

Viewpoints
No. 79

Iran and Syria: The End of the Road?

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In recent months, Bashar al-Assad has suffered numerous setbacks on the battlefield against Syrian opposition forces, and his position is looking increasingly precarious. His longstanding ally, Iran, has been alarmed by these events and has reacted rapidly in a bid to shore up the position of the Ba'athist regime. This article provides an overview of Tehran's policies and objectives in the Syrian conflict. It also sheds light on developments that have accentuated Iran's tendency to look at the Syrian crisis as a zero-sum game, and on its possible future behavior depending on the different scenarios that could unfold in Syria.

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“The Iranian nation and government will remain at the side of the Syrian nation and government until the end of the road...Tehran has not forgotten its moral obligations to Syria and will continue to provide help and support on its own terms to the government and nation of Syria.”

- Iranian President Hassan Rouhani, June 2, 2015

“The axis of resistance has been formed in the region and no one can break it...and God willing, we will witness growing victories, and of course, these victories [would not be] possible without the Islamic Republic of Iran’s support.”

- Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, May 19, 2015

When the Syrian crisis erupted in 2011, the regime of Bashar al-Assad suffered numerous setbacks, and its days seemed to be numbered. Contrary to expectations, by mid-2013 and early 2014, it was able to recoup some of its losses and regain the initiative in the fighting, in part due to substantial support from its long-time ally, Iran, and Hezbollah. Al-Assad appeared to have weathered the worst part of the storm, and his position seemed relatively secure. However, over the past year, the pendulum has swung once again in favor of the Syrian opposition. In 2014, Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) fighters were able to overrun large swathes of territory in Iraq and in northern and western Syria at the expense of the regime and other armed opposition groups. In the closing weeks of 2014, for example, the government lost its largest military base in northern Syria, Wadi al-Daif, to the opposition. This trend has accelerated in recent months as the main regional benefactors of the Syrian opposition – Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar – have overcome their differences, closed ranks, and coordinated their efforts to provide vital military assistance to the armed opposition, most notably, a coalition of mainly Islamist groups known as the Army of Conquest (Jaysh al-Fatah) led by Ahrar al-Sham and al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra.¹

Since March 2015, when an agreement was reached between Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Saudi King Salman, and the leaders of other Arab states of the Persian Gulf to provide support to the Syrian opposition, the military situation on the ground has been changing steadily. In the North, the Army of Conquest has been able to dislodge pro-government forces from Idlib and Jisr al-Shughur, thereby threatening to cut off the link between Damascus and Aleppo. It has also positioned itself to advance on the key port city of Latakia, situated in the Alawite heartland.² In the South, the opposition has succeeded in taking Bosra al-Sham, the Nasib crossing point with Jordan, and more recently the base of the 52nd Brigade in al-Harak.³ In the East, ISIS has seized the city of Palmyra, placing it in a more advantageous position to march on Homs and Damascus.⁴

The recent reverses can be attributed not only to increased support by al-Assad’s regional adversaries to the armed opposition, but also to the acute manpower shortage facing the regime and its dwindling resources that have made it more reliant over time on Iran and its allies. It is estimated that over the past four years, between 80,000 and 100,000 government soldiers have

been killed or wounded in action. Furthermore, in view of recent setbacks on the battlefield and no end in sight to the fighting, morale among Syrian government forces has reached a nadir.⁵ These developments have sounded alarm bells in both Damascus and Tehran. Consequently, since April, there has been a flurry of diplomatic activity with senior officials from both countries visiting each other's capitals for consultations.

In late April, Syrian Defense Minister Fahd Jassem al-Frej visited Tehran and met with his Iranian counterpart Hossein Dehghan and other high-ranking officials to discuss the deteriorating military situation on the ground and other related issues.⁶ This was followed in quick succession in May by a series of visits by Iranian officials to Damascus, most notably, those of Ali Akbar Velayati, Foreign Affairs Advisor to Ayatollah Ali Khamenei; Alaeddin Boroujerdi, Head of the *Majlis* (Parliament) Foreign Policy and National Security Committee; and an Iranian economic delegation.⁷ More recently, in June, the Speaker of the Syrian People's Council, Mohammad Jihad al-Laham, and the Syrian Interior Minister, Major General Mohammad Ibrahim al-Sha'ar, traveled to Iran, while the commander of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) elite Quds Force, Major General Qassem Soleimani, arrived in Syria and toured the front lines in the Latakia region.⁸

