

IRANIAN STRATEGY IN SYRIA

BY WILL FULTON, JOSEPH HOLLIDAY, & SAM WYER

A JOINT REPORT BY AEI'S CRITICAL THREATS PROJECT & INSTITUTE FOR THE STUDY OF WAR

MAY 2013



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COVER IMAGE: IRANIAN PRESIDENT MAHMOUD AHMADINEJAD, SYRIAN PRESIDENT BASHAR AL-ASSAD, AND HEZBOLLAH'S SHEIKH HASSAN NASRALLAH APPEAR TOGETHER ON A POSTER IN DAMASCUS, SYRIA. CREDIT: INTER PRESS SERVICE NEWS AGENCY

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ABOUT US

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Islamic Republic of Iran has conducted an extensive, expensive, and integrated effort to keep President Bashar al-Assad in power as long as possible while setting conditions to retain its ability to use Syrian territory and assets to pursue its regional interests should Assad fall.

The Iranian security and intelligence services are advising and assisting the Syrian military in order to preserve Bashar al-Assad's hold on power. These efforts have evolved into an expeditionary training mission using Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) Ground Forces, Quds Force, intelligence services, and law enforcement forces. The deployment of IRGC Ground Forces to conflict abroad is a notable expansion of Iran's willingness and ability to project military force beyond its borders.

Iran has been providing essential military supplies to Assad, primarily by air. Opposition gains in Syria have interdicted many ground resupply routes between Baghdad and Damascus, and the relative paucity of Iranian port-visits in Syria suggests that Iran's sea-lanes to Syria are more symbolic than practical. The air line of communication between Iran and Syria is thus a key vulnerability for Iranian strategy in Syria. Iran would not be able to maintain its current level of support to Assad if this air route were interdicted through a no-fly zone or rebel capture of Syrian airfields.

Iran is also assisting pro-government *shabiha* militias, partly to hedge against Assad's fall or the contraction of the regime into Damascus and a coastal Alawite enclave. These militias will become even more dependent on Tehran in such a scenario, allowing Iran to maintain some ability to operate in and project force from Syria.

Lebanese Hezbollah began to take on a more direct combat role in Syria as the Assad regime began losing control over Syrian territory in 2012. Hezbollah has supported Assad with a robust, well-trained force whose involvement in the conflict aligns with Iranian strategic interests as Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah acknowledged on April 30 in Tehran. Hezbollah's commitment is not without limitations, however, because Nasrallah must carefully calibrate his support to Assad with his domestic responsibilities in order to avoid alienating his core constituency in Lebanon.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Iraqi Shi'a militants are also fighting in Syria in support of Assad. Their presence became overt in 2012 with the formation of the Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas Brigade, a pro-government militia that is a conglomerate of Syrian and foreign Shi'a fighters, including members of Lebanese Hezbollah and Iraq-based Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq and Kata'ib Hezbollah. Like other paramilitary forces operating in Syria, these militants escalated their involvement as the conflict descended into civil war. The open participation of Iraqi Shi'a militants in Syria is an alarming indicator of the expansion of sectarian conflict throughout the region.

The Syrian conflict has already constrained Iran's influence in the Levant, and the fall of the Assad regime would further reduce Tehran's ability to project power. Iran's hedging strategy aims to ensure, however, that it can continue to pursue its vital interests if and when the regime collapses, using parts of Syria as a base as long as the Syrian opposition fails to establish full control over all of Syrian territory.

INTRODUCTION

Syria is vital to Iran's strategic interests in the Middle East and has long been Iran's closest state ally. The Assad regime has provided crucial access to Iranian proxies, including Lebanese Hezbollah, Hamas, and Palestinian Islamic Jihad, allowing Iran to move people, weapons, and money to these groups through Syrian territory. Iran has provided support to Syria's chemical weapons programs, including the deployment of Iranian scientists, the supply of equipment and precursor chemicals, and technical training. Syria has been Iran's strategic partner in deterring Israel from attacking Iran's proxies or its nuclear program. Iran's strategy in Syria aims to keep President Bashar al-Assad in power as long as possible while setting conditions to ensure Tehran's ability to use Syrian territory and assets to pursue its regional interests should Assad fall. Iran has conducted an extensive, expensive, and integrated effort to achieve these objectives.

Iranian training and support to the Syrian state security apparatus is intended to prolong Assad's grip on power. This effort consists of an advisory and assistance mission to support the Assad regime's security forces. Iran has conducted this foreign internal defense mission in Syria using its regular Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) forces alongside the IRGC Quds Force and other clandestine services, marking a new kind of Iranian expeditionary military strategy. These missions initially supported Assad's counterinsurgency campaign, which attempted to restore state control throughout Syria. As Assad began to lose control over eastern and northern Syria in the summer of 2012, the Iranian advisory and assistance mission continued to reinforce Assad's geographically consolidated grip on central and southern Syria.

Iran is also hedging against the failure of this strategy by complementing its support for state security institutions with assistance to pro-government militias in order to develop proxies that will survive Assad. This aspect of Iran's approach is congruent with Tehran's longstanding efforts in Lebanon and Iraq, where it also built Shi'a militias to ensure that its interests were protected even in the absence of effective or pliable host states. These paramilitary forces have become increasingly important to Iran and the Assad regime as the nature of the

conflict has devolved from counterinsurgency to civil war. As Syrian state military capabilities continue to deteriorate, these militias may form the framework for Iran's continued influence and activity in Syria and the region.

The Syrian conflict has already constrained Iran's influence in the Levant, and the fall of the Assad regime would further reduce Tehran's ability to project power. Iran's hedging strategy aims to ensure, however, that it can continue to pursue its vital interests if and when the regime collapses, using parts of Syria as a base as long as the Syrian opposition fails to establish full control over all of Syrian territory. This strategy is meant to guarantee that the mostly Alawite remnants of the Assad regime continue to provide support for Iranian activity in the Levant even if an opposition government takes power in Damascus. By encouraging convergence between pro-regime militias and loyalist remnants of the Assad regime by supporting both the official and the paramilitary components of Assad's forces, Iran is working to preserve its short-term interests while laying the foundations for long-term influence and access in the Levant.

Few observers doubt Iranian involvement in Syria. The scope and nature of that involvement, however, has been difficult to describe or pinpoint. Iran has once again demonstrated

its ability to work within low-intensity-conflict environments while successfully obfuscating details about its operations, as it did in Iraq during the latter half of the Iraq War. Iranian media sources provide only limited insight, and often only in rare public slips, and most Syrian opposition accusations of Iranian involvement lack credibility. Utilizing only open-source material, it is difficult and in many cases impossible to verify press reports or public announcements independently. The information below derives from a broad range of sources, including U.S. Department of the Treasury designations, Western and Iranian news outlets, and social media, which have been placed in context to form assessments based on the indicators available and past behavior.

Advisory Mission

Iran has made a concerted effort to advise the Syrian military in order to preserve Bashar al-Assad's hold on power. Both the IRGC Quds Force (IRGC-QF) and elements of the conventional IRGC Ground Forces (IRGC-GF), as well as several Iranian intelligence organizations, have trained and advised elements of Assad's state military and security services. These organizations all have distinct operational strengths that complement one another in support of Assad.

Top-level Support to the Syrian Army

Iran's primary foreign military arm, IRGC-QF, appears to be leading this effort. The U.S. Department of the Treasury (USDOT) designated IRGC-QF Commander Major General Qassem Suleimani and Operations and Training Commander Mohsen Chizari in May 2011 for their role in "the violent repression against the Syrian people."¹ The Quds Force is responsible for Iran's external operations, and Commander Suleimani played a prominent role managing Iranian activity in Iraq, so it is not surprising that he has taken a leadership role in Iran's Syria policy.² Former Syrian Prime Minister Riad Hijab said in a news conference



PHOTO 1 | IRGC COMMANDER MAJOR GENERAL MOHAMMAD ALI JAFARI AND QUDS FORCE COMMANDER MAJOR GENERAL QASSEM SULEIMANI ATTEND FUNERAL FOR HASSAN SHATERI IN TEHRAN, FEBRUARY 16, 2013. (SOURCE: FARIS NEWS)

after his defection that "Syria is occupied by the Iranian regime. The person who runs the country is not Bashar al-Assad but Qassem Suleimani, the head of Iranian regime's Quds Force."³ Hyperbole aside, Hijab's accusation underscores Suleimani's leading role in Syria.

Mohsen Chizari was presumably directing Quds Force training efforts, as his title implies, although the USDOT designation does not specify. Chizari is also known to have facilitated militant activities in Iraq. U.S. forces captured Chizari and another IRGC-QF commander inside the compound of Iraqi Shi'a leader Abdul Aziz al-Hakim in 2006.⁴ U.S. defense officials reported at the time that the two men had been found with information related to the movement of sophisticated weapons, including shaped explosive charges, into Iraq.⁵ The Iraqi government promptly expelled the two IRGC-QF commanders rather than detain them, claiming that they were protected by diplomatic immunity.⁶

The extent of IRGC-QF involvement in Syria became clearer in February 2013 when Iranian Brigadier General Hassan Shateri was assassinated in the Damascus countryside while traveling to Beirut, after having travelled to Aleppo.⁷ Shateri was a senior Quds Force commander who had been operating covertly in Lebanon since 2006 as the head of Iran's Committee for the Reconstruction of Southern

Lebanon under the alias Hessam Khoshnevis.⁸ Prior to his time in Lebanon, Shateri had operated in Afghanistan and Iraq.⁹ The presence of such a high-ranking commander inside Syria highlights Tehran's commitment to achieving its objectives in the country, as well as its potential vulnerabilities should Assad fall.

Shateri's mission in Syria may have been related to the al-Safir chemical weapons and SCUD missile facility near Aleppo. Iranian personnel have been involved in the operations of al-Safir since at least 2005; a number were killed in an explosion at the facility in 2007.¹⁰ Rebels had made significant gains near al-Safir days prior to Shateri's assassination.¹¹ It is reasonable to conclude that Iran would dispatch a team to sanitize the base of documents or materials that could have revealed aspects of Iran's WMD programs before the rebels seized them. Shateri's presence in such a dangerous location shows, in any case, that the IRGC-QF is deeply involved in Syria at the highest levels.

Iranian support to Syrian security forces may include training new military units. In a leaked video of a Syrian Republican Guard briefing in Baba Amr, the Brigadier General giving the briefing tells his troops, "we are forming the 416th Special Forces Battalion and they are being trained now by domestic and foreign trainers."¹² The leaked video does not specify the location of the training, but the Syrian Special Forces training complex in al-Dreij, situated between the capital and Zabadani, is a likely facility. Although Russia or Lebanese Hezbollah could have provided the foreign trainers referenced here, Iran is the prime candidate, as there is further evidence that it has provided other trainers.

The conventional Ground Forces of the IRGC are also involved in this advisory and assistance mission within Syria. The January 2013 release of 48 Iranian nationals kidnapped near Damascus in August 2012 revealed that IRGC-GF personnel have been operating inside of Syria since at least that time. Among

those released were the current and former commanders of the IRGC's Shohada unit (West Azerbaijan province)—both 2nd class brigadier generals—as well as Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei's former representative to that unit; the commander of the 14th Imam Sadegh Brigade (Bushehr province); and personnel linked to the 33rd al-Mahdi Brigade (Fars province).¹³ The forward deployment of high-ranking current commanders of IRGC Ground Forces units is unusual, as IRGC-QF is Iran's traditional foreign military arm while IRGC-GF is responsible for internal security and conventional operations inside of Iran. The evolution of an expeditionary training capability relying on the IRGC Ground Forces in addition to the Quds Force, in-country, is a notable expansion of Iran's ability to project its influence and military force well beyond its borders and immediate neighbors.

