



CENTRE FOR THE  
NEW MIDDLE EAST  
At The Henry Jackson Society

# How the Iran Entente Caused the Syria Crisis

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## Summary

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- The United States has reoriented U.S. policy away from containing Iran in alliance with traditional allies—the Gulf states, Turkey, and Israel—and toward a partnership with Iran on some issues, specifically defeating the Islamic State, and more broadly creating an equilibrium in the Middle East (which by definition means empowering Iran), the prime goal being to allow the withdrawal of U.S. resources from the region.
- This is having deleterious consequences: territorial and political gains for Western adversaries, a humanitarian crisis, and destabilization not only of the Middle East but Europe.
- Iran does not want to be a “very successful regional power,” as President Barack Obama described his hopes for the Islamic Republic in 2014.<sup>1</sup> Instead, Tehran sees in the U.S. withdrawal a chance for hegemony. In alliance with Russia, Iran has pressed this intention, most obviously in Syria, where the U.S. has tacitly ceded the country as an Iranian protectorate, but in Iraq, Lebanon, Yemen, and increasingly Afghanistan, too.
- Even de facto collaboration with Iran and its proxies carries a high moral price, and the proposed pay-off for détente with Iran—the elimination of threats like Islamic State and other Sunni extremists—will never be realized, and could not be even if Iran wanted it to be.
- Iran's creation of an integrated proxy network across the region, bordering NATO, is a threat in its own right, giving Iran's long history of global anti-Western terrorism.

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Transcript: President Obama’s Full NPR Interview’, *npr*, 29 December 2014, available at: <http://www.npr.org/2014/12/29/372485968/transcript-president-obamas-full-npr-interview>, last visited: 3 June 2016.

## 1. The Aleppo Offensive

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At the beginning of February, as the Iranian-led ground forces advanced on Aleppo under the cover of Russian airstrikes, encircling the city from the east and north, cutting off the rebels final supply line into Turkey, it seemed plausible that this was the beginning of the end of the Syrian revolution and the victory of Syria's ruler, Bashar al-Assad.<sup>2</sup>

70,000 Syrians fled almost immediately from Aleppo.<sup>3</sup> The population had good reason to fear a regime siege. Of forty-six sieges currently ongoing in Syria, forty-three of them are imposed by the regime, including the six most severe, which have starved people to death.<sup>4</sup>

As in so many civil conflicts, Lebanon being a notable case, the tipping point never arrived, and instead the inherent limitations of the factions—in this case the limited manpower of the Assad regime—reasserted themselves.

By February 21, ISIS and some al-Qaeda-linked forces attacking from the opposite side blocked the regime's supply line in southern Aleppo, which was enabling the offensive further north, ending the momentum for the pro-regime coalition. Several days later the regime retook Khanaser,<sup>5</sup> before reportedly losing it again several days after that.<sup>6</sup> The regime had lost Khanaser to ISIS once before, in October 2015.<sup>7</sup>

What this shows is that the regime cannot sustainably hold new territory without endangering the territory it already has in western Syria, even with the massive assistance of outside powers. The territorial gains in northern Aleppo, while incredibly strategic, were physically modest, and the regime could not defend them. The notion that Assad was or ever will be close to a position where he could march on ISIS's capital in Raqqa—an idea doing the rounds again after the fall of Palmyra—is a fantasy.<sup>8</sup> Assad himself conceded as much in an important speech on July 26, 2015. "Everything is available for the army, but there is a shortage in manpower," Assad said.<sup>9</sup> By the next month, Russia was building up forces on the Syrian coast; by the month after that, Iran had brought in thousands more troops and Russia had begun conducting direct airstrikes in Syria. This was the last in a series of escalations by Iran and Russia.

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<sup>2</sup> Sly, L. and Zakaria Zakaria, 'Syrian Rebels are losing Aleppo and perhaps also the war', *The Washington Post*, 4 February 2016, available at: [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle-east/syrian-rebels-are-losing-aleppo-and-perhaps-also-the-war/2016/02/04/94e10012-cb51-11e5-b9ab-26591104bb19\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle-east/syrian-rebels-are-losing-aleppo-and-perhaps-also-the-war/2016/02/04/94e10012-cb51-11e5-b9ab-26591104bb19_story.html), last visited: 2 June 2016.

<sup>3</sup> Loveluck, L. and Hiba Dlewati, 'Up to 70,000 Syrian refugees flee to Turkey's closed border', *The Telegraph*, 6 February 2016, available at: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/12144248/Up-to-70000-Syrian-refugees-flee-to-Turkeys-closed-border.html>, last visited: 2 June 2016.

<sup>4</sup> Orton, K., 'The Syrian Intifada', *kyleorton1991*, 2 March 2016, available at: <https://kyleorton1991.wordpress.com/2016/03/02/the-sieges-of-syria/>, last visited: 2 June 2016.

<sup>5</sup> Perry, T., 'Assad Forces Retake Town Near Syria's Aleppo From ISIS', *haaretz.com*, 25 February 2016, available at: <http://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/1.705366>, last visited: 2 June 2016.

<sup>6</sup> Dan Rivers, @danriversiv, *Twitter*, 28 February 2016, available at: <https://twitter.com/danriversiv/status/704034422736101376>, last visited: 2 June 2016.

