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Iran in Syria**

Jonathan Spyer

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Israel and the Emergent Western Conflict Against Iran in Syria

The two wars that have been raging in Syria over recent years are currently drawing to a close. They are set to be replaced, however, not by tranquility and peace, but rather by the opening up of new conflict systems on Syrian soil. These new conflicts are driven not by internal Syrian dynamics but rather by the clash of external powers on Syrian soil.

Central among these emergent conflict systems is the effort by the US and its allies to contain and roll back the Iranian influence both in Syria and across the region. Iran has emerged as the main beneficiary of the fragmentation of a number of Arab states as a result of the unrest of recent years. In Lebanon, Syria, Iraq and Yemen the methods of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) have produced major gains for Teheran, leading some analysts to conclude that Teheran today effectively 'controls' four Arab capitals (Beirut, Baghdad, Damascus and Sana'a). While such a claim is exaggerated, it is undeniable that Teheran has significantly expanded its influence in recent years, and now stands on the cusp of achieving its goal of a 'land corridor' from the Iraq-Iran border to the Mediterranean.

This Iranian ambition and the determination of western allies to prevent its realization, are set to form the basis for the emergent contest between Iran and the US and its allies in Syria. There are two main elements to this contest. This paper will seek to look into both. The first is the ongoing secret war currently being waged by Israel against Iran and its interests on Iranian soil. The second is the overt US presence in eastern Syria, in partnership with the Kurdish-dominated Syrian Democratic Forces.

This paper is based on interviews conducted during a visit to SDF-controlled north-east Syria in late July and with conversations with serving and former Israeli officials engaged in relevant areas.

Iran's gains in Syria

The relationship of alliance between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Ba'athist regime in Syria is of long standing. It dates back to the first years following the Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979, and the support afforded Iran by Syria in the subsequent Iran-Iraq War. In the course of the Syrian civil war over the last seven years, Iran has more than repaid any debt owed for Syria's earlier support. Indeed, the support of Teheran, and specifically the mobilization by the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps of its proxy militias and use of its methods of paramilitary organization have proven crucial for the regime's survival and its eventual victory over the rebellion against it.

What form has this taken? A central dilemma facing the Assad regime from the outset of the war was the absence of loyal manpower in sufficient quantities for its defense. This derived

from the narrow sectarian base of the regime (the Alawi community, to which the Assads belong, numbered only 12% of the Syrian population. The rebellion, meanwhile, emerged from the Sunni Arab community, numbering 60%.)

Iran, and more specifically the IRGC, was the force that stepped into the breach and addressed this problem. The IRGC did this in three specific ways: firstly, the Guards mobilized and deployed paramilitary proxies from across the region (along with IRGC personnel themselves). These included Lebanese Hizballah, Iraqi Shia militias, the Afghan Fatemiyun group, the Pakistani Zeinabiyun and other groups.

Secondly, the IRGC established a number of local, 'Syrian Hizballah' type groups. Directly recruited by the IRGC, sometimes with the cooperation of Lebanese Hizballah, these groups included Quwat al-Ridha from the Homs area, al-Ghalibun from the Sayida Zeinab area in Damascus Governorate, and the 313 Brigade from the Deraa area.

Thirdly, the Iranians established structures within the official ranks of the Syrian state security forces. These – such as the National Defense Forces and the Local Defense Forces – were organized along the lines of the Iranian paramilitary Basij.

All these forces, in their different ways, have played an indispensable role in Assad's survival and resurgence.

With the war now reaching its conclusion, the proper dimensions and nature of the Iranian project in Syria are becoming apparent. As may be seen from previous examples of Iranian intervention into other countries' civil wars, Iran's assistance is not of a purely altruistic nature, and the structures created by the IRGC for participation in a particular conflict are not then disbanded when that conflict ends. Rather, they are maintained as forces for the furtherance of Iranian long-term aims. Thus Hizballah in Lebanon (the prototypical IRGC proxy) was supposedly created to fight Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon, but today is the primary military and political force in Lebanon, nearly twenty years after Israel's withdrawal.