The Iranian Regime has probably used IRGC-GF personnel working under or alongside IRGC-QF in Syria in order to draw on the Ground Forces' training and experience conducting internal security and conventional or counter-insurgent operations. Although the Quds Force is experienced in unconventional warfare, it has not previously played the role of counterinsurgent. In contrast, the Ground Forces train for and have experience in counterinsurgency. In fact, the IRGC-GF personnel captured in Syria hailed from provincial units that deal both with insurgencies and tribal and ethnic unrest. The regime may



PHOTO 2 | IRGC 14TH IMAM SADEGH BRIGADE COMMANDER MOHAMMAD TAGHI SAFFARI RETURNS TO BUSHEHR PROVINCE AFTER BEING RELEASED BY SYRIAN REBELS ON JANUARY 9, 2013. (SOURCE: BUSHEHR NEWS)

be deliberately selecting trainers from the elements of the ground forces most prepared for counterinsurgency.

The IRGC-QF and the IRGC-GF typically operate separately due to their distinct missions but appear to be working together in this case. There is no available open-source information indicating the exact nature of their cooperation or command and control; however, despite a report in September 2012 that former IRGC Greater Tehran unit commander BG Hossein Hamedani is leading Iran's advisory mission, it is more likely that Qassem Suleimani commands Iran's overall effort. As a three-star major general, Suleimani outranks Hamedani and all other IRGC-GF commanders, and the QF has historically led Iran's external operations. If Suleimani is in charge of the effort, it appears that he is able both to draw on non-QF IRGC units and resources to fill capability gaps and to draw on specific expertise to support IRGC-QF efforts.

Some activities of the Syrian armed forces have been congruent with strategic concepts promoted by senior Quds Force officials, although we cannot assess what specific influence Iranian advisors have had on the Syrian military or leadership. Assad's decision to commit the majority of his security forces to secure key urban areas, for example, may have been influenced by Iranian advice. Qassem Suleimani said in January 2012, for example, that "the mass movement in Syria has not been in the cities but rather has been, and continues to be, in the villages.... Therefore, Syria's illness is not an illness that will destroy the government."¹⁴ Suleimani concluded that Assad could contain the conflict by preventing the opposition from gaining territory in Syria's urban centers. Indeed, Assad has concentrated his forces in cities while the opposition has flourished in rural areas. Although Assad's forces have lost control of many neighborhoods even in key cities, they had prevented the opposition from taking control of any provincial capital

until rebels seized the eastern desert city of al-Raqqa in March 2013.¹⁵

Specific military operations have served the interests of both IRGC-QF and the Assad regime, and may have been driven by Iranian advice. The Assad regime mounted a string of major offensives in the first quarter of 2012, beginning with the Damascus suburb of Zabadani, even though the opposition had a greater presence in Homs. The regime may have chosen to begin in Zabadani for two reasons, not mutually exclusive: first, because it is closer to the capital, sitting approximately forty kilometers northwest of Damascus, and second, because Zabadani functions as a critical line of supply to Hezbollah in Lebanon.

Zabadani was the staging area for the IRGC's deployment to Lebanon in 1982; the IRGC even moved the kidnapped president of the American University of Beirut through Zabadani on the way to Tehran the following year.¹⁶ Just weeks into the 2011 uprising, a United Press International report identified Zabadani as "IRGC's main support facility for Hezbollah."¹⁷ Qassem Suleimani is only known to have visited Assad in Damascus twice since the beginning of the conflict, and one of those visits occurred just a few days prior to the Zabadani operation.¹⁸ It is possible that Suleimani's January 2012 visit was related to the imperative of recapturing Zabadani. Assad's decision to prioritize Zabadani may have reflected Iranian advice or pressure as much as his own perception of the regime's best interests.

Some of the Syrian regime's urban counterinsurgency practices may also reflect Iranian advice that derived from lessons learned in Iraq. After clearing Zabadani, the regime laid siege to Homs, forcing rebels to retreat by the beginning of March 2012. Assad garrisoned the city with a large contingent of his forces and began to construct a concrete wall around the former rebel stronghold. A reporter who visited the wall described it as a ten-foot high cement

barrier, around which soldiers and secret police guard a few narrow gaps in the wall and arrest military-aged males who attempt to pass through it.¹⁹ In 2008, American forces constructed a similar cement barrier around the Shi'a enclave of Sadr City, Baghdad to cut insurgents' supplies and limit their movements.²⁰ Iranian observers working with proxies in Sadr City at that time would have seen the effectiveness of the campaign first-hand and could have advised the Assad regime to adopt a similar approach.

The Assad regime has not been a perfect partner, however. Iranian senior leaders have been frustrated at times by the Assad regime's approach to the opposition. Quds Force Commander Suleimani implicitly criticized the Syrian military as recently as February 2013 during an address honoring Iran-Iraq War-era IRGC commanders. After a lengthy exposition on the courage, religiosity, and selflessness of Iran's martyred commanders, Suleimani concluded his speech by stating, "If the government and country of Syria had just one Hemmat and Kharrazi [war-era martyrs] of their own, their condition would not be [as it is now] and we would not have seen any of the events [that we have seen] in that country. The missing link in these countries is the absence of individuals that we had in abundance during the Sacred Defense."²¹ This critique followed Shateri's assassination and may have reflected Suleimani's resentment toward the regime whose failings allowed his subordinate to be killed.

Quds Force Deputy Commander Brigadier General Esmail Ghaani also issued an implicit criticism of the Assad regime two days after the May 25, 2012 Houla massacre, during which Assad's forces killed an estimated 90 people. Apparently frustrated with Assad's propensity to respond disproportionately to protests, Ghaani told an Iranian media outlet, "If the Islamic Republic were not present in Syria, many more of its people would have been killed."²² Qassem Suleimani is said to have echoed his deputy's frustrations in September 2012. According

to an Iranian nationalist opposition source, Suleimani said at that time, "We tell Assad to send the police to the streets and suddenly he dispatches the army!"²³

The IRGC has clearly been providing advice and coordination, but it is unlikely that they have assumed a direct combat role. The only evidence to the contrary has emerged from Syrian defectors and opposition leaders, who have accused Iran of deploying snipers to assist in crackdowns on protests and military operations.²⁴ Regardless of whether Iran is involved in direct combat, Iranian top-level coordination with Assad's military forces is evident and demonstrates the energy and resources that Tehran is expending in order to achieve its strategic objectives in Syria.

Intelligence Support

Assad's need for Iranian intelligence support likely became more urgent as the regime sought to suppress protests throughout Syria in the spring of 2011. A series of U.S. Department of the Treasury (USDOT) designations beginning at that time indicate that a range of Iranian organizations have been involved in the effort, including Law Enforcement Forces (LEF), the Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS), and the large defense contractor Iran Electronics Industries (IEI). These designations also shed some light on the relationships between Syrian and Iranian state security institutions.

Tehran dispatched LEF personnel to advise and assist Assad beginning in early 2011.²⁵ According to the USDOT designation, LEF Deputy Commander Brigadier General 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."²⁶ The designation further states that the LEF "provided material support to the Syrian General Intelligence Directorate (GID) and dispatched personnel to Damascus...to assist the Syrian government in suppressing the Syrian people."²⁷

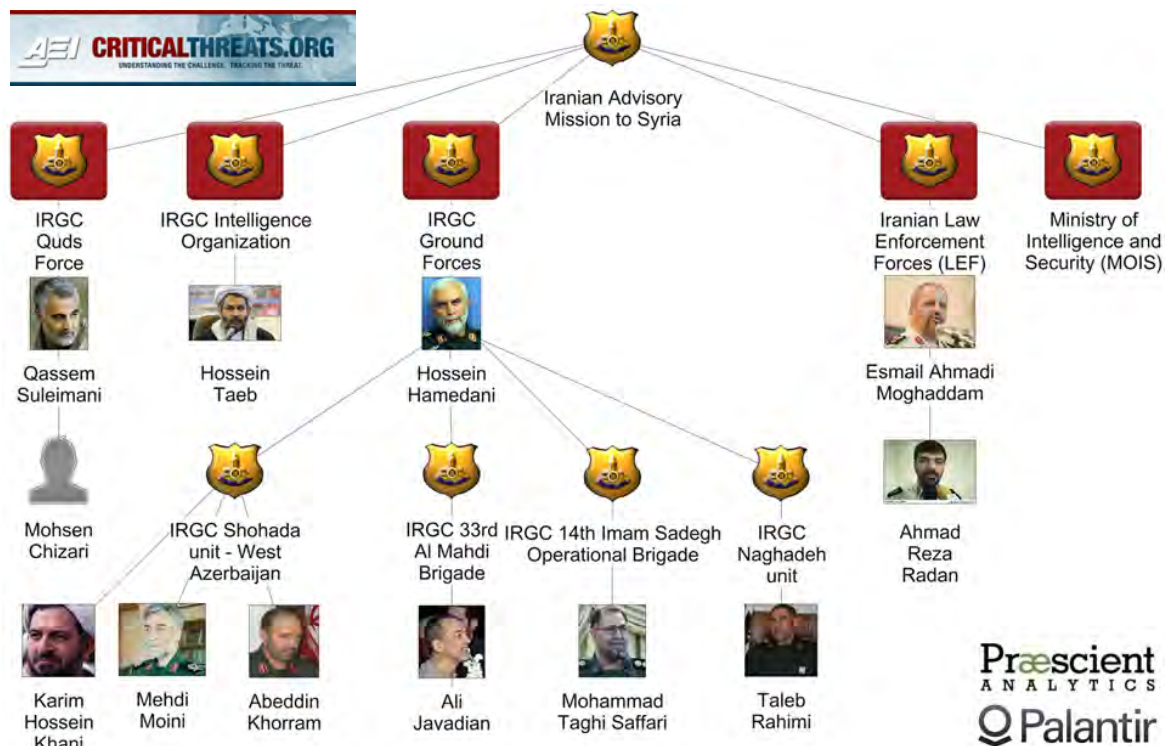


CHART 1 | KNOWN SENIOR PERSONNEL IN IRAN'S ADVISORY MISSION TO SYRIA

The U.S. Department of the Treasury had previously designated LEF for its “role in the government crackdown on protesters in the aftermath of [Iran’s] June 2009 election,” during which the LEF gained extensive experience neutralizing popular unrest.²⁸ Since that episode, addressing internal unrest has become a primary mission for the Islamic Republic’s security apparatus more broadly.²⁹ It is understandable, then, that the Iranians drew on the LEF’s combination of recent experience, training, and technological know-how to support Assad’s early efforts to control popular protests.

The deployment of LEF personnel in support of Assad is noteworthy, however, because it demonstrates that Iranian strategy toward Syria has been formulated and is being implemented by the senior-most leadership of the Islamic Republic. The LEF fall under the control of the Interior Ministry and are not in the chain-of-command of the IRGC or the regular armed forces.³⁰ The Interior Minister in theory reports to President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

In practice, however, the LEF, like all Iranian security services, is overseen by the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC), which reports to the Supreme Leader.³¹ It is very likely, therefore, that the SNSC developed a plan for supporting Assad that the Supreme Leader would then have approved and that this plan is now being executed. The presence of LEF officers in Syria is the clearest possible evidence that Iran’s whole-of-government strategy in Syria is being controlled directly by Khamenei rather than Suleimani, the IRGC, or any other single individual or entity in Iran.