<sup>7</sup> Dagher, S., 'Islamic State Cuts Off Crucial Supply Line for Syrian Regime to Aleppo', *The Wall Street Journal*, 27 October 2015, available at: <http://www.wsj.com/articles/islamic-state-cuts-off-crucial-supply-line-for-syrian-regime-to-aleppo-1445972386>, last visited: 2 June 2016.

<sup>8</sup> Carrel, P., Shadia Nasralla, and Tom Perry, 'Syrian Army gain ground around Aleppo, looks to Raqqa', *Reuters*, 14 February 2016, available at: <http://www.reuters.com/article/mideast-crisis-syria-idUSKCN0VN03B>, last visited: 2 June 2016.

<sup>9</sup> Hassan, H., 'Putin can't save Assad, it's far too late for that', *The National*, 28 September 2015, available at: <http://www.thenational.ae/opinion/comment/putin-cant-save-assad-its-far-too-late-for-that>, last visited: 2 June 2016.

## 2. Assad Loses Ground to Foreign Powers

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In the summer of 2012, Aleppo City and Damascus became fully embroiled in the rebellion and several senior members of the Assad regime were killed.<sup>10</sup> The regime appeared to be reeling. In late 2012, the Quds Force—the expeditionary wing of Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), charged with spreading the revolution—and soon units of the regular IRGC were in Syria to reorganize, train, and lead Assad’s various sectarian militias, folding them into the ostensibly-unified National Defence Forces (NDF).<sup>11</sup>

“As a strictly volunteer force, the NDF immediately gained a reputation ... for its steadfast loyalty to Assad,” writes Charles Lister in his new book *The Syrian Jihad*.<sup>12</sup> “This ultra-loyalism and the dominance of Alawite and Shia members also encouraged the NDF to become an organization founded largely on sectarian principles.”<sup>13</sup> The Alawi commanders of the NDF, indeed, said the organization was meant to “kill the Sunnis and rape their women in revenge [for rebelling].”<sup>14</sup> IRGC officers were “embedded within individual units,” Lister adds, and Iran allegedly wanted a more hearts-and-minds-focused counterinsurgency program.<sup>15</sup> But when the NDF matched ISIS cruelty-for-cruelty—including burning alive whole families, not merely single captives—the Iranians did nothing to stop or punish the NDF.<sup>16</sup>

The NDF was constructed to “play a predominantly defensive role, thereby freeing up the army to go on the offensive,” as Lister notes.<sup>17</sup> But the Syrian Arab Army—the “official” army of the government—was deeply depleted by late 2012. The regime had ostensibly started the conflict with nearly 300,000 troops, but it deeply distrusted the Sunni conscripts—and not without reason, since many defected and led the early Free Syrian Army-branded rebel groups—so confined Sunni soldiers largely to barracks and over-relied on several elite, Alawi-dominated units, which not only locked in sectarian dynamics but restricted the regime to a trusted force of about 38,000.<sup>18</sup> With an insurgency of more than 50,000, this was a problem.<sup>19</sup> One solution was to disperse these elite forces among the rank-and-file as effectively barrier troops, but that had severe limits. As Syria’s sovereignty was ceded to Iran, another solution was adopted.

Concurrent with its creation of the NDF, Iran orchestrated a full-fledged international Shi’a jihad to give Assad’s battered army some offensive capability, bringing in men from as far afield as Afghanistan and the Ivory Coast.<sup>20</sup> At any one time there are perhaps 20,000 Shi’a holy warriors fighting in defence of the regime, including from designated terrorist groups, notably the Quds

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<sup>10</sup> MacFarquhar, N., ‘Syrian rebels land deadly blow to Assad’s Inner circle’, *The New York Times*, 18 July 2012, available at: [http://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/19/world/middleeast/suicide-attack-reported-in-damascus-as-more-generals-flee.html?\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/19/world/middleeast/suicide-attack-reported-in-damascus-as-more-generals-flee.html?_r=1), last visited: 2 June 2016.

<sup>11</sup> Dagher, S., ‘Syria’s Alawite Force Turned Tide for Assad’, *The Wall Street Journal*, 26 August 2013, available at: <http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424127887323997004578639903412487708>, last visited: 2 June 2016.

<sup>12</sup> Lister, C., ‘The Syrian Jihad: Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State and the Evolution of an Insurgency’, (London, C. Hurst & Co. Ltd, 2015), p. 90.  
<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> Solomon, E., ‘Insight: Syrian government guerrilla fighters being sent to Iran for training’, *Reuters*, 4 April 2013, available at: <http://uk.reuters.com/article/us-syria-iran-training-insight-idUSBRE9330DW20130404>, last visited: 2 June 2016.

<sup>15</sup> Lister, C., ‘The Syrian Jihad: Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State and the Evolution of an Insurgency’, (London, C. Hurst & Co. Ltd, 2015), p. 90.

<sup>16</sup> Press, S., ‘Assad Forces Burned Dozens of Syrians Alive, Shocking Report Reveals’, *The Syrian Observer*, 20 February 2015, available at: [http://svrianobserver.com/EN/News/28682/Assad\\_Forces\\_Burned\\_Dozens\\_Syrians\\_Alive\\_Shocking\\_Report\\_Reveals](http://svrianobserver.com/EN/News/28682/Assad_Forces_Burned_Dozens_Syrians_Alive_Shocking_Report_Reveals), last visited: 2 June 2016.

