

Iran in Syria

From an Ally of
the Regime
to an Occupying
Force

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Foreword

This report is the result of a year of *Naame Shaam*'s work. It draws largely on information gathered from monitoring Syrian, Iranian and the international media's coverage of events in Syria. The majority of the information and sources found in this report are in the public domain. The authors have drawn on private sources on only a few occasions. This is the case, for instance, with the Syrian 'crisis cell' assassination story towards the end of chapter II. Even in such cases, however, the authors did their best to verify and corroborate the information conveyed to them from other, publicly available sources.

Readers will notice that the authors have made a special effort to reference almost every piece of information mentioned in the report. This is because they want readers to be able to verify the information and to expand on it if necessary. The references should also be useful for legal practitioners and organisations wishing to use the original sources as evidence in any future lawsuits.

Naame Shaam has backed up and made copies of all the web pages referenced in the report, just in case they 'disappear', as many Iranian news reports concerning Syria have done in the past.

While drawing on a wide range of sources in a variety of languages, the authors have deliberately avoided using Syrian opposition groups and media outlets as a source, except when that was unavoidable. The reason for this is to avoid accusations of bias and unreliability.

A note on language and spelling. The authors have mostly used the Iranian English spelling of names and places, even when these are originally Arabic. Thus, they use 'Hezbollah' rather than 'Hizbullah', and 'Sepah Qods' rather than 'Quds'. The reason is that numerous quotes from Iranian reports originally in English are used throughout the report, so the authors opted for keeping the spelling of such words consistent as much as possible.

The authors would like to thank all their Syrian, Iranian and Lebanese correspondents, colleagues and friends who provided them with the information and news that formed the core and basis of this report. Thanks are also due to the Rule of Law Foundation for its support.

This report has been produced by the Research and Advocacy Team of the campaign group *Naame Shaam*.

Naame Shaam is a group of Iranian, Syrian and Lebanese activists that focuses on uncovering the role of the Iranian regime in Syria. See www.naameshaam.org

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Erratum

- The plural S at end of National Defence Forces (NDF) has been dropped by mistake in several place throughout the report.
- P. 7 and P. 74 - “1904 Hague Regulations...” It should be 1907.
- P. 12, third paragraph says: “Two other aspects of the Iranian support to the Syrian regime, namely economic and financial aid and spreading pro-regime propaganda through Iranian state-controlled media, are not tackled in this report but have been examined by Naame Shaam to some extent before.” The economic and financial support are in fact discussed in detail in chapter III.

Executive Summary

The core argument of this report is that the Syrian regime of President Bashar al-Assad would have collapsed a long time ago if it were not for the enormous military and economic support provided to it by the Iranian regime since March 2011, following the outbreak of the Syrian revolution. This unprecedented level of support was driven, first and foremost, by the strategic interests of the Iranian regime in keeping arms shipments flowing to Hezbollah in Lebanon via Syria, so as to keep Hezbollah a strong deterrent against any attack on Iran's military nuclear programme.

One result of this heavy Iranian involvement in the war in Syria has been a qualitative change in the nature of the relationship between the Syrian and the Iranian regimes. From being historically mutually beneficial allies, the Iranian regime is now effectively an occupying force in the regime-held areas of Syria, and the Syrian regime is little more than a puppet in the hands of Sepah Pasdaran (the Iranian Revolution Guards) and its foreign operations, arm Sepah Qods. The latter's commander-in-chief, Gen. Qassem Soleimani, is the *de facto* ruler of 'Iranian-occupied Syria'.

Moreover, the authors argue that the Iranian regime's influence in Syria is likely to continue even after the fall of the Assad regime because it is now exercised primarily through Iranian-backed and controlled militias fighting in Syria on behalf of the Syrian regime. Many of these militias, both local and foreign, are likely to outlive Bashar al-Assad and his inner circle.

The Iranian Regime in Syria

With this in mind, chapter I, tracks the Iranian regime's military involvement in the current war in Syria, showing how it gradually grew from providing strategic and technical support to Syrian regime forces against the mass popular protests to being in overall control of the Syrian regime's military strategy and directing all its major military campaigns.

In early 2011, Sepah Qods as well as several Iranian intelligence agencies, formed a top-level 'advisory mission' to assist the Syrian regime in its 'crisis' following the start of the revolution. The mission was said to be headed by the former commander of Sepah Pasdaran's Greater Tehran unit, Brigadier-General Hossein Hamedani, and the commander-in-chief of Sepah Qods, Gen. Qassem Soleimani. They reportedly dispatched Sepah Pasdaran commanders skilled in urban and guerrilla warfare to supervise and direct military operations in Syria.

One of the first steps in this Iranian effort was creating the Syrian National Defence Force (NDF), which was modelled on the Iranian Basij force and its experience in suppressing Iran's own dissident movements, particularly the 2009 pro-democracy protests known as the Green Movement. The NDF, which is commonly known among Syrians as the *shabbiha*, was thus charged with doing the 'dirty work' of the regime in suppressing the anti-regime protests instead of the regular armed forces, just like in Iran.

The chapter details various pieces of evidence to support this claim about the 'Iranian connection', ranging from rare admissions and revelations by Iranian officials to testimonies by regime insiders and Syrian militiamen who served under Iranian commanders or were trained in Iran. Indeed, this chapter shows that the Iranian role in creating the *shabbiha* was not confined to advice but included training, arming and funding this notorious militia.

As the revolution was pushed towards militarisation and opposition armed forces started to achieve military advances on the ground around mid-2012, the Iranian regime made a strategic decision to send some of its loyal militias in Lebanon and Iraq to fight in Syria alongside, and even on behalf of, the Syrian regime forces.

Additionally, chapter I details various pieces of evidence to counter repeated denials by Iranian and Hezbollah officials of the role played by Sepah Pasdaran-controlled militias. It also tracks the gradual development of the role of these militias from supporting Syrian regime forces to assuming a leading role in all major, strategic battles (al-Qusayr, Homs, Yabroud, etc.). The chapter looks in detail at the role of Hezbollah Lebanon, Iraqi Shia militias, Afghan and other Shia fighters trained, armed and directed by Sepah Pasdaran.

The authors argue that the battle of al-Qusayr in spring 2013 was a major turning point in the Syria war. It reflected a noticeable shift in the Iranian regime's military strategy in Syria: conceding, or perhaps losing interest in, the possibility of regaining control of the eastern and northern parts of the country that were now under the rebels' control. Instead, the focus from now on would be on defending and consolidating the Syrian and Iranian regimes' control in Damascus and its surroundings, Homs and its surroundings (which connect the capital with the coastal region) and the Qalamon region (which connects the first two and connects both with Lebanon).

The aim, they add, was to secure the capital, whose fall would have been seen as a fall of the regime, and to secure the Damascus-Homs corridor in order to provide both a geographical and demographic continuity of regime-held areas and to secure arms shipments to Hezbollah in Lebanon, while at the same time cutting off rebels coming from or through eastern Lebanon.

The leading role in these key battles would be assigned to Hezbollah and other Iranian-backed militias, who were seen as more reliable and better organised than the regular Syrian army. Meanwhile, the regime's air force would continue its bombardment of rebel-held areas in the north and the east to perpetuate a state of war in those areas and make life there unbearable. The barrel bombs campaign on Aleppo is an obvious example of this. Moreover, this leading role assigned to these Iranian-backed militias is likely to continue even after Bashar al-Assad falls. Indeed, many analysts have argued that the Iranian regime's strategy in Syria goes beyond saving the Assad regime and includes preparations for a post-Assad era in which Iranian-controlled militias still have influence on the ground and serve the Iranian regime's interests.

The chapter provides numerous examples of human rights violations, war crimes and crimes against humanity committed in Syria by all these Iranian-controlled militias and forces, highlighting ways of bringing possible lawsuits against the Iranian regime. The authors argue that there is sufficient evidence – some of which is indeed detailed in the report – to try the Iranian regime's military and political leadership for complicity in many of these crimes at various levels, ranging from 'inciting' and 'endorsing and adopting' specific acts to 'aiding and abetting' war crimes and crimes against humanity.

One of the examples included in the chapter, and perhaps the most significant, is the Ghouta chemical massacre near Damascus in August 2013. The case study details three types of evidence that strongly indicate a possible role for Sepah Pasdaran in this and other chemical massacres committed in Syria in 2013 and 2014, raising the following questions:

- Was the Iranian regime aware of the plan to carry out the attack;
- Were Iranian weapons used; and
- Did Sepah-controlled Iraqi militias play a role in the Ghouta massacre.

The authors therefore call for international investigations into the massacre to examine the possible complicity of the Iranian regime, particularly Gen. Qassem Solemani, in the massacre that led to a controversial international deal concerning Syria's chemical weapons.

Many of these crimes could also be regarded as terrorist acts (they were pre-planned, politically motivated, targeted civilians rather than militants, and were carried out by militia groups rather than regular armed forces). All related Iranian officials and entities, the authors argue, should therefore be added to terrorism black lists and sanctioned accordingly.

Indeed, a whole section of chapter I is dedicated to examining the links between the Syrian and the Iranian regimes and extremist Islamist groups such as the Islamic State in Iraq and Sham (ISIS, now known as Islamic State (IS),) and Jabhat al-Nusra. After detailing various pieces of evidence, the authors conclude that both the Syrian and the Iranian regimes have infiltrated, collaborated and used these al-Qaeda-affiliated groups to derail the Syrian revolution towards militarisation and sectarianism and to justify their military actions against Syrian protesters and rebels.

This is quite significant as both regimes were in the summer of 2014 attempting to sell themselves as 'partners' in the international campaign against Islamist terrorist groups, following the UN Security Council resolution on ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra in August 2014 and the US President's declaration of war against ISIS in Iraq and Syria on 10 September, 2014.

Finally, chapter I also examines the role of Iranian fighters and Iranian weapons sent to Syria and tracks their journey – like other aspects of the Iranian military involvement in Syria – from initial denial by Iranian officials, through intermittent admissions, to the gradual emergence of undeniable evidence.

Syria Under Military Occupation

Chapter II builds on these details and presents a case for treating the war in Syria as an international conflict that involves a foreign occupation (by the Iranian regime) and a liberation struggle by Syrian people against this foreign occupation.

This chapter starts with a legal discussion of what constitutes a military occupation, as defined by the 1904 Hague

Executive Summary

Regulations and the Fourth Geneva Convention of 1949, and whether the Iranian regime's presence in Syria can be defined as a military occupation.

After outlining various pieces of evidence and case studies to back up their claim, including statements by Iranian officials, the authors conclude that the war in Syria today has all the characteristics of an international conflict. Alternatively, they propose that the Syrian case is treated as what is sometimes called 'occupation with an indigenous government in post'.

They also highlight the possibility of invoking Article 1 of the 1977 Additional Protocol I to the Geneva Conventions, which provides that conflicts shall be qualified as international when they occur between a state and an authority representing a people "fighting against colonial domination and alien occupation and against racist regimes in the exercise of their right of self-determination."

The authors then examine how this Iranian occupation is enforced, both directly, through its armed forces and militias, and indirectly, through the puppet Syrian regime. The first requires a clear and identifiable Iranian command structure in Syria, which the authors attempt to explain based on available information.

Another crucial question in this regard is who in the Syrian regime and in Bashar al-Assad's inner circle has been liaising with the Iranian commanders and whether the latter's involvement resulted in any changes in the Syrian command structure.

To answer this question, the authors examine the exclusion and inclusion of senior Syrian government and army officials in accordance with Iranian desires or orders. As a case study, they re-examine the assassination of a number of top military and security officials from what was known as the Syrian regime's 'crisis cell' in July 2012.

Based on information relayed to them by a high-ranking and reliable source in the Syrian opposition, quoting Western intelligence officials, as well as various pieces of circumstantial evidence, the authors conclude that the high-profile operation had nothing to do with the Free Syrian Army or other opposition armed groups, as media reports claimed at the time. It was, rather, carried out by Sepah Pasdaran, possibly with direct orders from Gen. Qassem Soleimani himself.

The high-ranking and reliable source in the Syrian opposition told *Naame Shaam* that some members in the "crisis cell" had been opening communications channels with Arab Gulf states and the US to make a deal behind Iran's back. The Pasdaran struck to prevent such a deal and, since then, to fully control President Assad who *de facto* became their hostage.

The authors therefore propose a new narrative about the Syrian revolution and the current situation in Syria, as well as a new set of demands in light of this new reality. The war in Syria, they say, should be regarded as an international conflict that warrants the application of the four Geneva Conventions and the regime-held areas of Syria should be considered occupied territory – not metaphorically but in the strict legal sense of the word.

Recognising the war in Syria as an international conflict that involves a foreign occupation and a people struggling for liberation may also provide a powerful 'legal weapon' against the Iranian regime, namely that it is committing "grave breaches" of the Fourth Geneva Convention, which are considered even more serious war crimes than the ones outlined in chapter I. This is because, as an occupying force, Iran has certain "duties" towards the Syrian population under its occupation.

There is abundant evidence, some of which is outlined in this report, that the Iranian regime and its forces and militias fighting in Syria have repeatedly violated many of these duties since March 2011.

For instance, the mass destruction of private and public properties in vast areas of Syria has not always been necessitated by the war (against the rebels) and is a clear and repeated breach of Article 53 of the Fourth Geneva Convention. Similarly, the mass evacuations of entire villages and districts in Homs and elsewhere, and reports of evacuated properties being registered to Syrian and Iranian regime supporters from elsewhere (including foreigners such as Afghan fighters) are a clear and repeated breach of Article 49 and may even amount to ethnic cleansing.

Based on this new narrative, the authors also propose a new set of demands addressed to the European Union, the US and their allies in the Friends of Syria group, as well as the UN and other international bodies.

It is the view of the authors that, unless the Syrian opposition is united in pushing for the war in Syria to be recognised as an international conflict, the US and other Western powers are likely to continue with their 'slow bleeding' policy towards Iran and not publicly admit that the war in Syria is one against the Iranian regime, so as to avoid being pressured into taking concrete steps to end the bloodshed in Syria and the wider region.

Iran's Vietnam

The third and last chapter deals exactly with this issue. It sheds light on two main aspects of what is described as 'Iran's Vietnam' in Syria, namely the economic and human costs to Iran of the war in Syria and what sort of impact it has on the Iranian economy and ordinary Iranians.

The authors track the massive financial and economic support provided by the Iranian regime, which has prevented the Syrian regime from economic collapse, as many analysts were expecting it to do. In addition to the costs of the Iranian weapons, fighters and militias sent to Syria, particular attention is paid to Iranian financial loans and credit lines, worth billions of dollars, and how they have been used.

The authors then look at the impact of this expenditure on the Iranian economy and ordinary Iranians, coupled with the cost of international sanctions on Iran and Iran's nuclear programme. As the author argue at length, this is because the three issues cannot be separated.

One indicator of this enormous burden on the Iranian economy is the inflation rate, which has more than tripled between 2009 and 2014 and has increased by about 10 per cent since the start of the war in Syria in 2011. As a result, almost a third of all families in Iran (31 per cent) live below the poverty line in 2014.

At the same time, while phasing out energy subsidies, Iran has been sending millions of barrels of oil to Syria at discount prices, paid for by Iranian credit. While winding down social assistance payments to nearly 60 million Iranians, Iran has been sending millions of tonnes of food and cash to Syria.

Despite the Iranian media's celebration of President Hassan Rouhani's economic 'achievements', the authors argue that Iran's economic problems are unlikely to go away any

time soon unless there are fundamental shifts in its foreign policies. And that is certainly not in the president's power. The same applies to Hezbollah Lebanon.

Another aspect of 'Iran's Vietnam' in the mounting death tolls of Sepah Pasdaran, Hezbollah Lebanon and Iraqi militia commanders and fighters. This chapter examines available information on their casualties, which is admittedly limited.

This is because, right from the start, both Sepah Pasdaran and Hezbollah Lebanon have been very cagey about their casualties in Syria. Both have been doing all they can to keep this information hidden from the public because it would show how heavily involved they are in the war there. It would also reveal how much they are losing, which could be damaging to the morale of their supporters. Suppressing such evidence is a classic war tactic aimed at avoiding public pressure to 'bring the boys back home' before they too die out there.

While the Iranian regime has made a choice to 'go for it' in Syria at any cost, this 'Syrian Vietnam' is not just a consequence of this choice. It is also a policy by the US administration and its allies, which the authors describe as the strategy of 'slowly bleeding Iran in Syria.'

This chapter examines and assesses this strategy, quoting President Barack Obama and other US officials at length. The authors argue that this 'bleeding' policy is being implemented at the disproportionate expense of the people of Syria and the wider region, and will inevitably lead to more instability and extremism in the region and beyond.

In other words, hopes that a proxy war with the Iranian regime in Syria, coupled with crippling economic sanctions, would eventually lead to the weakening and even collapse of the Iranian regime ('winning the Syria war in the streets of Tehran') are, at best, wishful thinking.

As the authors put it, it may be true that Syria has become 'Iran's Vietnam' and that Iran is 'bleeding' in Syria. But the Iranian regime may be capable of bleeding for a long time to come, much longer than the Syrian people can endure.

I. The Iranian Regime in Syria



Syrian President, Bashar al-Assad, and Iranian Spiritual Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, in 2010. Ayatollah Ali Khamenei in Iran in 2010. © AP

I. The Iranian Regime in Syria

With the outbreak of the Syrian revolution in March 2011, the relationship between the Syrian and the Iranian regimes started to change from one of mutually beneficial partnership to one of dependency and dominance. The reason: the Syrian regime would not have been capable of suppressing the mass popular protests in Syria on its own, and would have probably fallen a long time ago if it was not for the Iranian regime's support. In the words of Iranian Defence Minister, Ahmad Vahidi, "Syria is managing this situation very well on its own. But if the government can't resolve the crisis on its own, then, based on their request, we will fulfill our mutual defense-security pact."¹

This part of the report discusses the main aspect of this support: Sepah Pasdaran's military involvement in the Syrian war, both direct and indirect, which has effectively kept Bashar al-Assad's regime in power since March 2011. It details the role of Iranian commanders and fighters and their possible complicity in war crimes and crimes against humanity in Syria. It also looks at Sepah's role in creating, arming and directing the militias fighting alongside Syrian regime forces, both local and foreign, from the notorious *shabbiha* to Hezbollah Lebanon and Iraqi Shia militias. Finally, it looks at the supply of Iranian weapons to Syrian regime forces and militias and whether they have been used in known crimes committed in Syria.

Two other aspects of the Iranian support to the Syrian regime, namely, economic and financial aid and spreading pro-regime propaganda through Iranian state-con-

trolled media, are not tackled in this report but have been examined by *Naame Shaam* to some extent before.²

Of course Iran is not the only regional and international power that has been intervening in Syria. There is also Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey, the US and so on. There is no point in having chicken-or-egg arguments about what was in response to what, but it is worth noting the crucial differences between the Iranian intervention in Syria and that of the so-called Friends of Syria (or of the Syrian opposition, to be more accurate). Unlike the latter, the Iranian intervention is in support of a repressive, murderous regime against people demanding freedom and dignity. It is also much larger in scale and consequences, and is more direct, culminating in a *de facto* occupation of the country, which is the subject of the next chapter.

1. Sepah Pasdaran 'advisors'

As mass anti-regime protests started to spread across Syria in the spring of 2011, the Syrian regime's leadership decided to create a paramilitary force charged with attacking and terrorising protesters in an attempt to quell them. The goal was to form an 'effective' and locally based force of pro-regime militias that were more loyal and more reliable than regular army conscripts, many of whom would indeed desert the army later and join the Free Syrian Army.



The commander-in-chief of Sepah Qods, Gen. Qassem Soleimani, who is the *de facto* ruler of Syria.

Sepah Qods commander, Ismail Haydari, in Syria in 2013, shortly before he was killed near Aleppo.

Initially known as the Popular Committees, the force later became officially known as the National Defence Force (NDF), which comprised at least 70,000 men and women as of mid-2014. Although both are commonly referred to by most Syrians as ‘*shabbiha*’, the two are slightly different in that NDF members receive regular salaries and military equipment from the regime, while ‘normal’ *shabbiha* reportedly only receive a few hundred Syrian pounds as ‘rewards’.

The term *shabbiha*, which is derived from the Arabic word for ghost, originally referred to shadowy smugglers and racketeers, operating mostly in the coastal province of Latakia.³ In 2011, these gangsters, along with other criminals released from prison, mercenaries and Ba’athist volunteers, were converted into one of the most notorious militia forces that the Middle East has ever seen.

Creating the *shabbiha*

In March 2014, Britain’s *The Telegraph* newspaper published an interview⁴ with a former member of the Assad family’s inner circle on how the *shabbiha* forces were created. Abdul Salam, a pseudonym for a former business partner of Rami Makhlouf, the Syrian president’s cousin who controls a huge business empire in Syria, described how he and seven other ‘allies’ from around the country were invited to secret meetings in Damascus in Summer 2011, in which Makhlouf and Maher al-Assad, the president’s brother who commands the elite fourth armoured division of the military, planned “the making of the *shabiha*” to do the “dirty work” of the regime to counter the anti-regime protests.

“They told us they were worried that the army, in front of the world’s media, couldn’t use the necessary force to stop the protests,” he said. “They couldn’t be seen to be shooting the protestors. So their idea was: ‘Let’s keep our hands clean and create a paramilitary group to do the dirty work’.” Their plan included appointing leaders for local militia forces across the country; releasing death-row prisoners held in Homs and Tartous jails to join the force; and providing them with money and weapons. “They told us to kill protesters, armed or unarmed, and torture those you capture,” he added.

Abdul Salam describes Rami Makhlouf and Maher al-Assad as “the brains behind the *shabiha* operation” and

says they were the ones who provided the money and arms. But later revelations would show this story to be incomplete, as discussed in the next section.

Various other testimonies seem to confirm Abdul Salam’s account of how and why the NDF was created. For example, in April 2013 *Reuters* quoted a Syrian military commander from Damascus saying: “After the events began, our leadership started to lose faith in the army and its effectiveness on the ground in a war like this... So we got the idea to make the National Defence Forces. They started out as popular committees patrolling their neighborhoods. Then they became armed groups. And in late 2012, they were legitimized under the name National Defence Forces (NDF).”⁵

Another article published in *The Wall Street Journal* in August 2013 tells a similar story: “The genesis of the Defense Force goes back to [summer 2012] when the

1 ‘Defence agreement between Iran and Syria still in place’ (in Persian), *Fars News*, 22 August 2012, available: <http://www.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=13910601000629> For English, see: Farnaz Fassihi, *The Wall Street Journal*, 27 August 2012, available: <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10000872396390444230504577615393756632230>.

2 On economic support and its impact on the Iranian economy, see for example: ‘Iran’s failing economy, the Syria adventure and dreaming of the bomb’, *Naame Shaam*, 7 April 2014, available: <http://www.naameshaam.org/en/irans-failing-economy-the-syria-adventure-and-dreaming-of-the-bomb/>. On propaganda, see *Naame Shaam*’s ‘propaganda’ tag page (<http://www.naameshaam.org/en/tag/propaganda/>) which has various examples of monitoring and debunking Iranian state-controlled media’s propaganda on Syria, including some in-depth case studies.

3 For a brief history and insight into the inner workings of the *shabbiha*, see: ‘Who are the *shabbiha*?’ (in Arabic), available: <http://syrianleaders.com/history/145/154>. See also this *Telegraph* article: ‘The Shabiha: Inside Assad’s death squads’, 2 June 2012, available: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/9307411/The-Shabiha-Inside-Assads-death-squads.html>.

4 Salwa Amor, Ruth Sherlock, ‘How Bashar al-Assad created the feared shabiha militia: an insider speaks’, *The Telegraph*, 23 Mar 2014, available: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/10716289/How-Bashar-al-Assad-created-the-feared-shabiha-militia-an-insider-speaks.html>

5 Erika Solomon, ‘Insight: Battered by war, Syrian army creates its own replacement’, *Reuters*, 21 April 2013, available: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/04/21/us-syria-crisis-paramilitary-insight-idUSBRE93K02R20130421>.

regime hastily organized so-called popular committees among loyalist communities in Damascus to help fend off a major rebel offensive in the capital... By the fall, the Syrian regime had decided to create a national force similar to the Basij – the paramilitary group created by Iran’s clerical regime in the 1980s to fight in the Iran-Iraq war – government officials said at the time.”⁶

It is worth noting that *shabbiha* members are not only Alawis, as they are often portrayed in Western media reports. They also include Sunnis, Druze and other ethnic and religious backgrounds depending on the region. In Aleppo, for example, many *shabbiha* come from powerful local families, the most notorious of which being the Berri family, which is known for drugs and arms smuggling and its close ties to the regime. In Rukin al-Deen in Damascus, many belong to Damascene-Kurdish families; in Deir al-Zor, to Arab Sunni families and clans... and so on and so forth.⁷

The Iranian connection

These and other testimonies seem to omit one crucial element: the role of the Iranian regime in creating the *shabbiha* force. It may be that, at the time, little was known about the Iranian regime’s role in Syria. But this is no longer the case.

Almost three years after the NDF was first thought of, a high-ranking Iranian general admitted that Sepah Pasdaran had played an important role in setting it up. During a speech in April 2014, Brigadier-General Gholam

Ali Rashid, the Deputy Head of the General Staff of Iran’s Armed Forces, reiterated the Iranian regime’s official line that “we are not fighting in Syria” but admitted “advising the commanders who formed the National Defence Force,” which he described as “organisationally similar to Basij.”⁸

The Basij, officially known as the Organisation for Mobilisation of the Oppressed, is an Iranian paramilitary militia established by Ayatollah Khomeini in 1979 and is often used by the Iranian regime to terrorise and suppress protests and dissident movements in Iran, such as the so-called Green Movement in 2009.

About a month after Rashid’s admission, another senior Iranian commander boasted of establishing a “second Hezbollah” in Syria, in reference to the NDF Forces,

which he claimed comprised some 70,000 young Alawi, Shia and Sunni fighters organised in 42 groups and 128 battalions.⁹

Around the same time, another prominent Iranian official, Hojjat al-Islam Mehdi Taeb, the head of Ayatollah Khamenei’s think-tank, Ammar Strategic Base, made similar remarks: “Syria had an army, but did not have the ability to manage a war inside Syria’s cities. It is for this reason the Iranian government suggested that ‘in order to manage an urban war you must form a Basij... The Syrian Basij was formed with 60,000 [members] of the Party of God [religious zealous] who took over the war in the streets from the army.”¹⁰

Coupled with the above-mentioned testimonies, these three admissions are crucial pieces of evidence regarding the Iranian regime’s role in creating the NDF, and therefore its complicity in the crimes committed by NDF members. The fact that the force was modelled on the Iranian Basij forces suggests there was more to the Iranian role than general advice; Iranian commanders helped their Syrian counterparts *organise* the force. In the words of Victoria Nuland, a US State Department spokeswoman, “The Iranians have clearly supplied support and training and advice to the Syrian army, but this *Shabiha* thug force mirrors the same force that the Iranians use. The Basij and the Shabiha are the same type of thing and clearly reflects the tactics and the techniques that the Iranians use for their own suppression of civil rights.”¹¹

A 2013 study by the Institute for the Study of War and the American Enterprise Institute’s Critical Threats Project, entitled *Iranian Strategy in Syria*, claims that Sepah Pasdaran’s Qods Force and elements of the conventional Sepah Pasdaran Ground Forces, as well as several Iranian intelligence agencies, formed a “top-level advisory mission” to support the Syrian regime since early 2011.¹² Although the two think-tanks that produced the report are known for their close ties with US ‘hawks’ and neoconservatives, the report’s authors provide a great deal of credible information and back up their claims with verifiable sources.

Among these sources are the periodical sanction designations produced by the US Treasury Department. One of these designations, released in June 2011, claimed that the deputy chief of Iran’s *Law Enforcement Forces*

(LEF), 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 on the Syrian people.”¹³ Another report, from September 2012, claimed that Brigadier-General Hossein Hamedani, the former commander of the Greater Tehran unit in Sepah Pasdaran who led the 2009 crackdown on the Green Movement protesters in Tehran, was leading this ‘advisory mission’.¹⁴ We will have more to say about Hamedani and his colleague, Gen. Qassem Soleimani later in the report.

According to a former senior Iranian official “with close links to Sepah Pasdaran,” in February 2014 there were “a few hundred” commanders from Sepah Pasdaran and Sepah Qods in Syria.¹⁵ A recently retired senior Sepah Pasdaran commander also told *Reuters* that “top” Sepah Qods commanders in Syria numbered between 60 to 70 at any given time.¹⁶ Their role, according to these sources, is to “direct and train Syrian forces”, “assist in the gathering of intelligence” and “direct the fighting on the instructions of the Qods Force commanders.” While many lower-ranking officers go in and out of Syria by land through Turkey and Iraq, the senior commanders are reportedly flown directly to and from Damascus. Many apparently do not carry Iranian passports but Syrian ID cards and wear Syrian military uniforms.¹⁷

For over a year after the outbreak of the revolution, Iranian officials kept denying any involvement in Syria.

In May 2012, however, in one of the first official admissions of its kind, the deputy chief of Sepah Qods, Ismail Qani, said in an interview with the Iranian Students News Agency (ISNA): “If the Islamic Republic was not present in Syria, the massacre of people would have happened on a much larger scale... Before our presence in Syria, too many people were killed by the opposition but with the *physical and non-physical* presence of the Islamic Republic, big massacres in Syria were prevented.”¹⁸ (emphasis added)

6 Sam Dagher, ‘Syria’s Alawite Force Turned Tide for Assad’, *The Wall Street Journal*, 26 August 2013, available: <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424127887323997004578639903412487708>.

7 For more on this, see for example: Yassin al-Haj Saleh, ‘On the *shabbiha* and *tashbeeh* and their state’ (in Arabic), *Kalamon* 5, Winter 2012, available: <http://www.kalamon.org/articles-details-122#axzz3BIVV8l9Q>. An English translation is available: <http://lb.boell.org/en/2014/03/03/syrian-shabiha-and-their-state-statehood-participation>.

8 Brigadier-General Rashid’s admission was made during a speech in Dezful, Khuzestan at an official commemoration of the city’s liberation from Iraqi forces in 1982. The speech was reported by the *Dezful Emrooz* news website in Persian, available at <http://www.deztoday.ir/?p=246669>. For an English translation and commentary, see: <http://www.naameshaam.org/en/iranian-general-admits-advising-syrian-regime-on-establishing-shabbiha-paramilitary-force/>.

9 Brig. Gen. Hossein Hamedani’s comments were reported by Iranian state-controlled news agency *Fars News* on 4 May 2014, but the report was later removed from the agency’s website. A screen shot and an English summary of the report are available at <http://www.naameshaam.org/en/sepah-pasdaran-commander-al-assad-is-fighting-syria-war-as-our-deputy/>.

10 ‘Head of Ammar Base: Our priority is to keep Syria rather than Khuzestan’, *BBC Persian*, 14 February 2013, available: http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/iran/2013/02/130214_nm_tayeb_syria_basij.shtml. For an English translation, see: ‘Head of Ammar Strategic Base: Syria is Iran’s 35th Province; if we lose Syria we cannot keep Tehran’, *Iran Pulse*, 14 February 2013, available: <http://iranpulse.al-monitor.com/index.php/2013/02/1346/head-of-ammar-strategic-base-syria-is-irans-35th-province-if-we-lose-syria-we-cannot-keep-tehran/>.

11 Chris McGreal, ‘Houla massacre: US accuses Iran of ‘bragging’ about its military aid to Syria’, *The Guardian*, 29 May 2012, available: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/may/29/houla-massacre-us-accuses-iran>.

12 Fulton, Joseph Holliday and Sam Wyer, *Iranian Strategy in Syria*, AEI’s Critical Threats Project and Institute for the Study of War, May 2013, available: <http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/IranianStrategyinSyria-1MAY.pdf>

13 US Department of Treasury, ‘Treasury Sanctions Syrian, Iranian Security Forces for Involvement in Syrian Crackdown’, 29 June 2011, available: <http://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/tg1224.aspx>.

14 Farnaz Fassihi and Jay Solomon, ‘Top Iranian Official Acknowledges Syria Role’, *The Wall Street Journal*, 16 September 2012, available: <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10000872396390443720204578000482831419570>.

15 Jonathan Saul and Parisa Hafezi, ‘Iran boosts military support in Syria to bolster Assad’, *Reuters*, 21 February 2014, available: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/02/21/us-syria-crisis-iran-idUSBREA1K09U20140221>.

16 *Ibid.*

17 *Ibid.*

18 Saeed Kamali Dehghan, ‘Syrian army being aided by Iranian forces’, *The Guardian*, 28 May 2012, available: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/may/28/syria-army-iran-forces>.

The interview was immediately removed from ISNA's website but it had already been reposted all over the internet. For about another year after that, the official Iranian line was: Iran is only providing 'advice' to the Syrian regime and is not involved militarily. For instance, a few months after Qani's 'slip of the tongue', Sepah Pasdaran's chief commander Brigadier-General Mohammed Ali Jafari acknowledged at a news conference in Tehran in September 2012 that members of Sepah Qods were present in Syria to assist the Syrian regime but insisted that this did not constitute military presence. "We assist Syria, the circle of resistance, with ideas and consultancy, and Iran is proud of such help," he said. "Sepah is offering assistance in planning, as well as financial help, but does not have a military presence [in Syria]."¹⁹

Training

But, of course, it was never just advice and consultancy. At the above-mentioned news conference, Jafari also mentioned a 50,000-strong militia of 'volunteers' called al-Jaysh al-Shaabi, or The Popular Army, another old name that was sometimes used for the NDF. "Currently, 50,000 people are being prepared and trained," he added. "It is an honor for the Islamic Republic of Iran to share its experience and provide any kind of consultation to help defend Syria."²⁰

Back in May 2011, the US Department of Treasury had announced the designation of ten Syrian and Iranian individuals and entities targeted with sanctions for their involvement in human rights abuses, including the repression of Syrian people. Among them, and alongside Qassem Soleimani, was Mohsen Shizari, whom the US Treasury describes as a "senior [Sepah Qods] officer who serves as the [force's] Commander of Operations and Training".²¹

The US Treasury does not provide details of exactly why Shizari was added to its sanctions list but it is safe to assume that it had to do with his role in directing Sepah Qods' training efforts in Syria, as his title suggests. Note also the early date of this designation: 18 May 2011, barely two months after the outbreak of the revolution and well before it was pushed into militarisation.

The US Treasury has also sanctioned Iranian airlines, such as Mahan Air, for providing "travel services for [Sepah Qods] personnel flown to and from Iran and Syria

for military training," in addition to "secretly ferrying operatives, weapons and funds on its flights."²²

Other pieces of evidence about the Iranian regime's role in training Syrian regime forces include leaked videos and reports of Syrian regime commanders referring to such a role. In one video, a Brigadier-General from the elite Syrian Republican Guards is addressing his troops in the aftermath of the siege and destruction of the Baba Amr district in Homs in Spring 2012.²³ Throughout the video, the soldiers are heard shouting pro-Assad slogans, including "*Shabbiha* forever, we are your soldiers, O Assad." At 07:10, the general is heard saying: "I have some things to tell you. We are now forming the 416th Battalion of commandos for special missions, and they are being trained by trainers from inside and outside the country."

Again, the general does not specify who these foreign trainers are, nor where the training is taking place. But it is safe to assume that they were Iranian, as there is no evidence to suggest that any other country has provided such a service to the Syrian regime. The Special Forces training has traditionally taken place at a complex in al-Dreij, near Damascus.

In April 2013, the Free Army's Shuhadaa Idlib Brigade captured an Iranian trainer in the suburbs of Idlib. In a video posted online, the captive says in broken Arabic that he had been in Syria for five months training pro-regime snipers.²⁴ What is alleged to be his identification documents are also displayed. In a televised interview a few days before, the commander of the brigade, who interrogates the Iranian captive in the video, claims they had also killed another Iranian fighter, whose documents are shown on camera.²⁵

One relevant question here is whether these foreign trainers were only training regular army soldiers or irregular paramilitary forces too. There is enough, concrete evidence of the first, and it can be seen as a continuation of 'normal' international relations under long-standing military cooperation agreements between Syria and Iran. For example, in February 2012, two Iranian Navy ships docked at the Syrian port of Tartus, having sailed through Egypt's Suez Canal. This was the second time that an Iranian naval fleet passed through the canal since 1979. According to Iranian state-controlled media, the aim of this high-profile mission was "to provide maritime

training to naval forces of Syria under an agreement signed between Tehran and Damascus a year ago.”²⁶

But what about training the *shabbiha*? A rare news report in a local Syrian opposition news site from July 2013 claims that, not very far from the above-mentioned Special Forces complex in al-Drej, a new, closed training camp for the NDF had been established.²⁷ Two people on average are selected from each area of Syria (the report focuses on al-Swaidaa in the south) and sent there to undergo a special training course, after which they were said to ‘qualify’ to lead local militia forces and receive a monthly salary of 15,000 to 25,000 Syrian pounds. Four of the al-Swaidaa trainees had been identified by the reporters and their families had been contacted in an attempt to dissuade them from “taking this step.”