The LEF is not the only Iranian security institution providing intelligence and technological support to the Syrian regime. A variety of Iranian organizations have been cited for providing a wide range of support to Assad:

- **June 2011:** The European Union sanctioned IRGC Intelligence Organization chief Hojjat al-Eslam Hossein Taeb for his involvement in

“providing equipment and support to help the Syria regime suppress protests.”³²

- **February 2012:** U.S. Department of Treasury designated the Iranian Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS) for providing “substantial technical assistance to the Syrian General Intelligence Directorate for the purpose of assisting the Syrian regime in its violent crackdown on protestors.”³³
- **March 2012:** An unnamed U.S. official stated that Iran had “shared techniques on Internet surveillance and disruption” with the Assad regime and provided “unarmed drones that Damascus is using along with its own technology to monitor opposition forces,” as well as “monitoring tools to help the regime suppress the opposition.”³⁴ Syrian activists had filmed an Iranian Monajer surveillance drone flying over Homs the previous month.³⁵
- **September 2012:** U.S. Department of Treasury designated Iran Electronics Industries (IEI) for its relationship with Syria’s Army Supply Bureau (SASB), accusing IEI of having “standing contracts” with SASB and attempting to ship the organization \$2 million worth of “communications equipment, including VHF/UHF [communications] jammers.”³⁶

Available evidence indicates that Iran’s intelligence support has been routed primarily through the Syrian General Intelligence Directorate.³⁷ Syria has four overlapping intelligence agencies, all of which enjoy broad mandates to monitor and neutralize internal and external threats to the regime, and all of which report directly to President Assad.³⁸ It is unclear whether Iran maintains direct relations with other Syrian intelligence agencies, or whether the GID acts as the sole conduit for Iranian intelligence support.



PHOTO 3 | REPRESENTATIVE OF THE SUPREME LEADER TO AND SECRETARY OF IRAN’S SUPREME NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL SAID JALILI MEETS BASHAR AL ASSAD IN SYRIA, JANUARY 16, 2013. (SOURCE: FINANCIAL TIMES)

Although GID is primarily responsible for external intelligence, its powerful internal security branch was headed for decades by Mohammed Nasif Kheirbek, a close advisor to Hafez al-Assad.³⁹ The Kheirbek family is one of three families that make up the inner core of the Assad regime and hold leadership roles throughout the intelligence and security apparatuses.⁴⁰ Mohammed Nasif later became the Deputy Director of GID, and he acted as a special assistant to President Assad for intelligence and security by the beginning of the uprising.⁴¹

Mohammed Nasif Kheirbek has been identified as the interlocutor between Assad and the Iranian regime.⁴² According to one report, Kheirbek travelled to Tehran during the summer of 2011 to negotiate Iranian assistance to establish a new military compound and supply depot at Latakia airport.⁴³ Kheirbek’s identification as the primary contact for Syria’s relationship with Iran reinforces the assessment that GID acts as the principal conduit for Iranian intelligence support to Syria’s security apparatus.

Military Resupply

Air

Aerial resupply is the most critical component of Iranian material support to Syria. USDOT designations have shed light on the significance of Iranian commercial airlines in these operations. Other evidence suggests that Iranian

Air Force jets have supplemented this effort and that Iran has relatively limited access to ground and sea lines of communication.

USDOT has sanctioned three Iranian airlines since the beginning of the conflict for transporting military equipment and personnel from Iran to Syria. In June 2011, USDOT designated Iran Air for transporting military equipment that included “missile or rocket components to Syria.”⁴⁴ According to the designation, the IRGC disguises military equipment as “medicine or generic spare parts” in order to transport the illicit cargo. Yas Air was designated in March 2012 for transporting IRGC-QF personnel and weapons, including small arms, ammunition, rockets, anti-aircraft guns, and mortar shells.⁴⁵ The designation describes a series of IRGC-QF-coordinated Yas Air flights in March 2011, at the very outset of the conflict, which transported weapons to Hezbollah and Syrian officials.⁴⁶

A separate USDOT designation in September 2012 cited 117 cargo and passenger planes linked to Yas Air, Iran Air, and Mahan Air for their use in arms and personnel smuggling to Syria.⁴⁷ While the majority of the designated aircraft are commercial jetliners, five Yas Air military transport aircraft were also identified, including three Antonov-74s and two Ilyushin-76s.⁴⁸ Both the Ilyushin and the Antonov are extremely durable and capable of shorter take-offs and landings than larger commercial aircraft. By employing a range of airframes, Iran has the ability to fly into



PHOTO 4 | IRAN AIR JET IN DAMASCUS

Syria’s larger airports as well as its smaller airbases.

Iranian air supply to Syria pre-dated the uprising, as Damascus has long been used as the main Iranian hub to supply Lebanese Hezbollah. Iran Air has facilitated shipments for Iran’s Ministry of Defense and Armed Forces Logistics (MODAFL) and the IRGC since at least 2000.⁴⁹ A UN report on illegal arms transfers found that Syria was the top destination for illicit arms shipments from Iran. These arms were then often passed on to Lebanese and Palestinian militants.⁵⁰

Iranian aircraft also transport personnel for advise-and-assist missions in Syria. The U.S. Treasury Department sanctioned Mahan Air in October 2011 for providing “travel services for IRGC-QF personnel flown to and from Iran and Syria for military training.”⁵¹ Five months later, Treasury also designated Yas Air for transporting IRGC-QF personnel.⁵² These designations demonstrate the use of air transport to deploy IRGC-QF advisors to Syria since at least the start of the uprising.

In addition to aircraft owned by Iranian commercial airlines, the Iranian and Syrian air forces have employed Ilyushin-76s from their own fleets. Opposition activists filmed an Iranian Air Force-marked Ilyushin-76 at Palmyra Airbase in October 2012.⁵³ Syrian Air Ilyushin-76s have also been filmed landing in Hama and Aleppo.⁵⁴ One Syrian Air Ilyushin-76 (tail fin number YK-ATA) has been identified as having travelled between airfields around Moscow, Tehran, and Damascus in 2012.⁵⁵ Unauthenticated flight manifest records indicate that this Syrian plane has used Iraqi, Iranian, and Azeri airspace to deliver equipment from Russia. The aircraft reportedly transported over 200 tons of Syrian banknotes printed in Russia over multiple trips in 2012.⁵⁶ The aircraft also attempted to transport refurbished Mi-25 Russian attack helicopters in this manner, although Iraqi authorities denied the over-flight request.⁵⁷

U.S. control of Iraqi airspace since the 1991 Gulf War previously required Iran to fly its shipments to Syria over Turkey, which tolerated this traffic as part of its “zero problems with neighbors” policy.⁵⁸ When Ankara turned against Assad after the onset of the conflict, it began to deny air shipments to Syria. In March 2011, Turkey seized crates of ammunition, machine guns, assault rifles, and mortar shells from a Yas Air Ilyushin-76 en route to Syria.⁵⁹ Iran has since shifted to using Iraqi airspace for shipments to Syria in light of its cooling relations with Turkey and the 2011 withdrawal of U.S. forces from Iraq, which allowed Iran to use that airspace without fear of American armed reprisal.

Despite initial pledges from Iraqi officials to inspect all flights from Iran to Syria, Iraq has only inspected six flights, none of which were found to be carrying illicit material.⁶⁰ According to U.S. intelligence reports, Iraqi officials, including head of the Iran-linked Badr Organization and Iraqi Transport Minister Hadi al-Amiri, are thought to be colluding with the IRGC to facilitate the passage of Iranian flights to Syria.⁶¹ To facilitate this arrangement, Qassem Suleimani arranged an Iraqi inspection on October 27th of an Iranian plane ordered by IRGC-QF to carry only humanitarian supplies in order to assuage U.S. concerns.⁶² At least one Syria-bound plane has ignored Iraqi requests for inspection.⁶³

Iraq, it should be noted, has no ability to protect or police its airspace in the wake of the American withdrawal. If Iranian aircraft fly over Iraq without permission, there is little Baghdad can do in practical terms to stop them. Recognizing this vulnerability, after U.S. Secretary of State Kerry pushed Prime Minister Nouri al Maliki to take additional steps to prevent Iranian planes from delivering weapons to the Assad regime via Iraqi airspace, Iraqi Foreign Minister Hoshyar Zebari replied, “We explained to the U.S. side that Iraq’s air defense capabilities are limited, and we are in the stage of building our air force.”⁶⁴

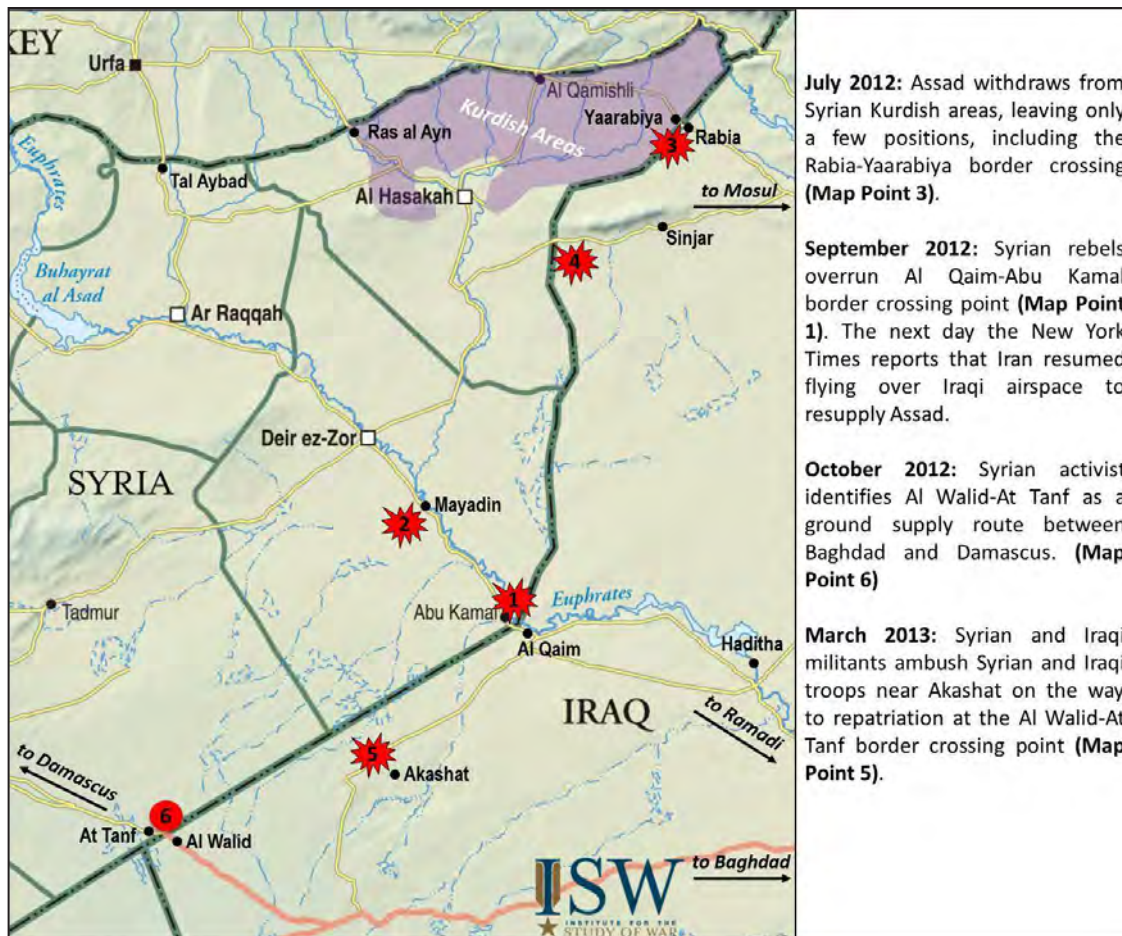


PHOTO 5 | IRANIAN AIR FORCE ILYUSHIN-76 IN PALMYRA, SYRIA (SOURCE: YOUTUBE)

