militiamen are being armed, trained and paid by Hezbollah.

In the details, some 1,000 Druze militiamen have been organised into a militia headed by former Lebanese MP Wiam Wahab and based in Druze areas east and southeast of Beirut in the Chouf region and along the Beirut-Damascus highway.

Similarly, between 3,000 and 5,000 Christian militiamen have been organised by the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM), a party headed by General Michel Aoun and allied with Hezbollah. This militia, also still without a name, is mainly present in villages and towns in Mount Lebanon and is talked about among Hezbollah circles as a

“reserve pool.” Although armed and trained by Hezbollah, its members do not yet receive a salary and most of its members have regular jobs, according to the sources.

The FPM militiamen are coordinated by a team of retired officers of the Lebanese army, who are still loyal to General Aoun. The secret militia possesses both light and heavy arms, such as rocket-propelled grenades and mortars.

In the Jabal Mohsen district of Tripoli in the north, the small Alawi community there has hundreds of gunmen who are chaperoned by Hezbollah Lebanon. Over the past few years, they have occasionally been involved in street battles against the Sunni gunmen of Bab al-Tabbaneh neighbourhood. The Lebanese army has often had to get embroiled to stop the fighting and impose a shaky truce in the area.

In the northeastern town of Ehdén, pro-Hezbollah Christian leader Suleiman Franjiyeh is also fielding several hundred gunmen. Hezbollah has provided them with some light arms, according to local sources.

Palestinian and Lebanese Sunni men in the Beqaa Valley (in the village of Bar Elias, for example) and in the southern town of Saida and in Palestinian refugee camps all over Lebanon, are also being recruited by Hezbollah into the ranks of the so-called Resistance Brigades, as mentioned above.

It appears that all these sub-militias, armed and controlled by Hezbollah Lebanon, are being prepared to secure the group’s ‘home front’ in Lebanon in the event of escalation there. Some of them could also be deployed to Syria in the future if Hezbollah and other Iranian-controlled militias fighting there become ‘overstretched’.

Footnotes:

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6. 'Iran and Hezbollah are one hand - Israel is not safe anywhere today' (in Persian), *Fars News*, 30 January 2015, available: <http://www.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=13931110000790>.
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11. See <http://www.almanar.com.lb/adetails.php?eid=1194202>. See also <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/05/iran-new-syria-strategy.html>.
12. See, for example: Manhal Barish, 'The Syrian Qalamon battle pushes Hezbollah to look for media victory' (in Arabic), *Al-Quds Al-Arabi*, 9 May 2015, available: <http://www.alquds.co.uk/?p=339117>; Ali Al-Amin, 'Al-Qalamon: A media battle and a victory of images and videos' (in Arabic), *Janoubia*, 14 May 2015, available: <http://goo.gl/b6pfJl>.
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21. See: <http://all4syria.info/Archive/241903>.
22. See: <http://goo.gl/DvnGPB>.
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28. See, for example, 'Iran Confirms Israeli Airstrike in Southern Syria Killed One of Its Generals', *The New York Times*, 19 January 2015, available: <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/20/world/middleeast/iran-says-one-of-its-generals-was-killed-in-israeli-strike-in-syria.html>.
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37. See: <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-israel-idUSKBN0U305I20151220>.

38. See, for example, this report by *Mashregh News* in Persian: <http://goo.gl/3aw49h>. See also this speech by Nasrallah: <http://www.almanar.com.lb/english/adetails.php?fromval=2&cid=14&frid=23&sec-catid=14&eid=193280>.

39. For more on this, see this *New York Times* article: <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/21/world/middleeast/syrian-fighting-gives-hezbollah-new-but-diffuse-purpose.html> and this *Al-Jazeera* debate in Arabic: <http://goo.gl/ryxsbb>.

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41. The full interview is available in Arabic at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iJifa2ugXQ4>. For English, see: <http://www.almanar.com.lb/english/wapadetails.php?eid=204774>.

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Holy wars

In August 2012, the Kuwaiti newspaper *Al-Siyasa* published a report claiming that Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei had instructed two prominent Shia religious authorities (*marji'yyat*) in Iraq and Iran to issue a *fatwa* (religious ruling) calling for Shia jihad against 'takfiri groups' in Syria.¹¹⁸ *Al-Siyasa* is known for its politically motivated reports and fabrications, but at least the Iranian *fatwa* appears to be authentic.

Qom-based Kazem al-Haeri had published on his official Facebook page a *fatwa* authorising and legitimising travelling to Syria to take part in 'holy jihad' in defence of Shia shrines.¹¹⁹ The *fatwa* came in the form of a response to a request for permission to travel to Syria for the purpose of defending the shrine of Sayyida Zaynab in Damascus without parental permission. Al-Haeri ruled that this action was permissible and that parental permission in such matters was unnecessary. "The battle in Syria," he later added, "is not only for the defense of the shrine of Sayyida Zaynab but it is a battle of infidels against Islam, and Islam should be defended."¹²⁰

Originally from Iraq, al-Haeri had previously published a book with various *fatwas* concerning matters of warfare, especially unconventional guerilla warfare.¹²¹ Some of his *fatwas*, such as killing prisoners of war and innocent individuals "if necessary", go against international human rights conventions. Before al-Haeri, another Iranian Shia authority, Ayatollah Seyed Mohammad Sadeq Rouhani, had also legitimised jihad in Syria for the purpose of protecting Shia holy sites.¹²² Another Iraqi *fatwa* by the Najaf-based Shia cleric Abu al-Qasim al-Ta'i, who has strong connections with one of the Iraqi militias fighting in Syria, also permitted Iraqi Shia to travel to Syria for 'jihad'.

These Shia *fatwas* followed other alleged *fatwas* by little-known or anonymous Saudi clerics calling for the destruction of Shia shrines,¹²³ as well as an alleged YouTube video in which a group said to belong to the Free Syrian Army called for the destruction of Sayyida Zaynab and other Shia shrines.¹²⁴ The author of this report has not been able to find this alleged video online, and the origin of the story appears to be a news item broadcast by the notorious Saudi TV channel *Wisa'* merely "calling upon" the Free Syrian Army to "target the temple of Sayyida Zaynab and destroy it."¹²⁵ Early statements by Shia leaders seem to support this conclusion.¹²⁶

The previous month, in June 2012, a suicide bomber had detonated a van packed with explosives in the Sayyida Zaynab district, wounding 14 people and causing some damage to the shrine.¹²⁷ Syrian state TV was quick to blame the rebels (or 'the terrorists', as it usually called them) for the attack, as did the representative of Iran's supreme leader in Syria Mojtaba al-Hosseini.¹²⁸ It was not clear, however, who was actually behind the bomb and whether it was intended to target the shrine itself or a police station 15 metres away.

The Free Army had taken over the neighbourhood earlier that year until its fighters were driven out, in late July 2012, by regime forces and militias, supported by Iraqi militias, following fierce fighting and many casualties on both sides.¹²⁹ The Free Army could have destroyed the shrine then if that had been their intention. The battle was more likely over the strategic location of the district as a gateway into southern Damascus and the Damascus airport further east.

In any case, for many Iraqi Shias, the news and rumours of the Sayyida Zaynab shrine being targeted or threatened by Sunni extremists was a reminder of the 2006 bombing of the al-Askari shrine in the Iraqi city of Samarra, which was then blamed on al-Qaeda and set off years of retaliatory bloodshed between Sunni and Shia extremists. So it is understandable that the news would create a great deal of concern among the Shia communities. It was indeed used extensively by supporters of Hezbollah Lebanon and various Iraqi militias to call for Shia jihad in Syria. Historical Shia grievances and notions of victimhood were also invoked to advance this call, with slogans such as "revenge for Hossein" and "O Zaynab, you will not be captivated twice"¹³⁰ becoming widespread.

It is also worth noting that both Mohammad Sadeq Rouhani and Kazem al-Haeri, who belong to a school of thought supporting political Shia Islam, are normally considered second-degree authorities and are less credible and popular than other religious leaders in Qom, Iran. But both are known to be close to Hezbollah and the Iranian regime. Al-Haeri is also said to be the 'spiritual leader' of 'Asa'eb Ahl al-Haq, one of the main Iraqi militias fighting in Syria.¹³¹ Their fatwas – even though they were opposed by other prominent

118 'Khamenei asked Sistani and Haeri to issue 'jihad against tak-firis fatwa' to save al-Assad', *Al-Siyasa*, 7 August 2012, available: <http://independencenews.net/news.php?action=view&id=5815>.

119 See: Ali Mamouri, 'Shiite seminaries divided on fatwas for Syrian jihad', *Al-Monitor*, 29 July 2013, available: <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/07/syria--jihad-fatwas-shiite-clergy-iran-iraq.html>.

120 Qassim Abdul-Zahra, 'Prominent Shiite cleric backs fighting in Syria', AP, 15 Decemeber 2013, available: <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/prominent-shiite-cleric-backs-fighting-syria>.

121 'Publications', *The official website of Ayatollah Kazem al-Haeri*, available: <http://www.alhaeri.org/ceo/pages/sireh.php?cid=19>.

122 Ali Mamouri, 'Shiite seminaries divided on fatwas for Syrian jihad', *idem*.

123 'Saudi Wahhabis call for the destruction of Shia shrine in Syria', *Tehran Times*, 21 July 2012, available: <http://www.tehrantimes.com/middle-east/99829-saudi-wahhabis-call-for-the-destruction-of-shia-shrine-in-syria>.

124 See, for example, this report for how the alleged video was being described: <http://www.elaph.com/Web/NewsPapers/2012/8/753380.html>. "A video was published on YouTube which contains statements by persons claiming to belong to the Free Syrian Army calling for the destruction of the shrine of Sayyida Zaynab, the daughter of Imam Ali, in the suburbs of Damascus, as well as other shrines and graves belonging to the family of the Prophet." (in Arabic)

125 See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4Fol3oo8do>.

126 See, for example, this speech by Yasser al-Habib, in which he only talks about the *Wisal* news item: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fNPL1n_o9IU.

127 'Car bomb damages major Shiite shrine in Syria', *Associated Press*, 14 June 2012, available: <http://news.yahoo.com/car-bomb-damages-major-shiite-shrine-syria-112539349.html>.

128 *Ibid*.

129 'Syrian troops retake Sayyida Zainab neighborhood from rebels', *Press TV*, 1 August 2012, available: <http://www.presstv.com/detail/2012/07/21/251991/syrian-troops-retake-sayyida-zainab-area/>. See also this video of one of the massacres committed by regime forces in Sayyida Zaynab at the time: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wZzaCzLAP-Y>, and this report about the suffering among civilians after regime forces took over the area: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oljUeFwpS8U>.

130 These and other Shia slogans refer to the battle of Karbala, more than 1,400 years ago, between the Damascus-based Umayyads and the followers of Imam Ali's son Hossein, who came to be known as Shia, over the right to caliphate. Hossein was killed in the battle and his sister Zaynab was taken captive to Damascus.

131 Visser Reider, 'Religious allegiances among pro-Iranian special groups in Iraq', *CTC Sentinel*, 26 September 2011, available: <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/religious-allegiances-among-pro-iranian-special-groups-in-iraq>.

Shia authorities¹³² – were used to open official registration offices in Iran for enrolling volunteers wishing to go for jihad in Syria.¹³³

In Iraq, a statement by Shia seminaries called upon the Iraqi government to take measures to protect holy Shia shrines in Syria, particularly that of Sayyida Zaynab.¹³⁴ A conference “in support of Zaynab” was organised in Karbalaa in July 2012, bringing together representatives from various Shia seminaries and groups. One of the outcomes was the establishment of “committees to support the Syrian people... against the enemies’ conspiracies.” A “popular delegation” was also sent to Damascus to “visit” the Sayyida Zaynab shrine.¹³⁵

Soon various Iraqi Shia militias – all funded, armed and directed by the Iranian regime – were recruiting more fighters to go and fight in Syria under the pretext or belief of protecting holy Shia shrines against Sunni extremists.¹³⁶ Moreover, their travel across the border was overlooked, and even facilitated, by the Iraqi government of Nouri al-Maliki.¹³⁷ Like Bashar al-Assad in Syria, al-Maliki was a close ally of the Iranian regime.

Meanwhile, the Syrian regime had set up so-called ‘popular committees’ to defend the Sayyida Zaynab shrine. They were presented by Syrian and Iranian state-controlled media as “local youths, armed with sticks and knives, [who] have formed committees to protect the holy shrine of Sayyida Zaynab.”¹³⁸ But video footage of the ‘popular committees’ in action only shows heavily armed regime troops and *shabbiha*, just like in other parts of the country.¹³⁹ And as discussed above, the Iranian regime had played an important role in setting up, training and arming these *shabbiha*.

Case study: Hezbollah denounces destruction of (Shia) holy sites in Syria

In late March 2014, Hezbollah Lebanon issued a statement condemning “terrorist organisations” for destroying “holy shrines and Islamic and Christian sanctities in Syria.”¹⁴⁰ The statement was in reaction to a decision by the Islamic State in Iraq and Sham (Daesh) to demolish what’s left of Uwais al-Qarani’s shrine in al-Raqqa, Syria.

Uwais al-Qarani was one of the prophet’s contemporaries who was killed in battle whilst fighting in Imam Ali’s army. He is highly regarded by Shia Muslims. His shrine

in al-Raqqa was renovated and expanded by the Iranian government in recent years, modelled on prestigious Shia shrines in Iran, Iraq and elsewhere.

That same month, the Syrian Network for Human Rights released a report documenting the partial or complete destruction of 1,451 mosques across Syria.¹⁴¹ All were destroyed by Syrian regime shells and bombs, either as a result of indiscriminate bombardment of civilian areas, such as in Aleppo, or by targeting the mosques directly because they were being used as ‘protest hubs’ or as alleged bases for opposition armed groups.

Interestingly, one of the destroyed mosques in Aleppo documented in the report is named after Uwais al-Qarani as well. It was being used as a school after all schools in the area had been destroyed, until it was destroyed by three barrel bombs dropped by regime helicopters, followed by a missile that hit the mosque directly. Three children died as a result, in addition to over 20 others wounded.

As Naame Shaam’s editors put it in a commentary on the story at the time, “There are two ways of reading Hezbollah’s statement: either it is opportunistic hypocrisy (focusing on some shrines while ignoring others), or it is sectarian (only concerned with Shia holy sites and not others). In this sense, Hezbollah is not very different from Daesh. The addition of ‘Christian’, almost as an afterthought, is a too-obvious attempt to cover this sectarianism. All attacks on religious sites should be condemned, but not in a selective, sectarian way.”¹⁴²

Iraqi militias in Damascus... and beyond

Unlike Hezbollah Lebanon, Iraqi Shia militias did very little to hide their involvement in Syria. One of the first Iraqi militias to announce its presence there, with the stated aim of defending the Sayyida Zaynab shrine, was the Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas Brigade, which observers describe as “the primary front group [of] Iranian-backed combatants and organizations based in Iraq.”¹⁴³ In a video posted on YouTube in January 2013, a masked man speaking with an Iraqi accent read out what he called “Declaration No. 1” of Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas Brigade, whose task, he stressed, was “to protect the shrine of our beloved lady Sayyida Zaynab against the attacks of takfiris, Wahhabis, the so-called Free Army and all the enemies of the Prophet’s family.”¹⁴⁴

A few months before, in October 2012, one of the brigade's founders, an Iraqi defector from Muqtada al-Sadr's Jaysh al-Mahdi (the Mahdi Army) was quoted by *Reuters* saying: "We formed the Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas brigade, which includes 500 Iraqi, Syrian and some other nationalities... When the fighting erupted in our areas [Sayyida Zaynab], we carried out some joint military operations side by side with the Syrian army to clean up areas seized by rebels."¹⁴⁵

Most of the brigade's members at the time were former fighters in the Mahdi Army of various nationalities, mostly Iraqi, who took refuge in Syria after 2007, when the militia group was crushed by Iraqi and American forces. Others crossed over later to join the 'holy jihad'.¹⁴⁶ Some media reports claimed the brigade was formed in coordination with the Syrian government and Khamenei's office in Damascus.¹⁴⁷

Throughout 2013, Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas Brigade posted tens of promotional videos on YouTube and other social media calling for jihad in Syria to protect the Sayyida Zaynab shrine.¹⁴⁸ Hezbollah Lebanon's Al-Manar TV station was the first proper media outlet to broadcast some of these videos. One of the early, well-produced ones shows Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas fighters alongside what

132 'Prominent [Shia] authority in Najaf: Those who go to fight in Syria disobey our orders' (in Arabic), *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 21 July 2013, available: http://classic.aawsat.com/details.asp?section=1&issueno=12654&article=737005&feature=#.Ue_LMKxc2d5. See also: 'War in Syria widens divide between Shia religious authorities in Iraq and Iran' (in Arabic), *Al-Qods Al-Arabi*, 21 July 2013, available: <http://www.alquds.co.uk/?p=65145>.

133 'Registration for defenders of holy shrines: volunteers for defending Sayyida Zaynab' (in Persian), *Behesht*, 3 June 2013, available: <http://www.behesht.info/News/Detail/3812/>.

134 'Religious seminaries demand that government intervenes to protect religious shrines in Syria from violent acts' (in Arabic), *Sawt al-Iraq*, 27 July 2012, available: <http://www.sotaliraq.com/iraq-news.php?id=66183#axzz393kvWjZT>.

135 'Conference in support of Sayyida Zaynab, a popular delegation to head from Karbalaa to Damascus' (in Arabic), *Buratha News*, 28 July 2012, available: <http://burathanews.com/news/164433.html>.

136 See, for example, Mona Mahmood and Martin Chulov, 'Syrian war widens Sunni-Shia schism as foreign jihadis join fight for shrines', *The Guardian*, 4 June 2013, available: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jun/04/syria-islamic-sunni-shia-shrines-volunteers>.

137 See, for example, European Council on Foreign Relations, 'Syria: the view from Iraq', 14 June 2013, available: http://www.ecfr.eu/content/entry/commentary_syria_the_view_from_iraq136.

138 'Syrian troops retake Sayyida Zainab', *Press TV*, *idem*. See also: 'Syrian popular committees to protect Sayyida Zaynab shrine' (in Arabic), *Al-Mayadeen*, 13 March 2013, available: <http://tinyurl.com/psf8e85>; Jamal al-Gharbi, 'In Sayyida Zaynab district: Visitors and popular committees and protection units', *Al-Akhbar*, 28 March 2013, available: <http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/180192>.

139 See, for example, this report: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LOwvSW2UrB4>.

140 'Hezbollah Denounces Terrorist Crimes against Holy Sites in Syria', *Al-Manar*, 27 March 2014, available: <http://www.almanar.com.lb/english/adetails.php?eid=142811&frid=23&cid=23&from-val=1&seccatid=14>.

141 Syrian Network for Human Rights, *Syria Without Mosques*, 5 March 2014, available: http://sn4hr.org/public_html/wp-content/pdf/arabic/synomosq.pdf.

142 'Hezbollah denounces destruction of (Shia) holy sites in Syria, ignores thousands of mosques destroyed by the regime', *Naame Shaam*, 5 April 2014, available: <http://www.naameshaam.org/en/hezbollah-denounces-destruction-of-shia-holy-sites-in-syria-ignores-thousands-of-mosques-destroyed-by-the-regime/>.

143 Phillip Smyth, 'From Karbala to Sayyida Zaynab: Iraqi Fighters in Syria's Shi'a Militias', 27 August 2013, *CTC Sentinel*, available: <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/from-karbala-to-sayyida-zaynab-iraqi-fighters-in-syrias-shia-militias>. See also: Phillip Smyth, 'From Najaf to Damascus and Onto Baghdad: Iraq's Liwa Abu Fadl al-Abbas', *Jihadology*, 18 June 2014, available: <http://jihadology.net/2014/06/18/hizballah-cavalcade-from-najaf-to-damascus-and-onto-baghdad-iraqs-liwa-abu-fadl-al-abbas/>.

144 'Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas, a sectarian title in the Syrian tragedy' (in Arabic), *Al-Jazeera*, 19 November 2013, available: <http://tinyurl.com/mzkbuv6>.

145 Suadad al-Salhy, 'Iraqi Shi'ite militants fight for Syria's Assad', *Reuters*, 16 October 2012, available: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/10/16/syria-crisis-iraq-militias-idUSL6E8L4KX920121016>.

146 For more details on the origins and early activities of the group, see: Phillip Smyth, 'What is the Liwa'a Abu Fadl al-Abbas (LAFa)? Assessing Syria's Shia "International Brigade" Through Their Social Media Presence', *Jihadology*, 15 May 2013, available: http://jihadology.net/2013/05/15/hizballah-cavalcade-what-is-the-liwaa-abu-fadl-al-abbas-lafa-assessing-syrias-shia-international-brigade-through-their-social-media-presence/#_ftn1.

147 Suadad al-Salhy, 'Iraqi Shi'ites flock to Assad's side as sectarian split widens', *Reuters*, 19 June 2013, available: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/06/19/us-iraq-syria-militants-idUSBRE95IOZA20130619>.

148 See, for example, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Od-mOx4Nnmpg>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9AYimRmay5k>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RUP0QAMEirM>. For an overview of the group's militant songs, see: Phillip Smyth, 'The Songs of Liwa'a Abu Fadl al-Abbas: Militant Iraqi Shia Music & Syria', *Jihadology*, 3 July 2013, available: <http://jihadology.net/2013/07/03/hizballah-cavalcade-the-songs-of-liwaa-abu-fadl-al-abbas-militant-iraqi-shia-music-syria/>.



Photos from a video showing 2 Iraqi Shia militiamen and a driver who were captured by Syrian rebels end 2013, two of them with their passports. Source: www.youtube.com/watch?v=LzNZOx-qii0



Nour el Dine Karam



Abbas Abed Mazloom



Raed Alwan (no ID to prove it), but with a picture he had on him holding a machinegun.

appears to be Hezbollah fighters in the Sayyida Zaynab area.¹⁴⁹ About a year later, interviews with serving and former members of Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas Brigade suggested that up to 10,000 volunteers had joined its ranks.¹⁵⁰

Another prominent Iraqi Shia militia fighting alongside the regime in Syria is 'Asa'eb Ahl al-Haq, or Leagues of the Righteous, which shares a similar origin and composition to those of the Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas Brigade, though it is a few years older.¹⁵¹ It was reportedly formed in 2006, as a splinter from the Mahdi Army, with the help of Sepah Qods and Hezbollah Lebanon, to fight the American troops in Iraq.¹⁵²

In July 2013, 'Asa'eb Ahl al-Haq announced the creation of a new sub-unit called Liwa' Kafeel Zaynab, or the Protector of Zaynab Brigade.¹⁵³ Like Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas, Kafeel Zaynab posted a number of promotional videos on YouTube, which were often a mixture of footage of its fighters in action against a backdrop of Shia religious songs or slogans.¹⁵⁴ Some of the videos show heavily armed fighters accompanied by tanks, Syrian army soldiers or Hezbollah Lebanon fighters, often outside the Sayyida Zaynab area and Damascus altogether.¹⁵⁵

Judging by its relatively high number of casualties and funerals compared to other Iraqi militias, 'Asa'eb Ahl al-Haq appears to have a large number of fighters in Syria and to be taking part in battles outside Damascus.¹⁵⁶ However, besides the fighting, the group also appears to have been charged, along with Kata'eb Hezbollah, another Iranian-backed Iraqi militia fighting in Syria,¹⁵⁷ with organising the enlistment and transfer of Iraqi fighters to Syria. One of the group's commanders was quoted in May 2013 boasting: "I personally get dozens of calls each day from people in the provinces and Baghdad who want to go... We send well-trained ideological fighters."¹⁵⁸ Back in 2011, an Iraqi source close to the group claimed that 'Asa'eb Ahl al-Haq received around \$5 million a month in cash and weapons from the Iranian regime.¹⁵⁹

Another group that is reportedly playing this role (coordinating the recruitment and transport of Iraqi fighters on behalf of the Iranian regime) is the Badr Organisation, which split from the Islamic Supreme Council in Iraq. One of the oldest Shia militias in Iraq, Badr was

set up by the Iranian regime to fight against Saddam Hussein inside Iraq during the Iran-Iraq war in 1980s. According to one media report, citing an Iraqi politician allied with the group, Iranian commanders had nominated a senior leader within Badr to control Iraqi militias fighting in Syria and coordinate between them and the Syrian regime.¹⁶⁰

149 Nicholas Blanford, 'Video appears to show Hezbollah and Iraqi Shiites fighting in Syria', *The Christian Science Monitor*, 18 January 2013, available: <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2013/0118/Video-appears-to-show-Hezbollah-and-Iraqi-Shiites-fighting-in-Syria>.

150 Mona Mahmood and Martin Chulov, 'Syrian war widens Sunni-Shia schism as foreign jihadis join fight for shrines', *The Guardian*, 4 June 2013, available: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jun/04/syria-islamic-sunni-shia-shrines-volunteers>.

151 For a brief history of the group's origin, see Sam Wyer, *The Resurgence of Asa'ib Ahl Al-Haq*, Institute for the Study of War, *Middle East Security Report* 7, December 2012, available: <http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/ResurgenceofAAH.pdf>.

152 *Ibid.*

153 See the unit's statements at <http://kafel-zinab.do.am/>.

154 See, for example, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BOvOb-WrVFv8>; <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cha0aD5lJns>; <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UA0hxKdHjUY>.

155 e.g. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c8tVM8SVNas>; <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LyofHVdteQk>. For a collection of Kafeel Zaynab videos and pictures, see: Phillip Smyth, 'Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq's Liwa'a Kafeel Zaynab', *Jihadology*, 14 August 2013, available: <http://jihadology.net/2013/08/14/hizballah-cavalcade-asaib-ahl-al-haqs-liwaa-kafeel-zaynab/>.

156 Martin Chulov, 'Controlled by Iran, the deadly militia recruiting Iraq's men to die in Syria', *The Guardian*, 12 March 2014, available: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/mar/12/iraq-battle-dead-valley-peace-syria>.

157 See, for example, Rabiah Jamal, 'Iraq's Kataeb Hezbollah announces involvement in Syria', *Now*, 7 April 2013, available: <https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/nownews/iraqs-kataeb-hezbollah-announces-involvement-in-syria>.

158 Sam Dagher, 'Fighters, Flowing to Syria, Guard Shiites', *The Wall Street Journal*, 23 May 2013, available: <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424127887323463704578497021387416606>.

159 Adam Schreck and Qassim Abdul-Zahra, 'Asaib Ahl Al-Haq, Iraq Shiite militia, will reportedly lay down arms', *Huffington Post*, 6 January 2012, available: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/01/06/asaib-ahl-al-haq-lay-down-arms_n_1189600.html.

160 Suadad al-Salhy, 'Iraqi Shi'ite militants fight for Syria's Assad', *idem*.

In July 2013, the Badr Organisation admitted sending 1,500 fighters to Syria.¹⁶¹ The name given to its Syria military wing is the al-Shahid al-Sadr Force, named after the late Grand Ayatollah Mohammed Baqir al-Sadr, the former leader of the Da'wa Movement in Iraq. That same month, the force announced its first Syria death and held a funeral for him in Iraq.¹⁶²

Other Iraqi Shia militias fighting in Syria include Kata'eb Sayyid al-Shuhadaa, the Imam Hossein Brigade, the Zulfikar Brigade, the Ammar Bin Yasir Brigade and Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujabaa.¹⁶³ According to media reports based on interviews with members of some of these militias, around 50 fighters were being flown or bused from Baghdad and Najaf to Damascus every week in 2013, often in small groups of 10-15, and often disguised as 'pilgrims'.¹⁶⁴ Numerous public funerals have also been held in Iraq for these militias' fighters killed in Syria.¹⁶⁵

'You are protecting Syria, not only the shrine'

Many of these Iraqi militias were established by the Iranian regime in late 2012 and early 2013 with the sole purpose of sending them to fight in Syria under the pretext of protecting Sayyida Zaynab and other Shia shrines. Some already existed and were used by the Iranian regime in its proxy war with the US in Iraq between 2003 and 2011. Each of these militias has at least a few hundred fighters in Syria, all of whom are armed and trained by Sepah Pasdaran. Evidence of this Iranian role ranges from declarations that Ayatollah Ali Khamenei is their supreme religious authority, with his pictures and quotes filling their websites and social media pages, to testimonies by serving or former members about being trained in Iran or serving under Iranian commanders. A BBC interview with 'Asa'eb Ahl al-Haq's leader Qais al-Khaz'ali in July 2014 concluded that 'Asa'eb Ahl al-Haq and its leaders "make no secrets of their links with the Iranians. Their fighters are trained and supplied by Iran."¹⁶⁶

For example, a former Mahdi Army fighter told *Associated Press* in October 2012 that Iraqi fighters, who "consider the defense of the holy sites to be a religious duty," were being "supported by Iran," which he said had been "providing logistical support and small arms to volunteer fighters guarding the shrine."¹⁶⁷ Another fighter explained to *The Guardian* in June 2013 how the process of going to fight in Syria worked: "The first step is to register with one of the Shia Islamic resistance offices, like [Asa'eb

Ahl al-Haq], [the] Mukhtar Army or Iraqi Hezbollah. Then comes a trip to a boot camp in Iran. You have to enrol on a 45-day training course in Iran to [become] specialised in using a specific weapon like rocket launchers, Kalashnikov, sniper rifle or RPGs [rocket-propelled grenades]. After the course, you will be handed over to an Iranian middleman who will take you to Syria to join the brigade."¹⁶⁸

Another fighter, who was first trained to use the Kalashnikov on the plains of southern Iraq, said he was then sent to Mashhad in Iran, then to Beirut, and on to Damascus by plane. "Once you get to the capital, there is a training centre near the [Sayyida Zaynab] shrine where all volunteers have to do a quick session of military training. Then they meet with Abu Ajeeb [the Syrian commander of Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas] who asks all the volunteers to be careful and to go home safe."¹⁶⁹

Another Iraqi fighter told *The New York Times* in October 2012 that he had arrived in Damascus two months before on a flight from Tehran. "Dozens of Iraqis are joining us," he added, "and our brigade is growing day by day."¹⁷⁰ Other interviewees in Iraq, including Shia leaders, told the paper the Iraqi volunteers had been receiving weapons and supplies from the Syrian and Iranian governments, and that Iran had "organized travel for Iraqis willing to fight in Syria on the [Syrian] government's side." The Iranian regime, they added, had also pressed Iraqi Shia forces to "organize committees to recruit young fighters." A senior official from the Sadrist movement and a former member of the Iraqi parliament also told the paper that convoys of buses from Najaf, ostensibly for pilgrims, were "carrying weapons and fighters to Damascus."¹⁷¹

Indeed, in many of the videos referenced above, Iraqi militants, particularly from Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas and Kata'eb Hezbollah, appear to be well trained and highly organised, with advanced, high-quality arms and uniforms that even the Syrian army does not possess. So much so that one Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas fighter was quoted in *The Guardian* article mentioned above saying: "There is no need for the Syrian army in Sayyida Zaynab. The brigade's fighters are protecting everything from the airport to the capital to Sweida, including residential areas, hospitals, government buildings, police stations, schools, mosques and hospitals."¹⁷²

Most of the Iraqi militias appear to be using RPG-7s, PKM machine guns, SVD-style sniper rifles and Kalashnikov- and M16-style assault rifles. All are supplied by the Iranian regime, as will be detailed later in the report.

In a video posted by Syrian rebels in December 2013, three Iraqi militants captured by the rebels in al-Ghouta, near Damascus, confess to the camera that they had been sent to Syria “for jihad.”¹⁷³ The second prisoner, who says he was a bus driver transporting fighters from Iraq to Syria, claims that his group, Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas Brigade, comprises “ideological fighters” who are fighting “for the doctrine... to protect the Sayyida Zaynab shrine,” unlike ‘Asa’eb Ahl al-Haq, to which the first prisoner said he belonged, which he describes as “mercenaries who are paid money” (500 dollars a month). The Syrian rebel then asks him why they were fighting in al-Ghouta and al-Qalamon when there is no Sayyida Zaynab shrines there, to which he responds: “for the doctrine.”

Most of the other details mentioned in the confessions – which are backed up by pictures, videos and documents found on the prisoners’ phones and a USB stick found with them, all of which are shown in the video – have already been mentioned above. However, in a follow-up interview, the first prisoner elaborates on the money issue.

The monthly salary of 500 dollars that ‘Asa’eb Ahl al-Haq fighters receive, he says, is sent to them from Iraq by the militia’s leader Sheikh Qais al-Khaz’ali, who is said to be based in Iran and was released by the American troops in Iraq in a prisoner exchange deal in 2010. Another religious authority associated with the militia, Qasim al-Ta’i, and his secretary also support them by sending other essential goods, such as sugar and rice. The prisoner also confirms that ‘Asa’eb Ahl al-Haq had been “charged” with fighting outside the Sayyida Zaynab area alongside regular Syrian troops and were responsible for some of the worst massacres committed by Iraqi fighters.¹⁷⁴

Other evidence of Iraqi militias fighting outside the Sayyida Zaynab area – suggesting they are not really there to protect Shia shrines – includes videos posted on YouTube, either by Syrian rebels or by the Iraqi militias themselves, of them fighting in other parts of the

161 Phillip Smyth, ‘Breaking Badr, The New Season: Confirmation of the Badr Organization’s Involvement in Syria’, *Jihadology*, 12 August 2013, available: <http://jihadology.net/2013/08/12/hizballah-cavalcade-breaking-badr-the-new-season-confirmation-of-the-badr-organizations-involvement-in-syria/>.

162 Phillip Smyth, ‘The Badr Organization’s Syrian Expeditionary Force: Quwet al-Shahid Muhammed Baqir al-Sadr’, *Jihadology*, 18 October 2013, available: <http://jihadology.net/2013/10/18/hizballah-cavalcade-the-badr-organizations-syrian-expeditionary-force-quwet-al-shahid-muhammed-baqir-al-sadr/>.

163 For an overview of Iranian-backed Iraqi militias fighting in Syria, see, for example: K. Gilbert, *The Rise of Shi’ite Militias and the Post-Arab Spring Sectarian Threat*, International Institute for Counter-Terrorism, October 2013, available: <http://i-hls.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/Gilbert-ICT-Rise-of-Shiite-militias-and-post-Arab-Spring-sectarian-threat.pdf>; Syrian Network for Human Rights, *The Fighting Shiite Militias in Syria*, July 2014, available: http://www.sn4hr.org/public_html/wp-content/pdf/english/shia%27a-en.pdf (the original Arabic is available at http://sn4hr.org/public_html/wp-content/pdf/arabic/shia%27a-arabic.pdf); Wasim Nasr, ‘Who are the Iraqi Shia fighters in Syria?’ (in Arabic), *France 24*, 13 December 2013, available: <http://tinyurl.com/kzbev57>.

164 Suadad al-Salhy, ‘Iraqi Shi’ites flock to Assad’s side as sectarian split widens’, *Reuters*, *idem*.

165 For a round-up of Iraqi militants killed in Syria in 2013, see this three-part collection by Phillip Smyth on *Jihadology*: Part 1: <http://jihadology.net/2013/05/11/hizballah-cavalcade-roundup-of-iraqis-killed-in-syria-part-1/>; Part 2: <http://jihadology.net/2013/05/17/hizballah-cavalcade-roundup-of-iraqis-killed-in-syria-part-2/>; Part 3: <http://jihadology.net/2013/06/02/hizballah-cavalcade-roundup-of-iraqis-killed-in-syria-part-3/>.

166 Jeremy Bowen, ‘The fearsome Iraqi militia vowing to vanquish Isis’, *BBC*, 7 July 2014, available: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-28199741>.

167 Qassim Abdul-Zahra and Adam Schreck, ‘Iraqi Shiites brace for violence amid Syria fears’, *Associated Press*, 25 October 2012, available: <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/iraqi-shiites-brace-violence-amid-syria-fears>.

168 Mona Mahmood and Martin Chulov, ‘Syrian war widens Sunni-Shia schism as foreign jihadis join fight for shrines’, *The Guardian*, 4 June 2013, available: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jun/04/syria-islamic-sunni-shia-shrines-volunteers>.

169 *Ibid.*

170 Yasir Ghazi and Tim Arango, ‘Iraqi Sects Join Battle in Syria on Both Sides’, *The New York Times*, 27 October 2012, available: <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/28/world/middleeast/influx-of-iraqi-shiites-to-syria-widens-wars-scope.html?pagewanted=all&r=0>.

171 *Ibid.*

172 Mona Mahmood and Martin Chulov, *idem*.

173 ‘Confessions of Iraqi mercenaries captured by the rebels in the suburbs of Damascus’ (in Arabic), 31 December 2013, available: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LzNZOx-qii0>.

174 *Ibid.*

country, such as al-Gouta and Aleppo.¹⁷⁵ In fact, the first Syria ‘martyr’ of ‘Asa’eb Ahl al-Haq was reportedly killed in Hama in early 2012.¹⁷⁶ A large funeral, attended by many of the militia’s leaders, was held for him in Baghdad.

In March 2014, Harakat al-Nujabaa posted pictures on its Facebook page showing its fighters holding a military-style funeral for one of its ‘martyrs’ inside a prominent military facility in Aleppo.¹⁷⁷ The place, the Military Engineering Academy, was described by the group as its “headquarters.” Al-Nujabaa split from ‘Asa’eb Ahl al-Haq and reportedly has strong links with Hezbollah Lebanon. In another video posted on YouTube in November 2013, a group of Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas are seen marching down the streets of Aleppo, with one of them shouting “Here we are, Zaynab.”¹⁷⁸

There have also been numerous pictures and reports of ‘Iraqi checkpoints’ throughout Damascus. Apart from those in Sayyida Zaynab and the surrounding areas in southern Damascus, Iraqi checkpoints, both stationary and mobile, have been seen in central Damascus (Bahsa and Hamidiyya) and at the Damascus airport, according to local activists. There have also been reports of regime checkpoints manned by Iraqi militiamen.¹⁷⁹

These and other similar events and reports have caused at least some of the Iraqi fighters to question what they were really doing in Syria. As one fighter from the Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas Brigade put it in *The Guardian* article mentioned above, “The moment you join the brigade, you have to join the Syrian government army. You have to fight with President Bashar al-Assad before you fight for [the brigade]. The Syrian army will tell you that you have to know that you are protecting Syria, not only the shrine.”¹⁸⁰

Interestingly, many Iraqi militia members are now refusing to fight under Syrian command, like Hezbollah fighters did before them. The rift is said to have started around mid-2013, following criticisms by Iraqi commanders of the ‘undisciplined’ behaviour of some Syrian *shabbiha* they were working with. The disagreements reportedly turned into a gun battle near the shrine of Sayyida Zaynab between ‘Asa’eb Ahl al-Haq, Kata’eb Hezbollah and some Iraqi Mahdi Army fighters on one side and the Syrian commander of the Abu al-Fadhl al-Abbas

Brigade and his local followers on the other. Two Iraqi fighters and three Syrian *shabbiha* died in the clashes. A reconciliation meeting was reportedly held on the order of Khamenei’s office in Damascus, but divisions festered and the Mahdi Army, ‘Asa’eb Ahl al-Haq and Kata’eb Hezbollah are now reportedly fighting under the command of Hezbollah Lebanon.¹⁸¹

In June 2014, following the fall of Mosul to the Islamic State in Iraq and Sham (Daesh), many Iraqi militiamen returned to Iraq to fight against Sunni extremists there.¹⁸² According to media reports, Hezbollah Lebanon subsequently announced a ‘general mobilisation’ and sent more than 1,000 additional fighters to Syria in order to fill the gap.¹⁸³

Case study: Al-Nabek massacres

As part of the Qalamon military campaign in early December 2013, Syrian regime troops, accompanied by Syrian *shabbiha* and Iraqi militia fighters, particularly from the Zulfiqar Brigade, invaded various villages and towns around the city of al-Nabek.¹⁸⁴ Militiamen from the Zulfiqar Brigade committed nine consecutive massacres against the local civilians, according to the Syrian Network for Human Rights.¹⁸⁵ At least 150 civilians, including entire families, the majority of them women and children, were executed. The Center for Documentation of Violations in Syria has documented the names of 128 of them.¹⁸⁶ Many were slaughtered with knives in the basements of their houses, where they were sheltering from shelling, and their bodies were then burnt.¹⁸⁷

Other less-known but well-documented massacres committed by Iraqi militias fighting in Syria include the al-Thiybiyya massacre, near Damascus, in October 2013. According to eyewitnesses, Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas militiamen, accompanied by some Hezbollah and Iranian fighters, entered the town from several directions, then executed and slaughtered an unknown number of unarmed civilians. The Syrian Network for Human Rights was able to document the death and disappearance of 13 entire families, describing the massacre as “bearing the marks of sectarian ethnic cleansing.”¹⁸⁸

These and other massacres committed by Iraqi militias in Syria clearly amount to war crimes and crimes against humanity. Yet many of these militias are still not included on international lists of terrorist groups.

Update on Iraqi militias' involvement in Syria

In Spring and Summer 2014, especially after the fall of Mosul to Daesh in June, many Iraqi Shia militiamen fighting in Syria returned to Iraq to fight against Sunni extremists there, as mentioned above. But not all of them did. Kata'eb Sayyed al-Shuhadaa and Hezbollah al-Nujabaa reportedly kept many of their fighters in Syria and took on leading roles alongside Hezbollah Lebanon. The latter also announced a 'general mobilisation' at the time and sent hundreds more fighters to Syria, many of them young, to fill this gap (see above).

Nevertheless, a special Syrian delegation reportedly travelled to Iraq in late September or early October 2014 and met with a number of Iraqi officials and militia leaders to convey the Syrian regime's "worries" regarding the "vacuum" created by the Iraqi fighters' returning home, especially in the Damascus countryside area. An Iraqi military source told *al-Arabi al-Jadeed* newspaper that the Syrian delegates did not meet with the Iraqi prime minister or his aides but with "influential" security officials and politicians, as well as the leaders of the Badr Organisation and 'Asa'eb Ahl al-Haqq, Hadi al-'Ameri and Qays al-Khaz'ali respectively.¹

In May 2015, Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas Brigade announced that it was withdrawing all its fighters from Aleppo following defeats suffered by its Iraqi branch at the hands of Daesh in al-Ramadi, according to media reports. Again, the gap left by the militia's fighters leaving were said to have been filled by Hezbollah Lebanon.² But by now, as Daesh no longer posed an imminent threat to Baghdad and Samarraa, many of the Iraqi militias had returned to Syria, both old and new,³ not to mention hundreds of Afghan and Pakistani Shia fighters (more on this below).

The role played by Iraqi Shia militias in the Syria war has been extensively documented, most notably by Phillip Smyth of *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*.⁴ What is worth highlighting here is the increasing geographical distribution and the more prominent role played by these militias in key battles.

For instance, Zulfiqar Brigade, a subdivision of Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas, has reportedly been fighting alongside Syrian regime forces and militias in the Latakia countryside since February 2015, and alongside Hezbollah Lebanon in al-Qalamon and al-Zabadani more recently.

175 e.g. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X1VMTw8YP58> (Eastern Gouta); <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9EQL7eN8Dsk> (Western Aleppo); http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=090cfh_9vno (Rshdin, Aleppo).

176 'Confirming what *Al-Tahrir* had previously disclosed: An 'Aa'ib Ahl al-Haq member is killed in Syrian Hama' (in Arabic), *Al-Tahrir News*, 27 May 2012, available: <http://www.altahreernews.com/inp/view.asp?ID=8580>.

177 'Iraqi militia given Aleppo military academy to use as its HQ', *Naame Shaam*, 24 March 2014, available: <http://www.naame-shaam.org/en/iraqi-militia-given-aleppo-military-academy-to-use-as-its-hq/>.

178 Available: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cgzV1fjXrMw>.

179 Information and pictures obtained by the author from various Syrian activists and citizen-journalists in Damascus.

180 Mona Mahmood and Martin Chulov, *idem*.

181 Suadad al-Salhy, 'Iraqi Shi'ites flock to Assad's side as sectarian split widens', *Reuters*, *idem*.

182 Maria Abi-Habib, 'Shiite Militias Decamping From Syria to Fight in Iraq', *The Wall Street Journal*, 17 June 2014, available: <http://online.wsj.com/articles/shiite-militias-decamping-from-syria-to-fight-in-iraq-1403051977>.

183 *Ibid*. See also: 'Hezbollah mobilizes to defend Shiite shrines in Syria', *Now*, 12 June 2014, available: <https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/lebanonnews/551145-hezbollah-announces-general-mobilization-in-syria>.

184 See, for example, Joanna Paraszczuk and Scott Lucas, 'Regime Mass Killing of Civilians in Nabk in Damascus Province?', *EA WorldView*, 7 December 2013, available: <http://eaworldview.com/2013/12/syria-today-regime-mass-killing-civilians-nabk-damascus-province/>

185 Syrian Network for Human Rights, *The Major Massacres Committed by Syrian Government Forces Against Civilian Citizens During 2013* (in Arabic), December 2013, available: <http://sn4hr.org/wp-content/pdf/arabic/%D8%A3%D8%A8%D8%B1%D8%B2%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%AC%D8%A7%D8%B2%D8%B1%20%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%A7%D9%85%202013.pdf>. See also the detailed reports by SN4HR about each individual massacre in al-Nabek, e.g. <https://docs.google.com/file/d/0B5pudHajcbMuS1hvQXplRWdHb0k/edit?pli=1> and <https://docs.google.com/file/d/0B5pudHajcbMuZjVVeUJpRG03V3c/edit?pli=1>.

186 Center for Documentation of Violations in Syria, 'Nabek martyrs list', available: <http://www.vdc-sy.info/index.php/en/martyrs/1/c29ydGJ5PWEua2lsbGVkX2RhZGV8c29ydGRpcj1ERVNDfGF-wcHJvdmVhPjZpc2libGV8ZXh0cmFkaXNwbGF5PTB8c3RhZdH-VzPTf8Y29kTXVsdGk9M3xzdGFydERhdGU9MjAxMy0xMi02fG-VuZERhdGU9MjAxMy0xMi0xNXwzPU5hYmt8>.

187 Some pictures are available at http://www.liveleak.com/view?i=bf6_1386526199 and some video footage <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NeH8NPkB1Q4> and <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F2GOKJ9wDOc>.

188 Syrian Network for Human Rights, 'Military campaign on town of al-Thiyabiyya in suburbs of Damascus bears marks of sectarian ethnic cleansing', 10 September 2013, available: <http://tinyurl.com/ms9vkyr>.

The same group also took part in the Jisr al-Shughour battle in April 2015. Al-Assad al-Ghaleb and al-Imam al-Hussain Brigades, two other subdivisions of Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas, have also been active in the coastal region. Kata'eb Sayyed al-Shuhadaa participated in the Daraa offensive in February 2015 alongside Iranian and Hezbollah fighters, and so on and so forth.

This geographic and missionary diversity has meant that these Iraqi Shia militias can no longer justify and recruit for what they are doing in Syria solely on the basis of defending holy Shia shrines. Fighting Daesh in Syria as a motive is increasingly found in their literature off and online, even though, in many cases, they are actually fighting against other Islamist and Free Army factions, and Daesh does not even exist in some of these areas.

Meanwhile in Iraq, under the pretext of fighting Daesh, Iranian-controlled Shia militias have expanded and consolidated their influence throughout the country to such an extent that they have practically replaced the army and security forces in many areas. Dozens of them recently united, under the auspice of Haider al-Abadi's government, under the name The Popular Mobilisation Forces. The coalition is headed by Jamal Jaafar Mohammed, better known by his *nom de guerre* Abu Mahdi al-Mohandis. Al-Mohandis is a former commander of the Badr Organisation, one of the most powerful Shia militias in Iraq.

According to an internal Iraqi intelligence report leaked to the media, the number of armed militias in Iraq in mid-2015 was 53, up from 43 in December 2014, with a total membership of 120,000 militiamen.⁵ The "only common factors" among them, the report adds, are the "extremist religious cover" and the source of their funding: Iran. Each militia is said to receive from Tehran between 100,000 and 500,000 US dollars per month, depending on its size and its achievements, in addition to Russian- and Iranian-made weapons.

In a series of interviews by *Reuters* published in February 2015, key figures inside the Iraqi Popular Mobilisation Forces detail the ways in which these militias cooperate with Baghdad and Tehran, and the role that Iranian 'advisers' play, both inside the groups and on the frontlines.⁶ The interviewees include two senior figures in the Badr Organisation and the commander of a relatively new militia called Saraya al-Khorasani.

Saraya al-Khorasani was founded in 2013 by Sepah Pasdaran's General Hamid Taghavi, who was killed in northern Iraq in December 2014.

Iraqi officials told *Reuters* that al-Mohandis is Major-Gen. Qassem Soleimani's right hand in Iraq, and militiamen praised him as "the commander of all troops," whose word is "like a sword above all groups." Soleimani, they added, "participates in the operation command center from the start of the battle to the end, and the last thing [he] does is visit the battle's wounded in the hospital."

Iranian-backed and controlled militias in Iraq have become so powerful and dominant in recent months that some commentators are now talking about a *de facto* Iranian occupation of Iraq.⁷ And it is all done under the watch and tacit blessing of the US troops in Iraq, their new 'partners' in the war against Daesh.

What the US administration seems to overlook is that relying on extremist Shia militias to fight an extremist Sunni group like Daesh will only increase the latter's popularity and justify its crimes in the eyes of its current and future supporters. More importantly, the Iranian regime has been allowed to build and consolidate an international army of well organised and well armed Shia militias that it can quickly deploy wherever needed, as the movement of the Iraqi militias to and from Syria has shown.

In late May 2015, following a visit to the frontlines in Idlib, Syria, Qassem Soleimani threatened the world that it "will be surprised in the coming days by what we and the Syrian military leadership are preparing."⁸ The 'surprise' turned out to be sending thousands more Iranian and Iraqi fighters to Syria to defend Damascus and the coastal region. "Around 7,000 Iranian and Iraqi fighters have arrived in Syria over the past few weeks and their first priority is the defence of the capital," a Syrian security source told AFP news agency a few days later. "The larger contingent is Iraqi," he added.⁹

This and similar developments strongly indicate that the flow of Iranian-controlled Shia militiamen into Syria, both Iraqi and otherwise, will only grow in the future, and that their role in defending and securing 'useful Syria' will become more and more prominent. In other words, the country is heading towards more 'militiasation' of pro-Assad forces under the control of the Iranian regime. Not only is the Iraqi

experience being more or less repeated in Syria, but Iraqi Shia militias are being used to achieve this. Phillip Smyth describes this as the “Hezbollahization” of the security field in Iraq and Syria.¹⁰ But it is not just about Syria. The Iranian regime now controls an extensive networks of militias that it can deploy wherever and whenever needed in the region.

Footnotes:

1 ‘Assad seeks Baghdad’s help and complains about withdrawal of Iraqi militias from Syria’ (in Arabic), *al-Arabi al-Jadeed*, 2 October 2014, available: <http://goo.gl/A9BffU>.

2 ‘Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas Brigade abandons al-Assad and withdraws from Aleppo’ (in Arabic), *al-Durar al-Shamiyya*, 19 May 2015, available: <http://eldorar.com/node/76901>.

3 For more on this, see: Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, ‘The Return of Iraqi Shi’i Militias to Syria’, Middle East Institute, 16 March 2015, available: <http://www.mei.edu/content/at/return-iraqi-shi%E2%80%98i-militias-syria>; Phillip Smyth, ‘Iraqi Shiite Foreign Fighters on the Rise Again in Syria’, 29 May 2015, *The Washington Institute*, available: <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/iraqi-shiite-foreign-fighters-on-the-rise-again-in-syria>.

4 Phillip Smyth, *The Shiite Jihad in Syria and Its Regional Effects*, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, February 2015, available: <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/pubs/PolicyFocus138-v3.pdf>.

5 ‘The militia world in Iraq: 53 organisations with Iranian support’ (in Arabic), *al-Arabi al-Jadeed*, 24 July 2015, available: <http://goo.gl/JXwJ0>.

6 ‘Special Report: How Iran’s military chiefs operate in Iraq’, *Reuters*, 24 February 2015, available: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/02/24/us-mideast-crisis-committee-specialreport-idUSKBN0LS0VD20150224>.

7 See, for example, ‘Iran Occupies Iraq’, *The Wall Street Journal*, 11 March 2015, available: <http://www.wsj.com/articles/iran-occupies-iraq-1426116089>. See also: Phillip Smyth, ‘Iranian proxies step up their role in Iraq’, *The Washington Institute*, 13 June 2015, available: <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/iranian-proxies-step-up-their-role-in-iraq>.

8 ‘Qassem Soleimani: The world will be surprised in Syria’ (in Persian), *Mashregh News*, 31 May 2015, available: <http://goo.gl/hioJZw>. For English, see: ‘General Soleimani vows ‘surprise’ in Syria’, *Tehran Times*, 6 June 2015, available: http://tehrantimes.com/index_View.asp?code=247156.

9 ‘Iraq, Iran fighters deployed to defend Damascus: security source’, *The Daily Star Lebanon*, 3 June 2015, available: <https://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Middle-East/2015/Jun-03/300429-iraq-iran-fighters-deployed-to-defend-damascus-security-source.ashx>. See also: <https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/NewsReports/565378-pro-assad-daily-iran-preparing-idlib-offensive>.

10 Phillip Smyth, *idem*.

Afghan fighters

Reports that some Shia Afghan fighters were fighting in Syria alongside Hezbollah and the Iraqi militias have been around at least since October 2012, when the Free Syrian Army captured an Afghan refugee from Iran who was allegedly fighting in Syria alongside the regime.¹⁸⁹ In April 2013, Afghan media reported that the Afghan Foreign Ministry had launched an investigation into the involvement of Afghan nationals in the Syria war.¹⁹⁰ A Foreign Ministry spokesperson said at a press conference that several Afghan nationals had reportedly been sent by Iran to Syria and a number of them had reportedly been killed there. According to the Syrian opposition, most of them were fighting within ‘mixed’ Iraqi militias, such as Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas Brigade and Saraya Tali’at al-Khurasani.¹⁹¹

Sending Afghan fighters to Syria may have been an attempt by Sepah Pasdaran to bolster the Iraqi militias fighting in Syria at the time, or simply because they are ‘cheaper’ for the Iranian regime than other fighters, as most of the recruits appear to be poor or undocumented Afghan refugees in Iran, so Sepah would not have the same financial commitments towards them and their families as it does to Iranian, Hezbollah or Iraq fighters. It is plausible, however, that using Afghan Shia fighters is also part of longer-term plans by the Iranian regime to consolidate its power in Syria by relying more and more on its own loyal militias instead of Syrian troops (more on this later in the report).

In May 2014, *The Wall Street Journal* published an explosive article claiming Sepah Pasdaran had been recruiting thousands of Afghan refugees to fight in Syria,

189 ‘Afghan refugee kidnapped by FSA in Syria’, 30 October 2012, available: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9vuv6aTVr0>.

190 Meena Haseeb, ‘Afghans involvement in Syria war to be investigated: Mosazai’, *Khaama Press*, 8 April 2013, available: <http://www.khaama.com/afghans-involvement-in-syria-war-to-be-investigated-mosazai-1562>.

191 e.g. ‘Saraya Tali’at al-Khurasani, a new Shia group fighting alongside al-Assad’ (in Arabic), *Orient*, 9 January 2014. Check also the group’s official Facebook page at <http://ar-ar.facebook.com/pages/%D8%B3%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%8A%D8%A7-%D8%B7%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%B9%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AE%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%8A/1463431740540052>.

offering them \$500 a month and Iranian residency permits.¹⁹² The allegations were based on an Iranian blog on recruitment efforts among Afghan refugees in Iran and were confirmed to the paper by an Afghan religious leader in Qom and by a member of Sepah Pasdaran. The article caused a storm in Afghanistan and Iran, with Iranian officials insisting the allegations were “baseless” and “unfounded.” But the paper maintained that its claims had been confirmed by reliable sources before the Iranian authorities put pressure on them to “recant their statements.”¹⁹³

A couple of weeks later, in June 2014, *France 24* published another investigation in which it quoted two “observers” based in Afghanistan who corroborated WSJ’s allegations, adding that the deployment of young Afghan Shia fighters was “no secret.”¹⁹⁴ One of them said two of his family members, who had fled to Iran a few years before, were sent to Syria after being offered 1.5 million Iranian Tomans (equivalent to 430 euros or 585 US dollars) by Sepah Pasdaran. “They both received military training in Iran for a few months before they were sent to Syria,” he added. “One told me he and 80 other Afghan fighters had received training and fought alongside Hezbollah for a while in Syria.” The other source told the channel that some Afghan Shia clerics were encouraging Shia youths during private gatherings to go and fight in Syria to “defend Shia Muslims in Syria and fight what they call the enemies of Ali.” “I know other youths [who] were recruited from cities such as the capital, Kabul, Balkh, Sarpol, Samangan as well as Faryab and Nimrooz in Afghanistan,” he added.

Around mid-2014, a number of media reports claimed that the Afghan Shia fighters sent to Syria had now formed their own separate militia called the Fatemiyoun Brigade (named after Fatima, Prophet Mohammad’s daughter and Imam Ali’s wife).¹⁹⁵ The brigade is estimated to have between 2,000 and 5,000 fighters and appears to be coordinating mainly with Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas Brigade.

In addition to Afghans, there have also been reports of Shia fighters from various other nationalities being sent to Syria or prepared to go. For example, in July 2013, Iranian media reported the death of a Shia fighter from the Ivory Coast in Syria.¹⁹⁶ In June 2014, India’s largest Shia organisation allegedly began to recruit volunteers

to defend Shia holy shrines in Iraq, and possibly in Syria, against the extremists of the so-called Islamic State (Daesh). Media reports claimed that nearly 30,000 Indian Shia Muslims had already signed up to fight and applied for visas to Iraq.¹⁹⁷

Update on Afghan Shia fighters

Since the publication of the first edition of this report in November 2014, the number and role of Afghan Shia fighters sent by Sepah Pasdaran to fight in Syria has become more prominent and more open, thanks to concerted propaganda and recruitment efforts by the Iranian regime and its media outlets. After a period of fighting in the ranks of Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas Brigade, Afghan Shia fighters in Syria formed a special contingent of their own called the Fatemiyoun Brigade, as mentioned above.¹

The brigade’s task was ostensibly to defend the Sayyeda Zaynab shrine in Damascus, even though its members are known to have fought elsewhere in Syria alongside Hezbollah and Syrian regime forces. Nevertheless, all Afghan Shia fighters in Syria are referred to by Iranian state-controlled media for propaganda purposes as “shrine defenders.” As a *Mashregh News* report from March 2015 puts it, the Fatemiyoun Brigade is “a special brigade of Afghan volunteers, many of whose members have been killed defending the [Shia] shrines [in Syria].”²

According to conservative Iranian news agency *Defa Press*, the Fatemiyoun Brigade was originally formed of two main contingents: The Mohammad Army, which mainly included Afghan Mujahedeen who fought against the Taliban in Afghanistan, and the Abu Zarr Brigade, which mainly included Afghans who fought with Iranian forces during the Iran-Iraq war. After the war in Syria started, many of them ‘volunteered’ to ‘defend the shrine’ of Sayyeda Zaynab in Damascus, according to the report.³

A third, increasingly large contingent comes from the Afghan Shia refugees in Iran, which is home to nearly a million Shia Hazaras who had fled war-torn Afghanistan, according to the UNHCR.⁴ In addition to the English and French media reports cited above, an Afghan daily, *Sobh*, published an article in January 2014 saying it had obtained evidence and documents proving that the Iranian regime had been recruiting Afghan migrants to go and fight in Syria after undergoing military training in

Tehran.⁵ In December and November 2013 alone, the report adds, 120 Afghan migrants, most of them under 25, were deployed to Syria.

In an interview with a Fatemiyoun commander, republished after his death on Sepah Pasdaran's website in late October 2015,⁶ Reza Khavari explains how the Brigade was formed: "First the plan was to deploy 10 Mohajereen [Afghan migrants in Iran] to Syria. The initial group was as big as 25 people, but only 10 were officially confirmed. We were told that these 10 individuals would be sent to see if they can stand the situation and stay. On the eve of year 1390 [2011-2012], this group of 10 was ready to go... but by the time of actual deployment, their number had reached 23. They were supposed to go through trainings and then head to Syria, but there was no time, so they were deployed without such training. Some of them had experiences in warfare before, but they gradually forgot what they knew."

The *Defa Press* report adds that the Fatemiyoun Brigade was upgraded in May 2014 to a Division due to "augmentation in its operational capacities and number of staff." There have also been unconfirmed reports that the Brigade has been or will be incorporated into an "Afghan Hezbollah".

In March 2015, *Ofogh*, a TV channel close to Sepah Pasdaran, broadcast a 23-minute 'documentary' about the Fatemiyoun Brigade produced by Farhangi Riwayeti Fathi Iran, a 'cultural center' close to Sepah Pasdaran that used to make propaganda films about the Iran-Iraq war.⁷ "Moalem", or Teacher in Persian, follows the story of an Afghan Shia commander in Syria over the past three years and talks mostly about the bravery and religious beliefs of the Afghan fighters in Syria. It focuses in particular on the towns of Harran al-Awameed and al-Mleiha near Damascus, where the Fatemiyoun Brigade had fought and the protagonist has "painful memories." The 'teacher' explains: "We fought for seven months from seven different directions in al-Mleiha. We imposed a siege and we lost about 50 martyrs. Our progress became slower because of the destruction and rabble... But the Fatemiyoun guys had sworn by Zaynab to liberate the area."

Ironically, the archive footage following the above statement, which is supposed to show the destruction caused by the "takfiris of Jabhat al-Nusra" that the Af-

ghan fighters were supposedly fighting, in fact shows fire and destruction that appears to have been caused by aerial bombardment. A man is heard shouting in Arabic: "May God take revenge on you, Bashar [al-Assad]... There are corpses under the rabble." The 'teacher' then adds: "Al-Mleiha is a strategic town. The [opposition] armed men fought very fiercely for it. There came the [Syrian] army and the Iraqis and Hezbollah. But in the end, when all their attempts failed, came the Fatemiyoun guys."

The film also shows footage of General Alireza Tavasoli, the founder and former commander of the Fatemiyoun Brigade who was killed in Daraa, Syria, on 28 February 2015, during a failed Iranian-led offensive in the south.⁸ Tavasoli had fought in Afghanistan and during the Iran-Iraq war and was reportedly close to Major-Gen. Qassem Soleimani.⁹ A few days later, on 12 March, Iranian state media reported the death of another commander of the Fatemiyoun Brigade, Mahdi Saberi, and published a picture of him alongside Soleimani.¹⁰

192 Farnaz Fassihi, 'Iran pays Afghans to fight for Assad', *The Wall Street Journal*, 22 May 2014, available: <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424052702304908304579564161508613846>.

193 Farnaz Fassihi and Ehsanullah Amiri, 'Afghans condemn Iran over recruiting refugees to fight in Syria', *The Wall Street Journal*, 21 May 2014, available: <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424052702303749904579576132289729204>.

194 Ershad Alijani and Andrew Hilliar, 'Afghan migrants offered \$500 by Iran to fight for Syrian regime', *France 24*, 04 June 2014, available: <http://observers.france24.com/content/20140604-afghan-migrants-offered-500-iran-fight-pro-assad-mercenaries>.

195 See, for example, 'An Afghan version of Hezbollah in Syria' (in Arabic), *Erem News*, 8 June 2014, available: <http://www.erdemnews.com/?id=45180>. See also: 'Afghan fighters join al-Assad forces for \$500 a month' (in Arabic), *Al-Arabiya*, 7 June 2014, available <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OzsGopANvxc>.

196 'First African martyr defending Sayyida Zaynab shrine' (in Persian), *Ahlul-Bayt News Agency*, 27 July 2013, available: <http://www.abna.ir/persian/service/middle/archive/2013/07/27/445548/story.html>. For more details in English, see: Phillip Smyth, 'The Lion of Damascus, and Afghans, and Africans! Oh My!: Fighters From Exotic Locales In Syria's Shia Militias', *Jihadology*, 30 July 2013, available: http://jihadology.net/2013/07/30/hizballah-cavalcade-the-lion-of-damascus-and-afghans-and-africans-oh-my-fighters-from-exotic-locals-in-syrias-shia-militias/#_ftnref8.

197 Amir Abdallah, 'URGENT – 30,000 Indians volunteer to fight in Iraq to defend Shia shrines', *Iraqi News*, 27 June 2014, available: <http://www.iraqinews.com/arab-world-news/urgent-30000-indians-volunteer-fight-iraq-defend-shia-shrines/>.

Martyrs & funerals

Official funerals held in Iran for Afghan Shia fighters killed in Syria have become not only frequent in recent months, but also more public and frequently reported by Iranian media. Naame Shaam has documented over 180 such funerals since September 2013. The names of the dead and the dates and places of their burial are produced in Appendix 2.

The list is based solely on Iranian media reports about these official funerals. The number of Afghan Shia fighters killed in Syria is certainly much higher. For instance, in May 2014, *Defa Press* reported that 200 Afghans had been killed in Syria until then.¹¹ *Sobh Daily* claimed that 3-4 bodies of Afghan fighters are being sent back to Iran every week.¹² Then there are all the bodies that could not be retrieved from the battlefields and those buried in silence or not reported by the media. According to the German *Der Spiegel* magazine, exact numbers are hard to come by, but some 700 Afghan Shia fighters are thought to have lost their lives in Aleppo and Daraa alone until May 2015. “No ethnic group is represented on all of the regime’s fronts to the degree that the Afghan Hazara are,” the magazine added.¹³

In the above-mentioned interview with a Fatemiyoun commander republished on Sepah Pasdaran’s website after his death, Reza Khavari reveals that, “At the time [2013], when the bodies of martyrs Seyed Hossein Hossein and Mahmoud Kalani were to be returned to Iran, one of the generals ordered an investigation to be conducted on the possible reactions in the country. All the officials worried that, if Afghans find out about the story, they might revolt or react harshly. Then the bodies arrived and the funerals were held and everyone saw that no such reaction occurred.” “At fist they were not even sure if they should put funeral notices on the walls or mention that these people had been martyred in Syria. Then the families took the initiative and called the martyrs shrine defenders.”