Similarly, the Shia militias in Iraq were mobilized in the summer of 2014 to fight the imminent danger of ISIS, but have remained as a political and military force, following the defeat of the Sunni jihadis in 2017.

In Syria, it is clear that the Iranians are attempting to establish a similar situation, in which a weak, hollowed out Assad regime remains in place, while Teheran operates an independent structure of political and military power on the ground. What are the specific goals of Iran in Syria?

Iran intends to maintain control of a passageway from Iraq into Syria, and thence to Lebanon, the Mediterranean Sea and the border with Israel. In this area, Teheran is engaged in the deployment of personnel, and ongoing efforts to develop missiles and build a physical infrastructure inside Syria.

According to a report in the Al Quds Al-Arabi newspaper on April 28th, 2018, Iran currently possesses fully 19 facilities on Syrian soil. These include air bases, such as T4 located near Palmyra, and logistical facilities and command centers, such as the 'Glasshouse' near the Damascus International Airport. The latest information available suggests that Iran is in the process of constructing a surface to surface missile factory outside Wadi Jahannam in northwest Syria. Pictures released by ImageSat International suggest that the facility

resembles the Parchin complex in Iran itself, a key element in the Iranian ballistic missile program, which has been linked also to its nuclear ambitions.

This Iranian project is part of the larger regional picture in which the IRGC utilizes combined political and paramilitary methods in order to achieve Iranian domination within areas of the Middle East wrecked in recent years by conflict and fragmentation.

There are in Syria presently two western-led projects, which stand in the way of the Iranian achievement of their goal in that country (now that the Sunni Arab rebellion has been defeated). These are Israel's determination to degrade Iranian capabilities, with the ultimate stated intention of securing the departure of Iran in its entirety from Syrian soil, and the US-led Syrian Democratic Forces project, which as a result of the successful prosecution of the war against Islamic State, is currently in possession of an area consisting of around 30% of the soil of Syria. This area contains around 80% of Syria's oil and gas resources. In addition, the US maintains a base at al-Tanf close to the Syrian-Jordanian border. Both the SDF area and the area around the al-Tanf base constitute physical barriers to the completion of the Iranian 'land corridor' to the sea, the border with Israel and with Lebanon. The ongoing IDF campaign against the Iranian infrastructure-building process constitutes an additional obstacle in the way of Teheran's plans. Let us consider each of these separately:

Israel's 'secret war' against Iran in Syria

Senior Israeli defense officials, speaking on background to the author of this paper, described Israel as currently being engaged in a 'secret war' against Iran on the soil of Syria. The record would appear to suggest that this effort has three elements:

Firstly, Israel is conducting periodic airstrikes against Iranian targets on Syrian soil. This is clearly intended to frustrate and degrade the Iranian attempt to build up its infrastructure and to turn Syria into an additional front against Israel.

Israeli aircraft have carried out periodic strikes against Syrian regime and Hizballah targets throughout the period of civil war in Syria. However, beginning in February of this year, Israel began to directly target Iranian facilities personnel on Syrian soil. The largest scale clashes so far took place on May 10, when in response to Iranian forces firing 20 Fajr 5 missiles toward Israeli positions on the Golan Heights, Israel launched an extensive air operation, targeting Iranian infrastructure throughout Syria. Operation 'House of Cards' involved 28 warplanes and the firing of 70 missiles, according to Russian Defense Ministry figures. Targets hit included a variety of facilities maintained by the IRGC in Syria, including a military compound and logistics complex of the Quds Force in Kiswah, an Iranian military camp north of Damascus, weapons storage sites belonging to the Quds Force at Damascus International Airport, and intelligence systems and installations associated with the Quds Force.