Ground

One ground resupply route between Baghdad and Damascus remains a viable corridor for Iranian material support to the Syrian regime. Iran has been “increasing their support [to Assad] for the last three, four months through Iraq’s airspace and now trucks,” an anonymous Western diplomat told Reuters in mid-March, “And the Iraqis are really looking the other way.”⁶⁵ As depicted on the map, the four primary Syria-Iraq border crossing points are Rabia-Yaarabiya in the north, the unofficial crossing at Sinjar, the Euphrates River belt Al Qaim-Abu Kamal Crossing, and the Al Walid-At Tanf border crossing near Jordan. As of late 2012 only one ground line of supply between Baghdad and Damascus remained viable, the Al Walid-At Tanf border crossing point.⁶⁶

Three of the four Iraq-Syria ground routes became unsuitable for ground resupply by fall 2012. First, historical Sunni militant activity in Sinjar area suggests that this route would not be useful for government forces due to security concerns.⁶⁷ Second, Assad’s withdrawal from Syria’s northeastern Kurdish areas left this northern route unsuitable for a principal overland support channel.⁶⁸ Third, The Syrian rebel seizure of the Al Qaim-Abu Kamal border crossing point in early September 2012 closed the Euphrates River belt to ground resupply from Iraq.⁶⁹ As soon as Syrian Rebels seized the Al Qaim-Abu Kamal crossing point, *The New York Times* reported that Iran had resumed



MAP 1 | SYRIA-IRAQ BORDER CROSSING POINTS

July 2012: Assad withdraws from Syrian Kurdish areas, leaving only a few positions, including the Rabia-Yaarabiya border crossing (Map Point 3).

September 2012: Syrian rebels overrun Al Qaim-Abu Kamal border crossing point (Map Point 1). The next day the New York Times reports that Iran resumed flying over Iraqi airspace to resupply Assad.

October 2012: Syrian activist identifies Al Walid-At Tanf as a ground supply route between Baghdad and Damascus. (Map Point 6)

March 2013: Syrian and Iraqi militants ambush Syrian and Iraqi troops near Akashat on the way to repatriation at the Al Walid-At Tanf border crossing point (Map Point 5).

shipping military equipment to Syria over Iraqi airspace, coinciding with constricting ground supply corridors.⁷⁰

The last available ground resupply route through Iraq, the Al Walid-At Tanf border crossing point, travels through the middle of the Syrian Desert and is the most direct route between Baghdad and Damascus. A month after rebels closed the Al Qaim-Abu Kamal crossing, one Syrian opposition activist posted a map on his Twitter account depicting the overland resupply route to Assad via Al Walid-At Tanf.⁷¹ Sunni militants ambushed a convoy of Syrian and Iraqi soldiers near Al Walid inside Iraq in March 2013, corroborating the importance of this southernmost route.⁷² The Iraqis were attempting to repatriate the Syrian troops, who had fled into Iraq as rebels overran their

positions at the northernmost Rabia-Yaarabiya crossing.⁷³ The Iraqi and Syrian governments appear well situated to maintain control of this last overland supply route, although the recent ambush also demonstrates militants' capacity to disrupt this critical line of communication.

Sea

Iran has also deployed naval vessels through the Suez Canal to Syrian ports of call, demonstrating the plausibility of a sea line of communication. In February 2011, before the uprising began, Iranian naval vessels transited the Suez Canal for the first time since the 1970s.⁷⁴ The two vessels, the Alvand and the Kharg, then docked in Latakia.⁷⁵ Two Iranian naval vessels made the same journey to the Mediterranean in February 2012, where Iranian state-run Press TV said that they docked in the port of Tartous to train with

Syrian forces. The U.S. Department of Defense, however, denied that the ships had docked or delivered cargo.⁷⁶ The relative infrequency of these voyages suggests that Iran's sea lanes to Syria are more symbolic than practical.

An unofficial sea line of communication utilizing commercial vessels is more plausible but still problematic. In February 2013, the Syrian Economic Task Force reported that tankers belonging to Iranian oil companies frequently traversed the Suez Canal to ship oil between Syria and Iran. Two ships in particular were identified, which had reflagged repeatedly in recent months. The report suggested that the Iranian ships were primarily moving Syrian crude to Iran, perhaps to offset Iranian investment in Assad's regime.⁷⁷ If the operational landscape significantly degrades Iran's ability to transport equipment and personnel via ground and air routes, however, Iran could look to make use of this established alternate point of access to transport weapons, equipment, and personnel.

Given the limitations of sea lines of communication, however, air shipments remain Iran's most feasible method of supplying the Assad regime. Shipping weapons by ground is much less expensive than maintaining an air bridge, but the constraints of the current operational environment in eastern Syria and western Iraq will place increasing significance on air shipments. The deployment of Iranian heavy transport aircraft and the unrestricted air corridor over Iraq enables continuous Iranian air supply to Syria. A U.S. intelligence report in September indicated that air shipments were occurring "on an almost daily basis."⁷⁸

As the battle for Syria continues and Assad consolidates forces around well-secured military airbases, the use of military-grade cargo planes for cross-border shipments will remain critical for Iranian support. Even if Damascus International Airport becomes unusable, Iran could continue to resupply both Assad and its proxies through a number of smaller military airbases north of Damascus. In any case,

Iran's ability to support Assad with personnel and equipment is inextricably linked to the maintenance of this air corridor, making it a key vulnerability for Iranian strategy in Syria.

Paramilitaries and Proxies

Bashar al-Assad has relied heavily on pro-regime militias since the outset of the conflict, but the relative significance of these paramilitary forces has increased over time. As the Syrian military suffered heavy attrition and defections in the first year of conflict, Assad increasingly looked to pro-regime militia units to fill the requirements gap. Iran has directly supported a number of Syria's pro-Assad paramilitary organizations. At the same time, Iran's proxies and regional partners, namely Lebanese Hezbollah and Iraqi Shi'a militant groups, have taken a more prominent combat role. These elements have augmented Assad's forces in an effort to preserve their mutual interests, as well as those of Iran.

Support to Syrian Paramilitaries

U.S. officials first acknowledged Iranian support for Syrian paramilitaries in August 2012, when U.S. Secretary of Defense Panetta testified that there are "indications that [Iran is] trying to develop or trying to train a militia within Syria to be able to fight on behalf of the regime." General Dempsey further clarified that Iran called this militia Jaysh al-Sha'bi, or "the People's Army," and that it was "made up of Syrians, generally Shia and some Alawite."⁷⁹

The next month IRGC Commander Major General Mohammad Ali Jafari explained at a news conference that "there is no need for external support in order to preserve the security in Syria, since 50,000 popular forces called Jaysh al-Sha'bi are fighting alongside the Syrian military."⁸⁰ In December 2012, USDOT sanctioned Jaysh al-Sha'bi, accusing IRGC-QF of providing the militia with advice, training, weapons, equipment and "funding worth millions of dollars."⁸¹ The designation further explains that the militia "was created, and

continues to be maintained, with support from Iran and Hizballah and is modeled after the Iranian Basij militia.”⁸²

Syria’s pro-regime militias like Jaysh al-Sha’bi must be understood within the Syrian historical context rather than as an imitation of the Iranian Basij. The Syrian Ba’ath party has used paramilitary forces since taking power in 1963, and Hafez al-Assad relied on them heavily to suppress the early 1980s Muslim Brotherhood uprising. The Ba’ath Party called its institutional paramilitaries “Jaysh al-Sha’bi” by the mid-1980s, and included an estimated 100,000 members as of 2011.⁸³

Pro-Assad militias in the current conflict comprise two distinct but related phenomena. The Popular Committees are comprised of minority communities that have armed themselves, fearing the militarized and majority-Sunni opposition. These local militias coordinate with regime security forces and man checkpoints in minority towns and neighborhoods.⁸⁴

A more extreme evolution of the pro-Assad militia groups grew out of the Alawite criminal networks of coastal Latakia and Tartous, known for smuggling goods to and from Lebanon. These smuggling gangs were known as *shabiba* – named for the old Mercedes Shahab (Ghost) popular for its smuggling-sized trunk – and were led by members of Assad’s extended family.⁸⁵ These militias have been responsible for some of the most brutal forms of violence against Sunni populations. The opposition refers to all pro-government militias as *shabiba*.

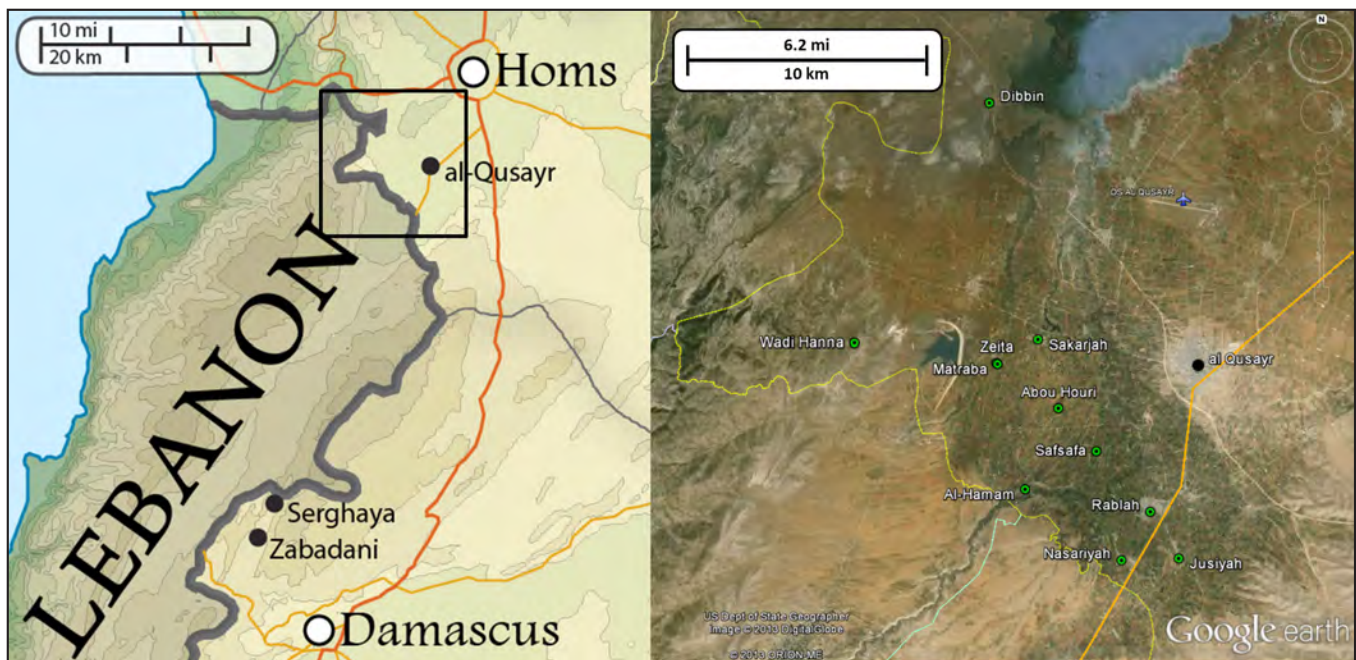
Iranian support to these pro-government militias bolsters Assad’s staying power while setting foundations for militant groups that can survive with or without Assad. Iranian support for the neighborhood Popular Committees primarily enables the first objective. The Popular Committees provide security for pro-Assad populations, freeing the Army and security apparatus to conduct operations against the opposition. This element of support is,

therefore, critical to Iran’s ability to achieve its two-track strategic objectives.