Iranian state-controlled media reports often do not mention where and how these fighters have died. They often just say “martyred in Syria defending the shrine.” It is well known, however, that some of them have died miles away from the Sayyeda Zaynab shrine in Damascus, in places as far as Aleppo in the north and Daraa in the south. Indeed, as mentioned above, the former commander of the Fatemyyon Brigade, General Alireza Tavassoli, was killed in Daraa along with six other Afghan fighters.

Interestingly, whereas before most Afghan ‘shrine defenders’ were buried in Mashhad, more and more are now being buried in the holy Shia city of Qom. The first known official and public funeral held for Afghan fighters killed in Syria was held in Mashhad in December 2013. All ten ‘shrine defenders’ celebrated then were buried in the Beheshti Reza cemetery in the city, while those injured were reportedly treated at a Sepah Pasdaran hospital.¹⁴ In contrast, many are being nowadays buried in a new, special section of Masouma’s Paradise Cemetery in Qom called “Defenders of Shrines Martyrs.”¹⁵

Moreover, big, public ‘commemoration gatherings’ are now being frequently organised by the Iranian government for Afghan ‘shrine defenders’. They are often attended by Iranian officials and/or Sepah Pasdaran commanders, and people are openly invited to take part in these events.¹⁶ For instance, on 5 May 2015 one such gathering was held in Mahdih Tehran,¹⁷ and another in Pakdasht,¹⁸ and another a few days later in Behesht Zahra.¹⁹ During the 11th ‘commemoration gathering’ in Tehran on 4 May 2015, the Afghan ‘shrine defenders’ issued a collective statement in which the event was seen as “an opportunity for the unity and cooperation of Iranians, Afghans, Lebanese and Syrians beyond geographical borders.”²⁰

The burials in Qom and the public commemoration gatherings held in Iran for the Afghan Shia fighters killed in Syria indicate that the Iranian regime is using these high-profile events as a propaganda tool to attract and recruit more Afghan fighters. So much so that Iran’s Supreme Leader’s Deputy at Sepah Qods, Ali Shirazi, said in July 2015: “The status of Shrine Defenders is even higher than that of the martyrs of the Sacred Defence [the Iran-Iraq war], so their [heavenly] reward is twofold.”²¹

Yet, despite this seemingly celebratory attention given to them in Iran in recent months, once in Syria, Afghan fighters are reportedly treated differently and seen as second-class Shia fighters.

In addition to testimonies from Afghan fighters captured by rebels, this is evidenced by the lack of interest by the Syrian and Iranian regimes in prisoner exchange deals involving Afghan fighters. In May 2015, a rebel commander in Aleppo, who was leading negotiations over six Afghan prisoners of war, was quoted by *Der Spiegel* saying he was told on the phone by one of the most powerful Syrian



Afghani fighters in Syria (undated photo).
Source: www.euronews.com/2015/10/27/why-afgans-are-dying-for-iran-in-syria/



Iranian Major-Gen. Qassem Soleimani (right) with two Shia Afghani commanders in Syria (undated photo). Source: www.euronews.com/2015/10/27/why-afgans-are-dying-for-iran-in-syria/



Funeral procession of a Shia Afghan fighter in the Iranian holy city of Qom (undated photo).
Source France 24: www.france24.com/en/20160129-iran-coerces-afghans-fight-syria-shiite-militia



Iranian Major-Gen. Qassem Soleimani (left) with Alireza Tavasoli, the Afghani commander of the Fatemiyoun Brigade, who was killed in Syria in 2015.
Source: www.rferl.org/content/persian-letters-afghans-pakistanis-killed-fighting-in-syria-for-iran/26977907.html



Shia Afghani fighter caught by Syrian rebels, 2015.
Source: www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-33195694

officers, Colonel Sohail al-Hassan, known among regime supporters as *Nimr*, or tiger in Arabic, that the Syrian regime was not interested in Afghan prisoners of war. “Do what you want with them. You can kill them, they’re just mercenaries. We can send you thousands of them,” the colonel allegedly said on the phone.²²

Iranian IDs for foreign mercenaries

In addition to offering them monthly salaries (see above), another tactic used by Sepah Pasdaran to recruit among the poor Hazara communities in Iran is to promise them Iranian citizenship.

Reports on this issue have been around at least since early 2014. For instance, the *Sobh* report mentioned above claimed that the Afghan migrants who went to fight in Syria were promised to be rewarded with ‘red residency cards’ as well as ‘blue cards’ that entitle them to travel freely within Iran.²³ In April 2015, Iranian opposition newspaper *Kayhan London* published an interview with an anonymous Afghan Shia fighter in Syria. When asked why he went to war in Syria, he responded: “Well, jihad, and they also said if you go, we will not deport you from Iran... Plus, for three months, you get six million [Toman].”²⁴

Other media reports and testimonies seem to corroborate these allegations. For instance, in June 2015, the BBC quoted a 22-year-old Afghan in Kabul saying: “They [the Iranians] gathered lots of us together [in Kabul] with the promise of jobs and ID cards. But once we got there [to Iran] we were offered something different – to go and fight in Syria. I refused.”²⁵ Another woman is quoted saying: “Many boys are going right now. They are jobless and told they will be given money and a house. Even if they die, they think their families will have a comfortable life.”

In May 2015, *Der Spiegel* published a feature focusing on a farmer from Afghanistan who was recruited by Sepah Pasdaran at the notorious Evin Prison in Tehran and sent to Syria to fight, only to be captured by Syrian rebels in Aleppo. “All he had wanted was an Iranian residence permit,” the report says. “But at the end of his trip, he found himself fighting as a mercenary in the Syrian civil war on the side of the Bashar Assad regime... He would have to join the war in Syria for two months, the officer told him, saying that he would only be given simple tasks and guard duty. When he returned, the officer promised, he may even receive a residency permit.”²⁶ Another Afghan who was

with the first one in the same cell in prison also agreed to trade the rest of his sentence for a two months’ service in Syria. “They were promised a monthly salary of two million toman, the equivalent of \$700,” the article adds.

Recruiting in prisons is only one way. Another is immigration raids targeted against undocumented Afghan migrants in Iran with the aim of recruiting them. A second Afghan prisoner of war, who spent years working in construction in Tehran, is quoted in the above-mentioned *Spiegel* article saying: “Suddenly, there were raids and I was one of 150 illegal immigrants arrested. All of us were Hazara. Then, the [Pasdaran] came and promised us money and residence permits if we would voluntarily go to Syria. But they said ‘we’re sending you there no matter what.’ Everybody signed up.”

In August 2015, AFP news agency interviewed a number of Afghan fighters and relatives of combatants killed in Syria who talked about “vigorous -- and sometimes coerced -- recruitment drive of Shiite Hazara refugees by Iran’s elite Revolutionary Guards Corps propping up Assad’s floundering regime.”²⁷

Of course, the Iranian government has been denying claims that it is paying Afghans to go and fight in Syria or promising them Iranian citizenship. Yet the Iranian parliament has discussed and published several reports on the issue of Iranian residency for Afghan fighters.

According to a report published on the website of the Iranian Parliament’s Research Center in July 2015, the parliament’s National Security Commission has been working on a draft amendment of Article 980 of the Iranian Civil Law which would allow non-Iranians “fighting in line with the ideals of Islamic revolution” to apply for permanent residency permits and Iranian citizenship along with their family members.²⁸

The report includes some suggestions from the Research Center about this matter, one of which is that non-Iranian ‘mujahedeen’ and their families, the families of non-Iranian martyrs, wounded veterans and informants can apply for Iranian citizenship but only if Sepah Pasdaran confirms that their activities have been supervised or ordered by the force.

If approved by parliament, the amendment – which is clearly aimed at Afghan, and to a lesser extent Pakistani,

Shia fighters, as well as non-Iranian spies who work for Iran – essentially gives Sepah Pasdaran a green light to form an official army of non-Iranian Shia mercenaries from around the world who will subsequently become Iranian citizens and can be deployed wherever Sepah Pasdaran's military adventures may take them.

Back in April 2013, the Afghan government promised to investigate the issue of Afghan nationals and refugees being recruited by Sepah Pasdaran, even inside Afghanistan, and sent to fight in Syria, threatening to file a complaint with the UN High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR). Yet, despite all the above-mentioned evidence, a spokesperson for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs recently said the Afghan government “does not have any official documents about Afghans being forced to go to Syria from Afghanistan or Iran. The documents which are to be found on the Internet are not reliable.”²⁹ However, according to Afghan analyst and writer Mohebullah Sharif, Afghan officials simply do not want to raise this issue because “they do not want to upset Iran.”³⁰

Footnotes:

1 References to the Fatemiyoun Brigade or Battalion started to appear regularly in Iranian state-controlled media in late 2014. See, for example, this report in Persian: <http://fa.abna24.com/service/pictorial/archive/2014/12/30/661714/story.html>.

2 ‘Fatemiyoun Brigade general martyred + photos’ (in Persian), *Mashregh News*, 2 March 2015, available: <http://goo.gl/J6W9uf>.

3 ‘Fatemiyoun Brigade changed to army’ (in Persian), *Defaa Press*, 20 May 2014, available: <http://www.defapress.ir/Fa/News/46772>.

4 See: <http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/page?page=49e486f96>.

5 ‘Iranian Revolutionary Guards is sending Afghan refugees to Syria’ (in Persian), *Sobh*, 11 January 2014, available: <http://8am.af/1392/10/21/iran-emigrant-afghan-to-send-sorya/>.

6 Available in Persian at: <http://www.defapress.ir/Fa/News/55808>.

7 The full documentary is available in Persian at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GM4Rgg-9W6g>. Arabic subtitles are available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1G8xbZ-gYRs>.

8 ‘Fatemiyoun Brigade general martyred’, *Mashregh News*, *idem*.

9 See, for example, <http://www.rajanews.com/news/204243>.

10 See, for example, <http://en.abna24.com/service/middle-east-west-asia/archive/2015/03/12/676298/story.html>.

11 *Defaa Press*, *idem*.

12 *Sobh*, *idem*.

13 Christoph Reuter, ‘Syria’s Mercenaries: The Afghans Fighting Assad’s War’, *Spiegel Online*, 11 May 2015, available: <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/afghan-mercenaries-fighting-for-assad-and-stuck-in-syria-a-1032869.html>.

14 *Sobh*, *idem*.

15 ‘Funeral of two defenders the shrine of Sayyeda Zaynab in Qom + Photos’ (in Persian), ABNA, 20 December 2014, available: <http://fa.abna24.com/service/states/archive/2014/12/20/659597/story.html>.

16 See, for example, this one in early May 2015: <http://fa.abna24.com/fa/service/archive/2015/05/03/687727/story.html>.

17 See: <http://fa.abna24.com/fa/service/archive/2015/05/05/687774/story.html>.

18 See: <http://fa.abna24.com/fa/service/archive/2015/05/04/687772/story.html>.

19 See: <http://fa.abna24.com/service/pictorial/archive/2015/05/07/687892/story.html>.

20 ‘Defenders of the Shrine’ stress unity of Iranians, Afghans, Lebanese, Iraqis and Syrians’ (in Persian), *Fars News*, 5 May 2015, available: <http://www.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=13940215000177>.

21 *Fars News*, 31 July 2015, available: <http://farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=13940509000005>.

22 Christoph Reuter, ‘Syria’s Mercenaries’, *Spiegel Online*, *idem*.

23 *Sobh*, *idem*.

24 ‘Exclusive, shocking interview with Kayhan London with a foreign Afghan member of Sepah Qods’ (in Persian), *Kayhan London*, 18 April 2015, available: <http://goo.gl/JYUzPp>.

25 Mark Lobel, ‘The jobless Afghans ‘paid by Iran’ to fight for Assad’, BBC, 18 June 2015, available: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-33187850>.

26 *Spiegel*, *idem*.

27 ‘Iran enlists Afghan refugees as fighters to bolster Syria’s Assad’, AFP, 26 August 2015, available: <http://www.afp.com/en/news/iran-enlists-afghan-refugees-fighters-bolster-syrias-assad>.

28 Available: <http://rc.majlis.ir/fa/report/show/932338>, 14 July 2015.

29 *Spiegel*, *idem*.

30 ‘The Fatemiyoun Brigade in Syria: An alignment coloured with blood’ (in Arabic), *Al-Jazeera*, 4 May 2015, available: <http://goo.gl/56OSRT>. ±See also this film about an Afghani fighter caught by Syrian rebels: www.youtube.com/watch?v=AHZKvwXLY7E



Two photos of three Pakistani Shia fighters in Syria, 2015. Source: Anadolu News Agency, www.youtube.com/watch?v=SdXel1aWpbw



Five Shia Pakistani fighters who were killed in Syria are buried in Iran. Source: <http://fa.abna24.com/service/special/archive/2015/04/23/685900/story.html>

‘More Shia than Sunni mercenaries now fighting in Syria’

There are no reliable statistics on the number of foreign Shia fighters in Syria but most estimates place their number in the tens of thousands.¹⁹⁸ In January 2014, security experts meeting at the Marrakech Security Forum agreed that there were now far more foreign Shia fighters in Syria than Sunni ones (almost double).¹⁹⁹ Their number was estimated to be around 40,000, and the main reason for this increase, they argued, was that the movement of Shia fighters across borders was facilitated by the Syrian and Iranian regimes through official channels, while anti-regime fighters often had to enter Syria clandestinely. Moreover, they pointed out that Sepah Pasdaran now had a “transnational army” of Shia militias that it could deploy in different parts of the world whenever needed.²⁰⁰

Indeed, various commentators and observers²⁰¹ have argued that part of the Iranian regime’s strategy in Syria is to

prepare for the Syrian regime’s collapse and a post-Assad Syria. This includes the ability to continue to exert influence on the ground through an ever-expanding list of militias, including the shabbiha, who are increasingly dependent on Iranian support. The other aim is to ensure that arms shipments to Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Gaza continue, so as to keep them strong, threatening deterrents against Israel and the West.

This strategy does not necessarily require control over the whole of Syria but only a few strategic areas, as discussed above. It is also likely that, in the event of a regime collapse, the Iranian-backed Shia militias, joined by the remnants of the shabbiha, will continue, and perhaps increase, their sectarian insurgency campaign against any future government that is not an ally of the Iranian regime.

New – Pakistani Shia fighters in Syria

There have been a few reports over the past few months about Pakistani Shia fighters fighting and dying in Syria alongside Iranian and Syrian regime forces. For instance, in June 2015, *Al-Jazeera* reported that there has been “a wave of Pakistani Shia fighters migrating to Syria,” following the military campaign in Waziristan the year before, which apparently resulted in a significant decrease of armed presence in the area.¹

In that same month (June 2015), the Pakistani Muslim Scholars Council issued a statement condemning the recruitment of Pakistani youth and their deployment to Syria “with Iranian support and funding.”² The Council also demanded that the Pakistani government stops this flow, threatening to “escalate the situation through mass protests all over Pakistan.”

In May 2015, Turkish news agency *Anadolu* broadcast mobile footage it had obtained showing Pakistani Shia fighters from the Zaynabiyoun Brigade in Aleppo, Syria.³ The footage shows tens of fighters eating, playing volleyball, dancing to Pakistani music and talking in Pashto and Urdu. It also shows the fighters apparently looting a house, undergoing military training and firing artillery shells. When one of them is asked why he had come to Syria, he says: “We came to Syria to fight a holy war. Even if we die a thousand times, we will win against the [Syrian] opposition and Daesh.”

According to *Al-Jazeera*, the Pakistani fighters shown in the footage speak mostly a dialect of Pashto spoken in the area of Koram, which is inhabited by many poor Pakistani Shia tribes.⁴ The inhabitants of this area have for years received support from the Iranian regime against the Taliban, which has frequently attacked their area. This support has reportedly included the supply of light arms and the establishment of military training centres. The prevalent poverty and insecurity may have pushed many youths in the area to take up recruitment offers by Sepah Pasdaran or their agents to go and fight in Syria alongside Syrian regime forces and militias.

Like their Afghan counterparts (see above), Pakistani Shia fighters initially fought within the ranks of Iraqi Shia militias, particularly Asa'eb Ahl al-Haq, which was apparently responsible for their deployment in Syria. An Afghan Shia fighter interviewed by Iranian opposition

newspaper *Kayhan London* in April 2015 was quoted saying, originally, the Afghan and Pakistani forces were in the same battalion with the Syrians and Iraqis, but these forces were later separated.⁵

It seems that, as the number of Pakistani Shia fighters in Syria grew, a special brigade called Zaynabiyoun was formed for them. The name of the Zaynabiyoun Brigade has occasionally appeared in Iranian media reports. For example, a *Mashregh News* report about the Qonayitra offensive in February 2015 said the military operation was conducted by “the Syrian army and their ally groups (Defaa al-Vatani [National Defence Forces], Syrian Hezbollah, the Fatemiyoun and Zaynabiyoun brigades and the Lebanese Islamic Resistance [Hezbollah Lebanon]) under the name of ‘Operation Revenge for the Qonayitra Martyrs’.”⁶

On 9 April 2015, Iranian state-controlled media reported the burial in Qom of seven Pakistani Shia fighters killed during battle in Syria.⁷ Two weeks later, on 23 April, Iranian media reported a similar funeral, held also in Qom, for another five Pakistani Shia fighters killed in Syria.⁸ In both cases, all were said to have been members of the Zaynabiyoun Brigade.

Naame Shaam has documented a few more deaths of Pakistani Shia fighters in Syria (40 in total). Their names and the dates and places of their burial are produced in Appendix 3. The list is based solely on Iranian media reports about

198 See, for example, Saud Al-Sarhan, ‘From Qusair to Yabrud: Shiite foreign fighters in Syria’, *Al-Monitor*, 6 March 2014, available: <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/03/qusair-yabroud-shiite-foreign-fighters-syria.html>

199 Riyadh Qahwaji, ‘40,000 foreign Shiites fighting in Syria: A transnational army led by the [Iranian] Revolutionary Guards’ (in Arabic), *Al-Hayat*, 5 February 2014, available: <http://alhayat.com/Details/600413>.

200 *Ibid.*

201 See, for example, Fulton, Joseph Holliday and Sam Wyer, *Iranian Strategy in Syria*, AEI’s Critical Threats Project and Institute for the Study of War, May 2013, available: <http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/IranianStrategyinSyria-1MAY.pdf>; K. Gilbert, *The Rise of Shi’ite Militias and the Post-Arab Spring Sectarian Threat*, International Institute for Counter-Terrorism, October 2013, available: <http://i-hls.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/Gilbert-ICT-Rise-of-Shiite-militias-and-post-Arab-Spring-sectarian-threat.pdf>.

official funerals held in Iran. The actual number of Pakistani fighters killed in Syria may be much higher.

All of the documented cases were buried in Qom, Iran, and many are said to have come from Parachinar in western Pakistan, near the border with Afghanistan. As with the Afghan fighters killed in Syria, the place and cause of death is never mentioned, only “martyred while defending holy [Shia] shrines in Syria.”

Available information so far indicates that the number of Pakistani Shia fighters in Syria is small compared to that of Afghan or Iraqi Shia fighters (a few hundred, at most) and they appear to be deployed mostly as ill-trained, secondary foot soldiers. However, the formation of the Zaynabiyoun Brigade suggests that their number may be increasing. Furthermore, the Shia community in Pakistan is larger than in Afghanistan.

Footnotes:

1 ‘Al-Zaynabiyou: Pakistanis fighting to defend al-Assad’ (in Arabic), *Al-Jazeera*, 26 June 2015, available: <http://goo.gl/99QNKe>.

2 ‘Pakistan scholar: Iran recruited hundreds of Pakistanis to fight for al-Assad’ (in Arabic), *Arabi 21*, 23 June 2015, available: <http://goo.gl/LQgQY1>.

3 The footage is available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SdXel1aWpbw>.

4 ‘Al-Zaynabiyoun’, *Al-Jazeera*, *idem*.

5 ‘Exclusive, shocking interview with Kayhan London with a foreign Afghan member of Sepah Qods’ (in Persian), *Kayhan London*, 18 April 2015, available: <http://goo.gl/JYuZPp>.

6 *Mashregh News*, 13 February 2015, available in Persian: <http://goo.gl/3aw49h>.

7 See, for example, ‘Photos of Pakistani Shrine Defenders’ funeral in Qom’ (in Persian), *ABNA 24*, 9 April 2015, available: <http://fa.abna24.com/service/pictorial/archive/2015/04/09/682377/story.html>.

8 See, for example, ‘Five Shrine Defenders from Parachinar buried in Qom + Photos’ (in Persian), *ABNA 24*, 23 April 2015, available: <http://fa.abna24.com/service/special/archive/2015/04/23/685900/story.html>.

European fascists

Another interesting phenomenon – though much smaller in scale than that of foreign Shia fighters – is European fascist and far-right groups’ supporting the Syrian regime, with some reportedly sending fighters to Syria.

A rare article by British activist Leila Shrooms, published by the Tahrir International Collective Network in December 2013,²⁰² lists a number of fascist and far-right nationalist groups and organisations from across Europe that have been openly supporting the Syrian regime, whether by going to fight in Syria, raising funds or organising pro-regime demonstrations. The list includes the National Front in France, Forza Nuova and CasaPound in Italy, Golden Dawn and Black Lily in Greece, the British National Party in the UK, and the National Rebirth of Poland, Falanga and All Polish Youth in Poland.

In July 2013, a Greek fascist from a group calling itself Black Lily (Mavros Krinos) revealed in an interview²⁰³ that the little-known group had fighters on the ground in Syria, allegedly the size of a military platoon, and had fought alongside Hezbollah and al-Assad’s forces in the battle of al-Qusayr in Spring 2013. He also claimed that “thousands of Russians, Ukrainians and Poles” from fascist groups have “declared themselves ready to fight... alongside our Syrian brothers in arms... and the lion of Syria,” meaning Bashar al-Assad (assad means lion in Arabic). Asked whether they had participated in any other “struggles” before, such as Kosovo, Iraq or Afghanistan, the Black Lily spokesperson answered no.

These European fascists reportedly join the ranks of both the Syrian army and the so-called Popular Committees, which were established, armed and trained by the Iranian regime to prop up the exhausted regular army, as discussed above. In the above-mentioned interview, the Black Lily fascist describes Hezbollah as “heroic.”

Other European fascist groups have travelled to Syria ‘in solidarity’ with the regime and on so-called ‘fact-finding missions’. Many of these groups are members of the European Solidarity Front, which organised a number of these ‘visits’ in 2013.²⁰⁴

While some of these fascist groups have a history of supporting the Syrian regime, others joined the ‘fight’ after the start of the Syrian revolution in 2011. Shrooms

attributes this rather bizarre phenomenon to a number of factors:

- Anti-imperialist or anti-globalist nationalist sentiments (they believe the al-Assad regime is fighting against US imperialism);
- Anti-semitism (they believe the al-Assad regime is fighting against Israel, their “age-old foe”);
- Islamophobia (they believe the al-Assad regime is fighting against Islamists); and
- Twisted concerns regarding growing Arab and Muslim migration to Europe, where fascists in a number of countries have been protesting against Syrian refugees and have reportedly attacked them.

“All of these beliefs,” Shrooms adds, “rest on fallacy and an uncritical perpetuation of [the Syrian] regime narratives. They are also positions shared (although without the racist element) by sections of the [European] left.”²⁰⁵

In an article published in February 2014, Naame Shaam added another factor: “These fascist groups seem to share the same mentality and value system with the Syrian regime, Sepah Pasdaran and Hezbollah Lebanon. They all believe in their supremacy, which is often based on racist mythologies, and are ready to eliminate, by any means possible, those they regard as inferior to them.”²⁰⁶

It is worth noting that this phenomenon has been largely overlooked by European mainstream media and politicians, while the issue of Islamist extremists of European origin fighting in Syria has frequently made front-page headlines. This obsession with European jihadists, who are often presented as the “biggest threat” facing the West, are then used as an excuse to not provide serious military support to the moderate factions within the Syrian opposition (more on this below, in the ‘Iran’s Vietnam’ chapter).

‘Sleeping with the enemy’

There is enough evidence by now to believe the claim, often dismissed as a conspiracy theory, that the Syrian and the Iranian regimes have made use of, and even facilitated, the activities of extremist Islamist groups, such as Daesh and Jabhat al-Nusra, in order to derail the Syrian revolution (towards militarisation and sectarianism) and justify their military actions against protesters and rebels.

The first indicator of such efforts was the suspicious release of Islamist extremists from Syrian jails soon after the start of the revolution, which is often cited by Syrians as proof of a carefully planned plot by the regime to present the revolution as a bunch of ‘Islamist terrorists’ supported by the West and the Gulf countries to destabilise Syria (this has been the Syrian and Iranian regimes’ discourse from the beginning).

The most famous story is perhaps that of Zahran ‘Al-loush, Hassan Abboud and Isa al-Sheikh, three leaders of three main Islamist factions fighting in Syria today (the Islam Brigade, which later became the Islam Army and then the Islamic Front; Ahrar al-Sham and Suqour al-Islam respectively). A rare picture of the three ‘friends’ standing together, taken upon their release from the Saidnaya prison in mid-2011, was published online in late 2013.²⁰⁷ All three were released from prison following a presidential ‘amnesty’ on 31 May 2011.²⁰⁸ Around the same time, Abu Mohammad al-Fateh al-Jolani, the leader of the Syrian offshoot of Al-Qaeda, al-Nusra Front, also returned from Iraq. They all went on to form different Islamist groups that became some of the largest and most heavily armed and supported factions fighting against the regime in Syria.

202 Leila Shrooms, ‘Syria: Who are Assad’s fascist supporters?’, *Tahrir ICN*, 11 December 2013, available: <http://tahriricn.wordpress.com/2013/12/11/syria-who-are-assads-fascist-supporters/>.

203 ‘Syria: The Greek Nationalist Socialists fighting alongside Asaad’s regime are far more dangerous than Golden Dawn’, *Glykosymoritis*, 28 September 2013, available: <http://glykosymoritis.blogspot.ro/2013/09/syria-greek-nationalist-socialists-that.html>. The original interview in Greek can be found at <http://tinyurl.com/lffdhxr>.

204 For more details, see: *Germano Monti*, ‘A red-brown alliance for Syria’, *Qantara*, 14 April 2014, available: <http://en.qantara.de/content/the-syrian-conflict-a-red-brown-alliance-for-syria>.

205 Leila Shrooms, *idem*.

206 ‘European fascists fighting in Syria alongside regime forces, Sepah Pasdaran and Hezbollah’, *Naame Shaam*, 11 February 2014, available: <http://www.naameshaam.org/en/european-fascists-fighting-in-syria-alongside-regime-forces-sepah-pas-daran-and-hezbollah/>.

207 Bassel al-Junaidy, ‘The tale of “the friends of Saidnaya”: the strongest three men in Syria’, *Republic Group for Studies*, 23 October 2013, available: <http://therepublicgs.net/2013/11/04/the-tale-of-the-friends-of-saidnaya-the-strongest-three-men-in-syria-today/>.

208 *Ibid.*

Together with these leaders, hundreds of Islamist extremists who had been held in Syrian prisons (many of them were arrested upon their return from 'jihad' in Iraq and Lebanon) were also released, particularly from Saidnaya, only to resume their 'jihad' in Syria.²⁰⁹ A Syrian activist who was released from Saidnaya at the same time was quoted by *The Telegraph* in January 2014 saying: "There was no explanation for the release of the jihadis. I saw some of them being paraded on Syrian state television, accused of being Jabhat al-Nusra and planting car bombs. This was impossible, as they had been in prison with me at the time the regime said the bombs were planted. [The regime] was using them to promote [its] argument that the revolution was made of extremists."²¹⁰ Meanwhile, so many other political prisoners (leftist, secular, civil society activists, etc.) were kept in incarceration or killed under torture.

In July 2012, *The Sunday Telegraph* published an interview with the former Syrian ambassador to Iraq, who was the most prominent regime defector at the time. Nawaf al-Fares said jihadist units that he himself had helped send into Iraq to fight US forces were now "immolating themselves in Syria, at the behest of the regime." One such action, he claimed, was a double suicide bomb outside the military intelligence complex in al-Qazzaz in Damascus in May 2012, in which 55 people were killed and 370 wounded. "I know for certain that not a single serving intelligence official was harmed during that explosion, as the whole office had been evacuated 15 minutes beforehand," he said. "All the victims were passers-by instead. All these major explosions have been perpetrated by al-Qaeda through cooperation with the security forces."²¹¹

Al-Fares also claimed that he personally knew of several Syrian government "liaison officers" who still dealt with al-Qaeda. "Al-Qaeda would not carry out activities without the knowledge of the regime," he said. "The Syrian government would like to use al-Qaeda as a bargaining chip with the West – to say: 'it is either them or us'."²¹²

Similar allegations were made by another significant regime defector in July 2013. Afaq Ahmad, the former right-hand man of General Jamil Hasan, the head of Syria's Air Force Intelligence and one of Bashar al-Asad's most brutal and trusted henchmen, defected after regime forces arrested and murdered 13-year-old

Hamza al-Khatib in 2011, in an infamous crime that became one of the early iconic symbols of the regime's brutal response to the popular protests. In an interview with a Syrian opposition website, Ahmad said the mukhabarat (intelligence services) had infiltrated jihadist and non-jihadist rebel groups in Syria up to the command level.²¹³

"The jihadist groups and brigades were very useful for the regime because they provided a justification for the regime's insistence on a military solution, and provided it with legitimacy under the pretext of the war on terror... These groups did not cross the red lines that were agreed on by the regime and these groups' sponsors. This included the regime turning a blind eye to the killing of some Alawis and Druze in order to push them [the minorities] to rally around the regime and hold on to it."

And the game went far beyond Syria's frontiers. In February 2014, the US Treasury released a new list of sanctions targeting companies and persons it accused of breaching the international sanctions against Iran.²¹⁴ Like previous editions, the list included companies and people facilitating the arming of the Syrian regime and Iran's nuclear programme. The new addition this time was the inclusion of one of al-Qaeda's key operators who had been raising funds and recruiting fighters for the Syrian regime's ostensible enemy number one, al-Qaeda. And he had been doing so from inside Iran.

The new sanctions targeted "a key Iran-based al-Qa'ida facilitator who supports al-Qa'ida's vital facilitation network in Iran, that operates there with the knowledge of Iranian authorities," the Treasury said in a press release.²¹⁵ Olimzhon Adkhamovich Sadikov, also known as Jafar al-Uzbeki and Jafar Muidinov, is an Uzbek national who is based in Mashhad, Iran, near the border with Afghanistan. His network, according to the Treasury, has been using Iran as a transit point for moving funds and foreign fighters through Turkey to Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria. Al-Uzbeki also facilitated the travel of numerous al-Qaeda extremists in and out of Pakistan and Afghanistan by obtaining Iranian visas and passports for them. All this was apparently done "with the knowledge of the Iranian authorities."

Back in July 2011, the US Treasury had added Ezedin Abdel Aziz Khalil, also known as Yasin al-Suri, to its Iran sanctions list. In October 2012, it also targeted Adel

Radi Saqr al-Wahabi al-Harbi. The first is said to be the head of the al-Qaeda network in Iran, and the second his deputy. The US government designated a \$17 million award for any information leading to their location. Yasin al-Suri, a Syrian national, had been temporarily detained in Iran in 2011 but was later released. As a member of the so-called Islamic Jihad Union, Jafar al-Uzbeki was an associate of Yasin al-Suri and helped him raise funds for his Iran-based activities. Among other things, his network facilitated the transfer of funds from Gulf-based donors to various al-Qaeda groups in Syria, including Jabhat al-Nusrah.²¹⁶

In February 2012, the Treasury also targeted the Iranian Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS) for “its support to terrorist groups, including al-Qa’ida.”²¹⁷ “MOIS has facilitated the movement of al-Qa’ida operatives in Iran,” the department said, “and provided them with documents, identification cards, and passports. MOIS also provided money and weapons to al-Qa’ida in Iraq (AQI).” Later that year, AQI would become ISIS, also known as the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and dubbed by Syrians as *Da’esh*, a mock name derived from the group’s name’s initials in Arabic.²¹⁸

209 For more on the ‘Saidnaya experiment’ (making and preparing jihadists inside the infamous prison), see: Firas Sa’d, ‘On the ‘Saidnaya experiment and its repercussions for the Syrian revolution: Organising Islamists as a first rehearsal for a civil conflict’ (in Arabic), *Republic Group for Studies*, 26 December 2013, available: <http://tinyurl.com/n7fkb8x>. See also: Rania Abouzeid, ‘The Jihad Next Door: The Syrian roots of Iraq’s newest civil war’, *Politico*, 23 June 2014, available: <http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2014/06/al-qaeda-iraq-syria-108214.html>; Mohammed Habash, ‘Radicals are Assad’s best friends’, *The National*, 1 January 2014, available: <http://www.thenational.ae/thenationalconversation/comment/radicals-are-assads-best-friends#full>.

210 Ruth Sherlock and Richard Spencer, ‘Syria’s Assad accused of boosting al-Qaeda with secret oil deals’, *The Telegraph*, 20 January 2014, available: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/10585391/Syrias-Assad-accused-of-boosting-al-Qaeda-with-secret-oil-deals.html>.

211 Ruth Sherlock, ‘Exclusive interview: Why I defected from Bashar al-Assad’s regime, by former diplomat Nawaf Fares’, *The Sunday Telegraph*, 14 Jul 2012, available: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/9400537/Exclusive-interview-why-I-defected-from-Bashar-al-Assads-regime-by-former-diplomat-Nawaf-Fares.html>.

212 *Ibid.*

One would imagine that the US sanctions are decided following extensive research and reliable intelligence, not on the basis of fabricated or speculative media reports. So it is safe, we think, to assume that the information above is reliable and is not just part of a psychological warfare. Supporting both sides of a conflict is an old war tactic. Indeed, the Iranian regime’s support for and facilitation of al-Qaeda’s activities is nothing new – it dates back at least to the US embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998.²¹⁹ Over the past two decades, the Iranian regime has also allowed many al-Qaeda operatives “a degree of freedom” in Iran as part of its proxy war with the US in Afghanistan and Iraq.²²⁰ One Iranian official told NBC News in March 2013 that “no nation has captured as many al-Qaida members as Iran.”²²¹

213 Riyadh Khaled, ‘Interview with Afaq Ahmad: On the Alawites, the infiltration of Islamist groups and the assassination of Bashar al-Assad’ (in Arabic), *All4Syria*, 27 July 2013, available: <http://all4syria.info/Archive/90775>. For English, see: Michael Weiss, ‘Assad’s no enemy of al-Qaeda’, *Now*, 31 July 2013, available: <https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/commentaryanalysis/assads-no-enemy-of-al-qaeda>.

214 US Department of the Treasury, ‘Treasury targets networks linked to Iran’, 6 February 2014, available: <http://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/jl2287.aspx>.

215 *Ibid.*

216 *Ibid.*

217 US Department of the Treasury, ‘Treasury Designates Iranian Ministry of Intelligence and Security for Human Rights Abuses and Support for Terrorism’, 16 February 2012, available: <http://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/tg1424.aspx>.

218 See: ‘After ‘Daesh’, Syrians invent new mocking name for Hezbollah Lebanon: Halesh’, *Naame Shaam*, 25 February 2014, available: <http://www.naameshaam.org/en/hezbollah-lebanon-halesh/>.

219 ‘Judge finds Sudan and Iran liable for 1998 embassy bombings’, *Legal Times*, 1 December 2011, available: <http://legaltimes.typepad.com/blt/2011/12/judge-finds-sudan-and-iran-liable-for-1998-embassy-bombings.html>.

220 Michael B Kelley, ‘Why is Iran letting a top al-Qaeda operative pump fighters and cash into Syria?’, *Business Insider*, 1 February 2014, available: <http://www.businessinsider.com/al-qaeda-yasin-al-suri-working-from-iran-2014-2>. See also: Dania Saadi, ‘Iran official admits to aiding Zarqawi in Iraq, Al-Awsat says’, *Bloomberg*, 11 August 2004, available: <http://www.bloomberg.com/apps/news?pid=newsarchive&sid=av.QsBGSCP0g>.

221 Robert Windrem, ‘Exclusive: Iran was holding bin Laden son-in-law Abu Ghaith, US officials say’, *NBC News*, 7 March 2013, available: http://investigations.nbcnews.com/_news/2013/03/07/17227424-exclusive-iran-was-holding-bin-laden-son-in-law-abu-ghaith-us-officials-say.

Many in the US intelligence circles believe that Iran held onto them for use as “bargaining chips.”²²² During 2013 and 2014, however, many of them were ‘freed’ by the Iranian authorities and left the country.²²³

In May 2014, in a strongly worded response to al-Qaeda’s leader Ayman al-Zawahiri’s attempt at reconciliation with Daesh, the latter group’s spokesman Abu Mohamad al-Adnani made a startling admission: al-Qaeda had been ordering its fighters and branches to refrain from attacking Iran so as to preserve the group’s supply network in the country: “The Islamic State has kept abiding by the advice and instructions of the sheikhs and figures of jihad. This is why the Islamic State has not attacked the Rawafid [or rejectionists, a term used by Sunni extremists to describe Shia Muslims] in Iran since its establishment, and left the Rawafid safe in Iran, and held back the outrage of its soldiers, despite its ability, then, to turn Iran into bloodbaths. [The Islamic State] has controlled its anger all these years and endured accusations of collaboration with its worst enemy, Iran, for refraining from targeting it, leaving the Rawafid there to live in safety, *acting upon the orders of al-Qaeda to safeguard its interests and supply lines in Iran...* Let history record that Iran is indebted to al-Qaeda.”²²⁴ (emphasis added)”

Internal Syrian state security documents leaked to the media in early 2014 provided further proof that some Islamist armed groups fighting in Syria, particularly Daesh, had been deeply infiltrated by the Syrian regime and had been coordinating with it to some degree. One such document is an alleged letter signed by Colonel Haydar Haydar, the head of the ‘security committee’ in the town of Nabl, near Aleppo, and addressed to Major-General Ali Mamlouk, the head of the National Security Office.²²⁵ It reveals arrangements for training and arming hundreds of Shia volunteers, who are said to be “ready to fight on frontlines or join the ranks of Islamist groups.”

“We already have 150 especially trained volunteers,” the letter says, “in addition to 600 who underwent [normal] military training when doing their military service.” A list of the names of over 200 fighters from the predominantly Shia towns of Nabl and Zahraa is enclosed with the letter. “Volunteers keep coming in to defend their homeland,” the letter adds. “We expect their number to reach 2,500 when weapons are made available.... The volunteers are ready to carry out any task assigned to

them within these [Islamist] groups, particularly in light of the good results that this method has achieved in our area recently, which is implemented in coordination with the concerned parties in the northern areas.”

Nabl and Zahraa occupy a strategic location because they allow regime forces and militias to control the Aleppo highway. This, according to the letter, enables them to “go in and out of Iraq, in coordination with our allies on the Iraqi side, to move fighters and equipment.” Lifting the opposition’s siege on the two towns was part of the Iranian-brokered deal in Homs in May 2014, which was discussed in detail above.

The leaked letter also reveals that the Syrian regime’s security apparatus had deeply infiltrated and used Daesh. “We now have many members and strong leaders within the [Islamic] State in Iraq and Sham in the northern region in general,” it says. “They can facilitate our new volunteers’ joining the ranks of the group by recommending them and guaranteeing that no suspicions about them are raised.” This, the letter adds, “will guarantee detailed and constant information about the armed men’s movements, their numbers, equipment and plans.”²²⁶

The letter then highlights the difficulty that Iraqi pro-regime fighters are facing when joining Islamist groups because of their names and religious sect (Shia). So a number of Syrian ID cards are requested as a solution, in addition to a request that the salaries of the volunteers are raised and that they are provided with all sorts of weapons and vehicles.

Allegations that Daesh fighters captured or killed by the Free Syrian Army (following its official fallout with Daesh in early 2014) possessed Syrian and Iranian IDs and passports have been made by the Syrian opposition before. In February 2014, the National Coalition released a four-page memo entitled “The Islamic State in Iraq and Sham and the Assad regime: from marriage of convenience to real partnership.”²²⁷ The memo details evidence of such ‘partnership’ based on confessions of captured Daesh members, testimonies of FSA members and material found at Daesh bases taken by the FSA. The latter allegedly includes Russian passports, Iranian visas and Iranian SIM cards, but the video showing the material referenced in the footnotes seems to have been taken down since.²²⁸

That same month (February 2014), the former leader of the Islamic Front Zahran Aloush made similar allegations during an interview, claiming that a number of local Daesh commanders that the Front had killed or captured turned out to be Syrian army officers or had travelled to Iran, judging by the Iranian passports and visas found on them.²²⁹

In January 2014, *Al-Arabiya* TV channel aired video footage showing Daesh members detained by the FSA, whom the latter accused of “cooperating with the regime of President Bashar al-Assad and of seeking to divide rebels.”²³⁰ One of the detainees is quoted saying: “It happened once that a Syrian regime officer and 11 others defected and drove their vehicle through Masila [north of Raqqa]. We received orders to arrest them and hand them over back to the regime.” Another detainee claimed that the group’s leader in the province of al-Raqqa, known as Abu Anas al-Iraqi, and whose unit apparently specialised in kidnappings, car bombs and targeted assassinations of FSA members, was “financed directly by the regime, through Iran and Iraq.”

The clearest evidence to date of links between Daesh and Jabhat al-Nusra on the one hand and the Syrian and Iranian regimes on the other is perhaps the secret oil deals between the two. In January 2014, *The Telegraph* published a report, based on Western intelligence sources, claiming that both al-Nusra and Daesh had been selling oil and gas from wells under their control to and through the Syrian regime.²³¹ The report suggests

that the regime began “collaborating actively” with these groups in spring 2013. “When Jabhat al-Nusra seized control of Syria’s most lucrative oil fields in the eastern province of Deir al-Zour, it began funding its operations in Syria by selling crude oil, with sums raised in the millions of dollars.” One intelligence source commented: “Assad’s vow to strike terrorism with an iron fist is nothing more than bare-faced hypocrisy. At the same time as peddling a triumphant narrative about the fight against terrorism, his regime has made deals to serve its own interests and ensure its survival.”

The Telegraph report corroborated previous media reports about oil dealings between the Syrian regime and al-Qaeda-affiliated groups. For example, a *Reuters* report in January 2013 quoted locals in al-Mayadin saying Jabhat al-Nusra had been transporting crude oil in large tankers from the nearby al-Ward oil and gas field to Deir al-Zor, which was under regime control at the time.²³²

222 See, for example, Jason Burke, ‘What is the relationship between Iran and al-Qaida?’, *The Guardian*, 23 April 2013, available: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/apr/23/iran-al-qaida>; Peter Bergen, ‘Strange bedfellows -- Iran and al Qaeda’, *CNN*, 11 March 2013, available: <http://edition.cnn.com/2013/03/10/opinion/bergen-iran-al-qaeda/>.

223 See, for example, Adam Goldman, ‘Senior al-Qaeda figure leaves Iran amid a series of departures by terrorist suspects’, *The Washington Post*, 14 February 2014, available: http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/senior-al-qaeda-figure-leaves-iran-amid-a-series-of-departures-by-terrorist-suspects/2014/02/14/b3291eda-9429-11e3-83b9-1f024193bb84_story.html.

224 ‘Abu Mohammad al-Adnani, ISIS’s spokesman: Iran is indebted to al-Qaeda’, *Janoubia*, 14 May 2014, available: <http://janoubia.com/180155>. For English, see: Bill Roggio, ‘“Iran owes al Qaeda invaluable,” ISIS spokesman says’, *Long War Journal*, 12 May 2014, available: http://www.longwarjournal.org/threat-matrix/archives/2014/05/iran_owes_al_qaeda_invaluable.php.

225 ‘A leaked document addressed to Ali Mamlouk reveals links with ISIS fighters’ (in Arabic), *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 4 April 2014, available: <http://www.aawsat.com/details.asp?section=4&is-sueno=12911&article=767159>. For an English translation and commentary, see: <http://www.naameshaam.org/en/leaked-documents-confirm-syrian-regimes-infiltration-of-al-qaeda-offshoot/>. The documents were originally published by a little-known website called Damascus Leaks (www.damascusleaks.com).

226 *Ibid.*

227 Syrian Opposition Coalition – Geneva Media Unit, ‘Memo: ISIS and the Assad regime: From marriage of convenience to partnership’, 10 February 2014, available: <http://syriageneva2.org/?p=242&lang=en>. The original Arabic is available at <http://syriageneva2.org/?p=242&lang=ar>.

228 The link is <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g8lQpl3h7fs>.

229 ‘Alloush: [ISIS] leader Hajji Bakir carries an Iranian passport’ (in Arabic), *Suriya al-Ghad*, 26 February 2014, available: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gvkN6gAq4_k

230 ‘Al-Qaeda detainees reveal ties with Assad’, *Al-Arabiya*, 20 January 2014, available: <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2014/01/21/Al-Qaeda-detainees-reveal-ties-with-Assad.html>.

231 Ruth Sherlock and Richard Spencer, ‘Syria’s Assad accused of boosting al-Qaeda with secret oil deals’, *The Telegraph*, 20 January 2014, available: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/10585391/Syrias-Assad-accused-of-boosting-al-Qaeda-with-secret-oil-deals.html>.

232 ‘Eastern Syrian town lives under al Qaeda rules’, *Reuters*, 30 January 2013, available: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/01/30/syria-crisis-town-idUSL5N0AX8MU20130130>.

Another report, published in *The Guardian* in May 2013, claimed al-Nusra had “struck deals” with regime forces to allow the transfer of Deir al-Zor’s crude across the front lines to the Mediterranean coast.²³³

The article quotes a Syrian fighter from Ahrar al-Sham saying the Syrian regime was paying more than 150 million Syrian pounds (about 2.3 million US dollars) a month to Jabhat al-Nusra to “guarantee oil is kept pumping through two major oil pipelines [to] Baniyas and Latakia.” “Middlemen trusted by both sides,” he added, “are to facilitate the deal and transfer money to the organisation.”

In April that year, the EU had lifted sanctions on oil exports from rebel-held areas in Syria in order to “aid the opposition,” leading to a scramble for control over wells and pipelines. As a result, open-air refineries were set up and crude oil was being stored in ditches and heated in metal tanks by wood fires, shrouding the area with black smoke and exposing the local inhabitants to the dangers of the thick smog and the frequent explosions.²³⁴

And it was not only oil. In a long interview published in *Al-Hayat* newspaper in April 2014, a Free Army commander claimed Daesh was selling grain to the regime while Syrians were dying of starvation.²³⁵ “As the fighting between the Free Army and Daesh intensified,” he said, “the latter struck a deal with the regime to sell it the two-year grain stocks they had put their hands on and had hidden away in Deir al-Zor. They sold a kilo of wheat, maize, lentils or barley for 8 Syrian pounds only, when the actual price, depending on the quality, was between 30 and 100 pounds. The regime would then transport them from Deir al-Zor to the areas under its control.” The commander also claimed that he used to receive information about the convoys transporting the grains and had seen some with his own eyes when attacking them on their way to the coastal area.

Other pieces of evidence of collaboration between Daesh and the regime often cited by Syrians include the fact that, until recently, the regime’s troops and air force had largely avoided clashing with and bombing Daesh bases and strongholds, while continuing to bombard and besiege all other armed factions. And vice versa: while targeting and killing rival opposition activists and leaders, Daesh almost stopped all fighting against the regime around mid-2013.

This has been confirmed by various testimonies. A Daesh defector is quoted in *The Telegraph* article mentioned above saying: “We were confident that the regime would not bomb us. We always slept soundly in our bases.”²³⁶ In the above-mentioned *Al-Hayat* interview, the Syrian rebel commander also says: “About eight months ago, they [Daesh] completely stopped all fighting with the regime. They would just go and put their hand on any liberated area, and ‘liberate’ the liberated. Daesh is today busy attacking the opposition... they either impose what they want, or threaten [others] with explosions and suicide bombs. That’s how they controlled the areas liberated from the regime.”²³⁷

To sum up, there is abundant evidence that both the Syrian and the Iranian regimes have infiltrated, collaborated and used al-Qaeda-affiliated groups to serve their own interests, either by aiding them and then using them against their opponents, or trading their extensive knowledge of these groups’ networks and figures with Western powers, and even selling them off, in exchange for being allowed to stay in power, or by claiming to be victims of terrorism so as to discredit all their opponents and legitimise their brutal crackdown on them. Syrian opposition leader Burhan Ghalyoun has dubbed this “three-way strategy” as “the business of terrorism.”²³⁸

Moreover, the US administration, which has deployed similar strategies in the past, seems to be happy to play along. In June 2014, Anne Barnard of *The New York Times* tweeted that a US government adviser had told her that fighting Daesh was “not [a] priority” for the US government because Daesh was “useful in tarring all insurgents & framing choice as Assad/Daesh.”²³⁹

The events in Syria and Iraq over the past two years seemed to confirm this claim, at least until August 2014, when the UN Security Council adopted a resolution, under the binding Chapter VII of the United Nations Charter, calling on all member states to “act to suppress the flow of foreign fighters, financing and other support to Islamist extremist groups in Iraq and Syria,” namely Daesh and Jabhat al-Nusra.²⁴⁰ The Syrian and Iranian regimes suddenly started to sell themselves to the West as ‘partners’ in combating terrorism (more on this in the ‘Iran’s Vietnam’ chapter).

Update on the relationship between Daesh and the Syrian and Iranian regimes

Since the publication of the first edition of this report in November 2014, more evidence has emerged of links between the Syrian and Iranian regimes on the one hand and Daesh and al-Qaeda-affiliated groups on the other. In addition to releasing Islamist extremists from prison, facilitating the movement of foreign fighters and secret oil and arms deals, this relationship has been most obvious in the Syrian regime's consistent strategy of targeting moderate rebels while largely avoiding Daesh and al-Qaeda-affiliated groups.

In December 2014, *NBC News* published exclusive data, compiled by IHS Jane's Terrorism and Insurgency Center (JTIC), that shows the Syrian regime and Daesh, despite presenting themselves to the world as 'sworn enemies' that would wipe each other off the battlefield, have in fact been "delicately dancing around each other."¹

The data reveals that around 64 percent of verifiable Daesh attacks in Syria in 2014 targeted other non-state groups. Only 13 percent of the group's attacks during the examined period (the year through 21 November 2014) targeted Syrian regime forces. Similarly, of 982 Syrian regime's military operations, only six percent directly targeted Daesh. The head of JTIC, Matthew Henman, is quoted saying the figures suggest that Daesh and al-Assad's forces have embraced the "clever strategy" of mostly "ignoring each other."

A Syrian commentator describes the Syrian regime's strategy on Daesh as a one of "don't fight Daesh; direct it."² In other words, the Syrian regime has deliberately allowed Daesh to target, weaken and even eliminate rebel groups fighting al-Assad, to then presents itself to the West as the only available 'partner' that can fight Daesh.

This strategy has been successfully implemented time and again in various parts of Syria. For instance, in late March and early April 2015, Daesh was allowed to enter the Yarmouk Palestinian refugee camp in Damascus, even though it had been under a suffocating siege by regime forces for over two years. Whatever the actual tactical aim was – whether it was sparking a rift between Daesh and Jabhat al-Nusra and other Islamist groups or allowing Daesh to enter the southern suburbs of Damas-

cus and on to the rebel strongholds in Daraa – it was obvious that the advance of Daesh into Yarmouk was "a regime-blessed tactic."³

Another example is targeting rebel areas in Aleppo with barrel bombs and other forms of aerial bombardment in order to weaken the rebels and enable Daesh to take over the areas they control. In June 2015, a post on the "US Embassy Syria" Twitter account accused the Syrian regime of backing Daesh against the rebels in Aleppo. "Reports indicate that the regime is making air strikes in support of ISIL's (Daesh's) advance on Aleppo, aiding extremists against Syrian population," the tweet read. "With these latest reports, [the Syrian military] is not only avoiding ISIL (Daesh) lines, but actively seeking to bolster their position," another tweet added.⁴

Even the US Secretary of State John Kerry has admitted that the Assad regime and Daesh are "dependent on one another." In a speech delivered in November 2014 at an annual conference on "transformational trends" organised by *Foreign Policy*, Kerry said, not only do the two lean on each other to stay in power but "they are symbiotic." Al-Assad "purports to be the last line of defense against ISIL (Daesh)," he added, but "both are stronger as a result."⁵

233 Julian Borger and Mona Mahmood, 'EU decision to lift Syrian oil sanctions boosts jihadist groups', *The Guardian*, 19 May 2013, available: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/may/19/eu-syria-oil-jihadist-al-qaida>.

234 *Ibid.*

235 Faysal Abdul-Karim, 'Abu Uday: Daesh is selling grain to the regime while people starve' (in Arabic), *Al-Hayat*, 28 April 2014, available: <http://tinyurl.com/pneorf2>.

236 Ruth Sherlock and Richard Spencer, *idem*.

237 Faysal Abdul-Karim, *idem*.

238 Burhan Ghalyoun, 'The business of terrorism... Iran, Al-Maliki, and Al-Assad', *Al-Araby al-Jadeed*, 19 June 2014, available: <http://www.alaraby.co.uk/opinion/5ba50f79-ec53-4f6b-89d6-be7d3b339db0>. And English translation is available at <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/articles/middle-east/12245-the-business-of-terrorism-iran-al-maliki-and-al-assad>.

239 Anne Barnard, tweet, 12 June 2014, 4:12 PM, available: <https://twitter.com/ABarnardNYT/status/477226933659660288>.

240 Security Council, 'Security Council adopts Resolution 2170 (2014) condemning gross, widespread abuse of human rights by extremist groups in Iraq, Syria', 15 August 2014, available: <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2014/sc11520.doc.htm>

Unfortunately, none of the above reports mention the Iranian regime's role in all of this, even though everyone knows that Sepah Pasdaran effectively controls the Syrian regime's military strategy. In fact, Iran's own dealings with Daesh and al-Qaeda are nothing new.

As mentioned above, the US Treasury has sanctioned key operatives in an al-Qaeda network based in Iran that has been supporting al-Qaeda-affiliated groups in Syria, such as Jabhat al-Nusra, with transferring funds and foreign fighters from Iran via Turkey, "with the knowledge of Iranian authorities."⁶ Many of the senior members of this Iran-based al-Qaeda network are now reportedly part of Khorasan,⁷ a small group affiliated with al-Qaeda that was targeted by the US in Syria at the beginning of its military campaign against Daesh. According to some media reports, however, the group appears to be re-grouping with a fresh influx of fighters "awaiting the order to start 'shooting the birds'."⁸

In March 2015, five senior members of al-Qaeda were released by the Iranian authorities as part of a prisoner exchange deal with al-Qaeda's branch in Yemen, according to media reports.⁹ The five were released in exchange for an Iranian diplomat who had been held by the group. They include Saif al-Adl, one of al-Qaeda's most senior leaders who stepped in to serve as the terrorist group's interim leader immediately after Osama bin Laden's death. He is listed on the FBI's 'most wanted' terrorist list. Gen. Michael T. Flynn, the former head of the US Defense Intelligence Agency, was quoted by *The New York Times* saying the release of Saif al-Adl will act like "a shot of energy" in the leadership of al-Qaeda.¹⁰ "The collusion between al-Qaeda and Iran is something we have seen before. And this trade, if known by the US, should have been included as part of the Iran deal negotiations," he added.

Back in 2004, the 9/11 Commission Report concluded that the topic of Iran's relationship with al-Qaeda "requires further investigation by the US government."¹¹ This is because one "cannot truly understand Daesh today without examining the agendas of [the] regimes in Iran and Syria," as Michael Weiss and Hassan Hassan wrote in their book, *Daesh: Inside the Army of Terror*.¹²

But instead of launching an investigation, Barack Obama's administration has chosen to partner with the Iranian regime in the battle against Daesh in Iraq and Syria. In a

leaked letter to Iran's supreme leader, Obama reassured Ayatollah Ali Khamenei that the US-led coalition's air strikes in Syria would not target Bashar al-Assad and his forces.¹³

Indeed, Washington and Damascus may not be directly coordinating their military plans targeting Daesh, but there appears to be a *de facto* deal between them in this regard.¹⁴ In an interview with the BBC in February 2015, Bashar al-Assad revealed that Washington was sharing information on coalition air strikes with his regime "through third parties."¹⁵

Other regional powers, such as Turkey and the Arab Gulf states, may have also facilitated and cooperated with Daesh and al-Qaeda-affiliated groups, each for their own agenda.¹⁶ But the Iranian and Syrian regimes' role in the rise of Daesh and Jabhat al-Nusra has been arguably way more cynical and way more harmful to the Syrian revolution. In the words of former White House staffer Michael Doran, "Iran and Syria have played a far more pernicious role in the rise of Daesh than have the Gulf monarchies."¹⁷

And now Russia appears to be playing a similar game. The country's secret service has reportedly been helping Caucasian jihadists join Daesh in Syria, according to an investigation by *Novaya Gazeta*, one of the few independent newspapers left in Russia. The *Daily Beast* reported that, based on extensive fieldwork in one village in the North Caucasus, reporter Elena Milashina concluded that Putin's Federal Security Service (FSB) has been "controlling the flow of jihadists" from the village into Syria, where they join up not only with Daesh but also other radical Islamist factions.¹⁸

"In other words, Russian officials are adding to the ranks of terrorists which the Russian government has deemed a collective threat to the security and longevity of its dictatorial ally on the Mediterranean, Bashar al-Assad. [...] It may sound paradoxical – helping the enemy of your friend – but the logic is actually straightforward: Better the terrorists go abroad and fight in Syria than blow things up in Russia. Penetrating and co-opting terrorism also has a long, well-attested history in the annals of Chekist tradecraft."¹⁹

Other evidence of collaboration between Daesh and the Syrian, Iranian and Russian regimes includes allegations of secretive oil deals between the two sides, which be-

came a hot top and the subject of mutual accusations between Russia and Turkey following the downing of a Russian warplane by Turkey near the Syrian border in late November 2015.²⁰

On 25 November 2015, the US government officially accused the Assad regime of purchasing oil from Daesh and blacklisted a Syrian-Russian businessman, among others, for allegedly facilitating these transactions. A Syrian-born businessman who has a dual Syrian-Russian citizenship, George Haswani is said to have been using his firm, HESCO Engineering and Construction Co., for facilitating oil trades between the Assad regime and Daesh.²¹

A few days later, in early December 2015, a senior US Treasury official revealed that Daesh was selling as much as \$40 million a month of oil and had made more than \$500 million from this trade. Speaking at Chatham House in London, Adam Szubin added that the “far greater amount” of the Daesh oil goes to the Assad regime, while some is consumed internally in Daesh-controlled areas and some goes across the border into Turkey.²²

Around the same time, a spokeswoman for the German Foreign Ministry said Germany has evidence of the Assad regime buying oil from Daesh. “The Assad regime has received large amounts of oil from [Daesh],” she said. “We have evidence; we have indications showing that this is the case.”²³ Asked about the Russian accusations that Turkey was also doing this, the spokeswoman said the German authorities have no information supporting this particular claim.

Footnotes:

1 ‘Syria, ISIS have been ‘ignoring’ each other on battlefield, data suggests’, *NBC News*, 11 December 2014, available: <http://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/isis-terror/syria-isis-have-been-ignoring-each-other-battlefield-data-suggests-n264551>.

2 Haid Haid, ‘Assad’s strategy: don’t fight Daesh; direct it’, *Now*, 15 June 2015, available: <https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/commentary/565398-assads-strategy-dont-fight-daesh-direct-it>. See also: <http://time.com/3719129/assad-isis-asset/> and <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/11055092/The-grotesque-alliance-that-has-been-allowed-to-carve-up-Syria.html>.

3 ‘Why Yarmouk’s takeover by ISIS is good news for Bashar al-Assad’, CNN, 7 April 2015, available: <http://edition.cnn.com/2015/04/07/opinions/isis-yarmouk-assad/>. See also this article in Arabic: <http://alhayat.com/Articles/8445144>.

4 ‘US accuses Syria of backing Islamic State’s Aleppo advance’, *Reuters*, 2 June 2015, available: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/06/02/us-mideast-crisis-syria-usa-idUSKBN00I13D20150602>.

5 ‘Kerry: Assad and ISIS Have ‘Symbiotic’ Relationship’, *Foreign Policy*, 17 November 2014, available: <http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/11/17/kerry-assad-and-isis-have-symbiotic-relationship/>.

6 ‘Treasury targets networks linked to Iran’, US Department of the Treasury, 6 February 2014, available: <http://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/jl2287.aspx>.

7 See, for example, <https://kyleorton1991.wordpress.com/2014/09/23/the-khorasan-group-and-al-qaeda-central/>.

8 ‘Syria conflict: Khorasan return with a fresh influx of fighters awaiting the order to start ‘shooting the birds’’, *The Independent*, 22 April 2015, available: <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/syria-conflict-khorasan-return-with-a-fresh-influx-of-fighters-awaiting-the-order-to-start-shooting-the-birds-10196611.html>.

9 See: <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/18/world/middleeast/iran-released-top-members-of-al-qaeda-in-a-trade.html>.

10 See: <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/18/world/middleeast/iran-released-top-members-of-al-qaeda-in-a-trade.html>.

11 The full report is available: <http://www.9-11commission.gov/report/911Report.pdf>.

12 Michael Weiss and Hassan Hassan, *Isis: Inside the Army of Terror*, Regan Arts, February 2015.

13 ‘Obama Wrote Secret Letter to Iran’s Khamenei About Fighting Islamic State’, *The Wall Street Journal*, 6 November 2014, available: <http://www.wsj.com/articles/obama-wrote-secret-letter-to-irans-khamenei-about-fighting-islamic-state-1415295291>.

14 See, for example, ‘Here’s How Obama and Assad Team Up Against ISIS’, *The Daily Beast*, 10 February 2015, available: <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/02/10/here-s-how-obama-and-assad-team-up-against-isis.html>.

15 ‘Assad says Syria is informed on anti-IS air campaign’, BBC, 10 February, available: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-31312414>.

16 See, for example, <http://europe.newsweek.com/isis-and-turkey-cooperate-destroy-kurds-former-isis-member-reveals-turkish-282920>.

17 Michael Doran, ‘Get Tough with Tehran’, *Brookings*, 14 July 2014, available: <http://www.brookings.edu/blogs/markaz/posts/2014/07/14-get-tough-on-iran-america-no-retreat-middle-east>.

18. See: <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/08/23/russia-s-playing-a-double-game-with-islamic-terror0.html>.

19 *Ibid.*

20 See, for example, <http://edition.cnn.com/2015/12/02/europe/syria-turkey-russia-warplane-tensions/>. On the Russian accusations of Turkey buying oil from ISIS, see: <https://www.rt.com/news/324263-russia-briefing-isis-funding/>.

21 See: <https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/jl0287.aspx>.

22 See: <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-usa-oil-idUSKBN0TT2O120151210#kJLHJWMM-HIJLoxdQ.99>.

23 See: <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/news/europe/22598-germany-assad-regime-buys-oil-from-daesh>.

3. Iranian fighters

Like other aspects of Iranian involvement in Syria, the issue of Iranian fighters was initially denied by Iranian officials, then intermittently admitted and finally supported by the gradual emergence of undeniable evidence.

Official admissions

As mentioned above, one of the first official Iranian admissions of a physical presence on the ground in Syria was made by the deputy chief of Sepah Qods Ismail Qani: “If the Islamic Republic was not present in Syria, the massacre of people would have happened on a much larger scale,” he said in May 2012, shortly after the Houla massacre. “Before our presence in Syria, too many people were killed by the opposition but with the physical and non-physical presence of the Islamic Republic, big massacres in Syria were prevented.”²⁴¹

About three months later, another senior Sepah Pasdaran commander offered another acknowledgement of direct military involvement in Syria: “Today we are involved in fighting every aspect of a war, a military one in Syria as well as a cultural one,” said the commander of Sepah Pasdaran’s Saheb al-Amr unit Gen. Salar Abnough in August 2012, in a speech to volunteer trainees.²⁴²

Of course Iranian officials could still claim, as they did, that ‘physical presence’ and fighting a ‘military war’ in Syria do not necessarily mean that Sepah Pasdaran had troops on the ground; it was only sending a number of commanders tasked with ‘advising’ and ‘training’ Syrian troops and commanders but they were not involved in the fighting themselves. However, a former Sepah Pasdaran commander told *Reuters* in February 2014 that these commanders (estimated to number between 60 and 70 high-ranking officers and many more lower-ranking ones) were “backed up by thousands of Iranian paramilitary Basij volunteer fighters as well as Arabic speakers including Shi’ites from Iraq.”²⁴³

Indeed, in June 2014, Brig. Gen. Hossein Hamedani, who is said to have overseen Sepah’s operations in Syria before his death in October 2015, revealed that Basij forces had been “established in 14 Syrian provinces.”²⁴⁴

In an attempt to explain where all these fighters had come from, Hamedani claimed that 10,000 anti-As-sad fighters had “switched sides” and were now Basij members. Sepah Pasdaran’s role in creating and training the NDF militias (which is presumably what Hamedani’s remarks refer to) has already been discussed above, and so has the recruitment of Iranian volunteers who want to go to fight in Syria.