The report – which is primarily about another training course for Political Security personnel administered by Hezbollah Lebanon trainers, three of whom are named in the report – appears to be authentic and credible but cannot be independently verified. Neither can be occasional reports of opposition forces launching attacks on what they describe as *shabbiha* training camps, particularly in the coastal region and in the suburbs of Damascus and Homs.²⁸

Another alleged location for training the *shabbiha*, particularly a division called the Capital's Streets Protection Force, is said to be the compound of the Political Security branch in al-Mezzeh in south-western Damascus, not far from the Mezzeah military airport and Hezbollah Lebanon's Damascus headquarters.²⁹ But whether Iranian trainers and advisors are based at these locations is difficult to confirm.

The most direct evidence of Iranian involvement in training the *shabbiha* comes from rare revelations by Iranian officials. In February 2014, Iranian MP Seyyed Mahmoud Nabavian boasted during a speech that Iran had trained some 150,000 Syrian regime fighters on Iranian soil, and another 150,000 in Syria, in addition to 50,000 Hezbollah Lebanon fighters.³⁰ These 300,000 Syrian fighters cannot have all been regular army soldiers, whose training was organised by the Ministry of Defence. Other available information on who is fighting and who is

19 Radio Farda, 'Sepah chief confirms presence of Sepah Qods members in Syria' (in Persian), 16 September 2012, available: http://www.radiofarda.com/content/f4_iran_revolutionary_guards_iran_syria_admitt/24709851.html. A summary in English is available at: <http://iranmilitarynews.org/2012/09/16/qods-force-present-in-syria-to-help-irgc-commander-says/>.

20 'Shahed 129' 'drones capable of launching missiles have been manufactured – US bases in Sepah's gun reach' (in Persian), *Fars News*, 16 Sep. 2012, available: <http://www.farsnews.com/news-text.php?nn=13910626000660>. For English, see: Farnaz Fassih and Jay Solomon, 'Top Iranian Official Acknowledges Syria Role', *The Wall Street Journal*, 16 September 2012, available: <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10000872396390443720204578000482831419570>. For a discussion about the accuracy of media coverage of Jafari's quote, see: Scott Lucas, 'Syria & Iran Follow-Up: The Real Story of "Syria's Iran-Hezbollah 50,000-Man Militia" in 3 Easy Steps', *EA WorldView*, 12 February 2013, available: <http://www.enduringamerica.com/home/2013/2/12/syria-iran-follow-up-the-real-story-of-syrias-iran-hezbollah.html>

21 US Department of Treasury, 'Administration Takes Additional Steps to Hold the Government of Syria Accountable for Violent Repression Against the Syrian People', 18 May 2011, available: <http://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/tg1181.aspx>.

22 US Department of Treasury, 'Treasury Designates Iranian Commercial Airline Linked to Iran's Support for Terrorism', 12 October 2011, available: <http://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/tg1322.aspx>.

23 'Republican Guards criminals boast about their achievements in destroying Baba Amr' (in Arabic), *Youtube*, 4 April 2012, available: <http://youtu.be/voBwOwYnOX4>.

24 'Suhadaa Idlib Brigade: Full confessions of an Iranian fighter captured by the Free Army' (in Arabic), 3 April 2013, available: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ienaxw5mAY>.

25 'Orient News coverage of Idlib checkpoints battle' (in Arabic), 31 March 2013, available: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NGxeQbNH8Oc>.

26 'Iranian ships docked at Syrian port lead to Israeli worries', *Press TV*, 20 February 2012, available: <http://www.presstv.com/detail/227611.html>.

27 'Hezbollah training 'shabbiha' from al-Swaidaa in al-Drej in Damascus suburbs' (in Arabic), *Swaida Voice*, available: <http://swaidavoices.net/archives/866>.

28 See, for example, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=whs61_Llda8; <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ysINbZ6NSYA>; <http://tinyurl.com/pe9ftuo>; <https://www.zamanalwsl.net/read-News.php?id=34643>; http://orient-news.net/?page=news_show&id=78898.

29 'Why Darayya and Why is it important for the regime?' (in Arabic), *Youkal.net*, available: <http://www.youkal.org/2012-12-02-14-05-23/24-26/7911-2013-02-20-15-41-04>.

30 'Nabavian: 300,000 Syrian troops trained by Iran' (in Persian), *Emrooz u Farda*, <http://emroozofarda.ir/?p=3047>. An English report is available at: <http://en.trend.az/regions/iran/2241820.html>.

undergoing military training does not seem to support such a conclusion.

The revelation caused a storm in Iran, suggesting it may have been true. One MP demanded that Nabavian should be prosecuted, adding that disclosing such details paints Iran as a “supporter of terrorists” and would harm the country’s “national interests.”³¹ But Mansour Haghhighatpour, who is affiliated with the ruling conservative block, did not deny the Iranian regime’s role in training and supporting Baschar al-Assad’s forces; he only said that revealing such details would harm Iran’s ‘national interests’ and should therefore be kept secret.

In April 2013, *Reuters* interviewed four Syrian regime fighters who claimed they had been on an “urban warfare course” at a “secret base in Iran.”³² They were all flown from an air base in Latakia to Tehran International Airport, then put on buses, whose windows were covered by curtains, and driven to an undisclosed location about an hour and a half drive from the airport.

The interviewees were all militiamen from minority backgrounds; they were not regular army soldiers. One of them is quoted saying their Iranian trainers told them the course, which lasted 15 days, was “the same course that Hezbollah operatives normally do.” Other interviewees said volunteers would assemble in groups of around 400 before being flown to Iran in smaller numbers, while others were trained by Iranians inside Syria.

In September 2013, *The Wall Street Journal* (WSJ) published a similar investigation about a base near Tehran, where Iranian forces were training Shiite militiamen from across the Arab world to go and fight in Syria.³³ In addition to fighters and local residents, the WSJ had interviewed an Iranian military officer briefed on the training camp, which is said to be 15 miles outside Tehran and called Amir al-Momenin, or Commander of the Faithful (a traditional title for Muslim Caliphs). Amir al-Momenin is a famous Sepah Pasdaran military base and is home to the force’s ballistic missiles arsenal, among other things.³⁴

In another report from August 2013, members of the National Defence Forces told the WSJ they had received “boot camp and more advanced combat training in Syria from Hezbollah operatives or have been flown to Iran for

similar purposes.”³⁵ Hezbollah confirmed providing such training, while a spokesman for Iran’s mission to the United Nations declined to comment, according to the paper.

The most conclusive evidence of the Iranian regime’s involvement in training Syrian regime militias is perhaps a video broadcast by the Netherlands Public Broadcasting network (NPO) and other media outlets around the world in September 2013.³⁶ It was shot by an embedded Iranian cameraman who died in battle in Syria shortly after he filmed this footage in August that year. Syrian rebels (the Dawood Brigade) obtained the footage after overrunning a group of Iraqi and Iranian fighters from the Abu Fadl al-Abbas brigade and handed it to Dutch Journalist Roozbeh Kaboly.

The video shows members of a Sepah Pasdaran unit living in a school in a village near Aleppo and meeting with local Syrian regime commanders and fighters, with whom they say they have “good relations.” A Sepah commander tells the camera he had been, for over a year, “working with Syrian militias,” many of whose members “had been previously trained by us in Iran.” Another NPO report, a few days before, showed other parts of the footage showing Syrian regime troops receiving instructions from Iranian commanders.³⁷

Around that same time, Iranian media reported the death of the commander who appears in the above-mentioned footage. Ismail Haydari was reportedly killed in battle near Damascus (see photo, p.12). Most Iranian state-controlled media reports claimed he was a ‘filmmaker’ and was in Syria to make a documentary, lumping his story with that of the Iranian filmmaker, Hadi Baghbani, who shot the footage and who died in Syria at or around the same time (on 20 August 2013).³⁸ However, pictures of Haydari’s mass funeral published by some Iranian sites clearly show a military-style funeral, where many Sepah Pasdaran officers in military uniform are seen saluting the coffin.³⁹ Haydari is also described in some of these reports as a *Sardar*, a military rank in Persian equivalent to Field Marshal. It is likely that Haydari was the subject of Baghbani’s special documentary (more on this below, in the ‘Iranian Fighters’ section).

It is worth pointing out that creating and training the *shabbiha* on suppressing protests and dissent may have

also provided Sepah Pasdaran itself with valuable experience. In October 2011, Sepah announced the creation of a new force of 31,000 members called the Imam Ali Security Battalion, whose task is to “defend the [Islamic] revolution and absorb people[’s anger].”⁴⁰ In his inauguration speech, the chief of Sepah Pasdaran Mohammad Ali Jafari said: “Our task is not limited to physically [responding to] the events. We have to realize how to counter those people who have attended such scenes [protests].” “The nature of the threats is changing,” he added. “It is the art of Sepah and Basij to match itself to the changes and to realize the threats which are aimed at the future of the revolution.”

War crimes and crimes against humanity

Over the past three years, the Iranian-trained *shabbiha* have “reigned with violence and impunity,” *The Telegraph* interview, mentioned above, states. There have been numerous reports about *shabbiha* members looting houses and setting them on fire; about them destroying entire villages and raping, torturing and slitting the throats of inhabitants suspected of opposing the regime. The *shabbiha* are also often charged with finding, torturing or killing anti-regime activists. They now have their own detention centres and torture facilities across the country. Their presence and checkpoints are often feared by Syrians more than those of the regular army due to their infamous brutality.

The *shabbiha* have come to be particularly associated with two types of ‘routine crimes’: looting and rape. Unlike army soldiers, NDF fighters are allowed, and even encouraged, to loot houses and take ‘spoils’ after battles, which they then sell on the black market in regime-held areas or in Lebanon. In fact, this has been used by the regime as an incentive to recruit for the NDF. A number of captured *shabbiha* members have admitted to this. For example, in April 2013, an NDF fighter from Homs told *Reuters*: “I get 15,000 lira (\$158) a month, and I am allowed to keep a percentage of the loot from any battle I fight in.”⁴¹

Similarly, many NDF fighters have admitted, and even bragged about, raping the ‘enemy’s women’, in what appears to be a systematic practice. In July 2012, a captured *shabbiha* member admitted receiving 30,000 Syrian pounds per month and an extra 10,000 for each person he captured or killed. He also admitted raping

one woman, a student at Aleppo University, before killing her. “My commander raped many times,” he added. “It was normal.” As to the reason, he had this to say: “I didn’t care about Bashar al-Assad. All I cared about was that I got the power.”⁴²

At the beginning of the revolution, in Spring 2011, the role of the *shabbiha* was limited to beating and shooting protesters. Gradually, as they became more organised

31 ‘Vice chair of National Security Committee: Do not speak so other countries say Iran is breeding terrorists’ (in Persian), *Khabar Online*, 16 February 2014, available: <http://khabaronline.ir/%28X-%281%29S%28zv0jvfqnrzv02vdv33nlcia%29%29/detail/338638/Politics/parliament>. An English translation and commentary is available at: <http://www.naameshaam.org/en/iranian-mp-revealing-details-of-irans-military-support-of-syrian-regime-against-national-interests/>.

32 Erika Solomon, ‘Insight: Syrian government guerrilla fighters being sent to Iran for training’, *Reuters*, 4 April 2013, available: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/04/04/us-syria-iran-training-insight-idUSBRE9330DW20130404>.

33 Farnaz Fassihi, Jay Solomon and Sam Dagher, ‘Iranians Dial Up Presence in Syria’, *The Wall Street Journal*, 16 September 2013, available: <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424127887323864604579067382861808984>.

34 See, for example, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/tehranbureau/2011/11/news-at-least-27-dead-after-irgc-depot-blast.html>.

35 Sam Dagher, ‘Syria’s Alawite Force Turned Tide for Assad’, *The Wall Street Journal*, August 2013, available: <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424127887323997004578639903412487708>.

36 The video with English subtitles is available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z2J02DutU2c>.

37 ‘Iran steps up fight in Syria’ (in Dutch), 11 September 2013, NPO, available: <http://nieuwsuur.nl/video/550232-iran-voert-strijd-in-syrie.html>.

38 See, for example, <http://www.tasnimnews.com/Home/Single/135870>, http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/iran/2013/08/130822_syria_iranian_heydari.shtml.

39 ‘Funeral of the martyr Sardar Ismail Haji Heydari + Photos’ (in Persian), 21 August 2013, available: <http://tinyurl.com/l4lsgrt>.

40 ‘Imam Ali security battalions are being inaugurated’, *Digarban*, 7 October 2011, available: <http://www.digarban.com/en/node/2584>.

41 Erika Solomon, ‘Insight: Battered by war, Syrian army creates its own replacement’, *Reuters*, 21 April 2013, available: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/04/21/us-syria-crisis-paramilitary-insight-idUSBRE93K02R20130421>.

42 ‘Confessions of an Assad ‘Shabiha’ loyalist: How I raped and killed for £300 a month’, *World Observer*, 17 July 2012, available: <http://worldobserveronline.com/2012/07/17/confessions-assad-shabiha-loyalist-i-raped-killed-300-month/>.

and better trained and armed – thanks to Sepah Pas-daran and Hezbollah Lebanon – they started to join the regime’s armed forces in major military campaigns against various towns and cities around the country, and even organise their own campaigns of terror. In April 2013, a Syrian army officer in Homs told *Reuters* that the army was “increasingly playing a logistical and directive role, while NDF fighters act as combatants on the ground.”⁴³

Case study: The Houla and Bayda massacres

The most well-known and well-documented massacre committed by the *shabbiha* is perhaps the massacre of Houla, north of Homs, in May 2012. Almost 100 civilians, nearly half of them children, were executed by *shabbiha* armed men.⁴⁴ Survivors described how gunmen entered their homes, fired indiscriminately and slit the throats of men, women and children.⁴⁵

The UN Independent International Commission of Inquiry subsequently released a 102-page report⁴⁶ accusing the *shabbiha* fighters who carried out the Houla summary executions of “committing the crimes against humanity of murder and torture, war crimes and gross violations of international human rights and humanitarian law, including unlawful killing, indiscriminate attacks against civilian populations and acts of sexual violence.” Furthermore, the report said that these crimes were committed “pursuant to state policy,” pointing the finger at the “highest levels of the Syrian armed and security forces.”

Other famous massacres committed by the *shabbiha* include the al-Bayda and Banyas massacres in May 2013, where army and *shabbiha* forces rounded up and executed at least 248 civilians, including women and children, after clashes had ended and opposition fighters had retreated. In September 2013, Human Rights Watch published a 68-page report summarising its investigation into the massacre, based on witness accounts and video evidence.⁴⁷ The report described the massacre as “one of the deadliest instances of mass summary executions since the start of the conflict in Syria.”⁴⁸

Case study: The *shabbiha* in Homs

A particularly notorious *shabbiha* force has reportedly been that of Homs. Various leaked internal documents and testimonies reveal a world of violence, crime and

mafia-style networks that do not appear to have any guiding values or principles other than money and power.⁴⁹

In one document, leaked in February 2014 to an independent Syrian opposition newspaper,⁵⁰ a letter submitted by an anonymous resident of Homs to the Presidential Palace details what it describes as the “non-patriotic” practices of the local NDF in the city, which the document describes as “worse than the practices of the terrorists” and even equates them to “systematic war crimes.” The letter names a number of local militia leaders but focuses mainly on the force’s chief in Homs, Saqr Rustum, who it claims is personally in charge of a special unit within the force responsible for “special missions” such as assassinations, kidnappings, robbery and so on.

The document gives detailed and well-informed examples of these ‘non-patriotic’ practices, including selling weapons and ammunition to armed opposition forces for extortionate prices; the bombing of a NDF arms depot in the Wadi al-Dahab district in August 2013 to avoid an inspection that would have revealed stolen and sold-off weapons and ammunition; and even smuggling in and detonating car bombs in regime-loyalist areas to send a message to the leadership in Damascus that “the Military Security is incapable of controlling its check point so it should be taken from it and handed over to the NDF.” The letter also reveals that up to 8,500 of the 18,500 NDF members in Homs are in fact inactive. They are only NDF members on paper because they wanted to avoid the compulsory military service. Saqr Rustum, the document claims, submits their names to the General Staff Command as having joined the NDF so they do not have to do the military service, in exchange for keeping their salaries (25,000 Syrian pounds a month) for himself.

Other criminal practices mentioned in the document include robbing people and vehicles at checkpoints and kidnapping men and women to blackmail their families for ransom. Other reports based on insider testimonies have also talked about this practice (the kidnapping of civilians, including women, in regime-held areas, especially among the Alawite and Christian communities).⁵¹ Pro-regime media have often accused the ‘sectarian terrorists’ of the opposition armed forces for such incidents.

Following an increasing number of complaints and demonstrations by residents in Homs about these practices, the governor of Homs, in collaboration with the military security, arrested 330 NDF members in January 2014. In retaliation, the NDF attempted to assassinate the governor by firing mortars on his house, according to the letter.

Significantly, the document blames the regular army for these criminal practices, which it says are “very widespread” and “have gone too far.” That is because the army has been handing over entire areas to the NDF after finishing its operations there. This scenario, the letter adds, is repeated in all the areas that fall under the control of regime forces. The NDF would then surround the area, set up checkpoints, and the ‘special missions unit’ would then comb the area and rob houses of everything they can put their hands on, then load the ‘spoils’ into trucks and take them to be sold elsewhere.

These reports should not be surprising given the composition of the NDF, whose members include many convicted criminals who were released from prison at the start of the revolution to form the force, not to mention the original *shabbiha* racketeers and gangsters. For example, Saqr Rustum, the leader of the NDF in Homs, was a civil engineer who occupied the position of the vice-president of the Hasyaa industrial zone in Homs, but was fired after it was found out that he had been involved in large-scale corruption. A few months after the outbreak of the mass protests in Homs, his maternal uncle, a brigadier-general who served as a military advisor to president Bashar al-Assad, put him in charge of forming a local pro-regime militia (or Popular Committee, as it was known then) in Homs.⁵²

There has not been much concrete evidence of a direct link between the Homs *shabbiha* and Iranian commanders, but it is safe to assume that such a link does exist, especially given the strategic importance of Homs to the Iranian regime and Hezbollah Lebanon and their presence and activity in the city and the surrounding areas since mid-2012, which will be discussed in detail in the next section.

Unfortunately, none of these reports documenting the crimes committed by the *shabbiha* and the NDF point out the Iranian connection. When Iranian officials

kept repeating, throughout the first two years of the revolution, that they were only present in Syria as ‘advisors’ – as a way to deny direct military involvement – what that meant was advising, among other things, on setting up, training and arming one of the most notorious militia forces that has been responsible for some of the most horrendous war crimes and crimes against humanity committed in Syria. As a US Treasury sanctions designation from December 2012 put it, “Iran has helped establish and train the Jaysh al-Sha’bi militia in Syria [another early name for the NDF] to support the Assad regime and relieve pressure on Syrian government forces. Since mid-2012, Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Qods Force (IRGC-QF) and Hezbollah have provided training, advice, and

43 Erika Solomon, ‘Insight’, *idem*.

44 Stephanie Nebehay, ‘Most Houla victims killed in summary executions: U.N.’, *Reuters*, 29 May 2012, available: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/05/29/us-syria-un-idUSBRE84S10020120529>.

45 ‘Syria crisis: Most Houla victims were executed’, *BBC*, 29 May 2012, available: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-18249413>.

46 The report is available at: http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/RegularSession/Session21/A-HRC-21-50_en.pdf.

47 Human Rights Watch, ‘No One’s Left’: *Summary Executions by Syrian Forces in al-Bayda and Baniyas*, September 2013, available: <http://www.hrw.org/node/118645/>.

48 Human Rights Watch, ‘Syria: Mass Executions by Government Forces’, 13 September 2013, available: <http://www.hrw.org/news/2013/09/13/syria-mass-executions-government-forces>.

49 See, for example, the series of leaked documents about the “*shabbiha* society” obtained by *Zanam al-Wasl*, a Syrian opposition news site, published in Arabic in April 2014: <https://zamanalwsl.net/news/48553.html>.

50 Amer Mohammad, ‘Saqr Rustum, the absolute ruler of Homs – The National Defence tried to assassinate Homs governor, bombed Wadi al-Dahab and robbed [regime] loyalists’ (in Arabic), *Souriatna* 125, 9 February 2014, available: <http://www.souriatnapress.net/?p=5630>.

51 See, for example, ‘Aref Hamza, ‘Who kidnapped the Alawites and Christians in Homs?’ (in Arabic), *Al-Mustaqbal* 5062, 15 June 2014, p.10, available: <http://www.almustaqbal.com/v4/article.aspx?Type=NP&ArticleID=621134>; ‘Clear prostitution in Homs, the *shabbiha* kidnap ‘Alawite women’ (in Arabic), *Zanam al-Wasl*, 13 June 2014, available: <https://zamanalwsl.net/news/50761.html>.

52 Amer Mohammad, ‘Saqr Rustum’, *Souriatna*, *idem*.



Iraqi Shia militiamen in Baghdad preparing to depart for Syria, June 2013 (Newscom). Source: http://www.weeklystandard.com/articles/iraq-war-not-over_736876.html

weapons and equipment for Jaysh al-Sha’bi. Iran has also provided routine funding worth millions of dollars to the militia.”⁵³

We now know that Gen. Qassem Soleimani, the commander-in-chief of Sepah Qods and Ayatollah Ali Khamenei’s man in Syria, deployed top Sepah commanders to Syria to help the Assad regime suppress the mass popular protests. Among these were experienced Sepah commanders who had supervised counter-insurgency campaigns against Iran’s own anti-regime movements, as well as the brutal crackdown on Iranian pro-democracy protests in 2009 known as the Green Movement. Among them were Gen. Hossein Hamedani, Yadollah Javani, Mohsen Shizari, Ismail Haydari and others. All these commanders, along with their superiors (Soleimani and Khamenei), should also be implicated in the crimes committed by the *shabbiha* and the NDF, because evidence suggests it was with their full knowledge and complicity, if not their direct orders, that these crimes were committed. The continuation of Iranian training, advice and financial and military support to these militia forces *after* some of these crimes came to light only goes to prove such complicity.

2. Foreign militias

Providing advice, training and money to the Syrian regime’s armed forces and militias was not enough. As the revolution was pushed towards militarisation and opposition armed forces started to achieve military advances on the ground, the Iranian regime made a strategic decision to send some of its loyal militias in Lebanon and Iraq to go and fight in Syria alongside, and even on behalf of, the Syrian regime forces. This was because, in the words of Mohsen Sazegara, a founding member of Sepah Pasdaran, “One of Iran’s wings will be broken if Assad falls. They are now using all their contacts from Iraq to Lebanon to keep him in power.”⁵⁴

According to some observers, another factor behind this decision may have had to do with Iranian commanders’ views of the *shabbiha*’s practices – although the authors of this report believe this issue is rather exaggerated and not as crucial as it is presented in the following quote. In any case, it does not mutually exclude the Iranian regime’s pursuing other, parallel strategies in Syria.

According to the American intelligence think-tank Stratfor, Iranian officials privately describe the *shabbiha* as “unruly and grossly undisciplined.” One Iranian source reportedly described the *shabbiha*’s use of violence as “misguided” and explained how Sepah Pasdaran “unsuccessfully attempted to convey to the Syrian militiamen that violence must be employed strategically so as to suppress and not proliferate unrest.” For this reason, the source claims, Sepah Pasdaran “has given up on training the *shabbiha* and has instead deployed Hezbollah Lebanon members to work with them and, in some cases, even defend *shabbiha* who have more recently become targets of attacks by the rebel Free Syrian Army.”⁵⁵

As the previous section has shown, the claim (made in January 2012) that Sepah Pasdaran has “given up” on training the *shabbiha* and the NDF is unfounded. There is plenty of evidence to the contrary, although Sepah may have well delegated *some* of this responsibility to Hezbollah, whose members and commanders are trained by Sepah Pasdaran in the first place. Language barriers may have been a factor in this, as Hezbollah commanders, being native Arabic speakers, would find it easier to communicate with Syrian trainees than their Iranian counterparts.

A report by the news agency *AFP* in April 2014, based on interviews with Hezbollah Lebanon members, revealed details of the training programmes that the group’s fighters undergo before going to fight in Syria: “Initial training for those who pass scrutiny of their religious credentials and background checks, is carried out in Lebanon, where courses last from 40 days to three months. Additional training is provided in Iran for about two months, with a focus on heavy weaponry and preparing members for command positions.” This experience is then also conveyed to Syrian regime forces and militias, whom Hezbollah fighters criticise as being “woefully unprepared.”⁵⁶

In any case, the “strategic employment of violence to suppress and not proliferate the unrest” does provide a partial explanation for the Iranian regime’s motivation behind sending Hezbollah Lebanon and Iraqi militias to go and fight in Syria. According to Stratfor emails leaked by WikiLeaks in March 2012, members of Sepah Pasdaran and Hezbollah Lebanon were deployed in Syria in the early days of the revolution to “stand behind

Syrian troops and kill Syrian soldiers immediately if they refuse to open fire.”⁵⁷

Early involvement

Rumours and reports of Hezbollah Lebanon and Iraqi militias’ presence inside Syria have been around at least since mid-2011. One of the earliest videos of Hezbollah’s presence in Syria, published in July 2011, shows Hezbollah fighters with machine guns and tanks in Horan in southern Syria.⁵⁸ In January 2012, *The Times* reported that the Syrian regime was deploying “large numbers of Hezbollah and Iranian snipers” to shoot anti-regime protesters.⁵⁹ The report’s source was a Syrian Treasury auditor at the Ministry of Defence who had defected and fled Syria the month before. According to him, the salaries of these snipers, who were imported as ‘military consultants’, were paid through a “slush fund replenished with US dollars flown in from Iran.” It was the same fund used to pay the *shabbiha*, he claimed.

In February 2012, Syrian regime forces, supported by Hezbollah fighters, regained control of the town of al-Zabadani, north-west of Damascus, after rebels had taken over it the previous month. A few days before, *Al-Arabiya* TV channel had quoted a Sepah Pasdaran

⁵³ US Department of Treasury, ‘Treasury Sanctions Al-Nusra Front Leadership in Syria and Militias Supporting the Assad Regime’, 11 December 2012, available: <http://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/pages/tg1797.aspx>.

⁵⁴ Farnaz Fassihi, ‘Iran said to send troops to bolster Syria’, *The Wall Street Journal*, 27 August 2012 9, available: <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10000872396390444230504577615393756632230>.

⁵⁵ Stratfor, ‘The Use of Mercenaries in Syria’s Crackdown’, Ocnus Net, 15 January 2012, available: http://www.ocnus.net/artman2/publish/Defence_Arms_13/The-Use-of-Mercenaries-in-Syria-s-Crackdown_printer.shtml.

⁵⁶ ‘Hezbollah shifts tactics, narrative for Syria fight’, *AFP*, 14 April 2014, available: <https://uk.news.yahoo.com/hezbollah-shifts-tactics-narrative-syria-fight-091321505.html>.

⁵⁷ ‘Some details on IRGC and HZ presence in Syria – ME1’, The Global Intelligence Files, *WikiLeaks*, 8 March 2012, available: https://wikileaks.org/gifiles/docs/96/962665_insight-iran-syria-some-details-on-irgc-and-hz-presence-in.html.

⁵⁸ Available: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9YscLuq4_vA.

⁵⁹ James Hider and Nate Wright, ‘Assad pays snipers “to murder protesters”’, *The Times*, 26 January 2012, available: <http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/news/world/middleeast/article3298307.ece>.

commander saying Hezbollah forces took part in the al-Zabadani battle, on Iranian orders, in order to protect a Sepah Pasdaran military base in the nearby town of Madaya.⁶⁰ According to media reports, al-Zabadani, which is situated on the way between Damascus and Beirut, has served as Sepah Qods's "logistical hub" for supplying Hezbollah Lebanon with arms at least since June 2011.⁶¹ According to US estimates, Hezbollah was at the time receiving \$100 million a year from Tehran in supplies and weaponry, which were transported through Syria.⁶²

In October 2012, a senior Hezbollah Lebanon commander was reported to have been killed in Syria.⁶³ Hezbollah said Ali Hussein Nassif had died while "performing his jihadist duty," without specifying where.⁶⁴ Syrian rebels said Nassif and several of his men had been killed in an ambush by the Free Syrian Army. Other reports said they had died in clashes on the border. Nassif was the second senior Hezbollah military commander to have reportedly been killed in Syria. Musa Ali Shahimi died in August 2012 and a public funeral attended by two Hezbollah MPs was held for him in Beirut.⁶⁵

A few months before, in March 2012, Hezbollah held funerals for two other, less senior members who, according to the Syrian opposition, had been killed in Mazzeh, Damascus.⁶⁶ After Nassif's death, however, many more public funerals followed. Syrian rebels also published a number of videos of Hezbollah fighters they had captured or killed in Syria.⁶⁷ It was no longer a secret, especially after the US Treasury added Hezbollah Lebanon to its sanctions list in August 2012 for "supporting the Assad regime," not only for being a "terrorist group."⁶⁸ In a special briefing on the designation, the Treasury's Under-Secretary for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence claimed that Hezbollah, in addition to training Syrian regime forces and providing them with logistical assistance, had also played "a substantial role in efforts to expel Syrian opposition forces from areas within Syria."⁶⁹

The following month, in September 2012, the US Treasury targeted with sanctions Hezbollah Lebanon's leader Hassan Nasrallah himself for his role in supporting the Assad regime. Nasrallah has personally "overseen Hezbollah's efforts to help the Syrian regime's violent crackdown on the Syrian civilian population," the department said in a press release.⁷⁰ Yet Nasrallah and other Hezbollah Lebanon spokespeople kept denying at this

point that the group had any involvement whatsoever in Syria and accused the Syrian opposition and its backers of fabricating 'lies' to undermine the 'resistance'.

Send in the Hezbollah boys

Like Nasrallah, Iranian officials also kept publicly denying that Iran had any direct military involvement in Syria and insisted they had nothing to do with what 'other groups' were doing there. In a famous statement about two years later, Iranian foreign minister Mohammad Javad Zarif told the World Economic Forum in Davos: "We are not sending people. Hezbollah has made its own decision."⁷¹

But others, including Hezbollah and Iranian regime insiders, disagree. Sheikh Subhi al-Tufayli, who led Hezbollah Lebanon between 1989 and 1991 before he fell out with the Iranian regime, told *Reuters* in an interview in 2013⁷² that Hezbollah's decision to intervene in Syria had been entirely down to Iran: "I was secretary-general of the party and I know that the decision is Iranian, and the alternative would have been a confrontation with the Iranians... I know that the Lebanese in Hezbollah, and Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah more than anyone, are not convinced about this war." The news agency also quotes a Lebanese security official saying: "Even if Hezbollah has its wise men, the decision [to fight in Syria] is not theirs. The decision is for those who created and established [Hezbollah]. They are obliged to follow Iran's orders." In another interview in July 2013, al-Tufayli said: "Although Iran does not get involved in all the little details [of Hezbollah Lebanon], political decisions are always 100% Iranian."⁷³

The 'tipping point' behind the Iranian regime's decision to adjust its Syria strategy (from an indirect, supervisory and supporting role to heavy, direct involvement) appears to have occurred in summer 2012, after Syrian rebels captured large sections of Aleppo and of the suburbs of Damascus. Fearing that the Assad regime would soon collapse, Tehran dispatched senior Sepah Pasdaran commanders skilled in urban warfare to supervise and direct military operations. According to US and Iranian officials, Sepah Qods established "operation rooms" to control cooperation between Sepah Pasdaran, Syrian regime forces and Hezbollah Lebanon.⁷⁴ In June 2013, Syrian rebels in Aleppo intercepted and recorded what appears to be a radio transmission between an Iranian

commander and another from Hezbollah (judging by their language and accent), in which the first gives the second military instructions.⁷⁵ Sources in the Free Army in Aleppo reported clashing with Hezbollah fighters for the first time in July 2012.⁷⁶ The month before, media reports claimed Hezbollah fighters were involved in the Douma and Saqba massacres near Damascus.⁷⁷

It is worth noting at this point that at least some of these reports originating from the Free Syrian Army or the Syrian opposition about Hezbollah's activities in Syria in 2011-12 appear to have been exaggerated for political purposes. But this does not mean they were entirely without basis. Many reports that were initially discredited by 'experts' turned out to be true later, when more evidence, admissions and confessions regarding Hezbollah's operations in Syria came to light.

As early as June 2011, the countryside of al-Qusayr, near Homs, along the Syrian-Lebanese border, had witnessed the first clashes between Hezbollah fighters and Syrian rebels. Hezbollah fighters, supported by Syrian regime rocket launchers, allegedly attempted to cross the border and enter the strategic Syrian village of Rableh. They subsequently captured eight border villages inhabited by mixture of Sunni, Shia, Alawi and Christian residents.⁷⁸ The following year, in May 2012, Hezbollah

invaded more villages in the area and established fortified bases for itself there.

In a speech on 11 October 2012, Hezbollah's leader Hassan Nasrallah justified these actions by claiming the fighters were Lebanese nationals who had lived in these Syrian villages for many years (there are 23 of these villages and 12 farms, whose population is estimated to be around 30,000). Many of them, he claimed, "decided to stay in their homes, bought weapons... to defend themselves and their properties" against armed groups

60 Najah Mohammad Ali, 'Hezbollah entered Syria to protect Iranian base' (in Arabic), *Al-Arabiya*, 22 January 2012, available: <http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/01/22/189816.html>.

61 'Evidence grows Iran aiding Syria's Assad, UPI, 2 June 2011, available: http://www.upi.com/Top_News/Special/2011/06/02/Evidence-grows-Iran-aiding-Syrias-Assad/UPI-72061307024479/.

62 Geneive Abdo, 'How Iran keeps Assad in power in Syria', *Foreign Affairs*, 25 August 2011, available: <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/68230/geneive-abdo/how-iran-keeps-assad-in-power-in-syria>.

63 'Hezbollah military commander "killed in Syria"', *BBC*, 2 October 2012, available: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-19801884>.

64 'Hezbollah held funeral for martyr Ali Nassif in Bawadi' (in Arabic), official site of the Islamic Resistance – Lebanon, 1 October 2012, available: <http://www.moqawama.org/essaydetails.php?eid=26429&cid=199>.

65 'Hezbollah held funeral for martyr Musa Shahimi in Rawdat al-Shahidayn' (in Arabic), *Al-Ahd News Website*, 10 August 2012, available: <http://www.alahednews.com.lb/essaydetails.php?eid=64614&cid=7>.

66 'Hezbollah's participation in Syria and the names of its fighters who have died so far' (in Arabic), *Lebanon Files*, 27 April 2013, available: <http://www.lebanonfiles.com/news/538003>.

67 See, for example, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0SJ-zWSMcX1Y>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rl70ZmevDyk>; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K_D3eIC_Nrg.

68 US Department of Treasury, 'Treasury Targets Hizballah for Supporting the Assad Regime', 10 August 2012, available: <http://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/tg1676.aspx>.

69 US Department of State, 'Briefing on the designation of Hezbollah for supporting the Syrian regime', 10 August 2012, available: <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2012/08/196335.htm>.

70 US Department of Treasury, 'Treasury Designates Hizballah Leadership', 13 September 2012, available: <http://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/tg1709.aspx>.

71 "They make up their own mind", *Naame Shaam*, 27 January 2014, available: <http://www.naameshaam.org/en/they-make-their-own-mind/>.

72 Samia Nakhoul, 'Special Report: Hezbollah gambles all in Syria', *Reuters*, 26 September 2013, available: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/09/26/us-syria-hezbollah-special-report-idUSBRE98POAI20130926>.

73 'Iran plunged Hezbollah into Syrian war, Tufaili', *Ya Libnan*, 3 July 2013, available: <http://yalibnan.com/2013/07/03/iran-plunged-hezbollah-into-syrian-war-tufaili/>.

74 Farnaz Fassihi, Jay Solomon and Sam Dagher, 'Iranians Dial Up Presence in Syria', *The Wall Street Journal*, 16 September 2013, available: <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424127887323864604579067382861808984>.

75 'Intercepted radiotransmission - Iran troops in Syria 2013', 8 June 2013, available: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C03FDXqkOkI>.

76 'Hezbollah's participation in Syria', *Lebanon Files*, *idem*.

77 Fadi Shamiyyeh, 'Not only in Qusayr is Hezbollah fighting' (in Arabic), *Middle East Online*, 27 April 2013, available: <http://www.middle-east-online.com/?id=154054>.

78 'Hezbollah fighters, Syrian rebels killed in border fighting', *Al-Arabiya*, 17 February 2013, available: <http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2013/02/17/266843.html>.

who attacked them.⁷⁹ “Some of the youth among them happened to be Hezbollah members,” he added. “We did not tell them what to do... and this has nothing to do with the fighting between the Syrian government and the armed groups.”