To date the actions of May 10 have constituted the most intense moment of the ongoing Israeli campaign. A recent statement by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu indicated that the campaign was not over: "The Israel Defense Forces will continue to act with full determination and strength against Iran's attempts to station forces and advanced weapons systems in Syria", Netanyahu told an audience in the southern Israeli town of Dimona.

But Israeli strikes appear to not only be targeting infrastructure targets. In mid-June, an airstrike took place on al-Harra, south east of Albukamal on the Syrian-Iraqi border. The target

was a base of the Ktaeb Hizballah militia, a leading Iran-supported irregular force. 22 members of the organization were killed in the strike. No country claimed responsibility for the attack. An Iranian militia commander quoted by Reuters said that the US was probably responsible for the attack.

A direct attack by the US on a force associated with the Iranians would represent a major shift in US strategy, however. It seems far more likely that the attack was carried out by Israel. If so, it indicates that for Israel, the Iranian land corridor from Iraq to Syria, and the passage of militia units through this, are issues of no lesser importance than the matter of Iranian infrastructure further west.

Lastly, there are indications that Israel may well be carrying out targeted assassinations against selected targets associated with the Iranians in Syria. On August 5, Dr. Aziz Asber, head of the Syrian Scientific Studies and Research Center in Masyaf, was killed by a car bomb in the city of Hama. Asber was involved, among other things, in a project to convert SM600 rockets into precision-guided missiles. A veteran official involved with Syria's chemical weapons program and working directly alongside General Qasem Suleimani, the IRGC Qods Force commander, he had long been sought after by Israel, according to a report in the Times of Israel.

On August 18, Ahmad Assa Habib, commander of the 'Palestine Branch' of Syrian Military Intelligence, was shot in the head in the village of Baarin, west of Hama city. Israel Army Radio, quoting Syrian opposition sources, noted that Habib was responsible for the 'struggle against Israel.'

Israel has not, of course, taken responsibility for either of these actions, and it cannot be said with certainty that Jerusalem was responsible. But given the pattern of Israeli activities in the past, it is certainly distinctly possible that these actions form an additional part of the secret war underway against Iran in Syria.

Israeli actions point to a very clear dominance by Israel in the field of intelligence regarding the southern Syrian theater.

While Israel's actions have undoubtedly proven effective on the tactical level, it is questionable as to how they can in the short term at least secure the departure of Iran in its entirety from Syria. Teheran has invested over \$30 billion in its efforts in the country in recent years. The level of disruption currently taking place is unlikely to persuade it to order a complete change of direction. As such, it is likely that Israel's reiteration of this goal is intended to signal that Israeli actions against Iran in Syria are set to continue. Israel's secret war against Iran in Syria is thus one of the major tools of pressure available in a comprehensive western strategy to contain and roll back Iranian advances.

Israel's campaign against Iran in Syria has been complicated by the September, 2018 incident in which a Russian Il-20 aircraft was accidentally downed by Syrian anti-aircraft fire after an IAF raid on an Iranian facility in Latakia province. Moscow's subsequent decision to reject Israel's account of the event, to supply the S-300 system to Syria, and to improve its own electronic warfare and radar capacities in Syria will create additional challenges for Israeli pilots operating over Syrian skies. But the operation by Syrian personnel of the S-300 system will not be an insurmountable barrier to continued Israeli actions, and considering the strategic importance attached by Israeli decision-makers to the imperative of preventing Iranian entrenchment and consolidation, it may be expected that the Israeli campaign will continue, despite the Russian moves.

The SDF area of control

The area controlled by the Syrian Democratic Forces currently constitutes a major physical obstacle to the Iranian hope of consolidating its land corridor. It also constitutes the sole remaining major barrier to the complete victory of the anti-western Assad regime in the Syrian civil war. The SDF-controlled area consists of two regions – Jazira and Euphrates cantons. This entity came into being with the retreat of Syrian regime forces from a large swathe of northern Syria in the June-July 2012 period. A third, isolated canton, Afrin, was destroyed by the Turkish army's Operation Olive Branch in January, 2018.