In the same speech, which according to Iranian media was made during a memorial service in the Hamedan province attended by a number of Sepah Pasdaran commanders, Hamedani added that there are also 100,000 trained Iranian Basij fighters “who would like to go and fight in Syria” but “Iran does not need to send military staff to Syria yet.”²⁴⁵ And it is not just in Syria that the Iranian regime is setting up and training loyal para-military forces. “After Lebanon and Syria, a Basij force is now being formed in Iraq,” Hamedani said. “The Islamic Republic of Iran’s third child is born.”

The most direct admission of sending Iranian fighters to Syria came in early November 2013 from a member of the National Security and Foreign Policy Committee in the Iranian parliament. Speaking at an “anti-imperialist ceremony” in the region of Khorasan, Javad Karimi Qodousi said “there are hundreds of troops from Iran in Syria,” adding that what is often reported in the news as Syrian military victories is “in fact the victories of Iran.”²⁴⁶

The revelation was emphatically denied by Sepah Pasdaran, with the force’s spokesperson Ramazan Sharif saying: “We strongly deny the existence of Iranian troops in Syria. Iranian [commanders] are only in Syria to exchange experiences and advice, which is central to the defense of this country.”²⁴⁷ Clearly disturbed by the remarks, he added: “The media in Iran must show greater care when publishing this kind of news so that they do not aid the foreign media’s psychological warfare.”

It is worth noting that all the above admissions and revelations came from Iranian officials with demonstrable insider knowledge of Iranian military operations. As to why they were made, some appear to have been the result of competing interests or agendas within the regime (many were immediately removed from the websites that originally published them); others as signals or threats

to the outside world. In some cases, though, they may have simply been out boasting about the regime’s power and influence in front of regime supporters or the Iranian public more generally.

Iran’s not-so-secret army

In addition to these admissions and revelations, there have been dozens of pictures and videos of Iranian fighters posing with their weapons in different parts of Syria. For instance, in February 2014, *Parsine* news agency published images of an Iranian fighter posing with his gun and military uniform in Syria.²⁴⁸ Other pictures of the man show him using heavy weapons, standing next to Syrian military vehicles, at a Syrian military college or with groups of colleagues or children. According to the report, the man, who is described as a “religious eulogist” from Tehran, had gone to Syria to “defend holy Shia sites” in the country as part of a group calling itself “The Defenders of Sayyida Zaynab.” The same website had previously published images of another fighter, described as a “famous eulogist” from Tehran, who had also taken

241 A screenshot of the original interview in Persian with the Iranian Students News Agency (ISNA) is available at http://www.dw.de/image/0,,15981135_401,00.jpg. For English, see: Saeed Kamali Dehghan, ‘Syrian army being aided by Iranian forces’, *The Guardian*, 28 May 2012, available: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/may/28/syria-army-iran-forces>.

242 A copy of the original report in the Iranian students’ news agency Daneshjoo is available at <http://www.freeze.page.com/1346016739ALEKCXYBK>. For English, see: <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10000872396390444230504577615393756632230>.

243 Jonathan Saul and Parisa Hafezi, ‘Iran boosts military support in Syria to bolster Assad’, *Reuters*, 21 February 2014, available: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/02/21/us-syria-crisis-iran-idUSBREA1K09U20140221>.

244 ‘General Hamedani’s most recent remarks on Syria’, ISNA, 29 June 2014, available: <http://tinyurl.com/ok88yd8>. For English, see: <http://www.naameshaam.org/en/forget-the-syrian-army-its-all-iranian-basij-now/>.

245 *Ibid.*

246 ‘Sepah denies presence of “hundreds of Iranian troops in Syria”’ (in Persian), *Deutsche Welle*, 04 November 2013, available: <http://tinyurl.com/mmww6j5>.

247 *Ibid.*

248 ‘New images and video footage of Iranian regime’s followers in Syria’ (in Persian), *Parsine*, 18 August 2013, available: <http://tinyurl.com/pmk6thj>. For English, see: <http://www.naameshaam.org/en/new-images-of-iranian-fighters-in-syria/>.

pictures of himself in Syria wearing a military uniform and pointing a gun.²⁴⁹ Both men and their colleagues appear to be ordinary fighters rather than commanders or advisors.

As a sign of the significance of this group(s) and its links to Sepah Pasdaran, Iranian media close to the force circulated in early 2014 a picture of Sepah Qods's commander-in-chief Qassem Soleimani standing next to the father of a member of the "The Defenders of Holy Shrines" who had died in Syria.²⁵⁰ Mohammad Hassan Khalili, also known as Rasoul Khalili, was reportedly killed in battle in November 2013, having "voluntarily" travelled to Syria to "defend the Sayyida Zaynab shrine." According to *Bultan News*, his 40th day ceremony was attended by Haj Agha Shirazi, Khamenei's representative within Sepah Qods, as well as the force's deputy chief Ismail Qani.²⁵¹

As early as June 2012, the Free Syrian Army in Homs captured a group of Iranian snipers who had allegedly participated in suppressing the popular protests in the city dubbed "the capital of the revolution." In a video posted on YouTube,²⁵² the group's leader, holding his Iranian ID card, says he is from the Iranian Armed Forces and that they had been taking instructions from the Syrian security services, particularly the Air Force Intelligence in Homs.

Less than two months later, in late August 2012, WSJ reported, quoting current and former members of Sepah Pasdaran, that the force had been sending "hundreds of rank-and-file members of Sepah Pasdaran and Basij... to Damascus," in addition to higher-ranking Sepah commanders to "guide Syrian forces in battle strategy and Qods commanders to help with military intelligence."²⁵³ According to the sources, many of these Iranian troops hail from Sepah units outside Tehran, particularly from Iran's Azerbaijan and Kurdistan regions, where they "have experience dealing with ethnic separatist movements." They were apparently sent to "replace low-ranking Syrian soldiers who have defected to the Syrian opposition," the sources said, and they allegedly "mainly assume non-fighting roles such as guarding weapons caches and helping to run military bases."

In October 2012, opposition activists filmed an Iranian Air Force-marked Ilyushin-76 airplane at Palmyra Airbase.²⁵⁴ The description accompanying the video says

"dropping off troops to support Assad" but no troops can actually be seen in the short (30 second) video. Furthermore, the cameraman's voice says "the content of the shipment is unknown." Other similar videos of Iranian planes landing in various military airports in Syria have been posted online.²⁵⁵

The most conclusive evidence of Iranian fighters fighting in Syria was video footage, posted on YouTube in August 2013,²⁵⁶ seized by Syrian rebels (the Dawood Brigade) after overrunning a group of Iraqi and Iranian fighters from the Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas Brigade.

As mentioned before (in the 'Training' section), the footage was shot by an embedded Iranian filmmaker, Hadi Baghbani, who appears to have been making a special documentary about the Syrian adventure of a Sepah Qods commander called Ismail Haydari (Baghbani appears to have had unrestricted access to film everything). Both died in Syria at or around the same time on 20 August 2013, in what is believed to be the last scene shot by Baghbani's camera near Aleppo. Some of the footage was broadcast in September 2013 by Al-Jazeera, the Netherlands Public Broadcasting network (NPO) and various other media outlets around the world. Two months later, the BBC made a 30-minute documentary based on the footage entitled "*Iran's Secret Army*".²⁵⁷

Most of the available footage is of Haydari talking about 'working with' Syrian regime troops and militias. One clip shows Iranian commanders instructing Syrian troops, and another shows an Iranian group of fighters, including the cameraman himself, involved in a gun battle against approaching rebels near a poultry farm in the suburbs of Aleppo.²⁵⁸ It is believed they were all killed there, where the rebels got hold of the camera and its footage.

Significantly, in one of the clips used in the BBC documentary, Haydari says: "This front [Syria] is supported by the Supreme Leader [Ayatollah Ali Khamenei] and [Hezbollah's] Sayyid Hassan Nasrallah. On our side are lads from Iran, Hezbollah, Iraqi mujahideen [jihadis], Afghan mujahideen... The opponents are Israel, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Qatar, UAE money, plus America, England, France and other Europeans..." He lists 'Iranians' among the other foreign militias fighting in Syria under Sepah Pasdaran's control.

“One thing we do,” he later adds, “is to gather intelligence on an area. Then there are a few options: either we target the places [of] the rebels with artillery, or we target the routes they use with landmines and roadside bombs. And the third option is to do a commando raid...” He uses ‘we’ throughout.

Funerals

As mentioned above, a prestigious, military-style funeral attended by many Sepah Pasdaran officers in military uniforms was held for Haydari and Baghbani in Iran, indicating both had a special position within the force. Yet, most Iranian state-controlled media reports on their death still insisted that Haydari was a ‘filmmaker’ and was in Syria to make a documentary, lumping his story with that of Baghbani. At least their death in Syria was acknowledged, for that of many other Iranian fighters and commanders who had reportedly died in Syria has not been (more on this in the ‘Iran’s Vietnam’ chapter).

In June 2013, at least three Sepah Pasdaran members were announced to have been killed in Damascus while “defending the Sayyida Zaynab shrine.”²⁵⁹

The same rhetoric had been used by Hezbollah and the Iraqi militias when talking about their Syria fighters and martyrs, as discussed above. The funeral of Mahdi Khorasani and Ali Asghar Shanaei is believed to have been the first group funeral held in Iran for Iranians killed in Syria.²⁶⁰ The two were pictured together holding Kalashnikov-type rifles in front of the Sayyida Zaynab shrine.²⁶¹ Another Sepah member whose funeral was held during the same month was Mohammed Hossein Atri, who Iranian media reports claimed was also killed while fighting near the shrine. His coffin was covered by numerous Sepah Pasdaran symbols.²⁶² Others, such as Amir Reza Alizadeh, were reported to have been killed by bombs or during “clashes with terrorists.”²⁶³

249 ‘Famous artist battles against rebels in Syria + Pictures’ (in Persian), *Parsine*, 26 June 2013, available: <http://www.parsine.com/fa/news/123934>.

250 e.g. ‘Soleimani taking pictures with father of Sepah member killed in Syria’, *Digarban*, available: <http://www.digarban.com/node/17347>. See also: <http://tinyurl.com/pem62w5>. For English, see: <http://www.nameshaam.org/en/the-unholy-sepah-qods-commander-and-the-big-lie/>.

251 ‘Pictures of the 40th day after martyrdom of Rasoul Khalili’, *Bultan News*, 30 December 2013, available: <http://tinyurl.com/nzzschm>.

252 ‘Arrest of Iranian snipers in Homs by Free Syrian Army’ (in Persian with Arabic subtitles), 1 June 2012, available: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lst1iW7z_P4. A longer video without translation is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1V9n1gdM4Lw>.

253 Farnaz Fassihi, ‘Iran said to send troops to bolster Syria’, *The Wall Street Journal*, 27 August 2012, available: <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10000872396390444230504577615393756632230>.

254 ‘Iranian Revolutionary Guard Transport IL76 TD at Palmyra Airport Syria’, 22 October 2012, available: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rzzMBU-jKMM>.

255 e.g. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uMN2HyBIA0c>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RRhE7zAinVU>.

256 Some of the raw footage, in six parts, is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TIblytliS4Y&list=PLPC0Udeof3T4s-lyyP9pqhkVP1P4PswlmO>. There is apparently several hours of footage but only some of it has been posted online. For a detailed account of the story behind the footage, though the author of this report does not agree with all the conclusions, see: Joanna Paraszczuk and Scott Lucas, ‘Syria Special Updated: Iran’s Military, Assad’s Shia Militias, & The Raw Videos’, *EA WorldView*, 15 September 2013, available: <http://eaworldview.com/2013/09/syria-special-irans-military-assads-forces-al-jazeera-what-raw-videos-really-show>.

257 Darius Bazargan, *Iran’s Secret Army*, *BBC Our World*, November 2013, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/n3cstnps>. The full documentary is available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZL_88ChjQtU.

258 Part 5 for the series above: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uleP0VDhl30&index=5&list=PLPC0Udeof3T4slyyP9pqhkVP1P4PswlmO>.

259 For a list of publicly announced funerals around this time, see for example: Y. Mansharof, ‘Despite denials by Iranian regime, statements by Majlis member and reports in Iran indicate involvement of Iranian troops in Syria fighting’, *The Middle East Media Research Institute*, 4 December 2013, available: <http://www.memri.org/report/en/print7623.htm>.

260 Phillip Smyth, ‘Iran’s Losses In the “35th Province” (Syria), Part 1’, *Jihadology*, 14 June 2013, available: <http://jihadology.net/2013/06/14/hizballah-cavalcade-irans-losses-in-the-35th-province-syria-part-1/>.

261 The picture is available at <http://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2013/06/untitled211.png?w=585&h=390>.

262 See, for example, this picture: <http://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2013/06/untitled217.png?w=585&h=390>.

263 ‘Body of Martyr Amir Reza Alizadeh buried in Rudsar’ (in Persian), *Mehr News Agency*, available: <http://www.mehrnews.com/detail/News/2046534>.

The following month, Iranian media reported the death of another senior Iranian fighter who had also been ‘defending holy Shia shrines’ in Syria. Mehdi Moussavi was described by websites and blogs close to Sepah Pasdaran as a “Basij commander” in the Ahwaz region.²⁶⁴ A high-profile ceremony attended by senior Iranian officials was held for him at the Ahwaz airport in southern Iran, where his coffin arrived.²⁶⁵

In November 2013, Iranian media reported the death of Mohammad Jamali Paqal’a, who was killed in fighting in Syria.²⁶⁶ *Mehr* News Agency described him as a Sepah Qods commander and an Iran-Iraq war veteran who hailed from the same Sepah outfit that had trained General Qassem Soleimani.²⁶⁷

Interestingly, while doing its best to hide the news of its Syria dead from the outside world, Sepah Pasdaran often invited the public inside Iran to attend these funerals, which were often attended by Sepah members and representatives of the Iranian Supreme Leader.²⁶⁸ ‘Died while defending holy shrines’ also became a generic description for many of these ‘martyrs’.

Pilgrims or fighters?

If lying about someone after their death is easy, lying about them while they are still alive and in the hands of your enemy is much harder. In addition to the Iranian snipers mentioned above, Syrian opposition forces have frequently claimed they had captured Iranian fighters or members of Sepah Pasdaran in Syria, posting videos of their confessions and their documents online.²⁶⁹ The Iranian regime and its media outlets often claimed these were civilian pilgrims who had gone to Syria, despite the raging war, to visit Sayyida Zaynab and other holy Shia sites in the country.

In August 2012, 48 Iranian nationals were kidnapped by Syrian rebels on their way from Sayyida Zaynab to the Damascus airport. The rebels claimed they were all members of Sepah Pasdaran; the Iranian government claimed they were Shia pilgrims. Later on, however, Iran’s foreign minister added that some of them were “retired members” of Sepah Pasdaran and the army, while others were from “other ministries,” but insisted that they were in Syria for pilgrimage.²⁷⁰

Judging by the confessions of Iraqi militiamen (see above), both stories may in fact be true: fighters and low-ranking officers were often sent by land among groups of pilgrims and other visitors. Even if the Sepah members were retired, it is still likely that they were sent to Syria as advisors due to their experience.

In any case, the 48 Iranian captives were released in January 2013 in a prisoner exchange deal mediated by Turkey, in exchange for releasing 2,130 opposition detainees held by the Syrian regime.²⁷¹ The move angered many regime supporters, many of whom posted angry comments on social media sites accusing the Syrian leadership of ‘not giving a toss’ about Syrian prisoners of war, while rushing to release so many ‘terrorists’ in exchange for a few Iranians.²⁷² About a year later, a video posted by Syrian activists on YouTube showed a group of Syrian pro-regime prisoners of war wishing that they were Iranian or Hezbollah Lebanon fighters so that the Assad regime would hurry to negotiate their release in a similar prisoner exchange deal.²⁷³

Angry reactions aside, the deal was perhaps a sign of who called the shots in Syria now. It was also an indication that the Iranian captives were of significance, as previous experiences show that the Iranian government does not care much about its ordinary citizens and even ordinary soldiers taken hostage.²⁷⁴ Indeed, their significance was obvious from the high-profile official delegations that met them upon their return to Iran. They included senior government officials and several key Sepah Pasdaran commanders, according to images published by Iranian media.²⁷⁵

Moreover, a number of Iranian opposition websites named at least four of the released hostages, describing them as current Sepah Pasdaran commanders from various Iranian provinces.²⁷⁶ These reportedly included a Brigadier-General 2nd Class who commands the Sepah Shohadaa unit in West Azerbaijan province; a Colonel who commands the 14th Imam Sadeq Operational Brigade in Bushehr; the Supreme Leader’s Representative at Sepah’s Orumiye unit; and an official from the 33rd al-Mahdi Brigade in Fars province.²⁷⁷ The Iranian regime nonetheless wanted everyone to believe that they were all in Syria in a personal capacity for religious pilgrimage.

Case study: The mysterious life and death Gen. Hassan Shateri

In February 2013, Iranian media reported the death of Hassan Shateri, the then head of the Iranian Commission for the Reconstruction of (South) Lebanon.²⁷⁸ Some Syrian opposition sources claimed he was shot by Syrian rebels as he was travelling from Aleppo to Beirut via Damascus.²⁷⁹ Others, including Israeli sources, claimed he had been killed in the Israeli air strike on 30 January, which apparently targeted a convoy carrying anti-aircraft missile systems bound for Lebanon.²⁸⁰ The Iranian regime also claimed Israel was behind the assassination and vowed revenge.²⁸¹

However, available evidence does not seem to support the air strike story. Images published at the time of Shateri's body being placed in its tomb in Iran show no burn marks or other injuries indicating an air strike.²⁸² A "friend and colleague" of Shateri also stated on 8 March 2013 that he had seen Shateri's gunshot wound before he was buried.²⁸³

In any case, it is clear that Shateri's role went far beyond that of the head of the Lebanon Reconstruction Commission. In fact, it is widely known in Lebanon and Iran that the Commission is a cover for Sepah Qods activities there. While in Lebanon, Shateri operated under the

272 See, for example, this *Orient TV* report (in Arabic): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VOK0N-2Bwhs>.

273 'Assad regime captives held by the Free Army envy Iranians' (in Arabic), 11 February 2014, available: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WbDtF_6zJms. For English, see: <http://www.naameshaam.org/en/syrian-soldiers-captured-by-the-opposition-wish-they-were-iranian/>.

274 See, for example: 'Petty lives of soldiers, precious lives of commanders', *Naame Shaam*, 27 March 2014, available: <http://www.naameshaam.org/en/petty-lives-of-soldiers-precious-lives-of-commanders/>

275 e.g. <http://www.farsnews.com/plarg.php?n=344057&st=699745> and <http://www.farsnews.com/plarg.php?nn=343951&st=699574>.

276 Farnaz Fassihi, 'Iran said to send troops to bolster Syria', *The Wall Street Journal*, 27 August 2012, available: <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10000872396390444230504577615393756632230>.

277 For more details, see: Will Fulton, 'IRGC Shows Its (True) Hand in Syria', *Iran Tracker*, 14 January 2013, available: http://www.irantracker.org/analysis/fulton-irgc-shows-its-true-hand-syria-january-14-2013#_edn6.

278 See, for example, 'Martyrdom of president of Commission for Reconstruction of Lebanon at the hands of Zionist regime agents', *Ahlul-Bayt News Agency (ABNA)*, 13 February 2013, available: <http://abna.co/data.asp?lang=1&id=390561>.

279 Saeed Kamali Dehghan, 'Elite Iranian general assassinated near Syria-Lebanon border', *The Guardian*, 14 February 2013, available: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/feb/14/elite-iranian-general-assassinated-syria-lebanon>.

280 Elior Levy, 'Rebels: Iranian official killed in airstrike on Syria', *YNet News*, 14 February 2013, available: <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4345171,00.html>.

281 See for example: <http://www.abna.ir/persian/service/middle/archive/2013/02/18/392005/story.html>; <http://tinyurl.com/n7staho>.

282 'Picture / the moment that Shateri kissed the Supreme Leader's hand' (in Persian), ABNA, 15 February 2013, available: <http://abna.ir/data.asp?lang=1&id=391035>. The pictures appear to have been removed since.

283 'Ceremony to commemorate martyr Shateri held in Qom' (in Persian), ABNA, 9 March 2013, available: <http://www.abna.ir/persian/service/iran/archive/2013/03/09/398184/story.html>. For more details, see: Will Fulton, 'The Assassination of Iranian Quds Force General Hassan Shateri in Syria', *Iran Tracker*, 28 February 2013, available: <http://www.irantracker.org/analysis/fulton-assassination-iranian-quds-force-general-hassan-shateri-syria-february-28-2013>.

264 See for example, <http://besme-rabbe-shohada.mihanblog.com/post/29>.

265 'Funeral of martyr Sayyid Mahdi Mousavi', *ISNA Khouzestan*, 8 July 2013, available: <http://khouzestan.isna.ir/Default.aspx?N-SID=5&SSLID=46&NID=41513>.

266 See, for example, <http://www.mehrnews.com/detail/News/2168935>.

267 *Ibid.*

268 In addition to the above, see for example: <http://archive.today/4dRDn#selection-691.0-672.19>.

269 e.g. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_o1piy-gux4 (February 2012); <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L3gTlkb-e2w> (February 2012); <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a-zK-mNMyH0M> (February 2012); <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D9fQ5C6amJ4> (April 2012); <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UOyJ-FbXn7A> (June 2012); <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kcifeGHesFI> (October 2012); <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oh7N2KPb3kw> (October 2012); <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BiEd-6zmWvQ> (March 2013); <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QzngsusADLU> (April 2013); <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SHXJC3EI2Gg> (September 2013); <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4VyHBTpWdIY> (February 2014).

270 'Retired' Revolutionary Guards among Syrian hostages: Iran', *Al-Arabiya*, 8 August 2012, available: <http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/08/08/231054.html>.

271 'Syrian government frees 2,130 prisoners in exchange for 48 Iranians', *CNN*, 10 January 2013, available: <http://edition.cnn.com/2013/01/09/world/meast/syria-prisoner-exchange/>.

alias of Hesam Khoshnevis, concealing his real identity even from the US Treasury Department, which added his alias to its sanctions list in August 2010 for “providing financial, material and technological support” to Hezbollah Lebanon.²⁸⁴

We now know that Shateri was a senior Sepah Pasdaran officer who had served in Afghanistan, Iraq and Lebanon. As an engineer, he was promoted in 1980s to head the force’s Sardasht headquarters and later the Hamzeh Seyyed al-Shohada Base combat engineering unit and Saheb al-Zaman engineering brigade.²⁸⁵ In 2006, he was picked to lead Iran’s ‘reconstruction’ efforts in South Lebanon following the 2006 war between Israel and Hezbollah. As a Fars News report put it, Shateri “went wherever he was needed by the Islamic Revolution.”²⁸⁶ The prestigious funerals held for him in Tehran and Semnan on 14 and 15 February 2013, which were attended by the most senior officials of Sepah Pasdaran and the Iranian regime, were a clear sign of Shateri’s significance.²⁸⁷ Many of the attendees praised his “outstanding role in resistance against Israel” and described him as “no less than Imad Moghniyeh,” the Lebanese Hezbollah commander who was assassinated in Syria in 2008. Shateri’s coffin was covered with Lebanese Hezbollah flags and pictures of him in Sepah Pasdaran military uniform.²⁸⁸ Moreover, the news of his death was personally delivered to his family by the commander-in-chief of Sepah Qods Gen. Qassem Soleimani.²⁸⁹ Soleimani and Sepah Pasdaran’s chief Mohammad Ali Jafari were also photographed weeping at Shateri’s funeral in Tehran.²⁹⁰ A few days later, the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khomeini invited Shateri’s family to his house to personally console them.²⁹¹

The question is: what was Shateri doing in Syria, and in Aleppo specifically? Hours after his death, the Iranian embassies in Beirut and Damascus released information about Shateri’s destination in Syria and how he died. He had allegedly been in Aleppo to “research and implement development and construction projects” there, they said, and was killed by rebels on his way back to Lebanon.²⁹² Later on, Iranian official statements and media reports omitted any mention of Aleppo and decided to go with the Israeli air strike story.

As a number of observers and experts have pointed out, the idea of a senior Sepah Qods commander going to

a city that has almost fallen into the hands of the rebels and is extremely unsafe in order to look into construction projects is “nonsensical.”²⁹³ Moreover, it is unlikely that Gen. Soleimani would have sent “one of his top lieutenants” to Aleppo on a mission (accompanying an arms shipment to Hezbollah) that could have been done by a less senior operational commander.²⁹⁴

It is more likely, as American analyst Will Fulton has argued, that Shateri had been dispatched to lead a mission related to the Syrian chemical weapons and missiles facility in al-Sfeira, near Aleppo, which was at the time on the brink of falling into the hands of rebels.²⁹⁵ The facility is known to have had Iranian presence before and after the outbreak of the Syrian revolution (more on this in the next section). So it is reasonable to assume that Sepah Qods may have wanted to retrieve or destroy sensitive material or evidence on the site before it fell in the hands of the rebels.

New case study – The death of Iranian General Hossein Hamedani in Syria

Iranian Brigadier-General Hossein Hamedani was killed near the Syrian city of Aleppo on 8 October 2015.¹ An official statement by Sepah Pasdaran was quick to claim Hamedani was killed by Daesh while “providing advisory service” to Syrian regime forces.² He had played “an important role... reinforcing the front of Islamic resistance against the terrorists,” the statement added.

A few days later, Iranian media spread rumours that Hamedani had actually died in a “car accident” after the driver lost control and Hamedani died later in hospital from his injuries.³ However, reliable sources in Hezbollah Lebanon and Western officials confirmed to Naame Shaam that Hamedani was in a military command truck near Aleppo when this was hit by a bomb or missile, causing his death. Tens of Iranian commanders and fighters were also killed in and around Aleppo in October and November 2015, as a massive Iranian-led offensive attempted to regain control of the area from rebel forces (see chapter III for more details).

Hamedani was Sepah Pasdaran’s second man in Syria after Major-Gen. Qassem Soleimani. He was reportedly in charge of overseeing the force’s ground operations in the country. His task included organising and direct-

ing the various militias controlled by the Iranian regime fighting on behalf of the Assad regime, including the Syrian National Defence Forces (NDF), or the '*shabbiha*', Hezbollah Lebanon and Iraqi and Afghan militias. As the deputy chief of Sepah Pasdaran and the former commander of the Greater Tehran unit in the force, who led the 2009 crackdown on the Green Movement protesters in Tehran, he had an extensive experience in crushing popular movements using paramilitary forces.

In a previously unpublished interview, published after his death (on 21 October 2015), Hamedani admitted that his force was responsible for establishing and training the notorious NDF militia.

"At first, the military forces in Syria, and even in Iraq, along with their commanders thought it was impossible to mobilise and use popular [paramilitary] forces alongside professional army forces – a misjudgment caused by their lack of insight into the power of the [Iranian] Basij. But we started the prompt trainings [of the NDF] and, consequently, when they showed their capabilities on the ground, Syrian army officials started to believe in them too."⁴

In a speech at Hamedani's funeral on 11 October 2015, Mohsen Rezaei, the Secretary-General of Iran's Expediency Discernment Council of the System, which is appointed directly by Ayatollah Khamenei, said General Hamedani had been in Syria since 2011 in order to "fight the enemy"; that he "formed" the NDF there and took part in 80 military operations.⁵ Hamedani established two bases in Syria, he added, the Sayyeda Zaynab base in Damascus and Sayyeda Roqayya base in Aleppo. "Just as Haj Ahmad Tavassolian established Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamedani established the NDF, a group similar to Hezbollah, to which he recruited tens of thousands of Syrian youth."

General Mohammad Ali Jafari, the chief commander of Sepah Pasdaran, was quoted by the media in October 2015 saying, "100,000 Syrians were mobilised to fight the insecurities in Syria, and a major role in this was played by General Hamedani."⁶ In another speech in November 2015, Jafari said, "If it wasn't for Hamedani, Damascus would have collapsed 2-3 years ago and no one knows what would have happened to the resistance front."⁷ However, according to General Rahim Safavi, a senior advisor to Khamenei, "many aspects of

the service provided by General Hamedani and his role in solidifying the axis of resistance in Syria can not be revealed."⁸

In an interview in October 2015, General Yaghoub Zohdi, a friend and colleague of Hamedani, was asked about him and his role in Syria. Zohdi's answer was:

"He told me that, when he went to Syria, he figured out that the only way out was to mobilise the Syrian

284 US Treasury Department, 'Fact Sheet: U.S. Treasury Department Targets Iran's Support for Terrorism', 3 August 2010, available: <http://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/tg810.aspx>.

285 For more on Shateri's career, see for example: Farnaz Fassihi, 'As Iran buries general, Syria rebels say he was killed in Israeli strike', *The Wall Street Journal*, 15 February 2013, available: <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424127887324432004578306381061380040>. For his position within Sepah Qods's global network, see for example this illustration: http://www.irantracker.org/sites/default/files/imce-images/shateri_slide_1200.gif.

286 'Martyr Shateri went wherever he was needed by the Islamic Revolution' (in Persian), *Fars News*, 21 February 2013, available: <http://www.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=13911203000769>.

287 See, for example, these news reports in Persian: <http://ra-janews.com/detail.asp?id=150462>; <http://tinyurl.com/lgb36c5>; <http://farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=13911201000682>; <http://www.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=1391127000548>; <http://mehrnews.com/detail/News/2001473>; <http://tinyurl.com/oezqpr4>.

288 See, for example: <http://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2013/06/untitled201.png>.

289 'Representative of the Supreme Leader: We will quickly take revenge from Israel for Martyr Shateri' (in Persian), *ARNA News*, 16 February 2013, available: <http://tinyurl.com/n7staho>.

290 'Two commanders in grief' (in Persian), *Afsaran*, 14 February 2013, available: <http://www.afsaran.ir/link/186064>.

291 'Family of martyr Gen. Shateri [received by] the Great Leader of the Revolution' (in Persian), *ABNA*, 19 February 2013, available: <http://www.abna.ir/persian/service/iran/archive/2013/02/19/392245/story.html>

292 'Iranian embassy in Lebanon informs of the martyrdom of the head of the Iranian Commission for the Reconstruction of Southern Lebanon' (in Persian), *IRNA*, 14 February 2013, available: <http://tinyurl.com/kgs7ybn>; 'Reflection by world media on the martyrdom of Hassan Shateri' (in Persian), *Javan*, 16 February 2013, available: <http://www.javanonline.ir/vdcjv8eituqevyz.fsfu.txt>.

293 Will Fulton, 'The Assassination of Iranian Quds Force General Hassan Shateri in Syria', *Iran Tracker*, 28 February 2013, available: <http://www.irantracker.org/analysis/fulton-assassination-iranian-quds-force-general-hassan-shateri-syria-february-28-2013>.

294 *Ibid.*

295 *Ibid.*

people. Their army was not efficient enough and there was a need for new motivated volunteer forces. I was the one who suggested the foundation of the National Defence and Basij. At first, everyone, including all the generals and the Defence Minister, opposed the idea; they thought it was not possible to arm such a force. I personally went and convinced Bashar al-Assad himself and he supported the idea. He asked me: Would you guarantee it? I replied: Yes, I do.”

“After such trust was established, [al-Assad] sent directives to all military commanders. In Syria, when the president gives an order, no one can refuse it. Then we started to mobilise a Basij force; initially a few thousand fighters were recruited, and now their number exceeds tens of thousands. All the offensives are carried out by these forces, and the army supports them with helicopters and artillery. When they capture an area, the army goes in and secures it. The army never initiates an attack against Daesh; it is the Basij / National Defence who start it.”⁹

The attack that killed Hamedani was not the first one targeting him. Another fellow of Hamedani told *Tasnim* news agency about a “terror attack” on Hamedani’s apartment in Damascus three years before. The general had apparently taken his family to Syria and, at the time of the attack, they were all home but no one was hurt.¹⁰

Footnotes:

1 ‘Senior Iranian Revolutionary Guards general killed in Syria - IRGC’, *Reuters*, 9 October 2015, available: <http://uk.reuters.com/article/2015/10/09/uk-mideast-crisis-syria-general-idUKKCN0S30MD20151009>.

2 ‘Gen. Hossein Hamedani martyred in Syria’ (in Persian), *Fars News*, <http://www.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=13940717000094>.

3 See, for example, *Tasnim News*, 8 November 2015, <http://goo.gl/6thHdK>.

4 The interview was originally published in the *Ramze Obour* magazine, <http://bit.ly/1Qw48Un>. But the full text is no longer available on the magazine’s website. It can, however, be found at <http://www.defapress.ir/Fa/News/55683> (21 October 2015).

5 ‘General Hamedani participated in 80 major Syria operations’ (in Persian), *Fars News*, available: <http://www.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=13940719000190>.

6 ‘Counting 100,000 people in Syria’ (in Persian), *Tasnim News*, 17 Oct 2015, available: <http://goo.gl/G3Wgaf>.

7 ‘If it weren’t for Gen. Hamedani, Damascus would have fallen’ (in Persian), *ISNA*, 17 November 2015, available: <http://goo.gl/zFRi60>.

8 ‘Much of General Hamedani’s services to strengthen Syrian resistance cannot be talked about’ (in Persian), *IRNA*, 10 October 2015, available: <http://www.irna.ir/fa/News/81792304/>.

9 ‘What was General Hamedani’s guarantee to Bashar al-Assad?’ (in Persian), *Cinema Press*, 18 October 2015, available: <http://goo.gl/alNHEH>.

10 ‘Terrorist attack targeted martyr General Hossein Hamedani 3 years ago in Syria’ (in Persian), *Tasnim News*, available: <http://goo.gl/7BpwAB>.

Update on Iranian fighters in Syria

In January 2015, Iranian state-controlled media reported for the first time that “a member of Sepah Qods” had been killed in the Syrian war. “Martyr Hossein Ahmadi was one of Sepah Qods’ fighters who went to Syria from the very beginning to defend the shrines of Ahl al-Bayt [the Prophet’s family],” a *Mashregh News* report said. “His leg was injured after being hit by a shell and he became a martyr shortly thereafter.”¹

Previously, Iranian media reports typically described the Iranian fighters killed in Syria as “shrine defenders” who travelled “voluntarily” to Syria to “defend holy [Shia] shrines” there. Or they would publish pictures of “martyred shrine defenders” without names, which made the task of documentation difficult.

Here is a typical example. In April 2014, a weekly Iranian magazine close to Sepah Pasdaran published photographs of “shrine defenders” without providing any names.² The text accompanying the pictures read: “Young lovers of Hussein and sons of Imam Khomeini, the ones who were in cradle at the time of the [1979 Islamic] Revolution, rushed to the frontlines of the international front of resistance [in Syria] and joined the Karbala martyrs near the holy shrine of Zaynab [in Damascus]. Were it not for their blood, the resistance front would not be so resolute today.”

Since then, Naame Shaam has documented many other cases of Sepah Qods or Basij members killed in Syria and reported by Iranian media as such (for more on Iranian casualties and funerals, see Chapter III and Appendix 1). Most of the cases reported, however, have been of high-ranking Sepah Pasdaran officers leading key battles fought by Syrian regime forces and Iranian-controlled militias.

For instance, as mentioned above, in the “Update on Hezbollah Lebanon”, an Israeli strike near the southern city of al-Qunaitera on 18 January 2015 killed General Mohammad Ali Allahdadi, along with a convoy of several other Iranian and Hezbollah fighters and commanders. The convoy appears to have been a special, sensitive mission near the Israeli border. According to a statement issued by Sepah Pasdaran, Allahdadi went to Syria “as an adviser to help Syrian people and government in overcoming takfiris and salafis.”³ He had previously served in the city of Kerman under Qassem Soleimani, and was later assigned as a “military adviser” in Iraq and Syria.⁴ The actual number of Sepah Pasdaran members killed in the attack was reportedly higher (six, according to some reports) but only Allahdadi was mentioned in official Iranian statements.

In May 2015, Iranian and Syrian activists circulated a picture on social media that shows Major-Gen. Qassem Soleimani standing alongside four Sepah Pasdaran commanders, all of whom had been deployed and killed in Syria.⁵ The four include Gen. Abbas Abdollahi, the former commander of Sepah Pasdaran’s Saber Brigade who was killed in Daraa, southern Syria, on 12 February 2015. A video showing his dead body was posted by Syrian rebels on YouTube on 13 February 2015.⁶ His corpse, along with that of a Syrian regime commander, were exchanged for two Syrian prisoners on 31 July 2015.⁷ Ali Sultan-Moradi, a commander of the Basij force who also appears in the picture, was reportedly killed with Abdollahi in the same operation.⁸

The other two commanders who appear in the picture with Soleimani are Alireza Tavassoli, the former head of the Afghan Fatemiyoun Brigade (see the update on Afghan fighters above), and Hossein Badpa, a member of Iran’s 41st army division stationed in Kerman, southern Iran. He was also killed in clashes with Syrian rebels in Daraa.

At least three other high-ranking Sepah commanders (Jalil Habibollah-Pour, Hadi Kajbaf and Roosbeh Halisaie) have also been killed in Daraa in recent months (see Appendix 1). Hadi Kajbaf, a major-general in Sepah Pasdaran, was the highest-ranking Iranian commander known to have been killed in the area.⁹

Other Iranian commanders have been killed on other fronts elsewhere in Syria. For instance, in July 2015, Colonel Abdul-Karim Gobash was reportedly killed in

al-Zabadani during clashes between Syrian rebels and Hezbollah Lebanon.¹⁰ The ranks of these and other Iranian commanders, and the timing and places of their death, clearly indicate that Sepah Pasdaran commanders are not only acting as ‘advisors’ to the Syrian regime forces, as the Iranian regime claims, but that they are actively leading battles on various fronts in Syria.¹¹

As to whether there are Iranian fighters actually participating in these battles, evidence suggests that there are some (as evidenced by the funerals of low-ranking members of Sepah Pasdaran and the Basij) but that the Iranian regime is mostly using irregular militias under its control to do the fighting. Until recently, Sepah Qods and Basij fighters appear to have only been used to supervise and lead battles, or were tasked with special, sensitive missions that the Iranian regime does not trust Syrian regime forces with.

In a report about the alleged retreat of all Iranian forces in Syria to Damascus and its surroundings in April 2015, Italian news agency AKI quoted “sources close to Hezbollah” saying they “believe there are around 6,000 [Iranian] fighters in all of Syria. They are all from the IRGC [Sepah Pasdaran] and there are no Basij fighters.”¹² The report adds that “Iranian officers are also supervising them and Syrians do not interfere in their work. The matter is limited to coordination with the Syrian military forces.” The figure may now be slightly higher after Major-Gen. Soleimani “surprised the world”¹³ and sent thousands more Iranian and Iraqi fighters to Syria to defend Damascus and the coastal region in late May and early June 2015.¹⁴

In late September and early October 2015, hundreds of new Iranian fighters reportedly arrived in Syria to take part in a major Iranian-led ground offensive, backed by Russian air strikes, in the northern parts of the country, particularly the southern countryside of Aleppo, in an attempt to recapture territory lost by regime forces to rebels. Two Lebanese sources told *Reuters*: “The vanguard of Iranian ground forces began arriving in Syria: soldiers and officers specifically to participate in this battle.”¹⁵ They are not advisors,” they added. “We mean hundreds with equipment and weapons. They will be followed by more.”

In October 2015, the US military estimated that there were fewer than 2,000 Iranian troops in Syria helping the forces of President Bashar al-Assad. Marine Corps Gen-

eral Joseph Dunford, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, was quoted by the media saying: “I think there’s more than 1,000 that are on the ground in Iraq. In Syria, we think the numbers are probably something less than 2,000.”¹⁶

However, in light of the above-mentioned reports about extra Iranian fighters sent to Syria in June and in October 2015, and judging by the increasingly high number of Iranian casualties, the US figure is likely to be an underestimate.¹⁷ In an interview with *The Guardian* during a visit to London on 20 October, Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister, Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, admitted that Iran had boosted the number of “military advisers” it has sent to Syria.¹⁸

A few days later, on 25 October, Sepah Pasdaran’s public relations officer, Brigadier-General Ramazan Sharif, said the force had taken a decision to “increase its advisory forces” in Syria as a result of recent developments in different parts of Syria.¹⁹ “Iran has increased the number of its troops to keep up with the new stage of the ground war in Syria,” he said.²⁰ The Iranian regime insists that it is only playing an ‘advisory’ role in Syria and often refers to its commanders and fighters there – even those dying in battle – as ‘military advisers’.

In addition to the increasingly high number of Iranian casualties, testimonies by defecting soldiers and prisoners of war indicate that not only are Iranian commanders directing and controlling the Syrian regime’s military strategy, but that Iranian fighters and militiamen are also increasingly doing the actual fighting on its behalf.

For instance, a defecting Syrian soldier told a *Middle East Eye* columnist in November 2015 that foreign militias have overrun the Syrian army.²¹ “One important thing to realise,” he said, “is that there is no Syrian army anymore; it is just militias, mostly Iranians and Lebanese.” For instance, 70 percent of troops in the ninth armoured division, he added, “are either Lebanese or Iranian. [...] Ten high-ranking Iranian officers control the division, they plan the operations. Only Iranian or Hezbollah forces can access operations rooms, no Syrian soldiers are allowed in.”

Similarly, two Hezbollah prisoners of war captured by al-Nusra Front in the Aleppo countryside told a Syrian opposition TV channel in November 2015 that directing

the military operations in the southern countryside of Aleppo was “totally in the hands of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards,” who “employ Iraqi, Afghan and Hezbollah [militiamen].”²² The Syrian military presence, they added, was “very, very little. There are some Syrian soldiers only at some checkpoints. On the ground and in the battlefield, there aren’t any.”

“The Iranians don’t trust anyone,” one of them adds. “They are in charge of the operation and directing it, and don’t allow anyone else to interfere. Everyone else just gets orders from them.”

Footnotes:

- 1** ‘Funeral of another [shrine] defender in Ishtihard + Photos’ (in Persian), *Mashregh News*, 10 January 2015, available: <http://bit.ly/1CCROaG>.
- 2** ‘Shrine defenders and Iranian martyrs of the resistance front’, *Ramze Obour*, 25 April 2014, available: <http://goo.gl/VamtUU>.
- 3** See: <http://www.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=13931029001105>. For English, see, for example: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/01/20/israel-iranian-general-killed_n_6507146.html.
- 4** See, for example, <http://www.yalasarat.com/vdcftxydw6dxya.igiw.html>.
- 5** ‘Soleimani’s four commanders killed in Syria’ (in Arabic), *Al-Arabiya*, 12 May 2015, available: <http://ara.tv/mvtcd>.
- 6** Available: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BpTY-j0ZLHE>.
- 7** See: http://syrianobserver.com/EN/News/29622/Regime_Releases_Woman_Man_Daraa_Prisoner_Exchange.
- 8** See: <https://twitter.com/paradoxy13/status/566545592688840704>.
- 9** See: <http://fa.abna24.com/service/middle/archive/2015/04/21/685308/story.html>. For English, see: <http://yalibnan.com/2015/06/13/iran-brings-home-body-of-top-general-killed-in-syria/>.
- 10** See: <https://twitter.com/archicivilians/status/621412784232730624>. See also: <http://yalibnan.com/2015/07/13/top-iranian-revolutionary-guard-advisor-killed-in-syria/>.
- 11** See, for example, this video footage of an Iranian commander leading the battles in the south: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LRY4Oyljfew>.
- 12** ‘Sources: Revolutionary Guards retreat to the capital Damascus and its surroundings’ (in Arabic), AKI, available: <http://www1.adnkronos.com/AKI/Arabic/Security/?id=3.2.1592382638>. For English, see: <https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/NewsReports/565123-iran-revolutionary-guards-reportedly-pull-back-in-syria>.

13 'Qassem Soleimani: The world will be surprised in Syria' (in Persian), *Mashregh News*, 31 May 2015, available: <http://goo.gl/hioJZw>. For English, see: 'General Soleimani vows 'surprise' in Syria', *Tehran Times*, 6 June 2015, available: http://tehrantimes.com/index_View.asp?code=247156.

14 'Iraq, Iran fighters deployed to defend Damascus: security source', *The Daily Star Lebanon*, 3 June 2015, available: <https://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Middle-East/2015/Jun-03/300429-iraq-iran-fighters-deployed-to-defend-damascus-security-source.ashx>. See also: <https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/NewsReports/565378-pro-assad-daily-iran-preparing-idlib-offensive>.

15 'Assad allies, including Iranians, prepare ground attack in Syria: sources', *Reuters*, 1 October 2015, available: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/10/01/us-mideast-crisis-syria-iranians-exclusi-idUSKCN-ORV4DN20151001>.

16 'Iran has over 1,000 troops in Iraq, less than 2,000 in Syria: U.S. general', *Reuters*, 27 October 2015, available: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/10/27/us-mideast-crisis-dunford-iranians-idUSKCN0SL23E20151027>.

17 See, for example, <http://news.yahoo.com/many-2-000-iran-backed-forces-near-aleppo-181205487.html>.

18 'Iran sending more advisers to Syria to defeat 'terrorism', says deputy minister', *The Guardian*, 21 October 2015, available: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/oct/21/iran-advisers-syria-terrorism-deputy-minister>.

19 See <http://www.irna.ir/en/News/81811727/>.

20 See <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/news/middle-east/21868-iran-increases-troop-numbers-in-syria>.

21 'Iran and Hezbollah controlling Assad's army, say Syrian army defectors', *Middle East Eye*, 18 November 2015, available: <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/iran-and-hezbollah-controlling-president-assads-army-says-defected-syria-soldier-384437201>.

22 Available: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vJl-cLNKlh24>.

4. Iranian weapons

In addition to footing the bill for Russian weapons, Iran has also been supplying the Syrian regime with Iranian weapons, ranging from rockets and missiles, rocket-propelled grenades and mortars, to drones and other military surveillance technology.

Illegal arms shipments

In May 2012, *Reuters* published an exclusive about a "confidential report", seen by the news agency, submitted by a panel of sanctions-monitoring experts to the UN Security Council.²⁹⁶ The report dealt with three illegal shipments of Iranian weapons over the previous year in violation of international sanctions against Iran. Two of these cases involved Syria, it said, "as were the majority of cases inspected by the Panel during its previous mandate." The third shipment involved rockets headed for Taliban fighters in Afghanistan.

The following month, the panel of experts published its report, providing details of two interception by the Turkish authorities of Iranian arms shipments bound for Syria.²⁹⁷ The first was in February 2011, a month before the outbreak of the Syrian revolution, when the Turkish authorities seized a truck carrying Iranian explosives. The contents of the truck were clearly described on the shipping documents: two boxes of gunpowder M9, two boxes of propelling charge, two boxes of slow-burning material, one box of detonators, six pallets of solid rocket fuel and two pallets of RDX explosives. The two companies named on the shipping documents, Parchin Chemical Industries and 7th of Tir Industries, are subordinates of the Iranian Defence Industries Organisation. Both had already been designated by UN sanctions. The contract referenced in the invoice had been concluded in 2006 for a series of 20 shipments.²⁹⁸ For some reason, Turkey did not report this interception to the UN until January 2012.

296 Louis Charbonneau, 'Exclusive: Iran flouts U.N. sanctions, sends arms to Syria: panel', *Reuters*, 17 May 2012, available: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/05/17/us-iran-sanctions-un-idUSBRE84F14520120517>.

297 UN Panel of Experts, 'Final report of the Panel of Experts established pursuant to resolution 1929 (2010)', 12 June 2012, available: http://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BF-CF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_2012_395.pdf.

298 *Ibid.*

The second shipment was intercepted on 19 March 2011. Nineteen crates containing 74 assault rifles, machine guns, 2,000 mortar shells and nearly 8,000 rounds of ammunition were seized by the Turkish authorities from an Iranian cargo aircraft operated by Yas Air bound for Aleppo.²⁹⁹ The flight had “auto spare parts” on its cargo manifest. In March 2012, the US Treasury Department listed Yas Air, along with Behineh Trading and one Nigerian shipping agent, for “providing support” to Sepah Qods, including shipments of weapons to the Middle East and Africa.³⁰⁰ Two other Iranian airlines, Air Iran and Mahan Air, had already been designated by the department for providing the force with transportation, funds transfers, personnel travel services, as well as arms shipments.³⁰¹ Both were also accused of transporting personnel, weapons and goods on behalf of Hezbollah Lebanon and omitting from their cargo manifests “secret weapons shipments bound for Hezbollah.”³⁰² All these companies, according to the Treasury, had used “deceptive measures” when shipping such items to Syria, using a combination of passenger and cargo flights and “declaring illicit cargo as humanitarian and other licit goods.”³⁰³

Both shipments intercepted by Turkey were found by the UN panel of experts to be in breach of international sanctions against Iran. Paragraph 5 of Security Council Resolution 1747 (2007) prohibits Iran from exporting “arms and related materiel” and prohibits other states and individuals from procuring such items from Iran.³⁰⁴ Moreover, in previous inspections the panel had found only ammunition and no arms, whereas the current cases included “a greater diversity of items.” The panel also observed that, previously, systematic attempts had been made by the Iranian regime to conceal illegal shipments through erased markings or packaging. These two shipments “reflected no such attempts,” which is presumably why they were caught. In any case, the report concluded that Syria “continues to be the central party to illicit Iranian arms transfers” in breach of the sanctions. Surprisingly, Russia did not block the release of the report this time as it did the year before.³⁰⁵

Since both incidents predated the Syrian revolution, it is not easy to link them directly to the Syrian regime’s brutal crackdown on the mass protests in Syria. Indeed, the shipments may well have been destined to Hezbollah Lebanon, Hamas or any other Iranian-backed militia via Syria.³⁰⁶ In January 2012, however, France’s foreign

ministry “condemned” Iran’s “repeated violations” of the UN arms embargo by exporting weapons to Syria, citing the Panel of Experts’ report.³⁰⁷ Senior US officials also told AFP news agency that Iran was supplying munitions to “aid Syria’s bloody protest crackdown in an initiative spearheaded by the head of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps’ elite Qods force, Qassem Soleimani.”³⁰⁸ The Iranian government denied the allegations, of course. The rest of this chapter will attempt to provide some evidence that the allegations were not unfounded.

Assisting Syrian regime in its ‘violent crackdown on protesters’

At this point, the Syrian revolution still largely revolved around mass peaceful protests that were being met by the regime with increasing brutality. It is likely therefore that Iranian military support to the Syrian regime – in addition to training and directing the regime forces and *shabbiha*, as detailed in previous sections – would have consisted mostly of crowd control weapons and surveillance equipment, which the Iranian regime used to crush the Green Movement protests in Iran in 2009.

As early as April 2011, barely a month after the outbreak of the mass protests, American officials disclosed intelligence, based on intercepted communications among Iranian officials, that the Iranian regime was supplying Syrian security services with equipment and technical knowledge for monitoring and disrupting different types of communications, including mobile phones, email, social media and so on.³⁰⁹

In March 2012, the head of the US military’s Central Command told the Senate during a hearing that, in addition to arms and scores of Sepah Qods trainers and Iranian intelligence agents, the Iranian regime had been providing Syrian security services with “electronic eavesdropping equipment to try and pick up where the opposition networks are.”³¹⁰ This reportedly included specialist mobile tracking equipment capable of intercepting satellite phones and other satellite broadcasting equipment.³¹¹ The Syrian regime had also obtained some surveillance technology from European suppliers, according to media reports.³¹²

In June 2011, the European Union imposed sanctions against three top leaders of Sepah Pasdaran for their role in “providing equipment and support to help the

Syria regime suppress protests in Syria.”³¹³ The three were the force’s chief Mohammad Ali Jafari, the chief of Sepah Qods, Qassem Soleimani, and Sepah’s deputy commander for intelligence, Hossein Taeb.

A few days later, in a sanctions designation targeting the Syrian Political Security Directorate and top Syrian regime officials, the US Treasury also designated Ismail Ahmadi Moqaddam, the chief of Iran’s Law Enforcement Forces (LEF), and his deputy Ahmad Reza Radan.³¹⁴

The reason, according to the department, was their role in providing “material support to the Syrian General Intelligence Directorate and dispatch[ing] personnel to Damascus in April to assist the Syrian government in suppressing the Syrian people.” In April 2011, it added, Radan had travelled to Damascus, “where he met with Syrian security services and provided expertise to aid in the Syrian government’s crackdown on the Syrian people.”

The US Treasury had listed Radan in September 2010 and Moqaddam in June 2011 for their “complicity in serious human rights abuses in Iran since the June 2009 disputed presidential election.”³¹⁵ It had also already

designated Sepah Qods and its senior commanders for providing support to the Syrian General Intelligence Directorate.

In February 2012, the US Treasury sanctioned the whole of the Iranian Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS) for its role in perpetrating human rights abuses against the citizens of Iran as well as “providing support to the

299 *Ibid.*

300 US Treasury Department, ‘Treasury targets Iranian arms shipments’, 27 March 2012, available: <http://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/tg1506.aspx>.

301 US Treasury Department, ‘Treasury Sanctions Major Iranian Commercial Entities’, 23 June 2011, available: <http://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/tg1217.aspx>; US Treasury Department, ‘Treasury designates Iranian commercial airline linked to Iran’s support for terrorism’, 12 October 2011, available: <http://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/tg1322.aspx>.

302 *Ibid.*

303 US Treasury Department, ‘Treasury designates Syrian entity, others involved in arms and communications procurement networks and identifies blocked Iranian aircraft’, 19 September 2012, available: <http://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/tg1714.aspx>.

304 For more details, see: UN Security Council’s Iran Sanctions Committee, ‘Implementation Assistance Notice: Conventional Arms and Related Materiel’, available: http://www.un.org/sc/committees/1737/pdf/Implementation%20Assistance%20Notice_Conv%20Arms.pdf.

305 Louis Charbonneau, ‘U.N. publishes report on Iran arms trade with Syria’, *Reuters*, 29 June 2012, available: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/06/30/us-iran-sanctions-un-idUSBRE85T02Q20120630>.

306 Israeli air strikes on Syria have often claimed to be targeting such shipments. See, for example, Nicholas Blanford, ‘Israeli strike indicates Syria, Hezbollah may have crossed its ‘red line’ (+video)’, *The Christian Science Monitor*, 30 January 2013, available: <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2013/0130/Israeli-strike-indicates-Syria-Hezbollah-may-have-crossed-its-red-line-video>; Anne Barnard, ‘Syria blames Israel for fiery attack in Damascus’, *New York Times*, 5 May 2013, available: <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/06/world/middleeast/after-strikes-in-syria-concerns-about-an-escalation-of-fighting.html>.

307 ‘Statements made by the Ministry of Foreign [Affairs] and European Spokesperson’, *France in the United States*, 16 January 16 2012, available: <http://ambafrance-us.org/IMG/html/briefing/2012/us120116.htm>.

308 ‘Iran rejects French charge it is sending arms to Syria’, *The Telegraph*, 17 January 2012, available: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/iran/9019706/iran-rejects-French-charge-it-is-sending-arms-to-Syria.html>.

309 Adam Entous And Matthew Rosenberg, ‘U.S. Says Iran Helps Crackdown in Syria’, *The Wall Street Journal*, 14 April 2011, available: <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424052748704547804576261222747330438>. See also: Mark Hosenball, ‘Iran helping Assad to put down protests: officials’, *Reuters*, 23 March 2012, available: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/03/23/us-iran-syria-crackdown-idUSBRE82M18220120323>.

310 Eric Schmitt and Robert f. Worth, ‘With arms for Yemen rebels, Iran seeks wider Mideast role’, *The New York Times*, 15 March 2012, available: <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/15/world/middleeast/aiding-yemen-rebels-iran-seeks-wider-mideast-role.html>.

311 Hugh Macleod and Annasofie Flamand, ‘Iran’s support for Syrian regime raises questions of legality’, *Global Post*, 18 September 2012, available: <http://www.globalpost.com/dispatch/news/regions/middle-east/syria/120914/iran-support-syria-regime-legality>.

312 Mark Hosenball, ‘Iran helping Assad to put down protests: officials’, *Reuters*, *idem*.

313 ‘Council Implementing Regulation (EU) No. 611/2011’, Official Journal of the European Union, 23 June 2011, available: <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:L:2011:164:0001:0003:EN:PDF>.

314 US Treasury Department, ‘Treasury sanctions Syrian, Iranian security forces for involvement in Syrian crackdown’, 29 June 2011, available: <http://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/tg1224.aspx>.

315 *Ibid.*

Syrian regime's violent repression of dissent in Syria.”³¹⁶ Like Sepah Qods and LEF, the department added, the MOIS had provided “substantial technical assistance” to the Syrian General Intelligence for the purpose of “assisting the Syrian regime in its violent crackdown on protesters.”

As to what exactly this ‘substantial’ and ‘material assistance’ was, another US sanctions designation in September 2012 sheds some more light. The designation targeted Syria’s Army Supply Bureau for providing support to Iran Electronics Industries (IEI), a subsidiary of the Iranian Ministry of Defense and Armed Forces Logistics (MODAFL) with which the Bureau has standing contracts. In its press release, the Treasury revealed that, in March 2012, IEI had prepared to send “two large shipments of communications equipment,” including radio jammers, to Syria.³¹⁷ The shipments were valued at more than two million US dollars and were apparently financed by the Central Bank of Syria. According to media reports, jamming equipment was used by the Syrian regime against anti-regime fighters at least in Aleppo.³¹⁸ There had also been reports of Iranian-made tear gas used in Homs in 2011.³¹⁹

Stepping up military support

As the revolution was gradually pushed towards militarisation and armed opposition groups started to achieve significant victories on the ground, the Iranian regime also stepped up its military support to the Assad regime to ensure its survival. In March 2013, *Reuters* published another exclusive report, citing Western officials and diplomats, claiming that Iran had “significantly stepped up” its military support to the Syrian regime in the previous months, describing it as a “crucial lifeline” to Bashar al-Assad.³²⁰ As with sending Lebanese and Iraqi militias to Syria, the increased military support to the Syrian regime suggested the war in Syria had entered a new phase in which the Iranian regime played a leading role. But there was one problem: a viable route.

By now, the Turkish government had totally given up on al-Assad’s promises of ‘reform’ and was fully supportive of the rebels. Part of this was apparently a relentless campaign to stamp out Iranian arms smuggling via Turkish territory and airspace, which led Iran to begin using Iraqi territory and airspace instead. The diplomats cited by *Reuters* in the above-mentioned article made clear that the main delivery route for Iranian arms to Syria

was now through Iraq. In another report from September 2012, *Reuters* quoted a Western intelligence report claiming Iranian planes were flying from Iran to Syria via Iraq “on an almost daily basis.” They allegedly carried Sepah Pasdaran personnel and “tens of tons of weapons to arm the Syrian security forces and militias fighting against the rebels.”³²¹ The extent of such shipments is “far greater than has been publicly acknowledged,” it added, “and much more systematic, thanks to an agreement between senior Iraqi and Iranian officials.”

The intelligence report specifically mentions two Boeing 747 aircraft as being involved in Syria arms transfers: An Iran Air plane with the tail number EP-ICD and Mahan Air’s EP-MNE. Both were indeed among 117 aircraft identified by the US Treasury Department in its sanctions designation in September 2012 as “blocked Iranian aircraft.”³²² In addition to the airlines named above, the EU and the US also added to their Iran sanctions lists the names of Iranian shipping and construction companies associated with Sepah Pasdaran and apparently used for shipping weapons to Syria and a number of African countries.

In August 2012, *The Wall Street Journal* quoted a founding member of Sepah Pasdaran, who now opposes the Iranian regime and lives in exile, saying Iran had also started moving military aid and cash to Syria “through Iranian companies in Iraq, such as a construction company owned by a former [Sepah] member now living in Iraq and a tour company servicing pilgrims to holy Shiite sites.”³²³ A Syrian rebel fighter operating in Homs with Liwa al-Haq was quoted by *Reuters* in February 2014 saying opposition forces “knew of Iranian planes flying into Hama airport in central Syria to deliver weapons.” Latakia’s airport and port, as well as the port in Tartous, were also used to bring equipment, he added.³²⁴

It is worth noting that, in addition to targeting companies, the US Treasury also sanctioned Ismail Qani, the deputy commander of Sepah Qods, whom the department described as being responsible for “financial oversight” of the force’s arms shipments.³²⁵ Qani, as already mentioned, was the first senior Iranian official to admit a “physical” Iranian regime presence in Syria.

The former Iraqi government of Nouri al-Maliki, a close ally of the Iranian regime, was repeatedly accused of allowing Iranian aircraft to use Iraqi airspace to transport

arms and troops to Syria. In response, the Iraqi authorities staged a number of theatrical inspections of Iranian aircraft flying through Iraq and allegedly found “no illegal item.”³²⁶

In an interview with *Al-Asharq Al-Awsat* in July 2013, Iraqi foreign minister Hoshyar Zebari confirmed that the “random inspections” that started in September 2012 only found non-lethal materials (equipment, medicine and food) but added: “Honestly, these planes could be carrying other things, but we don’t have the deterrents, air defense systems or military aircraft necessary to prevent arms trafficking.”³²⁷

“We told the Iranians, ‘We don’t want you to use your relationship with us to move any arms to others.’... Moreover, we told NATO two days ago, and before that the members of Security Council and a small group of Syrians the following: ‘We refuse and condemn arms trafficking through our airspace and will officially inform Iran of that, but we cannot stop it... If you believe these flights contradict the Security Council decisions prohibiting arms from leaving Iran under the provisions of Chapter 7, I ask you, in the name of the government, to help us stop these flights in Iraqi airspace.’”

American officials, citing “classified intelligence reports,” claimed there was evidence of “collusion between Iranian and Iraqi officials on the inspections,” accusing the

latter of tipping off Iran as to when inspections would be conducted.³²⁸ In one instance, Qassem Soleimani is said to have ordered a flight to Syria to carry only humanitarian goods. The plane was asked to land in Iraq for inspection soon after, on 27 October 2012. In another instance, an Iranian flight ignored an Iraqi request to land, presumably because it did not want its cargo to be inspected.³²⁹

In addition to al-Maliki, media reports have specifically pointed the finger at then Iraqi Transport Minister Hadi al-Amiri, who belongs to the Badr Organisation, and Ammar al-Hakim, the leader of the Supreme Islamic Iraqi Council. Both are said to be close to Sepah Pasdaran

320 Louis Charbonneau, ‘Exclusive: Iran steps up weapons lifeline to Assad’, *Reuters*, 14 March 2013, available: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/03/14/us-syria-crisis-iran-idUSBRE92D05U20130314>.

321 Louis Charbonneau, ‘Exclusive: Western report – Iran ships arms, personnel to Syria via Iraq’, *Reuters*, 19 September 2012, available: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/09/19/us-syria-crisis-iran-idUSBRE88117B20120919>.

322 US Treasury Department, ‘Syria Designations; Syria Identifications; Non-proliferation Designations; Non-proliferation Identifications; Burma Designation Removals; Non-proliferation Designation Removals; Anti-Terrorism Designation Update’, 19 September 2012, available: <http://www.treasury.gov/resource-center/sanctions/OFAC-Enforcement/Pages/20120919.aspx>.

323 Farnaz Fassihi, ‘Iran Said to Send Troops to Bolster Syria’, *The Wall Street Journal*, 27 August 2012, available: <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10000872396390444230504577615393756632230>.

324 Jonathan Saul and Parisa Hafezi, ‘Iran boosts military support in Syria to bolster Assad’, *Reuters*, 21 February 2014, available: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/02/21/us-syria-crisis-iran-idUSBREA1K09U20140221>.

325 US Treasury Department, ‘Treasury targets Iranian arms shipments’, *idem*.

326 See, for example: ‘Iraq inspects second Syrian-bound Iran flight, finds no illegal items’, *Press TV*, 28 October 2012, available: <http://www.presstv.com/detail/2012/10/28/269235/iraq-inspects-2nd-iranian-plane-to-syria/>.

327 Michel Abu Najm, ‘Iraqi Foreign Minister on the Syrian Crisis’, *Asharq al-Awsat*, 16 Jul, 2013, available: <http://www.aawsat.net/2013/07/article55309833>.

328 Michael R. Gordon, Eric Schmitt and Tim Arango, ‘Flow of arms to Syria through Iraq persists, to U.S. dismay’, *The New York Times*, 1 December 2012, available: <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/02/world/middleeast/us-is-stumbling-in-effort-to-cut-syria-arms-flow.html>.

329 *Ibid.*

316 US Treasury Department, ‘Treasury designates Iranian Ministry of Intelligence and Security for human rights abuses and support for terrorism’, 16 February 2012, available: <http://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/tg1424.aspx>.

317 US Treasury Department, ‘Treasury designates Syrian entity, others involved in arms and communications procurement networks and identifies blocked Iranian aircraft’, 19 September 2012, available: <http://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/tg1714.aspx>.

318 See for example, C. J. Chivers, ‘Life with Syria’s rebels in a cold and cunning war’, *The New York Times*, 20 August 2012, available: <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/21/world/middleeast/syrian-rebels-coalesce-into-a-fighting-force.html>. See also: ‘Syria conflict: UK to give extra £5m to opposition groups’, *BBC*, 10 August 2012, available: <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-19205204>.

319 See, for example, this video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=he3tg6NkOQg>. For more on the use of tear gas in Syria, see for example: ‘Syria CS gas may have been made in the UK’, *Corporate Watch*, 6 April 2011, available: <http://www.corporate-watch.org/content/april-6-2011-syria-cs-gas-may-have-been-made-uk>.

and were accused of facilitating the transportation of fighters and weapons from Iran and Iraq into Syria.³³⁰ They are the ones, according to these reports, who are “protecting Iranian aircraft and tankers from inspection.”