By the beginning of 2013, Assad took steps to formalize and professionalize the Popular Committee militias under a new group dubbed the National Defense Forces, or *quwat al-difa’ al-watani*. Iran has contributed to establishing this new organization, which gathers together existing neighborhood militias into a functioning hierarchy and provides them with better equipment and training.⁸⁶ One journalist who has extensively interviewed regime insiders has claimed that members of the National Defense Forces have received training from Iranian advisors.⁸⁷

Iran has been training pro-Assad militants both in Syria and in Iran. Iranian training efforts for Iraqi and Afghan groups have previously taken place primarily in Iran, where training facilities are robust, dispersed, and secure.⁸⁸ U.S. Treasury designations have shown that Iran has been training Assad’s security forces inside Syria since the beginning of the conflict.⁸⁹ A recent report indicates, however, that Iran is also sending pro-Assad militants to Iran for training. In early April 2013, Reuters published interviews with four fighters from Homs province, each hailing from a separate militia unit, who all claimed to have travelled to Iran for urban warfare training.⁹⁰

This effort overlaps with Iran’s second objective of supporting militant groups that can survive with or without Assad. The more extreme *shabiba* criminal networks led by extended members of the Assad family are the most likely to continue fighting after regime collapse. As one militiaman explained, “I know the Sunnis will take revenge for what we have done. I am fighting to guarantee a good future for my sons and grandsons. So this is the final battle: Win, or die. There’s no third choice.”⁹¹ These militias form a significant base for recruitment to build militant cadres for an enduring proxy militia force.



MAP 2 | LEBANESE HEZBOLLAH AREAS OF OPERATION

Iran is likely to develop reliable proxies that can continue to pursue Tehran’s interests if Assad falls. The militias and the remnants of Assad’s security institutions will look to Iran for continued support, fearful of the ascendant Sunni opposition. Indeed, even if Assad falls and the Sunni opposition consolidates control over most of Syria, the regime’s remnants are prepared to transform themselves into a complex and capable insurgent network, a transformation that Iran is well situated to encourage and facilitate.⁹²

Lebanese Hezbollah

Lebanese Hezbollah (LH) is one regional partner that has taken on a more direct combat role in Syria as the increasingly embattled Assad regime began to lose control over parts of Syria in 2012. From the early stages of the conflict, LH has supported Assad with a robust, well-trained force whose involvement in the conflict aligns with Iranian strategic interests. U.S. Department of the Treasury designations have accused Lebanese Hezbollah (LH) of both directly supporting Assad and facilitating Iranian activity in Syria. Hezbollah has played an

“integral role in the continued violence” and has provided increasing levels of support for Assad since the beginning of the conflict.⁹³ Hezbollah has also worked with Syrian officials to ensure the passage of Iranian arms shipments to Syria since the summer of 2012.⁹⁴

Over the past decade, Hezbollah has strengthened its political and military dominance in Lebanon and has emerged as its own actor in the region.⁹⁵ The conflict in Syria, however, has placed Hezbollah on the defensive to protect its support base and ensure the continuation of supply routes from Syria into Lebanon.⁹⁶ These supply lines can be maintained by preserving Assad, even if his regime contracts to a defensive posture around Damascus, Homs and the coast. If Assad falls, supply lines can be protected by proxies as long as the ascendant opposition is unable to effectively establish control over Syria’s borders.

IRGC-QF has coordinated with LH to train government and pro-Assad forces inside Syria.⁹⁷ According to the above-cited designations, LH involvement in Syria includes logistical support, training and advising, facilitation of

IRGC-QF activity, and direct combat action. Hezbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah also admitted in October 2012 that Hezbollah militants were fighting in Syria, although he claimed they were fighting of their own accord and not under the direction of Hezbollah leadership.⁹⁸ He clarified in February 2013 that the party as a whole was not involved in Syria, but that members of the organization living in majority Lebanese Shi'ite villages in Syria have been involved in fighting.⁹⁹

Hezbollah fighters are well situated to provide advice and training to Syrian armed forces, pro-regime paramilitaries, and Shi'a proxy groups because of their native Arabic language and experience with light infantry combat operations. Any advisory and assistance force faces linguistic challenges operating beyond its borders, and Persians operating in Arab lands are no exception. Hezbollah's Lebanese Arabs are better suited to work closely with Syrian counterparts than Iranian Revolutionary Guards. U.S. Treasury officials noted Hezbollah's particular contribution regarding counterinsurgency capabilities in low-intensity conflict.¹⁰⁰ With the exception of its twelve Special Forces Regiments, the Syrian Army is primarily a heavy, mechanized force that lacks the light infantry capability necessary for sustained conflict against lightly armed insurgents. Hezbollah's experience fighting in low-intensity conflict could be a valuable supplementary asset for Assad's armored forces.

LH militants participate in a number of direct support activities in Syria, including sniper and counter-sniper operations, facility and route protection, joint clearing operations, and direct engagement with opposition forces, often in coordination with Syrian forces and pro-government militias.¹⁰¹ In the early stages of the Syrian conflict, the opposition frequently accused LH fighters of augmenting Syrian personnel, particularly trained marksmen. Syrian security forces "didn't have decent snipers or equipment," a defected regime insider who managed Defense Ministry funds

diverted to Hezbollah personnel explained in early 2011, "They needed qualified snipers from Hezbollah and Iran."¹⁰² These early claims remain impossible to verify.

Hezbollah's involvement in direct action inside Syria became more verifiable in 2012, particularly in areas near the Lebanese border. In one of the first unconfirmed acknowledgements of LH direct action, an unnamed IRGC official claimed that Hezbollah snipers had been deployed during the Battle of Zabadani in early 2012.¹⁰³ The town of Zabadani sits in the middle of a historic supply route from Damascus to Lebanese Hezbollah's headquarters in Baalbek, a town in the southern Bekaa Valley near the Syrian border. The town was, as noted earlier, the hub for Iranian support to Hezbollah in 1982. During the current conflict, LH has deployed forces to protect and engaged in small skirmishes with rebel forces areas along this route.¹⁰⁴ LH is also said to have numerous weapons caches in the area.¹⁰⁵

An Israeli Defense Forces airstrike in February 2013 against a weapons convoy reportedly carrying SA-17 anti-aircraft missiles bound for Lebanon is evidence that these routes remain an integral component of Iran's and Hezbollah's logistical network in Syria.¹⁰⁶ This area is also an active staging ground for Iranian personnel in Syria. Reports state that IRGC-QF has established an operating base close to Zabadani.¹⁰⁷

Another area where Hezbollah activity has become clearer is further north, along the northeastern Lebanese border near Homs. Hezbollah and Syrian opposition camps sit in close proximity in Lebanon's northern Bekaa valley, although these groups are only known to fight each other inside Syrian territory.¹⁰⁸ Hezbollah's involvement in this area was demonstrated in October 2012 when Ali Hussein Nassif, reported to be commander of Hezbollah's operations in Syria, was killed in al-Qusayr, 10 kilometers from the Lebanese border and 20 kilometers southwest of Homs.¹⁰⁹

The same month, LH launched Katyusha rockets into al-Qusayr from the northern Bekaa Valley.¹¹⁰

Hezbollah escalated its combat role in mid-February 2013 when LH fighters, supported by Syrian air support and pro-Assad militias, launched a coordinated ground offensive against rebel-held villages near al-Qusayr.¹¹¹ Syrian opposition bodies including the Syrian National Council (SNC) and Free Syrian Army (FSA) denounced the assault, seeing it as a “military intervention” by Hezbollah and the beginning of “an open war against Syrian civilians in full coordination with the Assad regime.”¹¹² According to rebel groups, Hezbollah controls at least eight Syrian villages near the north Lebanese border and is attempting to secure more in an effort to disrupt rebel supply lines to Homs.¹¹³

A number of factors help explain Hezbollah’s overt involvement in this case. In early 2013, the Lebanese military moved to lock down the border crossing near Aarsal, a Sunni town used to smuggle weapons and supplies to opposition fighters in Syria.¹¹⁴ With this major opposition supply line disrupted, Sunni rebels have been forced to use al-Qusayr as a crossing point. This location is further north, close to Hermel and many predominately-Shi’a towns across the Syrian border. The February escalation may be a consequence of this shifting line of communication, with LH acting to protect the predominately-Shi’a villages in Syria from the growing rebel presence in the area. A pro-opposition source reported that tensions between the two sides in al-Qusayr flared again in April 2013 when rebels attacked fifty LH fighters, killing nine and wounding fifteen others.¹¹⁵ The ambiguity of the Syria-Lebanon border near al-Qusayr has facilitated Hezbollah’s cross-border activity and helped the group to justify it. Border disputes between Lebanon and Syria in the northeast corner have never been resolved, and many of the residents on the Syrian side have Lebanese passports. Nasrallah’s abovementioned February 2013

statement relied on this ambiguity in claiming that the only members of Hezbollah fighting in Syria hailed from Shia villages along the Syrian border.

Hezbollah’s involvement in Syria has aligned with Iranian strategic interests, but its commitment is not without limitations. Lebanese Hezbollah’s domestic responsibilities require careful calibration to avoid alienating its core constituency. Hezbollah has built its reputation on a narrative of popular resistance against Israel but now finds itself supporting a repressive regime in Syria, a problem Tehran also faces. Calculated infusions of direct assistance will continue to impact the course of the conflict, but Hezbollah cannot invest all of its resources in Syria.

Iraqi Shi’a Militants in Syria

Iraqi Shi’a militants are also fighting in Syria in support of Assad. Iranian-backed Shi’a militias established close relations with IRGC-QF and functioned as a disruption force during the U.S. counterinsurgency in Iraq. These loyal and battle-tested proxy militias can likewise help Iran to ensure a permissive environment in Syria even if Assad falls.