This was the first in a series of justifications that Nasrallah and other Hezbollah officials would reiterate in front of their supporters, the other main one being “defending holy Shia shrines” in Damascus (more on this below).⁸⁰ It was also the first official half-admission of Hezbollah’s involvement in Syria and a signal for a later, full-scale military campaign starting from the Syrian villages that the group had occupied.

What Nasrallah ‘forgot’ to mention in his speech was the open secret that the Qusayr-Hermel region has historically been a main route for Iranian arms shipments to Hezbollah Lebanon via Syria, and is also close to some of Hezbollah’s main arms depots in the Beqaa Valley in Lebanon. Moreover, Hezbollah would not have been able or willing to intervene in Syria without Iranian training, weapons, money and orders.

The battle of al-Qusayr

A major turning point in Hezbollah Lebanon’s involvement in the Syria war was the battle of al-Qusayr in April-June 2013.⁸¹ The strategic town, located close to the Lebanese border and on the highway connecting Damascus to Homs and the coastal region, had been held by Syrian rebels and besieged by the army since November 2011, with sporadic fighting since February 2012. On 11 April 2013, a full-scaled, well-planned military campaign, led by Hezbollah Lebanon and Sepah Pasdaran, was launched with the aim of capturing all villages around al-Qusayr and ultimately al-Qusayr itself. One journalist reported seeing Iranian military commanders inside the city.⁸²

On the first day of the operation, a large force of Hezbollah fighters, backed by the Syrian army, attacked and captured the hilltop village of Tell al-Nabi Mando. Over the next few weeks, heavy bombardment and fierce fighting between rebels and Hezbollah and Syrian army fighters continued in various villages around al-Qusayr. For example, on 18 May, the rebels ambushed Hezbollah fighters along the banks of the al-Assi river on the Syrian side of the Lebanese border while they attempted

to enter Syria. Ten Hezbollah fighters were reportedly killed. The next morning, a new Hezbollah force was seen heading towards al-Qusayr.

In the early hours of 19 May, planes, artillery and mortars bombarded al-Qusayr. Later in the day, hundreds of Hezbollah fighters, accompanied by Syrian regime troops, stormed the city from several directions. The rebels fought back and initially managed to push them back to their starting positions on the outskirts of the city. Hezbollah reinforcements were reportedly sent across the border to back them up. On 5 June, Syrian state TV reported that the Syrian army had gained full control of the city. The rebels stated they had pulled out of the city and retreated north to the village of Dabaa, which was still partially under the rebels’ control. One Hezbollah fighter was quoted saying they took al-Qusayr in a rapid overnight offensive, allowing some of the rebels to flee.⁸³

More than 500 rebels were killed and some 1,000 wounded during the battle. Well over 100 Hezbollah fighters were also killed, according to opposition sources, of whom some 100 were confirmed by Hezbollah. The number of Syrian army soldiers who were killed is unknown.

One reason for the high number of Hezbollah casualties was that the group played a leading role in the battle of al-Qusayr. According to one Hezbollah fighter interviewed in June 2013, “Hezbollah is leading operations in Qusayr; the Syrian army is only playing a secondary role, deploying after an area is completely ‘cleaned’ and secured. Hezbollah officers coordinate with the People’s Army [NDF] but fighters never interact. The People’s Army is usually last to [be] deploy[ed] after the Syrian army, as they have a better understanding of the area and its residents.”⁸⁴

It was during this time that Hezbollah Lebanon’s leader made his first official admission of sending fighters to Syria. In a televised speech broadcast by Hezbollah’s TV station *Al-Manar* on 25 May 2013, Hassan Nasrallah described Syria as the “back of the resistance”, so “the resistance cannot stand arms folded while its back is [being] broken.” Hezbollah had entered a new phase a few weeks ago, he added, a phase he described as “the phase of fortifying the resistance and protecting its back-

bone.” As to sending fighters to Syria, Nasrallah claimed Hezbollah does not force anybody to go to fight in any battle. “We don’t need to declare jihad,” he added, “but with two words you will find tens of thousands of fighters who are ready to take [to] all fronts.”⁸⁵

After falling into their hands, al-Qusayr was run by Hezbollah as ‘independent territory’, according to media reports. The group’s commanders were in charge of ‘maintaining discipline’ among Syrian regime forces. They also established an operations base in the town’s northern section that is off-limits to most Syrians. According to one Hezbollah commander who patrolled the town with his fighters in a pickup truck, only regime loyalists were allowed back into al-Qusayr, and only after they were ‘vetted’ by him personally.⁸⁶

From a supporting to a leading role

The battle of al-Qusayr was viewed by most observers as a major turning point in the Syria war.⁸⁷ It reflected a noticeable shift in the Iranian regime’s military strategy in Syria: conceding, or perhaps losing interest in, the possibility of regaining control of the eastern and northern parts of the country that were now under the rebels’ control. Instead, the focus from now on would be on defending and consolidating the Syrian and Iranian regimes’ control in Damascus and its surround-

ings, Homs and its surroundings (which connect the first with the coastal region), and the Qalamon region (which connects the first two and connects both with Lebanon).⁸⁸ The aim was to secure the capital, whose fall would have been seen as a fall of the regime, and to secure the Damascus–Homs–Coast corridor in order to both provide a geographical and demographic continuity of regime-held areas and secure arms shipments to Hezbollah in Lebanon, while at the same time cutting off those of the rebels coming from or through eastern Lebanon.⁸⁹ The leading role in these key battles would be assigned to Hezbollah and other Iranian-backed militias, who were seen as more reliable and better organised than the regular Syrian army. Meanwhile, the regime’s air force would continue its long-range bombardment

79 ‘Sayyed Nasrallah: Drone Is Ours, It Won’t Be the Last’, *Al-Manar*, 1 November 2012, available: <http://www.almanar.com.lb/english/adetails.php?fromval=3&cid=33&frid=23&seccatid=14&eid=71210>. The actual speech is available in English at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bGc_4M0iCWw (the talk about Syria starts at 22:25).

80 For more on Hezbollah’s involvement in Syria and how it justified it at different stages, see, for example, International Crisis Group, *Lebanon’s Hizbollah Turns Eastward to Syria*, May 2014, available: <http://www.crisisgroup.org/~/media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/Iraq%20Syria%20Lebanon/Lebanon/153-lebanon-s-hizbollah-turns-eastward-to-syria.pdf>

81 The battle has been well documented and extensively analysed. See, for example, <http://understandingwar.org/backgrounders/syria-update-fall-al-qusayr>; <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-qusayr-rules-the-syrian-regimes-changing-way-of-war>; <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/06/05/us-syria-crisis-town-idUSBRE95406220130605>; <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-22586378>; <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/20/world/middleeast/syrian-army-moves-to-rebel-held-qusayr.html>; <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424>

127887323864604579067382861808984; <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2013/0605/Hezbollah-marks-major-triumph-as-Qusayr-tips-back-into-Assad-camp>. For an Iranian state view, see, for example, this *Press TV* documentary about the al-Qusayr battle: <http://vimeo.com/72141870>.

82 Farnaz Fassihi, Jay Solomon and Sam Dagher, ‘Iranians Dial Up Presence in Syria’, *The Wall Street Journal*, 16 September 2013, available: <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424127887323864604579067382861808984>.

83 Erika Solomon, ‘Syrian army captures strategic border town of Qusair’, *Reuters*, 5 June 2013, available: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/06/05/us-syria-crisis-town-idUSBRE95406220130605>.

84 Mona Alami, ‘Hezbollah fighter details ops in Qusayr’, *Now*, 4 June 2013, available: <https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/interviews/hezbollah-fighter-details-ops-in-qusayr>.

85 ‘Sayyed Nasrallah: As I promised you victory in July, I renew my promise today’, *Al-Manar*, 29 May 2013, available: <http://www.almanar.com.lb/english/adetails.php?eid=95030&cid=23&fromval=1&frid=23&seccatid=14&s1=1>.

86 Farnaz Fassihi *et. al.*, ‘Iranians Dial Up Presence in Syria’, *The Wall Street Journal*, *idem*.

87 See, for example, Anne Barnard and Hwaida Saad, ‘Hezbollah Aids Syrian Military in a Key Battle’, *The New York Times*, 19 May 2013, available: <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/20/world/middleeast/syrian-army-moves-to-rebel-held-qusayr.html>.

88 Isabel Nassief, *The Campaign for Homs and Aleppo*, Institute for the Study of War, January 2014, available: <http://www.understandingwar.org/report/campaign-homs-and-aleppo>

89 Nicholas Blanford, ‘Hezbollah close to cutting off key route for Syrian rebels, refugees’, *The Christian Science Monitor*, 14 March 2014, available: <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Security-Watch/2014/0314/Hezbollah-close-to-cutting-off-key-route-for-Syrian-rebels-refugees>

of rebel-held areas in the north and the east to perpetuate a state of war in those areas and make life there impossible. The barrel bombs campaign on Aleppo is an obvious example of this.⁹⁰

This new strategy and the leading role assigned to Hezbollah are best reflected in a number of key, strategic battles in which the group took part.⁹¹ One of these was the two-year-long campaign to retake Homs and its countryside, of which the al-Qusayr battle was but a part, and in which Hezbollah played a key role.

Homs

In May 2011, as mass protests spread to Homs and the city was dubbed “the capital of the revolution”, regime forces and militias carried out a brutal crackdown against the protesters in an attempt to quell them, and the city was placed under a suffocating siege that would last for three years (until May 2014). An increasing number of army defectors were joined by some of the protesters who picked up light arms to defend themselves. In October and November 2011, the rebels resisted repeated attempts by the regime forces to enter the district of Baba Amr.

In February 2012, regime forces launched an offensive against Baba Amr, shelling the entire district and blocking all supply routes. In early March, ground troops pushed their way into the neighbourhood, forcing the rebels to withdraw. By early May 2012, following a UN-brokered ceasefire, only sporadic street fighting and shelling was taking place and regime forces and militias were in control of most of the city (75-80 per cent). A brigadier-general who defected was quoted by the media as saying that the Syrian regime forces and militias were led by Iranian military ‘advisors’.⁹²

In December 2012, regime forces also captured the district of Deir Baalba, leaving only the Old City, the al-Khalidiyya district and a few other areas under rebel control. In early March 2013, they launched an assault into several rebel-controlled neighborhoods but the rebels, reinforced by units arriving from al-Qusayr, managed to repel the attacks. On 2 May 2013, however, the Syrian army, along with Hezbollah, Iraqi and Iranian fighters, pushed into Wadi al-Sayegh in the heart of the city and regained control of the strategic neighbourhood, cutting off all links between the Old City and the

al-Khalidiyya district. On 26 July, regime and Hezbollah forces advanced further into al-Khalidiyya and eventually captured 60 percent of the district, including the historic mosque of Khalid Ibn al-Walid.

It is worth noting that almost none of the early reports documenting the crimes committed in Homs at this stage mentioned Hezbollah’s or the Iranian regime’s role.⁹³ Reports by the Syrian opposition or the Free Army talking about such a role were often dismissed as ‘fabrications’, ‘exaggerations’, ‘propaganda’ or ‘conspiracy theories’. Yet, later reports revealed that at least some Syrian regime forces and militias were fighting under Hezbollah and Iranian commanders. In September 2013, *WSJ* quoted a 19-year-old Syrian militiaman who “fought under a Hezbollah commander in a district called Khalidiya.”⁹⁴ “If we take back all of Homs,” he added, “the revolution is going to be completely finished.”

In early May 2014, following two months of negotiations, the Iranian regime brokered an unprecedented deal with the Homs rebels that was hailed as a “victory for al-Assad.”⁹⁵ The terms of the deal included a ceasefire in the Old City of Homs, which had been under siege for over two years, and the safe withdrawal, under UN supervision, of some 2,000 opposition fighters with their light arms from all the besieged areas of Homs to the northern parts of the country. In return, 45 hostages and prisoners of war held by the rebels in Aleppo and Latakia were released. The rebels also agreed to ease their siege on Nubl and Zahraa, two predominantly Shia, pro-regime towns north of Aleppo.⁹⁶

Earlier reports had claimed that the deal would involve the release of a disputed number of Sepah Pasdaran and Hezbollah Lebanon fighters who had been captured by the Islamic Front, an alliance of several Syrian Islamic rebel groups. Some said this referred to a Sepah Qods commander held by the Baydaa Martyrs Battalion in Homs, but could be expanded to include the release of other Iranian prisoners of war, as well as ten Hezbollah fighters held by the Islamic Front. French news agency *AFP* then quoted one of the Syrian opposition’s negotiators saying the negotiations had entered “a new phase” that involved the Liwa al-Tawhid brigade, which was negotiating the release of “two Iranian officers” held by the group in Aleppo. Other media

reports mentioned a Russian military officer who had been held by the Islamic Front in the suburbs of Latakia. But later media reports gave conflicting accounts of whether all of these foreign hostages were actually released as part of the deal. Some of the evacuated rebels were later arrested and executed by the regime, according to the opposition.⁹⁷

Whatever the truth is, it is certain that Iranian officials played a prominent role in brokering the deal on behalf of the Assad regime.⁹⁸ According to Syrian opposition sources, the negotiations took place at al-Safir hotel in Homs in the presence of representatives from the UN. The opposition side was represented by a few rebel commanders and community leaders from the besieged areas of Homs. The regime side was represented by a high-ranking Syrian officer (the head of the Political Security branch in Homs), the governor of Homs, in addition to the Iranian ambassador to Damascus and a “senior Iranian commander” believed to be from Sepah Qods. The Iranian embassy in Damascus had been handling negotiations to secure the release of Sepah Pasdaran personnel held in Aleppo. According to media reports, a similar deal that was negotiated, without success, in the besieged, rebel-held district of al-Wa’r in Homs the following month included a clause about “opening an office for the Iranian mediator to deal with any breach of the agreement.”⁹⁹

90 For more on the use of barrel bombs in Aleppo, see, for example, Human Rights Watch, ‘Syria: Unlawful Air Attacks Terrorize Aleppo’, 24 March 2014, available: <http://www.hrw.org/news/2014/03/24/syria-unlawful-air-attacks-terrorize-aleppo>.

91 For a list of Syria battles involving Hezbollah Lebanon, see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category:Battles_involving_Hezbollah.

92 ‘Iranian officers led Syrian regime militias in Homs: defected general’, *Al-Arabiya*, 13 August 2012, available: <http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/08/13/231945.html>.

93 See, for example, the *Periodic Reports* of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, e.g. <http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/HRCouncil/SpecialSession/CISyria/PeriodicUpdateCISyria.pdf>.

94 Farnaz Fassihi *et. al.*, ‘Iranians Dial Up Presence in Syria’, *The Wall Street Journal*, *idem*.

95 See, for example, ‘Syrian rebels withdraw from Homs, marking key victory for Assad’, *The Christian Science Monitor*, 7 May 2014, available: <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Latest-News-Wires/2014/0507/Syrian-rebels-withdraw-from-Homs-marking-key-victory-for-Assad>.

As the then vice-president of the National Coalition, the main Syrian opposition body, put it, the Homs deal “reflects al-Assad regime’s subordination to Iran and the fact that it has become the main importer of terrorism in the region... It has shown that [the Syrian regime] is little more than a tool in the hands of external forces [Iran and Russia] that are trying to impose their dominance over Syria.”¹⁰⁰ One activist from Homs also told *WSJ*, “Without the Iranian prisoners, we couldn’t have reached this life-saving deal. The regime never cared about its people, even its own soldiers.”¹⁰¹

Yabroud

Another strategic battle in which the Iranian regime and Hezbollah were heavily involved was that of Yabroud in February-March 2014.¹⁰² Following a month of fierce resistance by opposition fighters, this strategic town in the Qalamon region fell into the hands of Hezbollah and Syrian regime forces. The main reason for this was that Hezbollah Lebanon had thrown in its full force behind the campaign. Media reports claimed the group had

96 For more details about these two towns, see: ‘Leaked documents confirm Syrian regime’s infiltration of Al-Qaeda offshoot’, *Naame Shaam*, 1 May 2014, available: <http://www.naameshaam.org/en/leaked-documents-confirm-syrian-regimes-infiltration-of-al-qaeda-offshoot/>.

97 ‘Opposition Coalition accuses government of executing 20 Homs fighters who were evacuated in the truce deal’ (in Arabic), *Al-Qods Al-Arabi*, 8 June 2014, available: <http://www.alquods.co.uk/?p=177906>.

98 Brooklyn Middleton, ‘Homs truce underscores high degree of Iranian involvement’, *Al-Arabiya*, 9 May 2014, available: <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/views/news/middle-east/2014/05/09/Homs-truce-underscores-high-degree-of-iranian-involvement.html>.

99 Ibrahim Himeidi, ‘A permanent office for Iranian mediator in al-Wa’r district, the last rebel stronghold in Homs’ (in Arabic), 7 June 2014, available: <http://tinyurl.com/myujb7g>.

100 ‘Opposition: Homs truce confirms Assad’s subordination to Iran and his exclusive sponsorship of terrorism’ (in Arabic), *CNN Arabic*, 5 May 2014, available: <http://arabic.cnn.com/middleeast/2014/05/05/syria-homs-iran>.

101 Maria Abi-Habib, ‘Syrian Government, Rebels Agree to Cease Fire in Homs’, *The Wall Street Journal*, 2 May 2014, available: <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424052702303678404579537793811103878>.

102 For a detailed account of the battle and why Hezbollah won it, see: ‘Why Yabroud fell to al-Assad and Hezbollah forces’, *Naame Shaam*, available: <http://www.naameshaam.org/en/why-yabroud-fell-to-al-assad-and-hezbollah-forces/>.

sent at least 2,000 of some its best fighters to fight in Yabroud,¹⁰³ in addition to fighters from the notorious Iraqi Shia militia known as the Badr Legion, which was set up by Sepah Pasdaran during the Iranian-Iraqi war.¹⁰⁴

All sorts of weapons were used to pave the way for the ground troops, from Russian and Iranian missiles (Scud and Burkan) to cannons and barrel bombs.¹⁰⁵ As one local activist from the Yabroud Coordination Committee put it, “the amount of missiles fired on Yabroud, and the number of troops amassed, would have been enough to destroy large parts of Israel or take over Washington DC.” Significantly, it was not just the Syrian air force firing rockets and barrels; Hezbollah Lebanon was also firing its own missiles.¹⁰⁶

The fall of Yabroud was portrayed by Hezbollah, Syrian and Iranian state-controlled media as a ‘victory’, even though the huge, month-long military campaign had cost Hezbollah and Iran a great deal of money, weapons and souls – not to mention the obvious question of whether flattening a whole historical town and displacing its entire population can ever be regarded as a victory. Like the battle of al-Qusayr, Hezbollah and Sepah Pasdaran seemed to have underestimated how long and how much it would take to ‘conquer’ Yabroud.

Meanwhile, a growing number of people living in Hezbollah strongholds in Lebanon were growing increasingly “tired of the war” as the human and economic costs of Hezbollah’s adventures in Syria continued to climb, not to mention growing fears that their areas were becoming part of the Syria war (as targets for suicide bombs). In fact, such fears were used by Hassan Nasrallah and other Hezbollah leaders in their public speeches to justify the Yabroud campaign and the group’s involvement in Syria more generally. In a speech in February 2014, Hezbollah’s Deputy Secretary-General Naim Qassem claimed that Yabroud was “the main source” of the explosive-rigged cars that had targeted civilian areas in Lebanon, mainly Hezbollah strongholds, in recent weeks.¹⁰⁷

Testimonies

Various testimonies by Hezbollah fighters confirm the leading role of Hezbollah Lebanon in Syria, where it reportedly had thousands of fighters on the ground by mid-2014. For example, an *AFP* report in April 2014 quoted a Hezbollah fighter saying the Syrian army

soldiers “have no experience in urban warfare or how to deal with a guerrilla force, so we lead the way in battle and have trained them on how to conduct themselves and use certain weapons.”¹⁰⁸

In another article, published in *The Lebanon Debate* in February 2014, Hezbollah fighters who participated in battles inside Syria were quoted saying: *There are some soldiers in the Syrian army who are sympathetic to the opposition, and others who would sell information to anyone who pays for it. We got to a point where we, in Hezbollah, could no longer go to sleep altogether. One or two people would stay up to ensure that we won’t be betrayed one night. During the Qusayr battle, it became necessary that one Hezbollah member would accompany every Syrian army tank. And this procedure is still followed to date in all the battles in which Hezbollah fighters participate. This issue [untrustworthy Syrian army officers] is being dealt with by bringing in non-Syrian pilots in order to ensure the precision of air strikes against target sites. The fighters of the National Defense [Forces] do not betray. They fight to the last moment and follow orders. These we trust a lot, and the [Hezbollah] leadership now prefers to fight battles jointly with them rather than with any other Syrian armed formation.*¹⁰⁹

The *Lebanon Debate* interviewees’ account of the Qusayr and Eastern Ghouta battles corroborate previous accounts by other Hezbollah fighters published in the past.¹¹⁰ It is reasonable therefore to believe that what they say in this interview is accurate and reliable.

In addition to its leading role in battles, Hezbollah also expanded its presence in Syria geographically. According to one Hezbollah fighter, “At the beginning of the war, elite forces were initially responsible for protecting Shiite shrines. They have now been deployed in different Syrian areas. Besides Qusayr, we are now fighting in Aleppo and rural areas surrounding it, as well as the suburbs of Damascus, Hama, and Idlib. In the Damascus suburbs and Aleppo, we are leading similar operations than those launched in Qusayr due to the nature of the terrain.”¹¹¹

Case study: Hezbollah and the al-’Otaibeh massacre

On 26 February 2014, more than 175 Syrians were executed by Hezbollah Lebanon and Syrian regime forces near the town of al-’Otaibeh in the eastern suburbs of

Damascus.¹¹² The high-profile operation was described by Syrian, Lebanese and Iranian state-controlled media as a “tight, pre-planned ambush” of “heavily armed al-Qaeda terrorists.” But evidence suggests the victims were either unarmed civilians or prisoners of war who were executed *en masse* in breach of international laws and conventions. Moreover, pictures of how their corpses were treated afterwards – using bulldozers to dump them in the wild – caused shock and outrage across the world.

A short video posted on YouTube,¹¹³ which activists claimed was obtained from a member of Hezbollah Lebanon, shows two officers in military uniform on the scene joking about the corpses of the ‘Otaibeh massacre with a distinctive Lebanese accent. One of them also appears to be wearing a badge that looks similar to the distinctive yellow badge worn by Hezbollah Lebanon fighters. The quality of the video is bad (it seems to have been taken with a mobile phone) but both things can nonetheless be noticed.

Moreover, Hezbollah Lebanon’s official TV channel *Al-Manar* broadcast on the same day “exclusive footage” of the first moments of the ‘ambush’.¹¹⁴ A night-vision camera shows a row of people marching before two mines explode and heavy gun shots are heard.

Both pieces of evidence suggest that Hezbollah Lebanon was not only involved in carrying out the ‘Otaibeh massacre but was also involved in planning and preparing for it. This begs the question: were Iranian Sepah Qods commanders, who are known to coordinate and direct Hezbollah’s key operations in Syria, also involved in the orchestration and implementation of this and other massacres?

Case study: Hezbollah in al-Yarmouk

Like many other densely populated areas across the country, and under the pretext of harboring opposition armed groups, the al-Yarmouk Palestinian refugee ‘camp’ in Damascus was placed under a suffocating siege for over a year by Syrian regime forces, aided by members of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine – General Command and members of Fatah al-Intifada. As a result, over 150 Syrian-Palestinians had died from starvation and malnutrition by the end of May 2014, according to the Action Group for the Palestinians of Syria.¹¹⁵ Almost 1,000 more had been killed by regime shells, snipers or under torture.

103 ‘Hezbollah sends 2,000 fighters to Yabroud... and rebels resist’ (in Arabic), *Orient News*, 19 February 2014, available: http://www.orient-news.net/index.php?page=news_show&id=7839.

104 ‘Yabroud battles intensify... and news of Badr Legion fighters sent to support regime forces in the battle’ (in Arabic), *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 3 March 2014, available: <http://classic.aawsat.com/details.asp?section=4&article=763334&issueno=12879>.

105 See, for example, these videos: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uwN9EG4ppMQ>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LfVuwsRHljg>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1ep4-KruYLS>.

106 See, for example, these two videos, in which one can clearly hear a distinct Lebanese accent: http://www.liveleak.com/view?i=bf0_1393772640 and <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LO-6S5KKP8o>.

107 ‘Qassem: Hezbollah Will Defeat Takfiri Plot, Achievements to Appear Soon’, *Al-Manar*, 07 February 2014, available: <http://www.almanar.com.lb/english/adetails.php?fromval=2&cid=19&frid=21&seccatid=19&eid=134583>. For more details on this issue, see: ‘Hezbollah uses Lebanon terrorist attacks to justify invasion of Yabroud, Syria’, *Naame Shaam*, 17 February 2014, available: <http://www.naameshaam.org/en/hezbollah-uses-lebanon-terrorist-attacks-to-justify-invasion-of-yabroud-syria/>. See also: <http://www.naameshaam.org/en/nasrallah-justifies-hezbollahs-crimes-in-syria-with-those-of-takfiris/>.

108 ‘Hezbollah shifts tactics, narrative for Syria fight’, *AFP*, 14 April 2014, available: <https://uk.news.yahoo.com/hezbollah-shifts-tactics-narrative-syria-fight-091321505.html>.

109 ‘The Syrian regular army against Hezbollah?’ (in Arabic), *Lebanon Debate*, 2 February 2014, available: <http://www.lebanondebate.com/details.aspx?id=162256>. For an English translation, see <http://www.naameshaam.org/en/hezbollah-fighters-dont-trust-the-assad-army-prefer-to-fight-in-syria-on-their-own/>.

110 e.g. Mona Alami, *idem.*; ‘Exclusive interview with a Hezbollah fighter’ (in Arabic), *Now*, 15 November 2013, available: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eXpZ9kC1auk>.

111 Mona Alami, *idem.*

112 For a detailed report about the massacre and Hezbollah’s involvement, see: ‘Hezbollah accused of another massacre near Damascus, treating dead with “utmost disrespect”’, *Naame Shaam*, 5 March 2014, available: <http://www.naameshaam.org/en/hezbollah-accused-of-another-massacre-near-damascus-treating-dead-with-utmost-disrespect/>.

113 Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LgBRGTZzvrE>.

114 ‘Scenes of the moment when armed groups are ambushed by Syrian army in Eastern Ghouta’ (in Arabic), *Al-Manar*, 26 February 2014, available: <http://www.almanar.com.lb/adetails.php?fromval=1&cid=21&frid=21&eid=761770>.

115 Action Group for the Palestinians of Syria, *Report on the conditions of Palestinian refugees in Syria*, March 2014, available: <http://tinyurl.com/qdbey36>.

In April 2014, the spokesperson of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) described the situation in Yarmouk as follows: “It is unprecedented in living memory for a UN-assisted population to be subject to abject desperation in this way... the sheer humanitarian facts cry out for a response.”¹¹⁶

Even though it is not recognised by UNRWA as an official refugee camp, al-Yarmouk is the largest Palestinian residential area in Syria. Before its near-complete destruction by the Syrian regime, it stretched over 2 square kilometres and housed over 170,000 registered refugees, according to official 2013 statistics. Unofficial statistics put the number higher. Tens of thousands of internally displaced Syrians had also come to the camp from neighbouring areas targeted by regime forces.

One controversial aspect of the siege of al-Yarmouk has been the alleged involvement of the Iranian regime and Hezbollah Lebanon, given their rhetoric in support of Palestinian rights. In June 2014, activists published a video from al-Yarmouk¹¹⁷ showing members of Hezbollah Lebanon participating in the beating and humiliation of Syrian-Palestinians queuing for food parcels, along with members of the General Command and Syrian *shabbiha*, and in the presence of UNRWA staff. Previous, unconfirmed reports had claimed Hezbollah fighters were taking part in fighting against opposition armed groups inside the camp.

These and other reports have led many Palestinians and Syrians to accuse Hezbollah Lebanon and the Iranian regime of ‘hypocrisy’, particularly after their fiery statements about Palestinian rights in the wake of the Israeli attack on Gaza in July 2014.

Holy wars

In August 2012, the Kuwaiti newspaper *Al-Seyassah* published a report claiming that Iran’s Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei had instructed two prominent Shia religious authorities (*marji’yyat*) in Iraq and Iran to issue a *fatwa* (religious ruling) calling for Shia jihad against ‘takfiri groups’ in Syria.¹¹⁸ *Al-Siyasa* is known for its politically motivated reports and fabrications, but at least the Iranian *fatwa* appears to be authentic.

Qom-based Kazem al-Haeri had published on his official Facebook page a *fatwa* authorising and legitimising

travelling to Syria to take part in ‘holy jihad’ in defence of Shia shrines.¹¹⁹ The *fatwa* came in the form of a response to a request for permission to travel to Syria for the purpose of defending the shrine of Sayyida Zaynab in Damascus without parental permission. Al-Haeri ruled that this action was permissible and that parental permission in such matters was unnecessary. “The battle in Syria,” he later added, “is not only for the defense of the shrine of Sayida Zaynab but it is a battle of infidels against Islam, and Islam should be defended.”¹²⁰

Originally from Iraq, al-Haeri had previously published a book with various *fatwas* concerning matters of warfare, especially unconventional guerrilla warfare.¹²¹ Some of his *fatwas*, such as killing prisoners of war and innocent individuals “if necessary”, go against international human rights conventions. Before al-Haeri, another Iranian Shia authority, Ayatollah Seyed Mohammad Sadeq Rouhani, had also legitimised jihad in Syria for the purpose of protecting Shia holy sites.¹²² Another Iraqi *fatwa* by the Najaf-based Shia cleric Abu al-Qasim al-Ta’i, who has strong connections with one of the Iraqi militias fighting in Syria, also permitted Iraqi Shia to travel to Syria for ‘jihad’.

These Shia *fatwas* followed other alleged *fatwas* by little-known or anonymous Saudi clerics calling for the destruction of Shia shrines,¹²³ as well as an alleged YouTube video in which a group said to belong to the Free Syrian Army called for the destruction of Sayyida Zaynab and other Shia shrines.¹²⁴ The authors of this report have not been able to find this alleged video online, and the origin of the story appears to be a news item broadcast by the notorious Saudi TV channel *Wisaal* merely “calling upon” the Free Syrian Army to “target the temple of Sayyida Zaynab and destroy it.”¹²⁵ Early statements by Shia leaders seem to support this conclusion.¹²⁶

The previous month, in June 2012, a suicide bomber had detonated a van packed with explosives in the Sayyida Zaynab district, wounding 14 people and causing some damage to the shrine.¹²⁷ Syrian state TV was quick to blame the rebels (or ‘the terrorists’, as it usually called them) for the attack, as did the representative of Iran’s supreme leader in Syria Mojtaba al-Hosseini.¹²⁸ It was not clear, however, who was actually behind the bomb and whether it was intended to target the shrine itself or a police station 15 metres away.

The Free Army had taken over the neighbourhood earlier that year until its fighters were driven out, in late July 2012, by regime forces and militias, supported by Iraqi militias, following fierce fighting and many casualties on both sides.¹²⁹ The Free Army could have destroyed the shrine then if that had been their intention. The battle was more likely over the strategic location of the district as a gateway into southern Damascus and the Damascus airport further east.

In any case, for many Iraqi Shias, the news and rumours of the Sayyida Zaynab shrine being targeted or threatened by Sunni extremists was a reminder of the 2006 bombing of the al-Askari shrine in the Iraqi city of Samarra, which was then blamed on al-Qaeda and set off years of retaliatory bloodshed between Sunni and Shia extremists. So it is understandable that the news would create a great deal of concern among the Shia communities. It was indeed used extensively by supporters of Hezbollah Lebanon and various Iraqi militias to call for Shia jihad in Syria. Historical Shia grievances and notions of victimhood were also invoked to advance this call, with slogans such as “revenge for Hossein” and “O Zaynab, you will not be captivated twice”¹³⁰ becoming widespread.

116 Terrence McCoy, ‘Thousands starving on outskirts of Damascus; situation “unprecedented in living memory,” U.N. says’, *The Washington Post*, 21 April 2014, available: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2014/04/21/thousands-starving-in-outskirts-of-damascus-situation-unprecedented-in-living-memory-un-says/>.

117 Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qzOX-P3wk8orhttp://syrianpc.com/?p=16517>.

118 ‘Khamenei asked Sistani and Haeri to issue ‘jihad against takfiris fatwa’ to save al-Assad’, *Al-Siyasa*, 7 August 2012, available: <http://independencenews.net/news.php?action=view&id=5815>.

119 See: Ali Mamouri, ‘Shiite seminaries divided on fatwas for Syrian jihad’, *Al-Monitor*, 29 July 2013, available: <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/07/syria--jihad-fatwas-shiite-clergy-iran-iraq.html>.

120 Qassim Abdul-Zahra, ‘Prominent Shiite cleric backs fighting in Syria’, *AP*, 15 Decemeber 2013, available: <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/prominent-shiite-cleric-backs-fighting-syria>.

121 ‘Publications’, *The official website of Ayatollah Kazem al-Haeri*, available: <http://www.alhaeri.org/ceo/pages/sireh.php?cid=19>.

122 Ali Mamouri, ‘Shiite seminaries divided on fatwas for Syrian jihad’, *idem*.

123 ‘Saudi Wahhabis call for the destruction of Shia shrine in Syria’, *Tehran Times*, 21 July 2012, available: <http://www.tehrantimes.com/middle-east/99829-saudi-wahhabis-call-for-the-destruction-of-shia-shrine-in-syria>.

It is also worth noting that both Mohammad Sadeq Rouhani and Kazem al-Haeri, who belong to a school of thought supporting political Shia Islam, are normally considered second-degree authorities and are less credible and popular than other religious leaders in Qom, Iran. But both are known to be close to Hezbollah and the Iranian regime. Al-Haeri is also said to be the ‘spiritual leader’ of ‘Asa’eb Ahl al-Haq, one of the main Iraqi militias fighting in Syria.¹³¹ Their fatwas – even though they were opposed by other prominent Shia

124 See, for example, this report for how the alleged video was being described: <http://www.elaph.com/Web/NewsPapers/2012/8/753380.html>. “A video was published on YouTube which contains statements by persons claiming to belong to the Free Syrian Army calling for the destruction of the shrine of Sayyida Zaynab, the daughter of Imam Ali, in the suburbs of Damascus, as well as other shrines and graves belonging to the family of the Prophet.” (in Arabic)

125 See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4Foa3oo8do>.

126 See, for example, this speech by Yasser al-Habib, in which he only talks about the *Wisal* news item: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fNPL1n_o9IU.

127 ‘Car bomb damages major Shiite shrine in Syria’, *Associated Press*, 14 June 2012, available: <http://news.yahoo.com/car-bomb-damages-major-shiite-shrine-syria-112539349.html>.

128 *Ibid*.

129 ‘Syrian troops retake Sayyida Zainab neighborhood from rebels’, *Press TV*, 1 August 2012, available: <http://www.presstv.com/detail/2012/07/21/251991/syrian-troops-retake-sayyida-zainab-area/>. See also this video of one of the massacres committed by regime forces in Sayyida Zaynab at the time: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wZzaCzLAP-Y>, and this report about the suffering among civilians after regime forces took over the area: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oljUeFwpS8U>.

130 These and other Shia slogans refer to the battle of Karbala, more than 1,400 years ago, between the Damascus-based Umayyads and the followers of Imam Ali’s son Hossein, who came to be known as Shia, over the right to caliphate. Hossein was killed in the battle and his sister Zaynab was taken captive to Damascus.

131 Visser Reider, ‘Religious allegiances among pro-Iranian special groups in Iraq’, *CTC Sentinel*, 26 September 2011, available: <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/religious-allegiances-among-pro-iranian-special-groups-in-iraq>.

132 ‘Prominent [Shia] authority in Najaf: Those who go to fight in Syria disobey our orders’ (in Arabic), *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 21 July 2013, available: http://classic.aawsat.com/details.asp?section=1&issueno=12654&article=737005&feature=#.Ue_LMKxc2d5. See also: ‘War in Syria widens divide between Shia religious authorities in Iraq and Iran’ (in Arabic), *Al-Qods Al-Arabi*, 21 July 2013, available: <http://www.alquds.co.uk/?p=65145>.

authorities¹³² – were used to open official registration offices in Iran for enrolling volunteers wishing to go for jihad in Syria.¹³³

In Iraq, a statement by Shia seminaries called upon the Iraqi government to take measures to protect holy Shia shrines in Syria, particularly that of Sayyida Zaynab.¹³⁴ A conference “in support of Zaynab” was organised in Karbalaa in July 2012, bringing together representatives from various Shia seminaries and groups. One of the outcomes was the establishment of “committees to support the Syrian people... against the enemies’ conspiracies.” A “popular delegation” was also sent to Damascus to “visit” the Sayyida Zaynab shrine.¹³⁵

Soon various Iraqi Shia militias – all funded, armed and directed by the Iranian regime – were recruiting more fighters to go and fight in Syria under the pretext or belief of protecting holy Shia shrines against Sunni extremists.¹³⁶ Moreover, their travel across the border was overlooked, and even facilitated, by the Iraqi government of Nouri al-Maliki.¹³⁷ Like Bashar al-Assad in Syria, al-Maliki was a close ally of the Iranian regime.