<sup>17</sup> Lister, C., ‘The Syrian Jihad: Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State and the Evolution of an Insurgency’, (London, C. Hurst & Co. Ltd, 2015), p. 90.

<sup>18</sup> Holliday, J., ‘The Assad Regime: From Counterinsurgency to Civil War’, *understandingwar.org*, March 2013, available at: <http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/TheAssadRegime-web.pdf>, last visited: 2 June 2016.

<sup>19</sup> O’Bagy, E., ‘Jihad in Syria’, *understandingwar.org*, September 2012, available at: <http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Jihad-In-Syria-17SEPT.pdf>, last visited: 2 June 2016, p. 26.

<sup>20</sup> Smyth, P., ‘The Shi’ite Jihad in Syria and Its Regional Effects’, *The Washington Institute*, February 2015, available at: <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-shiite-jihad-in-syria-and-its-regional-effects>, last visited: 2 June 2016.

Force itself which controls these fighters, Lebanese Hezbollah, and Kataib Hezbollah. These Shi'a jihadists spearheaded the February offensive in Aleppo and the March offensive in Palmyra—as they have all recent regime offensives, north and south.<sup>21</sup>

### 3. The Peace Process as a Trigger for More War

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The immediate trigger for the regime offensive in Aleppo was the Geneva III peace process. After negotiations in Saudi Arabia in December, the rebels formed the Higher Negotiating Committee (HNC), which includes armed opposition groups, political oppositionists, and activists, bringing together for the first time something that could reasonably be said to represent the broad majority of the Syrian opposition.

In theory, the HNC would then sit down with the Assad regime and negotiate a political settlement in Syria. The agreement would have to involve the resignation of Assad personally and his senior lieutenants, but would also fuse the rebels with much of the regime's security apparatus, including the effectively-imprisoned conscripts, in order to restore order and defeat ISIS. The rebels are unable to do so at the present because the government keeps bombing them, especially when ISIS is attacking them.<sup>22</sup>

The problem was that after Russia intervened directly in September, the regime was simply too secure on the ground; it saw no reason to negotiate. Instead, Russia enabled the largely-Iranian-controlled regime to go on the offensive under the cover of negotiations: while engaged in diplomacy, the United States and allies were de-escalating—restricting access to weaponry for the rebels in early January, for example—and ostensibly expected that Russia would soon follow suit. While Russia had lowered the tempo of its attacks since the “cessation of hostilities” began on February 27, its war continues in areas where it feels it is necessary, without even the pretence it is fighting “terrorists”—a loophole in the ceasefire that many observers had expected Moscow to exploit since it labels all opposition to Assad as “terrorist.”<sup>23</sup>

The problem with the peace process from the start was that with facts on the ground as they were and the U.S. unwillingness to change them, the HNC had little to bargain with. The U.S. would have to either abandon the process, which President Obama and especially Secretary of State John Kerry had invested political capital in, or keep the process by forcing their own ostensible side—the rebels—to agree to the regime's conditions. The U.S. chose the latter.

The HNC arrived in Geneva on January 29, and by February 4—the day after the pro-Assad coalition captured the territory that choked off rebel supplies in Aleppo—the conference was suspended until February 25, and was then put off again until March 7. The opposition had refused to sit with Assad because the pro-Assad forces continued to bombard and starve civilian areas. The United States reacted to this—agreeing with Assad and his allies—that the cessation of

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<sup>21</sup> Dagher, S., 'Iran 'Foreign Legion' Leads Battle in Syria's North', *The Wall Street Journal*, 17 February 2016, available at: <http://www.wsj.com/articles/iran-foreign-legion-leads-battle-in-syria-north-1455672481>, last visited: 2 June 2016.

<sup>22</sup> Barnard, A., 'Assad's Forces May Be Aiding New ISIS Surge', *The New York Times*, 2 June 2015, available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/03/world/middleeast/new-battles-aleppo-syria-in-surgents-isis.html>, last visited: 2 June 2016.

<sup>23</sup> Itani, F. and Hossam, Abouzahr, 'The War on the Syrian Insurgency Continues in Plain Sight', *Atlantic Council*, 14 March 2016, available at: <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/syriasource/the-war-on-the-syrian-insurgency-continues-in-plain-sight>, last visited: 2 June 2016.

war crimes and access to food should be something that was negotiated about, not imposed as a precondition.<sup>24</sup>

Just after the suspension of the talks, Kerry was confronted in London by a Syrian civil society activist about the fact that the Russians were using the peace talks as a distraction for their aggression in Syria. Kerry is reported to have said, “Don’t blame me—go and blame your opposition,” since their refusal to treat with Assad meant that the regime offensive had not been halted.<sup>25</sup> (Kerry’s spokesman later denied that he made that comment.)<sup>26</sup> This could have been passed off as a misunderstanding or a biased report, but Kerry’s blaming the opposition for Russian-enabled regime escalations has become a theme of the Geneva III process.