During the Iraq War, IRGC-QF played a crucial role in facilitating the creation and training of Iraqi Shi’a militant groups, including both Kata’ib Hezbollah (KH) and Asa’ib Ahl al-Haq (AAH). Iran used Lebanese Hezbollah to facilitate the formation and training of these groups. It is known, for example, that Lebanese Hezbollah militant Ali Mussa Daqduq travelled to Tehran in May 2006 to meet with Abdul Reza Shahlai (also known as Hajji Youssef), the deputy commander of the Quds Force’s Department of External Special Operations. There he received directives from the IRGC-QF to oversee the training of Iranian-backed Shi’a militant groups in Iraq.¹¹⁶

One of the first indications of a similar strategy in Syria appeared in early 2012 when Jaafar Athab, a purported member of the Iran-backed



PHOTO 6 | FUNERAL FOR ASA'IB AHL AL-HAQ FIGHTER KILLED IN SYRIA, APRIL 2013. (SOURCE: NOW LEBANON)

Iraqi Shi'a militant group Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, was killed in Hama.¹¹⁷ Athab's body was reportedly transported from Syria to Baghdad with the help of Iraqi and Syrian security forces. A funeral was then held in Tahrir Square in Baghdad under the protection of Iraqi government forces.¹¹⁸ The existence of AAH militants in Syria is plausible given Iran's direct connection to the militia, AAH's active role during the U.S. war in Iraq, and the group's attested presence in Lebanon as well as Iraq.¹¹⁹

Rumors continued to circulate regarding the nature of Iraqi Shi'a involvement in Syria throughout 2012. According to unconfirmed reports, IRGC Quds Force commander Qassem Suleimani ordered AAH and KH to send fighters to Syria to assist Assad some time in 2012.¹²⁰ Iraqi Shi'a leaders told *The New York Times* in October 2012 that Iran assisted in the recruitment, transportation, armament, and payment of Shi'a fighters travelling to Syria from Iraq.¹²¹ According to the report, some Iraqi Shi'a fighters are traveling to Tehran before being flown into Damascus, while others are being transported from Najaf, Iraq into Syria.¹²²

Like other paramilitary forces operating in Syria, Iraqi Shi'a militants in Syria escalated their involvement as the conflict descended into civil war. Their presence became overt in the fall of 2012 with the formation of the Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas Brigade (AFAB), a pro-government militia that appears to be a conglomerate of Syrian and foreign Shi'a fighters, including

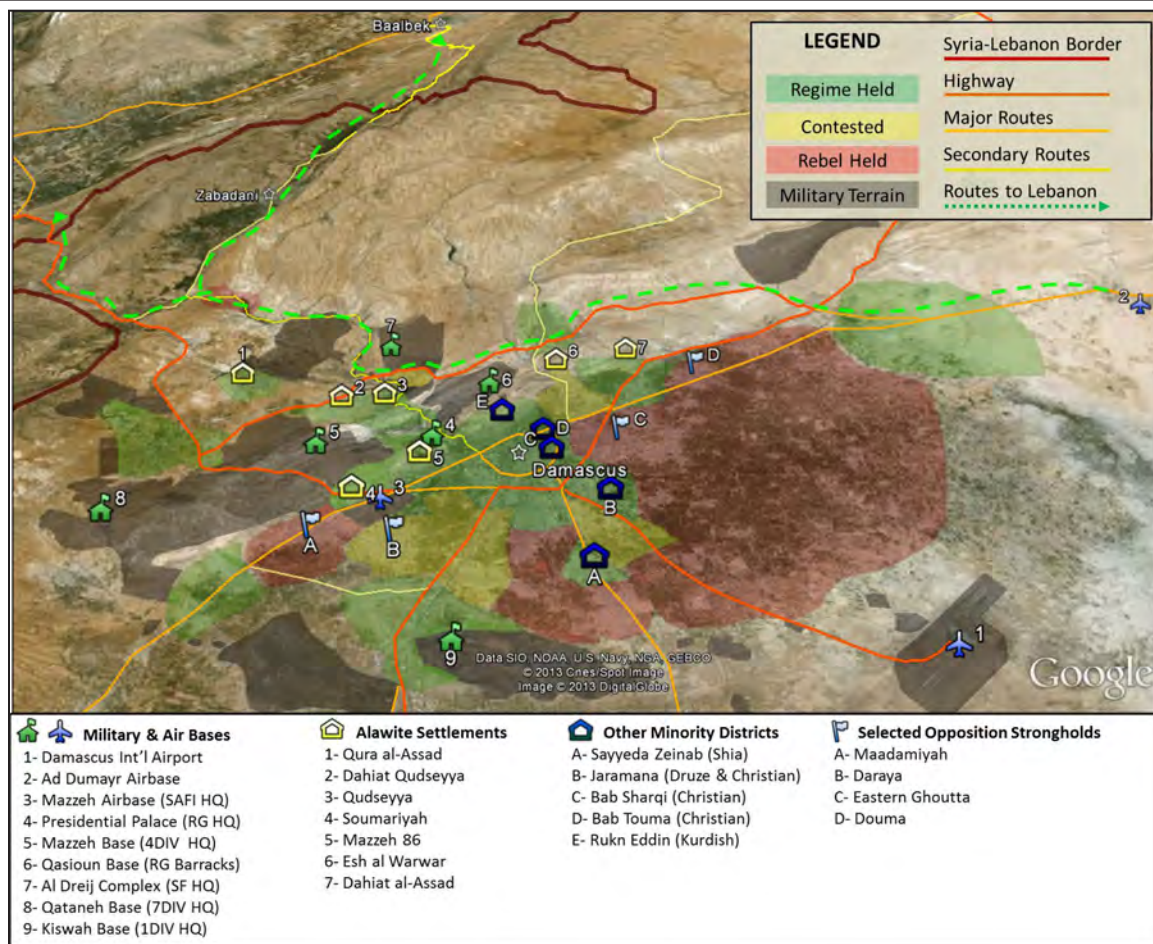
members of Lebanese Hezbollah and the various Iraqi Shi'a militias.¹²³ The name of the brigade, Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas, refers to al-Abbas ibn Ali, Imam Ali's brother, and was used by brigades connected to KH and AAH during the Iraq War. A public statement released by AFAB confirmed that leadership and general membership of the militia is split between Syrian and Iraqi Shi'a "mujahidin."¹²⁴ An interview with Abu Hajar, an AFAB leader and self-proclaimed defector from the Jaysh al-Mahdi militia in Iraq, said that AFAB numbers some 500 fighters.¹²⁵

In April 2013, both KH and AAH confirmed their involvement in the Syrian conflict. The two groups published videos and photographs on the internet acknowledging that four of their fighters had been killed while "defending Shi'ite shrines in the Damascus suburb of Sayyeda Zeinab."¹²⁶ The open participation of Iranian-backed Shi'a militants in Syria highlights Iran's deep and evolving involvement in the conflict and the extent to which Iran has increasingly looked to proxy groups and paramilitaries to help achieve its objectives.

AFAB's online statements consistently define the group's primary task as protecting the shrine of Sayyeda Zeinab in southeast Damascus.¹²⁷ The shrine entombs the remains of the daughter of the first Shi'a Imam. The brigade also participates in "joint military operations" with the Syrian army, preemptive attacks against FSA positions bordering the



PHOTO 7 | AFAB FIGHTER (SOURCE: PHOTO POSTED ON FACEBOOK BY ABU AL-FADL AL-ABBAS BRIGADE, ACCESSED APRIL 2013)



MAP 3 | REGIME CONTROL AND LINES OF COMMUNICATION IN DAMASCUS

Sayyeda Zeinab neighborhood, and securing Shi'a neighborhoods and offices of Shi'a religious leaders in Damascus.¹²⁸

Sayyeda Zeinab is not just a symbolic location; it is also key terrain for Assad and for Iran. The Sayyeda Zeinab neighborhood is operationally critical to the defense of Damascus and strategically significant for long-term Iranian operations around Damascus. Without Sayyeda Zeinab, the opposition could form a contiguous area of control encircling regime positions in western Damascus and would cut off regime access to Damascus International Airport.¹²⁹ Sayyeda Zeinab also contains many hotels and travel agencies that provide Iran with the ability to move personnel throughout the region under the guise of religious tourism. Iran has previously used its Shi'i religious

tourism system to facilitate travel for IRGC personnel and clandestine operatives.¹³⁰ AFAB may be defending Sayyeda Zeinab because of its religious significance, but it also suits Iran's interests for its proxies to defend the neighborhood for operational purposes.

The largest hotel in Sayyeda Zeinab, the As Safir Damascus Hotel, is owned by the wealthy Shi'a Nahas family, which has close ties with the Assad family. General Shafiq Fayyad, Hafez al-Assad's first cousin and the long-time commander of the Syrian 3rd Armored Division was a critical supporter of Hafez during the Muslim Brotherhood Uprising and Rifat al-Assad's 1984 coup attempt.¹³¹ One of Fayyad's sons married into the Nahas family.¹³² The Nahas Group holding company had listed Iran Air as one of its strategic partners, but removed the



PHOTO 8 | SAEB NAHAS MEETS IRANIAN PRESIDENT MAHMOUD AHMADINEJAD. (SOURCE: NAHAS-GROUP.COM)

association from its website recently.¹³³ Listed holding companies include the Sayyeda Zeinab Company for Tourism and Visit and the Nahas Travel and Tourism Company. The website includes pictures of the Saeb Nahas meeting with many foreign dignitaries, including Ahmadinejad.¹³⁴

The various paramilitary forces fighting in Syria profit from Iranian sponsorship as they pursue their mutual objectives in Syria. Each of these elements benefits from preserving Iran's regional strategic depth. They also share the requirement to protect against the threat of al-Qaeda affiliates as well as a potentially hostile Sunni majority transition government in Syria. These groups will likely continue to engage in direct combat operations in Syria while Iran pursues its dual-track strategy. They will likewise work to preserve Assad for as long as possible and to promote Iranian interests should he fall. Of the paramilitary forces fighting for Assad, the Syrian *shabiba* have the most to lose. They, too, will continue to fight and stand to gain from Iran's post-Assad militia network development.

Conclusion

The long-time senior foreign affairs advisor to Iran's Supreme Leader, Ali Akbar Velayati, underscored the significance of Syria to Iranian strategic interests during a press conference held March 27, 2013, during which he asserted, "Syria is the golden ring of resistance against Israel, and if it weren't for Syria's active

government the country would become like Qatar or Kuwait. Iran is not prepared to lose this golden counterweight."¹³⁵ Another close ally of Iran's Supreme Leader, Hojjat al-Eslam Mehdi Taeb, a former IRGC official and current head of the pro-Khamenei think-tank, Ammar Base, also shared this sentiment in a mid-February gathering of university Basij units: "Syria is the 35th province [of Iran] and a strategic province for us. If the enemy attacks us and seeks to take over Syria or [Iran's] Khuzestan, the priority lies in maintaining Syria, because if we maintain Syria we can take back Khuzestan. However, if we lose Syria, we won't be able to hold Tehran."¹³⁶

Iranian strategy seeks first and foremost to preserve the Assad regime for as long as possible. Syria has historically been an independent ally of the Islamic Republic, and the interests of these two allies have sometimes diverged. The regime's deepening dependence on Iranian support, however, has made Assad increasingly beholden to Tehran. Public outcry from Assad regime supporters over the recent prisoner swap deal that included Iranian nationals, including IRGC-GF commanders but not captured pro-regime Syrians, indicates the extent to which Syria has been forced to prioritize Iranian interests.¹³⁷

While working to preserve Assad, Iran is actively preparing to ensure a permissive environment post-Assad. As an Iraqi official who met with Qassem Suleimani explained, "The mission of Suleimani in Syria is complicated. It is not limited to protecting the regime from collapsing, rather it also has to preserve Iranian interests in Lebanon and Syria should the regime fall."¹³⁸

Ultimately, Iran does not require control over significant amounts of territory in order to continue projecting influence in the Levant, and the Assad regime appears positioned to maintain critical lines of

communication to Lebanese Hezbollah for the time being. Moreover, Iran likely intends to continue supporting regime remnants in Alawite-majority regions even after the regime collapses. By embedding with regime military forces while simultaneously establishing proxy militant networks, Iran can work to drive the convergence between the remnants of the Syrian Army and pro-government militias. This combined force, allied with Lebanese Hezbollah and Shi'a militant groups like AFAB, can continue to compete for limited territory within Syria and ensure that Iran remains able to project the force necessary to provide strategic depth and deterrence.