Developments in Syria and Iraq in summer 2014 (the expansion of Daesh and the subsequent US air strikes against Daesh) seem to have created a new obstacle for Iranian arms shipments to Syria via Iraq. Various Syrian and Lebanese sources have told the author of this report that Sepah Pasdaran commanders and weapons are now being flown to Beirut, where the airport's security is controlled by Hezbollah, and then transferred by air or land into Syria. We have not been able to verify these claims or obtain any more details. One thing is for sure, though: The Iranian regime's military support to the Syrian regime is becoming ever riskier and ever costlier.

Made in Iran, used in Syria

Judging by the intercepted shipments and the sanctions-monitoring reports, the kinds of weapons that the Iranian regime has been sending to Syria range from communications equipment and light arms (assault rifles, machine guns, explosives, detonators and mortar shells) to more advanced and strategic weapons such as shore-to-sea missiles, surface-to-surface ballistic missiles, and even unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs).

Iranian tanks (T-72 Ural TURMS-T, T-72M1 TURMS-T, T-72AV 'T-82' TURMS-T), multiple rocket launchers (333mm Falaq-2 and IRAM), ballistic missiles (Fateh-110 or M-600) and even military jeeps and vans (Morattab Pazhan and Sahra) are all known to be in the possession of Syrian armed forces and Iran-backed militias fighting in Syria.³³¹ The question is whether these Iranian weapons have actually been used by Syrian regime forces and militias against civilians and rebels and whether there is undeniable evidence of that. This is important to establish the Iranian regime's complicity in the war crimes and crimes against humanity committed by the Syrian regime and the militias fighting alongside it.

In addition to the above official and media reports, other evidence of Iranian weapons being used in Syria includes photographs and videos published and analysed by a number of dedicated bloggers who have been following the events in Syria very closely.³³² For instance, in May 2013, independent arms expert Eliot Higgins, blogging

under the name of Brown Moses, reposted a video from 'Aqraba, Damascus, that provided “a very rare example of evidence” of accusations of Iran's exporting weapons to Syria in violation of the UN Security Council ban.³³³

The video³³⁴ shows an unexploded 107mm rocket, typically launched by Type-63 multiple rocket launchers. After examining various variations of the rocket, Higgins concludes that the colours and the markings on this rocket “strongly indicate it was manufactured in Iran.” Moreover, the date of manufacture, which can be clearly seen in screenshots taken from the video, is 2012. As he puts it, “it appears what we have here is an Iranian rocket manufactured in 2012, during the Syrian conflict, and the arms embargo, that has managed to find its way into Damascus.” The unexploded rocket was found amidst a completely destroyed residential area. The destruction was presumably caused by similar rockets that did explode.

In another post a few days later,³³⁵ Brown Moses reposted another video³³⁶ filmed by opposition fighters at a position they had just captured from Syrian regime forces. The video clearly shows the markings on a munitions box containing two 120mm mortar bombs, manufactured in 2012, with AZ111A2 fuzes. As Higgins points out, AZ111A2 fuzes are produced by the Iranian Defense Industries Organisation. The box is seen among many others, and a rebel fighter is heard saying: “they were using this ammunition to shell civilians over there,” near the Tahmaz poultry farms in Hama.

Another Iranian weapon that has been used in Syria is the HS.50 anti-materiel sniper rifle, or rather, the unlicensed Iranian copy of it called Sayad-2.³³⁷ The Syrian armed forces were not known to possess these rifles before the start of the current war. Yet thousands of civilians have been killed in Syria over the past three years by snipers, many apparently using this Iranian rifle.

In a post from April 2013, a specialist arms-monitoring blog called Oryxspioenkop said there were “two theories” to explain how these sniper rifles could have ended up in Syria.³³⁸ The first is through Hezbollah Lebanon, which is “a known operator of the HS.50.” The other “and most likely theory” is that the weapons were delivered to Syria directly. The Sayad-2, the blogger adds, is likely to have been included in the above-mentioned Iranian arms

shipments. It is also worth noting that most of these rifles have been seen not with regular Syrian troops but with Lebanese and Iraqi pro-Assad militias, as well as local Syrian militias 'protecting' their neighbourhoods.³³⁹

The most fatal Iranian weapons used in Syria have perhaps been the unguided artillery rockets, often mounted on converted Mercedes trucks. The Syrian army is known to have used Fajr and Falaq missiles, both the single tube and the double tube versions.³⁴⁰ In February 2014, the director of Armament Research Services confirmed to *Reuters* that Iranian-made Falaq-1 and Falaq-2 rocket launchers had been sent from Iran to Syria.³⁴¹ "While they have been around for a while," he added, "we have seen an increase in [their] use of late." Indeed, there have been a number of videos and photos of Falaq and Fajr rockets being fired by regime forces in Syria, especially in the Ghouta suburbs near Damascus.³⁴²

Then there are the short-range ballistic missiles (Zelzal, Fateh, etc.). Fateh-110, which is also known under its Syrian designations M-600 and Tishreen, was filmed in action at least once. Leaked footage of a Fateh-110 missile being launched by Syrian regime forces in the Qalamon region was posted on YouTube in March 2013.³⁴³

Needless to say, it is not just the missiles themselves that the Iranian regime has been shipping to Syria but also the know-how. In August 2012, for example, Iranian media reported that 13 commanders from Sepah Pasdaran's missiles unit went to Syria to train their Syrian counterparts.³⁴⁴ The team was reportedly headed by Hassan Moqaddam.

The determination of the Iranian regime to do everything it can to support Bashar al-Assad's regime is perhaps best exemplified by sending its latest unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs or drones) to Syria. In April 2014, footage of the Shahed 129 UAV flying over Eastern Ghouta, Damascus, was posted on YouTube.³⁴⁵ The Shahed 129 was unveiled in Iran in late 2012 and entered mass production in September 2013 for the Aerospace Force of the Iranian army.

According to Oryx, the Shahed 129 flying over Ghouta is a modified version of the original Shahed 129, "possibly of the third batch manufactured."³⁴⁶ The authors say

330 Saud Al-Sarhan, 'From Qusair to Yabrud: Shiite foreign fighters in Syria', *Al-Monitor*, 6 March 2014, available: <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/03/qusair-yabroud-shiite-for-foreign-fighters-syria.html>. See also: Moshreq Abbas, 'Flow of Iranian weapons to Syria undermines Iraqi sovereignty', *Al-Monitor*, 28 September 2012, available: <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/ar/politics/2012/09/iranian-weapons-to-syria-via-iraq.html>.

331 See, for example: 'Syrian fighting vehicles', *Oryx Blog*, 25 February 2013, available: http://spioenkop.blogspot.it/2013/02/syria-and-her-fighting-vehicles_25.html.

332 These include: <http://brown-moses.blogspot.co.uk>; <http://rogueadventurer.com/category/syria/>; <http://spioenkop.blogspot.it/search/label/Syria>.

333 Brown Moses, 'Evidence of Iranian arms provided to Syria in the past 18 months', 20 May 2013, available: <http://brown-moses.blogspot.co.uk/2013/05/evidence-of-iranian-arms-provided-to.html>.

334 Available: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8FG0Ak-xNGo>.

335 Brown Moses, 'More evidence of sanction busting Iranian munitions deliveries to Syria', 26 May 2013, available: <http://brown-moses.blogspot.co.uk/2013/05/more-evidence-of-sanction-busting.html>.

336 Available: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WGLiI7l4hfY>.

337 'Anti-Materiel Rifles In Syria', *Brown Moses*, 18 April 2013, available: <http://brown-moses.blogspot.fr/2013/04/anti-material-rifles-in-syria.html>.

338 'Syria and her HS.50s', *Oryx Blog*, 27 April 2013, available: <http://spioenkop.blogspot.it/2013/04/syria-and-her-hs50s.html>.

339 *Ibid.* The blog provides many pictures of militiamen seen holding the rifle or using it in Syria. See also: Phillip Smyth, 'Khomeini's Cannon: .50 caliber anti-material rifles and Shia fighters in Syria', *Jihadology*, 24 December 2013, available: <http://jihadology.net/2013/12/24/hizballah-cavalcade-khameneis-cannon-50-caliber-anti-material-rifles-shia-fighters-in-syria/>.

340 For more details, see: 'Mercedes-Benz and Syria, a deadly combination', *Oryx Blog*, 2 September 2013, available: <http://spioenkop.blogspot.it/2013/09/mercedes-benz-and-syria-deadly.html>.

341 Jonathan Saul and Parisa Hafezi, 'Iran boosts military support in Syria to bolster Assad', *idem*.

342 e.g. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N4XxQvWLx_k; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MvespWr4JFo>.

343 Available: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yDFde3XtBRU>. For more on Iranian missiles used in Syria, see: 'Mercedes-Benz and Syria, a deadly combination', *idem*.

344 'Syria welcomes 13 Sepah missile commanders + photos' (in Persian), *Mashregh News*, 12 August 2012, available: <http://tinyurl.com/n936ppt>.

345 See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h2nb7iajUdl> and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ncFicAkemSY>.

346 'Iran deploying her newest drones to Syria: The Shahed 129', *Oryx Blog*, 10 April 2014, available: <http://www.spioenkop.blogspot.it/2014/04/iran-deploying-her-newest-drones-to.html>.

improvements include a retractable landing gear and the ability to carry weapons (up to eight guided missiles). The drone seen in the video is not provided with missiles but this does not exclude the possibility that others are or will be. In November 2013, another new Iranian drone, known as The Yasir, was also spotted in Syria.³⁴⁷ The Yasir is apparently based on the American-made Scan Eagle, of which at least one has been captured by Iran.

Iranian drones were first spotted in Syrian skies in early 2012.³⁴⁸ But sending its latest drones to Syria is a sign not only of the length to which the Iranian regime is prepared to go to defend Bashar al-Assad's regime but also that it may be using Syria as a testing ground for its latest military technology.

Update on Iranian weapons used in Syria

In a press conference with Russian media in March 2015, Syrian president Bashar al-Assad confirmed that his forces continued to receive arms and other military equipment from Russia. "There were Russian contracts with Syria signed before the crisis which started to be implemented after the beginning of the crisis," he said. "There are also other new contracts," he added, "concerning weapons and military cooperation signed during the crisis and their implementation is ongoing. The nature of these contracts has of course changed given the nature of the battles conducted by the Syrian armed forces in facing the terrorists."¹

While al-Assad did not mention Iran, there is no doubt that Iranian arms shipments to Syria – as well as to Hezbollah Lebanon via Syria – have also continued throughout 2014 and 2015, despite international sanctions on Iran and Syria and despite losing control over all of Syria's border crossings to the Free Syrian Army or to Daesh. Nor is there doubt that the nature of the Iranian military assistance to al-Assad's regime has changed over the past few years "given the changing nature of the battles conducted by the Syrian armed forces in facing the terrorists," to use al-Assad's words. The continuation of these arms shipments is evident, for example, from the repeated Israeli air strikes on strategic arms depots on Syrian soil or Iranian arms shipments destined to Hezbollah in Lebanon.²

As mentioned above, the Iranian regime has supplied Syrian regime forces and militias with sniper rifles

(Sayyad, an Iranian replica of the Austrian-built Steyr HS.50), tanks (modified T-72S Russian tanks), anti-tank weapons (M40 recoilless rifles and the Saeghe-2 and Toophan anti-tank guided weapons), jeeps equipped with multiple rocket launchers (Safir), multiple rocket launch systems (Fajr-3, Fajr-5, Ra'd and Falaq-2) and even ballistic missiles (Fateh-110, Zelzal-2, Zelzal-3 and Shahab-2).³

Since the publication of the first edition of this report in November 2014, more evidence has emerged of Iranian-made weapons being used in Syria. There is also evidence of new types of Iranian weapons being used in the ongoing war there.

For instance, in March 2015, independent arms expert Eliot Higgins, blogging under the name of *Bellingcat*, revealed that Iran had delivered 10 restored and modified Sukhoi-22 fighter-bombers to Syria onboard Ilyushin Il-76 planes.⁴ Iran's Su-22 fleet had become part of Sepah Pasdaran's aerospace wing instead of Iran's Air Force, and the delivery was made "on the direct order of Khamenei," the report adds. Higgins also claims that at least six Iranian pilots were trained to fly the Su-22s in Syria and were sent to Belarus for further training.

About two years before, in February 2013, a Jordanian website reported that Iran had supplied the Syrian regime with 32 Sukhoi-22 aircraft it had obtained from Iraq many years ago, in addition to helicopters and military transport aircraft.⁵ Neither of the reports could be independently verified by the author of this report.

The Syrian army's fleet of MiG and Sukhoi fighter jets have been at the forefront of the aerial bombing campaigns against rebel and civilian areas across Syria. Su-22s have been used to drop unguided munition, such as barrel bombs, as well as cluster and incendiary bombs.⁶ However, the prolonged war seems to have exhausted the Syrian air force, whose MiG and Sukhoi aircraft are reportedly grounded for weeks at a time for maintenance. Many have also been shot down by rebels using man-portable air-defense systems (MANPADS).⁷

The new Iranian fighter-bombers would therefore compensate for these losses to some extent. One of the new Iranian Su-22s was spotted while bombing the town of Talbisah, near Homs, on 9 March 2015, according to

Bellingcat's report.⁸ Talbisah, a rebel stronghold, has been repeatedly targeted by Syrian regime forces and militias since 2011.⁹

In addition to fighter jets, Iran is known to have supplied Syrian regime forces with different types of Iranian-made missiles, as mentioned above. In February 2015, the head of Sepah Pasdaran's Aerospace Force, Brigadier General Amir Ali Hajizadeh, admitted that Iran had "helped Iraq, Syria, Palestine and the Lebanese Hezbollah by exporting the technology that it has for the production of missiles and other equipment, and they can now stand against the Zionist regime, ISIS (Daesh) and other Takfiri groups and cripple them."¹⁰

In March 2015, Hajizadeh also announced that Iran was planning to replace its Fateh, Qiyam and Qadr missile series with a new generation of missiles.¹¹ A few days before, Iran had unveiled new plans for producing a new long-range surface-to-surface cruise missile system called Somar.¹² It had also already started mass-producing another series of long-range missiles called Sejil. It is plausible that Syria is being used by Sepah Pasdaran's Aerospace Force to both use up its stock of old missiles and as a testing ground for new ones.

The same could be said about Iranian-made drones, which have been the subject of boasting by Iranian officials and military commanders in recent months.¹³ In April 2015, the specialist defence magazine *Jane's Defence Weekly* revealed that Sepah Pasdaran and Hezbollah had built a remote airstrip in the northern Bekaa Valley in Lebanon to fly Iranian-made drones over Syria.¹⁴ The strip is said to be around 10 miles west of the Syrian border and was spotted on satellite images that have recently been made available by Google Earth. Sources in Hezbollah Lebanon confirmed to the magazine that the group was using drones to back its operations against rebel forces in Syria, particularly in the Qalamon region.

Another Iranian weapon that has terrorised civilians and rebels alike across Syria is Iranian-made sniper rifles.¹⁵ As mentioned above, an Iranian copy of the HS.50 Australian anti-materiel sniper rifle, called Sayyad-2, has been used extensively in Syria. A new Iranian 14.5mm anti-materiel sniper rifle called Shaher has emerged since then.¹⁶ The new rifle is capable of penetrating concrete strongholds and armored vehicles, with an effective

range of 4km. Both sniper rifles have been seen in different parts of Syria and some appear to have fallen into the hands of opposition forces.¹⁷

As to how these Iranian weapons have made their way into Syria, most now appear to be transported by Sepah Qods by air and sea since the Syrian regime lost control over all of Syria's land border crossings to the Free Syrian Army or Daesh, making all previously used land routes inviable.¹⁸ Media reports have also claimed that Russia has been helping Iran deliver weapons into Syria. Western intelligence sources told *Fox News* in late October 2015 that Russian cargo planes transported Iranian weapons to Syria twice a day.¹⁹ Many Syrian military airports in regime-held areas are now reportedly under Iranian control.²⁰

For instance, a report from April 2015 claims that the Dab'a military airport, south of Homs, is now "under complete Iranian control."²¹ The former commander of one of the Free Army brigades in Homs is quoted in the report saying the airport is "one of the most important airports for Bashar al-Assad's regime" because Iranian airplanes carrying food and military supplies frequently land there, and because the airport is located near more than one motorway used by Iranian and Syrian regime forces and militias. The airport itself is guarded by Iranian forces, according to the report, while the task of protecting the surrounding area has been assigned to Hezbollah Lebanon. Even Syrian regime forces and militias are not allowed to go near it, the source adds.

Unlike their counterparts in Idlib, armed rebel groups in the Homs area do not possess anti-aircraft weaponry. Thus, despite repeated American promises of providing such weapons to moderate Syrian rebels, and despite international sanctions on Iranian arms exports and US war planes filling Syrian skies to target Daesh, Iranian weapons continue to pour into Syria and continue to be used by Syrian regime forces and Iranian-controlled militias to commit war crimes and crimes against humanity.

347 'Iran deploying her newest drones to Syria: The Yasir UAV', *Oryx Blog*, 10 November 2013, available: <http://spioenkop.blogspot.fr/2013/11/the-yasir-uav-iran-deploying-her-newest.html>.

348 Mark Hosenball, 'Iran helping Assad to put down protests: officials', *Reuters*, 23 March 2012, available: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/03/23/us-iran-syria-crackdown-idUSBRE82M18220120323>.

Indeed, the Iranian regime seems to be largely unaffected by the sanctions as far as its arms exports to Syria and Hezbollah Lebanon are concerned. In the words of Brigadier-General Amir Ali Hajizadeh, "Sanctions have no bearing on the process of Iran's defense programs. The host of products we have received for the country's defensive purposes have been achieved under the sanctions that the enemies described as tough and stinging."²²

Footnotes:

1 'President al-Assad: The West has not changed policy, intervention in terrorists' favor must stop for a solution to succeed', SANA, 27 March 2015, <http://www.sana.sy/en/?p=33642>.

2 See, for example, this Israeli strike on locations near Damascus on 7 December 2014: <https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/NewsReports/564516-israel-hits-damascus-targets>. See also: https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/israel-bombs-syria-in-attacks-probably-aimed-at-hezbollah/2014/12/07/dc0040d6-7e3e-11e4-b936-f3afab0155a7_story.html. And this one in al-Qalamon region on 24 April 2015: <http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2015/4/27/israeli-strikes-high-light-fears-over-hezbollah.html>.

3 For a list of weapons possessed by Syrian regime forces, see: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Equipment_of_the_Syrian_Army. See also this *France 24* article, <http://observers.france24.com/en/20150526-iran-iranian-weapons-iraq-militia-islamic>, and this blog by *Bellingcat*, <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/mena/2015/03/13/irans-expanding-sphere-of-influence-iranian-t-72-tanks-in-iraq/>, about similar weapons supplied by Iran to Iraqi militias.

4 'Iranian fighter-bombers operating in Syria', *Bellingcat*, 16 March 2015, available: <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/2015/03/16/iranian-fighter-bombers-operating-in-syria>.

5 'Iran supplies Syria with 32 Sukhoi aircraft that belong to Iraq' (in Arabic), *Al-Sawsana*, 13 February 2013, available: <https://www.assawsana.com/portal/pages.php?newsid=135060>.

6 See, for example, this strike on the eastern countryside of Damascus in January 2013: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wc3mCzw7j10>; and this one on the Zawiya mountain near Idlib in April 2015: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=47EifakXQn8>. See also this video about MIG-23s and SU-22s in action: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DIUwoYrLQJ8>; and this report by the Syrian Violations Documentation Center: <http://www.vdc-sy.info/index.php/en/reports/1395627722>.

7 The first Su-22 was reportedly shot down by rebel forces on 14 February 2013. Several others have been shot down since then. See, for example, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uNi8rWdDTdU> and <http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2013/02/20/267391.html>.

8 The video showing the aircraft is available on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tCOT7qG8YN4>.

9 See, for example, this massacre in September 2014: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29236341>.

10 'IRGC Commander: Syria, Iraq, Palestine, Hezbollah Aided by Iran's Missile Technology', *Fars News*, 2 February 2015, available: <http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.aspx?nn=13931113001541>.

11 'Iran Plans to Replace Missile Arsenal', *Fars News*, 14 March 2015, available: <http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.aspx?nn=13931223000749>.

12 *Ibid.*

13 On new developments in Iran's drones technology, see these Iranian media reports: <http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.aspx?nn=13930908001088>; <http://www.irna.ir/en/News/81424260/>; <http://www.tasnimnews.com/English/Home/Single/611044>; <http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.aspx?nn=13931120001384>; <http://www.presstv.ir/Detail/2015/02/21/398510/Iran-will-extend-homebuilt-drones-range>; <http://isna.ir/en/news/93121005890/Iran-raises-drones-flights-by-800-times>; <http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.aspx?nn=13940125000459>; <http://sputniknews.com/middleeast/20150213/1018207955.html>.

14 'Hizbullah airstrip revealed', *IHS Jane's Defence Weekly*, 23 April 2015, available: <http://www.janes.com/article/50922/hizbullah-airstrip-revealed>.

15 See, for example, this report by the Syrian Network for Human Rights: http://sn4hr.org/public_html/wp-content/pdf/english/Hunting-Humans.pdf.

16 See: http://www.liveleak.com/view?i=637_1428004783 and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MyzTpDi4XQw>.

17 See: <http://foreignpolicytalk.weebly.com/weapon-identification/iranian-and-chinese-sniper-rifles-used-by-syrian-rebel-group>.

18 See, for example, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/security/2014/07/who-controls-syrian-border-crossings.html> and <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-32840508>.

19 See: <http://www.foxnews.com/world/2015/10/29/exclusive-russia-flying-iranian-weapons-shipments-into-syria-sources-say/>.

20 For an overview of military airports used by Syrian regime forces, see, for example, 'Where do Assad's planes take off from?' (in Arabic), *Siraj Press*, 7 April 2015, available: <http://goo.gl/su6C5N>.

21 'Iran completely controls one of the most important airports in central Syria and turns adjacent land into hashish farms' (in Arabic), *Al-Souria Net*, 22 April 2015, available: <https://goo.gl/9VUWDS>.

22 'Iran's Defense Projects Unaffected by Sanctions: Commander', *Tasnim News Agency*, 8 March 2015, available: <http://www.tasnimnews.com/english/Home/Single/678539>.

Case study: Who's making the barrel bombs?

Barrel bombs are highly explosive, unguided bombs, which are cheaply produced using large oil drums, gas cylinders or water tanks filled with high explosives and scrap metal to enhance their destructive capacity. They are then dropped from helicopters without any guiding system to kill and destroy indiscriminately. They have nonetheless been extensively used by the Syrian regime forces over the last two years, despite a Security Council resolution in February 2014 ordering all parties to end the use of barrel bombs and other indiscriminate weapons in populated areas. More than 60 per cent of old Aleppo has been completely destroyed by barrel bombs, for example.³⁴⁹

In July 2014, Syrian opposition media published what they claimed was an outline of one of the biggest and most controversial arms factories in Syria, near al-Sfeira in Aleppo, leaked by an engineer who worked there.³⁵⁰ The factory reportedly manufactures large quantities of barrel bombs, ground-to-ground missiles, mortars and other types of weapons commonly used by Syrian regime forces.

Significantly, the engineer claimed that there are “four separate administrations competing with one another within the factory.” One of them is Iranian, he said, which is allegedly responsible for importing explosives and metals used to make shells, before sending them off to the “Chinese ovens.” The factory, according to the whistleblower, is overseen by the Syrian Air Force Intelligence, which submits regular reports to the Presidential Palace and coordinates with the Iranian and Chinese experts.

The report corroborates other reports about the al-Sfeira factory being run with Iranian and Chinese assistance.³⁵¹ Moreover, barrel bombs loaded with toxic chemicals, such as chlorine, have been used by Syrian regime forces on civilian areas, such as Kafar Zeita near Hama.³⁵² Iran has been accused of supplying the Syrian regime with Chinese-made chlorine gas canisters, of which it recently placed an order of 10,000 canisters, according to media reports.³⁵³

If the engineer's account of the Sfeira factory is true, then Iranian military experts and their commanders in Sepah Pasdaran may have been knowingly and willingly participating in one of the clearest and best documented types of war crimes committed in Syria, especially in Aleppo.

Case study: Did Sepah Qods play a role in the Ghouta chemical massacre?

On 21 August 2013, several opposition-controlled areas in the Ghouta suburbs of Damascus were hit by rockets containing the chemical agent sarin, killing hundreds of civilians, including many women and children.³⁵⁴

Apart from a few Syrian, Iranian and Russian propaganda outlets, and a few western journalists and commentators who fell for their propaganda,³⁵⁵ most serious observers around the world today agree that it was Syrian regime forces who committed the massacre, which the UN has described as a war crime.

349 For more details, see for example: Human Rights Watch, ‘Syria: Barrage of Barrel Bombs’, 30 July 2014, available: <http://www.hrw.org/news/2014/07/30/syria-barrage-barrel-bombs>.

350 ‘Secrets and details of the largest arms factory in Syria’ (in Arabic), *All4Syria*, 17 July 2014, available: <http://all4syria.info/Archive/157599>.

351 See, for example: ‘Aleppo Missile Factory’, NTI, 1 August 2010, available: <http://www.nti.org/facilities/482/>. See also: ‘Iran aids Syria's CW programme’, *Janes Defense Weekly*, 21 October 2005; ‘Syria blast ‘linked to chemical weapons’: report’, *AFP*, 19 September 2007, available: <http://afp.google.com/article/ALEqM5i-JuglQvDKwxupz9eULk1ml6OZ4Q>; ‘Syria has expanded chemical weapons supply with Iran's help, documents show’, *The Washington Post*, 27 July 2012, available: http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2012-07-27/world/35489623_1_chemical-weapons-chemical-plants-president-bashar.

352 For more details on this, see: ‘Reports confirm use of toxic gases by Syrian regime, again - Chlorine barrel bombs produce highly toxic dioxin’, *Naame Shaam*, 19 April 2014, available: <http://www.naameshaam.org/en/reports-confirm-use-of-toxic-gases-by-syrian-regime-again/>.

353 Con Coughlin, ‘All the evidence points to Iran supplying Syria with chlorine bombs’, *The Telegraph*, 6 May 2014, available: <http://blogs.telegraph.co.uk/news/concoughlin/100270222/all-the-evidence-points-to-iran-supplying-syria-with-chlorine-bombs/>.

354 There have been a number of investigations and in-depth reports about the Ghouta chemical attack. For example: The UN report, available: <http://www.scribd.com/doc/168606795/U-N-Report-on-Chemical-Attack-in-Syria>; Human Rights Watch's reports, available: <http://www.hrw.org/node/118725> and http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/syria_cw0913_web_1.pdf; the Violations Documentation Center's report, available: <http://www.vdc-sy.info/index.php/en/reports/chemicalmassacrefollowup>; and the US government's assessment, available: http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/shared/bsp/hi/pdfs/30_08_13_assessment.pdf.

355 The most famous example of this was Seymour Hersh's article in the *London Review of Books* in April 2014, which argued that the attack may have been committed by Jabhat al-Nusra with the →

Very few reports, however, have examined the possible role of the Iranian regime in this and other chemical massacres committed in Syria over the past two years.³⁵⁶ In August 2014, on the first anniversary of the Ghouta massacre, Naame Shaam published a six-page report summarising various pieces of evidence that strongly suggest Sepah Qods may have played a role in the attack, calling for international investigations into the massacre to examine the possible complicity of the Iranian regime, particularly Gen. Qassem Solemani.³⁵⁷

The evidence was divided into three parts. The first dealt with the question of whether the Iranian regime was aware of the plan to carry out the attack. After discussing various relevant pieces of evidence, the report concluded that it was highly unlikely that the Ghouta chemical attack was the result of Bashar al-Assad's "losing his nerves," as a German report had claimed. It was also unlikely, the report added, that the Iranian and Russian leaderships were unaware of such plans, as other media reports had suggested, citing other evidence that suggests the opposite.

Even if we were to believe that the Iranian government or political leadership were not aware of the Syrian regime's plans to use chemical weapons against rebels, the report cites other evidence that strongly suggests Sepah Pasdaran was fully aware of such plans, and may have even been part of drawing them up. This includes intelligence reports that Iranian officers believed to be members of Sepah Pasdaran were present at chemical weapons tests in Syria; the testimony of the former head of Syria's chemical weapons arsenal, who defected in 2012, claiming that members of Sepah Pasdaran attended "numerous meetings" with their Syrian counterparts to discuss the use of chemical weapons; and communications between Sepah Qods and the Syrian leadership intercepted by US intelligence services in which the former "urged" the latter to "use its supplies of toxic Sarin gas against rebels and the civilians supporting them in the besieged city of Homs."³⁵⁸

A thorough investigation by a specialist and independent team, Naame Shaam suggested, should be able to put together these and other pieces of evidence to establish whether Sepah Pasdaran had prior knowledge of the Ghouta attack and whether it had indeed advised and trained Syrian regime troops to use sarin and other chemical weapons. It should also not be very difficult for such a team to establish which Syrian military units carried out the attack (the 155th

Missile Brigade, the 4th Armoured Division, etc.) and whether they had been liaising with Sepah Pasdaran 'advisors', as evidence suggests they have been.

The second type of evidence is to do with whether Iranian weapons were used in the attack. In addition to all the evidence detailed above of Iranian weapons being used in Syria, there have been a couple of reports specifically suggesting that the rockets used in the Ghouta attack may have been Iranian ones.

In December 2013, a study analysing rockets linked to the Ghouta attack concluded that they were "most likely" fired by multiple launchers and had a range of about 3 kilometres. Moreover, the analysis suggested that the rockets were propelled by motors taken from a common family of 122-millimetre conventional artillery rockets known as the BM-21. The BM-21 line is a globally abundant system of ground-to-ground rockets, widely known as Grads, which originated in the Soviet Union but have been reproduced and updated by many countries, including Russia, China, Egypt and Iran.³⁵⁹

A few months before, another independent analysis of videos and pictures of the munitions claimed to have been used to deliver the chemical agents in the Ghouta attack concluded that it was "likely a non-standard munition produced in Iran or Syria, not widely used or manufactured, but likely not an 'improvised' munition." It also concluded that it was "a tube-launched munition, fired from an Iranian Falaq-2 type launcher or derivative or copy."³⁶⁰

Finally, the Naame Shaam report raised a question about the possible role of Sepah-controlled Iraqi militias, particularly Kata'eb Sayyid al-Shuhadaa, that were present in the area during and in the immediate aftermath of the attack, according to some reports. Their task was reportedly to "guard" the besieged areas held by rebels to prevent people from fleeing. Clashes between the two sides were reported over the few following days and Sayyid al-Shuhadaa held funerals for a number of its fighters who were killed there. The area was also heavily bombarded by regime forces, perhaps to destroy evidence of the chemical attack, as a number of observers have suggested.

The relevant question here is whether this Sepah-controlled militias' presence in the area was pre-planned in connection to the chemical attack or was just part of wider military operations in the area. It should not be difficult for an international investigation to establish this.

Update on the use of barrel bombs and chemical weapons in Syria

Despite several UN Security Council resolutions condemning their use and threatening to take action under Chapter VII of the UN Charter, the use of barrel bombs and chemical weapons by Syrian regime forces continued unabated throughout 2014 and 2015.¹

In February 2015, Human Rights Watch (HRW) released yet another report on the use of barrel bombs in defiance of UN resolutions.² Based on witness statements, satellite imagery and video and photographic evidence, the report identified at least 450 distinct major damage sites in 10 towns and villages held by rebel groups in Daraa and over 1,000 in Aleppo between 22 February 2014 and 25 January 2015. The majority of the sites had damage signatures “strongly consistent with the detonation of large, air-dropped munitions, including improvised barrel and conventional bombs dropped by helicopters.” The attacks “have had a devastating impact on civilians, killing or injuring thousands of people,” the report added.

In May 2015, Amnesty International released a similar report focusing on Aleppo.³ Attacks using barrel bombs killed more than 3,000 civilians in the Aleppo governorate in 2014, and more than 11,000 in Syria since 2012, according to the report. “Horrendous war crimes and other abuses” are being committed in the city by government forces and armed opposition groups on a daily basis, the report added, concluding that some of the Syrian government’s actions in Aleppo amounted to crimes against humanity.

The same is true of attacks using chemical agents, particularly chlorine. In a report released in August 2015, the Syrian Network for Human Rights documented 125 breaches by Syrian regime forces of the Security Council resolutions related to the use of chemical weapons in Syria.⁴

Chlorine was not part of the 2013 international deal, in the wake of the Gouta chemical massacre in August 2013. The deal then forced Syria to join the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) and hand over about 1,300 tons of its stock of chemical weapons and ingredients to avoid military action by the US. This was seemingly because Chlorine is a widely available substance used for many industrial and com-

help of the Turkish government, available: <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v35/n24/seymour-m-hersh/whose-sarin> and <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v36/n08/seymour-m-hersh/the-red-line-and-the-rat-line>. For more details on the whole affair, see: <http://www.naameshaam.org/en/seymour-hersh-and-the-gouta-chemical-massacre/>. There have been numerous articles and commentaries debunking Hersh’s misguided allegations, e.g.: http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2013/12/09/sy_hersh_chemical_misfire#sthash.bMCue1XH.APmouRPS.dpbs; <https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/commentaryanalysis/524969-524969-why-seymour-hersh-has-it-wrong-this-time>; <http://eaworldview.com/2013/12/syria-special-chemical-weapons-conspiracy-wasnt-seymour-hersh-exclusive-dissected/>; <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/apr/22/allegation-false-turkey-chemical-attack-syria>; <http://lareviewofbooks.org/essay/dangerous-method-syria-sy-hersh-art-mass-crime-revisionism>. The other famous propaganda piece was a *Mint Press* ‘investigation’ in August 2013 claiming the attack was carried out by the rebels themselves with the help of Saudi Arabia: <http://www.mintpressnews.com/witnesses-of-gas-attack-say-saudis-supplied-rebels-with-chemical-weapons/168135/>. For a detailed debunking of the story, see: <https://ceasefiremagazine.co.uk/syria-deciphering-propaganda-war-ghouta-massacre/>.

356 About previous and subsequent chemical attacks, see: <http://www.naameshaam.org/en/reports-confirm-use-of-toxic-gases-by-syrian-regime-again/>; <http://www.syrianhr.org/reports/syrian-network-for-human-rights-report-24-07-2013-10.pdf>; <http://www.vdc-sy.info/index.php/en/reports/1400970048>; <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/10796175/Syria-chemical-weapons-the-proof-that-Assad-regime-launching-chlorine-attacks-on-children.html>.

357 ‘Evidence suggests Sepah Pasdaran may have played role in 2013 Ghouta chemical attack in Syria’, *Naame Shaam*, 19 August 2014, available: <http://www.naameshaam.org/en/evidence-suggests-sepah-pasdar-may-have-played-role-in-2013-ghouta-chemical-attack-in-syria/>.

358 For reference to all these reports, see *ibid*. See also: Jacob Campbell, ‘Iran’s Hand in Chemical Attacks by Assad’s Syrian Regime’, *The Clarion Project*, 12 May 2014, available: <http://www.clarionproject.org/analysis/irans-hand-chemical-attacks-assads-syrian-regime>.

359 C. J. Chivers, ‘New Study Refines View of Sarin Attack in Syria’, *The New York Times*, 28 December 2013, available: <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/12/29/world/middleeast/new-study-refines-view-of-sarin-attack-in-syria.html>.

360 N.R. Jenzen-Jones, ‘Alleged CW munitions in Syria fired from Iranian Falaq-2 type launcher’, *The Rogue Adventurer*, 29 August 2013, available: <http://rogueadventurer.com/2013/08/29/alleged-cw-munitions-in-syria-fired-from-iranian-falaq-2-type-launchers/>. For a collection of articles and blogs analysing munitions linked alleged chemical attacks in Syria, see: <http://brown-moses.blogspot.fr/2013/08/collected-media-of-munitions-linked-to.html>.

mercial purposes. But the omission has led to chlorine becoming the “chemical weapon of choice” in Syria.⁵ Even the UN-OPCW fact-finding mission on Syria’s chemical weapons has reported that chlorine is repeatedly used in attacks on towns and villages across Syria.⁶

Moreover, the indirect, yet deadly effects of chlorine attacks in the long run have been largely overlooked by official and media reports. When chlorine burns in the wake of an explosion, it produces a highly toxic substance called dioxin. Dioxin is considered one of the most toxic substances known after plutonium. Naame Shaam was the first organisation to raise this issue in April 2014, as far as the author of this report is aware.⁷

Another absurdity characterising Syria’s chemical weapons affair is that, until recently, the UN-OPCW mission was not mandated to reach conclusions about attributing responsibility for the use of chemical weapons in the country, only how, where and when they were used. This is despite abundant evidence that only Syrian regime forces are capable of using such weapons, and have indeed been doing so for over two years.

On 7 August 2015, the UN Security Council finally adopted a resolution establishing a Joint Investigative Mechanism between the UN and OPCW to identify perpetrators using chemical weapons in Syria, including the use of chlorine.⁸ The new mission was mandated to “identify to the greatest extent feasible individuals, entities, groups or governments perpetrating, organizing, sponsoring or otherwise involved in the use of chemicals as weapons in Syria.” In September 2015, following delays caused by Russian objections, the Security Council finally gave the joint mission a green light to start its investigation to identify who is using chemical weapons in Syria.⁹

On 19 August 2015, Naame Shaam demanded that OPCW experts should sample all sites where chlorine bombs have been used in Syria to determine the degree of dioxin contamination in those areas. It also demanded that the new Joint Investigative Mechanism should examine the role played by Sepah Pasdaran in the use of chemical weapons in Syria, citing various pieces of evidence supporting its claim.¹⁰

It remains to be seen whether this resolution will be

implemented more rigorously than previous ones and whether the new Joint Investigative Mechanism will have more teeth than the previous UN-OPCW mission. It also remains to be seen whether the Syrian regime and its backers will comply with the resolution. Previous experiences do not inspire much confidence. In May 2015, for instance, international inspectors found traces of sarin and VX nerve agent at a military research site in Syria that had not been declared to the OPCW. One western diplomat was quoted by *Reuters* saying: “This is a pretty strong indication they [the Syrian government] have been lying about what they did with sarin.”¹¹

Moreover, Tehran appears to be using back-channel diplomacy to try and shield Bashar al-Assad from international attempts to punish him for using chlorine and other chemical weapons against civilians, according to media reports.¹² Such attempts may prove more fruitful now that Western relationships with Iran are being normalised following the US-Iranian nuclear deal reached in July 2015.¹³ By trying to shield al-Assad from responsibility, the Iranian regime is also trying to shield its own officials and commanders from charges of complicity in the war crimes and crimes against humanity committed in Syria, including chemical and barrel bomb attacks.

Footnotes:

1 Resolution 2118 (2013) condemned the killing of civilians resulting from chemical attacks and affirmed that the use of chemical weapons constituted a serious violation of the international law, stressing that those responsible for any use of chemical weapons must be held accountable. See: http://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B-65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_res_2118.pdf. Resolution 2209 (2015) condemned the use of chlorine as a weapon in Syria and threatened Chapter VII action in the event of non-compliance. See: <http://www.un.org/press/en/2015/sc11810.doc.htm>.

2 Human Rights Watch, *Syria: New spate of barrel bomb attacks*, 24 February 2015, available: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/02/24/syria-new-spate-barrel-bomb-attacks>. See also this report: <http://sn4hr.org/blog/2015/02/25/4184/>.

3 Amnesty, *Death everywhere’: War crimes and human rights abuses in Aleppo*, 4 May 2015, available: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde24/1370/2015/en/>.

4 Syrian Network for Human Rights, *Toxic gases in Syria: Unlimited Security Council Breaches*, August 2015, available: http://sn4hr.org/wp-content/pdf/english/Toxic_Gases_in_Syria_en.pdf.

5 See, for example, Mike Corder, ‘Full circle: Chlorine now chemical weapon of choice in Syria’, AP, 20 April 2015,

available: <http://news.yahoo.com/full-circle-chlorine-now-chemical-weapon-choice-syria-093039236.html>.

6 See the reports at: <http://opcw.unmissions.org/AboutOPCWUNJointMission/OPCWUNReports.aspx>.

7 See: <http://www.naameshaam.org/reports-confirm-use-of-toxic-gases-by-syrian-regime-again/>.

8 See: <http://www.un.org/press/en/2015/sc12001.doc.htm>.

9 See: <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-chemicalweapons-idUSKCN0RA24D20150910>.

10 See: <http://www.naameshaam.org/experts-should-sample-sites-of-chlorine-bomb-attacks-in-syria-for-highly-toxic-dioxin-and-investigate-iranian-role/>.

11 Anthony Deutsch, 'Exclusive: Weapons inspectors find undeclared sarin and VX traces in Syria - diplomats', *Reuters*, 8 May 2015, available: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/05/08/us-mideast-crisis-syria-chemicals-exclus-idUSKBN0NT1YR20150508>.

12 Colum Lynch, 'Iran is trying to shield Assad from chemical weapons condemnation', *Foreign Policy*, 4 February 2015, available: <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/02/04/iran-is-trying-to-shield-assad-from-chemical-weapons-condemnation/>.

13 For more on this, see: <http://www.naameshaam.org/iran-nuclear-deal-misses-opportunity/>.

Conclusion

Chapter I has shown that Bashar al-Assad's regime would not have been able on its own to suppress the mass popular protests that erupted in Syria in March 2011 and the subsequent armed opposition across the country. It has shown that the Syrian regime would not have survived long without the unlimited, full-scale military support provided to it by the Iranian regime. In the words of a Hezbollah Lebanon fighter quoted by the Time magazine in November 2013, "If we don't defend the Syrian regime, it would fall within two hours."³⁶¹

The chapter examined in detail the Iranian regime's military involvement in the war in Syria, tracking its gradual increase over the period March 2011 – August 2014, an increase that would culminate in a de facto occupation of the country, as the next chapter will argue. From Sepah Pasdaran commanders providing strategic and tactical 'advice' to Syrian regime forces, through providing weapons and fighters, to creating, arming and directing various local and foreign militias that gradually assumed a leading role in the war.

This leading Iranian role is likely to continue after Bashar al-Assad falls if Hezbollah Lebanon and other Sepah Pasdaran-controlled militias remain stationed in Syria. Indeed, many analysts have argued that the Iranian regime's strategy in Syria goes beyond saving Bashar al-Assad's regime and includes preparations for a post-Assad era in which Iranian-controlled militias still exert influence on the ground and serve the Iranian

regime's interests.³⁶² These interests include, first and foremost, securing Iranian arms shipments to Hezbollah in Lebanon.

Apart from the political consequences and implications, there are also important legal consequences for the Iranian regime's involvement in the war in Syria: its complicity in various war crimes and crimes against humanity committed in Syria.

There have been numerous reports about such crimes committed by Syrian regime forces and militias by various Syrian and international bodies and organisations. Unfortunately, most of these reports often stop short of pointing the finger at everyone responsible for these crimes. As many examples cited in this chapter should have demonstrated, many of these crimes would not have taken place without the Iranian regime's direct military involvement. But is this sufficient to make the Iranian regime complicit in these crimes?

Without getting into detailed, complex legal arguments, there is sufficient evidence that the Iranian regime's military and political leadership has participated in many of these crimes in various ways and at various levels, ranging from 'inciting' and 'endorsing and adopting' specific acts to 'aiding and abetting' war crimes and crimes against humanity. Some of these crimes may have also been committed as 'joint enterprises', as various case studies included in the chapter would indicate.

The threshold of evidence in these types of cases is often very high. However, the author of this report is confident that there is sufficient concrete evidence – some of which has indeed been detailed above – to bring lawsuits against a number of Iranian regime officials and commanders linked to the war in Syria.

For instance, talking about war crimes often requires that the armed conflict is recognised as an 'international conflict' and that those accused of complicity in these crimes have 'effective control' over the forces accused of actually committing them. The next chapter will provide legal arguments and factual evidence for such cases, showing that the war in Syria is of international character and that Sepah Pasdaran has effective control over Syrian regime forces and militias implicated in various war crimes and crimes against humanity.



Hezbollah Lebanon chief, Hassan Nasrallah kissing Iranian Spiritual Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei in Iran (undated photo).

There may also be easier ways of bringing lawsuits against the Iranian regime than going to the International Criminal Court in The Hague. For instance, any European citizen or resident who had been a victim of any specific human rights violation or crime against humanity in Syria could bring a lawsuit in the domestic courts under 'universal jurisdiction' (which allows the prosecution of people regardless of where the alleged crime was committed and regardless of the accused's nationality and country of residence). Or they could bring a lawsuit against certain low-level soldiers or militiamen who allegedly committed the crime and attempt to prove their link to higher-ranking Iranian commanders and even the Iranian regime's top leadership.

Finally, many of the crimes committed against civilians in Syria could also be regarded as terrorist acts (they were pre-planned, politically motivated, targeted civilians rather than militants, and were carried out by militia groups rather than regular armed forces). The Syrian opposition could therefore demand that all related Iranian officials and entities are added to terrorism black lists and sanctioned accordingly.

361 Aryn Baker and Rami Aysha, 'Taking the Lead, Hizballah Girds for Key Syria Battle on Assad's Behalf', *Time*, 7 November 2013, available: <http://world.time.com/2013/11/07/taking-the-lead-hizballah-girds-for-key-syria-battle-on-assads-behalf/>.

362 See, for example: Fulton, Joseph Holliday and Sam Wyer, *Iranian Strategy in Syria*, *idem*. See also: 'The Hezbollah Connection in Syria and Iran', Council on Foreign Relations, 15 February 2013, available: <http://www.cfr.org/iran/hezbollah-connection-syria-iran/p30005>; Karen DeYoung and Joby Warrick, 'Iran, Hezbollah build militia networks in Syria in event that Assad falls, officials say', *The Washington Post*, 10 February 2013, available: http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/iran-hezbollah-build-militia-networks-in-syria-in-event-that-assad-falls-officials-say/2013/02/10/257a41c8-720a-11e2-ac36-3d8d9dcaa2e2_story.html; 'Pro-regime militias may outlast Assad, threaten future state: report', *The Daily Star*, 13 December 2013, available: <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Middle-East/2013/Dec-13/240910-pro-regime-militias-may-outlast-assad-threaten-future-state-report.ashx#axzz3CoKUIJS3>.



Paramilitary "Shabiha" in the streets of a Syrian city. Undated photo © AP.
Source: <http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/06/05/218793.html>



Paramilitary "Shabiha" beating up demonstrators in Damascus. Undated photo from 2012. Source: www.spiegel.de/politik/ausland/assad-setzt-shabiha-milizen-gegen-oppositionelle-in-syrien-ein-a-820984.html



Paramilitary „Shabih“ Mohammed Al-Abdullah in an undated photo. He was arrested in Sweden in 2015. Sources: <https://unfetteredfreedom.wordpress.com/2015/10/03/list-of-shabiha-posing-as-refugees-in-europe/> and www.tablet-mag.com/jewish-news-and-politics/197787/assads-thugs-in-europe



Paramilitary "Shabiha" members post their photos online. Photo published in 2015. Source: <https://twitter.com/alitahmizian/status/537234705695780864>



1 Syrian *shabbiha*

2 Sepah Pasdaran's chief, Maj. Gen. Mohammad Ali Jafari: "Sepah is offering [Syria] assistance in planning, as well as financial help, but does not have a military presence [in Syria]."

3 The Houla massacre, May 2012, was committed by the Iranian-backed *shabbiha*.

4 Alleged Iranian military trainer captured by Syrian rebels in Idlib in April 2013.



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6

1 One of the earliest videos of Hezbollah fighters in Syria - Horan, July 2011.

2 Funeral of Hezbollah commander Ali Hussein Nassif in Lebanon, October 2012.

3 Hezbollah Lebanon participated in Al-'Otaibeh massacre, 26 February 2014.

4 The battle of al-Qusayr in April-June 2013 was a major turning point in Hezbollah Lebanon's involvement in the Syria war. Picture of regular Syrian army troops after Hezbollah militiamen occupied the town.

5 Hezbollah members in the al-Yarmouk Palestinian camp in Damascus, June 2014.

6 Iraqi Shia fighters in Sayyida Zaynab, Damascus. Undated photo, on November 28, 2013



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1 Up to 1,500 mosques in Syria have been partially or completely destroyed, for example, see the Khaled bin Walid Mosque in Homs, summer 2013 pictured here. ©AFP

2 Harakat al-Nujabaa holding a military-style funeral in the Military Engineering Academy in Aleppo, March 2014.

3 Checkpoint of Shia Iraqi militiamen at Damascus airport (date unknown).



1 Afghan fighters in Syria (date unknown).

2 Funeral of an Afghan fighter killed in Syria held in Qom, Iran, and attended by Sepah Pasdaran commanders.

3 European Solidarity Front delegation with Syrian army soldiers in Damascus.

4 Ezedin Abdel Aziz Khalil, aka Yasin al-Suri, the head of the al-Qaeda network in Iran, according to the US Treasury Department.

5 Zahran Alloush, Hassan Abboud and Isa al-Sheikh, the leaders of the Islam Brigade (now Islamic Front), Ahrar al-Sham and Suqour al-Islam respectively, taken upon their release by the regime from the Saidnaya prison in mid-2011.



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1 Iranian snipers captured by Syrian rebels in Homs in June 2012.

2 One of the high-profile official receptions held in Iran for 48 Iranian prisoners of war who were released by Syrian rebels in January 2013 in a prisoner exchange deal. The Iranian regime claimed they were 'pilgrims' but many turned out to be Sepah Pasdaran officers.

3 Iranian experts are allegedly involved in the manufacturing of Syrian barrel bombs at an arms factory near Aleppo.

4 The Iranian drone Shahed 129 spotted flying over al-Ghouta near Damascus in April 2014.

5 Iranian commanders instructing Syrian regime forces in the suburbs of Aleppo. From footage found by Syrian rebels on the camera of an Iranian filmmaker killed in Syria in August 2013.

6 Victims of the Ghouta chemical attack on 21 August 2013.

II. Syria Under Military Occupation



Picture of two Sepah Pasdaran commanders, Mahdi Khorasani and Ali Asghar Shanaei, holding rifles in front of the Sayyida Zaynab shrine in Damascus. Picture taken during their funeral in Iran in June 2013.

II. Syria Under Military Occupation



In February 2013, former Syrian Prime Minister Riad Hijab, who defected from the regime in August 2012, said in an interview with *Al-Arabiya* TV channel that Syria was currently “occupied by Iran” and was “run” by the commander-in-chief of Sepah Qods, Major-General Qassem Soleimani.¹ As far as the author of this report is aware, Hijab was the first prominent Syrian opposition figure to use the term ‘occupation’ to describe the Iranian regime’s role in Syria, even though Syrian activists and campaigners had been using it rhetorically for a while.²

This chapter will attempt to demonstrate that describing what the Iranian regime is doing in Syria today as an occupation is more than rhetorical; that it actually has a legal basis and legal consequences, including Iran’s obligations as an occupying force in Syria. We will start with a legal discussion of what constitutes a military occupation and whether the Iranian regime’s presence in Syria can be defined as a military occupation. We will then outline various pieces of evidence and case studies to back up this claim, including statements by Iranian officials. Based on this, we will then propose a new narrative about the Syrian revolution and the current situation in Syria, as well as a new set of demands in light of this new reality.

Update on the use of the term ‘Iranian occupation’

Since the publication of the first edition of this report in November 2014, the term ‘Iranian occupation of Syria’ has become widespread and has been used by the Syrian opposition, politicians and media commentators and analysts across the world.

In February 2015, for instance, the leader of the Syrian opposition’s National Coalition, Khaled Khoja, said in an interview with *al-Sharq al-Awsat* that the Syrian opposition is “not fighting Bashar al-Assad but fighting Iran in Syria.” Al-Assad, he added, “is just an executive manager of Iranian interests... [But] Iran can no longer carry the burden in Syria, and time will come when it will abandon al-Assad like it abandoned al-Maliki [in Iraq].”¹

The same goes for much of the media coverage of the events in Syria. For example, in March 2015, Lebanese journalist and writer Abdul-Wahab Badrkhan wrote in *Al-Hayat* newspaper arguing that the next war in the region will be one to “liberate Syria from the Iranian occupation.”²

In April 2015, Naame Shaam called for peaceful demonstrations in front of Iranian embassies all over the world



On April 13, 2015, four days before Syria's Independence Day, Naame Shaam activists held a peaceful protest in front the Iranian embassy in Paris. Source: www.naameshaam.org/protest-iran-embassy-par-is-occupation-syria/

on 17 April, Syria's Independence Day, to protest against what the group described as the "Iranian occupation of Syria."³ A few days before, on 13 April, Naame Shaam activists also held a peaceful protest in front the Iranian embassy in Paris. Standing in front of the embassy, the masked activists held banners in Arabic, Persian and English which read: "End Iranian occupation of Syria."⁴

Footnotes:

¹ 'Khaled al-Khoja to al-Sarq al-Awsat: We are fighting Iran... al-Assad is just an executive tool' (in Arabic), *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat*, 7 February 2015, available: <http://goo.gl/ojIjAv>.

² 'The next war: Liberating Syria from Iranian occupation' (in Arabic), *Al-Hayat*, 12 March 2015, available: <http://goo.gl/nxpmEB>.

³ The callout is available at: <http://www.naameshaam.org/call-for-protests-iranian-embassies-april-17/>.

⁴ See: <http://www.naameshaam.org/protest-iran-embassy-paris-occupation-syria/>.

What is military occupation?

In its most basic sense, 'occupation' refers to situations where a person or a group of people assume physical control over a place or a piece of land, monopolising the power to enter it, use it and stay there as they please, while excluding others, who may include the original occupants, from doing so. In international humanitarian law, occupation – often referred to in legal jargon as 'belligerent occupation' or 'military occupation' – is when a state assumes effective, provisional control over a territory belonging to another sovereign state using military force. This control or administration is often referred to as the occupation government or military government, which should be distinguished from martial law, which is the undemocratic rule by domestic armed forces.

¹ 'Riyad Hijab: Syria in occupied by Iran and is run by Soleimani' (in Arabic), *Al-Arabiya*, 14 February 2013, available: <http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2013/02/14/266293.html>.

² e.g. 'Syrian protests: "No to Iranian Occupation of Syria"', *Naame Shaam*, 17 November 2013, available: <http://www.naameshaam.org/en/syrian-protests-no-to-iranian-occupation-of-syria/>.

There are two main pieces of international law that deal with occupations: the 1907 Hague Regulations Concerning the Laws and Customs of War on Land and the Fourth Geneva Convention of 1949. Article 42 of The Hague Regulations state: "Territory is considered occupied when it is actually placed under the authority of the hostile army. The occupation extends only to the territory where such authority has been established and can be exercised."³

Although occupation is not defined as clearly in the Fourth Geneva Convention, Article 2 states: "The present Convention shall apply to all cases of declared war or of any other armed conflict which may arise between two or more of the High Contracting Parties [states], even if the state of war is not recognized by one of them. The Convention shall also apply to all cases of partial or total occupation of the territory of a High Contracting Party, even if the said occupation meets with no armed resistance."⁴

These situations of military occupation are assumed to be temporary, seeking to preserve the *status quo* pending a final resolution of the conflict. Otherwise they would be considered an annexation of land, colonisation or permanent settlement, which are prohibited under international law, at least in theory. As the 1948 Nuremberg Trial put it, "In belligerent occupation, the occupying power does not hold enemy territory by virtue of any legal right. On the contrary, it merely exercises a precarious and temporary actual control."⁵

Nor is it necessary for both parties of the conflict to recognise the occupation or the state of war as such in order for the Fourth Geneva Convention to apply. The main issue is whether the concerned territory (in this case the regime-controlled parts of Syria) is placed "under the authority of the hostile army" (in this case the Iranian armed forces and militias).

The specifics of the nature and extent of this authority have been dealt with in a number of international cases. For instance, in the 2005 case concerning *Armed Activities on the Territory of the Congo*, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) ruled that the definition of belligerent occupation as set out in Article 42 of The Hague Regulations required that the authority of the hostile army "was in fact *established and exercised* by the intervening State in the areas in question."⁶ (emphasis added)

It should also be noted that the above treaties – with the exception of Article 3 common to the four Geneva Conventions – deal with international or inter-state armed conflicts, as opposed to non-international or internal armed conflicts. Thus, if a state intervenes militarily on the side of another state in a non-international armed conflict, it is generally agreed by international law experts that this does not change the qualification of the conflict. However, a non-international armed conflict, even if it was geographically confined to the territory of a single state, can be qualified as international if a foreign state intervenes militarily on the side of rebels fighting against government forces.

In the 1995 case of *Tadić*, the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) concluded that a foreign state exercising "overall control" over a rebel group would be sufficient to internationalise a conflict. This does not require the "issuing of specific orders by the State, or its direction of each individual operation." It is sufficient that a state "has a role in organizing, coordinating or planning the military actions" of a non-state armed group.⁷

Furthermore, Article 1 of the 1977 Additional Protocol I to the Geneva Conventions provides that conflicts shall be qualified as international when they occur between a state and an authority representing a people "fighting against colonial domination and alien occupation and against racist regimes in the exercise of their right of self-determination."⁸ The potential application of this provision – which, to our



Members of Hezbollah Lebanon in Beirut in 2013 the coffin of a fighter who was killed in Syria, Fadi Mohammad al-Jazzaar. Source: <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/21/world/middleeast/syria-developments.html?pagewanted=all&r=0>

knowledge, has never actually been used before – to the Syrian war will be explored further in the next section.

The legality of conduct during an occupation must be distinguished from the legality of the occupation itself. Thus, once an armed conflict is recognised as international or as a military occupation, the above treaties specify certain rights and duties for the occupying force. These include the protection of civilians, the treatment of prisoners of war, the prohibition of torture, of collective punishment and unnecessary destruction of property, the coordination of relief efforts and so on. The repeated violation of any of these provisions by the occupying force is considered a serious war crime.

For example, Article 43 of The Hague Regulations states: “The authority of the legitimate power having in fact passed into the hands of the occupant, the latter shall take all the measures in his power to restore, and ensure, as far as possible, public order and safety, while respecting, unless absolutely prevented, the laws in force in the country.”

Article 49 of the Fourth Geneva Convention is more specific:

“Individual or mass forcible transfers, as well as deportations of protected persons from occupied territory to the territory of the Occupying Power or to that of any other country, occupied or not, are prohibited, regardless of their motive.

Nevertheless, the Occupying Power may undertake total or partial evacuation of a given area if the security of the population or imperative military reasons so demand. Such evacuations may not involve the displacement of protected persons outside the bounds of the occupied territory except when for material reasons it is impossible to avoid such displacement. Persons thus evacuated shall be transferred back to their homes as soon as hostilities in the area in question have ceased.

The Occupying Power undertaking such transfers or evacuations shall ensure, to the greatest practicable extent, that proper accommodation is provided to receive the protected persons, that the removals are effected in satisfactory conditions of hygiene, health, safety and nutrition, and that members of the same family are not separated.

The Protecting Power shall be informed of any transfers and evacuations as soon as they have taken place. The Occupying Power shall not detain protected per-

sons in an area particularly exposed to the dangers of war unless the security of the population or imperative military reasons so demand.

The Occupying Power shall not deport or transfer parts of its own civilian population into the territory it occupies.”⁹

It is worth noting that even if the domestic laws are changed by the occupying force, Article 47 of the Fourth Geneva Convention still guarantees the same rights for the occupied people:

“Protected persons who are in occupied territory shall not be deprived, in any case or in any manner whatsoever, of the benefits of the present Convention by any change introduced, as the result of the occupation of a territory, into the institutions or government of the said

3 ICRC, ‘Article 42, Regulations concerning the Laws and Customs of War on Land’, annexed to *Convention (IV) respecting the Laws and Customs of War on Land*, The Hague, 18 October 1907, available: <http://www.icrc.org/applic/ihl/ihl.nsf/Article.xsp?action=openDocument&documentId=01D426B0086089BEC-12563CD00516887>.

4 ICRC, ‘Article 42’, *Convention (IV) relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War*, Geneva, 12 August 1949, available: <http://www.icrc.org/applic/ihl/ihl.nsf/Article.xsp?action=openDocument&documentId=C5031F972DD7E216C12563CD0051B998>.

5 Cited in Yutaka Arai Takahashi, *The Law of Occupation: Continuity and Change of International Humanitarian Law*, Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 2009, p. 7.

6 ICJ, *Case Concerning Armed Activities on the Territory of the Congo*, 19 December 2005, available: <http://www.icj-cij.org/docket/files/116/10455.pdf>, paras.166-180. For more examples of recent case law dealing with the definition of belligerent occupation, see for example: Michael Siegrist, ‘IV. Examples of recent case law dealing with the definition and beginning of belligerent occupation’ in *The Functional Beginning of Belligerent Occupation*, Graduate Institute Publications, Geneva, 2011, available: <http://books.openedition.org/iheid/95?lang=en>.

7 ICTY, ‘Decision on the Defence Motion for Interlocutory Appeal on Jurisdiction’ in *Prosecutor v. Dusko Tadić a/k/a “Dule”*, 2 October 1995, available: <http://www.icty.org/x/cases/tadic/acdec/en/51002.htm>.

8 ICRC, ‘Article 1’, *Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949, and relating to the Protection of Victims of International Armed Conflicts (Protocol I)*, 8 June 1977, available: <http://www.icrc.org/applic/ihl/ihl.nsf/Article.xsp?action=openDocument&documentId=6C86520D7EFAD527C12563CD0051D63C>.

9 ICRC, ‘Article 49’, *Convention (IV)*, *idem.*, available: <http://www.icrc.org/applic/ihl/ihl.nsf/WebART/380-600056?OpenDocument>.

territory, nor by any agreement concluded between the authorities of the occupied territories and the Occupying Power, nor by any annexation by the latter of the whole or part of the occupied territory.¹⁰

Does Iranian presence in Syria constitute a military occupation?

As indicated above, if a state intervenes on the side of another state fighting against domestic rebels, the conflict may still be considered 'non-international'. However, there is much more to the Iranian intervention in Syria than supporting the Syrian 'government' and its armed forces, as the previous chapter has shown.

In addition to arming, training and directing irregular Syrian paramilitary forces (the *shabbiha* and the NDF) and Iran's own paramilitary forces fighting in Syria (Sepah Qods and Basij), there are all the Iranian-backed foreign militias that have assumed a leading role in major military operations in certain parts of Syria, at least since the battle of al-Qusayr in Spring 2013. In fact the presence of Hezbollah Lebanon and the Iraqi militias in parts of Syria, such as Sayyida Zaynab and Yabroud, can arguably be considered as a separate occupation of Syrian territory by 'non-state entities'.

Furthermore, other states (the US, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, etc.) have also intervened in Syria on the side of Syrian rebels. They have all played a role in "organizing, coordinating or planning the military actions of a non-state armed group," as the judgment in the *Tadić* case put it. Moreover, the Syria war is no longer geographically confined to the territory of Syria; it has occasionally and increasingly spilled over to other neighbouring countries, especially Lebanon and Iraq. Thus, even if one forgets about the Iranian regime's involvement, the intervention of other states is arguably sufficient for the Syrian war to be regarded as an international one within the meaning of The Hague Regulations and the Fourth Geneva Convention.

Some legal experts have argued that if the military intervention by the outside state (in this case Iran) is solely directed at non-state armed groups (the rebels) and their military operations or infrastructure, the conflict should still be regarded as non-international. But as the previous chapter has shown, the Iranian military intervention in Syria (through Iranian weapons, Iranian fighters and military advisors, Iranian-backed militias and so on) has targeted and affected both Syrian civilians and civilian

infrastructure. This, according to the experts, renders the conflict into an international one.¹¹ Alternatively, it could be argued that the current war in Syria is both internal and international at the same time.

A better argument, in our view, is treating the Syrian case as what is sometimes called 'occupation with an indigenous government in post'.¹² Leaving aside the question of Bashar al-Assad's regime's legitimacy as an indigenous government,¹³ and leaving aside the presence of Iranian commanders, fighters and militias on Syrian territory without an official treaty between the two countries allowing the stationing of Iranian armed forces and military bases in Syria, there is abundant evidence that the Iranian regime has established and is exercising authority in Syria, both directly through its armed forces and militias and indirectly through the Syrian regime. The evidence includes new military command structures involving Iranian commanders, fundamental changes introduced into Syrian government institutions as a result of the Iranian regime's intervention, as well as statements by Iranian officials indicating how they view their role in Syria. The next sections will discuss each of these points in more detail.

There are many examples in history of this type of occupation: Czechoslovakia and Denmark under Nazi-German rule before and during the Second World War, the Soviet and British occupation of Iran in 1941-46, the French mandate in Syria and Lebanon between the two great wars, Vichy France, and even the Syrian occupation of Lebanon up until 2005. In all these cases, the indigenous government was little more than a 'puppet government', serving as an agent of the occupying force and effecting the latter's military control in the concerned state, often against the national interests of that state.

It should also be noted that, even with an indigenous puppet government in place, the implementation of international humanitarian law is still the responsibility of the occupying power.

Finally, as indicated above, the Syrian war could arguably be treated as an international conflict under Article 1 of the 1977 Additional Protocol I to the Geneva Conventions, because it now involves people fighting against the "colonial domination and alien occupation" of the Iranian regime, among others. There is a procedural requirement for this article to be triggered, which involves a

recognised authority representing the Syrian people who are struggling for freedom and independence (in this case the Syrian National Coalition or any other Syrian opposition umbrella group) making a formal, unilateral declaration addressed to the Swiss Federal Council. This will trigger the application of the Geneva Conventions and the Additional Protocols to the Syrian opposition's conflict with the Syrian and Iranian regimes.