Meanwhile, the Syrian regime had set up so-called ‘popular committees’ to defend the Sayyida Zaynab shrine. They were presented by Syrian and Iranian state-controlled media as “local youths, armed with sticks and knives, [who] have formed committees to protect the holy shrine of Sayyida Zainab.”¹³⁸ But video footage of the ‘popular committees’ in action only shows heavily armed regime troops and *shabbiha*, just like in other parts of the country.¹³⁹ And as discussed above, the Iranian regime had played an important role in setting up, training and arming these *shabbiha*.

Case study: Hezbollah denounces destruction of (Shia) holy sites in Syria

In late March 2014, Hezbollah Lebanon issued a statement condemning “terrorist organisations” for destroying “holy shrines and Islamic and Christian sanctities in Syria.”¹⁴⁰ The statement was in reaction to a decision by the Islamic State in Iraq and Sham (ISIS) to demolish what’s left of Uwais al-Qarani’s shrine in al-Raqqa, Syria.

Uwais al-Qarani is one of the prophet’s contemporaries who was killed in battle whilst fighting in Imam Ali’s army. He is highly regarded by Shia Muslims. His shrine in

al-Raqqa was renovated and expanded by the Iranian government in recent years, modelled on prestigious Shia shrines in Iran, Iraq and elsewhere.

That same month, the Syrian Network for Human Rights released a report documenting the partial or complete destruction of 1,451 mosques across Syria.¹⁴¹ All were destroyed by Syrian regime shells and bombs, either as a result of indiscriminate bombardment of civilian areas, such as in Aleppo, or by targeting the mosques directly because they were being used as ‘protest hubs’ or as alleged bases for opposition armed groups.

Interestingly, one of the destroyed mosques in Aleppo documented in the report is named after Uwais al-Qarani as well. It was being used as a school after all schools in the area had been destroyed, until it was destroyed by three barrel bombs dropped by regime helicopters, followed by a missile that hit the mosque directly. Three children died as a result, in addition to over 20 others wounded.

As *Naame Shaam*’s editors put it in a commentary on the story at the time, “There are two ways of reading Hezbollah’s statement: either it is opportunistic hypocrisy (focusing on some shrines while ignoring others), or it is sectarian (only concerned with Shia holy sites and not others). In this sense, Hezbollah is not very different from ISIS. The addition of ‘Christian’, almost as an afterthought, is a too-obvious attempt to cover this sectarianism. All attacks on religious sites should be condemned, but not in a selective, sectarian way.”¹⁴²

Iraqi militias in Damascus... and beyond

Unlike Hezbollah Lebanon, Iraqi Shia militias did very little to hide their involvement in Syria. One of the first Iraqi militias to announce its presence there, with the stated aim of defending the Sayyida Zaynab shrine, was the Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas Brigade, which observers describe as “the primary front group [of] Iranian-backed combatants and organizations based in Iraq.”¹⁴³ In a video posted on YouTube in January 2013, a masked man speaking with an Iraqi accent read out what he called “Declaration No. 1” of Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas Brigade, whose task, he stressed, was “to protect the shrine of our beloved lady Sayyida Zaynab against the attacks of *takfiris*, Wahhabis, the so-called Free Army and all the enemies of the Prophet’s family.”¹⁴⁴

A few months before, in October 2012, one of the brigade's founders, an Iraqi defector from Muqtada al-Sadr's Jaysh al-Mahdi (the Mahdi Army) was quoted by *Reuters* saying: "We formed the Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas brigade, which includes 500 Iraqi, Syrian and some other nationalities... When the fighting erupted in our areas [Sayyida Zaynab], we carried out some joint military operations side by side with the Syrian army to clean up areas seized by rebels."¹⁴⁵

Most of the brigade's members at the time were former fighters in the Mahdi Army of various nationalities, mostly Iraqi, who took refuge in Syria after 2007, when the militia group was crushed by Iraqi and American forces. Others crossed over later to join the 'holy jihad'.¹⁴⁶ Some media reports claimed the brigade was formed in coordination with the Syrian government and Khamenei's office in Damascus.¹⁴⁷

Throughout 2013, Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas Brigade posted tens of promotional videos on YouTube and other social media calling for jihad in Syria to protect the Sayyida Zaynab shrine.¹⁴⁸ Hezbollah Lebanon's *Al-Manar* TV station was perhaps the first proper media outlet to broadcast some of these videos. One of the early, well-produced ones shows Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas fighters alongside what appears to be Hezbollah fighters in the

133 'Registration for defenders of holy shrines: volunteers for defending Sayyida Zeynab' (in Persian), *Behesht*, 3 June 2013, available: <http://www.behesht.info/News/Detail/3812/>.

134 'Religious seminaries demand that government intervenes to protect religious shrines in Syria from violent acts' (in Arabic), *Sawt al-Iraq*, 27 July 2012, available: <http://www.sotaliraq.com/iraq-news.php?id=66183#axzz393kvWjZT>.

135 'Conference in support of Sayyida Zaynab, a popular delegation to head from Karbalaa to Damascus' (in Arabic), *Buratha News*, 28 July 2012, available: <http://burathanews.com/news/164433.html>.

136 See, for example, Mona Mahmood and Martin Chulov, 'Syrian war widens Sunni-Shia schism as foreign jihadis join fight for shrines', *The Guardian*, 4 June 2013, available: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jun/04/syria-islamic-sunni-shia-shrines-volunteers>.

137 See, for example, European Council on Foreign Relations, 'Syria: the view from Iraq', 14 June 2013, available: http://www.ecfr.eu/content/entry/commentary_syria_the_view_from_iraq136.

138 'Syrian troops retake Sayyida Zainab', *Press TV*, *idem*. See also: 'Syrian popular committees to protect Sayyida Zaynab shrine' (in Arabic), *Al-Mayadeen*, 13 March 2013, available: <http://tinyurl.com/psf85>; Jamal al-Gharbi, 'In Sayyida Zaynab district: Visitors and popular committees and protection units', *Al-Akhbar*, 28 March 2013, available: <http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/180192>.

139 See, for example, this report: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LOwvSW2UrB4>.

140 'Hezbollah Denounces Terrorist Crimes against Holy Sites in Syria', *Al-Manar*, 27 March 2014, available: <http://www.almanar.com.lb/english/adetails.php?eid=142811&frid=23&cid=23&from-val=1&seccatid=14>.

141 Syrian Network for Human Rights, *Syria Without Mosques*, 5 March 2014, available: http://sn4hr.org/public_html/wp-content/pdf/arabic/synomosq.pdf.

142 'Hezbollah denounces destruction of (Shia) holy sites in Syria, ignores thousands of mosques destroyed by the regime', *Naame Shaam*, 5 April 2014, available: <http://www.naameshaam.org/en/hezbollah-denounces-destruction-of-shia-holy-sites-in-syria-ignores-thousands-of-mosques-destroyed-by-the-regime/>.

143 Phillip Smyth, 'From Karbala to Sayyida Zaynab: Iraqi Fighters in Syria's Shi'a Militias', 27 August 2013, *CTC Sentinel*, available: <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/from-karbala-to-sayyida-zaynab-iraqi-fighters-in-syrias-shia-militias>. See also: Phillip Smyth, 'From Najaf to Damascus and Onto Baghdad: Iraq's Liwa Abu Fadl al-Abbas', *Jihadology*, 18 June 2014, available: <http://jihadology.net/2014/06/18/hizballah-cavalcade-from-najaf-to-damascus-and-onto-baghdad-iraqs-liwa-abu-fadl-al-abbas/>.

144 'Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas, a sectarian title in the Syrian tragedy' (in Arabic), *Al-Jazeera*, 19 November 2013, available: <http://tinyurl.com/mzkbu6>.

145 Suadad al-Salhy, 'Iraqi Shi'ite militants fight for Syria's Assad', *Reuters*, 16 October 2012, available: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/10/16/syria-crisis-iraq-militias-idUSL6E8L4KX920121016>.

146 For more details on the origins and early activities of the group, see: Phillip Smyth, 'What is the Liwa'a Abu Fadl al-Abbas (LAFa)?: Assessing Syria's Shia "International Brigade" Through Their Social Media Presence', *Jihadology*, 15 May 2013, available: http://jihadology.net/2013/05/15/hizballah-cavalcade-what-is-the-liwaa-abu-fadl-al-abbas-lafa-assessing-syrias-shia-international-brigade-through-their-social-media-presence/#_ftn1.

147 Suadad al-Salhy, 'Iraqi Shi'ites flock to Assad's side as sectarian split widens', *Reuters*, 19 June 2013, available: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/06/19/us-iraq-syria-militants-idUSBRE95I0ZA20130619>.

148 See, for example, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OdmOx4Nnmpg>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9AYimRmay5k>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RUp0QAMEiRM>. For an overview of the group's militant songs, see: Phillip Smyth, 'The Songs of Liwa'a Abu Fadl al-Abbas: Militant Iraqi Shia Music & Syria', *Jihadology*, 3 July 2013, available: <http://jihadology.net/2013/07/03/hizballah-cavalcade-the-songs-of-liwaa-abu-fadl-al-abbas-militant-iraqi-shia-music-syria/>.

Sayyida Zaynab area.¹⁴⁹ About a year later, interviews with serving and former members of Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas Brigade suggested that up to 10,000 volunteers had joined its ranks.¹⁵⁰

Another prominent Iraqi Shia militia fighting alongside the regime in Syria is 'Asa'eb Ahl al-Haq, or Leagues of the Righteous, which shares a similar origin and composition to those of the Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas Brigade, though it is a few years older.¹⁵¹ It was reportedly formed in 2006, as a splinter from the Mahdi Army, with the help of Sepah Qods and Hezbollah Lebanon, to fight the American troops in Iraq.¹⁵²

In July 2013, 'Asa'eb Ahl al-Haq announced the creation of a new sub-unit called Liwa' Kafeel Zaynab, or the Protector of Zaynab Brigade.¹⁵³ Like Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas, Kafeel Zaynab posted a number of promotional videos on YouTube, which were often a mixture of footage of its fighters in action against a backdrop of Shia religious songs or slogans.¹⁵⁴ Some of the videos show heavily armed fighters accompanied by tanks, Syrian army soldiers or Hezbollah Lebanon fighters, often outside the Sayyida Zaynab area and Damascus altogether.¹⁵⁵

Judging by its relatively high number of casualties and funerals compared to other Iraqi militias, Asa'eb Ahl al-Haq appears to have a large number of fighters in Syria and to be taking part in battles outside Damascus.¹⁵⁶ However, besides the fighting, the group also appears to have been charged, along with Kata'eb Hezbollah, another Iranian-backed Iraqi militia fighting in Syria,¹⁵⁷ with organising the enlistment and transfer of Iraqi fighters to Syria. One of the group's commanders was quoted in May 2013 boasting: "I personally get dozens of calls each day from people in the provinces and Baghdad who want to go... We send well-trained ideological fighters."¹⁵⁸ Back in 2011, an Iraqi source close to the group claimed that Asa'eb Ahl al-Haq received around \$5 million a month in cash and weapons from the Iranian regime.¹⁵⁹

Another group that is reportedly playing this role (coordinating the recruitment and transport of Iraqi fighters on behalf of the Iranian regime) is the Badr Organisation, which split from the Islamic Supreme Council in Iraq. One of the oldest Shia militias in Iraq, Badr was set up by the Iranian regime to fight against Saddam Hussein

inside Iraq during the Iran-Iraq war in 1980s. According to one media report, citing an Iraqi politician allied with the group, Iranian commanders had nominated a senior leader within Badr to control Iraqi militias fighting in Syria and coordinate between them and the Syrian regime.¹⁶⁰

In July 2013, the Badr Organisation admitted sending 1,500 fighters to Syria.¹⁶¹ The name given to its Syria military wing is the al-Shahid al-Sadr Force, named after the late Grand Ayatollah Mohammed Baqir al-Sadr, the former leader of the Da'wa Movement in Iraq. That same month, the force announced its first Syria death and held a funeral for him in Iraq.¹⁶²

Other Iraqi Shia militias fighting in Syria include Kata'eb Sayyid al-Shuhadaa, the Imam Hossein Brigade, the Zulfikar Brigade, the Ammar Bin Yasir Brigade and Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujabaa.¹⁶³ According to media reports based on interviews with members of some of these militias, around 50 fighters were being flown or bused from Baghdad and Najaf to Damascus every week in 2013, often in small groups of 10-15, and often disguised as 'pilgrims'.¹⁶⁴ Numerous public funerals have also been held in Iraq for these militias' fighters killed in Syria.¹⁶⁵

'You are protecting Syria, not only the shrine'

Many of these Iraqi militias were established by the Iranian regime in late 2012 and early 2013 with the sole purpose of sending them to fight in Syria under the pretext of protecting Sayyida Zaynab and other Shia shrines. Some already existed and were used by the Iranian regime in its proxy war with the US in Iraq between 2003 and 2011. Each of these militias has at least a few hundred fighters in Syria, all of whom are armed and trained by Sepah Pasdaran. Evidence of this Iranian role ranges from declarations that Ayatollah Ali Khamenei is their supreme religious authority, with his pictures and quotes filling their websites and social media pages, to testimonies by serving or former members about being trained in Iran or serving under Iranian commanders. As a *BBC* interview with 'Asa'eb Ahl al-Haq's leader Qais al-Khaz'ali put it, "Asaib Ahl al-Haq and its leaders make no secrets of their links with the Iranians. Their fighters are trained and supplied by Iran."¹⁶⁶

For example, a former Mahdi Army fighter told *Associated Press* in October 2012 that Iraqi fighters, who "consider the defense of the holy sites to be a religious duty,"

were being “supported by Iran,” which he said had been “providing logistical support and small arms to volunteer fighters guarding the shrine.”¹⁶⁷ Another fighter explained to *The Guardian* in June 2013 how the process of going to fight in Syria worked:

*The first step is to register with one of the Shia Islamic resistance offices, like [Asa'eb Ahl al-Haq], [the] Mukhtar Army or Iraqi Hezbollah. Then comes a trip to a boot camp in Iran. You have to enrol on a 45-day training course in Iran to [become] specialised in using a specific weapon like rocket launchers, Kalashnikov, sniper rifle or RPGs [rocket-propelled grenades]. After the course, you will be handed over to an Iranian middleman who will take you to Syria to join the brigade.*¹⁶⁸

Another fighter, who was first trained to use the Kalashnikov on the plains of southern Iraq, said he was then sent to Mashhad in Iran, then to Beirut, and on to Damascus by plane.

149 Nicholas Blanford, ‘Video appears to show Hezbollah and Iraqi Shiites fighting in Syria’, *The Christian Science Monitor*, 18 January 2013, available: <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2013/0118/Video-appears-to-show-Hezbollah-and-Iraqi-Shiites-fighting-in-Syria>.

150 Mona Mahmood and Martin Chulov, ‘Syrian war widens Sunni-Shia schism as foreign jihadis join fight for shrines’, *The Guardian*, 4 June 2013, available: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jun/04/syria-islamic-sunni-shia-shrines-volunteers>.

151 For a brief history of the group’s origin, see Sam Wyer, *The Resurgence of Asa’ib Ahl Al-Haq*, Institute for the Study of War, *Middle East Security Report* 7, December 2012, available: <http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/ResurgenceofAAH.pdf>.

152 *Ibid.*

153 See the unit’s statements at <http://kafel-zinab.do.am/>.

154 See, for example, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BOvObWrVFv8>; <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cha0aD5lJns>; <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UA0hxKdHjUY>.

155 e.g. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c8tVM8SVNas>; <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LyofHVdteQk>. For a collection of Kafeel Zaynab videos and pictures, see: Phillip Smyth, ‘Asa’ib Ahl al-Haq’s Liwa’a Kafeel Zaynab’, *Jihadology*, 14 August 2013, available: <http://jihadology.net/2013/08/14/hizballah-cavalcade-asaib-ahl-al-haqs-liwaa-kafeel-zaynab/>.

156 Martin Chulov, ‘Controlled by Iran, the deadly militia recruiting Iraq’s men to die in Syria’, *The Guardian*, 12 March 2014, available: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/mar/12/iraq-battle-dead-valley-peace-syria>.

157 See, for example, Rabiha Jamal, ‘Iraq’s Kataeb Hezbollah announces involvement in Syria’, *Now*, 7 April 2013, available: <https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/nownews/iraqs-kataeb-hezbollah-announces-involvement-in-syria>.

158 Sam Dagher, ‘Fighters, Flowing to Syria, Guard Shiites’, *The Wall Street Journal*, 23 May 2013, available: <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424127887323463704578497021387416606>.

159 Adam Schreck and Qassim Abdul-Zahra, ‘Asaib Ahl Al-Haq, Iraq Shiite militia, will reportedly lay down arms’, *Huffington Post*, 6 January 2012, available: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/01/06/asaib-ahl-al-haq-lay-down-arms_n_1189600.html.

160 Suadad al-Salhy, ‘Iraqi Shi’ite militants fight for Syria’s Assad’, *idem*.

161 Phillip Smyth, ‘Breaking Badr, The New Season: Confirmation of the Badr Organization’s Involvement in Syria’, *Jihadology*, 12 August 2013, available: <http://jihadology.net/2013/08/12/hizballah-cavalcade-breaking-badr-the-new-season-confirmation-of-the-badr-organizations-involvement-in-syria/>.

162 Phillip Smyth, ‘The Badr Organization’s Syrian Expeditionary Force: Quwet al-Shahid Muhammed Baqir al-Sadr’, *Jihadology*, 18 October 2013, available: <http://jihadology.net/2013/10/18/hizballah-cavalcade-the-badr-organizations-syrian-expeditionary-force-quwet-al-shahid-muhammed-baqir-al-sadr/>.

163 For an overview of Iranian-backed Iraqi militias fighting in Syria, see, for example: K. Gilbert, *The Rise of Shi’ite Militias and the Post-Arab Spring Sectarian Threat*, International Institute for Counter-Terrorism, October 2013, available: <http://i-hls.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/Gilbert-ICT-Rise-of-Shiite-militias-and-post-Arab-Spring-sectarian-threat.pdf>; Syrian Network for Human Rights, *The Fighting Shiite Militias in Syria*, July 2014, available: http://www.sn4hr.org/public_html/wp-content/pdf/english/shia%27a-en.pdf (the original Arabic is available at http://sn4hr.org/public_html/wp-content/pdf/arabic/shia%27a-arabic.pdf); Wasim Nasr, ‘Who are the Iraqi Shia fighters in Syria?’ (in Arabic), *France 24*, 13 December 2013, available: <http://tinyurl.com/kzbev57>.

164 Suadad al-Salhy, ‘Iraqi Shi’ites flock to Assad’s side as sectarian split widens’, *Reuters*, *idem*.

165 For a round-up of Iraqi militants killed in Syria in 2013, see this three-part collection by Phillip Smyth on *Jihadology*: Part 1: <http://jihadology.net/2013/05/11/hizballah-cavalcade-roundup-of-iraqis-killed-in-syria-part-1/>; Part 2: <http://jihadology.net/2013/05/17/hizballah-cavalcade-roundup-of-iraqis-killed-in-syria-part-2/>; Part 3: <http://jihadology.net/2013/06/02/hizballah-cavalcade-roundup-of-iraqis-killed-in-syria-part-3/>.

166 Jeremy Bowen, ‘The fearsome Iraqi militia vowing to vanquish Isis’, *BBC*, 7 July 2014, available: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-28199741>.

167 Qassim Abdul-Zahra and Adam Schreck, ‘Iraqi Shiites brace for violence amid Syria fears’, *Associated Press*, 25 October 2012, available: <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/iraqi-shiites-brace-violence-amid-syria-fears>.

168 Mona Mahmood and Martin Chulov, ‘Syrian war widens Sunni-Shia schism as foreign jihadis join fight for shrines’, *The Guardian*, 4 June 2013, available: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jun/04/syria-islamic-sunni-shia-shrines-volunteers>.

*Once you get to the capital, there is a training centre near the [Sayyida Zaynab] shrine where all volunteers have to do a quick session of military training. Then they meet with Abu Ajeeb [the Syrian commander of Abu Fadl al-Abbas] who asks all the volunteers to be careful and to go home safe.*¹⁶⁹

Another Iraqi fighter told *The New York Times* in October 2012 that he had arrived in Damascus two months before on a flight from Tehran. “Dozens of Iraqis are joining us,” he added, “and our brigade is growing day by day.”¹⁷⁰ Other interviewees in Iraq, including Shia leaders, told the paper the Iraqi volunteers had been receiving weapons and supplies from the Syrian and Iranian governments, and that Iran had “organized travel for Iraqis willing to fight in Syria on the [Syrian] government’s side.” The Iranian regime, they added, had also pressed Iraqi Shia forces to “organize committees to recruit young fighters.” A senior official from the Sadrist movement and a former member of the Iraqi parliament also told the paper that convoys of buses from Najaf, ostensibly for pilgrims, were “carrying weapons and fighters to Damascus.”¹⁷¹

Indeed, in many of the videos referenced above, Iraqi militants, particularly from Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas and Kata’eb Hezbollah, appear to be well trained and highly organised, with advanced, high-quality arms and uniforms that even the Syrian army does not possess. So much so that one Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas fighter was quoted in *The Guardian* article, mentioned above, saying:

*There is no need for the Syrian army in Sayyida Zaynab. The brigade’s fighters are protecting everything from the airport to the capital to Sweida, including residential areas, hospitals, government buildings, police stations, schools, mosques and hospitals.*¹⁷²

Most of the Iraqi militias appear to be using RPG-7s, PKM machine guns, SVD-style sniper rifles and Kalashnikov- and M16-style assault rifles. All are supplied by the Iranian regime, as will be detailed later in the report.

In a video posted by Syrian rebels in December 2013, three Iraqi militants captured by the rebels in al-Ghouta, near Damascus, confess to the camera that they had been sent to Syria “for jihad.”¹⁷³ The second prisoner, who says he was a bus driver transporting fighters from Iraq to Syria, claims that his group, Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas Brigade, comprises of “ideological fighters” who are fighting

“for the doctrine... to protect the Sayyida Zaynab shrine,” unlike ‘Asa’eb Ahl al-Haq, to which the first prisoner said he belonged, which he describes as “mercenaries who are paid money” (500 dollars a month). The Syrian rebel then asks him why they were fighting in al-Ghouta and al-Qalamon when there is no Sayyida Zaynab shrines there, to which he responds: “for the doctrine.”

Most of the other details mentioned in the confessions – which are backed up by pictures, videos and documents found on the prisoners’ phones and a USB stick found with them, all of which are shown in the video – have already been mentioned above. However, in a follow-up interview, the first prisoner elaborates on the money issue. The monthly salary of 500 dollars that ‘Asa’eb Ahl al-Haq fighters receive, he says, is sent to them from Iraq by the militia’s leader Sheikh Qais al-Khaz’ali (who is said to be based in Iran and was released by the American troops in Iraq in a prisoner exchange deal in 2010). Another religious authority associated with the militia, Qasim al-Ta’i, and his secretary also support them by sending other essential goods, such as sugar and rice. The prisoner also confirms that ‘Asa’eb Ahl al-Haq had been “charged” with fighting outside the Sayyida Zaynab area alongside regular Syrian troops and were responsible for some of the worst massacres committed by Iraqi fighters.¹⁷⁴

Other evidence of Iraqi militias fighting outside the Sayyida Zaynab area – suggesting they were not really there to protect Shia shrines – includes videos posted on YouTube, either by Syrian rebels or by the Iraqi militias themselves, of them fighting in other parts of the country, such as al-Gouta and Aleppo.¹⁷⁵ In fact, the first Syria ‘martyr’ of ‘Asa’eb Ahl al-Haq was reportedly killed in Hama in early 2012.¹⁷⁶ A large funeral, attended by many of the militia’s leaders, was held for him in Baghdad.

In March 2014, Harakat Al-Nujabaa posted pictures on its Facebook page showing its fighters holding a military-style funeral for one of its martyrs inside a prominent military facility in Aleppo.¹⁷⁷ The place, the Military Engineering Academy, was described by the group as its “headquarters.” Al-Nujabaa split from ‘Asa’eb Ahl al-Haq and reportedly has strong links with Hezbollah Lebanon. In another video posted on YouTube in November 2013, a group of Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas are seen marching down the streets of Aleppo, with one of them shouting “Here we are, Zaynab.”¹⁷⁸

There have also been numerous pictures and reports of 'Iraqi checkpoints' throughout Damascus. Apart from those in Sayyida Zaynab and the surrounding areas in southern Damascus, Iraqi checkpoints, both stationary and mobile, have been seen in central Damascus (Bahsa and Hamidiyya) and at the Damascus airport, according to local activists. There have also been reports of regime checkpoints manned by Iraqi militiamen.¹⁷⁹

These and other similar events and reports have caused at least some of the Iraqi fighters to question what they were really doing in Syria. As one fighter from the Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas Brigade put it in *The Guardian* article mentioned above,

*The moment you join the brigade, you have to join the Syrian government army. You have to fight with President Bashar al-Assad before you fight for [the brigade]. The Syrian army will tell you that you have to know that you are protecting Syria, not only the shrine.*¹⁸⁰

Interestingly, many Iraqi militia members are now refusing to fight under Syrian command, like Hezbollah fighters did before them. The rift is said to have started around mid-2013, following criticisms by Iraqi commanders of the 'undisciplined' behaviour of some Syrian *shabbiha* they were working with. The disagreements reportedly turned into a gun battle near the shrine of Sayyida Zaynab between 'Asa'eb Ahl al-Haq, Kata'eb Hezbollah and some Iraqi Mahdi Army fighters on one side and the Syrian commander of the Abu al-Fadhl al-Abbas Brigade and his local followers on the other. Two Iraqi fighters and three Syrian *shabbiha* died in the clashes. A reconciliation meeting was reportedly held on the order of Khamenei's office in Damascus, but divisions festered and the Mahdi Army, 'Asa'eb Ahl al-Haq and Kata'eb Hezbollah are now reportedly fighting under the command of Hezbollah Lebanon.¹⁸¹

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁰ Yasir Ghazi and Tim Arango, 'Iraqi Sects Join Battle in Syria on Both Sides', *The New York Times*, 27 October 2012, available: http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/28/world/middleeast/influx-of-iraqi-shiites-to-syria-widens-wars-scope.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁷² Mona Mahmood and Martin Chulov, *idem*.

In June 2014, following the fall of Mosul to the Islamic State in Iraq and Sham (ISIS), many Iraqi militiamen returned to Iraq to fight against Sunni extremists there.¹⁸² According to media reports, Hezbollah Lebanon subsequently announced a 'general mobilisation' and sent more than 1,000 additional fighters to Syria in order to fill the gap.¹⁸³

Case study: Al-Nabek massacres

As part of the Qalamon military campaign in early December 2013, Syrian regime troops, accompanied by Syrian *shabbiha* and Iraqi militia fighters, particularly from the Zulfiqar Brigade, invaded various villages and towns around the city of al-Nabek.¹⁸⁴ Militiamen from the Zulfiqar Brigade committed nine consecutive massacres

¹⁷³ 'Confessions of Iraqi mercenaries captured by the rebels in the suburbs of Damascus' (in Arabic), 31 December 2013, available: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LzNZOX-qji0>.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁵ e.g. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X1VMTw8YP58> (Eastern Gouta); <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9EQL7eN8Dsk> (Western Aleppo); http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=090cfh_9vno (Rshdin, Aleppo).

¹⁷⁶ 'Confirming what *Al-Tahrir* had previously disclosed: An 'Aa'ib Ahl al-Haq member is killed in Syrian Hama' (in Arabic), *Al-Tahrir News*, 27 May 2012, available: <http://www.altahreernews.com/inp/view.asp?ID=8580>.

¹⁷⁷ 'Iraqi militia given Aleppo military academy to use as its HQ', *Naame Shaam*, 24 March 2014, available: <http://www.naameshaam.org/en/iraqi-militia-given-aleppo-military-academy-to-use-as-its-hq/>.

¹⁷⁸ Available: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cgzV1fjXrMw>.

¹⁷⁹ Information and pictures obtained by the authors from various Syrian activists and citizen-journalists in Damascus.

¹⁸⁰ Mona Mahmood and Martin Chulov, *idem*.

¹⁸¹ Suadad al-Salhy, 'Iraqi Shi'ites flock to Assad's side as sectarian split widens', *Reuters*, *idem*.

¹⁸² Maria Abi-Habib, 'Shiite Militias Decamping From Syria to Fight in Iraq', *The Wall Street Journal*, 17 June 2014, available: <http://online.wsj.com/articles/shiite-militias-decamping-from-syria-to-fight-in-iraq-1403051977>.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.* See also: 'Hezbollah mobilizes to defend Shiite shrines in Syria', *Now*, 12 June 2014, available: <https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/lebanonnews/551145-hezbollah-announces-general-mobilization-in-syria>.

¹⁸⁴ See, for example, Joanna Paraszczuk and Scott Lucas, 'Regime Mass Killing of Civilians in Nabk in Damascus Province?', *EA WorldView*, 7 December 2013, available: <http://eaworldview.com/2013/12/syria-today-regime-mass-killing-civilians-nabk-damascus-province/>

against the local civilians, according to the Syrian Network for Human Rights.¹⁸⁵ At least 150 civilians, including entire families, the majority of them women and children, were executed. The Center for Documentation of Violations in Syria has documented the names of 128 of them.¹⁸⁶ Many were slaughtered with knives in the basements of their houses, where they were sheltering from shelling, and their bodies were then burnt.¹⁸⁷

Other less-known but well-documented massacres committed by Iraqi militias fighting in Syria include the al-Thiybiyya massacre, near Damascus, in October 2013. According to eyewitnesses, Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas militiamen, accompanied by some Hezbollah and Iranian fighters, entered the town from several directions, then executed and slaughtered an unknown number of unarmed civilians. The Syrian Network for Human Rights was able to document the death and disappearance of 13 entire families, describing the massacre as “bearing the marks of sectarian ethnic cleansing.”¹⁸⁸

These and other massacres committed by Iraqi militias in Syria clearly amount to war crimes and crimes against humanity. Yet many of these militias are still not included on international lists of terrorist groups.

Afghan fighters

Unconfirmed reports that some Shia Afghan fighters have been fighting in Syria alongside Hezbollah and the Iraqi militias have been around at least since October 2012, when the Free Syrian Army captured an Afghan refugee from Iran who was allegedly fighting in Syria alongside the regime.¹⁸⁹ In April 2013, Afghan media reported that the Afghan foreign ministry had launched an investigation into the involvement of Afghan nationals in the Syria war.¹⁹⁰ A Foreign Ministry spokesperson said at a press conference that several Afghan nationals had reportedly been sent by Iran to Syria and a number of them had reportedly been killed there. According to the Syrian opposition, most of them were fighting within ‘mixed’ Iraqi militias, such as Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas Brigade and Saraya Tali’at al-Khurasani.¹⁹¹

Sending Afghan fighters to Syria may have been an attempt by Sepah Pasdaran to bolster the Iraqi militias fighting in Syria at the time, or simply because they are ‘cheaper’ for the Iranian regime than other fighters, as most of the recruits appear to be poor or undocumented

Afghan refugees in Iran, so Sepah would not have the same financial commitments towards them and their families as it does to Iranian, Hezbollah or Iraq fighters. It is plausible, however, that using Afghan Shia fighters is also part of longer-term plans by the Iranian regime to consolidate its power in Syria by relying more and more on its own loyal militias instead of Syrian troops (more on this later in the report).

In May 2014, *WSJ* published an explosive article claiming Sepah Pasdaran had been recruiting thousands of Afghan refugees to fight in Syria, offering them \$500 a month and Iranian residency permits.¹⁹² The allegations were based on an Iranian blog on recruitment efforts among Afghan refugees in Iran and were confirmed to the paper by an Afghan religious leader in Qom and by a member of Sepah Pasdaran. The article caused a storm in Afghanistan and Iran, with Iranian officials insisting the allegations were “baseless” and “unfounded.” But the paper maintained that its claims had been confirmed by reliable sources before the Iranian authorities put pressure on them to “recant their statements.”¹⁹³

A couple of weeks later, in June 2014, *France 24* published another investigation in which it quoted two “observers” based in Afghanistan who corroborated *WSJ*’s allegations, adding that the deployment of young Afghan Shia fighters was “no secret.”¹⁹⁴ One of them said two of his family members, who had fled to Iran a few years before, were sent to Syria after being offered 1.5 million Iranian Tomans (equivalent to 430 euros or 585 US dollars) by Sepah Pasdaran. “They both received military training in Iran for a few months before they were sent to Syria,” he added. “One told me he and 80 other Afghan fighters had received training and fought alongside Hezbollah for a while in Syria.” The other source told the channel that some Afghan Shia clerics were encouraging Shia youths during private gatherings to go and fight in Syria to “defend Shia Muslims in Syria and fight what they call the enemies of Ali.” “I know other youths [who] were recruited from cities such as the capital, Kabul, Balkh, Sarpol, Samangan as well as Faryab and Nimrooz in Afghanistan,” he added.

Around mid-2014, a number of media reports claimed that the Afghan Shia fighters sent to Syria had now formed their own separate militia called the Fatimyyoun

that the movement of Shia fighters across borders was facilitated by the Syrian and Iranian regimes through official channels, while anti-regime fighters often had to enter Syria clandestinely. Moreover, they pointed out that Sepah Pasdaran now had a “transnational army” of Shia militias that it could deploy in different parts of the world whenever needed.²⁰⁰

Indeed, various commentators and observers²⁰¹ have argued that part of the Iranian regime’s strategy in Syria is to prepare for the Syrian regime’s collapse and even a post-Assad Syria. This includes the ability to continue to exert influence on the ground through an ever-expanding list of militias, including the *shabbiha*, who are increasingly dependent on Iranian support. The other aim is to ensure that arms shipments to Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Gaza continue, so as to keep them strong, threatening deterrents against Israel and the West.

This strategy does not necessarily require control over the whole of Syria but only a few strategic areas, as discussed above. It is also likely that, in the event of a regime collapse, the Iranian-backed Shia militias, joined by the remnants of the *shabbiha*, will continue, and perhaps increase, their sectarian insurgency campaign against any future government that is not an ally of the Iranian regime.

European fascists

Another interesting phenomenon – though much smaller in scale than that of foreign Shia fighters – is European fascist and far-right groups’ supporting the Syrian regime, with some reportedly sending fighters to Syria. A rare article by British activist Leila Shrooms, published by the Tahrir International Collective Network in December 2013,²⁰² lists a number of fascist and far-right nationalist groups and organisations from across Europe that have been openly supporting the Syrian regime, whether by going to fight in Syria, raising funds or organising pro-regime demonstrations. The list includes the National Front in France, Forza Nuova and CasaPound in Italy, Golden Dawn and Black Lily in Greece, the British National Party in the UK, and the National Rebirth of Poland, Falanga and All Polish Youth in Poland.

In July 2013, a Greek fascist from a group calling itself Black Lily (Mavros Krinos) revealed in an interview²⁰³ that the little-known group had fighters on the ground in Syria, allegedly the size of a military platoon, and had

fought alongside Hezbollah and al-Assad’s forces in the battle of al-Qusayr in Spring 2013. He also claimed that “thousands of Russians, Ukrainians and Poles” from fascist groups have “declared themselves ready to fight... alongside our Syrian brothers in arms... and the lion of Syria,” meaning Bashar al-Assad (*assad* means lion in Arabic). Asked whether they had participated in any other “struggles” before, such as Kosovo, Iraq or Afghanistan, the Black Lily spokesperson answered no.

These European fascists reportedly joined the ranks of both the Syrian army and the so-called Popular Committees, which were established, armed and trained by the Iranian regime to prop up the exhausted regular army, as discussed above. In the above-mentioned interview, the Black Lily fascist describes Hezbollah as “heroic.”

Other European fascist groups have travelled to Syria ‘in solidarity’ with the regime and on so-called ‘fact-finding missions’. Many of these groups are members of the European Solidarity Front, which organised a number of these “visits” in 2013.²⁰⁴

While some of these fascist groups have a history of supporting the Syrian regime, others joined the ‘fight’ after the start of the Syrian revolution in 2011. Shrooms attributes this rather bizarre phenomenon to a number of factors:

- Anti-imperialist or anti-globalist nationalist sentiments (they believe the al-Assad regime is fighting against US imperialism);
- Anti-semitism (they believe the al-Assad regime is fighting against Israel, their “age-old foe”);
- Islamophobia (they believe the al-Assad regime is fighting against Islamists); and
- Twisted concerns regarding growing Arab and Muslim migration to Europe, where fascists in a number of countries have been protesting against and Syrian refugees and have reportedly attacked them.