The SDF-controlled area has a population of around 4.6 million people. It covers 35,000 square kilometers (13,500 square miles) of Syria's surface area of 185,000 square kilometers.

The majority population is Kurdish, though Arabs form a majority in parts of the Euphrates region. Its military force is the 45000-strong Syrian Democratic Forces, formed in late 2015, and dominated de facto by the Kurdish YPG (Peoples' Protection Units). The area is governed by a coalition known as the Movement for a Democratic Society (TEV-DEM), which is dominated by the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD). The latter, in turn, is a member of the Kurdistan Communities Union (KCK), a coalition of parties supportive of the ideology of Abdullah Ocalan, founder of the PKK (Kurdish Workers Party).

The alliance between this entity and the United States derives from the now successfully-prosecuted war against the Islamic State, which commenced in 2014. The US sought a reliable, non-Islamist ground partner to prosecute that war. The SDF is the successful result of that search. The US currently officially maintains 2000 military personnel in the SDF area. It is generally considered that the actual number of US personnel is somewhat larger than this. A considerable US military infrastructure has also been constructed in the course of the war against IS. This includes two air bases, one in the Rumeilan area of Hasakeh province, and another in Kharab al-Sheikh town, south west of Kobani city in Aleppo Province. In addition, the US has eight more military points in Raqqa, Hasakeh and Manbij areas. US forces are currently carrying out joint patrols with Turkish forces along the Sajur River line north of Manbij city, in accordance with an agreement reached between the US and Turkey.

In a recent visit to this area, I interviewed senior officials of the ruling Syrian Democratic Council and observed the conditions of daily life in the cities under SDC administration. There is a marked contrast between the stable and regular appearance of daily life in this area, and the extreme uncertainty regarding its political future. In areas recently liberated from IS, such as Manbij and Raqqa cities, regular daily life has returned, the central markets are operating and the streets are full, though the pace of reconstruction of areas damaged by aerial bombing in Raqqa City appears notably slow.

The key question I sought an answer to concerned the future intentions of the United States. Did the United States intend to quit the area, having completed its stated purpose of destroying the Islamic State as a quasi state entity, or would its control be maintained, as part of a larger strategy of containing and rolling back Iran? In recent weeks, an answer appears to have clearly emerged to this question. The US appears set to remain.

This did not always seem likely. President Trump on Tuesday April 3, 2018 according to US media reports told a meeting of the National Security Council that it was 'time' for US troops to leave Syria. A day earlier he told reporters that "I want to get out — I want to bring our troops back home... It's time. We were very successful against ISIS."

Yet SDC officials interviewed for this article were adamant throughout that the US would not withdraw.

Aldar Khalil, one of the top officials in the SDC enclave, told the author that 'it is not logical that the US will leave immediately or soon: after ISIS, the US will fight Iran. And they will fight Iran within Syria.'

Mustafa Bali, chief media officer of the SDF, concurred: 'US interests require them to be here...The US is concerned by the Iranian crescent.' (ie the desire of the Iranians for a contiguous line of control stretching from the Iraq-Iran border via Iraq, Syria and Lebanon to the Mediterranean Sea.)

And as Nuri Mahmoud, SDF spokesman, noted, 'We have been in coalition with the US since the Kobani battle. There has been media speculation regarding imminent withdrawal. Putin also once said that his forces were leaving – but the opposite took place. Syria today is a place of international confrontation, in which all forces seek to strengthen their allies on the ground. The US will not leave Syria without stability on the ground. And we see no evidence of imminent withdrawal.'

These sentiments were supported in statements made by US officials Defense Secretary James Mattis, speaking in early June, said that "As the operations ultimately draw to a close, we must avoid leaving a vacuum in Syria that can be exploited by the Assad regime or its supporters.'