One problem here is that Iran has signed but not ratified Protocol 1, which means it is not legally bound by it yet.¹⁴ Syria has, however, and both countries are parties to the four Geneva Conventions.¹⁵ Moreover, Article 2 common to the four Geneva Conventions provides that, "Although one of the Powers in conflict may not be a party to the present Convention, the Powers who are parties thereto shall remain bound by it in their mutual relations. They shall furthermore be bound by the Convention in relation to the said Power, if the latter accepts and applies the provisions thereof."¹⁶

From the horse's mouth

As indicated above, it is not necessary for the Iranian government to officially declare or acknowledge that it is in a state of war in Syria or that it is occupying Syrian territory in order for The Hague Regulations and the Fourth Geneva Convention to apply. Nevertheless, various Iranian officials and commanders have actually made such acknowledgements, some of which were cited in the previous chapter.

For example, in August 2012, the commander of Sepah Pasdaran's Saheb al-Amr unit Gen. Salar Abnough said in a speech to volunteer trainees: "Today we are involved in fighting every aspect of a war, a military one in Syria as well as a cultural one."¹⁷

In September 2013, the chief of Sepah Qods Gen. Qassem Soleimani told Iran's Assembly of Experts that Iran "will support Syria to the end."¹⁸

On the same day, 170 members of the Iranian Consultative Assembly (parliament) signed a statement expressing their "support for the resistance front in Syria" and declaring their readiness to "sacrifice our lives beside our Syrian brothers against the infidels and oppressors."¹⁹

Less than two months later, Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei echoed Soleimani's words during a meet-

ing with Syrian religious scholars: "Iran will stand by Syria which is facing an unjust war," adding that the only way to confront this war was "resistance and steadfastness."²⁰

10 ICRC, 'Article 47', *Convention (IV)*, *idem.*, available: <http://www.icrc.org/applic/ihl/ihl.nsf/ART/380-600054?OpenDocument>.

11 For a detailed discussion of this point, see: 'Qualification of armed conflicts', Geneva Academy of International Humanitarian Law and Human Rights, 13 June 2012, available: http://www.geneva-academy.ch/RULAC/qualification_of_armed_conflict.php.

12 Adam Roberts, 'What is a Military Occupation?', Colombia University, 1985, available: <https://web.law.columbia.edu/sites/default/files/microsites/gender-sexuality/Roberts%20What%20is%20Military%20Occupation.pdf>, pp. 284-8. See also: Evan J. Wallach, 'Belligerent Occupation' in *Interactive Outline Of The Law Of War*, 2000, available: <http://lawofwar.org/Occupation.htm>.

13 Bashar al-Assad was never democratically elected and his rule is opposed by the majority of Syrians. He literally inherited the presidency from his father, Hafez al-Assad, in 2000. After his father fell ill and his elder brother Basil died in a car accident in 1994, Bashar was brought back from the UK and prepared to succeed his father instead of Basil. In 2000, Bashar was appointed as president by the ruling inner circle after the constitution was hastily changed so as to lower the minimum age for presidency candidates from 40 to 34, which was his age at the time. His 're-election' in June 2014 was viewed by the majority of the world as a 'cruel joke'. For more details, see: <http://www.naameshaam.org/en/why-bashar-al-assads-elections-are-a-cruel-joke/> and <http://www.naameshaam.org/en/how-sepah-pasdaran-guarantees-bashar-al-assads-re-election-on-3-june-2014/>.

14 See the list of states party to the Protocol: http://www.icrc.org/applic/ihl/ihl.nsf/States.xsp?xp_viewStates=XPages_NORMStatesParties&xp_treatySelected=470.

15 See the list of states party to the Convention: http://www.icrc.org/applic/ihl/ihl.nsf/States.xsp?xp_viewStates=XPages_NORMStatesParties&xp_treatySelected=380.

16 ICRC, 'Article 2', *Convention (IV)*, *idem.*, available: <http://www.icrc.org/ihl/385ec082b509e76c41256739003e636d/6756482d86146898c125641e004aa3c5>.

17 A copy of the original report in the Iranian students' news agency, Daneshjoo, is available at <http://www.freezepage.com/1346016739ALEKCXYBK>. For English, see: <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10000872396390444230504577615393756632230>.

18 'Quds Force Commander: Iran to support Syria to the end', *Fars News*, 4 September 2013, available: <http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.aspx?nn=13920613001181>.

19 *Ibid.*

20 'Khamenei: Iran will stand by Syria against the unjust war', *Islamic Awakening*, 31 October 2013, available: <http://islamic-awakening.ir/?a=content.id&id=50378&lang=en>.

Various Iranian officials and commanders have repeatedly stated that Syria was a “red line” or a “strategic defence line” for Iran and that any attack on it would be considered “an attack on Iran.”²¹ For example, in May 2014, Major-General Yahya Rahim Safavi, the former chief commander of Sepah Pasdaran and Ali Khamenei’s military advisor, said:

“Iran’s influence has been extended from [the] Iran, Iraq and Syria axis to the Mediterranean, and this is the third time that Iran’s influence has expanded to the Mediterranean. Our line of defense is no longer in Shalamche [a border town in Iran which was one of the main sites of the Iran-Iraq war]; our defensive lines are [at the] southern Lebanon border with Israel, and our strategic depth has reached areas adjacent to the Mediterranean above Israel.”²²

The remarks were made during a ceremony held in a Sepah centre in Isfahan to mark the anniversary of the launch of the Beit-ol-Moqaddas operation during the Iran-Iraq war. Safavi also described the previous 40 months of the military and political war in Syria as a “great strategic victory for the Islamic Republic of Iran.”

In February 2013, Hojjat al-Islam Mehdi Taeb, the head of Ayatollah Khamenei’s think-tank Ammar Strategic Base, made a startling statement during a meeting with university student members of the Basij paramilitary force: “Syria is the 35th province of Iran and is a strategic province for us. If the enemy attacks us and wants to appropriate either Syria or Khuzestan [an Arab-populated Iranian province bordering Iraq’s Basra], the priority is that we keep Syria. If we keep Syria, we can get Khuzestan back too. But if we lose Syria, we cannot keep Tehran.”²³

Other statements by senior Sepah Pasdaran commanders have implied that the Iranian regime was exerting a considerable amount of military authority in Syria. For example, in September 2012, Gen. Qassem Soleimani was quoted by an Iranian nationalist opposition source criticising the Syrian regime’s military strategy and implying that he and his force exerted a considerable amount of influence over it, even though this may ‘go wrong’ sometimes. “We tell al-Assad to send the police to the streets,” he said, “and suddenly he dispatches the army.”²⁴

In April 2014, another senior Sepah commander implied that it was Iranian support that kept Bashar al-Assad in power. “86 world countries stood and said the Syrian

government should be changed and Bashar al-Assad should go,” said Brigadier-General Amir Ali Hajizadeh, the commander of Sepah Pasdaran’s Aerospace Force, “but they failed because Iran’s view was to the contrary, and they were eventually defeated.”²⁵

The most direct admission of the Iranian regime’s exercising military authority in Syria came in May 2014 from a very senior Sepah Pasdaran commander, namely Brig. Gen. Hossein Hamedani, who is said to have been in charge of overseeing Sepah’s operations in Syria before his death in October 2015. Bashar al-Assad is “fighting this war [in Syria] as our deputy,” he said, implying that the Iranian regime is the one who is in charge.²⁶ Hamedani also described the Iranian regime’s role in Syria as a “sacred defence” of Iran, a term that was used by the Iranian regime during the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq war. Urging normal Iranian citizens and businesspeople to support “the troops of Islam and the people of Syria as they did so during the Sacred Defence,” Hamedani also revealed that the Iranian regime was establishing “centres for supporting Syrian people” in various Iranian provinces, where each Iranian province will be “responsible for one Syrian province.”

As pointed out in the previous chapter, all these and other statements and declarations were made by Iranian officials with demonstrable insider knowledge of Iranian military operations. As to why they were made, some appear to have been the result of competing interests or agendas within the Iranian regime (many were immediately removed from the websites that originally published them); others as signals or threatening messages to the outside world. In some cases, thought, they may have simply been out of boasting about the regime’s power and influence in front of regime supporters or the Iranian public more generally.

But keep it between us

Yet, in addition to removing some of these controversial statements, the Iranian regime and/or government have also on occasions reacted with obvious anger and defensiveness. For instance, when Iranian MP Seyyed Mahmoud Nabavian boasted during a speech in February 2014 that Iran had trained some 150,000 Syrian regime fighters on Iranian soil, and another 150,000 in Syria, in addition to 50,000 Hezbollah Lebanon fighters,²⁷ another MP demanded that Nabavian should be prosecuted, adding that disclosing such details paints Iran as a “supporter of terrorists” and would harm the country’s “national interests.”²⁸

But Mansour Haghighatpour, who is affiliated with the ruling conservative bloc, did not deny the Iranian regime's role in training and supporting Bashar al-Assad's forces; he only said that revealing such details would harm Iran's 'national interests' and should therefore be kept secret.

Similarly, when Javad Karimi Qodousi, a member of the National Security and Foreign Policy Committee in the Iranian parliament, revealed during a ceremony in November 2013 that there were "hundreds of troops from Iran in Syria" and that what was often reported in the news as Syrian military victories was in fact "the victories of Iran," the statement was emphatically denied by Sepah Pasdaran, with the force's spokesperson, Ramazan Sharif, saying: "We strongly deny the existence of Iranian troops in Syria. Iranian [commanders] are only in Syria to exchange experiences and advice, which is central to the defense of this country." Clearly disturbed by the remarks, he added: "the media in Iran must show greater care when publishing this kind of news so that they do not aid the foreign media's psychological warfare."²⁹

Such statements and revelations by Iranian military commanders and other hardliners in Iran were not only embarrassing to Rouhani's government, which has been marketing itself as more moderate, but also to the Syrian regime, which has been trying hard to maintain an image of a strong, national leadership fighting against a foreign conspiracy aimed at destabilising Syria. The tension reached its height in April 2014, when the Syrian Ministry of Information took unprecedented measures against 'friendly' foreign TV channels, including a requirement to obtain a prior permission before covering Syrian regime forces' battles, especially on the frontlines and in regime-held areas.

The surprise move appears to have been prompted by a number of 'friendly TV channels', particularly Hezbollah Lebanon's *Al-Manar* and the Iranian-funded *Al-Mayadeen*, going 'over the top' in their celebration of the Syria military victories of Hezbollah and other Iranian-backed militias. The aim of the measures, according to insiders from *Al-Manar* and *Al-Mayadeen*, was to allow Syrian state TV to broadcast such 'scoops' first so as to give the impression that the Syrian regime was still in control, not Hezbollah and Sepah Pasdaran and the media outlets affiliated with them.³⁰

The affair was neatly summed up in a revealing statement by the Syrian president's political and media adviser, Bu-

thayna Shaaban: "Some friendly TV channels have recently been broadcasting interviews and reports that kind of give the impression that the Syrian state would not have held up if it was not for so-and-so state and such-and-such party. This is completely unacceptable to us. Syria has held

²¹ See, for example, this collection of official Iranian statements on Syria: <http://www.irantracker.org/analysis/toumaj-iranian-reaction-syria-aug-31-2013>.

²² 'Iran's sphere of influence has been expanded to Mediterranean: general', *Tehran Times*, 2 May 2014, available: <http://www.tehran-times.com/politics/115471-irans-sphere-of-influence-has-been-expanded-to-mediterranean-general>. See also: <http://www.ncr-iran.org/en/ncr-statements/terrorism-fundamentalism/16487-khame-nei-s-advisor-iran-s-defensive-line-is-in-southern-lebanon-border-with-israel-and-syria>.

²³ 'Head of Ammar Base: Our priority is to keep Syria rather than Khuzestan', *BBC Persian*, 14 February 2013, available: http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/iran/2013/02/130214_nm_tayeb_syria_basij.shtml. For an English translation, see: 'Head of Ammar Strategic Base: Syria is Iran's 35th Province; if we lose Syria we cannot keep Tehran', *Iran Pulse*, 14 February 2013, available: <http://iranpulse.al-monitor.com/index.php/2013/02/1346/head-of-ammar-strategic-base-syria-is-irans-35th-province-if-we-lose-syria-we-cannot-keep-tehran/>.

²⁴ 'Qassem Suleimani's criticism of Bashar al-Assad's policies' (in Persian), *Mazhabi Melli*, 5 September 2012, available: <http://tinyurl.com/nhshbbv>.

²⁵ 'IRGC commander: US-led front unable to topple Assad because of Iran', *Fars News*, 12 April 2014, available: <http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.aspx?nn=13930123000316>.

²⁶ Hamedani's comments were reported by Iranian state-controlled news agency Fars News on 4 May 2014, but the report was later removed from the agency's website. A screen shot and an English summary of the report are available at <http://www.naameshaam.org/en/sepah-pasdar-commander-al-assad-is-fighting-syria-war-as-our-deputy/>.

²⁷ 'Nabavian: 300,000 Syrian troops trained by Iran' (in Persian), *Emrooz u Farda*, <http://emroozofarda.ir/?p=3047>. An English report is available at: <http://en.trend.az/regions/iran/2241820.html>.

²⁸ 'Vice chair of National Security Committee: Do not speak so other countries say Iran is breeding terrorists' (in Persian), *Khabar Online*, 16 February 2014, available: <http://khabaronline.ir/%28X-%281%29S%28zv0jvfqnrzv02vdv33nlcia%29%29/detail/338638/Politics/parliament>. An English translation and commentary is available at: <http://www.naameshaam.org/en/iranian-mp-revealing-details-of-irans-military-support-of-syrian-regime-against-national-interests/>.

²⁹ 'Sepah denies presence of "hundreds of Iranian troops in Syria"' (in Persian), *Deutsche Welle*, 04 November 2013, available: <http://tinyurl.com/mmww6j5>.

³⁰ 'Syrian regime frustrated by media attributing its 'victories' to Hezbollah and other militias', *Naame Shaam*, 11 April 2014, available: <http://www.naameshaam.org/en/syrian-regime-frustrated-by-media-attributing-its-victories-to-hezbollah-and-other-militias/>.

up because of its people, who have so far given over a quarter of a million martyrs. The Ministry of Information has taken a number of measures that reflect the Syrian state's vision, which sees its relations with other countries as based on mutual respect."

In reaction, *Al-Mayadeen* decided to significantly reduce its coverage of the war in Syria (or its propaganda, rather).³¹ *Al-Manar* managers and Hazbollah commanders were reportedly "very pissed off," even though they were later reassured that "nothing will change" as Shaaban retracted her statement and the Syrian Minister of Information tried to water down the measures that the ministry had taken.³² It is also plausible that the measures were taken in coordination with the Iranian regime, which had also been trying hard to not be portrayed – at least in front of the outside world – as the one who is actually calling the shots in Syria.

Update – More admissions

Since the publication of the first edition of this report, many more admissions and revelations by Iranian officials and commanders about their role in Syria have emerged. Indeed, the Iranian regime appears to be much less secretive and more open than before about what it is doing in Syria. And most such admissions appear to follow the same pattern mentioned above: some are intended as messages to the outside world about Iran's importance and influence, while others are intended to show off Iran's power in front of the regime's internal supporters and opponents and to mobilise more support.

For instance, in March 2015, the former advisor of Sepah Pasdaran's commander in chief, Gen. Hossein Hamadani, told *Rasad* news agency: "When 85 percent of Syria was in the hands of the enemy and even Bashar al-Assad had accepted defeat, it was Iranian commanders who decided to resist and, inspired by Imam Khomeini and the Supreme Leader's ideas, they kept the axis of resistance alive."¹

Of course, Hamadani's claim is exaggerated and inaccurate. It was not until much later that 85 percent of all Syrian territory fell in the hands of Syrian rebels and Islamist groups. In August 2015, regime-held areas constituted a fifth to a sixth of all Syrian territory. In any case, the attribution of 'resistance' or 'victory' to Iranian commanders rather than Syrian regime forces is nevertheless significant.

Indeed, most Iranian officials and commanders appear to believe that the war in Syria is not about the Syrian regime but a war pitting Iran against the US and its allies. In the same above-mentioned speech, Hamadani added that, "there is currently two axes in the region. The first includes the US, Europe and all Arab countries without exception. The second is the Iranian axis, which is standing up to the arrogants of the world."

A similar view was expressed in July 2015 by the advisor of the Supreme Leader's representative in Sepah Pasdaran: "The existing tension in the region is not a proxy war between the US and Iran; it is a proxy war between the US and the nations of the region. But since the Islamic Republic is a popular regime, it automatically took on the role of an axis and a leader of this front."²

This worldview is often also linked to Iran's imperial past or imperial ambitions, even when this is merely used as a populist rhetorical device. In May 2015, Sepah Pasdaran's commander in chief, Mohammad Ali Jafari, said during a speech in Semnan, Iran: "With the recent developments in the region, the Shiite Crescent is taking shape in order to pierce Israel's heart like a dagger. The Shiite Crescent means the unification and cooperation of Muslims in Iran, Syria, Yemen, Iraq, Lebanon and other defiant countries in the region."³

In the same speech, Jafari boasted, once again, about the Syrian National Defence Forces, which were established in 2011 with Sepah Pasdaran's assistance and were modelled on the Iranian Basij forces (see Chapter I): "The imperialists tried to arm the [Syrian] regime's opponents in order to topple the Syrian government, which is acting in line with the Islamic Revolution and the Islamic front. But the result was the coming together of 100,000 Syrian people and the formation of a pro-Iranian armed force. The most important thing here is the hearts of Syrian people, which are now with Iran and the Islamic Republic."

In March 2015, another controversial statement was made by Ali Younisi, an advisor of Iranian president Hassan Rouhani, during a speech at a conference called "Iran, nationality, culture and history."⁴ Younisi's words were reported inaccurately and out of context by some Arabic media outlets, such as *Al-Arabiya*, which claimed what he said was "Iran has become an 'empire', with Baghdad its capital."⁵

Younisi was in fact talking about Iraq, as well other countries in the “Iranian Plateau,” being “under the influence of [Iranian] civilization.” Iraq, he added, “shares our identity and culture. It is our capital city and base. This is how it is and this is how it was before, because Iran and Iraq are inseparable. So we have to fight together and unite.”

Nevertheless, it is worth quoting Younisi’s speech at length because it reveals a great deal about the mentality of the Iranian regime, including those considered to be ‘moderates’ within it.

“Today, Iran is limited to the centre of the Iranian Plateau, since some of the countries in the east and west of the Plateau have separated. But the whole region is considered to be part of Greater Iran and its culture is Iranian. This is an accurate, scientific, historically right and documented argument.”

“Protecting our national interests and security and historic identity would not be possible without paying attention to Iran’s realm of influence and its surrounding. It goes without saying that we do not have any claims beyond our own borders. But the fact of the matter is that the Iranian culture, civilization, religion and spirit is present all over the region and there is a natural potential for a union in this region, although there are differences which hindered the formation of such a union.”

“Of course this does not mean we should conquer the world again. But we have to recognize our position and develop a historical consciousness. In other words, we should think globally and act on a national level.”

“We defend all the people of the region as they are all people of Iran. Everyone who lives in the Iranian Plateau would be under our protection and we will defend them against Islamic fanaticism, takfir and heresy, as well as the dominance of the Neo-Ottomans, Wahhabism, the West and Zionism.”

Beyond cultural influence, many within the Iranian regime appear to view the neighbouring countries under Iranian influence (Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, etc.) merely as external ‘lines of defence’. In the words of Mohammad Hossein Saffar Harandi, the cultural advisor of Sepah Pasdaran’s commander in chief, “Some argue that it is meaningless to carry the burden of Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Yemen; that it is none of our business. But the fact of the matter is that there is a give-and-take between us and the fighters on these foreign fronts. And to be fair, it is them who are carrying our burden, not vice versa.”

“They have built the fronts that we were actually supposed to build near our borders in order to defend ourselves some 2000 kilometers away from our territory and in the heart of the enemy’s. They are fighting the enemy to defend the idea of the Islamic Revolution and we owe them for this.”⁶

Footnotes:

1 The original report appears to have been removed from Rasad’s website: <http://www.rasad.org/%D8%A2%D8%AE%D8%B1%DB%8C%D9%86-%D8%AE%D8%A8%D8%B1/?lastnews=1439459>. A slightly different version of the same quote appears in: ‘Iranian Revolutionary Guards: We liberated 85% of Syrian territory’ (in Arabic), *Al-Arabiya*, 10 March 2015, available: <http://ara.tv/6axw8>. For English, see: <https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/NewsReports/564958-irgc-of-ficial-iran-indoctrinating-syria-youth>. See also: <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2015/0312/Syria-as-Vietnam-Why-the-war-could-be-making-Hezbollah-stronger.-video>.

2 ‘Iran is the leader of the resistance front in the region against America’ (in Persian), *Saheb Khabar*, 22 July 2015, available: <http://bit.ly/1KoUcqm>.

3 The speech was reported by various Iranian news agencies on 7 May 2015, but the reference to the ‘Shiite Crescent’ created a lot of controversy among Arabs and Iranians alike, so all official and semi-official Iranian news agencies removed the story from their websites. However, a screenshot of a report by *Tasnim* news agency is available at: <http://www.freeze.page.com/1431175521GRIQUKSWIR>.

4 ‘Younisi: Netanyahu admits Iran’s great influence’ (in Persian), ISNA, 8 March 2015, available: <http://goo.gl/WDsK3p>.

5 ‘Iran: We have become an empire, our capital is Baghdad’ (in Arabic), *Al-Arabiya*, 8 March 2015, available: <http://goo.gl/qKGi4K>.

6 ‘Saffar Harandi on examples of distortion of the revolution and the war – How martyred divers have exposed the false claims’ (in Persian), *Fars News*, 12 June 2015, available: <http://www.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=13940322000265>.

31 Nazeer Rida, ‘Al-Mayadeen channel withdraws Damascus correspondent’, *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 14 April 2014, available: <http://www.aawsat.net/2014/04/article55331170>.

32 ‘Buthayna Sha’ban denies statement attributed to her on a Facebook page bearing her name’ (in Arabic), *Al-Hayat*, 11 April 2014, available: <http://tinyurl.com/o5y4qnn>. For an English translation, see *ibid*.



To visualize the Iranian hegemony in Syria, Lebanon, Iraq and Yemen, as well as the Iranian regime's funding of terrorist activities and groups in these countries, Naame Shaam has produced a photomontage of a Syrian, Lebanese, Iraqi and Yemeni bank notes carrying the counterfeit of Iranian Major-Gen. Qassem Soleimani, the head of Sepah Qods. Source: www.naameshaam.org/new-syrian-lebanese-iraqi-and-yemeni-banks-notes/

Case study: Who's responsible for the death of *Al-Manar* journalists in Maaloula?

On 7 April 2014, three Lebanese journalists working for Hezbollah Lebanon's *Al-Manar* TV were killed and two others injured when their car came under gunfire attack in the historic town of Maaloula in Syria. Reporter Hamza Haj Hassan, cameraman Mohammad Mantash and technician Halim Allaw were among a convoy of 'friendly' media workers, including some from the Iranian state-run Arabic-speaking channel *Al-Alam* TV. They were accompanying Syrian regime and Hezbollah forces as these took over Maaloula from opposition forces, along with two other towns in the Qalamon region near the Lebanese border.

Hezbollah, Iranian and Syrian officials were quick to condemn the "cowardly act" and blame it on "takfiri terrorists." But important questions remain unanswered.

According to *Al-Manar* itself, the attack came hours after Syrian regime and Hezbollah forces recaptured Maaloula and drove the opposition forces out. The town was reportedly "under their full control." So where did these opposition forces that opened fire on the media convoy come from? Why had they not been driven out too?

Haj Hassan's last Tweet sounded relaxed and confident. He even named the hotel where he and his colleagues were going to stay that day (al-Safir hotel). Would any sensible war correspondent publicly reveal his location if he was not confident that he would be safe there?

These and other facts gave rise to speculation among Syrian and Lebanese commentators that the Hezbollah and Iranian media convoy may have been fired at by angry Syrian soldiers as tensions between the Syrian regime on the one hand and Hezbollah and Sepah Pasdaran on the other reached unprecedented levels in previous days (see above).

A few days before, Syrian soldiers and Hezbollah fighters had been heard exchanging insults on radios and blaming one another for heavy losses, according to sources in the Syrian opposition and the Free Syrian Army. There had even been rumours of tensions at the highest levels between the Syrian and Iranian regimes following statements by Iranian officials that it was Iran that had kept Bashar al-Assad in power.

So could it have been some angry or insulted Syrian soldiers who opened fire on the Hezbollah and Iranian media convoy? Or could it have been orders from higher levels in the Syrian regime to send a message about who's in charge in Syria?

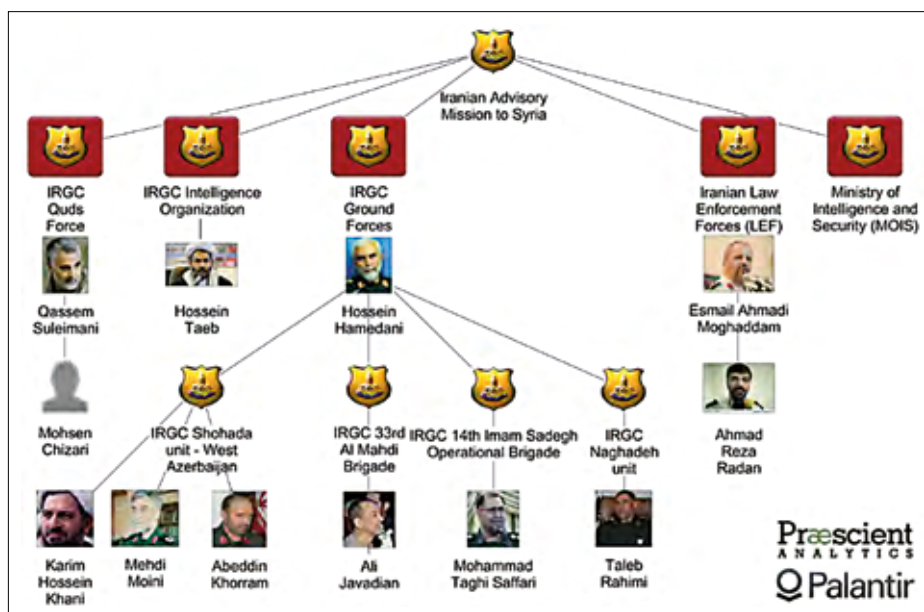
Even if one ruled out such 'conspiracy theories', the *Al-Manar* journalists were embedded with the Syrian regime and Hezbollah forces, which had launched an offensive to recapture rebel-held towns in the Qalamon region. The TV channel aired footage of two cars, including a white SUV carrying broadcasting equipment for live transmission, riddled with bullets. Moreover, *Al-Manar*'s director initially said it was "not clear whether the journalists were specifically targeted." Yet the channel was quick to blame "terrorists" in later reports.

Could it be that the media convoy was simply caught up in crossfire between regime and Hezbollah forces and the remaining opposition fighters on the outskirts of Maaloula, where some reports said the attack took place? It certainly does not look like a targeted sniper attack, as some human rights organisations claimed.

Moreover, Haj Hassan, along with other *Al-Manar* reporters, had provided extensive coverage of the Qalamon battles, accompanying Hezbollah and Syrian regime troops, interviewing them and making up stories about their victories and heroism. They were not simply "carrying out their professional duty in covering events," as some of the condemnations claimed. *Al-Manar* is a propaganda mouthpiece for Hezbollah Lebanon and the Iranian regime. This has made many in the Syrian opposition armed forces view the channel and its staff as "legitimate military targets." Indeed, Haj Hassan had previously posted on Facebook pictures of himself wearing a military uniform and carrying a heavy weapon.³³

As a Naame Shaam commentary on the story put it at the time, "All attacks on journalists and media workers covering wars and armed conflicts should be condemned. But watching the prestigious funeral held in South Lebanon for the *Al-Manar* journalists on

³³ See: <http://www.globalarabnetwork.com/politics/41-lebanon-politics/12190-2014-04-15-12-01-56>.



Known senior personnel in Iran's 'advisory mission' to Syria.
Source: 'Iranian Strategy in Syria', *idem*.

Tuesday, and hearing the high-profile, strongly worded condemnations by Lebanese, Syrian and Iranian officials (including the Lebanese president, the Iranian foreign minister and others), one cannot but wonder: where was your conscience when other journalists and media workers were killed in Syria?"³⁴

The new command chain

As with official declarations of war or occupation, there is no legal requirement for a specific number of foreign commanders (in this case Iranian) to be 'on site' (in Syria) before it can be said that the country has been placed under a foreign military rule or occupation. Such rule results from the fact that national sovereignty has been surrendered and a foreign military force is now in overall control. To quote Article 43 of The Hague Regulations, it is enough that "the authority of the legitimate power [has] in fact passed into the hands of the occupant."

The implicit assumption here is that the occupying force exercises this authority directly, through its armed forces, which requires a clear and identifiable command structure. However, as argued above, authority can also be partly exercised indirectly, through local agents or an indigenous government. Evidence suggests that the Syrian case is a combination of both scenarios.

In September 2013, *The Wall Street Journal* quoted one of the chief commanders of the Free Syrian Army's intelligence operations, Gen. Yahya Bitar, saying the Free Army possessed identification cards and dog tags of Iranian soldiers the rebels had captured or killed in battle. "Al-Assad asked for them to be on the ground," he added. "The Iranians are now part of Syria's command-and-control structure."³⁵ But is there any other evidence of this apart from claims of Syrian rebels?

The previous chapter cited many examples that clearly show Sepah Pasdaran is in charge of directing the Syrian regime's overall military strategy, at least in some strategic parts of the country. The military campaigns in al-Qusayr, Yabroud and the wider Qalamon region, which were clearly led by Sepah Pasdaran and Hezbollah, are good examples. Negotiating and brokering the Homs deal in May 2014 on behalf of the Syrian regime is another. Other cases mentioned in the chapter show Iranian commanders are directing military operations on the ground, as the captured footage of the Sepah commander in Aleppo clearly shows. A number of Syrian, Lebanese and Iraqi fighters have also testified to serving under Iranian or Hezbollah command.

A crucial question here is how high up or down the Syria military command chain these Iranian commanders are and whether it is possible to identify a clear Iranian command structure in Syria.³⁶

Various reports by Western think-tanks and intelligence services provide varying degrees of details on Iranian military commanders who are said to be directing the Iranian regime's operations in Syria. For example, a 2013 study by the Institute for the Study of War and the American Enterprise Institute's Critical Threats Project, entitled *Iranian Strategy in Syria*, claims that Sepah Pasdaran's Qods Force and elements of the conventional Sepah Pasdaran Ground Forces, as well as several Iranian intelligence agencies, formed a "top-level advisory mission" to support the Syrian regime since early 2011.³⁷ The report names two prominent Sepah commanders, Hossein Hamedani and Qassem Soleimani, as leading this mission, and names a number of other senior commanders from various Sepah units serving under them with specific responsibilities in Syria. Many of these were also mentioned in the previous chapter.

Brigadier-General Hossein Hamedani was the former commander of Sepah Pasdaran's unit in Greater Tehran who led the 2009 crackdown on the Green Movement protesters in Tehran. Before that he served as the commander of Sepah's units in Kurdistan, where he led the campaign against the guerilla movement there. He is said to have been Iran's main strategist in guerilla and urban warfare and had written a book about that. US and European officials say he was playing "a central role" in implementing similar strategies in Syria.³⁸ As already mentioned in this and the previous chapters, Hamedani made a number of statements about the Iranian regime's role in Syria. He was the one who said Bashar al-Assad was fighting the war in Syria as "our deputy."

Another prominent person in the Iranian regime's command structure in Syria – and perhaps the most important – is Major-General Qassem Soleimani, the commander-in-chief of Sepah Qods. According to one media report, quoting a Sepah member in Tehran "with knowledge about deployments to Syria," Soleimani was personally appointed by Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei to "spearhead military cooperation with al-Assad and his forces."³⁹ He was indeed one of the first senior Iranian commanders to visit Damascus after the escalation of the war in Syria in late 2011, according to US officials.⁴⁰

Another report quotes "a prominent Iraqi official who met with Soleimani months ago" saying the latter's mission in Syria was "not limited to protecting the [Syrian] regime

from collapsing [but] also has to preserve Iranian interests in Lebanon and Syria should the regime fall."⁴¹ The same report quotes pro-Iran Iraqis saying, in October 2012, Soleimani "directly took charge of the 70,000 best Syrian fighters, in addition to 2,500 from Hezbollah and 800 Iraqis, most of whom have lived in Syria since the 1980s."⁴² More information about Soleimani and his role in Syria is provided in the box below.

Needless to say, the chief commander of Sepah Pasdaran, Maj. Gen. Mohamad Ali Jafari, and Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei should also feature in this command structure.⁴³ Besides the well-known fact that Khamenei has

34 'Who's responsible for the death of *Al-Manar* journalists in Maaloula? Ayatollah Khamenei', *Naame Shaam*, 18 April 2014, available: <http://www.naameshaam.org/en/whos-responsible-for-the-death-of-al-manar-journalists-in-maaloula/>.

35 Farnaz Fassihi, Jay Solomon and Sam Dagher, 'Iranians dial up presence in Syria', *The Wall Street Journal*, 16 September 2013, available: <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424127887323864604579067382861808984>.

36 For Sepah Pasdaran's command structure in general, see for example: Will Fulton, *The IRGC Command Network: Formal Structures and Informal Influence*, AEI's Critical Threats Project, July 2013, available: http://www.irantracker.org/sites/default/files/pdf_upload/analysis/The_IRGC_Command_Network.pdf.

37 Will Fulton, Joseph Holliday and Sam Wyer, *Iranian Strategy in Syria*, AEI's Critical Threats Project and Institute for the Study of War, May 2013, available: <http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/IranianStrategyinSyria-1MAY.pdf>

38 Farnaz Fassihi and Jay Solomon, 'Top Iranian official acknowledges Syria role', *The Wall Street Journal*, 16 September 2012, available: <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB1000087239639044320504577615393756632230>.

39 Farnaz Fassihi, 'Iran said to send troops to Bolster Syria', *The Wall Street Journal*, 27 August 2012, available: <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10000872396390444230504577615393756632230>.

40 'US: Iran supplying weapons for Syrian crackdown', *Now*, 14 January 2012, available: https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/nownews/us_iran_supplying_weapons_for_syrian_crackdown.

41 Mushreq Abbas, 'Iran's man in Iraq and Syria', *Al-Monitor*, 12 March 2013, available: <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/03/soleimani-iraq-syria-difference.html>.

42 *Ibid.*

43 For more details about the Iranian decision-making structure under Khamenei, see, for example: Frederick W. Kagan, *Khamenei's Team of Rivals: Iranian Decision-Making*, American Enterprise Institute, July 2014, available: http://www.irantracker.org/sites/default/files/imce-images/Khameneis_Team_of_Rivals_20140729.pdf.

the final say in all important state matters in Iran, there are a number of indications that he has personally been guiding the Iranian regime's policy in Syria. For instance, in August 2013, the director of Iran's Central Council of Friday Prayer Leaders in the city of Jiroft in eastern Iran said in a speech that the Supreme Leader was "guiding [the operations] in southern Lebanon and, by virtue of his guidance, Gaza has raised its head and Syria has opposed the infidels."⁴⁴

Another indicator is the deployment of members of Iran's Law Enforcement Forces (LEF) to Syria, which was discussed in the previous chapter. As the above-mentioned report, *Iranian Strategy in Syria*, points out, the deployment of LEF personnel in support of the Syrian regime indicates that the Iranian strategy in Syria has been formulated and is being implemented by "the senior-most leadership of Iran."⁴⁵ This is because, in theory, LEF falls under the control of the Interior Ministry, which reports to the President. In practice, however, LEF, like all Iranian security services, is overseen by the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC), which reports directly to the Supreme Leader. It is therefore very likely, as the report suggests, that the SNSC developed a plan for supporting al-Assad that the Supreme Leader would have personally approved, and that this plan is now being executed. The presence of LEF officers in Syria, the authors add, is "the clearest possible evidence that Iran's whole-of-government strategy in Syria is being controlled directly by Khamenei rather than Soleimani, the IRGC, or any other single individual or entity in Iran."⁴⁶

The author of this report slightly disagrees with the wording: the Iranian strategy in Syria may involve various authorities and departments but it is being implemented by the Iranian regime rather than the government, that is, Khamenei and Sepah Pasdaran, not Iranian President Hassan Rouhani and his ministers. In February 2014, Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif told his American counterpart that he "did not have the authority to discuss or to negotiate on Syria," suggesting that such powers remained in the hands of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and Gen. Qassem Soleimani.⁴⁷

Qassem Soleimani, the de facto ruler of Syria

In May 2014, shortly before the sham presidential 'elections' that were held in Syria on 3 June 2014, Naame Shaam launched a mock 'election campaign' calling on Syrians to vote for Gen. Qassem Soleimani as president

of Syria and for Bashar al-Assad as his deputy.⁴⁸ The aim of the campaign was to mock the sham elections and to highlight the Iranian regime's role in Syria. As the group put it, "if presidential elections are to be forced upon Syrians in regime-held areas on 3 June 2014, why not vote for the one who really has the power and vote for the puppet Bashar al-Assad as his deputy?"

Interestingly, later that month, an Iranian news website quoted al-Assad declaring his 'love' for Soleimani during a meeting with Iranian MPs. "Major-General Soleimani has a place in my heart," he reportedly said. "If he had had to run against me, he would have won the election. This is how much Syrian people love him," he added.⁴⁹

Jokes and al-Assad's unwitty comments aside, Soleimani has been described as the principal Iranian military strategist and "the single most powerful operative in the Middle East today."

Born in 1957, Qassem Soleimani grew up in the south-eastern Iranian province of Kerman. After the 1979 Islamic Revolution, he joined Sepah Pasdaran. A few years later, he joined Sepah Qods, a division of Sepah that conducts special operations abroad in order to "export the Islamic revolution." He was later promoted to Major General by Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. The relationship between the two is said to be "very close."

Early in his career as a guard in his 20s, he was stationed in northwestern Iran and helped crush a Kurdish uprising. He later actively took part in the eight-year war between Iran and Iraq. He spent his early years at Sepah Qods combating Central Asian drugs smugglers and the Taliban in Afghanistan, which provided him with a considerable experience in the inner workings of international trafficking and terrorism networks. He was reportedly one of the principal architects and brains behind restructuring Hezbollah Lebanon in 1980s. He is also said to have been the mastermind behind a bomb plot aimed at killing the Saudi Arabian ambassador to the US in Washington D.C., which later led the US and some EU countries to include him in their sanctions lists.

Between 2004 and 2011, Soleimani was in charge of overseeing Sepah Qods's efforts to arm and train Shia militias in Iraq in a proxy war against the US. He is reportedly "familiar to every senior Iraqi politician and official." This

provided him with a rich experience, which he would later skilfully apply in Syria. According to media reports, Ayatollah Khamenei personally put him in charge of arming, training and directing the Syrian regime forces and militias, as well as Hezbollah fighters and the Iraqi militias fighting in Syria.⁵⁰

Update – New details about Iranian Major-Gen. Qassem Soleimani

From a mysterious, shadowy commander, Qassem Soleimani has over the past two years become a celebrity, almost legendary leader who is hopping around from one frontline in the region to another.¹ A combination of concerted efforts by the Iranian propaganda machine to create a legend or a hero that embodies the Iranian regime and its fight against its many enemies, and an obsession among Arab and Western media with person-alising their mysterious enemy, seem to have contributed to creating and spreading this image.

Indeed, once rarely seen in public, numerous photographs have been circulated in 2014 and 2015 on the web of Major-Gen. Soleimani in Syria and Iraq, often standing next to regime officials or militia leaders and fighters.² The Arabic-speaking commander-in-chief³ is often presented as being “personally in charge” of key battles in Iraq and Syria.⁴ And despite international sanctions and travel bans against him, he somehow manages to move around from one country to another with ease. He even reportedly visited Moscow in August 2015 to hold secret talks with Russian leaders.⁵

Soleimani's role in shaping Iran's foreign policy and military adventures is often exaggerated and personal-ised, so much so that an 11-min documentary film, titled “Soleimani”, was made about him in February 2015 and circulated by various Iranian state-controlled news agencies and TV channels.⁶ Another feature film about him, titled “The General”, is being produced at the moment, according to media reports.⁷

In March 2015, Soleimani was voted as “Iran's person of the year” in an annual poll conducted by *Khabar Online*.⁸ According to the semi-official news agency, 463,000 votes were cast between 7 and 14 March, with the results released a week before the Persian New Year, Nawroz, on 21 March. Soleimani reportedly won 37 percent of the votes, beating last year's winner, Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif.

A year before, in March 2014, one of the biggest news agencies in Iran, ISNA, published a revealing article about Qassem Soleimani based on anonymous inter-views with “people close to him.”⁹ The article confirmed Soleimani's presence in Iraq as a “commander”, and then in Syria among “volunteers” who went there to “defend the Seyyeda Zaynab shrine.” Some of these were apparently “comrades and soldiers, many of whom became martyrs later.”

⁴⁴ ‘Iranian religious leader: Syria, Gaza and South Lebanon in the hands of Khamenei’ (in Arabic), *Al-Arabiya*, 20 August 2013, available: <http://tinyurl.com/kybmkhf>. For English, see: Y. Mansharof, ‘Despite denials by Iranian regime, statements by Majlis member and reports in Iran indicate involvement of Iranian troops in Syria fighting’, The Middle East Media Research Institute, 4 December 2013, available: <http://www.memri.org/report/en/print7623.htm>.

⁴⁵ Will Fulton *et. al.*, *idem*.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*.

⁴⁷ ‘Zarif tells Kerry he can't talk Syria (See Pasdaran)’, *Iran Times*, 21 February 2014, available: <http://iran-times.com/zarif-tells-kerry-he-cant-talk-syria-see-pasdaran/>. See also, ‘FT interviews: Hassan Rouhani’, *Financial Times*, 29 November 2013, available: <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/22bbf304-58e2-11e3-a7cb-00144feabdc0.html#axzz3BEfH9AAu>.

⁴⁸ ‘Election campaign: #Vote_for_Qassem_Soleimani president of Syria!’, *Naame Shaam*, 22 May 2014, available: http://www.naame-shaam.org/vote_for_qassem_soleimani-president-of-syria/. As part of the campaign, *Naame Shaam* also called for ‘election rallies’ at Iranian embassies and consulates around the world on 2 June 2014. See: <http://www.naameshaam.org/videos-of-qassem-soleimanis-syria-election-rally-at-iranian-embassy-in-london/>.

⁴⁹ ‘Interesting comments by Bashar al-Assad about General Soleimani’ (in Persian), *Khedmat*, 24 June 2014, available: <http://khedmat.ir/vdcjyaev.uqeaizsfu.html>. For an English translations, see: <http://www.naameshaam.org/al-assad-gen-soleimani-has-a-place-in-my-heart-and-would-have-won-the-elections/>.

⁵⁰ For more on information on Maj. Gen. Qassem Soleimani, see, for example: ‘Iran's Master of Iraq Chaos Still Vexes U.S.’, *The New York Times*, 2 October 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/03/world/middleeast/qassim-suleimani-irans-master-of-iraq-chaos-still-vexes-the-us.html>; ‘The Shadow Commander’, *The New Yorker*, 30 September 2013, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2013/09/30/the-shadow-commander>; ‘Qassem Suleimani: the Iranian general ‘secretly running’ Iraq’, *The Guardian*, 28 July 2011, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/jul/28/qassem-suleimani-iran-iraq-influence>; ‘Qassim Suleimani: commander of Quds force, puppeteer of the Middle East’, *The Guardian*, 16 June 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jun/16/qassim-suleimani-iraq-iran-syria>; ‘Iran's Man in Iraq and Syria’, *Al-Monitor*, 12 March 2013, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/03/soleimani-iraq-syria-difference.html>.



Major-Gen. Soleimani near Tikrit, Iraq, 2015. Source: http://www.longwarjournal.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/IMG_20150303_2023001-1024x679.jpg

The most astonishing revelation in the article was that Jihad Moghniyeh, the Lebanese Hezbollah operative who was killed in an Israeli strike in southern Syria in January 2015, was Qassem Soleimani's nephew. In other words, Jihad's father, Imad Moghniyeh, Hezbollah's former chief of international operations who was also assassinated by Israel in Damascus in 2008, was married to Soleimani's sister.

These family ties may explain a few seemingly intriguing phenomena. Jihad Moghniyeh came into the spotlight in Iran in 2014, when various Iranian media outlets published photographs of him, head shaved, standing next to Qassem Soleimani during the latter's mother's funeral. According to media reports, Soleimani was seen talking to Moghniyeh a lot during the funeral and introducing him to guests. *Fars News* reported that the relationship between the two seemed so close that many people "assumed Jihad was Soleimani's son."¹⁰ Others explained it with the prominent role assigned to Moghniyeh, both the father and the son, within Hezbollah Lebanon.¹¹

On 20 January 2015, two days after Jihad Moghniyeh's death along with a few other Iranian and Hezbollah commanders, and almost seven years after his father's death, Soleimani reportedly visited the Moghniyehs family home in southern Beirut to pay his tributes. He then laid wreaths on Imad and Jihad Moghniyeh's tombs before returning to Tehran, according to media reports.¹²

In a recent article about the father's assassination published in the *Washington Post* in January 2015 under the title "CIA and Mossad killed senior Hezbollah figure

in car bombing,"¹³ US intelligence sources revealed that, during the operation, the American and Israeli operatives "had a chance" to kill Qassem Soleimani too, as he and Moghniyeh "walked together" and "at one point, the two men were standing there, same place, same street. All they had to do was push the button." But the operatives did not apparently have the authorisation to kill Soleimani. "There had been no presidential finding to do so," they said.

Footnotes:

1 See, for example, these two articles: <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/10/irans-shadow-commander-steps-into-the-limelight/381558/> and <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/jul/28/qassem-suleimani-iran-iraq-influence>.

2 See, for example, this picture of him with the leader of the Badr Organisation in Iraq: <https://twitter.com/Hossein-dalirian/status/529972264205578241/photo/1>, this one with the Syrian Mufti: https://twitter.com/green_lemonnn/status/554743812795695104, and these ones with troops near Aleppo in October 2015: <http://www.khabar-online.ir/detail/467797/culture/Defence> and <http://www.khabaronline.ir/detail/468079/multimedia/picture>. See also this collection of pictures of Soleimani with various militia leaders and commanders: <http://goo.gl/DNKgB5>.

3 See, for example, this video message in Arabic from Qassem Soleimani to Iraqi youth: www.abna24.com/persian/service/video/archive/2015/03/12/676412/story.html.

4 See, for example, these articles about Soleimani's role in the battle to recapture Tikrit from ISIS: <http://www.newsweek.com/iranian-military-mastermind-leading-battle-recapture-tikrit-isis-311516> and <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/03/iranian-general-at-the-forefront-of-the-tikrit-offensive.php>; and these articles about his role in attempting to take Aleppo:

<https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/commentaryanalysis/564528-soleimanis-aleppo-plan-is-back-on-track-and-Daraa>: http://www.aksalser.com/?page=view_articles&id=b8f096397189fcec5e070977f22d89f1; and these articles about the southern Aleppo offensive in October 2015: <https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/NewsReports/566069-irans-soleimani-allegedly-in-aleppo> and <http://www.almasdarnews.com/article/general-suleimani-oversees-the-large-scale-offensive-in-southern-aleppo/>.

5 See: <http://www.foxnews.com/politics/2015/08/06/exclusive-quds-force-commander-soleimani-visited-moscow-met-russian-leaders-in/>.

6 Available: <http://www.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=13931204001407>.

7 See: <http://goo.gl/zr6a8V>.

8 See: <http://news.yahoo.com/feared-iran-general-tops-person-poll-113525911.html>.

9 'The general is no longer a taboo' (in Persian), ISNA, 19 Mars 2014, available: <http://bit.ly/1NeCC9I>.

10 See: <http://www.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=13931028001466>.

11 See, for example, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/01/iran-general-killed-israeli-attack-syria.html> and <http://www.lebanondebate.com/news/193467>.

12 See: <https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/NewsReports/564754-soleimani-in-beirut-prior-to-hezbollah-strike>.

13 Available: https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/cia-and-mossad-killed-senior-hezbollah-figure-in-car-bombing/2015/01/30/ebb88682-968a-11e4-8005-1924ede3e54a_story.html

Another crucial question is who in the Syrian regime and in Bashar al-Assad's inner circle has been liaising with the Iranian commanders and whether the latter's involvement resulted in any changes in the Syrian command structure.

The clearest example of fundamental changes in the Syrian command structure and institutions is the creation and rise of the *shabbiha*. Like the Iranian Basij, the *shabbiha* were created to substitute the 'unreliable' regular army, and have indeed done so. The previous chapter has detailed how this happened and what the Iranian regime's role was in it. Furthermore, the Syrian army has been literally destroyed by the current 'internal' conflict to the extent that it is incapable of defending the country against any outside aggression, as the repeated Israeli attacks on Syrian sites over the past three years have shown.

Another example is the exclusion and inclusion of senior government and army officials in accordance with Iranian desires or orders. The most well-known case is that

of Farouq al-Shara', the former vice-president who has been reportedly under house arrest in Damascus for over a year, after he was prevented from flying to Moscow at the Damascus airport in early 2012. According to one Iraqi politician, quoted by an Arabic media report in February 2014, the reason behind this measure had more to do with the position held by al-Shara' on Iran's interference in Syria than his opposition to the military response to the peaceful protests at the beginning of the Syrian revolution, as reports claimed at the time.⁵¹ Others claimed he was secretly coordinating with the Russian government to form a 'national reconciliation government' that would exclude Bashar al-Assad and his brother Maher.

According to the Iraqi source, al-Shara' was opposed to Sepah Pasdaran, Hezbollah Lebanon and Iraqi Shia fighters' being brought in to fight in Syria, because he believed this will encourage other regional powers to interfere in the country and militarise the uprising – which is, indeed, what happened. He was apparently also pushing for a more prominent role for Russia and Saudi Arabia in reaching a political settlement, which the Iranian regime apparently felt would threaten its influence in Syria and limit its own role.

More surprising, perhaps, is the claim that al-Shara' has been under house arrest not by Syrian police or army but by Sepah Pasdaran. According to the Iraqi source, Sepah commanders asked Bashar al-Assad to guard al-Shara's two houses in Damascus themselves, because they feared that any Syrian armed forces that guard him, including the elite Republican Guards, who are known to be loyal to al-Assad and his brother Maher, could "collude with him [al-Shara'] and smuggle him out of Syria."⁵²

These changes in Syrian state institutions resulting from the Iranian regime's intervention are arguably a grave breach of Article 47 of the Fourth Geneva Convention,

51 'Al-Shara' banned from leaving Damascus and the [Iranian] Revolutionary Guards are in charge of guarding him', *Al-Seyasah*, 12 February 2014, available: <http://tinyurl.com/kfkhccc>. For English, see: <http://www.nameshaam.org/en/assad-trusts-sepah-pasdarans-more-than-his-own-armed-forces/>. See also: Bassam Barabandi and Tyler Jess Thompson, 'A Friend of my Father: Iran's Manipulation of Bashar al-Assad', *Atlantic Council*, 28 August 2014, available: <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/a-friend-of-my-father-iran-s-manipulation-of-bashar-al-assad>.

52 *Ibid.*

which provides that people in occupied territory “shall not be deprived, in any case or in any manner whatsoever, of the benefits of the present Convention by any change introduced, as the result of the occupation of a territory, into the institutions or government of the said territory, nor by any agreement concluded between the authorities of the occupied territories and the Occupying Power.”⁵³

Various reports have identified Mohammed Nasif Kheirbek, the former deputy director of Syria’s General Security Directorate and later the vice-president for security affairs, as the main ‘interlocutor’ between the Syrian and the Iranian regimes and the main contact for many Iranian-backed militias.⁵⁴ A leaked US diplomatic cable described him as Syria’s “point-man for its relationship with Iran.”⁵⁵ He is said to be the most senior adviser who “has the ear” of Bashar al-Assad, especially since the outbreak of the revolution. In June 2011, Nasif reportedly travelled to Tehran to meet Gen. Qassem Soleimani. They are said to have discussed opening a supply route that would enable Iran to transfer military hardware to Syria via a new military compound at Latakia airport.⁵⁶

But while Nasif was inherited by Bashar al-Assad from his father and was kept, and even promoted, during the current war, others in the president’s inner circle were not.

Update – The Syrian regime’s inner circle

Mohammad Nasif Kheirbek died on 28 June 2015 from prostate cancer. A couple of months before, Rustum Ghazaleh, the former head of the Political Security Directorate, also died in hospital after he was attacked by men loyal to Gen. Rafiq Shehadeh, who was in turn sacked. Both Nasif and Ghazaleh were closely linked to the Syrian occupation of Lebanon and the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri.

Whether their death – which follows that of other regime figures with similar connections – is linked to this role or to internal power struggles within the Syrian regime remains a secret.

What is certain, though, is that the inner circle of the regime is smaller and weaker than ever, and the remaining figures (Bashar and Maher al-Assad, Ali Mamlouk and a couple of others) are practically hostages of Iranian commanders running the show in Syria today.

Case study: Who assassinated the Syrian ‘crisis cell’?

On 18 July 2012, a bomb was allegedly detonated in the National Security HQ in Damascus, killing a number of top military and security officials from what was known as the Syrian regime’s ‘crDaesh cell’. Those killed included then Defence Minister Dawoud Rajha, his deputy and Bashar al-Assad’s brother-in-law Assef Shawkat, and the Deputy Vice-President Hassan Turkmani. The head of the National Security and al-Assad’s security advisor Hisham Ikhtyar (or Bakhtyar) was seriously injured and was announced dead two days later. Interior Minister Mohammad al-Sha’ar was also injured in the attack.⁵⁷

Both the Free Syrian Army and what was then known as the Islam Brigade claimed responsibility for the bombing. The FSA’s logistical coordinator Lou’ay al-Moqdad claimed the attack was carried out by a group of FSA members in coordination with some of the officials’ drivers and bodyguards. His claim was even furnished with minute details, such as that two bombs were used, not one, “one hidden in a packet of chocolates and one in a big flower pot.” They had been “planted in the room days before,” he said, and were “remotely detonated by defectors.”⁵⁸

But a prominent and reliable source in the Syrian opposition told Naame Shaam, quoting a Western intelligence official, that the high-profile operation had nothing to do with the FSA or other opposition armed groups. It was, rather, carried out by Sepah Pasdaran, possibly with direct orders from Gen. Qassem Soleimani himself.

According to the source, some members in the ‘crisis cell’ had opened communications channels with Arab Gulf states and the US with the aim of striking a deal behind Iran’s back. So Sepah Pasdaran struck to prevent such a deal. Since then, President Assad is said to be under Sepah’s fully control, effectively their hostage.

Local residents who live next door to the building also told Naame Shaam’s correspondent in Damascus that they did not hear any explosions on that day, and were “very surprised and bewildered” when they heard the news. The BBC’s correspondent at the time reported that the building’s windows were “not shattered.”⁵⁹ In an interview the following year, Hisham Ikhtyar’s son, who was present inside the building when the incident took place, said he “felt a shake but did not hear any explosions and did not see any fire. Only the walls fell down and there was darkness.”⁶⁰

All these pieces of circumstantial evidence suggest that the operation was an inside job. It is possible that the device was small, controlled explosives hidden in the dropped ceiling of the meeting room, as some reports have suggested,⁶¹ but this cannot be independently verified without a forensic examination of the site, which has obviously not been possible (the Syrian authorities did not even publish pictures of the crime scene).

Interestingly, the person who is alleged to have planted the bombs is said to be, according to Western intelligence sources, the office manager of Hisham Ikhtyar, who was apparently 'arrested' by the Syrian authorities but his whereabouts and fate are unknown to date.

The crucial question is: why were these top officials and commanders assassinated? Some clues may be found in who was present at the meeting and who was not.

A few months before the incident, a civilian secretary who worked for the 'crisis cell' defected from the regime and leaked some internal security documents that were made public by *Al-Arabiya* TV channel.⁶² The documents reveal the 'cell' was headed by Bashar al-Assad himself, who received reports and commented on them before they were discussed by the other officials; his brother Maher, who only attended the cell's meetings occasionally; and the Vice-Secretary-General of the Ba'th party, Mohammad Saed Bkhaitan, who was later replaced by Hassan Turkmani as the chair of the cell. The other eight members included the four victims of the 18 July operation (Asef Shawkat, Dawoud Rajha, Hisham Ikhtyar and Mohammad al-Sha'ar) as well as the head of the Air Force Intelligence Jamil Hasan, the head of the Military Intelligence Abdul-Fattah Qudsiyyeh, the head of the Political Security Directorate Deeb Zeitoun and the head of the General Intelligence Ali Mamlouk.

According to the leaked documents, these eight members met every day at 7pm (which presumably changed after the documents were leaked). Why were Mamlouk, Hasan, Qudsiyyeh and Zeitoun not present at this meeting?

Western intelligence sources claim that Bashar and Maher al-Assad received intelligence (most probably from the Iranian regime) that the assassinated officials were plotting "an internal coup" in coordination with Russia and/or Gulf countries, which would have removed

Bashar and Maher from power and replaced them with a transitional government led by Farouq al-Shara', aided by a military council headed by Dawoud Rajha and Assef Shawkat. As mentioned above, al-Shara' has been placed under house arrest and the other two were assassinated in this attack. In December 2012, Mohammad al-Sha'ar escaped what appears to have been another attempted assassination.⁶³

A few days after the 'crisis cell' incident, Ali Mamlouk was appointed as the head of National Security, replacing Ikhtyar. Deeb Zeitoun replaced Mamlouk and Abdul-Fattah Qudsiya became Mamlouk's deputy. Qudsiya

⁵³ ICRC, 'Article 47', *Convention (IV)*, *idem*.

⁵⁴ 'Factbox: Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's inner circle', *Reuters*, 4 May 2011, available: <http://uk.reuters.com/article/2011/05/04/us-syria-assad-circle-idUSTRE7433TN20110504>.

⁵⁵ 'Treasury Team's Damascus consultations on financial sanctions', Cable ID: 07DAMASCUS269_a, *WikiLeaks*, 15 March 2007, available: https://www.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/07DAMASCUS269_a.html.

⁵⁶ 'Bashar al-Assad's inner circle', *BBC*, 30 July 2012, available: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-13216195>.

⁵⁷ See, for example, 'Damascus blast 'kills' top Assad officials', *Al-Jazeera*, 19 Jul 2012, available: <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2012/07/20127189355415804.html>; 'Syria attack: Security chief Ikhtiar dies from wounds', *BBC*, 20 July 2012, available: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-18920733>.

⁵⁸ 'Syria: Fresh fighting in capital as hundreds flee regime reprisal attacks', *The Telegraph*, 19 July 2012, available: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/9410184/Syria-Fresh-fighting-in-capital-as-hundreds-flee-regime-reprisal-attacks.html>.

⁵⁹ 'Top Syrian security officials killed in suicide bomb' (in Arabic), *BBC*, 18 July 2012, available: http://www.bbc.co.uk/arabic/middleeast/2012/07/120718_syria_wrap1.shtml.

⁶⁰ 'Son of Gen. Bakhtyar tells Asia [news agency] the details of his father's assassination', 10 November 2013, available: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OCcNkcopFW8>. For text (in Arabic) see: <http://www.alhadathnews.net/archives/81116>.

⁶¹ Nizar Nayouf, 'Where have Bashar al-Assad and his brother hidden the perpetrator of the crime, the office manager of Hisham Ikhtiar' (in Arabic), 19 July 2013, available: <http://tinyurl.com/mhluhal>. See also: 'A Friend of my Father', *idem*.

⁶² 'Al-Arabiya reveals leaked documents about the Syrian crisis cell', *Al-Arabiya*, 17 April 2012, available: <http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/04/17/208475.html>.

⁶³ 'Syrian interior minister in Beirut for treatment', *Al-Arabiya*, 19 December 2012, <http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/12/19/256035.html>.

was replaced by Ali Younes, who is considered to be one of 'Maher al-Assad's men' within the regime. Finally, Rustum Ghazaleh, the former chief of Syrian intelligence in Lebanon and most recently the head of intelligence in Damascus, took over from Zeitoun. As to Rajha's Defence Minister post, it was given to Gen. Fahd Jasem al-Frej.⁶⁴ Apart from the latter, all these men are said to be closer to Bashar and Maher al-Assad than the ones they replaced.

Other indicators may be found in the media coverage of the incident at the time. Iranian media, such as *Press TV*, were quick to report that Hisham Ikhtyar had been killed, even though he was still in hospital and had not died yet.⁶⁵ A few days later, when Syrian state media were still saying the attack was carried out by a suicide bomber, *Fars News* published a report, quoting a Syrian member of parliament, that claimed the Syrian authorities had arrested the person who carried out the 'bomb attack', describing him as a security staff member who worked in the same building.⁶⁶

The 'crisis cell' incident was not the first time that the Syrian and Iranian regimes had been accused of orchestrating attacks against Syrian security officials and sites and blaming them on 'terrorists'. The previous chapter has already mentioned the twin car bomb attacks in May 2012, which killed 55 people outside a military intelligence complex in the Qazzaz area of Damascus. A high-ranking regime defector claimed at the time that the regime was behind this and other apparent suicide bombs.⁶⁷ Leaked security documents, obtained also by *Al-Arabiya* in September 2012, seem to back up this claim.⁶⁸

'He killed the killed and walked in his funeral'

Another controversial death was that of Hilal al-Assad, a cousin of Bashar al-Assad who was killed in March 2014. Hilal was the notorious chief of the NDF in Latakia. The Syrian regime and the Free Syrian Army both claimed he was killed by rebels during battles in Kasab that were raging at the time.

But Syrian opposition sources told Naame Shaam at the time that Hilal al-Assad was assassinated by Sepah Pasdaran and/or Hezbollah Lebanon because he had become a "loose cannon" and "was not obeying orders."⁶⁹

In May 2014, *Al-Arabiyya* TV reported that Gen. Qassem Soleimani had made a 'secret trip' to Syria to pay tribute to Hilal al-Assad's family in person.⁷⁰ A picture showing an

ageing Gen. Soleimani sitting with Hilal al-Assad's wife and son was circulated online without a date or source. If this turns out to be true, a Syrian proverb sums up the situation pretty well: "He killed the killed and walked in his funeral."

Update – New details about the crisis cell assassination

In December 2014, *The Wall Street Journal* published a rare article claiming that the crisis cell assassination was an "inside job."¹ Two dozen sources, "including past and current regime officials, opposition leaders, activists and rebels, and politicians in neighboring countries with ties to Mr. Assad," told the paper separately that the bombing was a result of "a split between the Assad family and its hard-line allies on one side, and officials seeking negotiations with opposition groups on the other."

The most prominent source of the WSJ's story is former Syrian army general Manaf Tlass, who defected two weeks before the crisis cell bombing, after guards allegedly found six explosive devices planted outside his office at a military base in Damascus.

The article does not say anything about a possible role played by Sepah Pasdaran in the operation but hints that the attack "opened the door for Iran, Mr. Assad's principal regional ally, and Hezbollah, its proxy militia in Lebanon, to play a greater role in defending the regime." It also quotes Tlass saying Qassem Suleimani was in Damascus on the day of the bombing.

In March 2015, Lebanese newspaper *Al-Safir*, which is considered close to the Syrian regime and Hezbollah Lebanon, published a badly written conspiracy theory story quoting unnamed former French security officials claiming the crisis cell bombing was an American-Lebanese plot.²

The *Safir* article appears to be an attempt by the Hezbollah propaganda machine to respond to Naame Shaam's and the WSJ's allegations and confuse the issue further.

Footnotes:

¹ Sam Dagher, 'Syrian bomb plot marked deadly turn in civil war', *The Wall Street Journal*, 19 December 2014, available: <http://www.wsj.com/articles/syrian-bomb-plot-marked-deadly-turn-in-civil-war-1419015331>.

² Mohammad Ballout, 'The CrDaesh Cell bombing in Damascus: American and Lebanese roles' (in Arabic), *Al-Safir*, 14 March 2015, available: <http://assafir.com/Article/407650/MostRead>.

New narrative

In July 2014, Naame Shaam wrote a long “discussion paper” and sent it to various Syrian and Iranian opposition groups and figures.⁷¹ The aim of paper was to “clarify some facts and misconceptions about Iran’s role in Syria and develop a new, joint narrative about the Syrian revolution in light of new realities on the ground.” This chapter has provided further factual and legal bases for some of the relevant points in that paper, namely, those related to the Iranian regime’s occupation of the regime-controlled parts of Syria.

The chapter has argued that the Iranian regime is in overall control of the Syrian regime’s military strategy and that Sepah Pasdaran and their foot soldiers in Hezbollah Lebanon and the Iraqi militias are leading and fighting all major, strategic battles in Syria on behalf of the Syria regime. This, we argued, amounts to surrendering national sovereignty and to a foreign power’s establishing and exercising authority as defined by The Hague Regulations, both directly through its armed forces and militias and indirectly through the Syrian regime.

As the discussion paper put it, “It is no longer accurate to say that al-Assad’s troops are fighting against the rebels with the support of Hezbollah fighters and Sepah Pasdaran ‘advisors’.” It is the other way round and the Assad regime is little more than a puppet government serving the interests of a foreign power (the Iranian regime).