The reversal of fortunes for the Assad regime on the battlefield and the meteoric rise of ISIS in Syria and Iraq have caused a great deal of consternation in Tehran. Over the past few years, Iran has bolstered the military manpower of the Syrian government by gradually building up an auxiliary force in Syria called the National Defense Forces, composed of Alawites, Shi'as, and regime loyalists to assist the Syrian army in the conflict. With patience, experience, foresight, and the expenditure of substantial resources, Tehran has created a force that is reportedly now 80,000 strong.⁹ In spite of Iranian efforts, including sending military advisors, equipment, and billions of dollars in aid and oil supplies since 2011, al-Assad seems to be in dire straits today. In recent weeks, there have been numerous reports that Iran has dispatched between 7,000 and 15,000 fighters to Syria to defend the Damascus region and to take part in offensive operations to retake Jisr al-Shughur in the Idlib province. Reportedly these forces are composed of Iranian, Iraqi, and Afghan Shi'a militiamen.¹⁰ It is difficult to judge the veracity and accuracy of these reports, but several facts are for certain. Iran is not about to abandon its support for the Assad regime as a result of the setbacks it has suffered in recent months. Tehran will carefully assess the level of assistance needed to prop up its Syrian ally, and will send men and materiel accordingly. In spite of repeated Iranian denials, it is clear that Iran has deployed combat units recently – if not earlier – in Syria to help stave off the collapse of the Ba'athist regime.¹¹ Concomitantly, Tehran will try to minimize its footprint to the degree possible for two reasons. First, it wants to avoid full-scale involvement in the Syrian conflict and incurring substantial casualties. Second, it prefers to use proxies, especially from Arab countries, such as Hezbollah and Iraqi militias, in part to prevent arousing Arab sensitivities with regard to the participation of non-Arab forces in the Syrian conflict.¹²

Besides the turning of the tide on the military front against al-Assad, Tehran is extremely worried about the successes of ISIS and other radical Sunni Islamist groups, including those that are part of the Army of Conquest. While the United States and its regional allies have been conducting an aerial bombing campaign to degrade ISIS in Iraq and Syria since mid-2014, this apparently has not diminished ISIS's ability to score more victories and seize additional territory in Syria and Iraq. This reality was reflected in the poignant comments of Qassem

Soleimani in May 2015 when he expressed his fear and frustration by stating, “ISIS is a plague and major catastrophe,” and criticized the United States for not having done “a damn thing” in the fight against ISIS.¹³

While some Iranian officials and the state-controlled media have made wild accusations that the United States created ISIS in order to destabilize Syria and erode Iran’s position in the region,¹⁴ there are others in the ruling circles who believe that the mere existence of ISIS and its activities have helped further Washington’s objectives in three respects. First, ISIS’s success in northern and western Iraq has enabled the United States to gain greater leverage over Iraq in view of Haidar al-Abadi’s dependence on American military assistance. Second, in Syria, ISIS’s campaign is proving to be a drain on Iran as Tehran continues to pour in men, money, and materiel to prop up Assad. Third, the battlefield successes of the rebels, including ISIS, are contributing to the erosion of the Assad regime, and could ultimately contribute to its downfall.

In general, Iran has been disappointed with the evolution of the overall situation in Syria since 2011. It was critical of the Syrian regime’s handling of the initial protests and the military efforts against the armed opposition afterwards, deeming them to be ill-conceived, clumsy, and heavy-handed. In the final analysis, Tehran does not believe that the pre-March 2011 political status quo ante can be restored, nor does it believe that al-Assad has a long-term future in Syria. However, the Islamic Republic has gone down the path of supporting the Assad regime for over four years now, and it does not see any viable alternatives at present. There is deep concern in Iran that once the regime is toppled, the last vestiges of the Syrian state and its institutions will collapse, and chaos will ensue, with Sunni Islamist extremists becoming the main beneficiaries.¹⁵

Moreover, it should be underscored that a number of important factors and developments have reinforced Iranian thinking that the Syrian conflict is a zero-sum game.

First, since the winter of 2011-2012, as the Syrian crisis transformed into a proxy war, with Saudi Arabia providing aid to the Syrian opposition, Tehran has viewed the situation in Syria as part of a broader regional power struggle against Riyadh and the fight against Sunni extremist Wahhabism and Salafism. Iran is concerned about Saudi activities that encourage sectarianism and Sunni fundamentalism, including activities among the Baluchi population that inhabit Iran and Pakistan.¹⁶ Furthermore, Riyadh’s military intervention in Bahrain in 2011 to suppress the popular protests against the authorities caused immense umbrage in Tehran. It is noteworthy that Iran’s role in Yemen should also be understood in the context of Saudi involvement in the Syrian crisis. From the vantage point of Iranian policymakers, they have had a 36-year-long alliance with Syria. Riyadh is attempting to change the political status quo between the two allies. Hence, Tehran took the decision to interfere in Saudi Arabia’s backyard in the Arabian Peninsula by providing support to the Houthi rebels in Yemen. The fact that King Salman of Saudi Arabia decided to intervene militarily in Yemen in March 2015 by initiating an air campaign, the outcome of which has been inconclusive to date, has generated some satisfaction in Tehran. Unless Tehran and Riyadh are able to overcome their differences, the Islamic Republic would look favorably upon the Saudis getting bogged down in the Yemeni quagmire.¹⁷