“All of these beliefs,” Shrooms adds, “rest on fallacy and an uncritical perpetuation of [the Syrian] regime narratives. They are also positions shared (although without the racist element) by sections of the [European] left.”²⁰⁵

In an article published in February 2014, *Naame Shaam* added another factor: “These fascist groups seem to share the same mentality and value system with the

Syrian regime, Sepah Pasdaran and Hezbollah Lebanon. They all believe in their supremacy, which is often based on racist mythologies, and are ready to eliminate, by any means possible, those they regard as inferior to them.”²⁰⁶

It is also worth noting that this phenomenon has been largely overlooked by European mainstream media and politicians, while the issue of Islamist extremists of European origin fighting in Syria has frequently made front-page headlines. This obsession with European jihadists, who are often presented as the “biggest threat” facing the West, are then used as an excuse to not provide serious military support to the moderate factions within the Syrian opposition (more on this below, in the ‘Iran’s Vietnam’ section).

‘Sleeping with the enemy’

There is enough evidence by now to believe the claim, often dismissed as a conspiracy theory, that the Syrian and the Iranian regimes have made use of, and even facilitated, the activities of extremist Islamist groups, such as the Islamic State in Iraq and Sham (ISIS) and Jabhat al-Nusra, in order to derail the Syrian revolution (towards militarisation and sectarianism) and justify their military actions against protesters and rebels.

The first indicator of such efforts was the suspicious release of Islamist extremists from Syrian jails soon after the start of the revolution, which is often cited by Syrians as proof of a carefully planned plot by the regime to present the revolution as a bunch of ‘Islamist terrorists’ supported by the West and the Gulf countries to destabilise Syria (this has been the Syrian and Iranian regimes’ discourse from the beginning).

The most famous story is perhaps that of Zahran al-Alloush, Hassan Abboud and Isa al-Sheikh, three leaders of three main Islamist factions fighting in Syria today (the Islam Brigade, which later became the Islam Army and then the Islamic Front; Ahrar al-Sham and Suqour al-Islam respectively). A rare picture of the three ‘friends’ standing together, taken upon their release from the Saidnaya prison in mid-2011, was published online in late 2013.²⁰⁷ All three were released from prison following a presidential ‘amnesty’ on 31 May 2011.²⁰⁸ Around the same time, Abu Mohammad al-Fateh al-Jolani, the leader of the Syrian offshoot of Al-Qaeda, al-Nusra Front, also returned from Iraq. They all went on to form different Islamist groups that became some of the largest

and most heavily armed and supported factions fighting against the regime in Syria.

Together with these leaders, hundreds of Islamist extremists who had been held in Syrian prisons (many of them were arrested upon their return from ‘jihad’ in Iraq and Lebanon) were also released, particularly from Saidnaya, only to resume their ‘jihad’ in Syria.²⁰⁹ A Syrian

200 *Ibid.*

201 See, for example, Fulton, Joseph Holliday and Sam Wyer, *Iranian Strategy in Syria*, AEI’s Critical Threats Project and Institute for the Study of War, May 2013, available: <http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/IranianStrategyinSyria-1MAY.pdf>; K. Gilbert, *The Rise of Shi’ite Militias and the Post-Arab Spring Sectarian Threat*, International Institute for Counter-Terrorism, October 2013, available: <http://i-hls.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/Gilbert-ICT-Rise-of-Shi-ite-militias-and-post-Arab-Spring-sectarian-threat.pdf>.

202 Leila Shrooms, ‘Syria: Who are Assad’s fascist supporters?’, *Tahrir ICN*, 11 December 2013, available: <http://tahriricn.wordpress.com/2013/12/11/syria-who-are-assads-fascist-supporters/>.

203 ‘Syria: The Greek Nationalist Socialists fighting alongside Asaad’s regime are far more dangerous than Golden Dawn’, *Glykosymoritis*, 28 September 2013, available: <http://glykosymoritis.blogspot.ro/2013/09/syria-greek-nationalist-socialists-that.html>. The original interview in Greek can be found at <http://tinyurl.com/lffdhrx>.

204 For more details, see: *Germano Monti*, ‘A red-brown alliance for Syria’, *Qantara*, 14 April 2014, available: <http://en.qantara.de/content/the-syrian-conflict-a-red-brown-alliance-for-syria>.

205 Leila Shrooms, *idem*.

206 ‘European fascists fighting in Syria alongside regime forces, Sepah Pasdaran and Hezbollah’, *Naame Shaam*, 11 February 2014, available: <http://www.naameshaam.org/en/european-fascists-fighting-in-syria-alongside-regime-forces-sepah-pas-daran-and-hezbollah/>.

207 Bassel al-Junaidy, ‘The tale of “the friends of Saidnaya”: the strongest three men in Syria’, *Republic Group for Studies*, 23 October 2013, available: <http://therepublicgs.net/2013/11/04/the-tale-of-the-friends-of-saidnaya-the-strongest-three-men-in-syria-today/>.

208 *Ibid.*

209 For more on the ‘Saidnaya experiment’ (making and preparing jihadists inside the infamous prison), see: Firas Sa’d, ‘On the ‘Saidnaya experiment and its repercussions for the Syrian revolution: Organising Islamists as a first rehearsal for a civil conflict’ (in Arabic), *Republic Group for Studies*, 26 December 2013, available: <http://tinyurl.com/n7fkb8x>. See also: Rania Abouzeid, ‘The Jihad Next Door: The Syrian roots of Iraq’s newest civil war’, *Politico*, 23 June 2014, available: <http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2014/06/al-qaeda-iraq-syria-108214.html>; Mohammed Habash, ‘Radicals are Assad’s best friends’, *The National*, 1 January 2014, available: <http://www.thenational.ae/thenationalconversation/comment/radicals-are-assads-best-friends#full>.

activist who was released from Saidnaya at the same time was quoted by *The Telegraph* in January 2014 saying: “There was no explanation for the release of the jihadis. I saw some of them being paraded on Syrian state television, accused of being Jabhat al-Nusra and planting car bombs. This was impossible, as they had been in prison with me at the time the regime said the bombs were planted. [The regime] was using them to promote [its] argument that the revolution was made of extremists.”²¹⁰ Meanwhile, so many other political prisoners (leftist, secular, civil society activists, etc.) were kept in incarceration or killed under torture.

In July 2012, *The Sunday Telegraph* published an interview with the former Syrian ambassador to Iraq, who was the most prominent regime defector at the time. Nawaf al-Fares said jihadist units that he himself had helped send into Iraq to fight US forces were now “immolating themselves in Syria, at the behest of the regime.” One such action, he claimed, was a double suicide bomb outside the military intelligence complex in al-Qazzaz in Damascus in May 2012, in which 55 people were killed and 370 wounded. “I know for certain that not a single serving intelligence official was harmed during that explosion, as the whole office had been evacuated 15 minutes beforehand,” he said. “All the victims were passersby instead. All these major explosions have been perpetrated by al-Qaeda through cooperation with the security forces.”²¹¹

Al-Fares also claimed that he personally knew of several Syrian government “liaison officers” who still dealt with al-Qaeda. “Al-Qaeda would not carry out activities without the knowledge of the regime,” he said. “The Syrian government would like to use al-Qaeda as a bargaining chip with the West – to say: ‘it is either them or us’.”²¹²

Similar allegations were made by another significant regime defector in July 2013. Afaq Ahmad, the former right-hand man of General Jamil Hasan, the head of Syria’s Air Force Intelligence and one of Bashar al-Assad’s most brutal and trusted henchmen, defected after regime forces arrested and murdered 13-year-old Hamza al-Khatib in 2011, in an infamous crime that became one of the early iconic symbols of the regime’s brutal response to the popular protests. In an interview with a Syrian opposition website, Ahmad said

the mukhabarat (intelligence services) had infiltrated jihadist and non-jihadist rebel groups in Syria up to the command level.²¹³

The jihadist groups and brigades were very useful for the regime because they provided a justification for the regime’s insistence on a military solution, and provided it with legitimacy under the pretext of the war on terror... These groups did not cross the red lines that were agreed on by the regime and these groups’ sponsors. This included the regime turning a blind eye to the killing of some Alawis and Druze in order to push them [the minorities] to rally around the regime and hold on to it.

And the game went far beyond Syria’s frontiers. In February 2014, the US Treasury released a new list of sanctions targeting companies and persons it accused of breaching the international sanctions against Iran.²¹⁴ Like previous editions, the list included companies and people facilitating the arming of the Syrian regime and Iran’s nuclear programme. The new addition this time was the inclusion of one of al-Qaeda’s key operators who had been raising funds and recruiting fighters for the Syrian regime’s ostensible enemy number one, al-Qaeda. And he had been doing so from inside Iran.

The new sanctions targeted “a key Iran-based al-Qa’ida facilitator who supports al-Qa’ida’s vital facilitation network in Iran, that operates there with the knowledge of Iranian authorities,” the Treasury said in a press release.²¹⁵ Olimzhon Adkhamovich Sadikov, also known as Jafar al-Uzbeki and Jafar Muidinov, is an Uzbek national who is based in Mashhad, Iran, near the border with Afghanistan. His network, according to the Treasury, has been using Iran as a transit point for moving funds and foreign fighters through Turkey to Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria. Al-Uzbeki also facilitated the travel of numerous al-Qaeda extremists in and out of Pakistan and Afghanistan by obtaining Iranian visas and passports for them. All this was apparently done “with the knowledge of the Iranian authorities.”

Back in July 2011, the US Treasury had added Ezedin Abdel Aziz Khalil, also known as Yasin al-Suri, to its Iran sanctions list. In October 2012, it also targeted Adel Radi Saqr al-Wahabi al-Harbi. The first is said to be the head of the al-Qaeda network in Iran, and the second his deputy. The US government designated a \$17 million award for any information leading to their location. Yasin al-Suri, a

Syrian national, had been temporarily detained in Iran in 2011 but was later released. As a member of the so-called Islamic Jihad Union, Jafar al-Uzbeki was an associate of Yasin al-Suri and helped him raise funds for his Iran-based activities. Among other things, his network facilitated the transfer of funds from Gulf-based donors to various al-Qaeda groups, including Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria.²¹⁶

In February 2012, the Treasury also targeted the Iranian Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS) for “its support to terrorist groups, including al-Qa’ida.”²¹⁷ “MOIS has facilitated the movement of al-Qa’ida operatives in Iran,” the department said, “and provided them with documents, identification cards, and passports. MOIS also provided money and weapons to al-Qa’ida in Iraq (AQI).” Later that year, AQI would become the Islamic State in Iraq and Sham (ISIS), also known as the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and dubbed by Syrians as *Da’esh*, a mock name derived from the group’s name’s initials in Arabic.²¹⁸

One would imagine that the US sanctions are decided following extensive research and reliable intelligence, not on the basis of fabricated or speculative media reports. So it is safe, we think, to assume that the information above is reliable and is not just part of a psychological warfare. Supporting both sides of a conflict is an old war tactic. Indeed, the Iranian regime’s support for and facilitation of al-Qaeda’s activities is nothing new – it dates

back at least to the US embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998.²¹⁹ Over the past two decades, the Iranian regime has also allowed many al-Qaeda operatives “a degree of freedom” in Iran as part of its proxy war with the US in Afghanistan and Iraq.²²⁰ One Iranian official told *NBC News* in March 2013 that “no nation has captured as many al-Qaida members as Iran.”²²¹ Many in the US intelligence circles believe that Iran held onto them for use as “bargaining chips.”²²² During 2013 and 2014, however, many of them were ‘freed’ by the Iranian authorities and left the country.²²³

210 Ruth Sherlock and Richard Spencer, ‘Syria’s Assad accused of boosting al-Qaeda with secret oil deals’, *The Telegraph*, 20 January 2014, available: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/10585391/Syrias-Assad-accused-of-boosting-al-Qaeda-with-secret-oil-deals.html>.

211 Ruth Sherlock, ‘Exclusive interview: Why I defected from Bashar al-Assad’s regime, by former diplomat Nawaf Fares’, *The Sunday Telegraph*, 14 Jul 2012, available: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/9400537/Exclusive-interview-why-I-defected-from-Bashar-al-Assads-regime-by-former-diplomat-Nawaf-Fares.html>.

212 *Ibid.*

213 Riyadh Khaled, ‘Interview with Afaq Ahmad: On the Alawites, the infiltration of Islamist groups and the assassination of Bashar al-Assad’ (in Arabic), *All4Syria*, 27 July 2013, available: <http://all4syria.info/Archive/90775>. For English, see: Michael Weiss, ‘Assad’s no enemy of al-Qaeda’, *Now*, 31 July 2013, available: <https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/commentaryanalysis/assads-no-enemy-of-al-qaeda>.

214 US Department of the Treasury, ‘Treasury targets networks linked to Iran’, 6 February 2014, available: <http://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/jl2287.aspx>.

215 *Ibid.*

216 *Ibid.*

217 US Department of the Treasury, ‘Treasury Designates Iranian Ministry of Intelligence and Security for Human Rights Abuses and Support for Terrorism’, 16 February 2012, available: <http://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/tg1424.aspx>.

218 See: ‘After ‘Daesh’, Syrians invent new mocking name for Hezbollah Lebanon: Halesh’, *Naame Shaam*, 25 February 2014, available: <http://www.naameshaam.org/en/hezbollah-lebanon-halesh/>.

219 ‘Judge finds Sudan and Iran liable for 1998 embassy bombings’, *Legal Times*, 1 December 2011, available: <http://legaltimes.typepad.com/blt/2011/12/judge-finds-sudan-and-iran-liable-for-1998-embassy-bombings.html>.

220 Michael B Kelley, ‘Why is Iran letting a top al-Qaeda operative pump fighters and cash into Syria?’, *Business Insider*, 1 February 2014, available: <http://www.businessinsider.com/al-qaeda-yas-in-al-suri-working-from-iran-2014-2>. See also: Dania Saadi, ‘Iran official admits to aiding Zarqawi in Iraq, Al-Awsat says’, *Bloomberg*, 11 August 2004, available: <http://www.bloomberg.com/apps/news?pid=newsarchive&sid=av.QsBGSC0g>.

221 Robert Windrem, ‘Exclusive: Iran was holding bin Laden son-in-law Abu Ghaith, US officials say’, *NBC News*, 7 March 2013, available: http://investigations.nbcnews.com/_news/2013/03/07/17227424-exclusive-iran-was-holding-bin-laden-son-in-law-abu-ghaith-us-officials-say.

222 See, for example, Jason Burke, ‘What is the relationship between Iran and al-Qaida?’, *The Guardian*, 23 April 2013, available: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/apr/23/iran-al-qaeda>; Peter Bergen, ‘Strange bedfellows -- Iran and al Qaeda’, *CNN*, 11 March 2013, available: <http://edition.cnn.com/2013/03/10/opinion/bergen-iran-al-qaeda/>.

223 See, for example, Adam Goldman, ‘Senior al-Qaeda figure leaves Iran amid a series of departures by terrorist suspects’, *The Washington Post*, 14 February 2014, available: http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/senior-al-qaeda-figure-leaves-iran-amid-a-series-of-departures-by-terrorist-suspects/2014/02/14/b3291eda-9429-11e3-83b9-1f024193bb84_story.html.

In May 2014, in a strongly worded response to al-Qaeda's leader Ayman al-Zawahiri's attempt at reconciliation with ISIS, the latter group's spokesman Abu Mohammad al-Adnani made a startling admission: al-Qaeda had been ordering its fighters and branches to refrain from attacking Iran so as to preserve the group's supply network in the country:

The ISIS has kept abiding by the advice and instructions of the sheikhs and figures of jihad. This is why the Islamic State has not attacked the Rawafid [or rejectionists, a term used by Sunni extremists to describe Shia Muslims] in Iran since its establishment, and left the Rawafid safe in Iran, and held back the outrage of its soldiers, despite its ability, then, to turn Iran into bloodbaths. [ISIS] has controlled its anger all these years and endured accusations of collaboration with its worst enemy, Iran, for refraining from targeting it, leaving the Rawafid there to live in safety, acting upon the orders of al-Qaeda to safeguard its interests and supply lines in Iran.... Let history record that Iran is indebted to al-Qaeda.²²⁴ (emphasis added)

Internal Syrian state security documents leaked to the media in early 2014 provided further proof that some Islamist armed groups fighting in Syria, particularly ISIS, had been deeply infiltrated by the Syrian regime and had been coordinating with it to some degree. One such document is an alleged letter signed by Colonel Haydar Haydar, the head of the 'security committee' in the town of Nabl, near Aleppo, and addressed to Major-General Ali Mamlouk, the head of the National Security Office.²²⁵ It reveals arrangements for training and arming hundreds of Shia volunteers, who are said to be "ready to fight on frontlines or join the ranks of Islamist groups."

"We already have 150 especially trained volunteers," the letter says, "in addition to 600 who underwent [normal] military training when doing their military service." A list of the names of over 200 fighters from the predominantly Shia towns of Nabl and Zahraa is enclosed with the letter. "Volunteers keep coming in to defend their homeland," the letter adds. "We expect their number to reach 2,500 when weapons are made available.... The volunteers are ready to carry out any task assigned to them within these [Islamist] groups, particularly in light of the good results that this method has achieved in our area recently, which is implemented in coordination with the concerned parties in the northern areas."

Nabl and Zahraa occupy a strategic location because they allow regime forces and militias to control the Aleppo highway. This, according to the letter, enables them to "go in and out of Iraq, in coordination with our allies on the Iraqi side, to move fighters and equipment." Lifting the opposition's siege on the two towns was part of the Iranian-brokered deal in Homs in May 2014, which was discussed in detail above.

The leaked letter also reveals that the Syrian regime's security apparatus had deeply infiltrated and used ISIS. "We now have many members and strong leaders within the [Islamic] State in Iraq and Sham in the northern region in general," it says. "They can facilitate our new volunteers' joining the ranks of the group by recommending them and guaranteeing that no suspicions about them are raised." This, the letter adds, "will guarantee detailed and constant information about the armed men's movements, their numbers, equipment and plans."²²⁶

The letter then highlights the difficulty that Iraqi pro-regime fighters are facing when joining Islamist groups because of their names and religious sect (Shia). So a number of Syrian ID cards are requested as a solution, in addition to a request that the salaries of the volunteers are raised and that they are provided with all sorts of weapons and vehicles.

Allegations that ISIS fighters captured or killed by the Free Syrian Army (following its official fallout with ISIS in early 2014) possessed Syrian and Iranian IDs and passports have been made by the Syrian opposition before. In February 2014, the National Coalition released a four-page memo entitled "*The Islamic State in Iraq and Sham and the Assad regime: from marriage of convenience to real partnership*."²²⁷ The memo details evidence of such 'partnership' based on confessions of captured ISIS members, testimonies of FSA members and material found at ISIS bases taken by the FSA. The latter allegedly includes Russian passports, Iranian visas and Iranian SIM cards, but the video showing the material referenced in the footnotes seems to have been taken down since.²²⁸

That same month (February 2014), the leader of the Islamic Front Zahran Aloush made similar allegations during an interview, claiming that a number of local ISIS commanders that the Front had killed or captured turned

out to be Syrian army officers or had travelled to Iran, judging by the Iranian passports and visas found on them.²²⁹

In January 2014, *Al-Arabiya* TV channel aired video footage showing ISIS members detained by the FSA, whom the latter accused of “cooperating with the regime of President Bashar al-Assad and of seeking to divide rebels.”²³⁰ One of the detainees is quoted saying: “It happened once that a Syrian regime officer and 11 others defected and drove their vehicle through Masila [north of Raqqa]. We received orders to arrest them and hand them over back to the regime.” Another detainee claimed that the group’s leader in the province of al-Raqqa, known as Abu Anas al-Iraqi, and whose unit apparently specialised in kidnappings, car bombs and targeted assassinations of FSA members, was “financed directly by the regime, through Iran and Iraq.”

The clearest evidence to date of links between ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra on the one hand and the Syrian and Iranian regimes on the other is perhaps the secret oil deals between the two. In January 2014, *The Telegraph* published a report, based on Western intelligence sources, claiming that both al-Nusra and ISIS had been selling oil and gas from wells under their control to and through the Syrian regime.²³¹ The report suggests that the regime began “collaborating actively” with these groups in spring 2013. “When Jabhat al-Nusra seized control of Syria’s most lucrative oil fields in the eastern province of Deir al-Zour, it began funding its operations in Syria by selling crude oil, with sums raised in the millions of dollars.” One intelligence source commented: “Assad’s vow to strike terrorism with an iron fist is nothing more than bare-faced hypocrisy. At the same time as peddling a triumphant narrative about the fight against terrorism, his regime has made deals to serve its own interests and ensure its survival.”

The Telegraph report corroborated previous media reports about oil dealings between the Syrian regime and al-Qaeda-affiliated groups. For example, a *Reuters* report in January 2013 quoted locals in al-Mayadin saying Jabhat al-Nusra had been transporting crude oil in large tankers from the nearby al-Ward oil and gas field to Deir al-Zor, which was under regime control at the time.²³² Another report, published in *The Guardian*

in May 2013, claimed al-Nusra had “struck deals” with regime forces to allow the transfer of Deir al-Zor’s crude across the front lines to the Mediterranean coast.²³³ The article quotes a Syrian fighter from Ahrar al-Sham saying the Syrian regime was paying more than 150 million Syrian pounds (about 2.3 million US dollars) a month to Jabhat al-Nusra to “guarantee oil is kept pumping through two major oil pipelines [to] Banias and Latakia.” “Middlemen trusted by both sides,” he added, “are to facilitate the deal and transfer money to the organisation.”

224 ‘Abu Mohammad al-Adnani, ISIS’s spokesman: Iran is indebted to al-Qaeda’, *Janoubia*, 14 May 2014, available: <http://janoubia.com/180155>. For English, see: Bill Roggio, “Iran owes al-Qaeda invaluable,” ISIS spokesman says’, *Long War Journal*, 12 May 2014, available: http://www.longwarjournal.org/threat-matrix/archives/2014/05/iran_owes_al_qaeda_invaluablely.php.

225 ‘A leaked document addressed to Ali Mamlouk reveals links with ISIS fighters’ (in Arabic), *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 4 April 2014, available: <http://www.aawsat.com/details.asp?section=4&issueno=12911&article=767159>. For an English translation and commentary, see: <http://www.naameshaam.org/en/leaked-documents-confirm-syrian-regimes-infiltration-of-al-qaeda-offshoot/>. The documents were originally published by a little-known website called Damascus Leaks (www.damascusleaks.com).

226 *Ibid.*

227 Syrian Opposition Coalition – Geneva Media Unit, ‘Memo: ISIS and the Assad regime: From marriage of convenience to partnership’, 10 February 2014, available: <http://syriageneva2.org/?p=242&lang=en>. The original Arabic is available at <http://syriageneva2.org/?p=242&lang=ar>.

228 The link is <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g8lQpl3h7fs>.

229 ‘Alloush: [ISIS] leader Hajji Bakir carries an Iranian passport’ (in Arabic), *Suriya al-Ghad*, 26 February 2014, available: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gvkN6gAq4_k

230 ‘Al-Qaeda detainees reveal ties with Assad’, *Al-Arabiya*, 20 January 2014, available: <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2014/01/21/Al-Qaeda-detainees-reveal-ties-with-Assad.html>.

231 Ruth Sherlock and Richard Spencer, ‘Syria’s Assad accused of boosting al-Qaeda with secret oil deals’, *The Telegraph*, 20 January 2014, available: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/10585391/Syrias-Assad-accused-of-boosting-al-Qaeda-with-secret-oil-deals.html>.

232 ‘Eastern Syrian town lives under al-Qaeda rules’, *Reuters*, 30 January 2013, available: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/01/30/syria-crisis-town-idUSL5N0AX8MU20130130>.

233 Julian Borger and Mona Mahmood, ‘EU decision to lift Syrian oil sanctions boosts jihadist groups’, *The Guardian*, 19 May 2013, available: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/may/19/eu-syria-oil-jihadist-al-qaeda>.

In April that year, the EU had lifted sanctions on oil exports from rebel-held areas in Syria in order to “aid the opposition,” leading to a scramble for control over wells and pipelines. As a result, open-air refineries were set up and crude oil was being stored in ditches and heated in metal tanks by wood fires, shrouding the area with black smoke and exposing the local inhabitants to the dangers of the thick smog and the frequent explosions.²³⁴

And it was not only oil. In a long interview published in *Al-Hayat* newspaper in April 2014, a Free Army commander claimed ISIS was selling grain to the regime while Syrians were dying of starvation.²³⁵ “As the fighting between the Free Army and Daesh [ISIS] intensified,” he said, “the latter struck a deal with the regime to sell it the two-year grain stocks they had put their hands on and had hidden away in Deir al-Zor. They sold a kilo of wheat, maize, lentils or barley for 8 Syrian pounds only, when the actual price, depending on the quality, was between 30 and 100 pounds. The regime would then transport them from Deir al-Zor to the areas under its control.” The commander also claimed that he used to receive information about the convoys transporting the grains and had seen some with his own eyes when attacking them on their way to the coastal area.

Other pieces of evidence of collaboration between ISIS and the regime often cited by Syrians include the fact that, until recently, the regime’s troops and air force had largely avoided clashing with and bombing ISIS bases and strongholds, while continuing to bombard and besiege all other armed factions. And vice versa: while targeting and killing rival opposition activists and leaders, ISIS almost stopped all fighting against the regime around mid-2013. This has been confirmed by various testimonies. An ISIS defector is quoted in *The Telegraph* article mentioned above saying: “We were confident that the regime would not bomb us. We always slept soundly in our bases.”²³⁶ In the above-mentioned *Al-Hayat* interview, the Syrian rebel commander also says: “About eight months ago, they [ISIS] completely stopped all fighting with the regime. They would just go and put their hand on any liberated area, and ‘liberate’ the liberated. ISIS is today busy attacking the opposition... they either impose what they want, or threaten [others] with explosions and suicide bombs. That’s how they controlled the areas liberated from the regime.”²³⁷

To sum up, there is abundant evidence that both the Syrian and the Iranian regimes have infiltrated, collaborated and used al-Qaeda-affiliated groups to serve their own interests, either by aiding them and then using them against their opponents, or trading their extensive knowledge of these groups’ networks and figures with Western powers, and even selling them off, in exchange for being allowed to stay in power, or by claiming to be victims of terrorism so as to discredit all their opponents and legitimise their brutal crackdown on them. Syrian opposition leader Burhan Ghalyoun has dubbed this “three-way strategy” as “the business of terrorism.”²³⁸

Moreover, the US administration, which has deployed similar strategies in the past, seems to be happy to play along. In June 2014, Anne Barnard, of *The New York Times*, tweeted that a US government adviser had told her that fighting ISIS was “not [a] priority” for the US government because ISIS was “useful in tarring all insurgents & framing choice as Assad/ISIS.”²³⁹

The events in Syria and Iraq over the past two years seemed to confirm this claim, at least until August 2014, when the UN Security Council adopted a resolution, under the binding Chapter VII of the United Nations Charter, calling on all member states to “act to suppress the flow of foreign fighters, financing and other support to Islamist extremist groups in Iraq and Syria,” namely ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra.²⁴⁰ The Syrian and Iranian regimes suddenly started to sell themselves to the West as ‘partners’ in combating terrorism (more on this in the ‘Iran’s Vietnam’ chapter).

3. Iranian fighters

Like other aspects of Iranian involvement in Syria, the issue of Iranian fighters was initially denied by Iranian officials, then intermittently admitted and finally supported by the, gradual emergence of undeniable evidence.

Official admissions

As mentioned above, one of the first official Iranian admissions of a physical presence on the ground in Syria was made by the deputy chief of Sepah Qods Ismail Qani: “If the Islamic Republic was not present in Syria, the massacre of people would have happened on a much larger scale,” he said in May 2012, shortly after the Houla massacre. “Before our presence in Syria, too many people were killed by the opposition but with the *physical and non-physical* presence of the Islamic Republic, big massacres in Syria were prevented.”²⁴¹

About three months later, another senior Sepah Pasdaran commander offered another acknowledgment of direct military involvement in Syria: “Today we are involved in fighting every aspect of a war, a military one in Syria as well as a cultural one,” said the commander of Sepah Pasdaran’s Saheb al-Amr unit Gen. Salar Abnough in August 2012, in a speech to volunteer trainees.²⁴²

Of course Iranian officials could still claim, as they did, that ‘physical presence’ and fighting a ‘military war’ do not necessarily mean that Sepah Pasdaran had troops on the ground; it was only sending a number of commanders tasked with ‘advising’ and ‘training’ Syrian troops and commanders but they were not involved in the fighting themselves. However, a former Sepah Pasdaran commander told *Reuters* in February 2014 that these commanders (estimated to number between 60 and 70 high-ranking officers and many more lower-ranking ones) were “backed up by thousands of Iranian paramilitary Basij volunteer fighters as well as Arabic speakers including Shi’ites from Iraq.”²⁴³

Indeed, in June 2014, Brig. Gen. Hossein Hamedani, who is said to oversee Sepah’s operations in Syria, revealed that Basij forces had been “established in 14 Syrian provinces.”²⁴⁴ In an attempt to explain where all these fighters had come from, Hamedani claimed that 10,000 anti-Assad fighters had “switched sides”

and were now Basij members. Sepah Pasdaran’s role in creating and training the *NDF* militias (which is presumably what Hamedani’s remarks refer to) has already been discussed above, and so has the recruitment of Iranian volunteers who want to go to fight in Syria.

In the same speech, which according to Iranian media was made during a memorial service in the Hamedan province attended by a number of Sepah Pasdaran commanders, Hamedani added that there are also 100,000 trained Iranian Basij fighters “who would like to go and fight in Syria” but “Iran does not need to send

234 *Ibid.*

235 Faysal Abdul-Karim, ‘Abu Uday: Daesh is selling grain to the regime while people starve’ (in Arabic), *Al-Hayat*, 28 April 2014, available: <http://tinyurl.com/pneorf2>.

236 Ruth Sherlock and Richard Spencer, *idem*.

237 Faysal Abdul-Karim, *idem*.

238 Burhan Ghalyoun, ‘The business of terrorism... Iran, Al-Maliki, and Al-Assad’, *Al-Araby al-Jadeed*, 19 June 2014, available: <http://www.alaraby.co.uk/opinion/5ba50f79-ec53-4f6b-89d6-be7d3b339db0>. And English translation is available at <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/articles/middle-east/12245-the-business-of-terrorism-iran-al-maliki-and-al-assad>.

239 Anne Barnard, tweet, 12 June 2014, 4:12 PM, available: <https://twitter.com/ABarnardNYT/status/477226933659660288>.

240 Security Council, ‘Security Council adopts Resolution 2170 (2014) condemning gross, widespread abuse of human rights by extremist groups in Iraq, Syria’, 15 August 2014, available: <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2014/sc11520.doc.htm>

241 A screenshot of the original interview in Persian with the Iranian Students News Agency (ISNA) is available at http://www.dw.de/image/0,,15981135_401,00.jpg. For English, see: Saeed Kamali Dehghan, ‘Syrian army being aided by Iranian forces’, *The Guardian*, 28 May 2012, available: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/may/28/syria-army-iran-forces>.

242 A copy of the original report in the Iranian students’ news agency Daneshjoo is available at <http://www.freezepage.com/1346016739ALEKCXYBK>. For English, see: <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10000872396390444230504577615393756632230>.

243 Jonathan Saul and Parisa Hafezi, ‘Iran boosts military support in Syria to bolster Assad’, *Reuters*, 21 February 2014, available: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/02/21/us-syria-crisis-iran-idUSBREA1K09U20140221>.

244 ‘General Hamedani’s most recent remarks on Syria’, ISNA, 29 June 2014, available: <http://tinyurl.com/ok88yd8>. For English, see: <http://www.naameshaam.org/en/forget-the-syrian-army-its-all-iranian-basij-now/>.

military staff to Syria yet.”²⁴⁵ And it is not just in Syria that the Iranian regime is setting up and training loyal paramilitary forces. “After Lebanon and Syria, a Basij force is now being formed in Iraq,” Hamedani said. “The Islamic Republic of Iran’s third child is born.”

The most direct admission of sending Iranian fighters to Syria came in early November 2013 from a member of the National Security and Foreign Policy Committee in the Iranian parliament. Speaking at an “anti-imperialist ceremony” in the region of Khorasan, Javad Karimi Qodousi said “there are hundreds of troops from Iran in Syria,” adding that what is often reported in the news as Syrian military victories is “in fact the victories of Iran.”²⁴⁶

The revelation was emphatically denied by Sepah Pasdaran, with the force’s spokesperson Ramazan Sharif saying: “We strongly deny the existence of Iranian troops in Syria. Iranian [commanders] are only in Syria to exchange experiences and advice, which is central to the defense of this country.”²⁴⁷ Clearly disturbed by the remarks, he added: “The media in Iran must show greater care when publishing this kind of news so that they do not aid the foreign media’s psychological warfare.”

It is worth noting that all the above admissions and revelations came from Iranian officials with demonstrable insider knowledge of Iranian military operations. As to why they were made, some appear to have been the result of competing interests or agendas within the regime (many were immediately removed from the websites that originally published them); others as signals or threats to the outside world. In some cases, though, they may have simply been boasting about the regime’s power and influence in front of regime supporters or the Iranian public more generally.

Iran’s not-so-secret army

In addition to these admissions and revelations, there have been dozens of pictures and videos of Iranian fighters posing with their weapons in different parts of Syria. For instance, in February 2014, *Parsine* news agency published images of an Iranian fighter posing with his gun and military uniform in Syria.²⁴⁸ Other pictures of the man show him using heavy weapons, standing next to Syrian military vehicles, at a Syrian military college or with groups of colleagues or children. According to the

report, the man, who is described as a “religious eulogist” from Tehran, had gone to Syria to “defend holy Shia sites” in the country as part of a group calling itself “The Defenders of Sayyida Zaynab.” The same website had previously published images of another fighter, described as a “famous eulogist” from Tehran, who had also taken pictures of himself in Syria wearing a military uniform and pointing a gun.²⁴⁹ Both men and their colleagues appear to be ordinary fighters rather than commanders or advisors.

As a sign of the significance of this group(s) and its links to Sepah Pasdaran, Iranian media close to the force circulated in early 2014 a picture of Sepah Qods’s chief Qasem Soleimani standing next to the father of a member of the “The Defenders of Holy Shrines” who had died in Syria.²⁵⁰ Mohammad Hassan Khalili, also known as Rasoul Khalili, was reportedly killed in battle in November 2013, having “voluntarily” travelled to Syria to “defend the Sayyida Zaynab shrine.” According to *Bultan News*, his 40th day ceremony was attended by Haj Agha Shirazi, Khamenei’s representative within Sepah Qods, as well as the force’s deputy chief Ismail Qani.²⁵¹

As early as June 2012, the Free Syrian Army in Homs captured a group of Iranian snipers who had allegedly participated in suppressing the popular protests in the city dubbed “the capital of the revolution.” In a video posted on YouTube,²⁵² the group’s leader, holding his Iranian ID card, says he is from the Iranian Armed Forces and that they had been taking instructions from the Syrian security services, particularly the Air Force Intelligence in Homs.

Less than two months later, in late August 2012, *WSJ* reported, quoting current and former members of Sepah Pasdaran, that the force had been sending “hundreds of rank-and-file members of Sepah Pasdaran and Basij... to Damascus,” in addition to higher-ranking Sepah commanders to “guide Syrian forces in battle strategy and Qods commanders to help with military intelligence.”²⁵³ According to the sources, many of these Iranian troops hail from Sepah units outside Tehran, particularly from Iran’s Azerbaijan and Kurdistan regions, where they “have experience dealing with ethnic separatist movements.” They were apparently sent to “replace low-ranking Syrian soldiers who have defected to the Syrian opposition,” the sources said,

and they allegedly “mainly assume non-fighting roles such as guarding weapons caches and helping to run military bases.”

