

Excerpt from

FRONTLINE SYRIA:

From Democratic Revolution to Proxy War

By David L. Phillips

Iran seeks a corridor from Tehran to Baghdad, Damascus and to Beirut that can supply weapons to Hezbollah, Hamas, and other radical Palestinian groups committed to destroying Israel. The corridor runs along a Shiite crescent that allows the Islamic Republic of Iran to export its ideology across the Middle East to the Mediterranean. The term, “Shiite Crescent”, was coined in 2004 by Jordan’s King Abdullah who warned that Iran’s support for Shiite forces in the Middle East sought to “alter the traditional balance of power between the two main Islamic sects and pose new challenges to U.S. interests and allies.”¹

...When Syria’s revolution started in 2011, Iran responded by providing training and weapons to the SAA, such as assault rifles, machine guns, explosives, detonators, as well as 60mm and 120mm mortar shells. Iran also provided rubber bullets, truncheons, and riot control equipment. The selection and sophistication of weapons increased as the fighting intensified.

U.S. Defense Secretary Leon Panetta accused Iran of arming and training pro-government militias. According to Panetta, "It is obvious that Iran has been playing a larger role in Syria in many ways."² He accused the IRGC of "trying to develop, trying to train a militia within Syria to be able to fight on behalf of the regime."³ According to Panetta, the growing presence of Iran in Syria was dangerous and “of deep concern to us. The Syrian people ought to determine their future, not Iran”. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Martin Dempsey, echoed Panetta’s message. He compared the Alawite force to the Mahdi Army of the Iraqi Shiite leader, Muqtada al-Sadr, which killed many Americans.

Ahmad Vahidi, Iran’s Defense Minister, warned foreign forces not to intervene in Syria, lest it create a “major crisis”. He accused Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey of arming the opposition, alleging collusion with the U.S. and Israel. "It is ugly that countries ... have flooded Syria with arms, equipping terrorist groups. It will have very bad implications in the region. The losers of such a crisis will be the Westerners and pro-Zionist countries". UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon called the Syrian conflict a "proxy war, with regional and international players arming one side or the other."⁴ As atrocities intensified, the 57-member Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) met in Jeddah and agreed in a symbolic move to suspend Syria’s membership.⁵

¹ David L. Phillips, “Unintended Consequences of Striking Syria,” *RightsViews*, 16 September 2013, <https://blogs.cuit.columbia.edu/rightsviews/tag/military-intervention/> (accessed 9 August 2019).

² “Iran accused of setting up pro-Assad militias,” *Al Jazeera*, 15 August 2012, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/americas/2012/08/20128154537913351.html> (accessed 6 August 2019).

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

The IRGC's deployment kept growing. Beyond training and acting as military advisers, IRGC members were actively fighting on the side of the regime. Some wore insignias, while others were involved in covert operations. Farsi was heard on the battlefield with a growing number of SAA units under Iranian command. Iranians wearing Syrian military uniforms and bearing local identification cards were deployed to Tartus and Latakia, alongside an elite Syrian Air Force intelligence unit. Iran's involvement was limited and did not make an appreciable difference during the early years of the war. The Syrian government lost Idlib province to the rebels by the middle of 2015, causing grave concern about the regime's survival.

Syria's main backers -- Russia and Iran -- discussed a security strategy and coordinated military action. When Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, and Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov met in May 2015, they agreed to a joint Iranian-Russian military operation to rescue Assad. They also agreed on a broader counter-terrorism strategy to counter the rise of ISIS. As follow-up to the Khamenei-Lavrov meeting, Iranian and Russian officials negotiated a political agreement defining their responsibilities.⁶ As of that time, Russia had only supplied weapons to the regime and Iran had dispatched only some IRGC members and small numbers of other Shiite paramilitary formations. Their modest support did not prevent Syria from losing about 80 percent of its territory.

Moscow required a formal request from Assad before military intervention. Assad visited Moscow to brief Putin and Defense Minister Sergey Shoygu on his country's urgent needs, which he characterized as a "manpower problem." Khamenei sent a senior envoy to Moscow. "Putin told him 'Okay we will intervene. Send Qassem Soleimani'".⁷ Soleimani was tasked with working out the details of military cooperation commands the Quds Force, the IRGC elite Special Forces in charge of extra-territorial operations. He earned notoriety in Iraq for shaping the battlefield with improvised explosive devices (IEDs), which killed many Americans.

Soleimani visited Moscow on 24 July 2015. In a meeting with Shoygu, Soleimani unfurled a map of Syria. He highlighted rebel advances to the coast, which posed a danger to Russian bases. The Russians were very alarmed, but Soleimani assured them that "there is still the possibility to reclaim the initiative". According to Soleimani, "We haven't lost all the cards."⁸

Soleimani and Shoygu agreed that Russia would supply air power, while the IRGC and Hezbollah engaged Sunni militias on the ground. Russia agreed to upgrade its supply of weapons to the SAA. Furthermore, Russia and Iran agreed to establish a joint operations command in Damascus and Baghdad. Soleimani became a fixture in Damascus. He was also a frequent visitor to the front-line of military operations.⁹

⁶ Laila Bassam, Tom Perry, "How Iranian general plotted out Syrian assault in Moscow," *Reuters*, 6 October 2015, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-soleimani-insigh/how-iranian-general-plotted-out-syrian-assault-in-moscow-idUSKCN0S02BV20151006> (accessed 6 August 2019).

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

New IRGC attachments started arriving in Tartus and Latakia by mid-September 2015. Members of the Basij were also deployed. Basij were known for their sacrifice and martyrdom during the Iran-Iraq war. Many were cannon fodder, charging across the minefields into battle.

In addition, about 3,000 fighters from the Iranian-backed Lebanese group, Hezbollah, were mobilized for a major offensive in the west and northwest of Syria. By October 2015, some 7,000 IRGC members and paramilitaries were fighting in Syria. With support from the Quds Force, the SAA gained ground in Aleppo, Daraa, Qusayr, and the al-Ghab plains, turning the tide of battle.

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