Iran may achieve some success with this two-track strategy over the short to mid-term, prolonging the conflict and creating conditions whereby it can retain some of its operational capacity in the Levant. The loss of Syria as a state ally, however, significantly limits Iran's strategic depth. The relatively limited zones that remain under the control of regime remnants will not provide Iran with the same level of deterrence, or political and economic support as Assad's Syria had provided. As Syria's ascendant opposition consolidates its gains over a longer time horizon, Iran's post-Assad network in Syria will provide Iran only limited and increasingly jeopardized access to its Levantine proxies and partners.

Former CENTCOM Commander General James Mattis pointed out this distinction between short and long-term effects of a contracting Alawite regime in testimony to the U.S. Senate Armed Services Committee March 5, 2013:

“It is an economically unsustainable enclave if they [regime supporters] go there [to a coastal enclave]. So it's not going to be a long-term thing. But it could certainly create a longevity for the regime if they were to lose Damascus,

that right now I think is something we have to consider. In other words, you'll see a kind of two-step. As Damascus starts to fall, they'll try to get over [to the coast]. I believe the Iranians are helping them to get established there.”¹³⁹

The situation that develops as the Syrian opposition dislodges Assad's regime and its remnants from Damascus is more likely to resemble pockets of minority control in central and coastal Syria than an orderly withdrawal into a well-defensible coastal enclave. With Iranian assistance, these pockets of minority control will continue to resist Syria's ascendant opposition and effectively prevent any new government from re-establishing control over the whole Syrian state. Over the long term, however, Iranian influence in the Levant is likely to continue waning as ground is lost.

Iran is certainly well aware that the loss of Syria will significantly degrade its ability to project power in the Levant and will plan for such a contingency. In order to compensate for this loss and continue to present an effective deterrent, Iran may look to expand its activities in other countries and regions. The recent interception of an Iranian weapons shipment containing sophisticated anti-aircraft missiles, arms, ammunition, and explosives destined for al-Houthi rebels in Yemen indicates that Iran is currently providing substantial lethal support for militants outside of the areas where its proxies have historically been most active.¹⁴⁰ As Damascus slips from Assad's control, Iran will be forced to find a careful balance between continuing its heavy investment in the Levant and deepening its networks and capabilities elsewhere in the region.

NOTES

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APPENDIX: THE ASSASSINATION OF IRANIAN QUDS FORCE GENERAL HASSAN SHATERI IN SYRIA

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Brigadier General Hassan Shateri, a member of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps Quds Force (IRGC-QF), was assassinated in Syria on February 13, 2013.¹ It appears that he had been in Aleppo and was killed while returning through Damascus to Beirut. It seems likely that the assassin was a member of the Syrian opposition; Tehran is convinced that his killers were operating at the behest of Israel. The evidence available at this time suggests that his assassination reflects a change in Israel's willingness to target very senior Iranian officials who are in-country providing military support to the Assad regime. Shateri's killing is a notable escalation in regional tensions that will very likely generate Iranian retaliation.²

The response of Iran's senior leaders to Shateri's killing demonstrates both his rank and his personal importance. Major General Qassem Suleimani, the Quds Force commander and head of Iranian strategy in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and the Persian Gulf, personally delivered the news of Shateri's death to his family and wept at his memorial ceremony.³ Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei invited Shateri's family to his home to console them.⁴ Shateri is the senior-most member of the Quds Force known to have been killed outside of Iran in the organization's three-decade history. He had deep connections with Lebanese Hezbollah and Iran's global force projection network. His death is a serious blow to the Quds Force, and his very presence in northern Syria shows the depth of Iran's involvement in that conflict.

The details of his death matter. In the first hours after Shateri's death, sources close to the Iranian embassies in Beirut and Damascus released information about Shateri's destination in Syria and the manner of his death. These details enable us to identify some of the Iranian covert networks that have been hitherto concealed in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan and their objectives in these locales. The circumstances of Shateri's death also shed light on Iran's current strategy in Syria and how that strategy fits in with Iran's broader global operations.

Where in Syria was Shateri?

Establishing Shateri's whereabouts in Syria and confirming that he was assassinated requires careful evaluation of the information and disinformation that has emerged about his death. The reporting on the incident has been contradictory, both between and within Western, Iranian, Israeli, and Syrian opposition sources.

The earliest information from Iranian sources indicates that Shateri was killed in a targeted assassination somewhere between Damascus and Beirut after visiting Aleppo. The later Iranian narrative omitted his visit to Aleppo and asserted that he was simply killed outside of Damascus. Iranian messaging has converged on an official narrative stating that Shateri was shot by "supporters and mercenaries" of Israel while traveling between Damascus and



HASSAN SHATERI GREETED SUPREME LEADER AYATOLLAH KHAMENEI BEFORE 2007 (SOURCE: ABNA)

Beirut after having travelled to Syria to survey reconstruction projects.⁵ Syrian opposition and an Israeli source have stated that he was killed in the January 30 Israeli airstrike on a convoy moving SA-17 anti-aircraft missiles across the Lebanese border.⁶

An assessment of the timeline of reporting on this event, however, indicates that the IRGC has been trying to walk back and contextualize some of the details leaked early on, particularly Shateri's presence in Aleppo.

The initial report came early February 13 from the Ahlul Bayt World News Agency (ABNA). This report stated only that Shateri was killed by "Zionist mercenaries...outside of Iran" and that Suleimani had confirmed the report "moments ago" and personally visited Shateri's family.⁷ Since then, ABNA has been in the lead and appears to have an inside track on Shateri reporting. ABNA was the first site to post images of Shateri's body being buried, Shateri with Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei before 2007, and Shateri with President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.⁸ ABNA is the reporting agency for the Ahlul Bayt World Assembly, headed by former two-time ambassador to Syria (1986-1997 and 2005-2008) Ayatollah Hassan Akhtari.⁹ Akhtari was also involved in standing up Lebanese Hezbollah in the 1980s.¹⁰ He was deeply involved in Iranian efforts to support Hezbollah, and the leading role that ABNA has taken in reporting on Shateri's death accounts in part for the emphasis on Shateri's participation in Iranian activities with Hezbollah as opposed to the various other important missions Shateri has undertaken outside the Levant.

The next reports provided details about Shateri's destination in Syria. A Lebanese source reported that Shateri had been in Aleppo to "research construction projects" and was killed on his way back to Lebanon.¹¹ The Iranian embassy in Beirut issued a statement claiming that Shateri had been sent to Aleppo to "implement development and construction projects" and was killed on his way to Damascus airport.¹²

One source also claimed that Shateri had been traveling with two other individuals who were not killed in the attack, a fact that is significant and will be explored later.¹³

The idea that a very senior Quds Force general had gone to a city that is likely soon to come under the control of Syria's opposition in order to look into construction projects is nonsensical. It likely reflects a reflexive boilerplate cover-story based on Shateri's best-known public role overseeing the reconstruction of southern Lebanon after the 2006 war. It does not seem to have occurred to Iranian officials in Lebanon that the fact they most needed to conceal was Shateri's presence in Aleppo itself rather than what he might ostensibly have been doing there.¹⁴

The IRGC took 24 hours to develop an official response and message discipline, giving an alternative, retrospective, official story that has been echoed ever since. IRGC Public Relations Deputy Brigadier General 2nd Class Ramazan Sharif told reporters on February 14 that Shateri had been in Syria to "implement construction headquarters projects" and "was martyred by supporters and mercenaries of the Zionist regime while traveling between Damascus and Beirut."¹⁵ Sharif's statement then became the official Iranian narrative.

Iranian Ambassador to Lebanon Qazanfar Roknabadi told the Islamic Republic's official Arabic news network al Alam on February 18 that "Hessam Khoshnevis [the alias Shateri used in Lebanon] was directly targeted by armed individuals while traveling from Damascus to Beirut and we are investigating his death.... Iran considers the Zionist regime the primary actors in the assassination of [Shateri]."¹⁶ He did not mention Aleppo. The Iranian regime's message discipline had finally reached Beirut.

The Syrian opposition has yet to converge on a single narrative of how Shateri died. One unnamed "Syrian rebel commander" claimed on February 14 that his forces had killed an

Iranian official near Zabadani, a Syrian city east of Damascus near the border with Lebanon, though this report was never confirmed and is typical of Syrian opposition overstatement.¹⁷ A spokesman for the Free Syrian Army, however, stated on February 14 that Shateri had, in fact, been killed in the January 30 Israeli airstrike on a convoy in Jamraya carrying SA-17 anti-aircraft missile systems bound for Lebanon.¹⁸ A report published by Britain's *The Sunday Times* on February 24 cites an anonymous Israeli security source also claiming that Shateri was killed in that airstrike.¹⁹ The source further asserts that Shateri had actually been the primary target, and that Israel would not launch such a high-risk attack into heavily defended Syrian airspace to strike a weapons convoy.²⁰

Israel may, indeed, prefer that the world believe that Shateri was killed in the January 30 airstrike in Jamraya. So, too, might the Syrian opposition. Iran has long claimed that the Syrian opposition is actually helping Israel achieve its objectives in the region; therefore, Iran must support the Assad regime in order to fortify the "axis of resistance" and combat the Zionist regime.²¹ Indications or even questions of Israel providing training or intelligence to Syrian rebels in a joint effort to assassinate Iranian and Lebanese Hezbollah targets would play directly into Iran's rhetorical strategy and undermine both Israeli and Free Syrian Army narratives.

How Shateri Died

The available evidence on Shateri's death does not support the Israeli or Syrian opposition claim that he died in the airstrike. Images of Shateri's body being placed in its tomb in Semnan, Iran on February 15 show no burn marks or other injuries indicative of an airstrike.²² On the contrary, the visible portion of Shateri's face appears unharmed and his head is heavily bandaged, suggesting, rather, that Shateri was killed by a gunshot wound.²³ [UPDATE: Sohrab Jafari, a "friend and colleague" of Shateri, stated on 8 MAR 2013 that he had seen Shateri's bullet wound before he was buried.²⁴] Funerals for

Shateri were held in Tehran and Semnan on February 14 and 15, respectively, during which Shateri's remains were presented but in a closed casket.²⁵

Iranian Ambassador to Lebanon Roknabadi also rejected the claims that he died in an airstrike, stating, "Those responsible for Shateri's assassination have published contradicting reports; some of these groups suggest that he was killed during the Zionist regime's strike in Jamraya.... These reports are absolutely inaccurate; especially the report published by the Free Syrian Army claiming that Khoshnevis was killed in the Jamraya region in an Israeli airstrike. Shateri was killed in Reef, Damascus.... The Zionist regime killed Khoshnevis by using its mercenaries."²⁶ [UPDATE: French newspaper *Le Figaro* reported 2 APR 2013 that Shateri was killed in an ambush between Damascus and Beirut in February and that Israel was responsible. The report also claims Shateri had met IRGC-QF commander BG Mohammad Reza Zahedi in Damascus shortly before his death.²⁷]

One could argue that Tehran would prefer to deny that Shateri was traveling with a convoy of weapons bound for Lebanese Hezbollah. But the counter to this argument is actually the most compelling reason to believe that the Iranian version of events is closest to the truth; namely, the official Iranian narrative is much more problematic for Tehran than the seeded Israeli narrative. Iranian support for Hezbollah, even their coordination in Syria, is not a startling revelation. The presence of a very senior Quds Force officer near Aleppo, which is besieged by the Syrian opposition, raises several important questions about Iran's current covert activity in Syria.

Who Was Hassan Shateri?