In October 2012, opposition activists filmed an Iranian Air Force-marked Ilyushin-76 airplane at Palmyra Airbase.²⁵⁴ The description accompanying the video says “dropping off troops to support Assad” but no troops can actually be seen in the short (30 second) video. Furthermore, the cameraman’s voice says “the content of the shipment is unknown.” Other similar videos of Iranian planes landing in various military airports in Syria have been posted online.²⁵⁵

The most conclusive evidence of Iranian fighters fighting in Syria was video footage, posted on YouTube in August 2013,²⁵⁶ seized by Syrian rebels (the Dawood Brigade) after overrunning a group of Iraqi and Iranian fighters from the Abu Fadl al-Abbas Brigade. As mentioned before (in the ‘Training’ section), the footage was shot by an embedded Iranian filmmaker, Hadi Baghbani, who appears to have been making a special documentary about the Syrian adventure of a Sepah Qods commander called Ismail Haydari (Baghbani appears to have had unrestricted access to film everything). Both died in Syria at or around the same time on 20 August 2013, in what is believed to be the last scene shot by Baghbani’s camera near Aleppo. Some of the footage was broadcast in September 2013 by *Al-Jazeera*, the Netherlands Public Broadcasting network (NPO) and various other media outlets around the world. Two months later, the *BBC* made a key 30-minute documentary based on the footage called *Iran’s Secret Army*.²⁵⁷

Most of the available footage is of Haydari talking about ‘working with’ Syrian regime troops and militias. One clip shows Iranian commanders instructing Syrian troops, and another shows an Iranian group of fighters, including the cameraman himself, involved in a gun battle against approaching rebels near a poultry farm in the suburbs of Aleppo.²⁵⁸ It is believed they were all killed there, where the rebels got hold of the camera and its footage.

Significantly, in one of the clips used in the *BBC* documentary, Haydari says: “This front [Syria] is supported by the Supreme Leader [Ayatollah Ali Khamenei] and [Hezbollah’s] Sayyid Hassan Nasrallah. On our side are lads from Iran, Hezbollah, Iraqi mujahideen [jihadis], Afghan mujahideen...

245 *Ibid.*

246 ‘Sepah denies presence of “hundreds of Iranian troops in Syria” (in Persian), *Deutsche Welle*, 04 November 2013, available: <http://tinyurl.com/mmw6j5>.

247 *Ibid.*

248 ‘New images and video footage of Iranian regime’s followers in Syria’ (in Persian), *Parsine*, 18 August 2013, available: <http://tinyurl.com/pmk6thj>. For English, see: <http://www.naameshaam.org/en/new-images-of-iranian-fighters-in-syria/>.

249 ‘Famous artist battles against rebels in Syria + Pictures’ (in Persian), *Parsine*, 26 June 2013, available: <http://www.parsine.com/fa/news/123934>.

250 e.g. ‘Soleimani taking pictures with father of Sepah member killed in Syria’, *Digarban*, available: <http://www.digarban.com/node/17347>. See also: <http://tinyurl.com/pem62w5>. For English, see: <http://www.naameshaam.org/en/the-unholy-sepah-qods-commander-and-the-big-lie/>.

251 ‘Pictures of the 40th day after martyrdom of Rasoul Khalili’, *Bultan News*, 30 December 2013, available: <http://tinyurl.com/nzzschm>.

252 ‘Arrest of Iranian snipers in Homs by Free Syrian Army’ (in Persian with Arabic subtitles), 1 June 2012, available: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lst1iW7z_P4. A longer video without translation is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1V9n1gdM4Lw>.

253 Farnaz Fassih, ‘Iran said to send troops to bolster Syria’, *The Wall Street Journal*, 27 August 2012, available: <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10000872396390444230504577615393756632230>.

254 ‘Iranian Revolutionary Guard Transport IL76 TD at Palmyra Airport Syria’, 22 October 2012, available: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rzzMBU-jKMM>.

255 e.g. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uMN2HyBIA0c>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RRhE7zAinVU>.

256 Some of the raw footage, in six parts, is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T1bYtliS4Y&list=PLPC0Udeof3T4s-lyyP9pqhkVP1P4PswlmO>. There is apparently several hours of footage but only some of it has been posted online. For a detailed account of the story behind the footage, though the authors of this report do not agree with all the conclusions, see: Joanna Paraszczuk and Scott Lucas, ‘Syria Special Updated: Iran’s Military, Assad’s Shia Militias, & The Raw Videos’, *EA WorldView*, 15 September 2013, available: <http://eaworldview.com/2013/09/syria-special-irans-military-assads-forces-al-jazeera-what-raw-vid-eos-really-show>.

257 Darius Bazargan, *Iran’s Secret Army*, *BBC Our World*, November 2013, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/n3cstnps>. The full documentary is available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zl_88ChjQtU.

258 Part 5 for the series above: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ulePOVDhI30&index=5&list=PLPC0Udeof3T4slyyP9pqhkVP1P4PswlmO>.

The opponents are Israel, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Qatar, UAE money, plus America, England, France and other Europeans...” He lists ‘Iranians’ among the other foreign militias fighting in Syria under Sepah Pasdaran’s control.

“One thing we do,” he later adds, “is to gather intelligence on an area. Then there are a few options: either we target the places [of] the rebels with artillery, or we target the routes they use with landmines and roadside bombs. And the third option is to do a commando raid...” He uses ‘we’ throughout.

Funerals

As mentioned above, a prestigious, military-style funeral attended by many Sepah Pasdaran officers in military uniforms was held for Haydari and Baghbani in Iran, indicating both had a special position within the force. Yet, most Iranian state-controlled media reports on their death still insisted that Haydari was a ‘filmmaker’ and was in Syria to make a documentary, lumping his story with that of Baghbani. At least their death in Syria was acknowledged, for that of many other Iranian fighters and commanders who had reportedly died in Syria has not been (more on this in the ‘Iran’s Vietnam’ chapter).

In June 2013, at least three Sepah Pasdaran members were announced to have been killed in Damascus while “defending the Sayyida Zaynab shrine.”²⁵⁹ The same rhetoric had been used by Hezbollah and the Iraqi militias when talking about their Syria fighters and martyrs, as discussed above. The funeral of Mahdi Khorasani and Ali Asghar Shanaei is believed to have been the first group funeral held in Iran for Iranians killed in Syria.²⁶⁰ The two were pictured together holding Kalashnikov-type rifles in front of the Sayyida Zaynab shrine.²⁶¹ Another Sepah member whose funeral was held during the same month was Mohammed Hossein Atri, who Iranian media reports claimed was also killed while fighting near the shrine. His coffin was covered by numerous Sepah Pasdaran symbols.²⁶² Others, such as Amir Reza Alizadeh, were reported to have been killed by bombs or during “clashes with terrorists.”²⁶³

The following month, Iranian media reported the death of another senior Iranian fighter who had also been ‘defending holy Shia shrines’ in Syria. Mehdi Moussavi was described by websites and blogs close to Sepah Pasdaran as a “Basij commander” in the Ahwaz region.²⁶⁴

A high-profile ceremony attended by senior Iranian officials was held for him at the Ahwaz airport in southern Iran, where his coffin arrived.²⁶⁵

In November 2013, Iranian media reported the death of Mohammad Jamali Paqal’a, who was killed in fighting in Syria.²⁶⁶ The *Mehr* News Agency described him as a Sepah Qods commander and an Iran-Iraq war veteran who hailed from the same Sepah outfit that had trained General Qassem Soleimani.²⁶⁷

Interestingly, while doing its best to hide the news of its Syria dead from the outside world, Sepah Pasdaran often invited the public inside Iran to attend these funerals, which were often attended by Sepah members and representatives of the Iranian Supreme Leader.²⁶⁸ ‘Died while defending holy shrines’ also became a generic description for many of these ‘martyrs’.

Pilgrims or fighters?

If lying about someone after their death is easy, lying about them while they are still alive and in the hands of your enemy is much harder. In addition to the Iranian snipers mentioned above, Syrian opposition forces have frequently claimed they had captured Iranian fighters or members of Sepah Pasdaran in Syria, posting videos of their confessions and their documents online.²⁶⁹ The Iranian regime and its media outlets often claimed these were civilian pilgrims who had gone to Syria, despite the raging war, to visit Sayyida Zaynab and other holy Shia sites in the country.

In August 2012, 48 Iranian nationals were kidnapped by Syrian rebels on their way from Sayyida Zaynab to the Damascus airport. The rebels claimed they were all members of Sepah Pasdaran; the Iranian government claimed they were Shia pilgrims. Later on, however, Iran’s foreign minister added that some of them were “retired members” of Sepah Pasdaran and the army, while others were from “other ministries”, but insisted that they were in Syria for pilgrimage.²⁷⁰

Judging by the confessions of Iraqi militiamen (see above), both stories may in fact be true: fighters and low-ranking officers were often sent by land among groups of pilgrims and other visitors. Even if the Sepah members were retired, it is still likely that they were sent to Syria as advisors due to their experience.

In any case, the 48 Iranian captives were released in January 2013 in a prisoner exchange deal mediated by Turkey, in exchange for 2,130 opposition detainees held by the Syrian regime.²⁷¹ The move angered many regime supporters, many of whom posted angry comments on social media sites accusing the Syrian leadership of ‘not giving a toss’ about Syrian prisoners of war, while rushing to release so many ‘terrorists’ in exchange for a few Iranians.²⁷² About a year later, a video posted by Syrian activists on YouTube showed a group of Syrian pro-regime prisoners of war wishing that they were Iranian or Hezbollah Lebanon fighters so that the Assad regime would hurry to negotiate their release in a similar prisoner exchange deal.²⁷³

Angry reactions aside, the deal was perhaps a sign of who called the shots in Syria now. It was also an indication that the Iranian captives were of significance, as previous experiences show that the Iranian government does not care much about its ordinary citizens and even ordinary soldiers taken hostage.²⁷⁴ Indeed, their significance was obvious from the high-profile official delegations that met them upon their return to Iran. They included senior government officials and several key Sepah Pasdaran commanders, according to images published by Iranian media.²⁷⁵

Moreover, a number of Iranian opposition websites named at least four of the released hostages, describing them as current Sepah Pasdaran commanders from various Iranian provinces.²⁷⁶ These reportedly included a Brigadier-General 2nd Class who commands the Sepah Shohadaa unit in West Azerbaijan province; a Colonel who commands the 14th Imam Sadeq Operational Brigade in Bushehr; the Supreme Leader’s Representative at Sepah’s Orumiyeh unit; and an official from the 33rd

259 For a list of publicly announced funerals around this time, see for example: Y. Mansharof, ‘Despite denials by Iranian regime, statements by Majlis member and reports in Iran indicate involvement of Iranian troops in Syria fighting’, The Middle East Media Research Institute, 4 December 2013, available: <http://www.memri.org/report/en/print7623.htm>.

260 Phillip Smyth, ‘Iran’s Losses In the “35th Province” (Syria), Part 1’, *Jihadology*, 14 June 2013, available: <http://jihadology.net/2013/06/14/hizballah-cavalcade-irans-losses-in-the-35th-province-syria-part-1/>.

261 The picture is available at <http://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2013/06/untitled211.png?w=585&h=390>.

262 See, for example, this picture: <http://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2013/06/untitled217.png?w=585&h=390>.

263 ‘Body of Martyr Amir Reza Alizadeh buried in Rudsar’ (in Persian), *Mehr News Agency*, available: <http://www.mehrnews.com/detail/News/2046534>.

264 See for example, <http://besme-rabbe-shohada.mihanblog.com/post/29>.

265 ‘Funeral of martyr Sayyid Mahdi Mousavi’, *ISNA Khouzestan*, 8 July 2013, available: <http://khouzestan.isna.ir/Default.aspx?N-SID=5&SSLID=46&NID=41513>.

266 See, for example, <http://www.mehrnews.com/detail/News/2168935>.

267 *Ibid.*

268 In addition to the above, see for example: <http://archive.today/4dRDn#selection-691.0-672.19>.

269 e.g. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_o1piy-gux4 (February 2012); <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L3gTlkb-e2w> (February 2012); <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a-zK-mNMyH0M> (February 2012); <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D9fQ5C6amJ4> (April 2012); <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UOyJ-FbXn7A> (June 2012); <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kcifeGHesFI> (October 2012); <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oh7N2KPb3kw> (October 2012); <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BiEd-6zmWvQ> (March 2013); <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QzngsusADLU> (April 2013); <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SHXJC3Ei2Gg> (September 2013); <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4VyHBTpWdIY> (February 2014).

270 ‘Retired’ Revolutionary Guards among Syrian hostages: Iran’, *Al-Arabiya*, 8 August 2012, available: <http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/08/08/231054.html>.

271 ‘Syrian government frees 2,130 prisoners in exchange for 48 Iranians’, *CNN*, 10 January 2013, available: <http://edition.cnn.com/2013/01/09/world/meast/syria-prisoner-exchange/>.

272 See, for example, this *Orient TV* report (in Arabic): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V0K0N-2Bwhs>.

273 ‘Assad regime captives held by the Free Army envy Iranians’ (in Arabic), 11 February 2014, available: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WbDtF_6zJms. For English, see: <http://www.naameshaam.org/en/syrian-soldiers-captured-by-the-opposition-wish-they-were-iranian/>.

274 See, for example: ‘Petty lives of soldiers, precious lives of commanders’, *Naame Shaam*, 27 March 2014, available: <http://www.naameshaam.org/en/petty-lives-of-soldiers-precious-lives-of-commanders/>

275 e.g. <http://www.farsnews.com/plarg.php?n=344057&st=699745> and <http://www.farsnews.com/plarg.php?nn=343951&st=699574>.

276 Farnaz Fassihi, ‘Iran said to send troops to bolster Syria’, *The Wall Street Journal*, 27 August 2012, available: <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10000872396390444230504577615393756632230>.

al-Mahdi Brigade in Fars province.²⁷⁷ The Iranian regime nonetheless wanted everyone to believe that they were all in Syria in a personal capacity for religious pilgrimage.

Case study: The mysterious life and death Gen. Hassan Shateri

In February 2013, Iranian media reported the death of Hassan Shateri, the then head of the Iranian Commission for the Reconstruction of (South) Lebanon.²⁷⁸ Some Syrian opposition sources claimed he was shot by Syrian rebels as he was travelling from Aleppo to Beirut via Damascus.²⁷⁹ Others, including Israeli sources, claimed he had been killed in the Israeli air strike on 30 January, which apparently targeted a convoy carrying anti-aircraft missile systems bound for Lebanon.²⁸⁰ The Iranian regime also claimed Israel was behind the assassination and vowed revenge.²⁸¹

However, available evidence does not seem to support the air strike story. Images published at the time of Shateri's body being placed in its tomb in Iran show no burn marks or other injuries indicating an air strike.²⁸² A "friend and colleague" of Shateri also stated on 8 March 2013 that he had seen Shateri's gunshot wound before he was buried.²⁸³

In any case, it is clear that Shateri's role went far beyond that of the head of the Lebanon Reconstruction Commission. In fact, it is widely known in Lebanon and Iran that the Commission is a cover for Sepah Qods activities there. While in Lebanon, Shateri operated under the alias of Hesam Khoshnevis, concealing his real identity even from the US Treasury Department, which added his alias to its sanctions list in August 2010 for "providing financial, material and technological support" to Hezbollah Lebanon.²⁸⁴

We now know that Shateri was a senior Sepah Pasdaran officer who had served in Afghanistan, Iraq and Lebanon. As an engineer, he was promoted in 1980s to head the force's Sardasht headquarters and later the Hamzeh Seyyed al-Shohada Base combat engineering unit and Saheb al-Zaman engineering brigade.²⁸⁵ In 2006, he was picked to lead Iran's 'reconstruction' efforts in South Lebanon following the 2006 war between Israel and Hezbollah. As a *Fars News* report put it, Shateri "went wherever he was needed by the Islamic Revolution."²⁸⁶

The prestigious funerals held for him in Tehran and Semnan on 14 and 15 February 2013, which were attended

by the most senior officials of Sepah Pasdaran and the Iranian regime, were a clear sign of Shateri's significance.²⁸⁷ Many of the attendees praised his "outstanding role in resistance against Israel" and described him as "no less than Imad Moghniyeh," the Lebanese Hezbollah commander who was assassinated in Syria in 2008. Shateri's coffin was covered with Lebanese Hezbollah flags and pictures of him in Sepah Pasdaran military uniform.²⁸⁸ Moreover, the news of his death was personally delivered to his family by the commander-in-chief of Sepah Qods Gen. Qassem Soleimani.²⁸⁹ Soleimani and Sepah Pasdaran's chief Mohammad Ali Jafari were also photographed weeping at Shateri's funeral in Tehran.²⁹⁰ A few days later, the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei invited Shateri's family to his house to personally console them.²⁹¹

The question is: what was Shateri doing in Syria, and in Aleppo specifically? Hours after his death, the Iranian embassies in Beirut and Damascus released information about Shateri's destination in Syria and how he died. He had allegedly been in Aleppo to "research and implement development and construction projects" there, they said, and was killed by rebels on his way back to Lebanon.²⁹² Later on, Iranian official statements and media reports omitted any mention of Aleppo and decided to go with the Israeli air strike story.

As a number of observers and experts have pointed out, the idea of a senior Sepah Qods commander going to a city that has almost fallen into the hands of the rebels and is extremely unsafe in order to look into construction projects is "nonsensical."²⁹³ Moreover, it is unlikely that Gen. Soleimani would have sent "one of his top lieutenants" to Aleppo on a mission (accompanying an arms shipment to Hezbollah) that could have been done by a less senior operational commander.²⁹⁴

It is more likely, as American analyst Will Fulton has argued, that Shateri had been dispatched to lead a mission related to the Syrian chemical weapons and missiles facility in al-Sfeira, near Aleppo, which was at the time on the brink of falling into the hands of rebels.²⁹⁵ The facility is known to have had Iranian presence before and after the outbreak of the Syrian revolution (more on this in the next section). So it is reasonable to assume that Sepah Qods may have wanted to retrieve or destroy sensitive material or evidence on the site before it fell in the hands of 'the enemy'.

4. Iranian weapons

In addition to footing the bill for Russian weapons, Iran has also been supplying the Syrian regime with Iranian weapons, ranging from rockets and missiles, rocket-propelled grenades and mortars, to drones and other military surveillance technology.

Illegal arms shipments

In May 2012, *Reuters* published an exclusive about a “confidential report”, seen by the news agency, submitted by a panel of sanctions-monitoring experts to the UN Security Council.²⁹⁶ The report dealt with three illegal shipments of Iranian weapons over the previous year in violation of international sanctions against Iran. Two of these cases involved Syria, it said, “as were the majority of cases inspected by the Panel during its previous mandate.” The third shipment involved rockets headed for Taliban fighters in Afghanistan.

The following month, the panel of experts published its report, providing details of two interception by the Turkish authorities of Iranian arms shipments bound for Syria.²⁹⁷ The first was in February 2011, a month before

more details, see: Will Fulton, ‘The Assassination of Iranian Quds Force General Hassan Shateri in Syria’, *Iran Tracker*, 28 February 2013, available: <http://www.irantracker.org/analysis/fulton-assassination-iranian-quds-force-general-hassan-shateri-syria-february-28-2013>.

284 US Treasury Department, ‘Fact Sheet: U.S. Treasury Department Targets Iran’s Support for Terrorism’, 3 August 2010, available: <http://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/tg810.aspx>.

285 For more on Shateri’s career, see for example: Farnaz Fassihi, ‘As Iran buries general, Syria rebels say he was killed in Israeli strike’, *The Wall Street Journal*, 15 February 2013, available: <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424127887324432004578306381061380040>. For his position within Sepah Qods’s global network, see for example this illustration: http://www.irantracker.org/sites/default/files/imce-images/shateri_slide_1200.gif.

286 ‘Martyr Shateri went wherever he was need by the Islamic Revolution’ (in Persian), *Fars News*, 21 February 2013, available: <http://www.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=13911203000769>.

287 See, for example, these news reports in Persian: <http://rajanews.com/detail.asp?id=150462>; <http://tinyurl.com/lgb36c5>; <http://farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=13911201000682>; <http://www.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=1391127000548>; <http://mehrnews.com/detail/News/2001473>; <http://tinyurl.com/oezqpr4>.

288 See, for example: <http://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2013/06/untitled201.png>.

289 ‘Representative of the Supreme Leader: We will quickly take revenge from Israel for Martyr Shateri’ (in Persian), *ARNA News*, 16 February 2013, available: <http://tinyurl.com/n7staho>.

290 ‘Two commanders in grief’ (in Persian), *Afsaran*, 14 February 2013, available: <http://www.afsaran.ir/link/186064>.

291 ‘Family of martyr Gen. Shateri [received by] the Great Leader of the Revolution’ (in Persian), *ABNA*, 19 February 2013, available: <http://www.abna.ir/persian/service/iran/archive/2013/02/19/392245/story.html>

292 ‘Iranian embassy in Lebanon informs of the martyrdom of the head of the Iranian Commission for the Reconstruction of Southern Lebanon’ (in Persian), *IRNA*, 14 February 2013, available: <http://tinyurl.com/kgs7ybn>; ‘Reflection by world media on the martyrdom of Hassan Shateri’ (in Persian), *Javan*, 16 February 2013, available: <http://www.javanonline.ir/vdcjv8eituqevyz.fsfu.txt>.

293 Will Fulton, ‘The Assassination of Iranian Quds Force General Hassan Shateri in Syria’, *Iran Tracker*, 28 February 2013, available: <http://www.irantracker.org/analysis/fulton-assassination-iranian-quds-force-general-hassan-shateri-syria-february-28-2013>.

294 *Ibid.*

295 *Ibid.*

296 Louis Charbonneau, ‘Exclusive: Iran flouts U.N. sanctions, sends arms to Syria: panel’, *Reuters*, 17 May 2012, available: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/05/17/us-iran-sanctions-un-idUSBRE84F14520120517>.

297 UN Panel of Experts, ‘Final report of the Panel of Experts established pursuant to resolution 1929 (2010)’, 12 June 2012, available: http://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BF-CF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_2012_395.pdf.

277 For more details, see: Will Fulton, ‘IRGC Shows Its (True) Hand in Syria’, *Iran Tracker*, 14 January 2013, available: http://www.irantracker.org/analysis/fulton-irgc-shows-its-true-hand-syria-january-14-2013#_edn6.

278 See, for example, ‘Martyrdom of president of Commission for Reconstruction of Lebanon at the hands of Zionist regime agents’, *Ahlul-Bayt News Agency* (ABNA), 13 February 2013, available: <http://abna.co/data.asp?lang=1&id=390561>.

279 Saeed Kamali Dehghan, ‘Elite Iranian general assassinated near Syria-Lebanon border’, *The Guardian*, 14 February 2013, available: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/feb/14/elite-iranian-general-assassinated-syria-lebanon>.

280 Elior Levy, ‘Rebels: Iranian official killed in airstrike on Syria’, *YNet News*, 14 February 2013, available: <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4345171,00.html>.

281 See for example: <http://www.abna.ir/persian/service/middle/archive/2013/02/18/392005/story.html>; <http://tinyurl.com/n7staho>.

282 ‘Picture / the moment that Shateri kissed the Supreme Leader’s hand’ (in Persian), *ABNA*, 15 February 2013, available: <http://abna.ir/data.asp?lang=1&id=391035>. The pictures appear to have been removed since.

283 ‘Ceremony to commemorate martyr Shateri held in Qom’ (in Persian), *ABNA*, 9 March 2013, available: <http://www.abna.ir/persian/service/iran/archive/2013/03/09/398184/story.html>. For

the outbreak of the Syrian revolution, when the Turkish authorities seized a truck carrying Iranian explosives. The contents of the truck were clearly described on the shipping documents: two boxes of gunpowder M9, two boxes of propelling charge, two boxes of slow-burning material, one box of detonators, six pallets of solid rocket fuel and two pallets of RDX explosives. The two companies named on the shipping documents, Parchin Chemical Industries and 7th of Tir Industries, are subsidiaries of the Iranian Defence Industries Organisation. Both had already been designated by UN sanctions. The contract referenced in the invoice had been concluded in 2006 for a series of 20 shipments.²⁹⁹ For some reason, Turkey did not report this interception to the UN until January 2012.

The second shipment was intercepted on 19 March 2011. Nineteen crates containing 74 assault rifles, machine guns, 2,000 mortar shells and nearly 8,000 rounds of ammunition were seized by the Turkish authorities from an Iranian cargo aircraft operated by Yas Air bound for Aleppo.²⁹⁹ The flight had “auto spare parts” on its cargo manifest. In March 2012, the US Treasury Department listed Yas Air, along with Behineh Trading and one Nigerian shipping agent, for “providing support” to Sepah Qods, including shipments of weapons to the Middle East and Africa.³⁰⁰ Two other Iranian airlines, Air Iran and Mahan Air, had already been designated by the department for providing the force with transportation, funds transfers, personnel travel services, as well as arms shipments.³⁰¹ Both were also accused of transporting personnel, weapons and goods on behalf of Hezbollah Lebanon and omitting from their cargo manifests “secret weapons shipments bound for Hezbollah.”³⁰² All these companies, according to the Treasury, had used “deceptive measures” when shipping such items to Syria, using a combination of passenger and cargo flights and “declaring illicit cargo as humanitarian and other licit goods.”³⁰³

Both shipments intercepted by Turkey were found by the UN panel of experts to be in breach of international sanctions against Iran. Paragraph 5 of Security Council Resolution 1747 (2007) prohibits Iran from exporting “arms and related materiel” and prohibits other states and individuals from procuring such items from Iran.³⁰⁴ Moreover, in previous inspections the panel had found only ammunition and no arms, whereas the current cas-

es included “a greater diversity of items.” The panel also observed that, previously, systematic attempts had been made by the Iranian regime to conceal illegal shipments through erased markings or packaging. These two shipments “reflected no such attempts,” which is presumably why they were caught. In any case, the report concluded that Syria “continues to be the central party to illicit Iranian arms transfers” in breach of the sanctions. Surprisingly, Russia did not block the release of the report this time as it did the year before.³⁰⁵

Since both incidents predated the Syrian revolution, it is not easy to link them directly to the Syrian regime’s brutal crackdown on the mass protests in Syria. Indeed, the shipments may well have been destined to Hezbollah Lebanon, Hamas or any other Iranian-backed militia via Syria.³⁰⁶ In January 2012, however, France’s foreign ministry “condemned” Iran’s “repeated violations” of the UN arms embargo by exporting weapons to Syria, citing the Panel of Experts’ report.³⁰⁷ Senior US officials also told *AFP* news agency that Iran was supplying munitions to “aid Syria’s bloody protest crackdown in an initiative spearheaded by the head of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps’ elite Qods force, Qassem Soleimani.”³⁰⁸ The Iranian government denied the allegations, of course. The rest of this chapter will attempt to provide some evidence that the allegations were not unfounded.

Assisting Syrian regime in its ‘violent crackdown on protesters’

At this point, the Syrian revolution still largely revolved around mass peaceful protests that were being met by the regime with increasing brutality. It is likely therefore that Iranian military support to the Syrian regime – in addition to training and directing the regime forces and *shabbiha*, as detailed in previous sections – would have consisted mostly of crowd control weapons and surveillance equipment, which the Iranian regime used to crush the Green Movement protests in Iran in 2009.

As early as April 2011, barely a month after the outbreak of the mass protests, American officials disclosed intelligence, based on intercepted communications among Iranian officials, that the Iranian regime was supplying Syrian security services with equipment and technical knowledge for monitoring and disrupting different types of communications, including mobile phones, email, social media and so on.³⁰⁹

In March 2012, the head of the US military's Central Command told the Senate during a hearing that, in addition to arms and scores of Sepah Qods trainers and Iranian intelligence agents, the Iranian regime had been providing Syrian security services with "electronic eavesdropping equipment to try and pick up where the opposition networks are."³¹⁰ This reportedly included specialist mobile tracking equipment able to intercept satellite phones and other satellite broadcasting equipment.³¹¹ The Syrian regime had also obtained some surveillance technology from European suppliers, according to media reports.³¹²

In June 2011, the European Union imposed sanctions against three top leaders of Sepah Pasdaran for their role in "providing equipment and support to help the Syria regime suppress protests in Syria."³¹³ The three were the force's chief Mohammad Ali Jafari, the chief of Sepah Qods, Qassem Soleimani, and Sepah's deputy commander for intelligence, Hossein Taeb.

A few days later, in a sanctions designation targeting the Syrian Political Security Directorate and top Syrian regime officials, the US Treasury also designated Ismail Ahmadi Moqaddam, the chief of Iran's Law Enforcement Forces (LEF), and his deputy Ahmad Reza Radan.³¹⁴ The reason, according to the department, was their role in providing "material support to the Syrian General Intelligence Directorate and dispatch[ing] personnel to Damascus in April to assist the Syrian government in suppressing the Syrian people." In April 2011, it added, Radan had travelled to Damascus, "where he met with Syrian security services and provided expertise to aid in the Syrian government's crackdown on the Syrian people."

298 *Ibid.*

299 *Ibid.*

300 US Treasury Department, 'Treasury targets Iranian arms shipments', 27 March 2012, available: <http://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/tg1506.aspx>.

301 US Treasury Department, 'Treasury Sanctions Major Iranian Commercial Entities', 23 June 2011, available: <http://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/tg1217.aspx>; US Treasury Department, 'Treasury designates Iranian commercial airline linked to Iran's support for terrorism', 12 October 2011, available: <http://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/tg1322.aspx>.

302 *Ibid.*

303 US Treasury Department, 'Treasury designates Syrian entity, others involved in arms and communications procurement networks and identifies blocked Iranian aircraft', 19 September 2012, available: <http://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/tg1714.aspx>.

304 For more details, see: UN Security Council's Iran Sanctions Committee, 'Implementation Assistance Notice: Conventional Arms and Related Materiel', available: http://www.un.org/sc/committees/1737/pdf/Implementation%20Assistance%20Notice_Conv%20Arms.pdf.

305 Louis Charbonneau, 'U.N. publishes report on Iran arms trade with Syria', *Reuters*, 29 June 2012, available: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/06/30/us-iran-sanctions-un-idUSBRE85T02Q20120630>.

306 Israeli air strikes on Syria have often claimed to be targeting such shipments. See, for example, Nicholas Blanford, 'Israeli strike indicates Syria, Hezbollah may have crossed its 'red line' (+video)', *The Christian Science Monitor*, 30 January 2013, available: <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2013/0130/Israeli-strike-indicates-Syria-Hezbollah-may-have-crossed-its-red-line-video>; Anne Barnard, 'Syria blames Israel for fiery attack in Damascus', *New York Times*, 5 May 2013, available: <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/06/world/middleeast/after-strikes-in-syria-concerns-about-an-escalation-of-fighting.html>.

307 'Statements made by the Ministry of Foreign [Affairs] and European Spokesperson', *France in the United States*, 16 January 2012, available: <http://ambafrance-us.org/IMG/html/briefing/2012/us120116.htm>.

308 'Iran rejects French charge it is sending arms to Syria', *The Telegraph*, 17 January 2012, available: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/iran/9019706/Iran-rejects-French-charge-it-is-sending-arms-to-Syria.html>.

309 Adam Entous And Matthew Rosenberg, 'U.S. Says Iran Helps Crackdown in Syria', *The Wall Street Journal*, 14 April 2011, available: <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424052748704547804576261222747330438>. See also: Mark Hosenball, 'Iran helping Assad to put down protests: officials', *Reuters*, 23 March 2012, available: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/03/23/us-iran-syria-crackdown-idUSBRE82M18220120323>.

310 Eric Schmitt and Robert f. Worth, 'With arms for Yemen rebels, Iran seeks wider Mideast role', *The New York Times*, 15 March 2012, available: <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/15/world/middleeast/aiding-yemen-rebels-iran-seeks-wider-mideast-role.html>.

311 Hugh Macleod and Annasofie Flamand, 'Iran's support for Syrian regime raises questions of legality', *Global Post*, 18 September 2012, available: <http://www.globalpost.com/dispatch/news/regions/middle-east/syria/120914/iran-support-syria-regime-legality>.

312 Mark Hosenball, 'Iran helping Assad to put down protests: officials', *Reuters*, *idem*.

313 'Council Implementing Regulation (EU) No. 611/2011', Official Journal of the European Union, 23 June 2011, available: <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:L:2011:164:0001:0003:EN:PDF>.

314 US Treasury Department, 'Treasury sanctions Syrian, Iranian security forces for involvement in Syrian crackdown', 29 June 2011, available: <http://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/tg1224.aspx>.

The US Treasury had listed Radan in September 2010 and Moqaddam in June 2011 for their “complicity in serious human rights abuses in Iran since the June 2009 disputed presidential election.”³¹⁵ It had also already designated Sepah Qods and its senior commanders for providing support to the Syrian General Intelligence Directorate.

In February 2012, the US Treasury sanctioned the whole of the Iranian Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS) for its role in perpetrating human rights abuses against the citizens of Iran as well as “providing support to the Syrian regime’s violent repression of dissent in Syria.”³¹⁶ Like Sepah Qods and LEF, the department added, the MOIS had provided “substantial technical assistance” to the Syrian General Intelligence for the purpose of “assisting the Syrian regime in its violent crackdown on protesters.”

As to what exactly this ‘substantial’ and ‘material assistance’ was, another US sanctions designation in September 2012 sheds some more light. The designation targeted Syria’s Army Supply Bureau for providing support to Iran Electronics Industries (IEI), a subsidiary of the Iranian Ministry of Defense and Armed Forces Logistics (MODAFL) with which the Bureau has standing contracts. In its press release, the Treasury revealed that, in March 2012, IEI had prepared to send “two large shipments of communications equipment,” including radio jammers, to Syria.³¹⁷ The shipments were valued at more than 2 million US dollars and were apparently financed by the Central Bank of Syria. According to media reports, jamming equipment was used by the Syrian regime against anti-regime fighters at least in Aleppo.³¹⁸ There had also been reports of Iranian-made tear gas used in Homs in 2011.³¹⁹

Stepping up military support

As the revolution was gradually pushed towards militarisation and armed opposition groups started to achieve significant victories on the ground, the Iranian regime also stepped up its military support to the Assad regime to ensure its survival. In March 2013, *Reuters* published another exclusive report, citing Western officials and diplomats, claiming that Iran had “significantly stepped up” its military support to the Syrian regime in the previous months, describing it as a “crucial lifeline” to Bashar al-Assad.³²⁰ As with sending Lebanese and Iraqi militias

to Syria, the increased military support to the Syrian regime suggested the war in Syria had entered a new phase in which the Iranian regime played a leading role. But there was one problem: a viable route.

By now, the Turkish government had totally given up on al-Assad’s promises of ‘reform’ and was fully supportive of the rebels. Part of this was apparently a relentless campaign to stamp out Iranian arms smuggling via Turkish territory and airspace, which led Iran to begin using Iraqi territory and airspace instead. The diplomats cited by *Reuters* in the above-mentioned article made clear that the main delivery route for Iranian arms to Syria was now through Iraq. In another report from September 2012, *Reuters* quoted a Western intelligence report claiming Iranian planes were flying from Iran to Syria via Iraq “on an almost daily basis.” They allegedly carried Sepah Pasdaran personnel and “tens of tons of weapons to arm the Syrian security forces and militias fighting against the rebels.”³²¹ “The extent of such shipments is far greater than has been publicly acknowledged,” it added, “and much more systematic, thanks to an agreement between senior Iraqi and Iranian officials.”

The intelligence report specifically mentions two Boeing 747 aircraft as being involved in Syria arms transfers: an Iran Air plane with the tail number EP-ICD and Mahan Air’s EP-MNE. Both were indeed among 117 aircraft identified by the US Treasury Department in its sanctions designation in September 2012 as “blocked Iranian aircraft.”³²² In addition to the airlines named above, the EU and the US also added to their Iran sanctions lists the names of Iranian shipping and construction companies associated with Sepah Pasdaran and apparently used for shipping weapons to Syria and a number of African countries.

In August 2012, *WSJ* quoted a founding member of Sepah Pasdaran, who now opposes the Iranian regime and lives in exile, saying Iran had also started moving military aid and cash to Syria “through Iranian companies in Iraq, such as a construction company owned by a former [Sepah] member now living in Iraq and a tour company servicing pilgrims to holy Shiite sites.”³²³ A Syrian rebel fighter operating in Homs with Liwa al-Haq was quoted by *Reuters* in February 2014 saying opposition forces “knew of Iranian planes flying into Hama airport in

central Syria to deliver weapons.” Latakia’s airport and port, as well as the port in Tartous, were also used to bring equipment, he added.³²⁴

It is worth noting that, in addition to targeting companies, the US Treasury also sanctioned Ismail Qani, the deputy commander of Sepah Qods, who the department described as being responsible for “financial oversight” of the force’s arms shipments.³²⁵ Qani, as already mentioned, was the first senior Iranian official to admit a “physical” Iranian regime presence in Syria.

The former Iraqi government of Nouri al-Maliki, a close ally of the Iranian regime, was repeatedly accused of allowing Iranian aircraft to use Iraqi airspace to transport arms and troops to Syria. In response, the Iraqi authorities staged a number of theatrical inspections of Iranian aircraft flying through Iraq and allegedly found “no illegal item.”³²⁶

In an interview with *Al-Asharq al-Awsat* in July 2013, Iraqi foreign minister Hoshiyar Zebari confirmed that the “random inspections” that started in September 2012 only found non-lethal materials (equipment, medicine and food) but added: “Honestly, these planes could be carrying other things, but we don’t have the deterrents, air defense systems or military aircraft necessary to prevent arms trafficking.”³²⁷

We told the Iranians, ‘We don’t want you to use your relationship with us to move any arms to others.’...