Prevailed upon by a Syrian aid worker at the same conference to get the Russians to do more to stop the airstrikes on civilian areas—the single most devastating component of this war, which not only kills and maims but is the (deliberate) primary driver of the refugee crisis—Kerry responded “It’s going to get much worse [if the HNC doesn’t come to the table]. This will continue for three months, and by then the opposition will be decimated.”<sup>27</sup> A Western diplomat shortly afterwards put it even more bluntly: “It’ll be easy to get a ceasefire soon because the opposition will all be dead.”<sup>28</sup> Hadi al-Bahra, the former president of the Syrian political opposition, reported that Kerry had said: “We are clear, if you don’t choose to be part of [the ceasefire] then you are choosing to perhaps make yourself a target.”<sup>29</sup>

To say that the rebellion will soon be defeated by Russian war crimes is one thing analytically; to use it as leverage to force the opposition to accept the regime’s terms for what is effectively surrender is quite another. Kerry’s statements come very close to doing the latter. And when the proposal for a ceasefire, theoretically part of the preparation for negotiations, was moving forward, other parts of the U.S. government started to echo Kerry in providing, in advance, legitimacy to Russia’s air attacks as legitimate counter-terrorist activity.

Laying out how the al-Nusra exception to the ceasefire would be operationalized, State Department spokesman Mark Toner said: “al-Nusra and Daesh [ISIS] are not part of any kind of ceasefire. ... So if you hang out with the wrong folks, then you make that decision. ... Who you hang out with ... sends a signal.”<sup>30</sup>

The February 27 “ceasefire” was a second attempt just in February, the first having failed even to take hold. Violence was indeed lowered, most notably on the first day, though this reduction in hostilities saw the regime reportedly use poison gas by the second day.<sup>31</sup> Russia, as mentioned,

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<sup>24</sup> Al-Khalidi, S., Tom Perry, and Tom Miles, ‘U.N. invites warring parties to Syria talks this week’, *Reuters*, 26 January 2016, available at: <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-opposition-idUSKCN0V40MI>, last visited: 2 June 2016.

<sup>25</sup> Akkad, D., ‘Kerry ‘blames opposition’ for continued Syria bombing’, *Middle East Eye*, 7 February 2016, available at:

<http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/opposition-blame-syrian-bombing-kerry-tells-aid-workers-1808021537>, last visited: 2 June 2016.

<sup>26</sup> John Kirby, @statedeptspox, *Twitter*, 6 February 2016, available at: <https://twitter.com/statedeptspox/status/696126611607912448>, last visited: 2 June 2016.

<sup>27</sup> Barnard, A., ‘Syrian Opposition Groups Sense U.S. Support Fading’, *The New York Times*, 9 February 2016, available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/10/world/middleeast/syrian-opposition-groups-sense-us-support-fading.html>, last visited: 2 June 2016.

<sup>28</sup> Nichols, M., Tom Perry, and Humeira Pamuk, ‘Russia, pressed to end Syria bombing, proposes March truce’, *Reuters*, 11 February 2016, available at: <http://in.reuters.com/article/mideast-crisis-syria-idLNKCN0VJLZY>, last visited: 2 June 2016.

<sup>29</sup> Hadi Al Bahra, @hadialbahra, *Twitter*, 22 February 2016, available at: <https://twitter.com/hadialbahra/status/701899739097333762>, last visited: 2 June 2016.

<sup>30</sup> Toner, M., ‘Daily Press Briefing’, *US State Department*, 22 February 2016, available at: <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/dpb/2016/02/253123.htm>, last visited: 2 June 2016.

<sup>31</sup> Barnard, A., ‘Violence in Syria Abates on Day 1 of Cease-Fire’, *The New York Times*, 27 February 2016, available at: [http://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/28/world/middleeast/violence-in-syria-abates-on-day-1-of-cease-fire.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/28/world/middleeast/violence-in-syria-abates-on-day-1-of-cease-fire.html?_r=0), last visited: 2 June 2016.

showed some restraint, but the goal remains the same. “Russia and the regime consider the truce as a military tactic, not as a preparatory measure for a political solution,” Capt. Abdulsalam Abdulrazzak of Kataib Nooradeen al-Zangi, a rebel group that has received U.S. anti-tank missiles, told *The Washington Post*.<sup>32</sup> Regime consolidation and an ability to prepare new offensives against the rebellion was not how this ceasefire was sold, but it is what has happened.<sup>33</sup>

### 4. The Ceasefire, al-Qaeda, and Russia

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One of the notable positives from the reduction of hostilities is the wedge it drove between the mainstream rebellion and Jabhat al-Nusra, al-Qaeda’s Syrian branch.

Al-Nusra has laced itself into the insurgency as part of a long-term stratagem of fostering co-dependency with the opposition and opposition-supporting populations so it can socialize them into al-Qaeda’s worldview and secure a durable base from which to wage further jihad—both to expand its envisioned Syrian “emirate” into the caliphate and to attack the West.<sup>34</sup> But without the level of extreme violence the regime habitually imposes, the necessity and dependency falls away. Clashes erupted between U.S.-supported rebels and al-Nusra in Maarat al-Numan in March, and protests against al-Nusra broke out and have continued ever since. Unfortunately, the U.S. did not come to the support of its assets, who were driven out of town (again);<sup>35</sup> and there is no plan in place to take advantage of this schism between the population and al-Nusra, which will surely crack down eventually.