In other words, the war in Syria should be regarded as an international conflict that warrants the application of the four Geneva Conventions and the regime-held areas of Syria should be considered occupied territory – not metaphorically but in the strict legal sense of the word. The *de facto* rulers of ‘Occupied Syria’ are Gen. Qassem Soleimani and his colleagues in Sepah Qods and Sepah Pasdaran, who dominate the new military command structure in Syria. As indicated above, it does not matter if the Syrian and Iranian regimes deny or refuse to acknowledge this.

The discussion paper urged the Syrian opposition to accept this new reality and adapt its political and communications strategies accordingly. This chapter has also pointed out the possibility of using Article 1 of the 1977 Additional Protocol I to the Geneva Conventions, which

recognises the struggle of people fighting against “colonial domination and alien occupation” as an international conflict that warrants the application of the four Geneva Conventions.

The right to struggle for liberation from colonial and foreign domination has been recognised by the UN and other international bodies as legitimate. To quote a 1978 UN General Assembly resolution, the Assembly “Reaffirms the legitimacy of the struggle of peoples for independence, territorial integrity, national unity and liberation from colonial and foreign domination and foreign occupation by all available means, particular-

64 ‘Assad names new security chief after bombing’, *Reuters*, 24 July 2012, available: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/07/24/syria-assad-security-idINDEE86N0BO20120724>.

65 ‘Damascus blast: More than meets the eye’, *Press TV*, 19 July 2012, was available: <http://www.presstv.ir/detail/251727.html> (the report appears to have since been removed).

66 The report was picked up by various international media, see, for example, ‘Syria says arrests person responsible for Damascus bombing’, *Reuters*, 24 July 2012, available: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/07/24/us-syria-crDaesh-bombing-idUSBRE86N0B320120724>.

67 Ruth Sherlock, ‘Exclusive interview: Why I defected from Bashar al-Assad’s regime, by former diplomat Nawaf Fares’, *The Sunday Telegraph*, 14 Jul 2012, available: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/9400537/Exclusive-interview-why-i-defected-from-Bashar-al-Assads-regime-by-former-diplomat-Nawaf-Fares.html>.

68 ‘Assad’s regime carried out deadly Damascus bombings: leaked files’, *Al-Arabiya*, 30 September 2012, available: <http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/09/30/241008.html>.

69 ‘As part of his Syria ‘election campaign’ tour: Qassem Soleimani visits family of killed Syrian *shabbiha* commander Hilal al-Assad’, *Naame Shaam*, 29 May 2014, available: <http://www.naameshaam.org/as-part-of-his-syria-election-campaign-tour-qassem-soleimani-visits-family-of-killed-syrian-shabbiha-commander-hilal-al-assad-2/>.

70 ‘Sepah Qods chief visits Hilal al-Assad’s family in Damascus in secret’ (in Arabic), *Al-Arabiya* 24 May 2014, available: <http://tinyurl.com/ob45dct>.

71 The paper has not been published as it was intended for internal discussion among Syrian and Iranian opposition groups. However, a brief summary of some of the relevant points can be found in another, open appeal by *Naame Shaam* addressed to opposition groups and activists in Syria and Iran: ‘Syria is an occupied country and Sepah Pasdaran are the ones who rule it’, *Naame Shaam*, 9 May 2014, available: <http://www.naameshaam.org/en/syria-is-an-occupied-country-and-sepah-pasdaran-are-the-ones-who-rule-it/>.

ly armed struggle.”⁷² The UN General Assembly has even “strongly condemned” governments that “do not recognize the right to self-determination and independence of peoples under colonial and foreign domination and alien subjugation.”⁷³ The author of this report would argue that the Syrian people’s struggle against the Syrian and Iranian regimes can legitimately be called a liberation struggle.

But this requires the Syrian opposition to unite in its discourse and demands and to act as one recognised representative of the Syrian people fighting against the colonial domination represented by the Syrian and Iranian regimes in Syria. The other legal requirement is that the conduct of the Syrian rebels remains subject to international humanitarian law and excludes terrorist acts, as defined by international law.⁷⁴

It is the view of the Naame Shaam campaign that, unless the Syrian opposition united in pushing in this direction, the US and other Western powers are likely to continue with their ‘slow bleeding’ policy towards Iran and not publicly admit that the war in Syria is one against the Iranian regime, not just the Syrian regime, so as to avoid being pressured into taking concrete steps to end the bloodshed in Syria and the wider region. This is the subject of the next chapter.

Recognising the war in Syria as an international conflict that involves a foreign occupation and a people struggling for liberation may also provide another ‘legal weapon’ against the Iranian regime, namely that it is committing “grave breaches” of the Fourth Geneva Convention, which are considered even more serious war crimes than the ones outlined in the previous chapter. This is because, as an occupying force, Iran has certain “duties” towards the Syrian population under its occupation.

There are almost 150 substantive articles in the Fourth Geneva Convention that deal with these duties, including the prohibition of mass deportations and population transfers (Article 49), guaranteeing care and education for children (Article 50), the prohibition of unnecessary destruction of private and public property (Article 53), providing adequate food and medical supplies (Article 55), public health and hygiene (Article 56), religious freedom (Article 58) and so on.

There is abundant evidence – some of which has been outlined in this and the previous chapters – that the Iranian regime and its forces and militias fighting in Syria have repeatedly violated many of these rights since March 2011. For instance, the mass destruction of private and public properties in vast areas of Syria has not always been necessitated by the war (against the rebels) and is a clear and repeated breach of Article 53. Similarly, the mass evacuations of entire villages and districts in Homs and elsewhere, and reports of empty properties being registered to Syrian and Iranian regime supporters from elsewhere (including foreigners such as Afghan fighters) are a clear and repeated breach of Article 49 and may even amount to ethnic cleansing.⁷⁵

For these and similar arguments to be used, one obviously needs to gather concrete evidence with well-documented cases and examples.⁷⁶ One should also be careful not to use this sort of arguments in a way that may let the Syrian regime off the hook and blame everything on the Iranian regime.⁷⁷

Based on this new narrative, the above-mentioned discussion paper also proposed a new set of demands addressed to the US and its allies in the Friends of Syria group, as well as the UN and other international bodies. The main ones relevant to this chapter include demands to support the moderate Syrian rebels with all means necessary to enable them to actually win the war against the Syrian and Iranian regimes, which this chapter has proposed describing as a liberation struggle.

Another relevant demand was linking the Iran nuclear negotiations and sanctions with the Iranian regime’s intervention in Syria and the wider region. As the discussion paper put it, “without direct military intervention [by international forces or Western powers], this represents the only realistic chance of ending the bloodshed in Syria, Iraq and Lebanon at the moment.” Both these and other demands will be fleshed out further in the Recommendations at the end of this report.⁷⁸



1 Poster of Naame Shaam's mock election campaign to vote Qassem Soleimani as president of Syria and Bashar al-Assad as his deputy – May 2014.

2 Hezbollah Lebanon's *Al-Manar* report Hamza Haj Hassan, who died in Maaloula on 7 April 2014, posing in military uniform and carrying a heavy weapon.

72 United Nations General Assembly, *Resolution A/RES/33/24*, 29 November 1978, available: <http://unispal.un.org/UNISPAL.NSF/0/D7340F04B82A2CB085256A9D006BA47A>.

73 United Nations General Assembly, *Resolution A/RES/3246 (XXIX)*, 29 November 1974, available: <http://unispal.un.org/UNISPAL.NSF/0/C867EE1DBF29A6E5852568C6006B2F0C>.

74 For a legal discussion of the difference between legitimate armed struggle and terrorism, see, for example: John Sigler, 'Palestine: Legitimate Armed Resistance vs. Terrorism', *The Electronic Intifada*, 17 May 2004, available: <http://electronicintifada.net/content/palestine-legitimate-armed-resistance-vs-terrorism/5084>.

75 See, for example: 'After Assad's New Regulations.. Who Acquires Syrians Houses?', Syrian Economic Forum, 28 August 2014, available: <http://www.syrianef.org/En/?p=3803>.

76 Various Syrian and international human rights organisations and NGOs are already doing this work and can be contacted for help.

77 For an example of how these arguments may be used, see: 'Israel's obligations as an occupying power under international law, its violations and implications for EU policy', European Coordination of Committees and Associations for Palestine, 29 January 2014, available: <http://www.eccpalestine.org/israels-obligations-as-an-occupying-power-under-international-law-its-violations-and-implications-for-eu-policy/>.

78 Some of the demands can be found in this open letter by Naame Shaam to the E3+3 powers negotiating with Iran about its nuclear programme: 'Open letter to foreign ministers: Link nuclear talks with Iran's role in Syria, Iraq and Lebanon', Naame Shaam, 6 July 2014, available: <http://www.naameshaam.org/open-letter-foreign-ministers/>.

III. Iran's Vietnam



Sepah Qods' commander-in-chief, Gen.Qassem Soleimani (weeping in the background) and Sepah Pasdaran's chief Mohammad Ali Jafari (front) at the funeral of Hassan Shateri, the head of the Iranian Commission for the Reconstruction of (South) Lebanon, who was killed in Syria. Tehran, 14 February 2013.

Source: *Fars News*

III. Iran's Vietnam

Most observers today agree that the Iranian regime's adventure in Syria is costing it a great deal – politically, economically and even socially. Indeed, many have started using the term 'Iran's Vietnam' (in reference to the catastrophic consequences of the Vietnam war for the US) to describe the 'Syrian swamp' in which the Iranian regime appears to be slowly drowning.¹ This chapter will shed some light on two main aspects of this 'Syrian Vietnam', namely the economic and human costs to Iran of the war in Syria and how it is impacting on the Iranian economy and ordinary Iranians.

While it may be obvious that the Iranian regime has made a choice to 'go for it' in Syria at any cost, this Syrian Vietnam is not just a consequence of this choice. It is also a deliberate policy by the US administration and its allies, which we describe here as a strategy of 'bleeding Iran in Syria.' The chapter will examine and assess this strategy and will argue that this 'slow bleeding' policy is being implemented at the disproportionate expense of the people of Syria and the wider region, and will inevitably lead to more instability

and extremism in the region and beyond. In other words, we will argue that Western hopes that a proxy war with the Iranian regime in Syria, coupled with economic sanctions, would eventually lead to the weakening and even collapse of the Iranian regime ('winning the Syria war in the streets of Tehran') are, at best, wishful thinking.

At any cost

After three and a half years of war, the Syrian economy is unsurprisingly in a state of acute distress. The full extent of economic losses is difficult to measure since the Syrian government has stopped gathering and releasing any meaningful statistics since 2011. Nevertheless, unofficial estimates indicate that Syria's gross domestic product (GDP) has dropped by at least 40-50 per cent during 2011-2013, with an estimated loss of 145 billion US dollars.²

Yet the Syrian regime has not collapsed economically, as many analysts were expecting it to do, basing their analysis on the experience of Iraq in the wake of the US



Naame Shaam's correspondent in Beirut toured several predominately Shia districts in the Lebanese capital. In one area, Amiliyeh school, he saw posters of one Amal and three Hezbollah 'martyrs' who had died in Syria. Local residents confirmed this.. Source: <http://www.naame-shaam.org/posters-of-hezbollahs-syria-martyrs-fill-beirut-streets/>

invasion in 2003, among other examples. And that is mainly thanks to the Iranian regime, and to a lesser extent to Russia and China, which have been propping up the Syrian regime over the past three and a half years.

Chapter I examined in considerable detail the Iranian regime's military involvement in Syria. In addition to Iranian commanders and fighters, there are also all the pro-regime militias fighting in Syria, which have been largely controlled *and financed* by Sepah Pasdaran. This includes the Syrian *shabbiha* and National Defence Forces (NDF). According to Iranian officials and commanders themselves, the NDF has some 70,000 members. They are not volunteers, however, as these officials often describe them. They are, rather, mercenaries who receive regular salaries and financial rewards, as many of them have confessed (see chapter I).

The monthly salary of a normal NDF member is said to range between 100 to 160 US dollars. Multiply that by 70,000 and you will get a rough idea of how much this force alone is costing the Syrian and Iranian regimes every month. According to one regime defector, their salaries are paid through a "slush fund replenished with US dollars flown in from Iran."³ A US Treasury sanctions designation in December 2012 claimed that the Iranian regime was providing the NDF with "routine funding worth millions of dollars."⁴

Then there are all Iranian-backed Iraqi militias fighting in Syria. At least fighters from 'Asa'eb Ahl al-Haq

are known to be paid 500 dollars a month, according to confessions of Iraqi militiamen captured by Syrian rebels.⁵ The money is allegedly sent to them through Iraq by the militia's leader Sheikh Qais al-Khaz'ali, who is said to be based in Iran. Similarly, Afghan fighters are being offered 500 US dollars a month by Sepah Pasdaran to fight in Syria on the regime's side.⁶

With regard to Hezbollah Lebanon, the force is known to have been receiving at least 100 million US dollars per year from the Iranian regime in supplies and weaponry, according to US estimates.⁷ Then there are all the running costs of the Syria operations, which are likely to be paid for by the Iranian regime too (food, training, transport, fuel, etc.). Add to that the militiamen's salaries and the money offered to the families of those killed in battle. In early 2014, Naame Shaam's correspondent in southern Lebanon was told by a number of families of Hezbollah members who had died in Syria that "the prize of martyrdom in Syria" was \$50,000 for each young and

¹ e.g. 'Why Syria could turn out to be Iran's Vietnam - not America's', *Foreign Policy*, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2013/05/13/how_do_you_say_quagmire_in_farsi_syria_iran_hezbollah; 'Syria's shadow lurks behind Iran nuclear talks', *Deutsche Welle*, <http://www.dw.de/syrias-shadow-lurks-behind-iran-nuclear-talks/a-17195356>; 'Is Syria becoming Iran's Vietnam?', *War in Context*, <http://warincontext.org/2014/03/30/is-syria-becoming-irans-vietnam/>; 'The consequences of slow bleeding', *Al-Hayat* (in Arabic), <http://tinyurl.com/n4r89ob>. Similar analogies have also been made about Hezbollah in Lebanon. e.g. 'Hezbollah's 'Mini-Vietnam' in Syria worsens on Beirut bombs', *Bloomberg*, 6 March 2014, available: <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2014-03-05/hezbollah-s-mini-vietnam-in-syria-escalates-with-beirut-bombs.html>.

It should be noted that *Naame Shaam* was probably the first media outlet to systematically use the term 'Iran's Vietnam' to describe the Iranian regime's adventure in Syria. See: <http://www.naameshaam.org/?s=Iran%27s+Vietnam&lang=en>.

² For more details on the state of the Syrian economy, see for example: *Squandering Humanity: Socioeconomic Monitoring Report on Syria*, UNDP, UNRWA with the Syrian Centre for Policy Research, May 2014, available: http://www.unrwa.org/sites/default/files/scpr_report_q3-q4_2013_270514final_3.pdf; Jihad Yazigi, *Syria's War Economy*, European Council on Foreign Relations, April 2014, available: http://www.ecfr.eu/page/-/ECFR97_SYRIA_BRIEF_AW.pdf; Mohsin Khan and Svetlana Milbert, 'Syria's economic glory days are gone', *Atlantic Council*, 3 April 2014, available: <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/syria-s-economic-glory-days-are-gone>.

³ James Hider and Nate Wright, 'Assad pays snipers "to murder protesters"', *The Times*, 26 January 2012, available: <http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/news/world/middleeast/article3298307.ece>.

⁴ US Department of Treasury, 'Treasury Sanctions Al-Nusra Front Leadership in Syria and Militias Supporting the Assad Regime', 11 December 2012, available: <http://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/pages/tg1797.aspx>.

⁵ 'Confessions of Iraqi mercenaries captured by the rebels in the suburbs of Damascus' (in Arabic), 31 December 2013, available: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LzNZOx-qii0>. See chapter I for more details.

⁶ Farnaz Fassihi, 'Iran pays Afghans to fight for Assad', *The Wall Street Journal*, 22 May 2014, available: <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424052702304908304579564161508613846>. See chapter I for more details.

⁷ Geneive Abdo, 'How Iran keeps Assad in power in Syria', *Foreign Affairs*, 25 August 2011, available: <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/68230/geneive-abdo/how-iran-keeps-assad-in-power-in-syria>.

unmarried fighter. The families of older men with children are apparently paid even more, and orphaned children are supported by Hezbollah for years.⁸

The weapons used by these fighters also cost money. As detailed in chapter I, Iranian weapons have been shipped to Syria, despite a UN embargo, since the start of the war. In March 2013, *Reuters* described this as a “weapons lifeline to al-Assad.”⁹ But in addition to Iranian weapons, Tehran has reportedly also been footing the bill for at least some of the Russian weapons supplied to the Syrian regime.

A quick look at available estimates of the Syrian regime’s known stocks of weapons shows an increase in most types of weapons.¹⁰ Most appear to be Russian-made and many are believed to be paid for by Iran. For instance, according to Russian newspapers, part of the MiG aircraft deal between Russia and Syria was financed by Iran as “a back-door purchase” of similar aircraft by Iran (to circumvent sanctions).¹¹ No further details are known owing to the secrecy surrounding such deals. As David Butter, an associate fellow at Chatham House, put it in September 2013, “Syria has never paid for its weapons from Russia – it doesn’t have any money... There is a pipeline of resupply of weapons going from Russia to Syria, possibly with Iran involved in that, but it’s pretty obscure.”¹²

The Syrian regime’s economic ‘resilience’ is most obvious in loyalist areas in Syria. Despite three years of war and economic decline, most areas under regime control continue to enjoy a good level of provision of many of their basic needs and services, such as water, electricity, fuel, food supplies and so on. The regime has even been able to pay the salaries of most state employees in these areas, not to mention those of soldiers and militia fighters.

The answer to this apparent puzzle lies in another aspect of ‘help’ offered by Iran to the Syrian regime: financial loans and credit lines.

As early as July 2011, media reports revealed that Iran was considering offering the Syrian regime financial assistance worth 5.8 billion US dollars in the form of cash and oil supplies. According to French business daily *Les Echos*, citing a confidential report by a think-tank linked to Iran’s Supreme Leader called the Strategic Research Center, the plan was approved by Khamenei himself.¹³

The offer reportedly included a three-month loan worth 1.5 billion US dollars to be made available immediately. Iran would also provide Syria with 290,000 barrels of oil every day over the following month, the report said.

In January 2013, Iran deposited 500 million US dollars in Syria’s Central Bank vaults to prop up the Syrian pound, which was on the brink of crashing. In July 2013, Tehran granted Damascus two credit lines worth 4.6 billion US dollars. The first, worth 1 billion US dollars, was intended to fund imports. The second, worth 3.6 billion US dollars, was dedicated to the procurement of oil products. In return, Iran would acquire equity stakes in investments in Syria.¹⁴

In an interview with the *Financial Times* in June 2013, Qadri Jamil, then Deputy Prime Minister for the economy, said that Syria actually had “an unlimited credit line with Tehran for food and oil-product imports,” adding that his government was borrowing 500 million US dollars a month.¹⁵ A Syrian government consultant confirmed this in another interview in July 2013.¹⁶

As to how these credit facilities were used, Syrian Minister of Oil Suleiman Al-Abbas provided a clue when he announced, in December 2013, that three Iranian oil tankers were docking in Syrian ports every month, paid for by the Iranian oil credit line. Around the same time, the Syrian General Foreign Trade Organization also issued two tenders to buy large quantities of food products, such as flour, sugar and rice, to be paid for through the other Iranian credit line (meaning sellers had to accept payment through Iranian funds under an agreement between the Commercial Bank of Syria and the Export Development Bank of Iran).¹⁷ Mostly Iranian companies, offering food products “available inside Iran,” took part in both tenders. In April 2014, Iran shipped 30,000 tonnes of food supplies to Syria to “help the Syrian government deal with shortages.”¹⁸

Needless to say, none of this food made its way to the people who need it most: people in destroyed or besieged areas. It may also be interesting to compare the above-mentioned amounts to the level of bilateral trade between Syria and Iran before the current war, which stood at 316 million US dollars in 2010, according to official Syrian statistics.¹⁹

In addition to money to buy (Iranian) food and oil, the Iranian regime has also been helping the Syrian regime get cheap oil from elsewhere, mainly for military purposes (diesel for military vehicles, etc.). An investigation by *Reuters* in December 2013 revealed that “millions of barrels” of Iraqi crude oil had been delivered that year, under the radar, to the Syrian regime through Lebanese and Egyptian trading companies, on board Iranian ships.²⁰ The investigation, based on an examination of previously undisclosed shipping and payment documents, said these previously unknown shipments, in addition to more known ones of Iranian crude oil, kept the Assad armed forces “running” in spite of the international sanctions.

Syria has lost almost all its oil exports, primarily because the regime surrendered or handed over the main oil wells in Syria to Islamist armed groups. So it has been depending mostly on Iran for its fuel needs, in addition to buying some oil from these Islamist groups, as detailed in chapter I.

So how much exactly has the Iranian regime spent on its Syria adventure so far, and where is this money coming from?

In August 2013, French newspaper *Libération* reported, citing the Syrian Center for Political and Strategic Studies as a source, that Iran had already “wasted around 17 billion dollars of its foreign currency reserves” on the war in Syria.²¹ Other sources estimate that the Iranian military

efforts in Syria are costing about 1.5 billion US dollars per month.²² But how are these estimates calculated? And do they include all the aspects mentioned above?

An obvious place to start looking is military expenditure databases. However, the data on Iran in most of these databases is often not only unreliable or unavailable (owing to Iran’s secrecy regarding its military activities),

8 ‘Pictures of Hezbollah fighters killed in Syria’, *Naame Shaam*, 10 February 2014, available: <http://www.naameshaam.org/pictures-of-hezbollah-fighters-killed-in-syria/>.

9 Louis Charbonneau, ‘Exclusive: Iran steps up weapons lifeline to Assad’, *Reuters*, 14 March 2013, available: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/03/14/us-syria-crisis-iran-idUSBRE92D05U20130314>.

10 e.g. <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/syria/army-equipment.htm>. See also: ‘Arms transfers to Syria’, *SIPRI Yearbook 2013*, available: <http://www.sipri.org/yearbook/2013/files/sipri-yearbook-2013-chapter-5-section-3>; Jonathan Saul, ‘Exclusive: Russia steps up military lifeline to Syria’s Assad – sources’, 17 January 2014, available: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/01/17/us-syria-russia-arms-idUSBREAOGOMN20140117>.

11 ‘Syria’s Russian weapon buys’, *Defense Industry Daily*, 29 May 2014, available: <http://www.defenseindustrydaily.com/syria-buying-mig31s-mig35s-for-1-billion-03391/>.

12 ‘How Putin’s Russia props up Assad’s military’, *Channel 4*, 10 September 2013, available: <http://www.channel4.com/news/syria-iran-weapons-arms-chemical-fighters-missiles>.

13 Yves Bourdillon, ‘Téhéran apporte son soutien financier à Damas’, *Les Echos*, 15 July 2011, available: http://www.lesechos.fr/15/07/2011/LesEchos/20974-039-ECH_teheran-apporte-son-soutien-financier-a-damas.htm?texte=Iran. For English, see: ‘Tehran ready to give Syria \$5.8 billion: report’, *Reuters*, 15 July 2011, available: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/07/15/us-syria-iran-idUSTRE76E3C720110715>.

14 Suleiman Al-Khalidi, ‘Iran grants Syria \$3.6 billion credit to buy oil products’, *Reuters*, 31 July 2013, available: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/07/31/us-syria-crisis-iran-idUSBRE96U0XN20130731>.

15 Michael Peel, ‘Iran, Russia and China prop up Assad economy’, *Financial Times*, 27 June 2013, available: <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/79eca81c-df48-11e2-a9f4-00144feab7de.html#axzz3C-j9eJw6O>.

16 Anne Barnard, ‘Syria weighs its tactics as pillars of its economy continue to crumble’, *The New York Times*, 13 July 2013, available: <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/14/world/middleeast/government-in-syria-searches-for-answers-as-economy-crumbles.html>.

17 Maha El Dahan, ‘Syria issues second food tender using Iranian credit’, *Reuters*, 24 December 2013, available: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/12/24/syria-flour-idUSL6NOK30WC20131224>.

18 Barbara Surk, ‘Iran sends Syria 30,000 tons of food supplies’, *AP*, 8 April 2014, available: <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/syria-iran-sends-30000-tons-food-supplies>.

19 Central Bureau of Statistics, ‘Statistical Abstract for 2011’ (in Arabic), available: www.cbssyr.sy.

20 Julia Payne, ‘Exclusive: Assad’s secret oil lifeline: Iraqi crude from Egypt’, *Reuters*, 23 December 2013, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/12/23/us-syria-oil-idUSBRE9BM0RI20131223>.

21 Jean-Pierre Perrin, ‘Téhéran devient tête de Syrie’, *Libération*, 25 August 2013, http://www.liberation.fr/monde/2013/08/25/teheran-devient-tete-de-syrie_927028. For Persian, see: <http://www.persian.rfi.fr/node/94821>.

22 Mohamad Amin, ‘Les dix fardeaux de l’économie en Iran’, *Les Echos*, 25 April 2014, available: <http://www.lesechos.fr/idees-debats/cercle/cercle-95955-les-dix-fardeaux-de-leconomie-en-iran-1007493.php>. For an English translation, see: <http://www.ncr-iran.org/en/news/economy/16863-the-ten-economic-burdens-of-iran>.

it also does not include spending on paramilitary forces. For instance, the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute's Military Expenditure Database states in a footnote: "The figures for Iran do not include spending on paramilitary forces such as the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC)."²³ Given that this force, Sepah Pasdaran, and its external arm Sepah Qods are the ones that are in charge of most of the Syria operations (save for some technical assistance provided by the Ministry of Intelligence and Security and the Ministry of Defense and Armed Forces Logistics, as indicated in chapter I), such databases are of little use for our purposes.

Sepah Pasdaran's declared budget is allocated by the Iranian government every year and must be approved by parliament, like all other government spending. The budget allocated to the force this year was just over 44 trillion Iranian rials (around 1.7 billion US dollars), a 30 per cent increase compared to the year before.²⁴ Sepah's budget has been constantly increasing in the last few years, which is presumably to do with the force's adventures in Iraq, Syria and elsewhere. As to how this money is divided within the force (e.g. how much goes to Sepah Qods and external operations), that is a well-guarded secret.

To put things in perspective, 44 trillion Iranian rials is nearly equivalent to the budgets allocated to health and education combined. The health budget for the current year is 25 trillion rials and the education budget is 21 trillion.²⁵

In addition to the official budget allocated by the government, eight per cent of Iran's infrastructure budget also goes to Sepah Pasdaran. This is, in fact, only what is publicly announced; in reality it may be as high as 60 per cent. Sepah or its affiliates are often the sole winners of the most profitable construction and oil-related contracts in Iran. The force also controls much of the import-export industry and has a monopoly over many other vital economic sectors in the country. Nonetheless, the force is not subject to the Iranian tax law.

Like Sepah, the Supreme Leader also controls a massive economic empire known as Setad, or the Setad Ejraiye Farmane Hazrate Emam (Headquarters for Executing the Order of the Imam). Setad manages and sells properties 'abandoned' or expropriated mainly from members of the opposition. The company's holdings of real estate,

corporate stakes and other assets are estimated to be worth about 95 billion US dollars, according to calculations by *Reuters* in November 2013.²⁶

Finally, there are also many foundations and businesses affiliated with or close to Sepah and Khamenei, many of which are known to give generous 'donations' to the force. There is no space here to look into this but it is worth mentioning in the context of who is funding the Iranian regime's adventure in Syria and how Iranian public and private money is being wasted.

'Eat just once a day or fast'

The impact of the war in Syria on the Iranian economy and ordinary Iranians cannot be separated from that of the international sanctions on Iran and Iran's nuclear programme. There are intrinsic reasons for this.

The main reason for the Iranian regime's uncompromising determination to save Bashar al-Assad's regime at any cost is to maintain its ability to ship arms to Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Gaza via Syria, so as to keep these strong deterrents against any possible Israeli and/or Western attacks on Iran's nuclear facilities. Together, these two 'lines of defence' (Hezbollah and Hamas and the nuclear bomb) are meant to secure the Iranian regime's survival. If the Assad regime falls, Iranian arms shipments to Hezbollah are likely to stop and Hezbollah would no longer be the threatening deterrence against Israel that it is now. The Iranian regime would therefore feel more vulnerable and would not be able to negotiate from a strong position during nuclear talks with the E3+3 powers in Vienna and Geneva, as it is doing now. It may even have to give up its nuclear dreams for a while. All available resources (human, economic, military) must therefore be mobilised to achieve this strategic aim.

Thus, if we add all the above costs (hundreds of billions of dollars) to the costs of Iran's nuclear programme (which is estimated to have cost well over 100 billion US dollars so far²⁷) and the costs of the sanctions imposed on Iran because of the nuclear programme (which are estimated to be around 100 million US dollars each day²⁸), the burdens on the Iranian economy are enormous.

One indicator of the economic burden is the inflation rate, which has more than tripled from 10 per cent in 2009 to over 30 per cent in 2014 and has increased by

about 10 per cent since the start of the war in Syria.²⁹ Official reports also indicate that Iranian household purchasing power has decreased by about 25 per cent. A price list of basic food items published by BBC Persian in March 2014 showed that consumer prices in Iran had at least tripled in the past four or five years.³⁰ According to the Ministry of the Economy, in July 2014, almost a third of all families in Iran (31 per cent) lived below the poverty line.³¹ Three months before, in March 2014, Iranian MP Mousareza Servati said 15 million Iranians (about 20 per cent of the population) were living below the national poverty line. Seven million of them were not receiving assistance of any kind.³²

Despite Iranian media's celebration of President Hassan Rouhani's economic 'achievements',³³ the reality is that Iran's economic problems are unlikely to go away any time soon unless there are fundamental shifts in its foreign policies. And that is certainly not in the president's power. The same applies to Hezbollah Lebanon.³⁴

In March 2014, *The New York Times* published an article entitled "Hopes fade for surge in the economy."³⁵ The article argued that people in Iran had voted for President Hassan Rouhani in the hope for a revival of the country's ailing economy. But more than six months after he took office, "hopes of a quick economic recovery are fading, while economists say the government is running out of cash."

"On taking office, he discovered that the government's finances were in far worse condition than his predecessor, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, had ever let on. Now, with a lack of petrodollars and declining tax revenues, Mr. Rouhani has little option but to take steps that in the short-run will only increase the pain for the voters who put him into office."³⁶

The article also quotes Saeed Laylaz, an economist and an advisor to President Rouhani, saying Iran is heading to a "black spring" and only a "miracle" could save it from political damage caused by the economic problems. "I am worried we might witness turmoil," he added.

But is it true, as this and other media reports claim, that Iran is so short of cash that the government has "no other option" but to take "painful steps" such as printing money (therefore pushing inflation further up) and cutting

down on public spending? While phasing out energy subsidies, Iran has been sending millions of barrels of oil to Syria at discount prices, paid for by Iranian credit, as indicated above. While winding down social assistance payments to nearly 60 million poor Iranians (about 12

23 'Military expenditure of Iran', SIPRI Military Expenditure Database, <http://milexdata.sipri.org/>.

24 'Are Iranian families earning so little?' (in Persian), *Iranian Economy*, available: <http://tinyurl.com/nl4kugo>. See also: 'Iranian military gets budget increase', IHS Jane's 360, available: <http://www.janes.com/article/31540/iranian-military-gets-budget-increase>.

25 See: <http://tinyurl.com/orlseg8> and <http://tinyurl.com/ooam3k3>.

26 See *Reuter's* three-part investigation into SETAD: <http://www.reuters.com/investigates/iran/#article/part1>; <http://www.reuters.com/investigates/iran/#article/part2>; <http://www.reuters.com/investigates/iran/#article/part3>.

27 See, for example: Ali Vaez and Karim Sadjadpour, *Iran's Nuclear Odyssey: Costs and Risks*, Carnegie, April 2013, available: http://carnegieendowment.org/files/iran_nuclear_odyssey.pdf.

28 David Blair, 'Sanctions costing Iran \$100 million every day', *The Telegraph*, 13 Nov 2012, available: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/iran/9675487/Sanctions-costing-Iran-100-million-every-day.html>. See also: www.al-monitor.com/pulse/business/2013/10/oil-sanction-harm-iran-economy.html. There are no reliable official Iranian figures for the impact of the sanctions on the economy because the Iranian government either denies altogether that the sanctions are having any impact on Iran, or they describe the impact in vague terms, such as "high costs", etc.

29 See: <http://www.tradingeconomics.com/iran/inflation-cpi>. See also: IMF, *Country Report: Iran*, April 2014, available: <http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/scr/2014/cr1493.pdf>.

30 'How expensive have food items been in Iran in the past five years' (in Persian), *BBC Farsi*, 22 March 2014, available: http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/business/2014/03/140322_food_iran_inflation.shtml.

31 'Ministry of Economy: 31% of families below the poverty line' (in Persian), *TA Bank*, 5 July 2014, available: <http://tinyurl.com/k2tc4at>.

32 '15 million people below poverty line in Iran – think government incompetence' (in Persian), *Fars News*, 5 March 2014, available: <http://farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=13921214001320>.

33 e.g. 'Iran puts end to economic stagnation: Rouhani', *Press TV*, 7 September 2014, available: <http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2014/09/07/377945/iran-economic-stagnation-over-rouhani/>.

34 See, for example, Ana Maria Luca, 'The other costs of Hezbollah's Syrian campaign', *Now*, 28 April 2014, available: <https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/reports/features/545007-the-other-costs-of-hezbollahs-syrian-campaign>.

35 Thomas Erdbrink, 'In Iran, Hopes Fade for Surge in the Economy' 20 March 2014, available: <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/21/world/middleeast/cut-in-energy-subsidies-iran.html>.

36 *Ibid.*

US dollars a month), Iran has been sending millions of tonnes of food and cash to Syria. It just doesn't make sense, as more and more Iranians are starting to realise.

It is worth noting that Iranian officials generally tend to avoid blaming the sanctions or Iran's foreign policy for economic hardship, as that might be interpreted as a victory for the West. Instead, they often focus on mismanagement, corruption and 'unwise management'. Not that this is not true too.³⁷

Iran's 'resistance economy'

In February 2014, Ayatollah Khamenei renewed his call to implement a "parallel economic plan" that he had first announced in 2010, which he dubbed "resistance economy."³⁸ Based on the principle "self-sufficiency," the plan is an attempt to thwart the impact of the sanctions. The Supreme Leader promised that his strategy would "lead to welfare and improving the condition of the life of all the people, especially the poor." Except it didn't. Rouhani nonetheless "endorsed" the plan and wrote to various government institutions urging them to implement it.³⁹

Meanwhile, as Iran's economy 'deteriorated' further and the new government proved unable to solve the country's 'chronic' financial problems, Iranian officials seemed to raise the tone of their warnings to the Iranian public that things will only get worse, clearly preparing them for more inflation and more poverty and hardship. Here are a few examples:

- In March 2014, Ali Fallahian, a member of Iran's Assembly of Experts and a former intelligence minister who is most famous for killing Iranian intellectuals in the 1990s, defied the Western sanctions and said, if they got harsher, "we will eat just once a day or fast."⁴⁰
- A few days before, Ali Saidi, Khamenei's representative at Sepah Pasdaran in the Ahwaz region, had said: "We are heading toward many challenges and sanctions, but we are not going to give up what we have achieved with blood only to get some bread. The people of Iran should prepare themselves for more suffering."⁴¹
- In that same month, Iranian state-controlled media published pictures of Ayatollah Khamenei wearing worn-out sandals, in a symbolic message that the Supreme Leader is 'suffering' like poor Iranians and he expects everybody to do the same.⁴²

Update on the economic costs of the war in Syria to Iran and Hezbollah

There is no doubt that the Iranian economy has suffered a great deal over the past year or so as a result of falling oil prices, strict international sanctions and the cost of financing simultaneous military adventures in Syria, Iraq and Yemen. Iranian oil exports have fallen by some 60 percent since 2011, and the country's budget deficit has reached 9 billion US dollars.

According to figures released by the Iranian government in December 2014, when the new budget bill was presented to parliament, the overall state budget for the current Iranian year (beginning 21 March 2015) is 8,379 trillion Iranian rials, or 294 billion US dollars.¹ This means a mere 4 percent growth compared with the previous annual budget. In addition to privatisation and increasing tax revenues, one of the ways through which Hassan Rouhani's government is planning to cut costs is by slashing the budget allocated for cash handouts to poor Iranians by 26 percent.

Yet, the budget allocated to defense and security expenditure will increase by 32 percent to 360 trillion rials (12.6 billion US dollars) compared with the previous budget. Part of this increase has been justified by the government by a 17 percent planned increase in the salaries of civil servants and military personnel.² Another, not-talked-about part is certainly related to Sepah Pasdaran's military adventures in the region.

Iran's financial problems have naturally also affected Hezbollah Lebanon, which receives hundreds of millions of dollars a year from the Iranian regime. From the sudden closure of the English-language edition of *Al-Akhbar* newspaper in March 2015 due to insufficient funds, to cuts in party members' wages and social provisions, such as medical care for fighters' families, Hezbollah too appears to be suffering economically.³

A *Newsweek* article in January 2015 quoted Hezbollah officials and observers close to the party confirming that many such 'austerity measures' have lately been put in place, in addition to delays in paying wages.⁴ Similarly, a *Christian Science Monitor* article, also in January 2015, cited Lebanese sources close to Hezbollah saying the party has halved certain salaries and delayed payments to suppliers of commercial enterprises.⁵

Yet, despite all these difficulties, Hezbollah's military operations in Syria, just like those of Sepah Pasdaran, are unlikely to be affected very much in the short term. One reason for this – in addition to the increase in Iran's defence budget mentioned above – is that a big part of Hezbollah's and Sepah Pasdaran's funding comes not from the regular Iranian state budget but from a separate fund directly overseen by Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, which does not appear in any official fiscal budgets. Khamenei's private fund is mainly propped up by "certain religious associations" other than the official *awqaf*, or *bonyads*, according to Hezbollah's representative in Iran, quoted in an article in *Al-Akhbar* newspaper in July 2012.⁶

Neither is it likely that the Iranian regime will significantly reduce its economic and military support to the Syrian regime for reasons to do solely with economic hardship. In July 2015, Iran provided the Syrian regime with yet another credit line worth one billion US dollars.⁷ According to the Syrian state news agency, SANA, the money would be used for funding imports of goods and commodities and implementing projects, without giving more details.

Some of these projects are likely to be reconstruction projects implemented by Iranian companies and old-new Syrian mafias linked to the inner circle of the regime.⁸ In March 2015, the advisor of Sepah Pasdaran's commander in chief, Gen. Hossein Hamadani, revealed that "a reconstruction Basij", named Jihad al-Bina, had been established in Syria with Iranian assistance.⁹ "The Syrian reconstruction Basij, like its Iranian model, has mobilised the youth and people of Syria to reconstruct the deprived regions and war-stricken areas," Hamadani added.

In January 2015, *Bloomberg* quoted a spokeswoman for the UN special envoy for Syria, Staffan de Mistura, saying the envoy estimates that Iran is spending 6 billion US dollars annually on al-Assad's government.¹⁰ Nadim Shehadeh, the director of the Fares Center for Eastern Mediterranean Studies at Tufts University, is quoted in the same article saying his research shows that Iran spent between \$14 and \$15 billion in military and economic aid to the Damascus regime in 2012 and 2013. A Beirut-based diplomat "with extensive contacts in Syria" was quoted by *The Christian Science Monitor* in January 2015 estimating that Iran funnels between \$1 billion to \$2 billion a month into Syria to keep al-Assad in power.¹¹ Of that, some \$500 million is spent on military assistance, mostly for the Syrian regime militia known as the National Defense Forces, according to the source.¹²

Another reason why Iran's and Hezbollah's military operations in Syria are unlikely to be affected very much in the short term by economic hardship is the expected cash infusion from sanctions relief, as well as an immediate \$30 to \$50 billion bonus, resulting from the nuclear deal between Iran and world powers reached in July 2015.¹³

There is no doubt that a big part of the hundreds of billions of dollars that will be released will be injected into Sepah Pasdaran's coffers and spent on supporting the Assad regime and Hezbollah Lebanon in suppressing the Syrian people, and on destabilising Iraq, Lebanon and Yemen.¹⁴

Indeed, President Bashar al-Assad was among the first to congratulate the Iranian regime the day the Vienna Deal was signed in July 2015 and to voice his confidence that Iran would step up its efforts to "support just causes," suggesting he expects more financial and military aid from his allies in Tehran.¹⁵ In June 2015, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani also said Iran would back the Syrian regime "until the end of the road."¹⁶

Footnotes:

1 See: <http://www.donya-e-eqtesad.com/news/846313/>. For English, see: <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/12/1394-budget-iran-economy.html>.

2 *Ibid.*

37 See, for example, 'President of the illiterate regrets reading critics' (in Persian), *Fars News*, 11 March 2014 <http://farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=13921218001123>.

38 'Resistance Economy: A model inspired by Islamic economic system and an opportunity to realise an economic epic' (in Persian), *Fars News*, 19 February 2014, available: <http://www.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=13921130000154>. For English, see: Bijan Khajehpour, 'Decoding Iran's 'resistance economy'', *Al-Monitor*, 24 February 2014, available: <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/02/decoding-resistance-economy-iran.html>.

39 'Rouhani endorses Ayatollah Khamenei's 'resistance economy'', *Iran Pulse*, 20 February 2014, available: <http://iranpulse.al-monitor.com/index.php/2014/02/3941/rouhani-endorses-ayatollah-khameneis-resistance-economy/>.

40 'Trends of resistance economy to confront the West and the sanctions', (in Persian) *Tasnim News Agency*, 28 March 2014, available: <http://www.tasnimnews.com/Home/Single/323166>.

41 'Representative of Supreme Leader in Sepah in Ahwaz: The Iranian national and leadership are on the side of the oppressed and the barefoot', *Basij Khozestan*, 15 March 2014, available: <http://khozestan.basij.ir/?q=node/3429>.

42 See, for example, <http://farsi.khamenei.ir/photo-album?id=25683#202329>.



Iranian Major-Gen. Qassem Soleimani at the grave of Lebanese Hezbollah commander Jihad Mughnieh who was killed in Syria during an Israeli attack. Screenshot from a film taken in the southern suburbs of Beirut in January 2015. Source: www.youtube.com/watch?v=pY-FObUI3umg



Undated Photo of Iranian Major-Gen. Qassem Soleimani and Lebanese Hezbollah commander Jihad Mughnieh who was killed by an Israeli attack in Syria in January 2015. © FARS News Agency.



A Hezbollah fighter, who was maimed in Syria, listens to a speech of Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah in the southern suburbs of Beirut, 14 June 2014. © AP

3 See, for example, Alex Rowell, 'Hezbollah's fading finances back in spotlight', *Now*, 19 March 2015, available: <https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/reports/features/565008-hezbollahs-fading-finances-back-in-spotlight>.

4 Jeff Neumann, 'Is Hezbollah Going Broke?', *Newsweek*, 15 January 2015, available: <http://www.newsweek.com/2015/01/23/hezbollah-going-broke-299139.html>.

5 Nicholas Blanford, 'How oil price slump is putting a squeeze on Hezbollah, Iran's Shiite ally', *The Christian Science Monitor*, 4 January 2015, available: <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2015/0104/How-oil-price-slump-is-putting-a-squeeze-on-Hezbollah-Iran-s-Shiite-ally>.

6 Amal Saad-Ghorayeb, 'Hezbollah's Iran money trail: It's complicated', *Al-Akhbar*, 31 July 2012, available: <http://english.al-akhbar.com/node/10553>.

7 See: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/07/08/us-mid-east-crisis-syria-iran-idUSKCN0P1RD20150708>.

8 For more on this, see: <http://www.naameshaam.org/report-silent-sectarian-cleansing/5-the-reconstruction-business/>.

9 'Reconstruction Basij formed in Syria' (in Persian), *Khaybar Online*, 2 March 2015, available: <http://goo.gl/THp22i>.

10 Eli Lake, 'Iran Spends Billions to Prop Up Assad', *Bloomberg*, 9 January 2015, available: <http://www.bloombergview.com/articles/2015-06-09/iran-spends-billions-to-prop-up-assad>.

11 Nicholas Blanford, 'How oil price slump is putting a squeeze on Hezbollah', *The Christian Science Monitor*, idem.

12 For a more detailed overview of Iran's expenditure on 'funding terror' in Syria and the wider region, see Naame Shaam's report 'Financing Terror – The economic impact of Iran's nuclear programme and its support to paramilitary groups across the Middle East', December 2015, available: <http://www.naameshaam.org/financing-terror/>.

13 See, for example, http://www.weeklystandard.com/articles/paying-tehran-s-bills_958516.html. See also: <http://fortune.com/2015/04/03/billions-nuclear-deal-iran/>.

14 For more on this, see: <http://www.naameshaam.org/iran-nuclear-deal-misses-opportunity/>.

15 See: <http://news.yahoo.com/iran-deal-heartens-syrias-assad-worries-rebels-140429786.html>.

16 See: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/06/02/us-mid-east-crisis-syria-iran-idUSKBN0OIUF20150602>.

Counting the dead

Chapter I cited many examples of Sepah Pasdaran, Hezbollah Lebanon and Iraqi militia commanders and fighters killed in Syria and the official funerals held for them in Iran, Lebanon and Iraq respectively. A number of websites and blogs have collected pictures and videos of these funerals, along with their owners' names and stories.⁴³

However, most of the Iranian and Lebanese funerals referred to above were for senior Sepah and Hezbollah commanders. Funerals for ordinary fighters were either held in secret or not held at all. This makes the task of assessing Sepah's and Hezbollah's losses in Syria very difficult, if not impossible.

In August 2014, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said it had documented the death of 561 Hezbollah Lebanon fighters in Syria. The number of deaths from other Shia militias documented by the organisation was 1,854.⁴⁴ However, as the report points out, the real figures are likely to be much higher as a result of the secrecy surrounding most of these forces' casualties.

Following the publication of some of the above-referenced reports and the issue of Hezbollah Lebanon's involvement in Syria and its mounting casualties there becoming a hot topic, the party reportedly started to 'bribe' the families of its 'martyrs' – allegedly offering them between 20,000 and 25,000 US dollars, according to some media reports – if they accepted not to announce the death in public and not to hold a public burial ceremony.⁴⁵ Some funerals may have also been kept low-key and not publicised online, making it difficult for outside observers and researchers to document them.⁴⁶

In March 2014, a Lebanese poll found that more than 70 per cent of the 600 participants queried, who were all residents of al-Dahiyeh, Beirut – a Hezbollah stronghold – knew someone (from their family, neighbourhood or village) who had been killed in Syria.⁴⁷ In April 2014, Naame Shaam's correspondent in Beirut conducted a short tour of several predominately Shia districts in the Lebanese capital. In one area alone (near the 'Amiliyeh school), within approximately 20 metres he saw posters of one Amal and three Hezbollah 'martyrs' who had died in Syria.⁴⁸

The number of Hezbollah fighters who have died in Syria since March 2011 is certainly higher than that publicly admitted by the party (a few hundred, at best). In the al-Qusayr battle alone, well over 100 Hezbollah fighters were killed, according to Syria opposition sources, of whom some 100 were confirmed by Hezbollah (see chapter I). In the Yabroud battle, at least as many were killed, if not more.⁴⁹ In one week alone, Hezbollah held an official funeral for 56 of its fighters killed in Yabroud after their bodies were returned to Lebanon.

43 For Iranian casualties, see: Y. Mansharof, 'Despite denials by Iranian regime, statements by Majlis member and reports in Iran indicate involvement of Iranian troops in Syria fighting', The Middle East Media Research Institute, 4 December 2013, available: <http://www.memri.org/report/en/print7623.htm>; Phillip Smyth, 'Iran's Losses In the "35th Province" (Syria), Part 1', *Jihadology*, 14 June 2013, available: <http://jihadology.net/2013/06/14/hizballah-cavalcade-irans-losses-in-the-35th-province-syria-part-1/>.

For Hezbollah Lebanon's casualties, see: 'Pictures of Hezbollah fighters killed in Syria', *Naame Shaam*, 10 February 2014, available: <http://www.naameshaam.org/pictures-of-hezbollah-fighters-killed-in-syria/>; 'How many Hezbollah fighters have died in Syria?', *Naame Shaam*, 16 April 2014, available: <http://www.naameshaam.org/how-many-hezbollah-fighters-have-died-in-syria/>;

For a round-up of Iraqi militants killed in Syria in 2013, see this three-part collection by Phillip Smyth on *Jihadology*: Part 1: <http://jihadology.net/2013/05/11/hizballah-cavalcade-roundup-of-iraqis-killed-in-syria-part-1/>; Part 2: <http://jihadology.net/2013/05/17/hizballah-cavalcade-roundup-of-iraqis-killed-in-syria-part-2/>; Part 3: <http://jihadology.net/2013/06/02/hizballah-cavalcade-roundup-of-iraqis-killed-in-syria-part-3/>.

44 'More than 260 thousand killed and died in Syria since the outbreak of the revolution' (in Arabic), Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, 21 August 2014, available: http://www.syriahr.com/index.php?option=com_news&nid=22274&Itemid=2&task=displaynews#U_ZtKPmSyyE.

45 'Pictures of Hezbollah fighters killed in Syria', *Naame Shaam*, *idem*.

46 See, for example: 'Hezbollah buries its Syria dead in secret' (in Arabic), 12 June 2014, available: http://www.alwatan.com.sa/politics/News_Detail.aspx?ArticleID=191029.

47 Available: <http://www.shiawatch.com/public/uploads/files/%5B-Polling%20Dahiyeh%20-ShiaWatch33%5D.pdf.pdf>.

48 'Posters of Hezbollah's Syria 'martyrs' fill Beirut streets', *Naame Shaam*, 29 April 2014, available: <http://www.naameshaam.org/posters-of-hezbollahs-syria-martyrs-fill-beirut-streets/>.

49 See, for example: <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2014/Mar-10/249775-drastric-rise-in-hezbollah-death-toll-as-party-battles-for-yabroud.ashx#axzz3CxIOChUV>; <http://tinyurl.com/kyxerbj>; <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Security-Watch/2014/0313/Fighting-for-Assad-Hezbollah-buries-its-own>.



Moreover, many corpses were not retrieved, according to Syrian and Lebanese sources.⁵⁰ In April 2014, a Free Syrian Army commander was quoted by *Al-Hayat* newspaper saying: "A big number of [corpses of] Hezbollah members who were killed in al-Qusayr are still in corpse refrigerators and Hezbollah cannot take them out. It is important to distinguish between the Shia and Hezbollah, because many honourable [Shiites] are opposed to Hezbollah and strongly refuse to send their sons to participate in the killing of the Syrian people. So the party [Hezbollah] has found itself in a trap. Families [of martyrs] are told their sons are in Southern Lebanon, at the border with Israel. That's why there are more than 175 corpses in refrigerators in Hasbaya since the Qusayr battle, and the party cannot tell their families about them."⁵¹



Both Sepah Pasdaran and Hezbollah Lebanon have been very cagey about their casualties in Syria, right from the start. Both have been doing all they can to keep this information hidden from the public because it could show how heavily involved they are in the war there. It would also reveal how much they are losing, which could be damaging to the morale of their supporters. Suppressing such evidence is a classic war tactic aimed at avoiding public pressure demanding to 'bring the boys back home' before they too die out there.

Update on Iranian and Hezbollah casualties in Syria

The number of Iranian and Hezbollah casualties in Syria remains a subject of dispute. Syrian opposition sources sometimes exaggerate the figures, while Iranian and Hezbollah officials and media outlets deny or downplay reports about their casualties in Syria. This denial, which sometimes amounts to outright lies, is partly due to Sepah Pasdaran's and Hezbollah's attempts to conceal or obscure the numbers of fighters deployed in Syria, and partly due to attempts to understate their casualties so as not to lower their supporters' morales. But the increasing number of Sepah Pasdaran and Hezbollah fighters deployed in Syria over the past year, and the more prominent role they have been playing in key battles, has naturally meant that their casualties are also rising.

Sepah Pasdaran's casualties

In late June 2015, the official Iranian news agency IRNA noted in a photo caption that 400 funerals had been held in Iran for "martyred defenders of the Sayyeda Zaynab

Naame Shaam activists held a demonstration in Berlin on 8 April 2014 against the Iranian regime's involvement in Syria. They demanded that Sepah Pasdaran and Hezbollah Lebanon pull out all of their fighters from the war-torn country. The activists held banners which read, "Syria is the Vietnam of Iran – Pasdaran and Hezbollah out of Syria now!" The peaceful protest took place outside a hotel where Mohammad Reza Nematzadeh, the Iranian Minister of Industry, Mines and Trade, along with other Iranian officials were attending a conference with German business representatives.

<<http://www.naameshaam.org/activists-protest-irans-involvement-in-syria-as-iranian-minister-attends-business-conference-in-berlin/>>

On the eve of the Syrian presidential elections, *Naame Shaam* activists staged a mock 'election rally' on 2 June 2014 in front of the Iranian embassy in London to highlight the role of Iran in fuelling the Syrian conflict. They mocked the upcoming elections by calling for the commander-in-chief of Sepah Qods, Gen. Qassem Soleimani, to be designated as President of Syria, and Syria's current President, Bashar al-Assad, as his deputy.

<<http://www.naameshaam.org/iranian-activists-stage-mock-syrian-election-rally-outside-london-embassy-to-highlight-irans-interference-in-syrian-conflict/>>

shrine” killed in Syria, of whom 56 were Iranians and the rest Afghani Shia fighters.¹ A couple of weeks before, Hossein Mashreghian, a member of the organisation formed to celebrate ‘shrine defender martyrs’, was quoted by Iranian media saying 52 shrine defender martyrs had been buried in Qom thus far, with another two to be buried soon, while five bodies had not been retrieved from the battlefield. Thus, “altogether 59 shrine defender martyrs have come from Qom,” he added.²

Around the same time, footage of the bodies of 65 Iranian and Afghan fighters killed in southern Syria, which were exchanged for 24 Syrian opposition prisoners of war held by the Syrian regime, was also broadcast by Iranian media.³ In late November 2015, a senior Sepah Qods advisor, General Hassan Karimpour, said in a speech in Rafsanjan that “180 Shia Iranians have been martyred in Syria.”⁴

But these rare admissions appear to significantly understate the actual numbers of Iranian casualties in Syria. A survey by *The Washington Institute* of funerals held in Iran for Shia fighters killed in Syria, published in August 2015, documents the cases of 113 Iranians, 121 Afghans and 20 Pakistanis killed in Syria since January 2013 and buried in Iran.⁵ Breaking down the casualties by the Sepah Pasdaran branch they served in, 8 of the Iranian ‘martyrs’ were identified as members of Sepah Qods, 8 served in Sepah’s Ground Forces, while 3 served in the Basij force. Funeral photos and online biographical material suggest that the remaining 94 were active-duty Sepah Pasdaran members as well, though the branch in which they had served is not known.

In contrast to the Afghan and Pakistani Shia fighters killed in Syria, most of whom appear to have served as foot soldiers, the 113 Iranians include 10 who were commemorated as *sardar*, a Persian word that refers to a high military rank equivalent to general. Judging by readers’ comments on the websites commemorating them, the study notes, most of the Iranian casualties appear to have been technical advisors, combat advisors, trainers, combat personnel (including one tank driver), special operations forces, intelligence officers, and even journalists and filmmakers.

Significantly, the study says that published accounts since July 2014 indicate an increasing number of casualties from Sepah Pasdaran’s Ground Forces. This is clear

when analysing their place of burial in Iran, according to the survey: Sepah Qods members are recruited from all over the country and are buried individually in their native province, while the Ground Forces are organised according to the country’s administrative divisions, with a local Sepah Pasdaran unit serving each province. Thus, mass funeral services in one province indicate that a Ground Forces unit from that province had been sent to Syria.

Naame Shaam has separately documented many of these funerals. The names of over 200 Sepah Pasdaran and Basij fighters and commanders killed in Syria and buried in Iran since the beginning of 2012 are produced in Appendix 1, along with the dates and places of their burial. A report by Ali Alfoneh, a senior fellow at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, who is also the author of *The Washington Institute* report mentioned above, prepared for the US Congress Foreign Affairs Committee in December 2015, gives a similar figure (201) over the same period of time.⁶

While funerals may be a good way of assessing Sepah Pasdaran’s casualties in Syria – especially that the Iranian regime and the media outlets affiliated with it appear to have become more open about such events in recent months – they are by no means conclusive as funerals may not be held, or they may be held secretly and not reported by the media. For instance, as mentioned in Chapter I, the number of Sepah Pasdaran members killed in an Israeli air strike on an Iranian-Hezbollah convoy near al-Qunaytira on 18 January 2015 was six according to some media reports, but only the name of General Mohammad Ali Allahdadi was mentioned in official Iranian statements.

Hezbollah Lebanon’s casualties

Like Sepah Pasdarn, Hezbollah too has been cagey about its casualties, despite a growing number of reports on this issue emerging since the first edition of this report was published. The reason, according to a social worker

50 ‘Hezbollah’s and regime’s dead in Yabroud number in tens and bodies have not been retrieved yet’ (in Arabic), *CNN Arabic*, 15 March 2014, available: <http://arabic.cnn.com/middleeast/2014/03/15/syria-ghozlan>.

51 ‘Abu Uday: ISIS is selling grains to the regime while people are starving.. and we have infiltrated Hezbollah’ (in Arabic), *Al-Hayat*, 28 April 2014, available: <http://tinyurl.com/pneorf2>.

“on good terms with Hezbollah circles” quoted by a Lebanese website in October 2014, is “to do with keeping the morales of fighters and their families high.”⁷ The unnamed source adds that “there is not a single [Shia] village in the South [of Lebanon] that does not have at least a martyr or two if it is a small village (less than 5,000 inhabitants). For larger villages and towns, the number easily rises to 4 or 5 martyrs.” There are around 300 Shia villages and towns in southern Lebanon, not to mention the Hezbollah strongholds in the upper Bekaa valley and the southern suburb of Beirut known as *al-Dahiyeh*.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights has documented the death of 903 Hezbollah fighters in Syria until 5 August 2015.⁸ Prior to the recent battles in al-Zabadani and al-Qalamon (see Chapter I), the figure was around 700. Other observers have reported slightly higher numbers. In October 2014, a Lebanese website estimated Hezbollah’s casualties in Syria to be 840 dead and some 2,400 injured.⁹ The latter estimates were said to be based on information provided by sources within Hezbollah’s own ‘War Ambulance Service’ and ‘Islamic Healthcare Commission’.

On 16 May 2015, Hezbollah’s leader Hassan Nasrallah claimed that only 13 of his fighters had been killed in the Qalamon battles over the previous two weeks.¹⁰ A pro-Hezbollah website listed 47 Hezbollah casualties in al-Qalamon in May and 30 in June 2015.¹¹ But the figures have been widely disputed by many observers. For instance, on 20 April, Lebanese daily *Annahar* published a list of names of 23 Hezbollah fighters killed in the battle, which is 10 casualties more than the 13 claimed by Nasrallah.¹² Similarly, *Al-Arabiya* published a report on 30 July 2015 claiming that 200 Hezbollah fighters had been killed in the Zabadani battles in 26 days alone.¹³

Even Iranian state-controlled media have reported higher figures than Hezbollah’s ones. In August 2015, an Iranian website said the number of Hezbollah’s ‘martyrs’ in July was 37, most of whom had been killed in al-Zabadani. In the three months of May to July 2015, the report added, 108 Hezbollah members died in different parts of Syria, and the total number of Hezbollah’s ‘martyrs’ in Syria since the war started “probably mounts to 800 or 900.”¹⁴

Similar media wars took place around Hezbollah’s casualties in southern Syria (Daraa and al-Qunaytira) in February 2015, when Syrian opposition sources estimated

Hezbollah’s casualties there to be somewhere between 60 and 80 fighters.¹⁵ Many were reportedly transported back to Lebanon via Beirut airport.¹⁶ Other bodies are allegedly kept in fridges or reported as ‘traffic accidents’.¹⁷

So, taking the above-mentioned Syrian Observatory for Human Rights figure as a basis, the number of Hezbollah Lebanon’s casualties in Syria would have now reached at least 1,000 in the most conservative estimates. This is close to the 1,284 fighters that the group lost over 18 years of Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon (1982–2000).¹⁸

Hezbollah’s rising death toll may not represent a “crippling blow” for the group, but it does “underscore the rising costs of an open-ended campaign [in support of] a regime that is gradually losing ground,” in the words of one commentator.¹⁹ And this should come as no surprise as Hezbollah has been increasingly playing a leading role in the fight against Syrian rebels, while the faltering Syrian regime forces are at best playing a supporting role. The ongoing battles in al-Qalamon and the South are two clear examples of this.

Hezbollah ‘overstretched’ in Syria

To make up for its growing losses, Hezbollah has recently intensified its recruitment efforts among the Lebanese Shia and non-Shia communities alike. In October 2014, a Lebanese website revealed that many Shia employees in a number of companies and institutions in Lebanon were resigning or taking long-term ‘vacations’ to join the fight in Syria as part of a general mobilisation by Hezbollah.²⁰ In May 2015, another Lebanese website reported that many Lebanese Shia students were being drafted by Hezbollah to go and fight in Syria.²¹ These recruitment efforts have been so intensive that a Lebanese military source was quoted by *Al-Monitor* in May 2015 saying the number of Hezbollah fighters in Syria “has doubled since 2013” and that the group is in fact “becoming bigger.”²²

However, it is also an indicator that Hezbollah is increasingly overstretched in Syria that the group has been reportedly drafting ever younger conscripts. In April 2015, a public funeral was held for a 15-year-old Hezbollah fighter who died while performing his “jihad duty” in Syria.²³ The following month, in May 2015, another young Hezbollah fighter, aged 16, was also killed in Syria.²⁴ In July 2015, media reports claimed Hezbollah arrested

175 of its own members for refusing to go and fight in al-Zabadani after it emerged that 120 of its fighters had been killed there.²⁵

These developments, coupled with the growing numbers of ‘martyrs’ dying in al-Qalamon and the South, have led to what appears to be a growing state of resentment and anger within the Shia community in Lebanon. In July 2015, a number of Hezbollah MP’s reportedly threatened, during a closed meeting with Hassan Nasrallah, to resign if Hezbollah’s leadership did not stop sending its members to “the Syrian swamp.”²⁶ One MP, Nawwaf al-Mousawi, apparently said: “Everyday we lose between 8 and 10 martyrs. Until when can we endure this situation?” In response, Nasrallah allegedly promised to scale down the group’s involvement in battles in Syria after they are “done with al-Zabadani.” He also promised to “ask Iran” to send more fighters from elsewhere to support Hezbollah fighters in Syria.

A couple of days later, Lebanese Shia mothers, whose sons had died in Syria, were reportedly planning to form a delegation and “visit” Nasrallah to “protest against the deaths in Syria.”²⁷ The month before, in June 2015, a group of Shia clerics, activists and intellectuals publicly rejected Nasrallah’s strategy in Syria, saying their loyalties lie with Lebanon and the Lebanese Army rather than Hezbollah.²⁸ One of the key speakers at the rally, Sheikh Abbas al-Jawhari, said no Lebanese party should be fighting in Syria. Even the euphoria that followed the nuclear deal between Iran and world powers did not manage to overshadow this growing resentment.²⁹

In July 2015, Lebanese NGO Hayya Bina published the results of a survey of the Shia communities in Lebanon about Hezbollah’s involvement in Syria and its impact on the Shia of Lebanon.³⁰ 81.3 percent of Lebanon’s Shia think “things are moving in the wrong direction,” according to the study, yet 78.7 percent nevertheless support Hezbollah’s involvement in Syria and 57.2 percent consider the takfiri threat to be “the most important issue facing the community.” More than half of the 1,000 respondents surveyed (53.2 percent) said they knew someone from their neighborhood, village or family who had been killed in Syria. In other words, many Lebanese Shia may not be happy with what Hezbollah is doing in Syria, but they nevertheless feel safer and more protected under its wings, regardless of how delusional this may be.³¹

New rhetoric

Faced with growing resentment and criticism, both inside and outside the party, Hezbollah appears to have become more aggressive towards its critics, accusing them of being “American embassy agents,” “traitors,” “stupid” and such like.³²

More importantly, to justify their continued involvement in the ‘Syrian swamp’ and to be able to recruit more supporters and fighters, Hezbollah and the Iranian regime appear to have adopted a new rhetoric and a new *raison d’être* other than ‘resistance against Israel’, namely, fighting Sunni ‘takfiris’ and ‘terrorists’.

Iranian and Hezbollah mourners at funerals now typically follow the traditional chants of “Death to Israel” and “Death to America” with “Death to the takfiris.”³³ In an interview with the Lebanese newspaper *Al-Safir* in April 2014, Nasrallah said the “takfiri threat and the Israeli threat go hand in hand.”³⁴ In another televised speech in July 2014, he described Daesh as “an existential threat” to Lebanon and the region.³⁵

In an interview with Hezbollah’s *al-Manar* TV channel on 25 August 2015, Syrian president Bashar al-Assad echoed the same idea: “Today, the main Israeli tool that is more important than [Israel’s strikes on Syrian territory] is the terrorists in Syria, meaning that what they do is much more dangerous than what Israel does from time to time to support them. They are the basis of the problem. So, if we want to confront Israel, first we have to confront its tools within Syria.”³⁶

Whatever the Iranian regime and Hezbollah may say to appease or scare their supporters, the reality is that their ‘Syrian Vietnam’ is becoming more and more costly by the day. As one commentator put it, Iran and Hezbollah are “plung[ing] ever deeper into a potential quagmire.”³⁷

Footnotes:

1 The original report appears to have been removed from IRNA’s website. However, a screenshot of it is available at: <http://goo.gl/X9iyyd>. For English, see: ‘Iran admits to 400 funerals for Syria fighters’, *The Daily Star Lebanon*, 30 June 2015, available: <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Middle-East/2015/Jun-30/304390-iran-admits-to-400-funerals-for-syria-fighters.ashx>.