A report in the Times of London on July 27th, meanwhile, cited 'Gulf sources' as confirming that President Trump in his meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin in Helsinki that US troops would remain in Syria until Iranian forces withdrew.

The Times article also noted that National Security Advisor John Bolton told ABC News that US forces would remain 'as long as the Iranian menace continues throughout the Middle East.'

In August, 2018, a State Department representative, William V. Roebuck, visited the SDC controlled area. He visited Manbij, Kobani and Shaddadah, and said following the visit that "We are prepared to stay here, as the president Donald Trump has made clear."

The situation regarding the al-Tanf base is analogous to that of the SDC enclave east of the Euphrates. The base was established to serve as a center for training rebels to fight against Islamic State. This task is now of limited relevance. Yet the base, and the 55km area around it maintained by the US as an area of control are of direct relevance to a strategy of preventing contiguous Iranian control in the land area of southern Syria. As such, al-Tanf now looks set to remain in US and allied hands.

Newly appointed US Special Representative for Syria James Jeffrey appeared to confirm US policy in regard to both areas in a statement on September 7 in which he said unambiguously that "We're no longer pulling out by the end of the year, we're going to stay in until we have an enduring defeat of (the Islamic State group)," before adding that the other focus of US policy in this regard was the complete withdrawal of all Iranian-commanded forces from Syrian territory.

Conclusion

The latest revelations regarding Iranian efforts to provide ballistic missiles to their Iraqi Shia militia clients, enabling them to target both Israel and Saudi Arabia, bring home the urgency of the need to develop a coherent and consistent anti-Iranian strategy in the Middle East. The Iranians have long related to the area formally comprising the states of Lebanon, Syria and Iraq as a single space, in which they seek dominance and hegemony through the application of the combined political and military strategy and methodology developed by the IRGC.

For a long period, efforts to resist this process have been piecemeal and lacking in coordination. There is at present a need to unite these various efforts and forces into a combined challenge to the Iranian effort. This need is of particular urgency in Syria, where the civil war and the related war against the Islamic State are presently in their closing stages. The post war order will therefore be decided in the period ahead. The dynamic in Syria is changing from wars against popular Sunni Arab Islamist insurgencies (the rebellion and IS) into a contest between a variety of state actors partially involving the use of proxies.

The United States and its allies and the Iranians and their proxies are two of the camps engaged in this contest. Russia and Turkey are also important players. At present, a comprehensive US strategy to roll back Iran appears to be in the process of formation. The intention appears to be to subject Iran to crippling sanctions, in order to force it to choose between the survival of its regime, or the continuation of the costly efforts to maintain its extensive regional commitments.

For this emergent strategy to be successful, it is vital that Iran continue to be placed under pressure and to face setbacks in the areas where it is engaged and where until now it has been enjoying success. Syria is perhaps the most vital of these spaces. The US and its allies are engaged in Syria in two quite different but complementary formations. These are the secret war being waged by Israel against Iranian infrastructure and personnel, and the 30% of Syria currently controlled by the US and its allies. Both these projects, in their different ways, are available tools of continued pressure in Teheran. Both should be maintained. More fundamentally, it is important that the region-wide nature of the contest be internalized by western strategists, so that a comprehensive strategy using all available assets and allies to contain and roll back Iran be both formulated and implemented.

*Dr. Jonathan Spyer is Director of the Rubin Center (formerly the GLORIA Center), IDC Herzliya, and a fellow at the Middle East Forum. He is the author of *The Transforming Fire: The Rise of the Israel-Islamist Conflict (Continuum, 2010)* and a columnist at the *Jerusalem Post* newspaper. Spyer holds a Ph.D. in International Relations from the London School of Economics and a Master's Degree in Middle East Politics from the School of Oriental and African Studies in London. His reporting on the war in Syria and Iraq has been published in a number of major news outlets, including the *Wall Street Journal*, *The Guardian*, *The Times*, *Weekly Standard* and many others.*

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