Second, the rise of ISIS and other Sunni extremist groups in the Middle East has also reinforced Iranian thinking that the Syrian conflict is a zero-sum game. Since these Sunni extremist groups do not consider Shi'as to be Muslims and persecute those who do not adhere to their version of Islam, Tehran views them as a clear and present danger. This perception has been accentuated by ISIS's battlefield successes in Syria, and also Iraq, which shares a 1,500-kilometer-long border with Iran. Iran fears that if the Assad regime is toppled, it will be supplanted by a Sunni extremist government, because these groups have emerged as the dominant force among the Syrian opposition groups fighting on the ground. Therefore, Iran has assumed an active role in the military campaign in both Syria and Iraq, particularly in the latter against ISIS.¹⁸

Third, between 2012 and 2014, Iran was excluded from the UN-sponsored Geneva I and II peace talks on Syria due to insistence by the Syrian opposition and the Western powers to exclude Iran from the talks. Since Iran has been repeatedly excluded from the political track and any diplomatic negotiations to end the conflict, Tehran sees the military option as the only viable alternative open to it. To add insult to injury, the statements by U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry in January 2014 that Tehran could play a role on the sidelines or margins perplexed and infuriated the Iranians, since they see themselves as a major regional actor and a key player in the Syrian equation.¹⁹ Iran is keen to be part of any political process and any multilateral negotiations aimed at ending the Syrian conflict. Iran has also concluded that there is no military solution and that the war of attrition in Syria is working to the advantage of the opposition, particularly the armed Sunni radical groups. Therefore, Iran also prefers a diplomatic solution to the conflict. In recent weeks, both European Union Foreign Policy Chief Federica Mogherini and UN Special Envoy for Syria Staffan de Mistura have stated that Iran should participate and could play a positive role in future Syrian peace talks (Geneva III).²⁰ Indeed, depending on the situation on the ground, Iranian participation may be desirable in order to persuade the Assad regime to acquiesce to a political transition and an eventual settlement.

Fourth, there is a general consensus among Iranian policymakers that there is no viable alternative to Bashar al-Assad at present. They maintain that if the current regime is toppled, the last remaining vestiges of the Syrian state and its institutions will collapse, ushering in chaos and instability in Syria and its immediate neighbors for the foreseeable future. The Iranians are highly skeptical that the Syrian opposition, or any other group for that matter, can fill the political vacuum, and restore peace and order. They believe that the more likely scenarios are a Sunni Islamist takeover, or Syria becoming a failed state.²¹

At present, if the Assad regime were to be overthrown, it would represent the most serious foreign policy setback for Iran since at least 1988 (when it reluctantly gave up its struggle to overthrow Saddam Hussein), if not since the establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1979. Ba'athist Syria has been important for Iran in at least four respects. First, it has been Iran's most important and only longstanding Arab ally for over three and a half decades. Second, it has provided Tehran with access to the Levant and the Arab-Israeli arena in order for the Islamic Republic to demonstrate its solidarity with the Arab-Palestinian cause in the struggle against Israel, and project its power in the eastern Mediterranean. Third, Syria has served as a major conduit for Iranian arms and assistance to Hezbollah in Lebanon since the 1980s. Outside of Iran's borders, the emergence and continued existence of the Lebanese Shi'a movement has been the only revolutionary "success story" for the clerics in Tehran. Fourth, the nexus with

Damascus has been an enduring example of Arab-Iranian cooperation in several important areas in terms of political, military, and economic collaboration. These are all of political and ideological significance from the viewpoint of Iranian policymakers.²²

As far as possible future scenarios with regard to the Syrian conflict are concerned, at least four can be identified. These could be one of the following:

- 1) A negotiated settlement and political transition/change
- 2) The survival of a weakened Assad regime in at least part of Syria (a rump state)
- 3) Regime collapse and continued civil strife and instability
- 4) The emergence of a Sunni Islamist or secular regime in Damascus

In terms of trying to establish and understand Iran's possible objectives and actions in these four situations, in the case of the first scenario, if there are political negotiations and Iran is a party to them, depending in large part on the military situation on the ground, Tehran's maximalist position would be to keep al-Assad or alternately some elements from the Syrian regime in power to ensure the continuation of the alliance. Its minimalist position would be the emergence of a transitional authority or new government, which at the very least is neutral and not hostile to Tehran.