315 *Ibid.*

316 US Treasury Department, ‘Treasury designates Iranian Ministry of Intelligence and Security for human rights abuses and support for terrorism’, 16 February 2012, available: <http://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/tg1424.aspx>.

317 US Treasury Department, ‘Treasury designates Syrian entity, others involved in arms and communications procurement networks and identifies blocked Iranian aircraft’, 19 September 2012, available: <http://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/tg1714.aspx>.

318 See for example, C. J. Chivers, ‘Life with Syria’s rebels in a cold and cunning war’, *The New York Times*, 20 August 2012, available: <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/21/world/middleeast/syrian-rebels-coalesce-into-a-fighting-force.html>. See also: ‘Syria conflict: UK to give extra £5m to opposition groups’, *BBC*, 10 August 2012, available: <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-19205204>.

Moreover, we told NATO two days ago, and before that the members of Security Council and a small group of Syrians the following: ‘We refuse and condemn arms trafficking through our airspace and will officially inform Iran of that, but we cannot stop it... If you believe these flights contradict the Security Council decisions prohibiting arms from leaving Iran under the provisions of Chapter 7, I ask you, in the name of the government, to help us stop these flights in Iraqi airspace.’

American officials, citing “classified intelligence reports,” claimed there was evidence of “collusion between Iranian and Iraqi officials on the inspections,” accusing the latter

319 See, for example, this video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=he3tg6NkOQg>. For more on the use of tear gas in Syria, see for example: ‘Syria CS gas may have been made in the UK’, *Corporate Watch*, 6 April 2011, available: <http://www.corporate-watch.org/content/april-6-2011-syria-cs-gas-may-have-been-made-uk>.

320 Louis Charbonneau, ‘Exclusive: Iran steps up weapons lifeline to Assad’, *Reuters*, 14 March 2013, available: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/03/14/us-syria-crisis-iran-idUSBRE92D05U20130314>.

321 Louis Charbonneau, ‘Exclusive: Western report – Iran ships arms, personnel to Syria via Iraq’, *Reuters*, 19 September 2012, available: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/09/19/us-syria-crisis-iran-iraq-idUSBRE88117B20120919>.

322 US Treasury Department, ‘Syria Designations; Syria Identifications; Non-proliferation Designations; Non-proliferation Identifications; Burma Designation Removals; Non-proliferation Designation Removals; Anti-Terrorism Designation Update’, 19 September 2012, available: <http://www.treasury.gov/resource-center/sanctions/OFAC-Enforcement/Pages/20120919.aspx>.

323 Farnaz Fassihi, ‘Iran Said to Send Troops to Bolster Syria’, *The Wall Street Journal*, 27 August 2012, available: <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10000872396390444230504577615393756632230>.

324 Jonathan Saul and Parisa Hafezi, ‘Iran boosts military support in Syria to bolster Assad’, *Reuters*, 21 February 2014, available: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/02/21/us-syria-crisis-iran-idUSBREA1K09U20140221>.

325 US Treasury Department, ‘Treasury targets Iranian arms shipments’, *idem*.

326 See, for example: ‘Iraq inspects second Syrian-bound Iran flight, finds no illegal items’, *Press TV*, 28 October 2012, available: <http://www.presstv.com/detail/2012/10/28/269235/iraq-inspects-2nd-iranian-plane-to-syria/>.

327 Michel Abu Najm, ‘Iraqi Foreign Minister on the Syrian Crisis’, *Asharq al-Awsat*, 16 Jul, 2013, available: <http://www.aawsat.net/2013/07/article55309833>.

of tipping off Iran as to when inspections would be conducted.³²⁸ In one instance, Qassem Soleimani is said to have ordered a flight to Syria to carry only humanitarian goods. The plane was asked to land in Iraq for inspection soon after, on 27 October 2012. In another instance, an Iranian flight ignored an Iraqi request to land, presumably because it did not want its cargo to be inspected.³²⁹

In addition to al-Maliki, media reports have specifically pointed the finger at then Iraqi Transport Minister, Hadi al-Amiri, who belongs to the Badr Organisation, and Ammar al-Hakim, the leader of the Supreme Islamic Iraqi Council. Both are said to be close to Sepah Pasdaran and were accused of facilitating the transportation of fighters and weapons from Iran and Iraq into Syria.³³⁰ They are the ones, according to these reports, who are “protecting Iranian aircraft and tankers from inspection.”

Developments in Syria and Iraq in summer 2014 (the expansion of ISIS and the subsequent US air strikes against ISIS in Iraq) seem to have created a new obstacle for Iranian arms shipments to Syria via Iraq. Various Syrian and Lebanese sources have told the authors of this report that Sepah Pasdaran commanders and weapons are now being flown to Beirut, where the airport’s security is controlled by Hezbollah, and then transferred by air or land into Syria. We have not been able to verify these claims or obtain any more details. One thing is for sure, though: the Iranian regime’s military support to the Syrian regime is becoming ever more risky and ever more costly.

Made in Iran, used in Syria

Judging by the intercepted shipments and the sanctions-monitoring reports, the kinds of weapons that the Iranian regime has been sending to Syria range from communications equipment and light arms (assault rifles, machine guns, explosives, detonators and mortar shells) to more advanced and strategic weapons such as shore-to-sea missiles, surface-to-surface ballistic missiles, and even unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs).

Iranian tanks (T-72 Ural TURMS-T, T-72M1 TURMS-T, T-72AV ‘T-82’ TURMS-T), multiple rocket launchers (333mm Falaq-2 and IRAM), Ballistic Missiles (Fateh-110 or M-600) and even military jeeps and vans (Morattab Pazhan and Sahra) are all known to be in the possession of Syrian armed forces and Iran-backed militias fighting

in Syria.³³¹ The question is whether these Iranian weapons have actually been used by Syrian regime forces and militias against civilians and rebels and whether there is undeniable evidence of that. This is important to establish the Iranian regime’s complicity in the war crimes and crimes against humanity committed by the Syrian regime and the militias fighting alongside it.

In addition to the above official and media reports, other evidence of Iranian weapons being used in Syria includes photographs and videos published and analysed by a number of dedicated bloggers who have been following the events in Syria very closely.³³² For instance, in May 2013, independent arms expert Eliot Higgins, blogging under the name of Brown Moses, reposted a video from ‘Aqraba, Damascus, that provided “a very rare example of evidence” of accusations of Iran’s exporting weapons to Syria in violation of the UN Security Council ban.³³³

The video³³⁴ shows an unexploded 107mm rocket, typically launched by Type-63 multiple rocket launchers. After examining various variations of the rocket, Higgins concludes that the colours and the markings on this rocket “strongly indicate it was manufactured in Iran.” Moreover, the date of manufacture, which can be clearly seen in screenshots taken from the video, is 2012. As he puts it, “it appears what we have here is an Iranian rocket manufactured in 2012, during the Syrian conflict, and the arms embargo, that has managed to find its way into Damascus.” The unexploded rocket was found amidst a completely destroyed residential area. The destruction was presumably caused by similar rockets that did explode.

In another post a few days later,³³⁵ Brown Moses reposted another video³³⁶ filmed by opposition fighters at a position they had just captured from Syrian regime forces. The video clearly shows the markings on a munitions box containing two 120mm mortar bombs, manufactured in 2012, with AZ111A2 fuzes. As Higgins points out, AZ111A2 fuzes are produced by the Iranian Defense Industries Organisation. The box is seen among many others, and a rebel fighter is heard saying: “they were using this ammunition to shell civilians over there,” near the Tahmaz poultry farms in Hama.

Another Iranian weapon that has been used in Syria is the HS.50 anti-materiel sniper rifle, or rather, the unli-

censed Iranian copy of it called Sayad-2.³³⁷ The Syrian armed forces were not known to possess these rifles before the start of the current war. Yet thousands of civilians have been killed in Syria over the past three years by snipers, many apparently using this Iranian rifle.

In a post from April 2013, a specialist arms-monitoring blog called *Oryxspioenkop* said there were “two theories” to explain how these sniper rifles could have ended up in Syria.³³⁸ The first is through Hezbollah Lebanon, which is “a known operator of the HS.50.” The other “and most likely theory” is that the weapons were delivered to Syria directly. The Sayad-2, the blogger adds, is likely to have been included in above-mentioned Iranian arms shipments. It is also worth noting that most of these rifles have been seen not with regular Syrian troops but with Lebanese and Iraqi pro-Assad militias, as well as local Syrian militias ‘protecting’ their neighbourhoods.³³⁹

The most fatal Iranian weapons used in Syria have perhaps been the unguided artillery rockets, often mounted on converted Mercedes trucks. The Syrian army is known to have used Fajr and Falaq missiles, both the single tube and the double tube versions.³⁴⁰ In February 2014, the director of Armament Research Services confirmed to *Reuters* that Iranian-made Falaq-1 and Falaq-2 rocket launchers had been sent from Iran to Syria.³⁴¹ “While they have been around for a while,” he added, “we have seen an increase in [their] use of late.” Indeed, there have been a number of videos and photos of Falaq and Fajr rockets being fired by regime forces in Syria, especially in the Ghouta suburbs near Damascus.³⁴²

Then there are the short-range ballistic missiles (Zelzal, Fateh, etc.). Fateh-110, which is also known under its Syrian designations M-600 and Tishreen, was filmed in action at least once. Leaked footage of a Fateh-110 missile being launched by Syrian regime forces in the Qalamon region was posted on YouTube in March 2013.³⁴³

Needless to say, it is not just the missiles themselves that the Iranian regime has been shipping to Syria but also the know-how. In August 2012, for example, Iranian media reported that 13 commanders from Sepah Pasdaran’s missiles unit went to Syria to train their Syrian counterparts.³⁴⁴ The team was reportedly headed by Hassan Moqaddam.

328 Michael R. Gordon, Eric Schmitt and Tim Arango, ‘Flow of arms to Syria through Iraq persists, to U.S. dismay’, *The New York Times*, 1 December 2012, available: <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/02/world/middleeast/us-is-stumbling-in-effort-to-cut-syria-arms-flow.html>.

329 *Ibid.*

330 Saud Al-Sarhan, ‘From Qusair to Yabrud: Shiite foreign fighters in Syria’, *Al-Monitor*, 6 March 2014, available: <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/03/qusair-yabroud-shiite-foreign-fighters-syria.html>. See also: Moshreq Abbas, ‘Flow of Iranian weapons to Syria undermines Iraqi sovereignty’, *Al-Monitor*, 28 September 2012, available: <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/ar/politics/2012/09/iranian-weapons-to-syria-via-iraq.html>.

331 See, for example: ‘Syrian fighting vehicles’, *Oryx Blog*, 25 February 2013, available: http://spioenkop.blogspot.it/2013/02/syria-and-her-fighting-vehicles_25.html.

332 These include: <http://brown-moses.blogspot.co.uk>; <http://rogueadventurer.com/category/syria/>; <http://spioenkop.blogspot.it/search/label/Syria>.

333 Brown Moses, ‘Evidence of Iranian arms provided to Syria in the past 18 months’, 20 May 2013, available: <http://brown-moses.blogspot.co.uk/2013/05/evidence-of-iranian-arms-provided-to.html>.

334 Available: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8FG0Ak-xNGo>.

335 Brown Moses, ‘More evidence of sanction busting Iranian munitions deliveries to Syria’, 26 May 2013, available: <http://brown-moses.blogspot.co.uk/2013/05/more-evidence-of-sanction-busting.html>.

336 Available: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WGLi7l4hfY>.

337 ‘Anti-Materiel Rifles In Syria’, *Brown Moses*, 18 April 2013, available: <http://brown-moses.blogspot.fr/2013/04/anti-material-rifles-in-syria.html>.

338 ‘Syria and her HS.50s’, *Oryx Blog*, 27 April 2013, available: <http://spioenkop.blogspot.it/2013/04/syria-and-her-hs50s.html>.

339 *Ibid.* The blog provides many pictures of militiamen seen holding the rifle or using it in Syria. See also: Phillip Smyth, ‘Khomeini’s Cannon: .50 caliber anti-material rifles and Shia fighters in Syria’, *Jihadology*, 24 December 2013, available: <http://jihadology.net/2013/12/24/hizballah-cavalcade-khameneis-cannon-50-caliber-anti-material-rifles-shia-fighters-in-syria/>.

340 For more details, see: ‘Mercedes-Benz and Syria, a deadly combination’, *Oryx Blog*, 2 September 2013, available: <http://spioenkop.blogspot.it/2013/09/mercedes-benz-and-syria-deadly.html>.

341 Jonathan Saul and Parisa Hafezi, ‘Iran boosts military support in Syria to bolster Assad’, *idem*.

342 e.g. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N4XxQvWlX_k; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MvespWr4JFo>.

343 Available: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yDFde3XtBRU>. For more on Iranian missiles used in Syria, see: ‘Mercedes-Benz and Syria, a deadly combination’, *idem*.

344 ‘Syria welcomes 13 Sepah missile commanders + photos’ (in Persian), *Mashregh News*, 12 August 2012, available: <http://tinyurl.com/n936ppf>.

The determination of the Iranian regime to do everything it can to support Bashar al-Assad's regime is perhaps best exemplified by sending its latest unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs or drones) to Syria. In April 2014, footage of the Shahed 129 UAV flying over Eastern Ghouta, Damascus, was posted on YouTube.³⁴⁵ The Shahed 129 was unveiled in Iran in late 2012 and entered mass production in September 2013 for the Aerospace Force of the Iranian army.

According to *Oryx*, the Shahed 129 flying over Ghouta is a modified version of the original Shahed 129, "possibly of the third batch manufactured."³⁴⁶ The authors say improvements include a retractable landing gear and the ability to carry weapons (up to eight guided missiles). The drone seen in the video is not provided with missiles but this does not exclude the possibility that others are or will be. In November 2013, another new Iranian drone, known as The Yasir, was also spotted in Syria.³⁴⁷ The Yasir is apparently based on the American-made Scan Eagle, of which at least one has been captured by Iran.

Iranian drones were first spotted in Syrian skies in early 2012.³⁴⁸ But sending its latest drones to Syria is a sign not only of the length to which the Iranian regime is prepared to go to defend Bashar al-Assad's regime but also that it may be using Syria as a testing ground for its latest military technology.

Case study: Who's making the barrel bombs?

Barrel bombs are highly explosive, unguided bombs, which are cheaply produced using large oil drums, gas cylinders or water tanks filled with high explosives and scrap metal to enhance their destructive capacity. They are then dropped from helicopters without any guiding system to kill and destroy indiscriminately. They have nonetheless been extensively used by the Syrian regime forces over the last two years, despite a Security Council resolution in February 2014 ordering all parties to end the use of barrel bombs and other indiscriminate weapons in populated areas. More than 60 per cent of old Aleppo has been completely destroyed by barrel bombs, for example.³⁴⁹

In July 2014, Syrian opposition media published what they claimed was an outline of one of the biggest and most controversial arms factories in Syria, near al-Sfeira in Aleppo, leaked by an engineer who worked there.³⁵⁰

The factory reportedly manufactures large quantities of barrel bombs, ground-to-ground missiles, mortars and other types of weapons commonly used by Syrian regime forces.

Significantly, the engineer claimed that there are "four separate administrations competing with one another within the factory." One of them is Iranian, he said, which is allegedly responsible for importing explosives and metals used to make shells, before sending them off to the "Chinese ovens." The factory, according to the whistleblower, is overseen by the Syrian Air Force Intelligence, which submits regular reports to the Presidential Palace and coordinates with the Iranian and Chinese experts.

The report corroborates other reports about the al-Sfeira factory being run with Iranian and Chinese assistance.³⁵¹ Moreover, barrel bombs loaded with toxic chemicals, such as chlorine, have been used by Syrian regime forces on civilian areas, such as Kafar Zeita near Hama.³⁵² Iran has been accused of supplying the Syrian regime with Chinese-made chlorine gas canisters, of which it recently placed an order of 10,000 canisters, according to media reports.³⁵³

If the engineer's account of the Sfeira factory is true, then Iranian military experts and their commanders in Sepah Pasdaran may have been knowingly and willingly participating in one of the clearest and best documented types of war crimes committed in Syria, especially in Aleppo.

Case study: Did Sepah Qods play a role in the Ghouta chemical massacre?

On 21 August 2013, several opposition-controlled areas in the Ghouta suburbs of Damascus were hit by rockets containing the chemical agent sarin, killing hundreds of civilians, including many women and children.³⁵⁴

Apart from a few Syrian, Iranian and Russian propaganda outlets, and a few western journalists and commentators who fell for their propaganda,³⁵⁵ most serious observers around the world now agree that it was Syrian regime forces who committed the massacre, which the UN has described as a war crime.

Very few reports, however, have examined the possible role of the Iranian regime in this and other chem-

ical massacres committed in Syria over the past two years.³⁵⁶ In August 2014, on the first anniversary of the Ghouta massacre, *Naame Shaam* published a six-page report summarising various pieces of evidence that strongly suggest Sepah Qods may have played a role in the attack, calling for international investigations into the massacre to examine the possible complicity of the Iranian regime, particularly Gen. Qassem Solemani.³⁵⁷

The evidence was divided into three parts. The first dealt with the question of whether the Iranian regime was aware of the plan to carry out the attack. After discussing various relevant pieces of evidence, the report concluded that it was highly unlikely that the Ghouta chemical attack was the result of Bashar al-Assad's "losing his nerves," as a German report had claimed. It was also unlikely, it said, that the Iranian and Russian leaderships were unaware of such plans, as other media reports had suggested, citing other evidence that suggests the opposite.

345 See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h2nb7iajUdl> and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ncFicAkemSY>.

346 'Iran deploying her newest drones to Syria: The Shahed 129', *Oryx Blog*, 10 April 2014, available: <http://www.spioenkop.blogspot.it/2014/04/iran-deploying-her-newest-drones-to.html>.

347 'Iran deploying her newest drones to Syria: The Yasir UAV', *Oryx Blog*, 10 November 2013, available: <http://spioenkop.blogspot.fr/2013/11/the-yasir-uav-iran-deploying-her-newest.html>.

348 Mark Hosenball, 'Iran helping Assad to put down protests: officials', *Reuters*, 23 March 2012, available: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/03/23/us-iran-syria-crackdown-idUSBRE82M18220120323>.

349 For more details, see for example: Human Rights Watch, 'Syria: Barrage of Barrel Bombs', 30 July 2014, available: <http://www.hrw.org/news/2014/07/30/syria-barrage-barrel-bombs>.

350 'Secrets and details of the largest arms factory in Syria' (in Arabic), *All4Syria*, 17 July 2014, available: <http://all4syria.info/Archive/157599>.

351 See, for example: 'Aleppo Missile Factory', NTI, 1 August 2010, available: <http://www.nti.org/facilities/482/>. See also: 'Iran aids Syria's CW programme', *Janes Defense Weekly*, 21 October 2005; 'Syria blast 'linked to chemical weapons': report', *AFP*, 19 September 2007, available: <http://afp.google.com/article/ALeqM5i-JuglQvDKwKxupz9eULk1ml6OZ4Q>; 'Syria has expanded chemical weapons supply with Iran's help, documents show', *The Washington Post*, 27 July 2012, available: http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2012-07-27/world/35489623_1_chemical-weapons-chemical-plants-president-bashar.

352 For more details on this, see: 'Reports confirm use of toxic gases by Syrian regime, again - Chlorine barrel bombs produce highly toxic dioxin', *Naame Shaam*, 19 April 2014, available: <http://www.naameshaam.org/en/reports-confirm-use-of-toxic-gases-by-syrian-regime-again/>.

353 Con Coughlin, 'All the evidence points to Iran supplying Syria with chlorine bombs', *The Telegraph*, 6 May 2014, available: <http://blogs.telegraph.co.uk/news/concoughlin/100270222/all-the-evidence-points-to-iran-supplying-syria-with-chlorine-bombs/>.

354 There have been a number of investigations and in-depth reports about the Ghouta chemical attack. For example: The UN report, available: <http://www.scribd.com/doc/168606795/U-N-Report-on-Chemical-Attack-in-Syria>; Human Rights Watch's reports, available: <http://www.hrw.org/node/118725> and http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/syria_cw0913_web_1.pdf; the Violations Documentation Center's report, available: <http://www.vdc-sy.info/index.php/en/reports/chemicalmassacrefollowup>; and the US government's assessment, available: http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/shared/bsp/hi/pdfs/30_08_13_assessment.pdf.

355 The most famous example of this was Seymour Hersh's article in the *London Review of Books* in April 2014, which argued that the attack may have been committed by Jabhat al-Nusra with the help of the Turkish government, available: <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v35/n24/seymour-m-hersh/whose-sarin> and <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v36/n08/seymour-m-hersh/the-red-line-and-the-rat-line>. For more details on the whole affair, see: <http://www.naameshaam.org/en/seymour-hersh-and-the-gouta-chemical-massacre/>. There have been numerous articles and commentaries debunking Hersh's misguided allegations, e.g.: http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2013/12/09/sy_hershs_chemical_misfire#sthash.bMCue1XH.APmouRPS.dpbs; <https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/commentaryanalysis/524969-524969-why-seymour-hersh-has-it-wrong-this-time>; <http://eaworldview.com/2013/12/syria-special-chemical-weapons-conspiracy-wasnt-seymour-hersh-exclusive-dissected/>; <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/apr/22/allegation-false-turkey-chemical-attack-syria>; <http://lareviewofbooks.org/essay/dangerous-method-syria-sy-hersh-art-mass-crime-revisionism>. The other famous propaganda piece was a *Mint Press* 'investigation' in August 2013 claiming the attack was carried out by the rebels themselves with the help of Saudi Arabia: <http://www.mintpressnews.com/witnesses-of-gas-attack-say-saudis-supplied-rebels-with-chemical-weapons/168135/>. For a detailed debunking of the story, see: <https://ceasefiremagazine.co.uk/syria-deciphering-propaganda-war-ghouta-massacre/>.

356 About previous and subsequent chemical attacks, see: <http://www.naameshaam.org/en/reports-confirm-use-of-toxic-gases-by-syrian-regime-again/>; <http://www.syrianhr.org/reports/syrian-network-for-human-rights-report-24-07-2013-10.pdf>; <http://www.vdc-sy.info/index.php/en/reports/1400970048>; <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/10796175/Syria-chemical-weapons-the-proof-that-Assad-regime-launching-chlorine-attacks-on-children.html>.

357 'Evidence suggests Sepah Pasdaran may have played role in 2013 Ghouta chemical attack in Syria', *Naame Shaam*, 19 August 2014, available: <http://www.naameshaam.org/en/evidence-suggests-sepah-pasdaran-may-have-played-role-in-2013-ghouta-chemical-attack-in-syria/>.

Even if we were to believe that the Iranian government or political leadership were not aware of the Syrian regime's plans to use chemical weapons against rebels, the report cites other evidence that strongly suggests Sepah Pasdaran was fully aware of such plans, and may have even been part of drawing them up. This includes intelligence reports that Iranian officers believed to be members of Sepah Pasdaran were present at chemical weapons tests in Syria; the testimony of the former head of Syria's chemical weapons arsenal, who defected in 2012, claiming that members of Sepah Pasdaran attended "numerous meetings" with their Syrian counterparts to discuss the use of chemical weapons; and communications between Sepah Qods and the Syrian leadership intercepted by US intelligence services in which the former "urged" the latter to "use its supplies of toxic Sarin gas against rebels and the civilians supporting them in the besieged city of Homs."³⁵⁸

A thorough investigation by a specialist and independent team, *Naame Shaam* suggested, that it should be possible to put together these and other pieces of evidence to establish whether Sepah Pasdaran had prior knowledge of the Ghouta attack and whether it had indeed advised and trained Syrian regime troops to use sarin and other chemical weapons. It should also not be very difficult for such a team to establish which Syrian military units carried out the attack (the 155th Missile Brigade, the 4th Armored Division, etc.) and whether they had been liaising with Sepah Pasdaran 'advisors', as evidence suggests they have been.

The second type of evidence is to do with whether Iranian weapons were used in the attack. In addition to all the evidence detailed above of Iranian weapons being

used in Syria, there have been a couple of reports specifically suggesting that the rockets used in the Ghouta attack may have been Iranian ones.

In December 2013, a study analysing rockets linked to the Ghouta attack concluded that they were "most likely" fired by multiple launchers and had a range of about 3 kilometres. Moreover, the analysis suggested that the rockets were propelled by motors taken from a common family of 122-millimetre conventional artillery rockets known as the BM-21. The BM-21 line is a globally abundant system of ground-to-ground rockets, widely known as Grads, which originated in the Soviet Union but have been reproduced and updated by many countries, including Russia, China, Egypt and Iran.³⁵⁹

A few months before, another independent analysis of videos and pictures of the munitions claimed to have been used to deliver the chemical agents in the Gouta attack concluded that it was "likely a non-standard munition produced in Iran or Syria, not widely used or manufactured, but likely not an 'improvised' munition." It also concluded that it was "a tube-launched munition, fired from an Iranian Falaq-2 type launcher or derivative or copy."³⁶⁰

Finally, the *Naame Shaam* report raised a question about the possible role of Sepah-controlled Iraqi militias, particularly the Kata'eb Sayyid al-Shuhadaa, that were present in the area during and in the immediate aftermath of the attack, according to some reports. Their task was reportedly to "guard" the besieged areas held by rebels to prevent people from fleeing. Clashes between the two sides were reported over the few following days and Sayyid al-Shuhadaa held funerals for a number of its fighters who were killed there. The area was also heavily bombarded by regime forces, perhaps to destroy evidence of the chemical attack, as a number of observers have suggested.

The relevant question here is whether these Sepah-controlled militias' presence in the area was pre-planned in connection to the chemical attack or was just part of wider military operations in the area. It should not be difficult for an international investigation to establish this.

358 For reference to all these reports, see *ibid*.

359 C. J. Chivers, 'New Study Refines View of Sarin Attack in Syria', *The New York Times*, 28 December 2013, available: <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/12/29/world/middleeast/new-study-refines-view-of-sarin-attack-in-syria.html>.

360 N.R. Jenzen-Jones, 'Alleged CW munitions in Syria fired from Iranian Falaq-2 type launcher', *The Rogue Adventurer*, 29 August 2013, available: <http://rogueadventurer.com/2013/08/29/alleged-cw-munitions-in-syria-fired-from-iranian-falaq-2-type-launchers/>. For a collection of articles and blogs analysing munitions linked alleged chemical attacks in Syria, see: <http://brown-moses.blogspot.fr/2013/08/collected-media-of-munitions-linked-to.html>.

Conclusion

Chapter I has shown that Bashar al-Assad's regime would not have been able on its own to suppress the mass popular protests that erupted in Syria in March 2011 and the subsequent armed opposition across the country. It has shown that the Syrian regime would not have survived long without the unlimited, full-scale military support provided to it by the Iranian regime. In the words of a Hezbollah Lebanon fighter quoted by *Time* magazine in November 2013, "If we don't defend the Syrian regime, it would fall within two hours."¹

The chapter examined in detail the Iranian regime's military involvement in the war in Syria, tracking its gradual increase over the period March 2011-August 2014, an increase that would culminate in a *de facto* occupation of the country, as the next chapter will argue. From Sepah Pasdaran commanders providing strategic and tactical 'advice' to Syrian regime forces, through providing weapons and fighters, to creating, arming and directing various local and foreign militias that gradually assumed a leading role in the war.

This leading Iranian role is likely to continue after Bashar al-Assad falls, if Sepah Pasdaran and Hezbollah remain stationed in Syria. Indeed, many analysts have argued that the Iranian regime's strategy in Syria goes beyond saving Bashar al-Assad's regime and includes preparations for a post-Assad era in which Iranian-controlled militias still have influence on the ground and serve the Iranian regime's interests.² These interests include, first and foremost, securing Iranian arms shipments to Hezbollah in Lebanon.

Apart from the political consequences and implications, there are also important legal consequences for the Iranian regime's involvement in the war in Syria: its complicity in various war crimes and crimes against humanity committed in Syria.

There have been numerous reports about such crimes committed by Syrian regime forces and militias by various Syrian and international bodies and organisations. Unfortunately, most of these reports often stop short of pointing the finger at *everyone* responsible for these crimes. As many examples cited in this chapter should have demonstrated, many of these crimes would not have taken place without the Iranian regime's direct mili-



Hezbollah Lebanon chief, Hassan Nasrallah kissing Iranian Spiritual Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei in Iran (undated photo).

tary involvement. But is this sufficient to make the Iranian regime complicit in these crimes?

Without getting into detailed, complex legal arguments, there is sufficient evidence that the Iranian regime's military and political leadership has participated in many of these crimes in various ways and at various levels, ranging from 'inciting' and 'endorsing and adopting' specific acts to 'aiding and abetting' war crimes and crimes against humanity. Some of these crimes may have also been committed as 'joint enterprises', as various case studies included in the chapter would indicate.

The threshold of evidence in these types of cases is often very high. However, the authors of this report are confident that there is sufficient concrete evidence – some of which has indeed been detailed above – to bring lawsuits against a number of Iranian regime officials and commanders linked to the war in Syria.

For instance, talking about war crimes often requires that the armed conflict is recognised as an 'international conflict' and that those accused of complicity in these crimes have 'effective control' over the forces accused of actually committing them. The next chapter will provide legal arguments and factual evidence for such cases, showing that the war in Syria is of international character and that Sepah Pasdaran has effective control over Syrian regime forces and militias implicated in various war crimes and crimes against humanity.

There may also be easier ways of bringing lawsuits against the Iranian regime than going to the International Criminal Court in The Hague. For instance, any European citizen or resident who had been a victim of any specific human rights violation or crime against humanity in Syria could bring a lawsuit in the domestic courts under 'universal jurisdiction' (which allows the prosecution of people regardless of where the alleged crime was committed and regardless of the accused's nationality and country of residence). Or they could bring a lawsuit against certain low-level soldiers or militiamen who allegedly committed the crime and attempt to prove their link to higher-ranking Iranian commanders and even the Iranian regime's top leadership.

Finally, many of the crimes committed against civilians in Syria could also be regarded as terrorist acts (they were pre-planned, politically motivated, targeted civilians rather than militants, and were carried out by militia groups rather than regular armed forces).

The Syrian opposition could therefore demand that all related Iranian officials and entities are added to terrorism black lists and sanctioned accordingly.

1 Aryn Baker and Rami Aysha, 'Taking the Lead, Hizballah Girds for Key Syria Battle on Assad's Behalf', *Time*, 7 November 2013, available: <http://world.time.com/2013/11/07/taking-the-lead-hizballah-girds-for-key-syria-battle-on-assads-behalf/>.

2 See, for example: Fulton, Joseph Holliday and Sam Wyer, *Iranian Strategy in Syria*, *idem*. See also: 'The Hezbollah Connection in Syria and Iran', Council on Foreign Relations, 15 February 2013, available: <http://www.cfr.org/iran/hezbollah-connection-syria-iran/p30005>; Karen DeYoung and Joby Warrick, 'Iran, Hezbollah build militia networks in Syria in event that Assad falls, officials say', *The Washington Post*, 10 February 2013, available: http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/iran-hezbollah-build-militia-networks-in-syria-in-event-that-assad-falls-officials-say/2013/02/10/257a41c8-720a-11e2-ac36-3d8d9dcaa2e2_story.html; 'Pro-regime militias may outlast Assad, threaten future state: report', *The Daily Star*, 13 December 2013, available: <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Middle-East/2013/Dec-13/240910-pro-regime-militias-may-outlast-assad-threaten-future-state-report.ashx#axzz3CoKUJS3>.



1 Syrian *shabbiha*

2 Sepah Pasdaran's chief, Maj. Gen. Mohammad Ali Jafari: "Sepah is offering [Syria] assistance in planning, as well as financial help, but does not have a military presence [in Syria]."

3 The Houla massacre, May 2012, was committed by the Iranian-backed *shabbiha*.

4 Alleged Iranian military trainer captured by Syrian rebels in Idlib in April 2013.



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6

1 One of the earliest videos of Hezbollah fighters in Syria - Horan, July 2011.

2 Funeral of Hezbollah commander Ali Hussein Nassif in Lebanon, October 2012.

3 Hezbollah Lebanon participated in Al-'Otaibeh massacre, 26 February 2014.

4 The battle of al-Qusayr in April-June 2013 was a major turning point in Hezbollah Lebanon's involvement in the Syria war. Picture of regular Syrian army troops after Hezbollah militiamen occupied the town.

5 Hezbollah members in the al-Yarmouk Palestinian camp in Damascus, June 2014.

6 Iraqi Shia fighters in Sayyida Zaynab, Damascus. Undated photo, on November 28, 2013



1



2

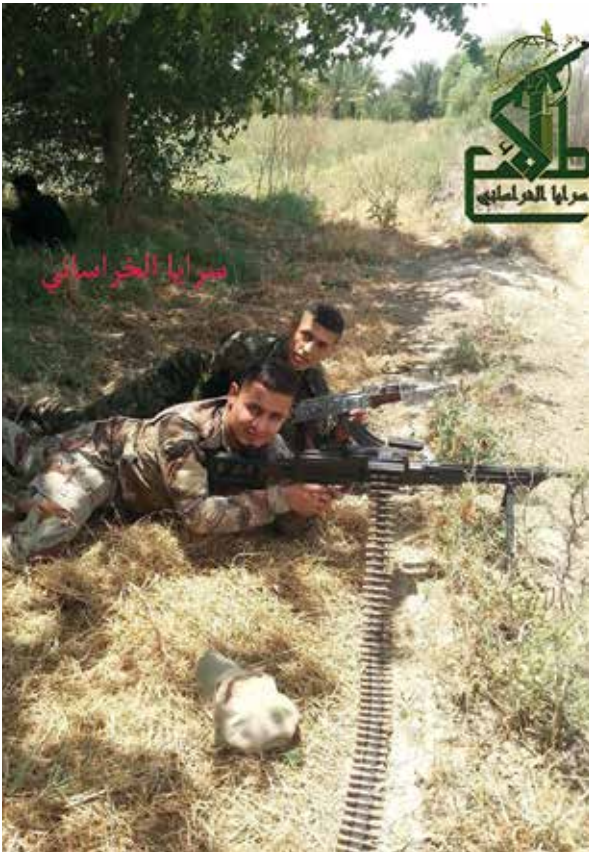


3

1 Up to 1,500 mosques in Syria have been partially or completely destroyed, for example, see the Khaled bin Walid Mosque in Homs, summer 2013 pictured here. ©AFP

2 Harakat al-Nujabaa holding a military-style funeral in the Military Engineering Academy in Aleppo, March 2014.

3 Checkpoint of Shia Iraqi militiamen at Damascus airport (date unknown).



1 Afghan fighters in Syria (date unknown).

2 Funeral of an Afghan fighter killed in Syria held in Qom, Iran, and attended by Sepah Pasdaran commanders.

3 European Solidarity Front delegation with Syrian army soldiers in Damascus.

4 Ezedin Abdel Aziz Khalil, aka Yasin al-Suri, the head of the al-Qaeda network in Iran, according to the US Treasury Department.

5 Zahran Alloush, Hassan Abboud and Isa al-Sheikh, the leaders of the Islam Brigades (now Islamic Front), Ahrar al-Sham and Suqour al-Islam respectively, taken upon their release by the regime from the Saidnaya prison in mid-2011.



1 Iranian snipers captured by Syrian rebels in Homs in June 2012.

2 One of the high-profile official receptions held in Iran for 48 Iranian prisoners of war who were released by Syrian rebels in January 2013 in a prisoner exchange deal. The Iranian regime claimed they were 'pilgrims' but many turned out to be Sepah Pasdaran officers.

3 Iranian experts are allegedly involved in the manufacturing of Syrian barrel bombs at an arms factory near Aleppo.

4 The Iranian drone Shahed 129 spotted flying over al-Ghouta near Damascus in April 2014.

5 Iranian commanders instructing Syrian regime forces in the suburbs of Aleppo. From footage found by Syrian rebels on the camera of an Iranian filmmaker killed in Syria in August 2013.

6 Victims of the Ghouta chemical attack on 21 August 2013.

II. Syria Under Military Occupation



Picture of two Sepah Pasdaran commanders, Mahdi Khorasani and Ali Asghar Shanaei, holding rifles in front of the Sayyida Zaynab shrine in Damascus. Picture taken during their funeral in Iran in June 2013.