Untangling al-Nusra from the rebellion is not in Russia’s interest. To the contrary: The re-emergence of the protest movement the moment Syrians had a chance is not what the regime and Russia need, which is why the Assad regime directed airstrikes at the Maarat al-Numan protests. Russia wants in the short-term to largely leave ISIS alone and use the al-Nusra smokescreen to destroy all moderate opposition, which actually threaten Assad’s key areas at the present time, securing Assad physically in power. Russia has claimed that “dozens” of known Free Syrian Army-style groups, some of them supported by the U.S. and its allies, are under al-Nusra’s control and thus are legitimate targets.<sup>36</sup> And in the longer term, Russia wants to secure Assad politically by leaving only extremists against Assad.<sup>37</sup>

The U.S. again reacted by pre-emptively giving Moscow the benefit of the doubt with regards to its intentions, and applying pressure against its own ostensible allies and assets inside Syria. Separating rebels from al-Nusra had “proven harder ... than we thought,” Kerry said. “And there’s

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<sup>32</sup> Sly, L., and Zakaria Zakaria, ‘Syria’s cease-fire is working, at least for now’, *The Washington Post*, 27 February 2016, available at: [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/as-two-week-truce-in-syria-goes-into-effect-guns-fall-silent/2016/02/27/1adccaaa-dc16-11e5-8210-f0bd8de915f6\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/as-two-week-truce-in-syria-goes-into-effect-guns-fall-silent/2016/02/27/1adccaaa-dc16-11e5-8210-f0bd8de915f6_story.html), last visited: 2 June 2016.

<sup>33</sup> Szakola, A., ‘Syria regime reportedly mobilizing for west Aleppo campaign’, *NOW*, 29 February 2016, available at: <https://now.nmedia.me/lb/en/NewsReports/566667-syria-regime-reportedly-mobilizing-for-west-aleppo-campaign>, last visited 2 June 2016.

<sup>34</sup> Orton, K., ‘Syria’s many moderate rebels’, *NOW*, 30 November 2015, available at: <https://now.nmedia.me/lb/en/commentary/566300-svrias-many-moderate-rebels>, last visited: 2 June 2016.

<sup>35</sup> Orton, K., ‘A price of America’s Détente with Iran: Al-Qaeda Gains ground in Syria’, *kyleorton1991*, 14 March 2016, available at: <https://kyleorton1991.wordpress.com/2016/03/14/a-price-of-americas-detente-with-iran-al-qaeda-gains-ground-in-syria/>, last visited: 2 June 2016.

<sup>36</sup> Alaeddin, M., ‘The fight against Jammāt al-nusra continues in Aleppo’s quarter’s’, *ria*, 29 February 2016, available at: <http://ria.ru/syria/20160229/1381817841.html>, last visited: 2 June 2016.

<sup>37</sup> Orton, K., ‘Russia Teams Up With Islamic State Against Syria’s Rebels’, *kyleorton1991*, 11 October 2015, available at: <https://kyleorton1991.wordpress.com/2015/10/11/russia-teams-up-with-islamic-state-against-svrias-rebels/>, last visited: 2 June 2016.

a Russian impatience and a regime impatience with the terrorists.”<sup>38</sup> Colonel Steve Warren, the spokesman for the anti-ISIS operation, said around the same time that, while “concerned” about Russia’s attacks on Aleppo City, “it’s primarily al-Nusra who holds Aleppo, and of course, al-Nusra is not part of the cessation of hostilities. So it’s complicated.”<sup>39</sup> Warren did later partly walk back his statement, saying al-Nusra only “controls the northwest suburbs” of Aleppo City.<sup>40</sup> This, too, was something of an exaggeration: al-Nusra certainly had a more concentrated presence in the Handarat and al-Mallah area, but it does not operate by controlling terrain, and as an al-Nusra commander himself conceded, the city is dominated overwhelmingly by non-Nusra factions.<sup>41</sup>

Many of the rebel factions controlling Aleppo City are vetted by the U.S., and their co-operation with al-Nusra is purely tactical—and within the U.S.’s power to stop. As one rebel commander bitterly complained: “Don’t you think we would prefer not to have al-Nusra in our trenches? They represent everything we are opposed to. ... But what can we do when our supposed friends abroad give us nothing to assert ourselves?”<sup>42</sup>

The rebels’ predicament did not change the U.S. message, however. Days later the State Department spoke of the “inherent dangers of intermingling” with al-Nusra since the group is “a legitimate [Russian] target” and “we don’t want to see our guys get hurt.”<sup>43</sup> Whether this was a threat or an expression of concern was an intensely debated issue, but it amounted to the same thing: a call for the U.S.-vetted rebels to cede areas to al-Nusra, who would then be forced to give up those areas to the pro-regime coalition.

Given the U.S. statements about the legitimacy of Russia’s airstrikes against al-Nusra—even when they were not targeting al-Nusra—the impression formed that the U.S. and Russia were working in tandem to destroy the Syrian revolution. Whether or not the Obama administration consciously thinks in those terms, its Syria policy—which is a subset of its Iran policy—gets awfully close to doing just that.

## 5. The Iran Deal and Syria

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The nuclear deal signed with Iran in July 2015 was advertised by the Obama administration on the “narrowest possible terms” as an arms control agreement, but behind this political sell were “grand ambitions” to “open up relations with Tehran and [make it] part of a transformation in the Middle East.”<sup>44</sup> The President intended to lead an “equilibrium” in the region between Iran and its neighbors,<sup>45</sup> as he laid out more clearly in his recent series of interviews with Jeffrey

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<sup>38</sup> Goodman, P.S., ‘Russian Military Buildup Near Aleppo, Syria, Threatens Truce, Kerry Warns’, *The New York Times*, 22 April 2016, available at: [www.nytimes.com/2016/04/23/world/middleeast/russian-military-buildup-near-aleppo-threatens-truce-kerry-warns.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/23/world/middleeast/russian-military-buildup-near-aleppo-threatens-truce-kerry-warns.html), last visited: 3 June 2016.