With regard to the second scenario, at present, it seems highly improbable that the Assad regime would be able to restore the pre-March 2011 political status quo within Syria and govern the entire country. The more likely scenario would be the Assad regime (with Iranian support) holding onto Damascus and as many other major population centers in the West (running along the North-South axis from Homs and Hama to Aleppo), as many seaports (Tartus, Baniyas, and Latakia), and the border regions next to Lebanon and Israel. Control of areas adjacent to Lebanon would be vital since they would lend strategic depth to the government-controlled region in Syria (in view of Hezbollah's key role in Lebanese affairs), and a potential second front with Israel could be maintained along the Golan Heights. Depending on the military situation, the regime may be forced to concede some territories in the North, including the Aleppo, and also some areas in the South along the Golan Heights and the border with Jordan.²³

As far as Iran's objectives in the third and fourth scenarios are concerned (which would entail the collapse of the Assad regime), over the past few years, as the Syrian conflict has become a protracted affair and Iranian involvement has increased, Tehran has created new, in effect, parallel institutions to help prop up the Assad regime and to protect its interests in Syria. The most notable example has been the National Defense Forces. If the Assad regime is overthrown, and there is no central authority in Syria or a hostile government comes to power in Damascus, Iran will use the assets it has cultivated in Syria to preserve its interests to the degree possible, and confront hostile forces in the country. This would provide it with some influence in Syria, and perhaps some leverage if a hostile government ascends to power in Damascus.

In conclusion, the steady deterioration of the position of the Assad regime and the heightened support by regional actors to the Syrian opposition seem to indicate that the tide of the conflict has once again turned against Syrian government forces. Unless a political process gets underway soon, Bashar al-Assad may be toppled in the not too distant future. Concomitantly, even if greater assistance from Iran and its allies enable him to survive and stave off defeat for

now, it is difficult to envisage that a continuation of the war of attrition would ultimately work in his favor. Iranian President Rouhani asserted recently that Iran would stand by al-Assad “until the end of the road.” Indeed, the end may come sooner than many expect. Irrespective of whether it comes sooner or later, the end though may be far worse than many could imagine. In view of the protracted nature of the Syrian conflict, the radicalization and brutalization of Syrian society, and the influx of foreign jihadists supported by some of the West’s regional allies, the fate awaiting Syria and its people may be far more hellish than under the rule of the Ba’ath.



The opinions expressed herein are those of the author and do not reflect those of the Wilson Center.

¹ Hassan Hassan, “Syria’s Revitalized Rebels Make Big Gains in Assad’s Heartland,” *Foreign Policy*, April 28, 2015.

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⁵ Excellent article and analysis by Nicholas Blanford, “Why Iran is Standing by its Weakened and Expensive Ally, Syria,” *The Christian Science Monitor*, April 27, 2015, and “Assad on the Back Foot,” *The Economist*, April 4, 2015.

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⁷ “Syria’s Assad Praises Iran’s Support as ‘Key Pillar,’” *Agence France Press (AFP)*, May 19, 2015.

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¹¹ For a recent example of Iranian denials of deploying military forces in Syria see the statement by Iranian foreign ministry spokeswoman Marzieh Afkham, “Claims of Iranian Fighters in Syria Dismissed,” *Kayhan*, June 10, 2015.

¹² For an illuminating study on Iran’s activities in recruiting, training and deploying foreign fighters from Lebanon, Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan and other countries in Syria, see Phillip Smyth, *The Shiite Jihad in Syria and its Regional Effects* (Washington: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2015).

¹³ Najmeh Bozorgmehr, “Iran Commander Warns of ISIS Threat to Its Security,” *The Financial Times*, May 25, 2015.

¹⁴ For an example by Iran’s Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and an overview, see Thomas Erdbrink, “For Many Iranians, the Evidence is Clear: ISIS is an American Invention,” *The International New York Times*, September 10, 2014.

¹⁵ Confidential conversation with a prominent Iranian foreign policy analyst, Tehran, Iran, March 2015.

¹⁶ Confidential conversation with an Iranian domestic political observer, Tehran, Iran, January 2015.

¹⁷ Confidential conversation with a prominent Iranian foreign policy analyst, Tehran, Iran, May 2015.

¹⁸ For a thorough and thoughtful account and analysis of Iran's policy toward ISIS, see Dina Esfandiary and Ariane Tabatabai, "Iran's ISIS Policy," *International Affairs*, Volume 91, Number 1, 2015, pp. 1-15.

¹⁹ Anne Gearan, "Kerry Suggests Iran Could Play Sideline Role in Syrian Peace Talks," *The Washington Post*, January 5, 2014, and Arshad Mohammed, "Kerry Says Iran Could Help on Sidelines of Syria Peace Talks," *Reuters*, January 5, 2014.

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²¹ For an insightful analysis in this regard, see Randa Slim, "Is Iran Overstretched in Syria?" *Foreign Policy*, April 17, 2015.

²² For an overview of the history and evolution of the alliance between Syria and Iran, see Jubin M. Goodarzi, *Syria and Iran: Diplomatic Alliance and Power Politics in the Middle East* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2009).

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