- 2** 'A ceremony to honor the innocent martyrs of the front of honor and manhood' (in Persian), *Fars News*, 13 June 2015, available: <http://www.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=13940323000170>.
- 3** See, for example, <http://alef.ir/vdccoeqis2bqmx8.ala2.html?276091> and <http://news.gooya.com/politics/archives/2015/06/198291.php>.
- 4** 'Sepah Qods advisor: Iran has 14 underground missile depots / 180 Iranians killed in Syria' (in Persian), *Asr Iran*, 26 November 2015, available: <http://goo.gl/eFxCLi>.
- 5** Ali Alfoneh, 'Shiite combat casualties show the depth of Iran's involvement in Syria', *The Washington Institute*, 3 August 2015, available: <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/shiite-combat-casualties-show-the-depth-of-irans-involvement-in-syria>.
- 6** Available: http://www.defenddemocracy.org/content/uploads/documents/Iran_and_the_IRGC_Fueling_Conflict_in_the_Middle_East.pdf.
- 7** 'Hezbollah's dead and wounded: 4,000 or 8,000?' (in Arabic), *Janoubia*, 12 October 2014, available: <http://goo.gl/8qixkl>.
- 8** See: <http://www.syriahr.com/en/2015/08/more-than-330000-people-die-while-about-1300000-wounded-and-displaced-since-the-beginning-of-syrian-revolution/>.
- 9** 'Hezbollah's dead and wounded: 4,000 or 8,000?', *Janoubia*, *idem*. See also this report by the same website from November 2014: <http://goo.gl/NsrWVt>.
- 10** See: <http://www.lebanondebate.com/details.aspx?id=204516>.
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- 12** See: <http://goo.gl/wbefAK>.
- 13** See: <http://ara.tv/pvx4b>. See also <https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/reportsfeatures/565601-the-fight-for-zabadani>.
- 14** 'What is the number of Hezbollah Lebanon's martyrs in the Syria war' (in Persian), *Parsine*, 2 August 2015, available: <http://goo.gl/YRhRWY>.
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- 16** *Ibid*.
- 17** See, for example, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/afghan-mercenaries-fighting-for-assad-and-stuck-in-syria-a-1032869.html>.
- 18** Nicholas Blanford, 'Syria as Vietnam? Why the war could be making Hezbollah stronger', *The Christian Science Monitor*, 12 March 2015, available: <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2015/0312/Syria-as-Vietnam-Why-the-war-could-be-making-Hezbollah-stronger.-video>. See also: Dan De Luce, 'Syrian war takes rising toll on Hezbollah', *Foreign Policy*, 9 July 2015, available: <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/07/09/syrian-war-takes-rising-toll-on-hezbollah/>.
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- 22** Ali Hashem, 'Iran's new strategy in Syria', *Al-Monitor*, 13 May 2015, available: <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/05/iran-new-syria-strategy.html#ixzz3h15czbif>.
- 23** See: <http://www.almanar.com.lb/adetails.php?eid=1181024>. For English, see: <https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/NewsReports/565198-hezbollah-mourns-child-soldier>.
- 24** See: <http://goo.gl/Aq0v8M>.
- 25** See: <http://www.lebanonfiles.com/news/911613>. See also: <http://www.lebanondebate.com/news/211594>.
- 26** 'Screams against the death bill inside a Hezbollah meeting' (in Arabic), *Lebanon Debate*, 11 July 2015, available: <http://www.lebanondebate.com/details.aspx?id=210342>.
- 27** See: <http://goo.gl/WvOH9a>.
- 28** See: <http://yalibnan.com/2015/06/21/2-more-hezbollah-fighters-killed-in-syria-while-defending-the-assad-regime/>.
- 29** See, for example, these two articles in Arabic published by *Janoubia*: <http://goo.gl/U2bnlJ> and <http://goo.gl/LZPGFd>.
- 30** Available: <http://www.shiawatch.com/article/623>.
- 31** For more on this issue, see, for example, these two articles in Arabic: <http://goo.gl/1HW4YE> and <https://goo.gl/X4IV44>. See also this article by Ziad Majed: <http://studies.aljazeera.net/reports/2015/06/20156119735796704.htm>, and this one in English by Nicholas Saidel: <https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/commentary/564733-ten-reasons-hezbollah-should-be-worried>.
- 32** See, for example, <https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/commentary/565328-further-militarization-of-lebanese-shiites> and <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/views/news/middle-east/2015/05/24/Nasrallah-to-his-Shiite-rivals-You-are-morons-and-traitors-.html>.
- 33** Ben Hubbard, 'Syrian fighting gives Hezbollah new but diffuse purpose', *The New York Times*, 20 May 2014, available: <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/21/world/middleeast/syrian-fighting-gives-hezbollah-new-but-diffuse-purpose.html>. See also this al-Jazeera debate in Arabic about the same issue: <http://goo.gl/VVW1el>.
- 34** See: <http://assafir.com/Article/129/345538>.
- 35** See: <http://english.al-akhbar.com/node/21153>.
- 36** See: <http://syriatimes.sy/index.php/interviews/19297-president-bashar-al-assad-s-al-manar-august-25-2015-interview>.
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New – Case study: Aleppo, the ‘graveyard’ of Iranian commanders

Following the death of Brigadier-General Hossein Hamedani near Aleppo on 8 October 2015 (see chapter I), several other Iranian high-ranking commanders were killed in battle around the city’s countryside during the same month.

Gen. Farshad Hassounizadeh, the former commander of the Saber Brigade, a Special Forces unit within Sepah Pasdaran, was killed on 12 October 2015, according to an Iranian pro-regime journalist based in Syria.¹ Alongside Hassounizadeh, Colonel Haj Hamid Mokhtarband, the former chief-of-staff of the First Imam Mahdi Brigade in Ahvaz, was also killed.²

A few days later, on 18 October, Iranian media reported the death of Colonel Moslem Khizab.³ While Iranian state-controlled media repeated the usual obscure line of “martyred in Syria while defending the shrine,” Syrian opposition sources said Khizab was killed during battles in the southern countryside of Aleppo.⁴ Khizab was reportedly the commander of the Ya Zahraa battalion of the Imam Hossein Division of Sepah Pasdaran. According to media reports, he was the fifth senior Iranian commander, out of 21 Iranian casualties, to have died in Syria within two weeks.⁵

In addition to Sepah Pasdaran commanders, a number of Basij and militia commanders were also killed in the Aleppo battles in October and November 2015. These include Rasoul Pourmorad, a commander of the Bassij force in Qazvin, who died on 14 October. On 22 October, a senior commander and a founding member of the Afghan Fatemiyoun Brigade, Brigadier-General Reza Khavari, was killed near Aleppo.⁶ A day later, another founding member of Fatemiyoun was killed. Mostafa Sadrzadeh, AKA Seyyed Ebrahim, was the commander of the Ammar Battalion of the Fatemiyoun Brigade.⁷

Tens of less senior commanders and fighters were also killed near Aleppo during the same period. For example, on 8 October, *Fars News* published the pictures of five Sepah Pasdaran fighters, including one commander (Major Mosa Jamshidian), who had been killed in Syria.⁸ On 24 October, the same news agency reported the death of Milad Mostafavi during fighting in Aleppo. On 26 October, it reported the death of two other Sepah Pasdaran members, Sajjad Tahernia and Ruhollah Emadi.⁹

Other deaths that have particularly caught the media’s attention were those of members of Sepah Ansar, a special force charged with the protection of senior Iranian officials. On 23 October, Iranian media reported the death of two members of the force in Aleppo, including Abdollah Bagheri, a former bodyguard of former President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.¹⁰ The other one was named as Amin Karimi.¹¹ Bagheri and Karimi were likely accompanying some senior Iranian commander(s) in the area.

It is difficult to independently confirm the exact number of Iranian commanders and fighters killed in Aleppo in October and November 2015. But they are certainly significantly higher than before.

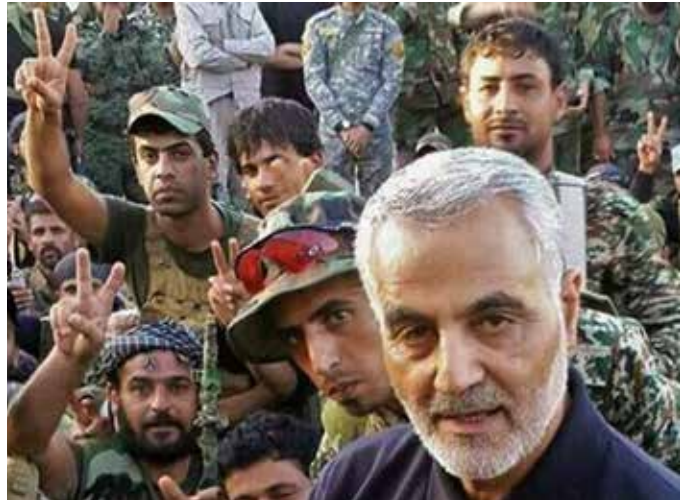
For instance, *Fars News* reported on 23 October that seven Sepah members, mostly from Sepah Ansar, were killed in Syria in the previous two days alone.¹² A state-run website called *Asr Iran* reported the death of 15 Sepah Pasdaran members in Syria on 22 October. The force denied the report and its public relations desk claimed only eight members had been killed in the whole of Syria in recent days.¹³

But Sepah Pasdaran is known to downplay its Syria casualties and give misleading figures. Sources in Hezbollah Lebanon, quoted by the Italian news agency AKI in early November 2015, claimed that Iran has lost “60 high-ranking generals” since the war started four and a half years ago.¹⁴ Of these, the sources added, Tehran has only officially admitted to 18 who were “close to the Iranian spiritual leadership.”

In any case, as numerous observers and commentators have noted, “Iran can no longer downplay its intervention in Syria’s civil war; there are too many public funerals these days.”¹⁵

Why so many?

In early October 2015, Iranian-led troops and militias, backed by Russian air strikes, launched a major offensive aimed at regaining territory from Daesh, al-Nusra Front and Syrian rebel factions in the northern parts of Syria, particularly in Hama’s northern countryside and Aleppo’s southern countryside.¹⁶ Hundreds of Sepah Pasdaran fighters had arrived with their weapons in the country over the previous 10 days to join the major ground offensive, according to two Lebanese sources quoted by *Reuters*.¹⁷



Major-Gen. Qassem Soleimani in the Aleppo region, autumn 2015.

Sources:

<https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/NewsReports/566069-irans-soleimani-allegedly-in-aleppo>, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RRs-bESNr0y8> and <http://khabaronline.ir/detail/467797>

“The vanguard of Iranian ground forces began arriving in Syria,” one of the sources said. “Soldiers and officers specifically to participate in this battle. They are not advisers... we mean hundreds with equipment and weapons. They will be followed by more.” In an interview with *The Guardian* during a visit to London on 20 October, Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister, Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, admitted that Iran had boosted the number of “military advisers” it has sent to Syria.¹⁸ A few days later, Sepah Pasdaran’s Deputy Commander, Brig. Gen. Hossein Salami, was quoted by the media saying Iran “is increasing the quality and quantity of its presence in Syria.”¹⁹

After Hamedani’s death, Operation Greater Aleppo was renamed Operation Hard Revenge, in a clear indication of who is in charge of the Syrian regime’s military oper-

ations.²⁰ The locations (on at least three different fronts) and the manner (in battle or from bombs or gunshots) in which the above Iranian generals and fighters died further indicate that Sepah Pasdaran is not only directing, but actually fighting these battles on behalf of the Assad regime. This obviously goes against the Iranian regime’s claims that it is only playing an ‘advisory’ role in Syria.

Media reports also claimed at the time that Gen. Qassem Soleimani had arrived in Syria to lead the new Aleppo offensive.²¹ A video posted on YouTube around the same time shows Soleimani addressing a crowd of Hezbollah and Sepah Pasdaran fighters, with a uniformed man with a Lebanese accent pledging allegiance to the Imam Khamenei in front of the Iranian general.²²

Two Hezbollah prisoners of war captured by al-Nusra Front in the Aleppo countryside told a Syrian opposition TV channel in November 2015 that directing the military operations in the southern countryside of Aleppo was “totally in the hands of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards,” who “employ Iraqi, Afghan and Hezbollah [militiamen].”²³ The Syrian military presence, they added, was “very, very little. There are some Syrian soldiers only at some checkpoints. On the ground and in the battlefield, there aren’t any.”

“The Iranians don’t trust anyone,” one of them adds. “They are in charge of the operation and directing it, and don’t allow anyone else to interfere. Everyone else just gets orders from them.”

The increase in the number of Sepah Pasdaran commanders and fighters deployed to the Aleppo front in October 2015, and the leading role they have taken on in this battle, seem to explain the increased number of their casualties. However, another factor may be the increased military support provided to Syrian rebels by the US, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey in the wake of the Russian military intervention in late September 2015 (See below for more on this).

Sources in Hezbollah Lebanon, quoted by the Italian news agency AKI in early November 2015, add another interesting angle. The reason for the high number of Iranian casualties is “the weakness of the Syrian army and the diversity of the militias, and the latter not sticking to the [military] plans devised by the Iranians in collaboration with high-ranking Syrian army officers.”²⁴ The high number of Iranian generals dying in Syria, the sources add, has led Iran to “decrease the number of high-ranking generals and increase the number of lower-ranking ones.”

If true, this may in fact lead to further military losses suffered by Iranian troops and militias as the quality of their military plans and conduct will presumably decline even further.

‘Debate’ at home

The increasing number of senior Iranian commanders killed in Syria seems to have sparked a rare public debate back home, with many questioning the Iranian regime’s efforts to prop up the Assad regime. According to *The Daily Star Lebanon*, the mounting death toll has

for the first time led some people in Iran to openly question the country’s four-year involvement in Syria, with concerns aired on social media.²⁵

Meanwhile, the Persian-language opposition website *Zamaneh* launched a special page entitled “War in the Region and Iran’s Share of Responsibility,” where it collected quotes and statements from by Iranian intellectuals and celebrities expressing their concern and opposition to the Iranian role in the war in Syria.²⁶ Similar initiatives and online campaigns have also been launched by Iranian activists on social media, including a Facebook page called “Iranians for Syria” and an online campaign titled “Sorry Syria”.²⁷

It took almost five years of bloodshed in Syria for a public debate in Iran to start and for Iranian intellectuals and celebrities to start openly stating their opposition to what the Iranian regime is doing in Syria. But as the proverb goes, it’s better late than never.

Footnotes:

1 See <http://goo.gl/nu1tfY>.

2 See: <http://goo.gl/nWgqrx>.

3 <http://www.defapress.ir/Fa/News/55462>.

4 See, for example, <http://www.enabbaladi.org/archives/49218>.

5 *Ibid*.

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19 See, for example, <http://edition.cnn.com/2015/10/27/middleeast/iran-syria-troop-buildup/>.

20 See, for example, <http://goo.gl/bnyHhp>.

21 See, for example, <https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/NewsReports/566069-irans-soleimani-allegedly-in-aleppo>. See also this picture of Soleimani in Syria from around the same time: <http://khabaronline.ir/detail/467797>.

22 Available: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RRs-bESNr0y8>.

23 Available: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vJL-cLNKh24>.

24 See: <http://www1.adnkronos.com/AKI/Arabic/Security/?id=3.2.1603817744>.

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Bleeding Iran in Syria

In the wake of the Ghouta chemical massacre in August 2013, US President Barack Obama threatened to use military force to punish the Syrian regime for crossing his famous 'red line', only to seize on an offer by Russia whereby Syria would dismantle and surrender its chemical weapons stockpile to avoid the attack. The deal surprised and disappointed many people around the world. Yet, portraying Obama as a reluctant, indecisive president who is lacking a strategy on Syria, as numerous media reports and commentaries have been doing, seems to miss an important point.

It may be true that the US and its Western allies have so far not been willing to intervene in Syria in any decisive manner. But that has not been out of indecisiveness. Rather, Obama and his team appear to have adopted a policy of 'slowly bleeding Iran and Hezbollah in Syria' – that is, arming Syrian rebels just enough not to lose the war, but not to win either. A prolonged fight in Syria, according to this rationale, would not only weaken the Syrian army so that it is no longer a threat to Israel, both directly and indirectly, it would also significantly weaken the Iranian regime and Hezbollah Lebanon. Coupled with prolonged economic sanctions against Iran, this may eventually lead to the collapse of the Iranian regime, or at least weaken it to the point that it is no longer a threat and can be easily forced to comply with US agendas.

A report by *The New York Times* from October 2013, based on interviews with dozens of current and former members of the US administration, foreign diplomats and Congressmen, sheds some light on the reasoning behind the Obama administration's position on Syria.⁵² According to the report, three of Obama's closest aides, who are said to have his ear on Syria, are all against direct military intervention in the country: Denis McDonough, the White House chief of staff and a former deputy national security adviser, Tom Donilon, Obama's former national security adviser, and Susan Rice, the US ambassador to the United Nations.

During a day trip with a group of senior lawmakers to the Guantánamo Bay naval base in early June 2013, McDonough reportedly argued that the status quo in Syria could "keep Iran pinned down for years." In later discussions, he also suggested that a fight in Syria between Hezbollah and al-Qaeda would "work to America's advantage." The following month, Obama asked Rice, who had succeeded Donilon as national security adviser, to undertake a review of American policy in the Middle East and North Africa and to "make Syria part of a broader strategy involving both Iran and the Middle East peace process."

The strategy was made clear by President Obama himself during a long interview about Israel and Palestine in March 2014:

"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. The Russians find their one friend in the region in rubble and delegitimized."⁵³

As a number of commentators observed at the time, the implication here is that Obama and his team "could be seeking to intentionally prolong the war, despite the catastrophic scale of the death and destruction that is taking place as a result, because it is bad for Iran and Russia."⁵⁴

The President even "rebuffed" a detailed plan, presented to him in summer 2012 by then Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and then CIA Director David Petraeus, to arm and train Syrian rebels.⁵⁵ After Petraeus resigned, his successor Michael J. Morell renewed his predecessor's pitch to arm the rebels; Obama was still not convinced, despite new intelligence assessments warning that Syrian regime forces and militias were gaining the upper hand in the war, thanks largely to Iranian munitions shipments that had "replenished the stocks of [Syrian] army units," while the rebels were running out of ammunition and supplies.

By now, the debate had "shifted from whether to arm Syrian rebels to how to do it," according to the above-mentioned New York Times article. So Obama decided to make the rebel training programme a "covert action" run by the CIA rather than the Pentagon. He reportedly signed a secret order allowing the agency to begin preparing to train and arm "small groups of rebels in Jordan." Meanwhile, the Iranian regime continued to step up its military support to the Syrian regime, and Hezbollah Lebanon and Iraqi militias were "taking root" in Syria, as the CIA assessment presented to the President put it.⁵⁶

In June 2014, Obama claimed that the existence of a moderate Syrian force that was able to defeat al-Assad was "simply not true." The idea that they would suddenly be able to defeat "not only al-Assad but also highly trained jihadists" if the US "just sent them a few arms" was "a fantasy," he added.⁵⁷ In a longer interview in August 2014, Obama defended his position on Syria and repeated his 'fantasy' line, adding,

"This idea that we could provide some light arms or even more sophisticated arms to what was essentially an opposition made up of former doctors, farmers, pharmacists and so forth, and that they were going to be able to battle not only a well-armed state but also a well-armed state backed by Russia, backed by Iran, a battle-hardened Hezbollah, that was never in the cards."⁵⁸

Syrian rebels and opposition groups were clearly offended and disappointed by the US President's remarks. A spokesman for the Syrian opposition's National Coalition said Obama's statement was "meant to cover up the inability of his administration to prevent the deterioration of the political and humanitarian situation in the Levant, and to evade the growing criticism of his policies regarding the Syrian crisis."⁵⁹

Many also disagreed with the President's logic, including US presidential hopeful Hillary Clinton. In an interview with *The Atlantic* in August 2014, she said:

⁵² Mark Mazzetti, Robert f. Worth and Michael r. Gordon, 'Obama's uncertain path amid Syria bloodshed', *The New York Times*, 22 October 2013, available: <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/23/world/middleeast/obamas-uncertain-path-amid-syria-bloodshed.html>.

⁵³ Jeffrey Goldberg, 'Obama to Israel - Time is running out', *Bloomberg View*, 2 March 2014, available: <http://www.bloomberg-view.com/articles/2014-03-02/obama-to-israel-time-is-running-out>.

⁵⁴ Omar Ghabra, 'Is Washington purposely bleeding Syria?', *The Nation*, 25 April 2014, available: <http://m.thenation.com/article/179545-washington-purposely-bleeding-syria>.

⁵⁵ Michael r. Gordon and Mark Landler, 'Backstage glimpses of Clinton as dogged diplomat, win or lose', *The New York Times*, 2 February 2013, available: <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/03/us/politics/in-behind-scene-blows-and-triumphs-sense-of-clinton-future.html>.

⁵⁶ 'Obama's uncertain path amid Syria bloodshed', *The New York Times*, *idem*.

⁵⁷ 'Obama: Notion that Syrian opposition could have overthrown Assad with U.S. arms a "fantasy"', *CBS News*, 20 June 2014, available: <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/obama-notion-that-syrian-opposition-could-overthrow-assad-a-fantasy/>.

⁵⁸ Thomas I. Friedman, 'Obama on the World', *The New York Times*, 8 August 2014, available: <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/09/opinion/president-obama-thomas-i-friedman-iraq-and-world-affairs.html>.

⁵⁹ 'Syrian Coalition: Safi Regrets Obama's Remarks on Syria', National Coalition of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces, 23 June 2014, available: <http://en.etilaf.org/all-news/news/syrian-coalition-safi-regrets-obamas-remarks-on-syria.html>.

“The failure to help build up a credible fighting force of the people who were the originators of the protests against Assad – there were Islamists, there were secularists, there was everything in the middle – the failure to do that left a big vacuum, which the jihadists have now filled.”⁶⁰

Yet, in a speech on 10 September 2014 authorising the expansion of US air strikes against Daesh in Iraq as well as in Syria, Obama called on the Congress to authorise plans to “train and equip Syrian rebels” as part of a four-leg strategy to fight Daesh.⁶¹ Suddenly the “former doctors, farmers, pharmacists and so forth” became good enough to be partners in fighting the “highly trained jihadists.” It remains to be seen whether the plan, which will apparently include training camps in Saudi Arabia, will go beyond two previous US promises to arm Syrian rebels and the small-scale, CIA-run training programme in Jordan mentioned above.

Refusing to coordinate with the Assad regime, which “will never regain the legitimacy it has lost,” Obama said that supporting the Syrian opposition was “the best counter-weight to extremists like Daesh.”⁶² However, this will be done, he added, “while pursuing the *political solution* necessary to solve Syria’s crisis, once and for all.” (emphasis added)

There was no mention in Obama’s speech of Iran or any of the Iranian-backed militias fighting in Syria. Nothing about the wider wars in Syria and Iraq, in fact. It is likely therefore that the ‘slow bleeding’ policy against Iran and its proxies will continue until further notice.

Indeed, Obama’s different approaches to dealing with Daesh in Syria and in Iraq was a crystallisation of his strategy on Iran. In Iraq, after Daesh took over Mosul in June 2014 and started to advance towards Erbil, Obama was very quick and decisive in authorising air strikes against Daesh forces and positions and in providing the Kurdish armed forces fighting Daesh with all sorts of weapons and support. This gave them significant advantages over the Iranian-back government in Baghdad and the Shia militias controlled by Sepah Pasdaran. In Syria, however, over a year of massacres and military advances by Daesh have not prompted such reactions from the US administration, even though Syrian rebels have been battling Daesh as well as the regime and have been requesting similar assistance from the US and its allies.⁶³

For a few weeks after the start of the US air strikes against Daesh in Iraq, US officials kept repeating that Obama still “did not have a strategy” on dealing with Daesh in Syria and was seeking a broad international coalition before acting. The political circumstances in Syria “are very different,” they added.⁶⁴ All that is different, in our view, is that Obama appears to be in no rush to put an end to the bloodshed in Syria because it is bleeding Iran and Russia.

Interestingly, the developments in Iraq and the US war on Daesh were seized on by both the Syrian and the Iranian regimes as an opportunity to naturalise their troubled relationship with the US and reach a comprehensive agreement, offering to be part of the new international partnership to ‘fight terrorism’.⁶⁵ In August 2014, a number of media outlets reported that Iranian Foreign Minister had even offered cooperating with the US in Iraq against Daesh if the sanctions on Iran are lifted.⁶⁶ But the reports were apparently based on a misquote.⁶⁷ Iran has always insisted on keeping the two issues separate during the nuclear negotiations.

In any case, the US did not seem interested in such offers, denying any cooperation with Damascus and Tehran.⁶⁸ President Obama and his team appear to be determined to continue with their ‘slow bleeding’ policy towards Iran and its proxies.

How long can the Iranian regime bleed?

While one may understand the political rationale behind this policy (weakening the Iranian regime and its proxies as much and as long as possible until a confrontation is inevitable), the author of this report believes that the policy is immoral and politically dangerous, because it is being implemented at the disproportionate expense of the people of Syria and the wider region and because it will inevitably lead to more instability and extremism.

Furthermore, hoping that multiple conflicts or fronts with the Iranian regime, coupled with crippling economic sanctions, would eventually lead to the weakening and even collapse of the regime (i.e. winning the war against the Iranian regime in the streets of Tehran) is, at best, wishful thinking. Similar things were said about the Syrian regime at the beginning of the revolution. Sepah Pasdaran and the Basij have shown that they can and will ruthlessly crush any possible dissent movement

inside Iran and that they can 'bleed' for much longer, so to speak. In fact, Sepah commanders are now arguably stronger than ever, militarily, politically and economically, not only in Iran but also in the whole Middle East.⁶⁹

There is no sign that Obama's 'slow bleeding' policy will change in the near future – unless all Syrian opposition groups unite in putting enough pressure on the US administration and its allies to change their position. It is true that Syria has become 'Iran's Vietnam' and that Iran is 'bleeding in Syria', but the Iranian regime may be capable of bleeding for a long time to come, much longer than the Syrian people can endure.

Update: The US policy on Iran and Syria

In November 2014, US president Barack Obama reportedly ordered his national security team to conduct yet another review of his administration's widely criticised policy on Syria. Various commentators and analysts interpreted that at the time as a "tacit admission" that the administration's strategy of trying to confront Daesh without confronting Bashar al-Assad and his backers was "a miscalculation."¹

A year later, however, and despite major developments in the region (the expansion of Daesh in Iraq and Syria, signing a comprehensive nuclear deal with Iran in July 2015, the Iranian-backed coup by the Houthis militias in Yemen and the subsequent military campaign led by Saudi Arabia against them, and the Russian military intervention in Syria), little seems to have changed in this strategy. Naame Shaam describes this as a policy of slowly bleeding Iran and Hezbollah in Syria at the expense of continued bloodshed in Syria and rising extremism and instability in the region.

The Obama administration has consistently insisted – at least in public – on separating the issue of Iran's nuclear programme from its military interventions in neighbouring countries, even though the two issues are intrinsically linked, as this report has argued above. Thus, Obama's single most important foreign policy goal is the Middle East has been reaching a nuclear deal with Iran first, then dealing with 'other issues' later. A comprehensive nuclear deal with Iran was reached in July 2015, and was approved by the US Congress in September 2015. Obama finally got his deal, but now everything has to wait for its implementation.

This approach has meant not only ignoring what the Iranian regime is doing in the region, but also not taking any action that may 'upset' Iran while the nuclear negotiations are ongoing and then while the nuclear deal is being implemented in 2016. In other words, the Obama administration is in fact linking the two issues in its strategy on Iran, but only as a trade-off: letting the Iran regime pursue its interests in Syria in return for a nuclear deal.

Despite all evidence to the contrary, President Obama still insists that the nuclear deal and normalising relationships with Iran may push the Iranian regime to become

⁶⁰ Jeffrey Goldberg, 'Hillary Clinton: 'Failure' to Help Syrian Rebels Led to the Rise of ISIS', *The Atlantic*, 10 August 2014, available: <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/08/hillary-clinton-failure-to-help-syrian-rebels-led-to-the-rise-of-isis/375832/>.

⁶¹ Obama's speech is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KvRd17vXaXM>. See also: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/09/11/us-iraq-crisis-obama-idUSKBN0H527Z20140911> and <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/09/10/us-iraq-crisis-obama-rebels-idUSKBN0H52K720140910>.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ See, for example, <http://en.etilaf.org/press/president-obama-s-counter-isis-policy.html>.

⁶⁴ See, for example, 'Obama says strategy not set to strike militants in Syria', *Bloomberg*, 29 August 2014, available: <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2014-08-29/obama-says-strategy-not-set-to-strike-militants-in-syria.html>.

⁶⁵ See, for example: 'Iran 'backs US military contacts' to fight Islamic State', *BBC*, 5 September 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29079052>; 'Syria offers to help fight ISIS but warns against unilateral air strikes', *The Guardian*, 26 August 2014, available: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/aug/26/syria-offers-to-help-fight-isis-but-warns-against-unilateral-air-strikes>.

⁶⁶ See, for example, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/08/21/us-iraq-security-iran-idUSKBN0GL1QN20140821> and <http://www.businessinsider.com/iran-offers-help-with-isis-if-us-lifts-nuclear-sanctions-2014-8>.

⁶⁷ 'West media spin 'Iraq' yarn from Zarif's remarks on 'Arak'', *Press TV*, 22 August 2014, available: <http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2014/08/22/376166/west-spins-iraq-yarn-of-zarif-arak-talk/>.

⁶⁸ See, for example, 'Daily Press Briefing', US State Department, 21 August 2014, available: <http://translations.state.gov/st/english/texttrans/2014/08/20140821306059.html#axzz3D6slbcaE>. See also: 'Washington denies cooperation with Tehran in Iraq: Al-Assad is part of the problem not the solution' (in Arabic), *Annahar*, 22 August 2014, available: <http://tinyurl.com/l8bj9x6>.

⁶⁹ See, for example, this worrying poll of al-Dahiyeh, Beirut: http://www.shiawatch.com/public/uploads/files/%5BPolling%20Dahiyeh%20_ShiaWatch33%5D.pdf.

more 'moderate' and end its destabilising policies in the region. In an interview with the National Public Radio network (NPR) in December 2014,² Obama said Iran could become a "very successful regional power" if Tehran agreed to a long-term deal to curb its nuclear programme. "They've got a chance to get right with the world," he said. "There's incredible talent and resources and sophistication... inside of Iran, and it would be a very successful regional power that was also abiding by international norms and international rules, and that would be good for everybody."

In another interview with NPR in April 2015,³ Obama reiterated his hope that, "ideally, we would see a situation in which Iran, seeing sanctions reduced, would start focusing on its economy, on training its people, on reentering the world community, to lessening its provocative activities in the region. But if it doesn't change, we are so much better if we have this deal in place than if we don't."

The basis of this wishful thinking appears to be a belief that there are two different trends inside the Iranian regime, according to the President: hard-liners who "seek to destroy Israel, to cause havoc in places like Syria or Yemen or Lebanon," and others who "think that this is counterproductive."⁴ So by reaching a nuclear deal with Iran, Obama hopes to "strengthen the hand of those more moderate forces inside of Iran."

In another interview with *The New York Times*,⁵ also in April 2015, Obama explained his engagement strategy further, a strategy that has been dubbed "the Obama doctrine."

"The notion that Iran is undeterrable, it's simply not the case. And so for us to say, 'Let's try' — understanding that we're preserving all our options, that we're not naïve — but if in fact we can resolve these issues diplomatically, we are more likely to be safe, more likely to be secure, in a better position to protect our allies, and who knows? Iran may change. If it doesn't, our deterrence capabilities, our military superiority stays in place. ... We're not relinquishing our capacity to defend ourselves or our allies. In that situation, why wouldn't we test it?"

However, to get his nuclear deal with Iran, Obama made significant concessions regarding Iran's nuclear programme, contrary to previous US and EU positions, in

addition to turning a blind eye to what the Iranian regime and its militias are doing in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Yemen.⁶ Iranian negotiators knew that Obama wanted a nuclear agreement with Iran so badly that he was ready to concede and compromise on many of his stated 'red lines', so much so that a *Wall Street Journal* OpEd in April 2015 described Obama's policy on Iran's nuclear as "whatever the Ayatollah wants."⁷

Indeed, all these concessions and compromises were seen by the Iranian regime as a sign of weakness on the part of the US administration and its Western allies, and that they fear a direct confrontation with Iran in the Middle East. In the words of one of Obama's senior national security aides, "what we intended as caution, the Iranians saw as weakness."⁸

The end result was that the Iranian regime was not only allowed to keep important aspects of its military nuclear programme, but was also given a free hand to continue with its destabilising policies in Syria and the wider region even more aggressively than before. As summed up in a Naame Shaam commentary on the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) between Iran and world powers regarding Iran's nuclear programme, the so-called Vienna Deal signed in July 2015 could in fact "prevent the US and its allies from being able to put any serious pressure on the Iranian regime in the future to force it to end its destabilising policies in the region."⁹

Then there was Daesh. And once again, the Syrian and the Iranian regimes were allowed to capitalise on the international focus on Daesh and the new war on terrorism. In fact, the Obama administration appears to have consciously and deliberately pushed for a pragmatic partnership with the Iranian regime on this front, in the hope that this would push it to sign and abide by a comprehensive nuclear deal.

In early November 2014, *The Wall Street Journal* revealed that President Obama secretly wrote to Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei in mid-October, urging him to recognise the two countries' "shared interest" in fighting Daesh, adding that any cooperation in the campaign was "largely contingent on Iran reaching a comprehensive agreement with global powers on the future of Tehran's nuclear programme."¹⁰

Significantly, Obama's letter also sought to assuage Iran's concerns about the future of its ally in Syria, President Bashar al-Assad. According to US officials briefed on the matter, the letter stated that the US military operations against Daesh in Syria "aren't targeted at Mr Assad or his security forces." A few months later, Aya-tollah Khamenei wrote back to President Obama and his response was "respectful but noncommittal," according to an Iranian diplomat.¹¹

The important point here is that Obama's letter to Khamenei tacitly acknowledged that his administration was treating the regime-held parts of Syria as an Iranian backyard – at least for now. And the Iranian regime surely got the message.

Several reports said that the US administration's unwillingness to target Bashar al-Assad's forces and positions in Syria stems from fears that this may have a negative impact on Iran's position in the nuclear negotiations, and may also trigger Iranian retaliatory actions in Iraq, and elsewhere.¹² In September 2013, US officials claimed that the US intelligence had intercepted a message from Gen. Qassem Soleimani, the head of Sepah Qods, to Iranian-backed militias in Iraq ordering them to prepare for attacking the US embassy and other American interests in Baghdad in the event of a strike on Syria.¹³

Even if true, this is no longer sufficient to explain the US's active cooperation with the Iranian regime in the fight against Daesh. While the US-led coalition's airplanes continue to strike Daesh positions in Iraq and Syria, the main forces fighting them on the ground in Iraq are Iranian-backed Shia militias, in addition to the Kurdish forces in northern Iraq and northern Syria. This was obvious in the battles to retake the Iraqi cities of Tikrit and al-Ramadi and the towns of Amirli and Jurf al-Sakher, to mention but a few examples.¹⁴

The "uncomfortable accommodation" by the US-led coalition of Iranian-backed and controlled militias in the campaign against Daesh has often been justified by the ill-preparedness of the Iraqi army and security forces.¹⁵ US officials also kept claiming that they were working with Iraqi Shia militias loyal to the central Iraqi government in Baghdad rather than Iran. The US military command centre was allegedly only opened to leaders of some Shia militias "not closely connected to Iran."¹⁶

But everyone knows that both the central government and the Shia militias in Iraq are under the influence of the Iranian regime and are coordinating with it. Indeed, fighters on the ground in Tikrit and elsewhere have been quoted by the media saying Iranian-backed fighters remain on the battlefield.¹⁷

In December 2014, when Iranian jets carried out, for the first time, air strikes against Daesh positions in Iraq, US Secretary of State John Kerry told reporters: "I think it's self-evident that if Iran is taking on ISIL (Daesh) in some particular place, and it's confined to taking on ISIL, and it has an impact, its net effect is positive." But that is "not something we're coordinating," he added.¹⁸ Yet, when asked how it was possible that American and Iranian airplanes were sharing the same airspace and targeting the same targets without coordinating, US officials have not been able to give a satisfactory answer.

According to David Cenciotti, a military aviation expert and editor of *The Aviationist*, it is unlikely that Iranian aircraft would fly inside Iraq without at least informing the US-led coalition of their presence and intentions. "Although it is theoretically possible for Iranian planes to fly inside Iraq without any coordination with other air forces operating in the same airspace, it would be suicidal," he told the *Business Insider*.¹⁹ In Syria, President Bashar al-Assad revealed in an interview with the BBC in February 2015 that Washington was sharing information on coalition air strikes with his regime "through third parties."²⁰

Only three months before his "positive" comment, Kerry had said, in September 2014, that it would be "inappropriate" for Iran to join the international coalition against Daesh.²¹ Yet, in that same month, during a hearing of the US Senate's Foreign Relations Committee, Kerry hinted that the task of defeating Daesh could be taken on by the Iranian and Syrian regimes if the current US strategy "failed miserably."

"You're presuming that Iran and Syria don't have any capacity to take on Isis," Kerry said. "I mean, who knows? I don't know what's going to happen here... If we're failing, failing miserably, who knows what choice they might make."²² In December 2014, American ambassador to Baghdad, Stuart Jones, told the *Associated Press*: "Let's face it, Iran is an important neighbour to Iraq. There has

to be cooperation between Iran and Iraq. The Iranians are talking to the Iraqi security forces and we're talking to Iraqi security forces ... We're relying on them to do the deconfliction.”²³

Obama's strategy on fighting Daesh has been widely criticised for its ineffectiveness and shortsightedness. As Kenneth Roth, the executive director of Human Rights Watch, argued in February 2015, there are “two big holes” in the US strategy on Daesh: the growing Shia sectarianism and al-Assad's atrocities in Syria, both of which are in fact strengthening Daesh.²⁴ In other words, when one of the stated aims of the US campaign against Daesh is to build up a moderate Sunni alliance capable of fighting Daesh on the ground and driving Sunni communities away from the terrorist organisation, aligning itself with the Iranian regime and its sectarian Shia militias is surely a recipe for failure, both in Iraq and in Syria.

Indeed, evidence suggests that this strategy is driving many Islamist anti-regime groups and fighters to support Daesh,²⁵ and the flow of foreigners traveling to Iraq and Syria to join Daesh has skyrocketed, according to the UN.²⁶

Meanwhile, the Obama administration has been turning a blind eye to abundant evidence that the Syrian and Iranian regimes are not serious about fighting Daesh; that they are in fact utilising and directing it to serve their own agendas (see Chapter I for more on this). It has also been refusing to seriously support moderate Syrian rebels to fight Daesh and regime forces and militias at the same time, and turning a deaf ear to Syrian and regional demands for safe zones or no-fly zones that most observers think are crucial to tip the balance in favour of the rebels in this dual battle.

On 16 September 2015, US Central Commander Gen. Lloyd Austin revealed during a testimony in front of the Senate's Armed Services Committee that “just four or five” Syrian rebel fighters trained and equipped by the US were currently fighting against Daesh in Syria.²⁷ The Congress had passed a bill to train and equip Syrian rebels about a year before, and a programme costing \$500 million was devised to train 5,400 fighters a year. Yet, instead of admitting failure, the Obama administration blamed others for the “abysmal failure” of the train-and-equip programme. The White House's Press

Secretary repeatedly noted at briefings that President Obama had always been “a skeptic” of training Syrian rebels. The finger, he implied, should instead be pointed at those who pressed him to attempt training incompetent Syrian rebels in the first place.²⁸

But the main reason for the failure of the programme was the condition imposed by the US administration on all Syrian fighters and groups undergoing the training that none of the skills and weapons they would acquire under the programme could be used against Syrian and Iranian forces and militias in Syria, only against Daesh. They were even made to sign a statement to that effect. This led many Syrian rebels to abandon and boycott the programme.

Even within the US administration, many current and former officials have been critical of Obama's approach in Syria. In October 2014, US Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel wrote a private, “very blunt,” “sharply critical” two-page memo to National Security Advisor Susan Rice “expressing concern about the overall Syria strategy.”²⁹ The memo reportedly warned that the administration's policy in Syria was in danger of unraveling because of its failure to clarify its intentions toward President Bashar al-Assad. The US' inaction was “indirectly aiding the Assad regime,” the Defence Secretary said in an interview with CBS a few days later.³⁰ Hagel resigned under pressure in late November 2014.

All the above developments have led many observers and analysts to conclude that the Obama administration “does not understand” that the problem of Daesh cannot be addressed in isolation from other aspects of the wider conflicts in Syria and Iraq.³¹ Others have argued that the administration is in fact gradually warming up to Iran and pushing it to change into a ‘successful regional power’ and a ‘partner’ in the fight against Daesh and possibly other things.³² Anything else that distracts from this ‘strategic priority’, such as the continued bloodshed in Syria, is seen as a secondary issue.

Michael Doran, a senior fellow at the Hudson Institute, a former Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense and a former Director of the National Security Council, describes this US rapprochement toward the Iranian regime as “Obama's secret Iran strategy,” adding that it is “central to his administration's strategic thinking” and has been there “from the beginning.”³³

“A strategy has been in place from the start, and however clumsily it may on occasion have been implemented, and whatever resistance it has generated abroad or at home, Obama has doggedly adhered to the policies that have flowed from it.”

Doran quotes David Sanger saying that, in the first year of Obama's first term, “there were more [White House] meetings on Iran than there were on Iraq, Afghanistan and China. It was the thing we spent the most time on and talked about the least in public.”

The seeds of this strategy, according to Doran, date back to a 2006 report by the Iraq Study Group, a bipartisan US congressional commission. The so-called Baker-Hamilton report advised then-president George W. Bush on broader Middle East policies and urged him to take four major steps: withdraw American troops from Iraq; surge American troops in Afghanistan; reinvigorate the Arab-Israeli peace process; and launch a diplomatic engagement with the Islamic Republic of Iran and its junior partner, the Assad regime in Syria.

Baker and Hamilton believed that the two regimes shared with Washington the twin goals of stabilising Iraq and defeating al-Qaeda and other Sunni jihadi groups. In turn, this shared interest would provide a foundation for building a new order in the region that comprises stable powers that could work together to contain the “worst pathologies of the Middle East and lead the way to a sunnier future.”

Doran claims that the Baker-Hamilton report became “the blueprint for the foreign policy of the Obama administration, and its spirit continues to pervade Obama's inner circle.” He therefore concludes that the Obama doctrine revolves around “disarming” the US' enemies or rivals by “ensnaring them in a web of cooperation.”³⁴

Naame Shaam slightly disagrees. It is our belief that, at least in Syria, the Obama administration's strategy toward Iran has been revolving around ‘disarming’ the Iranian regime not only through cooperation, but also through ‘slow bleeding’, as this report has extensively argued. Thus, while it may be cooperating with the Iranian regime in the war on Daesh, it is also, at the same time, continuing with the slow military and economic bleeding of Sepah Pasdaran and its militias in Syria – just in case the rapprochement option fails. That, in a nutshell, is Obama's doctrine.

Yet, both legs of the strategy appear to be based on a great deal of wishful thinking and misreading of developments: The Iranian regime does not seem to be interested in being an ally or partner in the first place, and it is not becoming weaker as a result of the slow bleeding; it is increasingly destabilising the region.

Naame Shaam has published seven open letters³⁵ to US President Barack Obama in the *Washington Post* newspaper between November 2014 and February 2016, in an attempt to convince him to change his Iran strategy:

- The first letter urges President Obama to recognize that the so-called regime-held areas of Syria are effectively occupied by the Iranian regime and the militias it controls, and to act decisively to end the bloodshed in Syria.
- The second letter focuses on the role of the Syrian regime and its Iranian backers in mass demolitions and population transfers in Syria, urging President Obama to act to stop this ongoing ‘sectarian cleansing’ in Syria.
- The third letter focuses on the catastrophic consequences of the Obama administration's ‘slow bleeding’ policy towards Iran and Hezbollah in Syria and how it goes against US interests.
- The fourth letter highlights the link between Iran's military nuclear plans and its intervention in Syria and other countries in the region. It also highlights the strategic importance of Hezbollah Lebanon in Iran's military nuclear ambitions.
- The fifth letter focuses on the Iranian regime's financing of terrorist activities and groups across the Middle East since the early 1980s. It urges President Obama to tackle the expected increase in Iran's ‘financing of terror’ after economic sanctions on Iran are lifted in 2016 as part of the nuclear deal sign in July 2015.
- The sixth letter focuses on the Iranian regime's military intervention in Syria to save the regime of President Bashar al-Assad and continue to be able to ship arms to Hezbollah in Lebanon. But this intervention has been the main cause of mass death and destruction in the country, and is fueling a violent sectarian strife, driving many Sunni Muslims into the arms of Daesh (the so-called Islamic State) and other Islamist extremist groups.
- The seventh letter explains how the Russian bombing of Syria is causing death and destruction, and how it is fueling extremism. It calls on the President Obama to pressure Russia to stop bombing Syria.

Footnotes:

1 'Sources: Obama seeks new Syria strategy review to deal with ISIS, al-Assad', CNN, 13 November 2014, available: <http://edition.cnn.com/2014/11/12/politics/obama-syria-strategy-review/index.html>.

2 Available: <http://www.npr.org/2014/12/29/372485968/transcript-president-obamas-full-npr-interview>.

3 Available: <http://www.npr.org/2015/04/07/397933577/transcript-president-obamas-full-npr-interview-on-iran-nuclear-deal>.

4 *Ibid.*

5 Available: <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/06/opinion/thomas-friedman-the-obama-doctrine-and-iran-interview.html>.

6 This *Washington Post* editorial sums up some of the widespread concerns about the nuclear deal between the US and Iran and how it was reached: https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/the-emerging-iran-nuclear-deal—7b9eba0f87d6_story.html raises major concerns in congress and beyond/2015/02/05/4b80fd92-abda-11e4-ad71.

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New – Russia dragged into Syria Quagmire

Before the escalation of its military intervention in the Syria war in late September 2015, Russia had been supplying the Syrian regime with weapons and shielding it diplomatically by repeatedly using its veto powers at the UN Security Council. But all the Russian and Iranian support did not prevent rebels and Islamist factions from making significant military advances over the previous few months, especially in the southern and northern parts of the country.

Like their Iranian counterparts, Russian officials insist that the deployment of Russian airplanes and troops to Syria came as a result of “a formal request” from President Bashar al-Assad, whose exhausted army was losing ground.¹ The fall of the northern towns of Idlib and Jisr al-Shughour in May 2015 apparently served as a “wake-up call.”² Some commentators even went further and claimed that it was the growing influence of Iran in Syria that prompted al-Assad to ask for Russia’s help.³

But it was the Iranian regime that asked Russia to intervene to prevent al-Assad’s fall and prevent further losses suffered by Iranian forces and militias fighting on his behalf.

According to regional officials quoted by *Reuters* in early October 2015, the chief commander of Sepah Qods, Major-General Qassel Soleimani, visited Moscow in July that year and convinced his Russian hosts of how a series of defeats could be turned into victory “with Russia’s help.”⁴

“Soleimani put the map of Syria on the table,” one of the officials told the news agency. “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.”

According to *Reuters*’ sources, Soleimani’s July 2015 trip was preceded by high-level Russian-Iranian contacts that produced a political agreement on “the need to pump in new support for Assad as his losses accelerated.” The decision for a joint Iranian-Russian military effort in Syria, they added, had been taken at a meeting between Russia’s foreign minister and Iran’s Supreme Leader a few months before. “Soleimani, assigned by Khamenei to run the Iranian side of the operation, traveled to Moscow to discuss details.” A week before Russian airplanes started bombing rebel-held positions in north-west Syria, Iran’s Deputy Foreign Minister for Arab and African Affairs, Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, was quoted by Iranian media saying: “Meetings and negotiations between the two countries’ officials at various levels have provided a great opportunity for the promotion of cooperation, as well as efforts for more regional convergence.”⁵

Another clear indication of the Iranian role in Russia’s decision to directly intervene in the war in Syria is the coincidence of the Russian air strikes with a major Iranian-led ground offensive in the north. Shortly before the start of the Russian air strikes on 30 September 2015, hundreds of new Sepah Pasdaran ground troops started arriving in Syria in preparation for a major ground offensive against rebel-held areas in the north-western parts of the country, under the cover of Russian air strikes.⁶ In the words of the BBC, the new offensive “shed light on Iran’s growing role” and its “deepen[ing] involvement in Syria’s war.”⁷

In other words, the main aim of Russia’s direct military intervention in Syria was to provide air support for ground operations by Iranian forces and militias. The agreement between Moscow and Tehran, according to *Reuters*’ sources mentioned above, also included the provision of more sophisticated Russian weapons to the Syrian army and the establishment of joint operations rooms.

Russia’s direct military intervention in Syria may also help President Vladimir Putin to divert attention inside Russia from the deteriorating economic situation and corruption,⁸ as well as pressuring the US and the EU to lift their sanctions imposed on Russia following the latter’s annexation of Crimea and the occupation of Eastern Ukraine in 2014.⁹



A satellite image showing Russian warplanes lined-up at al-Assad airbase near Latakia. Source: <http://theaviationist.com/2015/09/21/new-satellite-image-unveils-an-impressive-line-up-of-12-russian-su-25-frogfoot-attack-jets-in-syria/>



Russian jets have been pictured dropping their latest bombs on 'terrorist targets' in war-torn Syria. October 2015. © Tass



Russian Tupolev TU-22 bombers conduct an air strike in Syria. Moscow claimed it is targeting Daesh and other "terrorist groups". © Reuters. Source: www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jan/20/russian-airstrikes-in-syria-have-killed-more-than-1000-civilians



Residents inspect a damaged site from what activists said were airstrikes carried out by the Russian air force in Nawa city, Deraa, Syria, Nov. 21, 2015. © Reuters

But both of these goals are largely contingent on the success of the first one, that is, Iranian forces and militias, with Russian air support, achieving significant military gains on the ground. So far little has been achieved in this respect beyond Russian and Iranian war propaganda.

Disagreements? What disagreements?

Following Bashar al-Assad's surprise visit to Moscow on 20 October 2015,¹⁰ many commentators and analysts started arguing that there was a disagreement or divergence between Moscow's and Tehran's stance on al-Assad, as well as on the fate of Hezbollah Lebanon.¹¹

The speculations were largely based on smokescreen statements by Russian officials hinting that Moscow "will not insist" on Bashar al-Assad remaining in power,¹² and on a statement by Sepah Pasdaran's commander-in-chief, Major-General Mohammad Ali Jafari, who said: "The northern friend [Russia] came to Syria to provide military support recently [to serve] its own interests." Moscow "may not care if al-Assad stays as we do," he added. "In any case, [Moscow] is present [in Syria] now and may be compelled to stay there out of 'embarrassment' or for other reasons."¹³

Although Jafari emphasised that Iran "does not see any alternative to al-Assad," and that this position was shared by the country's leadership and Sepah Pas-

daran, his remarks were more rhetorical than a clear political message. The speech was delivered at the first “Anti-America Forum”, where Jafari was justifying and legitimising what the Iranian regime is doing in Syria, while also reassuring regime supporters that the anti-Western ‘resistance front’ was still going strong and Iran was not isolated in its fight against the ‘Great Satan’. “Al-Assad wholeheartedly believes in the [Islamic] resistance and stands against the arrogance of the West,” he reassured his audience.

Other Iranian officials – just like their Russian counterparts – have given contradictory messages regarding al-Assad’s fate. For instance, on the eve of the second round of the international Syria talks in Vienna in late October 2015, the Iranian diplomat Hossein Amir-Abdollahi-an was quoted by the media saying “Iran does not insist on keeping Assad in power forever,” prompting various media outlets to interpret the remarks as a “signal” that Iran “might be willing to back away from its insistence that President Bashar al-Assad remain in power.”¹⁴

Such contradictory statements should not be over-interpreted or taken too seriously. They often serve as a smokescreen to confuse other players and buy time. In the words of Lebanese political satirist and commentator Nadim Koteich, “The Supreme Leader rejected foreign interference in determining the fate and future of Bashar al-Assad and said the Syrian crisis can only be resolved by ending the war and stopping arms from reaching all armed groups. The Supreme Leader is not remotely concerned that this talk, which resembles that of NGOs or the ambassadors of non-aligned countries to the UN, coincides with the increased number of Iranian casualties in Syria recently, casualties of increasingly higher ranks, which indicates deepening Iran’s military intervention to save al-Assad. There is no relation here between words and deeds. Each has its own role and function in the battle that Iran is fighting.”¹⁵

The fact is, the Iranian regime does not care about al-Assad as long as its core interests in Syria are served. The same goes for Russia. And for the time being, al-Assad seems to still be a useful puppet in the hands of both. The Iranian regime’s strategy in Syria has hardly changed since 2011, a strategy that goes beyond saving al-Assad and includes preparations for a post-Assad era in which Iranian-controlled militias

would exert influence on the ground and serve the Iranian regime’s interests. The recent Russian intervention has only reinforced this strategy.

Many commentators have also argued that Russia’s military strategy in Syria (to weaken rebel groups as quickly as possible in the hope of securing better leverage in a political settlement) differs fundamentally from that of the Iranian regime’s (securing strategically important areas that will ensure the survival of al-Assad and Hezbollah).¹⁶ But the two are not necessarily contradictory. In fact, they appear to complement each other.

An often-cited manifestation of this apparent divergence of military strategies is allegations that Russia wants to preserve Syrian state institutions, particularly the regular army, while the Iranian regime depends on, and acts through, paramilitary groups and militias.¹⁷ But developments on the ground seem to belie such claims.

As mentioned above, the Russian air strikes on northern Syria in late September and early October 2015 were accompanied by an Iranian-led ground offensive that involved fighters from Sepah Pasdaran, Hezbollah Lebanon, Iraqi and Afghan Shia militias. The Syrian army was hardly seen. If anything, the Russian intervention has increased and strengthened the Iranian military presence and control in Syria (see the ‘update on Iranian fighters’ above for more details). In the words of Hezbollah’s leader Hassan Nasrallah, during an interview with the group’s *Al-Manar* TV days before Russia started its bombing campaign in Syria, “We welcome any force which intervenes and supports the front in Syria, because through its participation, it will contribute to pushing away the major dangers that are threatening Syria and the region.”¹⁸

Moreover, Russia has reportedly been recruiting its own mercenaries and militiamen to fight in Syria. In late 2015, a Russian blog called “Military Volunteer Movement” was recruiting “volunteers” on a contractual basis to participate in “special missions” in Syria.¹⁹ The group was created in 2014 to recruit and organise pro-Russian mercenaries to fight in Crimea and eastern Ukraine following the massacres in Donbas in April 2014.

One should therefore be wary of taking Russian officials’ statements, and Russian, Iranian and Syrian state-controlled media claims, in this regard at face value. Moreo-

ver, such claims often assume that Russia can in fact do so, ignoring the fact that it is Sepah Pasdaran that funds, arms and controls all the Syrian and foreign militias fighting on behalf of the Assad regime.

It is likewise important to distinguish between wishful thinking and facts-based analysis when talking about the convergence or divergence of Iran's and Russia's interests in Syria. Putin's visit to Tehran in November 2015 and his meeting with Khamenei only go to show that the two countries are pushing more and more towards forging a unified front against Western and regional powers opposed to their policies in Syria. "The Americans have a long-term plot and are trying to dominate Syria and then the whole region ... This is a threat to all countries, especially Russia and Iran," Khamenei said at the meeting with Putin on the sidelines of the Gas Exporting Countries Forum (GECF) Summit in Tehran.²⁰ Describing the 90-minute meeting as "quite constructive" and longer than planned, a Kremlin spokesman said the two countries had "unified views" on Syria.²¹ Putin reportedly described Iran as a "certain and reliable ally in the region and the world."²² Following Putin's visit to Tehran, the Iranian leadership decided to "unify its stance with Russia's in the push for a political deal to end Syria's civil war," according to Iranian officials quoted by *Reuters* in mid-December 2015.²³

On the economic front, Russia and Iran are looking at business deals worth hundreds of billions once international sanctions on Iran are lifted under the July 2015 nuclear deal between Tehran and world powers. The two countries have already agreed to \$40 billion in projects in the last two years.²⁴ A long-delayed delivery of an advanced Russian missile defence system, the S-300, started to arrive in Iran at the end of 2015, according to media reports.²⁵ During Putin's visit to Tehran, the Kremlin also announced lifting a ban on Russian firms working on uranium enrichment at Iran's atomic sites.

Targeting everyone but Daesh

Like the Syrian and Iranian regimes before it, the Russian government insists – against all evidence to the contrary – that its aerial bombardment campaign in Syria in late 2015 was targeting Daesh (the so-called Islamic State, ISIS or ISIL). Soon after Russian airplanes started bombing on 30 September 2015, the country's foreign minister, Sergei Lavrov, dismissed reports that they were

targeting non-Daesh positions, describing "the rumours" as unfounded. "Our targets are solely the positions of objects and equipment belonging to the armed terrorist group ISIL (Daesh)."²⁶

Yet, the majority of Russia's air strikes have not been aimed at Daesh but have instead targeted other armed Syrian opposition groups, including moderate Syrian rebels supported by the US and its allies. A week into the bombing campaign, a spokesman for the US State Department claimed that "greater than 90% of the strikes that we've seen [the Russians] take to date have not been against ISIL or al-Qaeda-affiliated terrorists."²⁷ Even a spokesman for Putin admitted on 1 October that Russia was going after other groups in addition to Daesh. "These organisations are well known and the targets are chosen in coordination with the armed forces of Syria," the spokesman said.²⁸ From "solely targeting Daesh," the Russian line now changed to "targeting terrorists" – again, the same line reiterated by the Syrian and Iranian regimes over the past four years to describe all their opponents in Syria.

Using geolocation techniques, the independent investigative journalism initiative *Bellingcat* analysed the videos released by Russia's Ministry of Defence showing their air strikes in Syria.²⁹ The findings showed that the "overwhelming majority" of Russian air strikes targeted positions held by non-Daesh rebel groups posing "a more immediate threat to the Syrian regime." Daesh strongholds were rarely attacked: out of the first 60 strikes recorded on video, only one was confirmed to have been both at the location indicated by the MoD and against Daesh. 14 other strikes said to target Daesh were geolocated to the claimed locations, but none of those areas were known to be under Daesh control.³⁰

For instance, most of the governorates of Hama and Idlib, where the Russian strikes were concentrated, were known to not have any Daesh presence at the time. In the northern countryside of Aleppo, Russian air strikes targeted rebel-held towns, while avoiding nearby Daesh positions to the northeast of the city. In the words of Syrian citizen-journalist Rami Jarrah, who filmed several videos showing the aftermath of Russian air raids, as well as a video in which he asked residents in Aleppo whether Daesh was present in their city, "There is no ISIS (Daesh) in Aleppo, so whom is Russia bombing?"³¹

In addition to armed opposition groups, Russian air strikes targeted hospitals, medical and civil defence teams, markets, schools, and even bakeries.³² According to the Violations Documentation Center in Syria, Russian air strikes killed at least 329 civilians in Syria in the first month of the campaign (from 30 September to 30 October), including 88 children and 58 women.³³ The Syrian Network for Human Rights documented the death of 254 civilians up until 26 October, including 42 women and 83 children.³⁴

The Syrian opposition's National Coalition described the Russian air strikes as "the leading killer of Syrian civilians now," accounting for more than half of all civilian deaths in the country.³⁵ Of course, Moscow was "outraged" at the "allegations" that its air strikes had killed civilians in Syria and destroyed civilian infrastructure.³⁶

Russia has used all types of bombs and missiles at its disposal in its aerial bombardment campaign, from cluster, vacuum and phosphorus bombs, long-range cruise missiles launched from the Caspian Sea, to less-precise 'dumb bombs' dropped from airplanes at medium altitudes.³⁷ In addition to the deaths, injuries and destruction caused by these bombs and missiles, the Russian military campaign also exacerbated the Syrian refugee crisis. In early November 2015, US officials estimated that, since the beginning of Russian strikes in Syria, "at least 120,000 Syrians have been displaced as a result of regime offensives aided by Russian air strikes in the cities of Hama, Aleppo, and Idlib."³⁸

Watching Putin "fail" in Syria

On 8 October 2015, the US Defense Secretary Ashton Carter, speaking at a meeting of NATO defence ministers in Brussels, warned that Russia will soon "begin to suffer casualties" in Syria. Russia's military campaign in Syria "will have consequences for Russia itself, which is rightly fearful of attacks," he said. "In the coming days, the Russians will begin to suffer from casualties."³⁹

Carter's words were interpreted by many observers and commentators as a message that the US and its regional allies have opted for a 'slow bleeding' policy towards Russia in Syria, similar to the one they have been following towards Iran and its militias. Indeed, numerous Western officials confirm – often behind closed doors – that the Obama administration has opted for a "watch

them fail" policy towards Russia in Syria, in the words of a senior US official quoted by *The Guardian* in early November 2015. "We are not going to oppose them militarily in their support for Assad," the official said. "So in that sense, yes, we are going to watch them fail and hope that brings them to reasonable terms and political negotiations."⁴⁰

Despite widespread criticisms of the Obama administration for its 'reluctance' and 'inaction' in confronting Russia – and Iran before it – in Syria,⁴¹ this 'slow bleeding' or 'watch them fail' policy is, in fact, not as passive as the American official presented it.

As soon as the Russian air strikes started, a number of Syrian opposition armed groups started receiving more weapons and ammunition from the US and/or Gulf countries through Turkey.⁴² Most notably, this included long-withheld American BGM-71 TOW missiles. According to media reports, TOWs were used by Syrian rebels in the northern parts of the country 82 times between 1 and 20 October 2015, compared to 13 times in September.⁴³ In addition, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar – following 'emergency meetings' with Syrian rebels in southern Turkey – also stepped up their provision of small arms, ammunition, mortars, tank shells, RBG multiple grenade launchers, and even Grad rockets.⁴⁴ Unconfirmed reports also claimed that long-awaited man-portable air-defence systems (MANPADS) would soon start to arrive in Syria to counter Russian aircraft.⁴⁵

This increase in military support unsurprisingly led to an increase in Syrian, Iranian and Russian casualties, despite concerted efforts by all three parties to hide their losses in Syria. For example, in late October 2015, Ukrainian intelligence sources claimed that the bodies of 26 Russian soldiers, who had died in Syria "as a result of poor sanitary or health conditions," were secretly transported to a Crimean port city.⁴⁶ Around the same time, a senior military source close to Damascus told *Reuters* that at least three Russian soldiers were killed and several wounded when a shell hit their position in the Lattakia province, noting that 20 Russian soldiers were in the targeted location in al-Nabi Younis.⁴⁷

In early November 2015, US security officials estimated that Russia's military force in Syria had grown to about 4,000 soldiers, up from an estimated 2,000 personnel

when the Russian air strikes began on 30 September.⁴⁸ However, many observers expect the number of Russian troops deployed to Syria to rise in 2016 as air strikes alone have achieved little territorial gains for Syrian and Iranian regime forces and militias. Moscow has consistently declined to comment on the size of its force or any casualties it has suffered in Syria.

The only Syria death the Russian government has reported was that of a “serviceman” who the military said “committed suicide.”⁴⁹

Meanwhile, the economic cost of Russia’s military intervention in Syria is also becoming a strain on an already suffering economy. A combination of low oil prices, a weak Ruble and Western sanctions have caused the country’s economy to contract by 3.4 per cent in the first half of 2015.⁵⁰ Yet, more than a quarter of the country’s budget has been earmarked for military expenditure, vast parts of which remain secret.

Data collated by IHS Jane’s for the *Moscow Times* estimated in October 2015 that Russian air strikes in Syria cost up to \$4 million per day.⁵¹ The calculations were based on the assumption that Russia had 36 fighter aircraft and 20 helicopters at its Latakia air base, which flew an average of 30 sorties a day and dropped five bombs per sortie, in addition to some 1,500 soldiers and naval support. A few days after the report was published on 20 October, however, the number of Russian warplanes increased to at least 36, and the number of sorties to around 40. The number of Russian troops deployed to Syria is also believed to be much higher, as indicated above.

Nonetheless, compared to Russia’s \$50 billion defense budget in 2015, this is a small fraction. According to calculations by IHS Jane’s and the *Financial Times*, even if Russia continued its air strikes at the current level for a full year, it would use less than 3 per cent of the funds budgeted for national defence in 2016. But Moscow may well see its Syria costs rocket as the conflict drags on and the US and its regional allies increase their military support to the opposition.⁵² Russia is unlikely to be able to bear the costs of continuing or expanding its military adventure in Syria for more than four months, according to the American intelligence think-tank Stratfor.⁵³

The financial burden of Moscow’s military intervention in Syria, and the belt-tightening policies that it will inevitably lead to, are likely to shift public opinion inside Russia in the coming months, a public opinion that has so far largely been supportive of President Putin’s war propaganda. About a month into the Russian air strikes, the independent pollster Levada found that support among Russians for Moscow’s military action in Syria had soared from a mere 14 per cent in late September to more than 70 per cent.⁵⁴

A second Afghanistan?