Hassan Shateri was born in 1955 in Semnan, Iran, and studied civil engineering before joining the IRGC after the 1979 Iranian revolution.²⁸ In 1980, he was sent to Sardasht, West Azerbaijan,

At some point after leaving Afghanistan, Shateri moved on to Iraq.³³ We have not yet been able to trace his movements or describe his activities in Iraq, though it is worth noting that the Supreme Leader’s Representative to the Quds Force, Ali Shirazi, is the only source thus far to have mentioned Shateri’s time in Iraq.³⁴ In 2006, Shateri was picked to establish and lead the Iranian Committee for the Reconstruction of Lebanon (ICRL), an organization established to rebuild Southern Lebanon in the wake of the 2006 Israeli-Hezbollah war.³⁵ The U.S. Treasury Department sanctioned ICRL and Shateri in August 2010 for “providing financial, material, and technological support” to Lebanese Hezbollah.³⁶ While in Lebanon, Shateri operated covertly under the alias Hessam Khoshnevis, apparently concealing his identity even from the U.S. Treasury Department, which did not list Hassan Shateri among his aliases. It is likely that Shateri also operated in Afghanistan and Iraq under different aliases, contributing to the dearth of information on his activities in those two countries.

While there is little information available on Shateri’s covert activities, one link in his network provides some insight into Shateri’s relationship with IRGC-QF and Hezbollah activities. Hezbollah’s representative to the ICRL, Hassan Hijazi, is described in an interview about Shateri as one of his “constant companions” in Lebanon. Hijazi also worked for Jihad al Bina, a construction company operated by Lebanese Hezbollah, overseen by Hezbollah’s influential Shura Council, and partially funded by Iran.³⁷

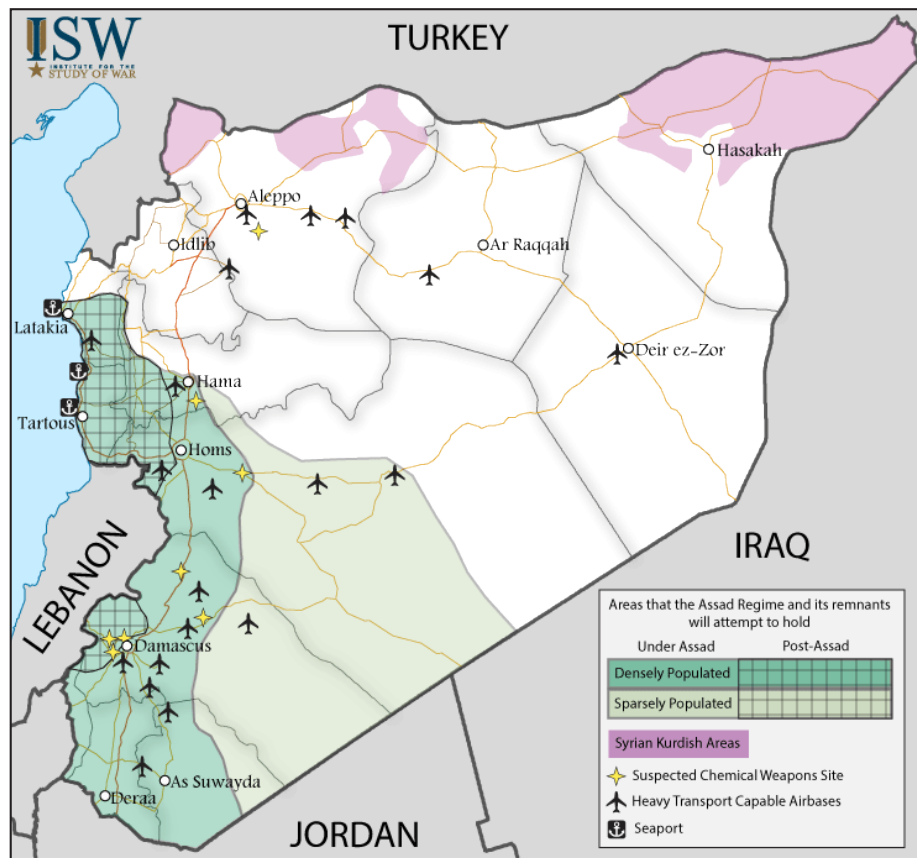
Additional links between Shateri and Iran’s global force projection network emerged in the reporting on Shateri’s death and subsequent mourning ceremonies. First, Shateri clearly had a close relationship with IRGC-QF Commander Qassem Suleimani. The very earliest reports on Shateri’s death stated that Suleimani visited Shateri’s family to inform them of his death and offer his condolences.³⁸ Suleimani was also



KAZEM DARABI SPEAKS WITH MINISTER OF DEFENSE AND FORMER QUDS FORCE COMMANDER BG AHMAD VAHIDI AT A MOURNING CEREMONY FOR SHATERI, TEHRAN, IRAN, FEBRUARY 19, 2013. (SOURCE: MEHR)

photographed weeping openly at Shateri’s funeral in Tehran.³⁹ Such a private visit and emotional display suggest that Suleimani had personally ordered Shateri to undertake whatever mission it was that had sent him into northern Syria and to his death.

Shateri’s links to Suleimani are, perhaps, unsurprising. Shateri’s apparently close relationship with Kazem Darabi, an Iranian Ministry of Intelligence (MOIS) agent involved in the 1992 assassination of Kurdish dissidents in Berlin, Germany, is more noteworthy.⁴⁰ German authorities in 1996 sentenced Darabi and his Lebanese coconspirator, Abbas Hossein Rhayel, to life in prison for their role in the attack; however, Darabi and Rhayel were released in 2007.⁴¹ Darabi returned to Tehran upon release, but later appeared in an interview with Iranian TV in Lebanon.⁴² Darabi, identified as a “friend and colleague” of Shateri, spoke to reporters about him on the day of his assassination.⁴³ Darabi participated prominently in Shateri’s February 14 and 15 funerals in Tehran and Semnan, and two separate ceremonies on February 21 in Tehran.⁴⁴ One of these ceremonies, a small event referred to as a “visit with friends of Shateri,” was also attended and addressed by former Hezbollah South Lebanon military commander and current member of the Lebanese Hezbollah Executive and Jihad councils Sheikh Nabil Qaouk.⁴⁵



MAP | AREAS THAT THE ASSAD REGIME AND ITS REMNANTS WILL ATTEMPT TO HOLD

The other Tehran ceremony attended by Darabi was also attended by Hojjat al-Eslam Ali Reza Panahian.⁴⁶ Panahian is the deputy head of the Ammar Base, a think tank supportive of Iran's Supreme Leader, and a representative of Khamenei to Iran's universities.⁴⁷ Panahian delivered a speech at Shateri's funeral in Tehran, during which he described how he met Shateri in Lebanon in 2008 and subsequently sought Shateri out whenever he was in Lebanon.⁴⁸ More important, however, is that Panahian referred to Shateri as "no less than Imad Mughniyeh," the former Hezbollah external operations commander assassinated in Syria in 2008.⁴⁹ Panahian is also seen in an undated image alongside Shateri and Kazem Darabi at a ceremony unveiling a statue of Ahmad Matousalian in Lebanon.⁵⁰ Matousalian headed the IRGC's Mohammad Rasoul Allah brigade in its efforts to stand up Lebanese Hezbollah in the early 1980s.⁵¹

Other notable attendees at the numerous events commemorating Shateri's death provide further evidence of Shateri's senior standing in Iran's global force projection network. Imad Mughniyeh's father attended a February 19 mourning ceremony in Tehran, and was greeted warmly by former Quds Force Commander and current Minister of Defense Brigadier General Ahmad Vahidi, and was seated next to IRGC Commander Major General Jafari.⁵² The Representative of the Supreme Leader to the Quds Force Ali Shirazi, former IRGC-QF Ramazan Base Commander Mohammad Bagher Zolghadr, and Supreme National Security Council Secretary Said Jalili also attended this event.⁵³ Attendees of Shateri's Semnan funeral include Quds Force Deputy Commander Brigadier General Esmail Ghaani, the Supreme Leader's Representative to Southern Lebanon, Hojjat al-Eslam Yousef Tabatabaei, and the aforementioned head of the Ahul Bayt World Assembly Ayatollah

Akhtari, who notably attended the service as a representative of the Supreme Leader.⁵⁴

The final indication of Shateri's elite status in the Islamic Republic was the Supreme Leader's reaction to the news. According to Khamenei's representative to the Quds Force, Ali Shirazi, Khamenei said after hearing of Shateri's death, "Blessed Hajj Hassan Shateri, was on a path of service to religion, the revolution, the velayat, and the Imam; in the end he drank the sweet syrup of martyrdom and he drew out the best ending for his life."⁵⁵ Khamenei also received the Shateri family in his home to offer his condolences.⁵⁶

Shateri's Mission in Syria

The largest, most compelling question remains: what was Shateri doing in Syria? More specifically, what was Shateri doing in Aleppo? Aleppo is currently being heavily contested by Syrian rebels and cannot be said to be within the Assad regime's control.⁵⁷ The ground routes into and out of Aleppo are extremely unsafe. To send a very senior Quds Force officer into such territory suggests that he was sent in to undertake a sensitive mission of high importance. Speculation that Shateri had been sent into Syria to coordinate Lebanese Hezbollah forces or oversee a weapons shipment does not fully consider Shateri's seniority. It is unlikely that Quds Force Commander Qassem Suleimani would have sent one of his top lieutenants to Aleppo on a mission that could have been served by a less senior operational commander.

Another possible scenario is that Shateri had been dispatched to lead a mission related to Syria's al Safir chemical weapons and missile facility. Al Safir is located thirty kilometers east of Aleppo and "houses a Scud missile base, missile storage, chemical weapons production, and weaponization and testing facilities."⁵⁸ The facility is known to have had an Iranian presence on site before the current conflict broke out.⁵⁹ By February, the base was in danger of being overrun. Syrian rebels captured the Assad regime's Jarrah military base in Aleppo province

on February 12 and took control of most of Base 80 on February 13.⁶⁰ Base 80 is home to the Assad regime's 80th regiment and is tasked with securing the nearby Aleppo International Airport and Nayrab military airport.⁶¹ The Assad regime's loss of these bases, combined with Israel's bold attack on the Lebanese Hezbollah military convoy in January, may have compelled Iran to secure and/or sanitize the al Safir facility before completely losing access. Given Iran's involvement in Syria's chemical weapons and ballistic missile programs, it is reasonable that Tehran would want to retrieve or destroy sensitive materials, remove remnants of the research and development program there, and perhaps close the facility before losing access to it entirely. Shateri's background as a technical officer, high rank, and familiarity with Lebanon and with the Assad regime would have made him an ideal candidate to undertake such a mission.⁶²

Conclusion: A Global Asset

Western media has missed the significance of Shateri's assassination. Reporting on his death highlights his activities in Lebanon, both because he was assigned there most recently and because of the location and manner of his death. But Shateri was not simply a supporter of and rebuilders of Hezbollah in Lebanon. Rather, Shateri was a senior, covert Quds Force operative whose assignments ranged from the Hindu Kush through Mesopotamia to the Mediterranean. His involvement in the Syrian conflict is further indication of the depth of Iran's commitment to its interests in Syria and the grand strategic importance it places upon that conflict. Shateri's presence in Syria also raises broader questions about how Syria fits into Iran's global force projection strategy. A forthcoming paper published by AEI's Critical Threats Project and the Institute for the Study of War will address the depth of Iranian involvement in Syria and the implications of the difficulties the Syrian regime is facing for Iranian regional and global strategy.

APPENDIX NOTES

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