<sup>39</sup> Warren, S., ‘Department of Defense Press Briefing by Col. Warren via Teleconference from Baghdad, Iraq’, *U.S. Department of Defense*, 20 April 2016, [www.defense.gov/News/News-Transcripts/Transcript-View/Article/739157/department-of-defense-pres-briefing-by-col-warren-via-teleconference-from-baghdad](http://www.defense.gov/News/News-Transcripts/Transcript-View/Article/739157/department-of-defense-pres-briefing-by-col-warren-via-teleconference-from-baghdad), last visited: 3 June 2016.

<sup>40</sup> Gutman, R., ‘America Is Silent as Aleppo Is Massacred’, *Foreign Policy*, 6 May 2016, available at: [foreignpolicy.com/2016/05/06/america-is-silent-as-aleppo-is-massacred/](http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/05/06/america-is-silent-as-aleppo-is-massacred/), last visited: 3 June 2016.

<sup>41</sup> Heller, S. and Asher-Schapiro, A., ‘The Regime Can’t Be Trusted’: Inside Syria’s Aleppo as a Shaky Truce Begins’, *Vice News*, 5 May 2016, available at: <https://news.vice.com/article/aleppo-syria-bashar-al-assyad-regime-russia-united-states-nusra-front-truce>, last visited: 3 June 2016.

<sup>42</sup> Lister, C., ‘Al Qaeda Is About to Establish an Emirate in Northern Syria’, *Foreign Policy*, 4 May 2016, available at: [foreignpolicy.com/2016/05/04/al-qaeda-is-about-to-establish-an-emirate-in-northern-syria/](http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/05/04/al-qaeda-is-about-to-establish-an-emirate-in-northern-syria/), last visited: 3 June 2016.

<sup>43</sup> ‘Daily Press Briefing’, *U.S. Department of State*, 25 April 2016, [www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/dpb/2016/04/256566.htm](http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/dpb/2016/04/256566.htm)

<sup>44</sup> Harris, G., ‘Deeper Mideast Aspirations Seen in Nuclear Deal With Iran’, *The New York Times*, 31 July 2015, available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/01/world/middleeast/deeper-mideast-aspirations-seen-in-nuclear-deal-with-iran.html>, last visited: 2 June 2016.

<sup>45</sup> Friedman, T. L., ‘Iran and the Obama Doctrine’, *The New York Times*, 5 April 2015, available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/06/opinion/thomas-friedman-the-obama-doctrine-and-iran-in-interview.html>, last visited: 2 June 2016.



## HOW THE IRAN ENTENTE CAUSED THE SYRIA CRISIS

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Goldberg of *The Atlantic*.<sup>46</sup> In short, the nuclear deal was not about stopping Iran's nuclear-weapons program; it was about removing the nuclear question from U.S.-Iranian relations so the U.S. could draw Iran into the Middle East security architecture and draw down the U.S. investment in the region.

Over time, the threat of ISIS would be used to justify the policy of détente with Iran. President Obama even engaged in an (unrequited) letter-writing campaign to Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, which by the end of 2014 was using the apparently-common threat of ISIS as the facilitator of an entente.<sup>47</sup> But the determination of the administration to pursue this course began before ISIS was on the horizon: Obama's letters to Khamenei began in 2009. Nor did the strategic change toward engagement originate on the Iranian side, as the administration would later frame it, with the election of the "moderate" president Hassan Rouhani in June 2013. To the contrary, the initial secret contacts that led to the interim deal in November 2013 had begun in July 2012 and more substantive meetings began in March 2013.<sup>48</sup>

The Iranians were reading from a different script, however. It was within days of the nuclear deal being signed,<sup>49</sup> promising to release up to \$100 billion, that Quds Force commander Qassem Suleimani was in Moscow finalizing the arrangements for the Russian intervention in Syria, which had been planned in June and began on September 30.<sup>50</sup> Suleimani has much Western blood on his hands, and made this trip in violation of a travel ban put in place because he has been designated as a terrorist by the United States—twice.

During the U.S.-led occupation of Iraq, Suleimani orchestrated the creation of "Special Groups," IRGC-run Shi'a militias, which killed or wounded more than 1,000 American soldiers.<sup>51</sup> Suleimani's deputy, Jamal Ebrahimi, better-known as Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, an Iraqi who has been an Iranian agent since the 1980s, was designated a terrorist in 2009 due to his role as leader of Kataib Hezbollah,<sup>52</sup> the most elite of the Special Groups and the only one formally designated as terrorist.<sup>53</sup> Oddly, Suleimani was not designated until May 2011, due to his direct support to the Syrian intelligence branch overseeing the murderous crackdown on the then-peaceful uprising and was listed again after he tried to blow up the Saudi ambassador in Washington, D.C.<sup>54</sup>

The Quds Force is the clearest reason why any concept of equilibrium cannot work in the Middle East: Iran has asymmetric capabilities that the Gulf states simply cannot match. Being even-handed between Iran and the Gulf states is another way of siding with Iran. This wasn't the U.S.'s only flawed assumption.