In addition to the financial burden, a mounting death toll is likely to reinforce the Russian public’s fears of Syria becoming “a new Afghanistan.”⁵⁵ And there is a good chance that such fears could materialise in the near future.

In early October 2015, the Russian government estimated that its aerial bombardment campaign in Syria would only last three to four months. The head of the Russian parliament’s foreign affairs committee, Alexei Pushkov, told French radio station Europe1 that “there is always a risk of being bogged down, but in Moscow, we are talking about an operation of three to four months.”⁵⁶

More than 6 months into the campaign, however, little concrete military gains have been achieved, as already mentioned. This is partly because air strikes alone cannot achieve any decisive military victory on the ground, as various experts have been arguing from the beginning, and because the US and its regional allies have stepped up their support to opposition armed groups. As the Russian and Iranian leaderships begin to realise this, they may well be forced to send in more ground troops; and as the losses and casualties mount without achieving much, Moscow is likely to extend its ‘mission’ in Syria. In other words, Syria may well gradually become Russia’s ‘second Afghanistan’, as numerous analysts and commentators have warned.⁵⁷

Moreover, all of Moscow’s past efforts to broker a negotiated settlement appear to have gone to waste as Putin is now perceived by the Syrian opposition and the rest of the world as a representative of the Assad regime, alongside Sepah Pasdaran and Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. And like the latter two, Putin and other Rus-

sian military commanders are now seen as co-responsible for the war crimes and crimes against humanity committed in Syria.⁵⁸ They too will probably face calls for being brought to justice.

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1 Iran shipped 30,000 tonnes of food supplies to Syria in April 2014 to "help the Syrian government deal with shortages."

2 Iran deposited 500 million US dollars in Syria's Central Bank vaults in January 2013 to prop up the Syrian pound, which was on the brink of crashing. The Syrian regime has also been borrowing 500 million US dollars a month from Iran.

3 Iranians lining up for food supplies in southern Tehran in February 2014.

4 Ayatollah Ali Khamenei wearing worn-out sandals, in a symbolic message that the Supreme Leader is 'suffering' like poor Iranians and he expects everybody to do the same – March 2014.



1 On 12 May 2014, *Naame Shaam* activists staged a protest in front of the Iranian embassy in Vienna against the role of the Sepah Pasdaran in Syria. The peaceful protest took place a day before a meeting in the Austrian capital between the European Union's foreign policy chief, Catherine Ashton, and the Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad, Javad Zarif. The meeting was part of a new round of negotiations between the Iranian regime and the E3+3 group to discuss Iran's nuclear plans.

Source:

<<http://www.naameshaam.org/activists-protest-against-iranian-regimes-role-in-syria-in-front-of-iranian-embassy-in-vienna-ahead-of-nuclear-talks/>>
<http://www.naameshaam.org/activists-protest-against-iranian-regimes-role-in-syria-in-front-of-iranian-embassy-in-vienna-ahead-of-nuclear-talks/>

2, 3 Activists from *Naame Shaam* staged a protest on 13 May 2014 at the Austria Center Vienna, where the European Union's foreign policy chief, Catherine Ashton, and Iranian Foreign Minister, Mohammad Javad Zarif, discussed Iran's nuclear plans. *Naame Shaam* said that the EU and the US must link these negotiations with the Iranian regime's disastrous role in Syria. A nuclear deal and the lifting of sanctions on Iran should only be possible if the Iranian regime pulls out all its fighters from Syria. That means every single fighter from Sepah Pasdaran, Hezbollah Lebanon and the Iraqi militias that it has been sending to Syria. It must also end all the financial and military support that it has been providing to Bashar al-Assad's regime.

Source:

<<http://www.naameshaam.org/naame-shaam-activists-protest-outside-eu-iran-meeting-in-vienna/>>
<http://www.naameshaam.org/naame-shaam-activists-protest-outside-eu-iran-meeting-in-vienna/>

IV. **Appendix**

Iranian fighters and commanders killed in Syria

NO.	NAME	POSITION	PLACE OF DEATH	DATE OF BURIAL	PLACE OF BURIAL
1	Mohammad Ahmadi Javan		Syria	Dez 7, 15	Boushehr
2	Sajjad Pour Jabbari		Syria	Dez 6, 15	Bandar Gaz
3	Meysam Najafi		Syria	Dez 6, 15	Qarchak
4	Abdol Hamid Salari		Syria	Dez 5, 15	Bandar Abbas
5	AbdoRashid Rashvand	Sepah member	Syria	Nov 30, 15	Karaj
6	Salman Barjasteh	Sunni Basiji	Syria	Nov 29, 15	Zahedan
7	Omar Mollazehi	Sunni Basiji	Syria	Nov 29, 15	Zahedan
8	Nazar Mohammad Bameri	Basiji	Syria	Nov 29, 15	Zahedan
9	Asghar bameri	Basiji	Syria	Nov 29, 15	Zahedan
10	Parviz Bameri	Basiji	Syria	Nov 29, 15	Zahedan
11	Morad Abdollahi	Basiji	Syria	Nov 29, 15	Zahedan
12	Seyyed Mohsen Sajjadi	Basiji	Syria	Nov 29, 15	Zahedan
13	Abdolreza Mojiri	Sepah member	Syria	Nov 28, 15	Khomeinshahr
14	Hamid Siahkali Moradi	Sepah member	Aleppo	Nov 27, 15	Qazvin
15	Hossein Hashemi		Syria	Nov 23, 15	Shahre Rey
16	Ahmad Rahimi	2nd lutenant- Sepah	Southern Syria	Nov 23, 15	unknown
17	Amir Ali Hyoudi	Sepah member	Near Damascus	Nov 23, 15	Dezful
18	Mahmoud Ghalandari		Near Damascus	Nov 20, 15	Mashahd
19	Ali Doust Hassanzadeh Gharib		Near Damascus	Nov 20, 15	Mashahd
20	Mohammad Reza Ebrahimi	Sepah member	Aleppo	Nov 18, 15	Isfahan
21	Behzad Seifi	Sepah member	Syria	Nov 18, 15	Fars
22	Sattar Abbasi	Sepah member	Syria	Nov 18, 15	Kermanshah
23	Mohammad Javad Ghorbani			Nov 17, 15	Isfahan
24	Mohammad Sokhandan		Aleppo	Nov 16, 15	Mashhad
25	Seyyed Mostafa Mousavi		Syria	Nov 16, 15	Tehran
26	Iman Khazaienezahad	Sepah member	Aleppo	Nov 15, 15	Jahrom
27	Mostafa Sadr Zadeh	Iranian commander of Ammar Brigade (Fatemyoun)	Syria	Nov 14, 15	unknown
28	Mohammad Yarani		Syria	Nov 13, 15	Mahallat
29	Masoud Asghari	Sepah member	Aleppo	Nov 12, 15	Tehran
30	Mohammadreza Dehghan	Sepah member and Bsiji student	Aleppo	Nov 12, 15	Tehran
31	Ahmad A'ataie	Sepah member	Aleppo	Nov 12, 15	Tehran
32	Seyyed Mostafa Mousavi	Sepah member	Aleppo	Nov 12, 15	unknown
33	Mohammad Hossein Mohammadkhani		Syria	Nov 10, 15	Tehran
34	(Hojjat ol-Islam) Ali Tamamzadeh AKA Abou Hadi	Basiji clergy	Aleppo	Nov 10, 15	Karaj
35	Seyyed Esmail Sirat Nia	Sepah member	Syria	Nov 10, 15	Gilan
36	Meysam Modvari	Basiji	Syria	Nov 10, 15	Tehran
37	Mohammad Tahan	Sepah member	Aleppo	Nov 9, 15	Semnan
38	Seyyed Milad Mostafavi	Sepah member	Aleppo	Nov 8, 15	Bahar city, Hamedan
39	Mohammad Hossein Khani	Sepah member	Syria	Nov 7, 15	Yazd
40	Mousa Jamshidian	Major	Syria	Nov 7, 15	Najaf Abad
41	Mohammad Hossein Azizabadi	Sepah member	Aleppo	Nov 7, 15	Neyshabour
42	Amir Hossein Hyoudi	Sepah member	unknown	Nov 6, 15	Dezful
43	Rouhollah Ghorbani	Sepah member	Aleppo	Nov 5, 15	Tehran
44	Qadir Sarkat	Sepah member	Aleppo	Nov 5, 15	Tehran
45	Mohsen Fanousi	Second Lieutenant	Aleppo	Nov 5, 15	Hamedan
46	Esmail Zahedpour	Sepah member	Aleppo	Nov 5, 15	Golestan
47	Ezzatollah Soleimani	Colonel	Aleppo	Nov 3, 15	Shahre Kord
48	Hamidreza Fatemi Athar	Saberin Brigade	Syria	Nov 2, 15	Khouzestan
49	Mohammad Mehrabi Panah	Saberin Brigade	Syria	Nov 2, 15	Aran and Bidgol
50	Mostafa (Komeil) Safaritarab	Saberin Brigade	Syria	Nov 2, 15	Mazandaran
51	Seyyed Sadjad Hosseini	Captain	Syria	Nov 2, 15	Isfahan
52	Hamid Fatemi (Mambini)	Sepah member	Syria	Nov 2, 15	Khouzestan
53	Mohammad Hossein Mir-Dousti		Syria	31-Oct-2015	Tehran
54	Morteza Mohammadi	Sepah member	Aleppo	Okt 31, 15	Fasa
55	Hojjat Asghari Shorbilani		Aleppo	30-Oct-2015	Shahre Rey
56	Hossein Jamali	Sepah Captan	Aleppo	Okt 30, 15	Khouzestan
57	Hamid Reza Zamani	IRGC Basij Organization	Damascus	28-Oct-2015	unknown
58	Mohammad Zahiri		Syria	Okt 28, 15	unknown
59	Mehdi Kaieni	Sepah member	Aleppo	Okt 28, 15	Jahrom
60	Moslem Nasr	Sepah Second Lieutenant - Mahmoud Ahmadijad's Bodyguard	Aleppo	Okt 28, 15	Tehran
61	Abdollah Bagheri	Sepah member	Syria	Okt 28, 15	Maraqeh
62	Mohammadreza Asgari Fard	Colonel	Syria	27-Oct-2015	Khorramshahr
63	Amin Karimi	General	Syria	Okt 27, 15	Khouzestan
64	Jabbar Araqi		Syria	Okt 27, 15	Kermanshah
65	Abouzar Amjadian	Sepah member	Aleppo	Okt 26, 15	Ahvaz
66	Mohammad Zahiri	Sepah member	Syria	Okt 26, 15	Esfahan

NO.	NAME	POSITION	PLACE OF DEATH	DATE OF BURIAL	PLACE OF BURIAL
67	Pouya Izadi	Sepah member	Syria	Okt 26, 15	Esfahan
68	Hamid Reza Daie Taghi	Sepah member	Syria	Okt 26, 15	Khouzestan
69	Seyyed Vahid Nomi	Sepah member	Syria	Okt 26, 15	Qom
70	Majid Mokhtarifar	Sepah member	Aleppo	Okt 25, 15	Gilan
71	Sajjad Tahernia		Aleppo	Okt 25, 15	Mazandaran
72	Seyyed Rouhollah Emadi		Syria	Okt 23, 15	Jahrom
73	Hadi Shoja'		Syria	Okt 23, 15	Chahardangeh
74	Mohammad Estehkami Jahromi	Sepah member	Hasakah	Okt 21, 15	Sabzevar
75	Reza Damroudi	Sepah member	Syria	Okt 21, 15	Hamedan
76	Majid Saneie Movaffagh	Basij member	Syria	Okt 20, 15	Hamedan
77	Mojtaba Karami (aka Majid)	First Lieutenant	Syria	Okt 20, 15	Hamedan
78	Moslem Khizab	Colonel	Syria	Okt 19, 15	Isfahan
79	Komeil Qorbani	First Lieutenant	Syria	Okt 19, 15	Najafabad
80	Mehdi Alidoust		Syria	Okt 19, 15	Qom
81	Hassan Ahmadi	Second Lieutenant	Syria	Okt 19, 15	Najafabad
82	Mehdi Alidoust	Basij member	Syria	Okt 18, 15	Khouzestan
83	Nader Hamid	Colonel	Syria	Okt 15, 15	Qazvin
84	Rasoul Pour Morad		Daraa	Okt 12, 15	Khouzestan
85	Farshad Hasouni Zadeh	Colonel	Daraa	Okt 12, 15	Khouzestan
86	Hamid mokhtarband		Syria	Okt 12, 15	Khouzestan
87	Meysam Hosseini		Syria	Okt 8, 15	Varamin
88	Alireza Qanavati		Syria	Okt 6, 15	Karaj
89	Mohammadreza Hosseini		Syria	2-Oct-2015	unknown
90	Abdol-Amir Dinarvand		Syria	Sep 18, 15	Shoush
91	Gholam Ali Rezaei		Syria	Sep 11, 15	Kerman
92	Mohammad Khalili		Syria	Sep 11, 15	kerman
93	Hassan Qassemi Dana	Died in Tehran from injuries in Syria	Syria	Julii 6, 15	Mashhad
94	Mohammad Davoud Rezaei		Syria	Aug 31, 15	Qom
95	Mohammad Taqi Baqeri		Syria	Aug 31, 15	Islamshahr
96	Ahmad Hayari	Captain	Latakia	Aug 30, 15	Shoush
97	Mostafa Bakhti		Tadmor	Julii 30, 15	Mashhad
98	Mojtaba Bkhti		Tadmor	Julii 30, 15	Mashhad
99	Nader Hamidi		Daraa	Julii 24, 15	Tehran
100	Mohammad Shafi' Karimi	Colonel	Zabadani	Julii 14, 15	Ahvaz
101	Qassem Qarib	Colonel	Tadmor	Julii 13, 15	Gorgan
102	Abdul Karim Qavabesh			Julii 8, 15	Khozastan
103	Hamid Sadeghi		Syria	Julii 4, 15	Mashhad
104	Reza Mirzaie		Syria	Julii 4, 15	Mashhad
105	Abbas Alizadeh		Syria	Julii 4, 15	Mashhad
106	Mohammad Hamidi (aka Abou-Zeinab)		Deraa	Juni 24, 15	Tehran
107	Hassan Ghaffari		Deraa	Juni 24, 15	Shahre Rey
108	Ali Amraei		Deraa	Juni 24, 15	Shahre Rey
109	Nematollah Jafari		Deraa	Juni 24, 15	Shahre Rey
110	Alireza Nowrouzi		Syria	Juni 12, 15	Malard
111	Hamed Javani	First Lieutenant	Latakia	Mai 13, 15	Azarbaijan
112	Seyyed Hassan Mousavi	Sepah member	Syria	Apr 19, 15	Kerman, Iran
113	Mohammad Javad Mohammadi	Major-General, Sepah commander in Shoushtar	Daraa	Apr 16, 15	Body retained by Daesh
114	Hadi Kajbaaf	Sepah member	Syria	Apr 16, 15	unknown
115	Rouzbah Helisaie	Sepah member	Daraa	Apr 16, 15	unknown
116	Hossein Badpa	Sepah member	Syria	März 21, 15	Karaj
117	Hamid Ehsani		Syria	Feb 26, 15	Mashhad
118	Nouroollah Hosseini		Syria	Feb 24, 15	Mashhad
119	Mohsen Kamali Dehghan	Sepah member	Daraa	Feb 12, 15	Body not retrieved
120	Ali Soltan Moradi	Sepah member	Daraa	Feb 12, 15	Body not retrieved
121	Seyed Ehsan Haji Hatamlou		Syria	Feb 6, 15	Golestan
122	Mohammad Aziz Heydari		Damascus	Feb 3, 15	Pakdasht, Tehran
123	Mostafa Heydari		Damascus	Feb 3, 15	Pakdasht, Tehran
124	Amir Kazemzadeh	IRGC-QF	Damascus	Feb 3, 15	Pakdasht, Tehran
125	Abbas Abdollahi	General	Qunaytira	Jan 19, 15	Sirjan
126	Mohammad Ali Allahdadi	Sepah Qods member	Syria	Jan 10, 15	Eshtehard
127	Hossein Ahmadi	Sepah member	Daraa	Dez 2, 14	Khouzastan
128	Ali Akbar Abtahi		Syria	Nov 13, 14	unknown
129	Hossein Akbarnejad		Syria	Nov 13, 14	Mazandaran
130	Masoud Zamanifar		Damascus	Nov 13, 14	
131	Majid Fard Taheri		Damascus	Nov 13, 14	
132	Mohammad Younesi		Syria	Nov 13, 14	
133	Rasoul Ali-Naqi		Syria	Nov 13, 14	
134	Hamid Reza Erfani		Syria	Nov 13, 14	
135	Mehdi Azhdari		Syria	Nov 13, 14	
136	Reza Jam Manesh		Syria	Nov 13, 14	

NO.	NAME	POSITION	PLACE OF DEATH	DATE OF BURIAL	PLACE OF BURIAL
137	Ali Asghar Rafiei		Syria	Nov 13, 14	
138	Mohammad Esmaili Sheikhani		Syria	Nov 13, 14	
139	Reza Dorostkar		Syria	Nov 13, 14	
140	Behrouz Rahimi Tabrizi		Syria	Nov 13, 14	unknown
141	Hassan Hezbavi		Syria	Okt 21, 14	Baharestan
142	Esmail Hosseini	Sepah General	Syria	Okt 11, 14	Ahvaz
143	Jabbar Darisavi		Syria	Okt 11, 14	Qom
144	Seyyed Isa Hosseini		Syria	Okt 11, 14	Qom
145	Mostafa Khademi		Syria	Okt 11, 14	Qom
146	Ra'ouf Shabani		Syria	Okt 11, 14	Qom
147	Gholam Mohammad Ahmadi		Syria	Okt 11, 14	Qom
148	Hadi Salimi		Syria	Okt 9, 14	Mashhad
149	Hamed Ahmadi		Syria	Okt 9, 14	Mashhad
150	Hamid Qassemi	Sepah member	Syria	Sep 16, 14	Shahrour
151	Hosseini Tabesteh		Syria	Sep 12, 14	Shahre Rey
152	Abolfazi Hosseini		Syria	Sep 11, 14	Varamin
153	Mohammad Yassin Gholami		Syria	Sep 3, 14	Varamin
154	Rahman heydari		Syria	Aug 27, 14	Isfahan
155	Mousa Kazemi		Syria	Aug 22, 14	Mashhad
156	Abdollah Rahmati			Aug 22, 14	Mashhad
157	Hadi Soltanzadeh		Damascus	Aug 21, 14	Mashhad
158	Seyyed Hadi Soltan Nejad			Aug 21, 14	Islamshahr
159	Gholamali ganji			Aug 21, 14	Islamshahr
160	Gholamali Panahi		Damascus	Aug 19, 14	Babolsar
161	Hadi Baghbani	Colonel	Syria	Jun 27, 14	Gorgan
162	Gholamali Tavalla		Syria	Jun 25, 14	Ilam
163	Mohammad Javad Bakhtiari		Syria	Jun 15, 14	Qom
164	Mohammad Amin Hosseini		Syria	Jun 15, 14	Qom
165	Heshmatollah Sohrabi		Syria	Jun 15, 14	Mashhad
166	Seyyed Mohammad Mortazavi		Syria	Jun 15, 14	Mashhad
167	Seyyed Esmail Hosseini		Syria	Jun 15, 14	Mashhad
168	Mohammad Javad Rahimi	Basiji Student, died in Tehran from injuries in Syria	Syria	Jun 8, 14	Tehran
169	Aghil Bakhtiari	Sepah General	Syria	Mai 27, 14	Fars
170	Qorban Hassani		Syria	Mai 25, 14	Mashhad
171	Abdollah Eskandari	Sepah member	Syria	Mai 25, 14	unknown
172	Asghar Shirdel		Syria	Apr 29, 14	Marand
173	Moharram Alipour	(May be Afghan)	Syria	Apr 23, 14	Kashan
174	Isa Naderi		Syria	Apr 22, 14	Tehran
175	Abdossamad Hosseini		Syria	Apr 22, 14	Tehran
176	Ramzan Ali Bakhshi		Syria	Apr 22, 14	Tehran
177	Abbas Karimi		Syria	Apr 22, 14	Mashhad
178	Morteza Mohammadi		Syria	Apr 22, 14	Mashhad
179	Ahmad Ahmadi		Syria	Apr 22, 14	Mashhad
180	Mohammad Reza Zahmati	Member of Karbala's Spah	Syria	Apr 22, 14	unknown
181	Seyed Jalil Habibollah pour	Reportedly first Iranian clergy who died in Syria	Daraa	Apr 21, 14	Unknown
182	Mohammad Mehdi Malamini		Syria	Apr 17, 14	Mashhad
183	Javid Heydari		Syria	Apr 10, 14	unknown
184	Qassem Shojaie	Sepah Captain	Syria	März 4, 14	Shiraz
185	Mohammad Saheb Karam Ardakani	Sepah General	Syria	Feb 20, 14	Amol
186	Esmail heydari		Syria	Jan 25, 14	Unknown
187	Ali Draji		Syria	Jan 25, 14	Rasht
188	Mohammad Hossein Atri		Syria	Jan 25, 14	Ahvaz
189	Seyed Mehdi Mousavi		Syria	Jan 23, 14	Tehran
190	Akbar Shahriari		Syria	Jan 22, 14	Tabriz
191	Mahmoud Beizale (AKA Hossein Nosrati)		Syria	Dez 18, 13	Isfahan
192	Nasser Moslemi-Savari aka Mansour		Syria	Dez 8, 13	Khozestan
193	Abolfazi Shirvanian		Syria	Nov 22, 13	Tehran
194	Mohammad Hossein moradi		Syria	Nov 18, 13	Tehran
195	Ahmad Dousti-ye Kalateh Rahman		Syria	Nov 11, 13	Tehran
196	Mohammad Hassan Khalili	Sepah General		Nov 4, 13	Kerman
197	Mohammad Jamali Paqal'e	2nd Lieutenant	Syria	Sep 26, 13	Jahrom
198	Jahanpour Sharifi	Sepah Member	Syria	Aug 22, 13	Kashmar
199	Ali Zadeh Akbar		Syria	Aug 22, 13	Khomeinshahr
200	Mohsen heydari		Syria	Aug 4, 13	Tehran
201	Mehdi Azizi		Syria	Aug 1, 13	Nazarabad
202	Reza Kargar Barzi	Deputy Basij commander in Ahvaz	Syria	Juli 8, 13	Ahvaz
203	Seyyed Mehdi mousavi		Syria	Jun 9, 13	Rasht
204	Mehdi Khorasani		Syria	Jun 9, 13	Damqan

NO.	NAME	POSITION	PLACE OF DEATH	DATE OF BURIAL	PLACE OF BURIAL
205	Seyed Aliasghar Shenaie	Sepah Lieutenant	Syria	Mai 8, 13	Isfahan
206	Amir Reza Alizadeh	Lieutenant Colonel	Damascus	Mai 1, 13	Gilan
207	Rouhollah Kafizadeh	Major	Syria	Apr 25, 13	Maraqeh
208	Hassan Shateri (aka Hesam Khoshnevis)	Brigadier General	Syria	Feb 13, 13	Tehran
209	Ali Kan'ani		Syria	Feb 3, 13	Taghanak
210	Ali Asgari Taqanaki		Damascus	Jan 28, 13	unknown
211	Moharram Turk	Major	Damascus	Jan 19, 12	Tehran
212	Ali Asghari	Sepah member	Aleppo	unknown	unknown

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Iranian fighters and commanders killed in Syria

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161 <http://bit.ly/1byzBDP>

162 <http://www.defapress.ir/Fa/News/46536>

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164 <http://aghigh.ir/fa/news/30493/%D8%AA%D8%B4%DB%8C%DB%8C%D8%B9-%D8%B4%D9%87%D8%AF%D8%A7%DB%8C-%D9%85%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%81%D8%B9-%D8%AD%D8%B1%D9%85-%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D9%82%D9%85>

165 <http://www.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=13930325000799>

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183 <http://www.afsaran.ir/payamak/724504>

184 <http://www.mashreghnews.ir/fa/news/394949/%D8%B4%D9%87%D8%A7%D8%AF%D8%AA-%DB%8C%DA%A9%DB%8C-%D8%AF%DB%8C%DA%AF%D8%B1-%D8%A7%DB%82-%D9%85%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%81%D8%B9%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%AD%D8%B1%D9%85-%D8%B9%DA%A9%DB%83>

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193 <http://www.jamnews.ir/detail/Photo/255784>

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Afghan fighters and commanders killed in Syria

NO.	NAME	POSITION	PLACE OF DEATH	DATE OF BURIAL	PLACE OF BURIAL
1	Ebrahim Rezaie		Syria	Unknown	Qom
2	Najibollah Mirzaie		Syria	Unknown	Qom
3	Seyyed Mehdi Salmani		Syria	Unknown	Isfahan
4	Zaker Heydari		Syria	Nov 30, 15	Varamin
5	Habib Shah Rezaei		Syria	Nov 30, 15	Varamin
6	Fakhr ol-Din Akbari		Syria	Nov 30, 15	Kerman
7	Mohammad Jomeh Mohammadi		Syria	Nov 30, 15	Kerman
8	Zabihollah Babaei		Syria	Nov 27, 15	Tehran
9	Nour Mohammad Abbasi	Sepah General	Syria	Nov 25, 15	Damavand
10	Nour Mohammad Abbasi	2nd Lieutenant	Syria	Nov 25, 15	Damavand
11	Zaher Rahimi	Sepah Member	Syria	Nov 24, 15	Damavand
12	Hossein Modabber		Syria	Nov 24, 15	Damavand
13	Hossein Hashemi		Syria	Nov 24, 15	Tehran
14	Hossein Modaber		Syria	Nov 24, 15	Damavand
15	Mohammad Reza hashemi	Deputy Basij commander in Ahvaz	Syria	Nov 23, 15	Shahre Rey
16	Sardar Moghaddam		Syria	Nov 23, 15	Shahre Rey
17	Seyyed Rahmat Hashemi		Syria	Nov 23, 15	Tehran
18	Seyyed Morteza Hosseini	Sepah Lieutenant	Syria	Nov 19, 15	Tehran
19	Javad Akbari	Lieutenant Colonel	Syria	Nov 13, 15	Qom
20	Mohammad Reza Ahmadi	Major	Syria	Nov 13, 15	Qom
21	Ali Rahimi	Brigadier General4	Damascus	Nov 12, 15	Mashhad
22	Seyyed Ali Alemini AKA Abou Sadjad		Damascus	Nov 12, 15	Mashhad
23	Ebrahim Yaqubi		Syria	Nov 12, 15	Karaj
24	Mohammad Barati	Major	Syria	Nov 12, 15	Mahallat
25	Reza Khavari AKA Hojjat	Sepah member	Syria	Nov 4, 15	Mashhad
26	Esmatollah Karimi	Fatemyyoun Brigade	Syria	Nov 4, 15	Mashhad
27	Seyyd Hamid Hosseini	Fatemyyoun Brigade	Syria	Nov 4, 15	Mashhad
28	Seyed Ali Hosseini AKA Abou Sajad	Fatemyyoun Brigade Commander	Syria	Nov 2, 15	Qom
29	Heydar Anvari (aka Rostami)	Fatemyyoun Brigade	Syria	Okt 27, 15	Karaj
30	Mohammad Ali Hosseini	Fatemyyoun Brigade	Aleppo	Okt 26, 15	Kerman
31	Ali Mohammad Hezareh 394	Fatemyyoun Brigade	Syria	Okt 19, 15	Shiraz
32	Mohammad Ali Khademi		Syria	Okt 15, 15	Mashhad
33	Karbalaie Mohammad-Rahim Rahim		Syria	Okt 15, 15	Semnan
34	Aref Hosseini	Fatemyyoun Brigade	Syria	Okt 12, 15	Tehran
35	Yar Mohammad Mardani	Fatemyyoun Brigade		Okt 12, 15	Tehran
36	Khanali Yousefi	Fatemyyoun Brigade	Aleppo	Okt 28, 15	Jahrom
37	Mohammad Ali Hosseini	Fatemyyoun Brigade	Syria	Okt 26, 15	Kerman
38	Hossein, Sajed		Syria	Okt 8, 15	Qom
39	Ali Dad		Syria	Okt 8, 15	Qom
40	Reza Rahimi		Syria	Okt 8, 15	Qom
41	Al Asghar Alizadeh 385		Syria	Okt 8, 15	Tehran
42	Amir Bakhshi 386		Syria	Okt 8, 15	Kashan
43	Ali Doust Beygi 387		Syria	Okt 8, 15	Kashan
44	Reza Qorbani 388		Syria	Okt 8, 15	Kashan
45	Mohammad Ali Khademi	Fatemyyoun Brigade	Aleppo	Okt 7, 15	Mashhad
46	Esmail Mousavi		Syria	Sep 28, 15	Mashhad
47	Nazer Hosseini		Syria	Sep 28, 15	Mashhad
48	Gholam Hossein Heydari		Syria	Sep 23, 15	Shahre Rey
49	Mohammad Jafari		Syria	Sep 22, 15	Tehran
50	Mousa Alizadeh		Syria	Aug 27, 15	Mashhad
51	Heydari, Esmail377		Syria	Aug 24, 15	Shahre Rey
52	Medi Ahmadi	Fatemyyoun Brigade	Syria	Aug 13, 15	Shahre Rey
53	Salman Qalandari	Fatemyyoun Brigade	Syria	Aug 13, 15	Shahre Rey
54	Abdollah Didari	Fatemyyoun Brigade	Syria	Aug 13, 15	Shahre Rey
55	Seyyed Esmail Hassani	Fatemyyoun Brigade	Syria	Aug 13, 15	Shahre Rey
56	Mohammad Hosseini (aka Heshmat)	Fatemyyoun Brigade	Deraa	Aug 8, 15	unknown
57	Mojtaba Amiri	Fatemyyoun Brigade	Syria	Aug 7, 15	
58	Kazem Hosseini	Fatemyyoun Brigade	Syria	Aug 7, 15	
59	(First name unknown) Javadi	Fatemyyoun Brigade	Syria	Aug 7, 15	
60	Seyyed Rouhollah Mousavi	Fatemyyoun Brigade	Syria	Juli 25, 15	Mashhad

NO.	NAME	POSITION	PLACE OF DEATH	DATE OF BURIAL	PLACE OF BURIAL
61	Mohammad Ebrahimi	Fatemyyoun Brigade	Syria	Juli 23, 15	Qom
62	Ahmad Ali Hosseini	Fatemyyoun Brigade	Syria	Juli 16, 15	Chardangeh
63	Hossein Zafardoust	Fatemyyoun Brigade	Syria	Juli 7, 15	Mashhad
64	Seyed Sarvar Hashemi	Fatemyyoun Brigade	Syria	Juni 25, 15	Mashhad
65	Seyed Mohammad Hadi Hashemi	Fatemyyoun Brigade	Syria	Juni 25, 15	Mashhad
66	Seyed Mojtaba hosseini	Fatemyyoun Brigade	Syria	Juni 25, 15	Mashhad
67	Mojtaba Mirzaie	Fatemyyoun Brigade	Syria	Juni 25, 15	Mashhad
68	Hassan Farhadi Karimi	Fatemyyoun Brigade	Syria	Juni 25, 15	Mashhad
69	Hassan Farahani		Syria	Juni 25, 15	
70	Seyyed Assadollah Sajadi	Fatemyyoun Brigade	Syria	Spring 2014	Mashhad
71	Seyyed Amin Hosseini	Fatemyyoun Brigade	Syria	Mai 19, 15	Qom
72	Sayyed Esmail Sajadi	Fatemyyoun Brigade	Syria	Mai 15, 15	Gilan
73	Gholam Reza Mohammadi		Syria	Mai 8, 15	unknown
74	Hassan Mahmoudi		Syria	Mai 8, 15	Qom
75	Salim Eqbali		Syria	Mai 4, 15	unknown
76	Seyyed Ahmad Torabi	Youngest Afghan casualty (17 years old)	Syria	Apr 28, 15	Isfahan
77	Mohammad Javad Mohammadi		Syria	Apr 15, 15	Bardsir
78	Masoud Taheri	Fatemyyoun Brigade	Syria	März 20, 15	Tehran
79	Mostafa Ahmadi	Fatemyyoun Brigade	Syria	März 12, 15	Qom
80	Ali Alizadeh	Fatemyyoun Brigade	Syria	März 12, 15	Qom
81	Abouzar Ghaznavi		Syria	März 8, 15	Sanqar
82	Nemat Nazari		Syria	März 8, 15	Kashan
83	Habibollah Heydari	Fatemyyoun Brigade	Syria	März 6, 15	Qom
84	Seyed Naser Hosseini	Fatemyyoun Brigade	Syria	März 6, 15	Qom
85	Mehdi Saberi	A commander in Fatemyyoun Brigade	Syria	März 6, 15	Qom
86	Ahmad Rajabi	Fatemyyoun Brigade	Syria	März 6, 15	Qom
87	Seyyed assadollah Kamali	Fatemyyoun Brigade	Syria	März 6, 15	Isfahan
88	Seyyed Mohamamd Reza Alavi	Fatemyyoun Brigade	Syria	März 5, 15	Tehran
89	Reza Bakhshi	Deputy Commander of Fatemyyoun Brigade in Daraa	Tal Qarin, Syria	März 4, 15	Mashhad
90	Mahmoud Hakimi	Fatemyyoun Brigade	Syria	März 4, 15	Mashhad
91	Javid Yousefi	Fatemyyoun Brigade	Syria	März 4, 15	Mashhad
92	Nematollah Najafi	Fatemyyoun Brigade	Syria	März 4, 15	Mashhad
93	Qassem Sadat	Fatemyyoun Brigade	Syria	März 4, 15	Mashhad
94	Hossein Hosseini	Fatemyyoun Brigade	Syria	März 4, 15	Mashhad
95	General Alireza Tavassoli	Fatemyyoun Brigade	Daraa	März 4, 15	Mashhad
96	Hamid Yazdani	Fatemyyoun Brigade	Syria	März 4, 15	Tehran
97	Mohammad Ali Khavari	Fatemyyoun Brigade	Syria	März 4, 15	Varamin
98	Naim Rezaie	Fatemyyoun Brigade	Syria	März 4, 15	Karaj
99	Hossein Ahmadi	Fatemyyoun Brigade	Syria	März 4, 15	Karaj
100	Hassan Jafari	Fatemyyoun Brigade	Syria	März 4, 15	Isfahan
101	Mohammad Hosseini	Fatemyyoun Brigade	Syria	März 4, 15	Isfahan
102	General Alireza Tavassoli	Fatemyyoun Brigade	Daraa	März 2, 15	Qom
103	Mohammad Shojale	Fatemyyoun Brigade	Syria	Feb 28, 15	unknown
104	Seyed Abdollah Hosseini	Fatemyyoun Brigade	Syria	Feb 23, 15	Mashhad
105	Seyed Nourollah Hosseini	Fatemyyoun Brigade	Syria	Feb 23, 15	Mashhad
106	Mostafa -	Fatemyyoun Brigade	Syria	Feb 10, 15	Mashhad
107	Davoud Sharifi		Damascus	Feb 9, 15	Shahre Rey
108	Seyyed Ayatollah Hosseini	Fatemyyoun Brigade	Syria	Feb 7, 15	Semnan
109	Taleb Hossein Ansari	Fatemyyoun Brigade	Syria	Feb 5, 15	Mobarakeh

Afghan fighters and commanders killed in Syria

NO.	NAME	POSITION	PLACE OF DEATH	DATE OF BURIAL	PLACE OF BURIAL
110	Hossein Barati		Syria	Feb 3, 15	Pakdasht
111	Hassan Hosseini		Eastern Ghouta	Feb 3, 15	unknown
112	Naghibollah Hezareh	Fatemyyoun Brigade	Syria	Feb 1, 15	Tehran
113	Habib Shojaie	Fatemyyoun Brigade	Syria	Dez 31, 14	Mashhad
114	Seyed Eshaq Mousavi	Fatemyyoun Brigade	Syria	Dez 31, 14	Mashhad
115	Nour Mohammad Mohammadi	Fatemyyoun Brigade	Syria	Dez 31, 14	Mashhad
116	Seyyed Reza Hosseini	Fatemyyoun Brigade	Syria	Dez 30, 14	Qom
117	Mostafa Karimi	Fatemyyoun Brigade	Syria	Dez 27, 14	Semnan
118	Seyed Mohamad Mehdi Hosseini	Fatemyyoun Brigade	Syria	Dez 27, 14	Semnan
119	Ayyoub Rezaie	Fatemyyoun Brigade	Syria	Dez 21, 14	Islamshahr
120	Seyed Gholam Sakhi Hosseini	Fatemyyoun Brigade	Syria	Dez 20, 14	Qom
121	Zavarshah Ghassemi	Fatemyyoun Brigade	Syria	Dez 20, 14	Qom
122	Hafizollah Khodadadi	Fatemyyoun Brigade	Syria	Dez 8, 14	Tehran
123	Ramzan Mirzaie	Fatemyyoun Brigade	Syria	Dez 8, 14	Tehran
124	Mirza hossein Qorbani	Fatemyyoun Brigade	Syria	Dez 1, 14	Qom
125	Azizollah Rasoul	Fatemyyoun Brigade	Syria	Okt 18, 14	Tehran
126	Asghar Yousefi	Fatemyyoun Brigade	Syria	Okt 18, 14	Tehran
127	Mohammad Hossein Khoda Panah	Fatemyyoun Brigade	Syria	Okt 18, 14	Tehran
128	Sadeq Mohammadi	Fatemyyoun Brigade	Syria	Okt 18, 14	Tehran
129	Isa Hosseini		Syria	Okt 14, 14	
130	Hadi Salimi		Syria	Okt 14, 14	
131	Mostafa Khademi		Syria	Okt 14, 14	
132	Raouf Shabani		Syria	Okt 14, 14	
133	Gholam Mohammad Ahmadi		Syria	Okt 11, 14	
134	Reza Hosseini		Syria	Okt 8, 14	Pishva
135	Hojjat-ol-Islam Mohammad Rezaie	Fatemyyoun Brigade	Syria	Okt 2, 14	Mashhad
136	Javad Gholami	Fatemyyoun Brigade	Syria	Okt 2, 14	Mashhad
137	Seyyed Ali Hosseini	Fatemyyoun Brigade	Syria	Okt 2, 14	Mashhad
138	Mohammad Reza Tavassoli	Fatemyyoun Brigade	Syria	Okt 2, 14	Mashhad
139	Qorbanali Afshar	Fatemyyoun Brigade	Syria	Sep 19, 14	Pishva
140	Najibollah Moradi	17 years old member of Fatemyyoun Brigade	Syria	Sep 15, 14	Shiraz
141	Mohammad Hossein Akbari		Syria	Sep 12, 14	Tehran
142	Javid Mousavi		Syria	Sep 11, 14	Tehran
143	Seyed Mohammad Sadjadi	Fatemyyoun Brigade	Syria	Aug 26, 14	Tehran
144	Seyyed Hadi Soltan Nejad	Fatemyyoun Brigade	Syria	Aug 21, 14	Mashhad
145	Abdollah Rahmati	Fatemyyoun Brigade	Syria	Aug 21, 14	Mashhad
146	Boustan Qorbani		Syria	Aug 16, 14	Shahre Rey
147	Mostafa Jafari		Aleppo	Jun 16, 14	unknown
148	Mohammad Shafi' Karimi		Syria	Jun 16, 14	Varamin
149	Esmail Hosseini (Heidan)	Fatemyyoun Brigade	Syria	Jun 15, 14	Mashhad
150	Seyyed Mohammad Amin Hosseini	Fatemyyoun Brigade	Syria	Jun 15, 14	Qom
151	Mohammad Javad Bakhtiari	Fatemyyoun Brigade	Syria	Jun 15, 14	Qom
152	Mohammad Mortazavi		Syria	Jun 15, 14	Mashhad
153	Mohammad Javad Rahimi		Syria	Jun 15, 14	Mashhad
154	Taher Qorbani	Fatemyyoun Brigade	Syria	Mai 30, 14	Qom
155	Mojtaba Vaezi		Syria	Mai 19, 14	Markazi Prvince
156	Abbas Ali Hamidi		Syria	Mai 16, 14	Mashhad
157	Nour-Mohammad Qassemi		Syria	Mai 16, 14	Qom
158	Nour Mohammad Mousavi		Syria	Mai 16, 14	Qom
159	Seyyed Ahmad Hosseini	Fatemyyoun Brigade	Syria	Mai 9, 14	Qom
160	Hossein Mahmoudi	Fatemyyoun Brigade	Syria	Mai 9, 14	Qom
161	Ali Akbar Ebrahimi		Syria	Mai 9, 14	Tehran
162	Ahmad Hosseini		Syria	Mai 9, 14	Tehran
163	Zaman Jafari		Syria	Mai 8, 14	Tehran
164	Mohammad Jomeh Rasouli		Syria	Mai 1, 14	Isfahan

NO.	NAME	POSITION	PLACE OF DEATH	DATE OF BURIAL	PLACE OF BURIAL
165	Seyyed Javad Sajadi	Fatemyyoun Brigade	Syria	Apr 30, 14	Shiraz
166	Ahmad Arefi	Fatemyyoun Brigade	Syria	Apr 30, 14	Mashhad
167	Seyed Jafar Hosseini	Fatemyyoun Brigade	Syria	Apr 30, 14	Mashhad
168	Ali Reza Mohammadi		Syria	Apr 21, 14	Tehran
169	Qassem Shojaei		Syria	Apr 17, 14	Mashhad
170	Nasim Mohammadian		Syria	Apr 17, 14	Isfahan
171	Mohammad Taghi Hosseini	Fatemyyoun Brigade	Syria	Apr 10, 14	Islamshahr
172	Mohammad-Taqi Hosseini		Syria	Apr 8, 14	Islamshahr
173	Ali Salehi		Syria	Apr 8, 14	unknown
174	Ali Adeli	Fatemyyoun Brigade	Syria	Apr 2, 14	Malard
175	Mohammad Qassem Hosseini		Syria	Feb 13, 14	Mashhad
176	Mohammad Nader Akhlaghi	Fatemyyoun Brigade	Syria	Feb 12, 14	Isfahan
177	Reza Esmaili	Fatemyyoun Brigade	Ghouta	Jan 28, 14	Mashhad
178	Yaser Jafari	Fatemyyoun Brigade	Syria	Nov 27, 13	Mashhad
179	Mehdi Salmani		Syria	Nov 26, 13	Isfahan
180	Azim Vaezi		Syria	Sep 1, 13	unknown
181	Mahmoud Kalani		Syria	unknown	Kerman
182	Ali Asghar Mousavi		Syria	unknown	Shahre Rey
183	Ali Mousa, Reza-Moham-mad337		Syria	unknown	unknown

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Pakistani fighters and commanders killed in Syria

NO.	NAME	POSITION	PLACE OF DEATH	DATE OF BURIAL	PLACE OF BURIAL
1	Mazaher Hossein	member of Zeynabyyoun brigade	Syria	Nov 28, 15	Qom
2	Shafiq Hossein	member of Zeynabyyoun brigade	Syria	Nov 28, 15	Qom
3	Etezas Hossein	member of Zeynabyyoun brigade	Syria	Nov 28, 15	Qom
4	Kamel Hossein	member of Zeynabyyoun brigade	Syria	Nov 28, 15	Qom
5	Javid Hossein	member of Zeynabyyoun brigade	Syria	Nov 28, 15	Qom
6	Mobin Hossein	member of Zeynabyyoun brigade	Syria	Nov 28, 15	Qom
7	Mobin Ali	member of Zeynabyyoun brigade	Syria	Nov 28, 15	Qom
8	Mottahar Hossein	member of Zeynabyyoun brigade	Syria	Nov 28, 15	Qom
9	Etezar Hassan	member of Zeynabyyoun brigade	Syria	Nov 28, 15	Qom
10	Sartaj Khan	member of Zeynabyyoun brigade	Syria	Nov 13, 15	Qom
11	Navid Hossein	member of Zeynabyyoun brigade	Syria	Nov 13, 15	Qom
12	Ershad Hossein	member of Zeynabyyoun brigade	Syria	Nov 13, 15	Qom
13	Seyyed Hassan	member of Zeynabyyoun brigade	Syria	Juni 26, 15	Qom
14	Monir Hossein	member of Zeynabyyoun brigade	Syria	Juni 26, 15	Qom
15	Emtiaz Hossein	member of Zeynabyyoun brigade	Syria	Juni 26, 15	Qom
16	Aqid Hossein	member of Zeynabyyoun brigade	Syria	Juni 26, 15	Qom
17	Momtaaz Hossein	member of Zeynabyyoun brigade	Syria	Juni 26, 15	Qom
18	Hassan Saqi	member of Zeynabyyoun brigade	Syria	Juni 26, 15	Qom
19	Sajed Hossein	member of Zeynabyyoun brigade	Syria	Mai 27, 15	Qom
20	Name unknown	member of Zeynabyyoun brigade	Syria	Apr 25, 15	Qom
21	Name unknown	member of Zeynabyyoun brigade	Syria	Apr 25, 15	Qom
22	Norouz Ali Darvish	member of Zeynabyyoun brigade, from Parachinar, Pakistan	Syria	Apr 23, 15	Qom
23	Hadi Hossein	member of Zeynabyyoun brigade, from Parachinar, Pakistan	Syria	Apr 23, 15	Qom
24	Taher Hossein	member of Zeynabyyoun brigade- from Parachinar, Pakistan	Syria	Apr 23, 15	Qom
25	Shahadat Ali	member of Zeynabyyoun brigade- from Parachinar, Pakistan	Syria	Apr 23, 15	Qom
26	Seyed Razi Shah	member of Zeynabyyoun brigade, from Parachinar, Pakistan	Syria	Apr 23, 15	Qom
27	Taher Hossein	member of Zeynabyyoun brigade, from Parachinar, Pakistan	Syria	Apr 9, 15	Qom
28	Jamil Hossein	member of Zeynabyyoun brigade, from Parachinar, Pakistan	Syria	Apr 9, 15	Qom

NO.	NAME	POSITION	PLACE OF DEATH	DATE OF BURIAL	PLACE OF BURIAL
29	Bagher Hossein	member of Zeynabyyoun brigade, from Parachinar, Pakistan	Syria	Apr 9, 15	Qom
30	Javid Hossein	member of Zeynabyyoun brigade, from Parachinar, Pakistan	Syria	Apr 9, 15	Qom
31	Ghabel Hossein	member of Zeynabyyoun brigade, from Parachinar, Pakistan	Syria	Apr 9, 15	Qom
32	Seyed Razi Shah	member of Zeynabyyoun brigade, from Parachinar, Pakistan	Syria	Apr 9, 15	Qom
33	Ghader Ali	member of Zeynabyyoun brigade, from Parachinar, Pakistan	Syria	Apr 9, 15	Qom
34	Seyed Ali Zeinab Jafari	member of Zeynabyyoun brigade	Syria	März 16, 15	Qom
35	Seyed Saber Hossein Shirazi	member of Zeynabyyoun brigade	Syria	März 16, 15	Qom
36	Adel Hossein	member of Zeynabyyoun brigade	Syria	Feb 6, 15	Qom
37	Seyed Habib Shah Tori	member of Zeynabyyoun brigade	Syria	Jan 21, 15	Qom
38	Name unknown	member of Zeynabyyoun brigade	Syria	Nov 22, 14	Qom
39	Name unknown	member of Zeynabyyoun brigade	Syria	Nov 22, 14	Qom

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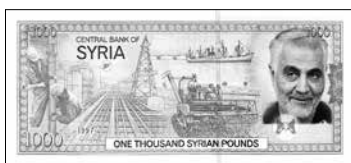
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Seven open Letters from Naame Shaam to US President Barack Obama, published in the Washington Post newspaper between November 2014 and February 2016



Iran is already occupying Syria, Mr. President

Iran's Revolutionary Guards' al-Qods Force, headed by General Qassem Soleimani, is in effective control of all major military operations attributed to the Syrian regime. Iranian and Hezbollah Lebanon commanders are in control of most Syrian regime forces, as well as Iraqi and Afghani Shia militias.

The Iranian role in Syria amounts to an unlawful military occupation, as defined by the 1907 Hague Regulations and the Fourth Geneva Convention of 1949.

In the areas out of their control, barrel bombs, mortars and missiles target civilians daily, with the full knowledge and complicity of Iranian and Hezbollah commanders. Chemical and toxic weapons have frequently been used.

The Iranian regime should not get away with war crimes and crimes against humanity committed in Syria, while also spreading mayhem in Iraq, Lebanon and Yemen through the militias it controls there.

This is why, Mr. President, we ask you to:

- Treat the war in Syria as an international armed conflict involving a foreign occupation by the Iranian regime and its militias and a liberation struggle by the Syrian people against this occupation.
- Refer the situation in Syria to the International Criminal Court to investigate the war crimes and crimes against humanity committed in Syria, including Iran's and Hezbollah's role.
- Impose no-fly zones to protect civilians and allow humanitarian access throughout Syria, in line with the international 'responsibility to protect' norm.
- Fulfill your promises by arming and training enough moderate Syrian rebels, not only to fight ISIS and al-Qaeda-linked groups, but also Syrian and Iranian regime forces and militias.

Mr. President, the people of Syria need to know that they did not make a mistake in March 2011 when they took to the street demanding freedom and dignity.

To visualize the Iranian occupation of Syria, Naame Shaam produced a photomontage of a Syrian bank note with the counterfeit of Iranian General Qassem Soleimani, the de facto ruler of Syria.

For more information about Iran's role in Syria, see Naame Shaam's report "Iran in Syria – From an Ally of the Regime to an Occupying Force": www.naameshaam.org

Naame Shaam, which means "Letter from Syria" in Persian, is a group of Iranian, Syrian and Lebanese activists and citizen-journalists that focuses on uncovering the role of the Iranian regime in Syria. The group is supported by the Netherlands-based Rule of Law Foundation, www.lawrules.org.

This is the first advert out of four. The next one will be published here in mid-May 2015.

www.naameshaam.org





A silent sectarian cleansing is taking place in Syria, Mr. President

Syrian regime forces and Iranian-controlled militias have been destroying and appropriating civilian property en masse in certain parts of Syria. They have also been forcibly displacing and transferring civilian population in and out of these areas, coupled with dubious 'reconstruction' projects.

The majority of those affected happen to be Sunni. The result is changing Syria's demographic composition.

Together, these war crimes and crimes against humanity constitute a deliberate policy of sectarian cleansing that is being implemented under the cover of the war.

The ultimate aim of this scheme is to secure the Damascus-Homs-Coast corridor along the Lebanese border in order to both provide a geographical and demographic continuity of so-called regime-held areas and to secure arms shipments to Hezbollah in Lebanon.

This is why, Mr. President, we ask you to:

- Treat the war in Syria as an international armed conflict involving a foreign occupation by the Iranian regime and its militias and a liberation struggle by the Syrian people against this occupation.
- Refer the situation in Syria to the International Criminal Court to investigate the war crimes and crimes against humanity committed in Syria, including Iran's and Hezbollah's role.

- Impose no-fly zones to protect civilians and allow humanitarian access throughout Syria, in line with the international 'responsibility to protect' norm.
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This is the second advert out of four.

The first one was published in this newspaper on May 5.

The last two will be published next June.

www.naameshaam.org



The policy of 'slowly bleeding Iran and Hezbollah in Syria' isn't working, Mr. President



The US administration's refusal to provide serious support to moderate Syrian rebels has allowed Iranian-controlled militias to gain the upper hand in Syria. It has also led to the strengthening of ISIS and al-Qaeda-linked groups.

The rationale behind the policy appears to be an assumption that a prolonged proxy war with the Iranian regime in Syria, coupled with crippling economic sanctions and falling oil prices, would eventually lead to weakening the Iranian regime and forcing Tehran to scrap its military nuclear program. However, the Iranian regime is now in effective control of four Arab capitals (Beirut, Baghdad, Damascus and Sanaa). This cannot be in the interest of the US.

It cannot be in the US interest that the Iranian regime is left to consolidate its dominance in the region through Shia militias that are as sectarian and extremist as ISIS and al-Qaeda.

It cannot be in the US interest that hundreds of thousands of Syrians are left to die and the moderate Syrian opposition is becoming weaker and weaker, and may eventually be defeated, because the US does not want to anger Iran in Syria and Iraq and endanger the ongoing nuclear negotiations.

It cannot be in the US interest that Syria and the wider region are left to descend into the Dark Ages, with ISIS and al-Qaeda attracting more and more extremists and exporting them to the rest of the world.

This is why, Mr. President, we ask you to:

- Fulfill your promises by arming and training enough moderate Syrian rebels, not only to fight ISIS and al-Qaeda-linked groups, but also Syrian and Iranian regime forces and militias.
- Impose no-fly zones to protect civilians and allow humanitarian access throughout Syria, in line with the international 'responsibility to protect' norm.
- Treat the war in Syria as an international armed conflict involving a foreign occupation by the Iranian regime and its militias and a liberation struggle by the Syrian people against this occupation.
- Refer the situation in Syria to the International Criminal Court to investigate the war crimes and crimes against humanity committed in Syria, including Iran's and Hezbollah's role.

Mr. President, only the US can save Syria from disintegration. Only the US can seriously pressure the Iranian regime to withdraw its Revolutionary Guards and Shia militias from Syria, Lebanon, Iraq and Yemen.

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This is the third ad out of four. The first was published in this newspaper on May 5, the second on 19 May 2015.

The last one will be published end of this month.

www.naameshaam.org



Iran's nuclear plans are intrinsically linked to its destabilizing policies in the region, Mr. President

We support engaging with the Iranian regime to persuade it to abandon its military nuclear program. Diplomacy should indeed be given a chance to prevent a major military conflict in the region. The use of force should be the very last option.

At the same time, the US administration is insisting on separating the nuclear issue from Iran's destabilizing policies in the region, even though the two issues are in reality one and the same. The main reason for the Iranian regime's determination to save the Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad at any cost is to maintain Iran's ability to ship arms to Hezbollah in Lebanon via Syria, so as to keep Hezbollah a strong deterrent against any possible Israeli or Western attacks on Iran's military nuclear facilities. Syria has been the lifeline of Iran's army in Lebanon, i.e. Hezbollah, since 2006. Hezbollah's *raison d'être* is to enable the Iranian regime to build a nuclear bomb.

Agreeing to lift the economic sanctions on Iran for the sake of limited concessions from the Iranian regime about its nuclear program, and without any serious commitment to end its intervention in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon and Yemen, is effectively giving Iran a green light and the financial ability to carry on with its destabilizing policies in these countries. And to eventually run for the nuclear bomb.

That is why, Mr. President, we ask you to:

- Push for a fundamental shift in Iran's foreign policy, without trading Syria, Iraq, Lebanon and Yemen for the Iranian nuclear bomb.
- Link the Iran nuclear talks and sanctions to the Iranian regime's intervention in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon and Yemen.
- Tell Iranian negotiators that there will be no lifting of economic sanctions until Iran pulls its troops and militias out of Syria.

- Treat the war in Syria as an international armed conflict involving a foreign occupation by the Iranian regime and its militias and a liberation struggle by the Syrian people against this occupation.
- Refer the situation in Syria to the International Criminal Court to investigate the war crimes and crimes against humanity committed in Syria, including Iran's and Hezbollah's role.
- Impose no-fly zones to protect civilians and allow humanitarian access throughout Syria, in line with the international 'responsibility to protect' norm.
- Fulfill your promises by arming and training enough moderate Syrian rebels, not only to fight ISIS and al-Qaeda-linked groups, but also Syrian and Iranian regime forces and militias.

Mr. President, only the US can save Syria from disintegration. Only the US can seriously pressure the Iranian regime to withdraw its Revolutionary Guards and Shia militias from Syria, Lebanon, Iraq and Yemen.

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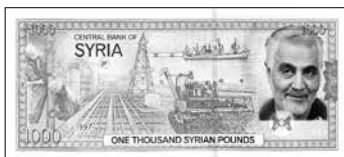
This is the last ad out of four.

The first was published in this newspaper on May 5, the second on May 19, the third on June 23, 2015.

www.naameshaam.org



Iran will continue financing terror, Mr. President



As a result of the nuclear deal signed with Iran last July, the Iranian regime will have access to US\$ 100-150 billion in 2016, in addition to new revenue from oil export. Some of this cash will be pumped into the country's ailing economy. But a lot of the fresh dollars will certainly be used to finance the Iranian

regime's terrorist activities and destabilising policies in Syria and elsewhere in the Middle East.

In a new report under the title "Financing Terror", we calculated that, since the outbreak of the Syrian revolution in March 2011, Iran has been propping up the killing machine of the Assad regime with US\$ 3 billion to US\$ 5 billion annually. This 'aid' has contributed to the death of over 300,000 people, the displacement of more than seven million inside Syria and about four million to other countries.

Additionally, Iran has been providing Hezbollah Lebanon with US\$ 100 million to US\$ 200 million per year since the 1980s, not accounting for special payments or arms deliveries. Shia militias in Iraq received US\$ 10 million to US\$ 35 million annually from the mid to the late 2000s. This increased to an estimated US\$ 100 million to US\$ 200 million yearly as of 2009.

Iran also provided the Palestinian Hamas with US\$ 100 million to US\$ 250 million between 2007 and 2011. The Palestinian Islamic Jihad received US\$ 100 million to US\$ 150 million annually since 2007. The Houthi militias in Yemen received US\$ 10 million to US\$ 25 million since 2010.

Our findings suggest that Iran's lavish expenditure on financing terror in the Middle East within the considered periods of time totalled between US\$ 20 and US\$ 80 billion. We believe this policy will continue in 2016. This cannot be in the interest of the US and its allies.

That is why we ask you, Mr. President, to:

- Treat the war in Syria as an international armed conflict that involves a foreign occupation by Iran and Russia on the one hand, and a liberation struggle by the Syrian people against this occupation on the other.
- Support referring the situation in Syria to the International Criminal Court to investigate all war crimes and crimes against humanity committed in Syria.
- Pressure Russia with more economic sanctions and diplomatic isolation so that it disengages from Iran and becomes part of the solution in Syria.
- Fulfill your promises by arming and training enough moderate Syrian rebels, not only to fight Daesh and al-Qaeda-linked groups, but also Syrian and Iranian regime forces and militias.
- Impose no-fly zones to protect civilians and allow humanitarian access throughout Syria, in line with the international 'responsibility to protect' norm.
- Help Syrians set up a democratic state where the rule of law prevails, and where there is no place for al-Assad and his supporters.

Mr. President, only the US can prevent Syria and the Middle East from further disintegration and chaos.

To visualize the Iranian occupation of Syria, the Naame Shaam campaign has produced a new Syrian bank note with the counterfeit of Iranian General Qassem Soleimani, the de facto ruler of Syria. See www.naameshaam.org **Naame Shaam** means "Letter from Syria" in Persian. We are a group of secular and progressive Iranian, Syrian and Lebanese activists and citizen-journalists who focus on uncovering the role of the Iranian regime in Syria. We are supported by the Netherlands-based Rule of Law Foundation, www.lawrules.org

This is the first out of two ads. The second one will be printed in this paper next week.

www.naameshaam.org



Endless sorrow and despair in Syria, Mr. President. Endless

Death, destruction and displacement on unprecedented scale have become daily routine in Syria. The main culprits on the ground are the Iranian Revolutionary Guards and the militias they control – Hezbollah Lebanon and Iraqi and Afghani Shia militiamen – who have been carrying out all major military operations since mid-2013 on behalf of the Assad regime.

More recently, these militias have been supported by Russian war planes, which have mainly been bombing Syrian rebels backed by the US. Daesh – the so-called Islamic State – is rarely targeted. Today, regime-held areas in Syria are effectively occupied by Iran and its militias, which have been implementing a systematic scheme of sectarian cleansing in Damascus, Homs and other areas.

The lack of hope and serious support is driving many Sunni Muslims in Syria (and in Iraq) to join Daesh and Qaeda-linked groups because of Iran's sectarian policies in the region. Sunni Muslims believe that the US has sold out Syria (and Iraq) to Iran for the sake of the nuclear deal signed with Iran in July 2015. Even worse, many in the Middle East believe that the US has stopped caring about values like freedom and human rights.

News of Western business delegations visiting Iran to sign new deals is further fueling the propaganda machine of Daesh. Empty promises by the US to seriously support moderate rebels are eroding what is left of Western credibility. Not acting decisively in Syria is making the situation worse by the day.

Now Russia has stepped in, capitalizing on the West's failure to act. The result is more radicalization and extremism, more terror, more refugees and a disintegrating Middle East. This cannot be in the interest of the US and its allies.

Mr. President, there is no time to waste to stop the bloodshed and chaos in Syria. That is why we ask you to:

- Treat the war in Syria as an international armed conflict that involves a foreign occupation by Iran and Russia on the one hand, and a liberation struggle by the Syrian people against this occupation on the other.
- Support referring the situation in Syria to the International Criminal Court to investigate all war crimes and crimes against humanity committed in Syria.
- Pressure Russia with more economic sanctions and diplomatic isolation so that it disengages from Iran and becomes part of the solution in Syria.
- Fulfill your promises by arming and training enough moderate Syrian rebels, not only to fight Daesh and al-Qaeda-linked groups, but also Syrian and Iranian regime forces and militias.
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Mr. President, only the US can prevent Syria and the Middle East from further disintegration and chaos.

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This is the second out of a series two ads.
The first one was published
in this paper on December 7, 2015

www.naameshaam.org



The Russian bombing of Syria must end, Mr. President

Russian war planes have been mainly bombing civilians and rebels supported by the US and its allies in Syria. All types of weapons have been used in this bombardment campaign, from cluster, vacuum and phosphorus bombs, to long-range cruise missiles and 'dumb bombs'. Hundreds of civilians and moderate rebels have been killed and injured, and tens of thousands have been forced to flee their homes.

Russia's military intervention in Syria is aimed mainly at preventing the defeat of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards, who control and direct the Syrian regime troops and militias on the ground. Tens of thousands of Iran's foot soldiers – the Lebanese Hezbollah, Iraqi and Afghani Shia militias, as well as Syrians Alawi militiamen – have been committing war crimes and crimes against humanity under the cover of Russian planes.

Syrians are asking: Under what right are Russia and Iran bombing Syria and starving besieged towns and cities to death? Under what right is the regime of President Bashar al-Assad and his supporters allowed to commit mass murder?

Syrians also want to know why the US and its allies are not stopping this carnage, and why the US and the EU are not imposing new sanctions against Russia and Iran for these war crimes. Most Syrians today believe that Western democratic values have been sacrificed in Syria for the sake of reaching a nuclear agreement with Iran and future business deals. The West's inaction to stop the war in Syria is seen as complacency, and even complicity.

Mr. President, Russia is capitalizing on the West's failure to act. The result is more radicalization and extremism, more terror, more refugees and a disintegrating Middle East. This cannot be in the interest of the US and its allies.

That is why we ask you to:

- Treat the war in Syria as an international armed conflict that involves a foreign occupation by Iran and Russia on the one hand, and a liberation struggle by the Syrian people against this occupation on the other.



Mr. President, only the US can prevent further disintegration and chaos in Syria and the Middle East.

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the de facto ruler of Syria. **Naame Shaam**, which means "Letter from Syria" in Persian, is a group of secular and progressive Iranian, Syrian and Lebanese activists and citizen-journalists who focus on uncovering the role of the Iranian regime in Syria. It is part of the Netherlands-based Rule of Law Foundation, www.lawrules.org. For more information about the campaign and its activities, see www.naameshaam.org.

This is the seventh Naame Shaam ad in the Washington Post.
The other six were published in this paper in 2015.

www.naameshaam.org



<http://www.naameshaam.org/report-silent-sectarian-cleansing/>

Silent Sectarian Cleansing

Iranian Role
in Mass Demolitions
and Population
Transfers in Syria

© Naame Shaam, 1st edition, May 2015



Financing Terror

The economic impact of
Iran's nuclear programme
and its support to
paramilitary groups across
the Middle East

© Naame Shaam, December 2015



The Syrian regime would not have survived long without the unlimited, full-scale military support of the Iranian regime.

There is ample evidence that the Iranian regime's leadership has participated in many crimes in Syria in various ways and at various levels, ranging from 'inciting' and 'endorsing and adopting' specific acts to 'aiding and abetting' war crimes and crimes against humanity.

From being historically mutually beneficial allies, the Iranian regime is now effectively an occupying force in the regime-held areas of Syria. Syrian President Bashar al-Assad is little more than a puppet in the hands of Sepah Pasdaran (the Iranian Revolution Guards) and its foreign operations arm Sepah Qods. The latter's commander-in-chief, Gen. Qassem Soleimani, is the *de facto* ruler of 'Iranian-occupied Syria'.

The war in Syria should be regarded as an international conflict that warrants the application of the four Geneva Conventions, and the regime-held areas of Syria should be considered occupied territory.

The Iranian Spiritual Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, has made a choice to 'go for it' in Syria at any economic and human cost. This 'Syrian Vietnam' is not just a consequence of this choice. It is also a policy by the US administration and its allies, which the authors describe as the strategy of 'slowly bleeding Iran in Syria'.

Syria has become 'Iran's Vietnam', and Iran is 'bleeding' in Syria.

But the Iranian regime may be capable of bleeding for a long time still, much longer than the Syrian people can endure.