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<sup>46</sup> Goldberg, J., 'The Obama Doctrine', *The Atlantic*, April 2016, available at: <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/04/the-obama-doctrine/471525/>, last visited: 3 June 2016.

<sup>47</sup> Solomon, J., and Carol E. Lee, 'Obama Wrote Secret Letter to Iran's Khamenei About Fighting Islamic State', *The Wall Street Journal*, 6 November 2014, available at: <http://www.wsj.com/articles/obama-wrote-secret-letter-to-irans-khamenei-about-fighting-islamic-state-1415295291>, last visited: 2 June 2016.

<sup>48</sup> Rozen, L., 'Inside the secret US-Iran diplomacy that sealed nuke deal', *al-monitor*, 11 August 2015, available at: <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/08/iran-us-nuclear-khamenei-salehi-jcpoa-diplomacy.html>, last visited: 2 June 2016.

<sup>49</sup> Bassam, L., and Tom Perry, 'How Iranian general plotted out Syrian assault in Moscow', *Reuters*, 6 October 2015, available at: <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-soleimani-in-sigh-idUSKCN0S02BV20151006>, last visited: 2 June 2016.

<sup>50</sup> Perry, T., Jonathan Landay, and Maria Tsvetkova, 'The road to Aleppo: how the West misread Putin over Syria', *Reuters*, 26 February 2016, available at: <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-putin-insight-idUSKCN0VZ1GG>, last visited: 2 June 2016.

<sup>51</sup> Weisgerber, M., 'How Many US Troops Were Killed By Iranian IED's in Iraq?', *defenseone*, 8 September 2015, available at: <http://www.defenseone.com/news/2015/09/how-many-u-s-troops-were-killed-iranian-ieds-iraq/120524/>, last visited: 2 June 2016.

<sup>52</sup> 'Treasury Designates Individual, Entity Posing Threat to Stability in Iraq', *US Treasury*, 2 July 2009, available at: <http://www.defenseone.com/news/2015/09/how-many-u-s-troops-were-killed-iranian-ieds-iraq/120524/>, last visited: 2 June 2016.

<sup>53</sup> 'Designation of Kata'ib Hizballah as a Foreign Terrorist Organization', *US State Department*, 2 July 2016, available at: <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2009/july/125582.htm>, last visited: 2 June 2016.

<sup>54</sup> 'Treasury Sanctions Five Individuals Tied to Iranian Plot to Assassinate the Saudi Arabian Ambassador to the United States', *US Treasury*, 11 October 2011, available at: <https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/pages/tg1320.aspx>, last visited: 2 June 2016.

A key fact overlooked by the U.S. was that Iran does not want to defeat ISIS—at least not right now.<sup>55</sup> The ability to present ISIS and al-Qaeda as the only serious opponents of Bashar al-Assad, Iran's client regime in Syria, increases Assad's international legitimacy. The presence of a Sunni jihadist statelet covering the Sunni areas of western Iraq and eastern Syria is not a concern to Iran: it could not rule over these areas for simple manpower reasons and has no incentive to in any case. The ISIS threat keeps the regimes in Damascus and Baghdad weak and reliant on Iran, allowing Tehran to have the unthreatening neighbour on its border in Iraq that it always wanted, plus the Syrian land-bridge to Lebanese Hezbollah, the group that provides the original template for the Special Groups and the primary means of leverage against Israel.<sup>56</sup>

For Iran, the scheme to have the international community view Assad as the least-bad option has essentially worked, making the U.S. into Assad's air force. The U.S. told Iran in advance of beginning airstrikes in Syria that Assad was off-limits and the only target was ISIS<sup>57</sup>—though the U.S. also later struck local insurgents.<sup>58</sup> Possessed of an American security guarantee and with the U.S. dealing with ISIS in the east, Assad focused his energies on eliminating the moderate opposition in the west to create the binary situation—the dictator or the terrorists—he had always wanted and had propagandized was the case all along.<sup>59</sup> With U.S. forces back in Iraq, where Iran had taken over the security sector with the very same Special Groups that murdered Coalition soldiers, Tehran was able to add the additional threat: if the U.S. moved against Assad, it would reactivate the militias' campaign against U.S. troops.<sup>60</sup>

With the U.S.'s Syria policy subject to an Iranian veto, Iran was able to intervene in Syria ever more flagrantly, beginning with the formation of the National Defence Forces and the influx of Shi'a jihadists in late 2012. It is very noticeable that this mass-movement of Shi'a terrorists, who are deeply integrated into Iran's global terrorist network,<sup>61</sup> has not provoked the response that al-Qaeda's "Khorasan Group," a cell of a few dozen externally-focused operatives in Syria, did.<sup>62</sup> With Iran's record of anti-Western terrorism, there is great danger in Tehran having a base on the border of NATO member Turkey.

The reason Iran has been allowed all of this is because the real goal of the nuclear negotiations was securing their partnership in the region, which meant allowing them their "equities."<sup>63</sup> Rather than the U.S. using Syria as a theatre in which to demonstrate that the nuclear deal was a narrow instrument dealing only with arms control by resisting Iran's aggression, instead, because the real

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<sup>55</sup> 'Map Shows That Iran Has No Intention of Defeating ISIS', *The Tower*, 5 January 2015, available at: <http://www.thetower.org/map-shows-that-iran-has-no-intention-of-defeating-isis/>, last visited: 2 June 2016.

<sup>56</sup> Smyth, P., 'Israel is the New Frontline in the Syrian War', *Foreign Policy*, 28 January 2015, available at: <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/01/28/israel-is-the-new-front-in-the-syrian-war/>, last visited: 2 June 2016.

<sup>57</sup> Hafezi, P., Louis Charbonneau, and Arshad Mohammed, 'Exclusive: U.S. told Iran of intent to strike Islamic State in Syria - source', *Reuters*, 23 September 2014, available at: <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-crisis-usa-iran-idUSKCN0H12F220140923>, last visited: 2 June 2016.

<sup>58</sup> Weiss, M., 'Did the U.S. Just Kill 5 Kids in Syria?', *The Daily Beast*, 13 August 2015, available at: <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/08/12/did-the-u-s-just-bomb-civilians-in-syria.html>, last visited: 2 June 2016.

<sup>59</sup> Orton, K., 'Provocation and the Islamic State: Why Assad Strengthened Jihadists', *Kyleorton1991*, 3 September 2014, available at: <https://kyleorton1991.wordpress.com/2014/09/03/provocation-and-the-islamic-state-why-assad-strengthened-the-jihadists/>, last visited: 2 June 2016.

<sup>60</sup> Barnes, J., and Adam Entous, 'U.S. to Give Some Syria Rebels Ability to Call Airstrikes', *The Wall Street Journal*, 17 February 2015, available at: <http://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-to-give-some-syria-rebels-ability-to-call-airstrikes-1424208053>, last visited: 2 June 2016.

<sup>61</sup> Sullivan, M., 'Hezbollah in Syria', *Understandingwar*, April 2014, available at: [http://www.understandingwar.org/site/default/files/Hezbollah\\_Sullivan\\_FINAL.pdf](http://www.understandingwar.org/site/default/files/Hezbollah_Sullivan_FINAL.pdf), last visited: 2 June 2016.

<sup>62</sup> Dearden, L., 'Syria air strikes: US targeted Khorasan terrorist group to stop 'imminent attack'', *Independent*, 23 September 2014, available at: <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/syria-air-strike-sus-targeted-khorasan-terrorist-group-to-stop-imminent-attack-9750060.html>, last visited: 2 June 2016.

<sup>63</sup> Brady, J.S., 'Press Conference by the President', *The White House*, 18 December 2015, available at: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/12/18/press-conference-president-121815>, last visited: 2 June 2016.

goal was détente and the paper agreement was needed to get there, Iran could proceed unobstructed in Syria *and* use Syria to increase leverage in the nuclear negotiations.

Russia's support for Iran's imperial push into the Arab world has been visible for some time. Russia has frequently played spoiler in efforts to diplomatically restrain Iran's nuclear program and is in the process of selling Iran an S-300 anti-aircraft system that would protect Iran's nuclear program militarily.<sup>64</sup> The increased intelligence cooperation between Iran and Russia became publicly visible in late 2014,<sup>65</sup> and recently this became an official intelligence-sharing cell in Baghdad that also includes the Iraqi government and Assad—both under significant Iranian sway.<sup>66</sup>

American hegemony in the Middle East is thus severely eroded already, and an Iranian-Russian axis is taking shape in its place. It cannot bring peace—having neither the forces nor the inclination to do so, relying on sectarian instruments that create their own counterweight—but it can secure the key zones needed by two malign international actors, while leaving the rest to chaos and violence that is already destabilizing Europe and the NATO alliance, creating tensions that are empowering pro-Kremlin political parties.

During the Aleppo assault, a number of prominent supporters of the Iran nuclear deal began to detect a de facto Obama administration support for the Tehran-Moscow position in Syria.<sup>67</sup> Such advocates condemned the latter but held to their support for the former, never making the connection that the one facilitated the other. Perhaps that recognition will come. Whether it will be in time to save Syria from the dire—and ultimately false—choice of the Islamic Republic or the Islamic State remains to be seen.

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<sup>64</sup> 'Iran to upgrade ballistic missiles, get Russian S-300 defense system soon', *The Jerusalem Post*, 10 February 2016, available at:

<http://www.jpost.com/Middle-East/Iran/Iran-to-upgrade-ballistic-missiles-get-Russian-S-300-defense-system-soon-44441>, last visited: 2 June 2016.

<sup>65</sup> 'New Intelligence Cooperation Between Moscow and Tehran', *20committee*, 24 October 2014, available at: <https://20committee.com/2014/10/24/new-intelligence-cooperation-between-moscow-and-tehran/>, last visited: 2 June 2016.

<sup>66</sup> Groll, E., 'Iraq Strikes Intel Sharing Agreement with Russia, Syria, and Iran', *Foreign Policy*, 27 September 2015, available at: <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/09/27/iraq-strikes-intel-sharing-agreement-with-russia-syria-and-iran/>, last visited: 2 June 2016.

<sup>67</sup> Cohen, R., 'America's Syrian Shame', *The New York Times*, 8 February 2016, available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/09/opinion/americas-syrian-shame.html>, last visited: 2 June 2016.

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