II. Syria Under Military Occupation

In February 2013, former Syrian Prime Minister, Riad Hijab, who defected from the regime in August 2012, said in an interview with *Al-Arabiya* TV channel that Syria was currently “occupied by Iran” and was “run” by the commander-in-chief of Sepah Qods, Major-General Qassem Soleimani.¹ As far as the authors of this report are aware, Hijab was the first prominent Syrian opposition figure to use the term ‘occupation’ to describe the Iranian regime’s role in Syria, even though Syrian activists and campaigners had been using it rhetorically for a while.²

This chapter will attempt to demonstrate that describing what the Iranian regime is doing in Syria today as an occupation is more than rhetorical; that it actually has a legal basis and legal consequences, including Iran’s obligations as an occupying force in Syria. We will start with a legal discussion of what constitutes a military occupation and whether the Iranian regime’s presence in Syria can be defined as a military occupation. We will then outline various pieces of evidence and case studies to back up this claim, including statements by Iranian officials. Based on this, we will then propose a new narrative about the Syrian revolution and the current situation in Syria, as well as a new set of demands in light of this new reality.

What is military occupation?

In its most basic sense, ‘occupation’ refers to situations where a person or a group of people assume physical control over a place or a piece of land, monopolising the

power to enter it, use it and stay there as they please, while excluding others, who may include the original occupants, from doing so. In international humanitarian law, occupation – often referred to in legal jargon as ‘belligerent occupation’ or ‘military occupation’ – is when a state assumes effective, provisional control over a territory belonging to another sovereign state using military force. This control or administration is often referred to as the occupation government or military government, which should be distinguished from martial law, which is the undemocratic rule by domestic armed forces.

There are two main pieces of international law that deal with occupations: the 1904 Hague Regulations Concerning the Laws and Customs of War on Land and the Fourth Geneva Convention of 1949. Article 42 of the Hague Regulations state:

*Territory is considered occupied when it is actually placed under the authority of the hostile army. The occupation extends only to the territory where such authority has been established and can be exercised.*³

Although occupation is not defined as clearly in the Fourth Geneva Convention, Article 2 states:

*The present Convention shall apply to all cases of declared war or of any other armed conflict which may arise between two or more of the High Contracting Parties [states], even if the state of war is not recognized by one of them. The Convention shall also apply to all cases of partial or total occupation of the territory of a High Contracting Party, even if the said occupation meets with no armed resistance.*⁴

These situations of military occupation are assumed to be temporary, seeking to preserve the status quo pending a final resolution of the conflict. Otherwise they would be considered an annexation of land, colonisation or permanent settlement, which are prohibited under international law, at least in theory. As the 1948 Nuremberg Trial put it, “In belligerent occupation, the occupying power does not hold enemy territory by virtue of any legal right. On the contrary, it merely exercises a precarious and temporary actual control.”⁵

Nor is it necessary for both parties of the conflict to recognise the occupation or the state of war as such



Members of Hezbollah Lebanon in Beirut in 2013 the coffin of a fighter who was killed in Syria, Fadi Mohammad al-Jazzaar. Source: <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/21/world/middleeast/syria-developments.html?pagewanted=all&r=0>

in order for the Fourth Geneva Convention to apply. The main issue is whether the concerned territory (in this case the regime-controlled parts of Syria) is placed “under the authority of the hostile army” (in this case the Iranian armed forces and militias).

The specifics of the nature and extent of this authority have been dealt with in a number of international cases. For instance, in the 2005 case concerning *Armed Activities on the Territory of the Congo*, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) ruled that the definition of belligerent occupation as set out in Article 42 of the Hague Regulations required that the authority of the hostile army “was in fact established and exercised by the intervening State in the areas in question.”⁶ (emphasis added)

It should also be noted that the above treaties – with the exception of Article 3 common to the four Geneva Conventions – deal with international or inter-state armed conflicts, as opposed to non-international or internal armed conflicts. Thus, if a state intervenes militarily on the side of another state in a non-international armed conflict, it is generally agreed by international law experts that this does not change the qualification of the conflict. However, a non-international armed conflict, even if it was geographically confined to the territory of a single state, can be qualified as international if a foreign state intervenes militarily on the side of rebels fighting against government forces.

In the 1995 case of *Tadić*, the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) concluded that a foreign state exercising “overall control” over a rebel group would be sufficient to internationalise a conflict. This does not require the “issuing of specific orders by the State, or its direction of each individual operation.” It is sufficient that a state “has a role in organizing, coordinating or planning the military actions” of a non-state armed group.⁷

Furthermore, Article 1 of the 1977 Additional Protocol I to the Geneva Conventions provides that conflicts shall be qualified as international when they occur between a state and an authority representing a people “fighting against colonial domination and alien occupation and against racist regimes in the exercise of their right of self-determination.”⁸ The potential application of this provision – which, to our knowledge, has never actually

been used before – to the Syrian war will be explored further in the next section.

The legality of conduct during an occupation must be distinguished from the legality of the occupation itself. Thus, once an armed conflict is recognised as international or as a military occupation, the above treaties specify certain rights and duties for the occupying force. These include the protection of civilians, the treatment of prisoners of war, the prohibition of torture, of collective punishment and unnecessary destruction of property, the coordination of relief efforts and so on. The repeated violation of any of these provisions by the occupying force is considered a serious war crime.

1 ‘Riyad Hijab: Syria in occupied by Iran and is run by Soleimani’ (in Arabic), *Al-Arabiya*, 14 February 2013, available: <http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2013/02/14/266293.html>.

2 e.g. ‘Syrian protests: “No to Iranian Occupation of Syria”’, *Naame Shaam*, 17 November 2013, available: <http://www.naameshaam.org/en/syrian-protests-no-to-iranian-occupation-of-syria/>.

3 ICRC, ‘Article 42, Regulations concerning the Laws and Customs of War on Land’, annexed to *Convention (IV) respecting the Laws and Customs of War on Land*, The Hague, 18 October 1907, available: <http://www.icrc.org/applic/ihl/ihl.nsf/Article.xsp?action=openDocument&documentId=01D426B0086089BEC12563CD00516887>.

4 ICRC, ‘Article 42’, *Convention (IV) relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War*, Geneva, 12 August 1949, available: <http://www.icrc.org/applic/ihl/ihl.nsf/Article.xsp?action=openDocument&documentId=C5031F972DD7E216C12563CD0051B998>.

5 Cited in Yutaka Arai Takahashi, *The Law of Occupation: Continuity and Change of International Humanitarian Law*, Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 2009, p. 7.

6 ICJ, *Case Concerning Armed Activities on the Territory of the Congo*, 19 December 2005, available: <http://www.icj-cij.org/docket/files/116/10455.pdf>, paras. 166-180. For more examples of recent case law dealing with the definition of belligerent occupation, see for example: Michael Siegrist, ‘IV. Examples of recent case law dealing with the definition and beginning of belligerent occupation’ in *The Functional Beginning of Belligerent Occupation*, Graduate Institute Publications, Geneva, 2011, available: <http://books.openedition.org/ihed/95?lang=en>.

7 ICTY, ‘Decision on the Defence Motion for Interlocutory Appeal on Jurisdiction’ in *Prosecutor v. Dusko Tadić a/k/a “Dule”*, 2 October 1995, available: <http://www.icty.org/x/cases/tadic/acdec/en/51002.htm>.

8 ICRC, ‘Article 1’, *Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949, and relating to the Protection of Victims of International Armed Conflicts (Protocol I)*, 8 June 1977, available: <http://www.icrc.org/applic/ihl/ihl.nsf/Article.xsp?action=openDocument&documentId=6C86520D7EFAD527C12563CD0051D63C>.

For example, Article 43 of the Hague Regulations states:

The authority of the legitimate power having in fact passed into the hands of the occupant, the latter shall take all the measures in his power to restore, and ensure, as far as possible, public order and safety, while respecting, unless absolutely prevented, the laws in force in the country.

Article 49 of the Fourth Geneva Convention is more specific:

Individual or mass forcible transfers, as well as deportations of protected persons from occupied territory to the territory of the Occupying Power or to that of any other country, occupied or not, are prohibited, regardless of their motive.

Nevertheless, the Occupying Power may undertake total or partial evacuation of a given area if the security of the population or imperative military reasons so demand. Such evacuations may not involve the displacement of protected persons outside the bounds of the occupied territory except when for material reasons it is impossible to avoid such displacement. Persons thus evacuated shall be transferred back to their homes as soon as hostilities in the area in question have ceased.

The Occupying Power undertaking such transfers or evacuations shall ensure, to the greatest practicable extent, that proper accommodation is provided to receive the protected persons, that the removals are effected in satisfactory conditions of hygiene, health, safety and nutrition, and that members of the same family are not separated.

The Protecting Power shall be informed of any transfers and evacuations as soon as they have taken place.

The Occupying Power shall not detain protected persons in an area particularly exposed to the dangers of war unless the security of the population or imperative military reasons so demand.

The Occupying Power shall not deport or transfer parts of its own civilian population into the territory it occupies.⁹

It is worth noting that even if the domestic laws are changed by the occupying force, Article 47 of the Fourth Geneva Convention still guarantees the same rights for the occupied people:

Protected persons who are in occupied territory shall not be deprived, in any case or in any manner whatsoever, of the benefits of the present Convention by any change introduced, as the result of the occupation of a territory,

into the institutions or government of the said territory, nor by any agreement concluded between the authorities of the occupied territories and the Occupying Power, nor by any annexation by the latter of the whole or part of the occupied territory.¹⁰

Does Iranian presence in Syria constitute a military occupation?

As indicated above, if a state intervenes on the side of another state fighting against domestic rebels, the conflict may still be considered 'non-international'. However, there is much more to the Iranian intervention in Syria than supporting the Syrian 'government' and its armed forces, as the previous chapter has shown.

In addition to arming, training and directing irregular Syrian paramilitary forces (the *shabbiha* and the NDF) and Iran's own paramilitary forces fighting in Syria (Sepah Qods and Basij), there are all the Iranian-backed foreign militias that have assumed a leading role in major military operations in certain parts of Syria, at least since the battle of al-Qusayr in Spring 2013. In fact the presence of Hezbollah Lebanon and the Iraqi militias in parts of Syria, such as Sayyida Zaynab and Yabroud, can arguably be considered as a separate occupation of Syrian territory by 'non-state entities'.

Furthermore, other states (the US, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, etc.) have also intervened in Syria on the side of Syrian rebels. They have all played a role in "organizing, coordinating or planning the military actions of a non-state armed group," as the judgment in the *Tadić* case put it. Moreover, the Syria war is no longer geographically confined to the territory of Syria; it has occasionally and increasingly spilled over to other neighbouring countries, especially Lebanon and Iraq. Thus, even if one forgets about the Iranian regime's involvement, the intervention of other states is arguably sufficient for the Syrian war to be regarded as an international one within the meaning of the Hague Regulations and the Fourth Geneva Convention.

Some legal experts have argued that if the military intervention by the outside state (in this case Iran) is solely directed at the non-state armed groups (the rebels) and their *military* operations or infrastructure, the conflict should still be regarded as non-international. But as the previous chapter has shown, the Iranian military intervention in Syria (whether through weapons, Iranian fighters

and military advisors, Iranian-backed militias and so on) has targeted and affected both Syrian civilians and civilian infrastructure. This, according to the experts, renders the conflict into an international one.¹¹ Alternatively, it could be argued that the current war in Syria is both internal and international at the same time.

A better argument, in our view, is treating the Syrian case as what is sometimes called 'occupation with an indigenous government in post'.¹² Leaving aside the question of Bashar al-Assad's regime's legitimacy as an indigenous government,¹³ and leaving aside the presence of Iranian commanders, fighters and militias on Syrian territory without an official treaty between the two countries allowing the stationing of Iranian armed forces and military bases in Syria, there is abundant evidence that the Iranian regime *has established and is exercising* authority in Syria, both directly through its armed forces and militias and indirectly through the Syrian regime. The evidence includes new military command structures involving Iranian commanders, fundamental changes introduced into Syrian government institutions as a result of the Iranian regime's intervention, as well as statements by Iranian officials indicating how they view their role in Syria. The next sections will discuss each of these points in more detail.

There are many examples in history of this type of occupation: Czechoslovakia and Denmark under Nazi-German rule before and during the Second World War, the Soviet and British occupation of Iran in 1941-46, the French mandate in Syria and Lebanon between the two great wars, Vichy France, and even the Syrian occupation of Lebanon up until 2005. In all these cases, the indigenous government was little more than a 'puppet government', serving as an agent of the occupying force and effecting the latter's military control in the concerned state, often against the national interests of that state.

It should also be noted that, even with an indigenous puppet government in place, the implementation of international humanitarian law is still the responsibility of the occupying power.

Finally, as indicated above, the Syrian war could arguably be treated as an international conflict under Article 1 of the 1977 Additional Protocol I to the Geneva Conventions, because it now involves people fighting against the "colonial domination and alien occupation" of the Iranian

regime, among others. There is a procedural requirement for this article to be triggered, which involves a recognised authority representing the Syrian people who are struggling for freedom and independence (in this case the Syrian National Coalition or any other Syrian opposition umbrella group) making a formal, unilateral declaration addressed to the Swiss Federal Council. This will trigger the application of the Geneva Conventions and the Additional Protocols to the Syrian opposition's conflict with the Syrian and Iranian regimes.

One problem here is that Iran has signed but not ratified Protocol 1, which means it is not legally bound by it yet.¹⁴ Syria has, however, and both countries are parties to the four Geneva Conventions.¹⁵ Moreover, Article 2 common to the four Geneva Conventions provides that,

9 ICRC, 'Article 49', *Convention (IV)*, *idem.*, available: <http://www.icrc.org/applic/ihl/ihl.nsf/WebART/380-600056?OpenDocument>.

10 ICRC, 'Article 47', *Convention (IV)*, *idem.*, available: <http://www.icrc.org/applic/ihl/ihl.nsf/ART/380-600054?OpenDocument>.

11 For a detailed discussion of this point, see: 'Qualification of armed conflicts', Geneva Academy of International Humanitarian Law and Human Rights, 13 June 2012, available: http://www.geneva-academy.ch/RULAC/qualification_of_armed_conflict.php.

12 Adam Roberts, 'What is a Military Occupation?', Colombia University, 1985, available: <https://web.law.columbia.edu/sites/default/files/microsites/gender-sexuality/Roberts%20What%20is%20Military%20Occupation.pdf>, pp. 284-8. See also: See also: Evan J. Wallach, 'Belligerent Occupation' in *Interactive Outline Of The Law Of War*, 2000, available: <http://lawofwar.org/Occupation.htm>.

13 Bashar al-Assad was never democratically elected and his rule is opposed by the majority of Syrians. He literally inherited the presidency from his father, Hafez al-Assad, in 2000. After his father fell ill and his elder brother Basil died in a car accident in 1994, Bashar was brought back from the UK and prepared to succeed his father instead of Basil. In 2000, Bashar was appointed as president by the ruling inner circle after the constitution was hastily changed so as to lower the minimum age for presidency candidates from 40 to 34, which was his age at the time. His 're-election' in June 2014 was viewed by the majority of the world as a 'cruel joke'. For more details, see: <http://www.naameshaam.org/en/why-bashar-al-assads-elections-are-a-cruel-joke/> and <http://www.naameshaam.org/en/how-sepah-pasdaran-guarantees-bashar-al-assads-re-election-on-3-june-2014/>.

14 See the list of states party to the Protocol: http://www.icrc.org/applic/ihl/ihl.nsf/States.xsp?xp_viewStates=XPages_NORMStatesParties&xp_treatySelected=470.

15 See the list of states party to the Convention: http://www.icrc.org/applic/ihl/ihl.nsf/States.xsp?xp_viewStates=XPages_NORMStatesParties&xp_treatySelected=380.

“Although one of the Powers in conflict may not be a party to the present Convention, the Powers who are parties thereto shall remain bound by it in their mutual relations. They shall furthermore be bound by the Convention in relation to the said Power, if the latter accepts and applies the provisions thereof.”¹⁶

From the horse's mouth

As indicated above, it is not necessary for the Iranian government to officially declare or acknowledge that it is in a state of war in Syria or that it is occupying Syrian territory in order for the Hague Regulations and the Fourth Geneva Convention to apply. Nevertheless, various Iranian officials and commanders have actually made such acknowledgments, some of which were cited in the previous chapter.

For example, in August 2012, the commander of Sepah Pasdaran's Saheb al-Amr unit Gen. Salar Abnoush said in a speech to volunteer trainees: “Today we are involved in fighting every aspect of a war, a military one in Syria as well as a cultural one.”¹⁷

In September 2013, the chief of Sepah Qods Gen. Qassem Soleimani told Iran's Assembly of Experts that Iran “will support Syria to the end.”¹⁸

On the same day, 170 members of the Iranian Consultative Assembly (parliament) signed a statement expressing their “support for the resistance front in Syria” and declaring their readiness to “sacrifice our lives beside our Syrian brothers against the infidels and oppressors.”¹⁹

Less than two months later, Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei echoed Soleimani's words during a meeting with Syrian religious scholars: “Iran will stand by Syria which is facing an unjust war,” adding that the only way to confront this war was “resistance and steadfastness.”²⁰

Various Iranian officials and commanders have repeatedly stated that Syria was a “red line” or a “strategic defence line” for Iran and that any attack on it would be considered “an attack on Iran.”²¹ For example, in May 2014, Major-General Yahya Rahim Safavi, the former chief commander of Sepah Pasdaran and Ali Khamenei's military advisor, said:

Iran's influence has been extended from [the] Iran, Iraq and Syria axis to the Mediterranean, and this is the third time

*that Iran's influence has expanded to the Mediterranean. Our line of defense is no longer in Shalamche [a border town in Iran which was one of main sites of the Iran-Iraq war]; our defensive lines are [at the] southern Lebanon border with Israel, and our strategic depth has reached areas adjacent to the Mediterranean above Israel.*²²

The remarks were made during a ceremony held in a Sepah centre in Isfahan to mark the anniversary of the launch of the Beit-ol-Moqaddas operation during the Iran-Iraq war. Safavi also described the previous 40 months of the military and political war in Syria as a “great strategic victory for the Islamic Republic of Iran.”

In February 2013, Hojjat al-Islam Mehdi Taeb, the head of Ayatollah Khamenei's think-tank Ammar Strategic Base, made a startling statement during a meeting with university student members of the Basij paramilitary force:

*Syria is the 35th province of Iran and is a strategic province for us. If the enemy attacks us and wants to appropriate either Syria or Khuzestan [an Arab-populated Iranian province bordering Iraq's Basra], the priority is that we keep Syria. If we keep Syria, we can get Khuzestan back too. But if we lose Syria, we cannot keep Tehran.*²³

Other statements by senior Sepah Pasdaran commanders have implied that the Iranian regime was exerting a considerable amount of military authority in Syria. For example, in September 2012, Gen. Qassem Soleimani was quoted by an Iranian nationalist opposition source criticising the Syrian regime's military strategy and implying that he and his force exerted a considerable amount of influence over it, even though this may ‘go wrong’ sometimes: “We tell al-Assad to send the police to the streets,” he said, “and suddenly he dispatches the army.”²⁴

In April 2014, another senior Sepah commander implied that it was Iranian support that kept Bashar al-Assad in power. “86 world countries stood and said the Syrian government should be changed and Bashar al-Assad should go,” said Brigadier-General Amir Ali Hajizadeh, the commander of Sepah Pasdaran's Aerospace Force, “but they failed because Iran's view was to the contrary, and they were eventually defeated.”²⁵

The most direct admission of the Iranian regime's exercising military authority in Syria came in May 2014 from a very senior Sepah Pasdaran commander, namely Brig. Gen. Hossein Hamedani, who is said to be in charge of overseeing Sepah's operations in Syria. Bashar al-Assad is "fighting this war [in Syria] as our deputy," he said, implying that the Iranian regime is the one who is in charge.²⁶ Hamedani also described the Iranian regime's role in Syria as a "sacred defence" of Iran, a term that was used by the Iranian regime during the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq war. Urging normal Iranian citizens and businesspeople to support "the troops of Islam and the people of Syria as they did so during the Sacred Defence," Hamedani also revealed that the Iranian regime was establishing "centres for supporting Syrian people" in various Iranian provinces, where each Iranian province will be "responsible for one Syrian province."

As pointed out in the previous chapter, all these and other statements and declarations were made by Iranian officials with demonstrable insider knowledge of Iranian military operations. As to why they were made, some appear to have been the result of competing interests or agendas within the Iranian regime (many were immediately removed from the websites that originally published them); others as signals or threatening messages to the outside world. In some cases, though, they may have simply been out of boasting about the regime's power and influence in front of regime supporters or the Iranian public more generally.

But keep it between us

Yet, in addition to removing some of these controversial statements, the Iranian regime and/or government have also on occasions reacted with obvious anger and defensiveness. For instance, when Iranian MP Seyyed Mahmoud Nabavian boasted during a speech in February 2014 that Iran had trained some 150,000 Syrian regime fighters on Iranian soil, and another 150,000 in Syria, in addition to 50,000 Hezbollah Lebanon fighters,²⁷ another MP demanded that Nabavian should be prosecuted, adding that disclosing such details paints Iran as a "supporter of terrorists" and would harm the country's "national interests."²⁸ But Mansour Haghghatpour, who is affiliated with the ruling conservative bloc, did not deny the Iranian regime's role in training and supporting Bashtar al-Assad's forces; he only said that revealing such details would harm Iran's 'national interests' and should therefore be kept secret.

- 16** ICRC, 'Article 2', *Convention (IV)*, idem, available: http://www.icrc.org/ihl/385ec082b509e76c41256739003_e636d/6756482d86146898c125641e004aa3c5.
- 17** A copy of the original report in the Iranian students' news agency, Daneshjoo, is available at <http://www.freezepage.com/1346016739ALEKCXYBK>. For English, see: <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10000872396390444230504577615393756632230>.
- 18** 'Quds Force Commander: Iran to support Syria to the end', *Fars News*, 4 September 2013, available: <http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.aspx?nn=13920613001181>.
- 19** *Ibid.*
- 20** 'Khamenei: Iran will stand by Syria against the unjust war', *Islamic Awakening*, 31 October 2013, available: <http://islamic-awakening.ir/?a=content.id&id=50378&lang=en>.
- 21** See, for example, this collection of official Iranian statements on Syria: <http://www.irantracker.org/analysis/toumaj-iranian-reaction-syria-aug-31-2013>.
- 22** 'Iran's sphere of influence has been expanded to Mediterranean: general', *Tehran Times*, 2 May 2014, available: <http://www.tehrantimes.com/politics/115471-irans-sphere-of-influence-has-been-expanded-to-mediterranean-general>. See also: <http://www.ncr-iran.org/en/ncr-statements/terrorism-fundamentalism/16487-khame-nei-s-advisor-iran-s-defensive-line-is-in-southern-lebanon-border-with-israel-and-syria>.
- 23** 'Head of Ammar Base: Our priority is to keep Syria rather than Khuzestan', *BBC Persian*, 14 February 2013, available: http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/iran/2013/02/130214_nm_tayeb_syria_basij.shtml. For an English translation, see: 'Head of Ammar Strategic Base: Syria is Iran's 35th Province; if we lose Syria we cannot keep Tehran', *Iran Pulse*, 14 February 2013, available: <http://iranpulse.al-monitor.com/index.php/2013/02/1346/head-of-ammar-strategic-base-syria-is-irans-35th-province-if-we-lose-syria-we-cannot-keep-tehran/>.
- 24** 'Qassem Suleimani's criticism of Bashar al-Assad's policies' (in Persian), *Mazhabi Melli*, 5 September 2012, available: <http://tinyurl.com/nhshbbv>.
- 25** 'IRGC commander: US-led front unable to topple Assad because of Iran', *Fars News*, 12 April 2014, available: <http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.aspx?nn=13930123000316>.
- 26** Hamedani's comments were reported by Iranian state-controlled news agency *Fars News* on 4 May 2014, but the report was later removed from the agency's website. A screen shot and an English summary of the report are available at <http://www.naameshaam.org/en/sepah-pasdaran-commander-al-assad-is-fighting-syria-war-as-our-deputy/>.
- 27** 'Nabavian: 300,000 Syrian troops trained by Iran' (in Persian), *Emrooz u Farda*, <http://emroozofarda.ir/?p=3047>. An English report is available at: <http://en.trend.az/regions/iran/2241820.html>.
- 28** 'Vice chair of National Security Committee: Do not speak so other countries say Iran is breeding terrorists' (in Persian), *Khabar Online*, 16 February 2014, available: <http://khabaronline.ir/%28X-%281%29%28zv0jvfqnrzv02vdv33nclia%29%29/detail/338638/Politics/parliament>. An English translation and commentary is available at: <http://www.naameshaam.org/en/iranian-mp-revealing-details-of-irans-military-support-of-syrian-regime-against-national-interests/>.

Similarly, when Javad Karimi Qodousi, a member of the National Security and Foreign Policy Committee in the Iranian parliament, revealed during a ceremony in November 2013 that there were “hundreds of troops from Iran in Syria” and that what was often reported in the news as Syrian military victories was in fact “the victories of Iran,” the statement was emphatically denied by Sepah Pasdaran, with the force’s spokesperson, Ramazan Sharif, saying: “We strongly deny the existence of Iranian troops in Syria. Iranian [commanders] are only in Syria to exchange experiences and advice, which is central to the defense of this country.” Clearly disturbed by the remarks, he added: “the media in Iran must show greater care when publishing this kind of news so that they do not aid the foreign media’s psychological warfare.”²⁹

Such statements and revelations by Iranian military commanders and other hardliners in Iran were not only embarrassing to Rouhani’s government, which has been marketing itself as more moderate, but also to the Syrian regime, which has been trying hard to maintain an image of a strong, national leadership fighting against a foreign conspiracy aimed at destabilising Syria. The tension reached its height in April 2014, when the Syrian Ministry of Information took unprecedented measures against ‘friendly’ foreign TV channels, including a requirement to obtain a prior permission before covering Syrian regime forces’ battles, especially on the frontlines and in regime-held areas.

The surprise move appears to have been prompted by a number of ‘friendly TV channels’, particularly Hezbollah Lebanon’s *Al-Manar* and the Iranian-funded *Al-Mayadeen*, going ‘over the top’ in their celebration of the Syrian military victories of Hezbollah and other Iranian-backed militias. The aim of the measures, according to insiders from *Al-Manar* and *Al-Mayadeen*, was to allow Syrian state TV to broadcast such ‘scoops’ first so as to give the impression that the Syrian regime was still in control, not Hezbollah and Sepah Pasdaran and the media outlets affiliated with them.³⁰

The affair was neatly summed up in a revealing statement by the Syrian president’s political and media adviser, Buthayna Shaaban:

Some friendly TV channels have recently been broadcasting interviews and reports that kind of give the im-

pression that the Syrian state would not have held up if it was not for so-and-so state and such-and-such party. This is completely unacceptable to us. Syria has held up because of its people, who have so far given over a quarter of a million martyrs. The Ministry of Information has taken a number of measures that reflect the Syrian state’s vision, which sees its relations with other countries as based on mutual respect.

In reaction, *Al-Mayadeen* decided to significantly reduce its coverage of the war in Syria (or its propaganda, rather).³¹ *Al-Manar* managers and Hezbollah commanders were reportedly “very pissed off,” even though they were later reassured that “nothing will change” as Shaaban retracted her statement and the Syrian Minister of Information tried to water down the measures that the ministry had taken.³² It is also plausible that the measures were taken in coordination with the Iranian regime, which had also been trying hard to not be portrayed – at least in front of the outside world – as the one who is actually calling the shots in Syria.

Case study: Who’s responsible for the death of *Al-Manar* journalists in Maaloula?

On 7 April 2014, three Lebanese journalists working for Hezbollah Lebanon’s *Al-Manar* TV were killed and two others injured when their car came under gunfire attack in the historic town of Maaloula in Syria. Reporter Hamza Haj Hassan, cameraman Mohammad Mantash and technician Halim Allaw were among a convoy of ‘friendly’ media workers, including some from the Iranian state-run Arabic-speaking channel *Al-Alam* TV. They were accompanying Syrian regime and Hezbollah forces as these took over Maaloula from opposition forces, along with two other towns in the Qalamon region near the Lebanese border.

Hezbollah, Iranian and Syrian officials were quick to condemn the “cowardly act” and blame it on “takfiri terrorists.” But important questions remain unanswered.

According to *Al-Manar* itself, the attack came hours after Syrian regime and Hezbollah forces recaptured Maaloula and drove the opposition forces out. The town was reportedly “under their full control.” So where did these opposition forces that opened fire on the media convoy come from? Why had they not been driven out too?

Haj Hassan's last Tweet sounded relaxed and confident. He even named the hotel where he and his colleagues were going to stay that day (al-Safir hotel). Would any sensible war correspondent publicly reveal his location if he was not confident that he would be safe there?

These and other facts gave rise to speculation among Syrian and Lebanese commentators that the Hezbollah and Iranian media convoy may have been fired at by angry Syrian soldiers as tensions between the Syrian regime on the one hand and Hezbollah and Sepah Pasdaran on the other apparently reached unprecedented levels in previous days (see above).

A few days before, Syrian soldiers and Hezbollah fighters had been heard exchanging insults on radios and blaming one another for heavy losses, according to sources in the Syrian opposition and the Free Syrian Army. There had even been rumours of tensions at the highest levels between the Syrian and Iranian regimes following statements by Iranian officials that it was Iran that had kept Bashar al-Assad in power.

So could it have been some angry or insulted Syrian soldiers who opened fire on the Hezbollah and Iranian media convoy? Or could it have been orders from higher levels in the Syrian regime to send a message about who's in charge in Syria?

Even if one ruled out such 'conspiracy theories', the *Al-Manar* journalists were embedded with the Syrian regime and Hezbollah forces, which had launched an offensive to recapture rebel-held towns in the Qalamon region. The TV channel aired footage of two cars, including a white SUV carrying broadcasting equipment for live transmission, riddled with bullets. Moreover, *Al-Manar's* director initially said it was "not clear whether the journalists were specifically targeted." Yet the channel was quick to blame "terrorists" in later reports.

Could it be that the media convoy was simply caught up in crossfire between regime and Hezbollah forces and the remaining opposition fighters on the outskirts of Maaloula, where some reports said the attack took place? It certainly does not look like a targeted sniper attack, as some human rights organisations claimed.

Moreover, Hajj Hassan, along with other *Al-Manar* reporters, had provided extensive coverage of the Qalamon battles, accompanying Hezbollah and Syrian regime troops, interviewing them and making up stories about their victories and heroism. They were not simply "carrying out their professional duty in covering events," as some of the condemnations put it. *Al-Manar* is a propaganda mouthpiece for Hezbollah Lebanon and the Iranian regime. This has made many in the Syrian opposition armed forces view the channel and its staff as "legitimate military targets." Indeed, Hajj Hassan had previously posted on Facebook pictures of himself wearing a military uniform and carrying a heavy weapon.³³

As a *Naame Shaam* commentary on the story put it at the time, "All attacks on journalists and media workers covering wars and armed conflicts should be condemned. But watching the prestigious funeral held in South Lebanon for the *Al-Manar* journalists on Tuesday, and hearing the high-profile, strongly worded condemnations by Lebanese, Syrian and Iranian officials (including the Lebanese president, the Iranian foreign minister and others), one cannot but wonder: where was your conscience when other journalists and media workers were killed in Syria?"³⁴

29 'Sepah denies presence of "hundreds of Iranian troops in Syria"' (in Persian), *Deutsche Welle*, 04 November 2013, available: <http://tinyurl.com/mmmww6j5>.

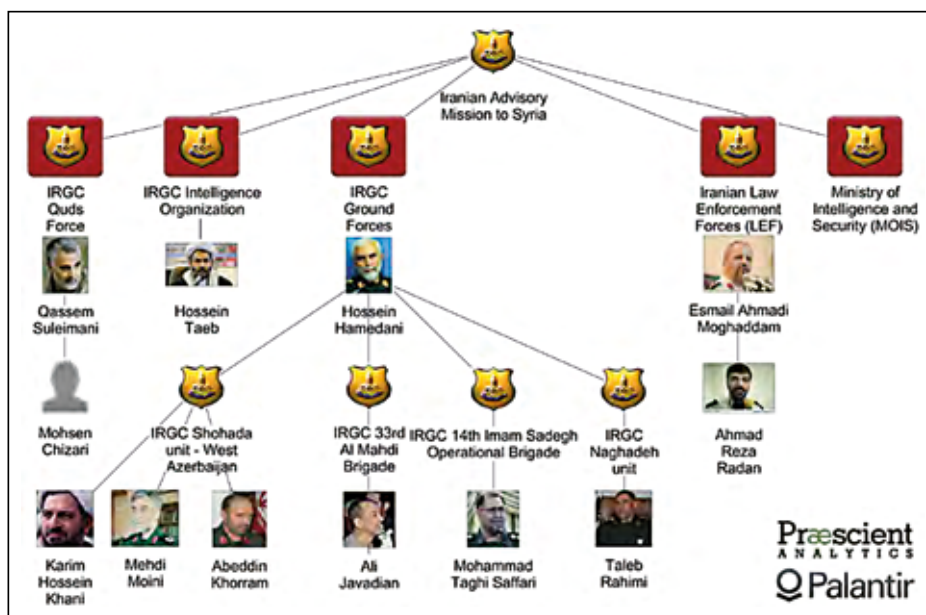
30 'Syrian regime frustrated by media attributing its 'victories' to Hezbollah and other militias', *Naame Shaam*, 11 April 2014, available: <http://www.naameshaam.org/en/syrian-regime-frustrated-by-media-attributing-its-victories-to-hezbollah-and-other-militias/>.

31 Nazeer Rida, 'Al-Mayadeen channel withdraws Damascus correspondent', *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 14 April 2014, available: <http://www.aawsat.net/2014/04/article55331170>.

32 'Buthayna Sha'ban denies statement attributed to her on a Facebook page bearing her name' (in Arabic), *Al-Hayat*, 11 April 2014, available: <http://tinyurl.com/o5y4qnn>. For an English translation, see *ibid*.

33 See: <http://www.globalarabnetwork.com/politics/41-lebanon-politics/12190-2014-04-15-12-01-56>.

34 'Who's responsible for the death of *Al-Manar* journalists in Maaloula? Ayatollah Khamenei', *Naame Shaam*, 18 April 2014, available: <http://www.naameshaam.org/en/whos-responsible-for-the-death-of-al-manar-journalists-in-maaloula/>.



Known senior personnel in Iran's 'advisory mission' to Syria.
Source: 'Iranian Strategy in Syria', *idem*.

The new command chain

As with official declarations of war or occupation, there is no legal requirement for a specific number of foreign commanders (in this case Iranian) to be 'on site' (in Syria) before it can be said that the country has been placed under a foreign military rule or occupation. Such rule results from the fact that national sovereignty has been surrendered and a foreign military force is now in overall control. To quote Article 43 of the Hague Regulations, it is enough that "the authority of the legitimate power [has] in fact passed into the hands of the occupant."

The implicit assumption here is that the occupying force exercises this authority directly, through its armed forces, which requires a clear and identifiable command structure. However, as argued above, authority can also be partly exercised indirectly, through local agents or an indigenous government. Evidence suggests that the Syrian case is a combination of both scenarios.

In September 2013, *WSJ* quoted one of the chief commanders of the Free Syrian Army's intelligence operations, Gen. Yahya Bitar, saying the Free Army possessed identification cards and dog tags of Iranian soldiers the rebels had captured or killed in battle. "Al-Assad asked for them to be on the ground," he

added. "The Iranians are now part of Syria's command-and-control structure."³⁵ But is there any other evidence of this apart from claims of Syrian rebels?

The previous chapter cited many examples that clearly show Sepah Pasdaran is in charge of directing the Syrian regime's overall military strategy, at least in some strategic parts of the country. The military campaigns in al-Qusayr, Yabroud and the wider Qalamon region, which were clearly led by Sepah Pasdaran and Hezbollah, are good examples. Negotiating and brokering the Homs deal in May 2014 on behalf of the Syrian regime is another. Other cases mentioned in the chapter show Iranian commanders are directing military operations on the ground, as the captured footage of the Sepah commander in Aleppo clearly shows. A number of Syrian, Lebanese and Iraqi fighters have also testified to serving under Iranian or Hezbollah command.

A crucial question here is how high up or down the Syria military command chain these Iranian commanders are and whether it is possible to identify a clear Iranian command structure in Syria.³⁶

Various reports by Western think-tanks and intelligence services provide varying degrees of details on Iranian military commanders who are said to be directing the Iranian regime's operations in Syria. For example, a 2013

study by the Institute for the Study of War and the American Enterprise Institute's Critical Threats Project, entitled *Iranian Strategy in Syria*, claims that Sepah Pasdaran's Qods Force and elements of the conventional Sepah Pasdaran Ground Forces, as well as several Iranian intelligence agencies, formed a "top-level advisory mission" to support the Syrian regime since early 2011.³⁷ The report names two prominent Sepah commanders, Hossein Hamedani and Qassem Soleimani, as leading this mission, and names a number of other senior commanders from various Sepah units serving under them with specific responsibilities in Syria. Many of these were also mentioned in the previous chapter.

Brigadier-General Hossein Hamedani is the former commander of Sepah Pasdaran's unit in Greater Tehran who led the 2009 crackdown on the Green Movement protesters in Tehran. Before that he served as the commander of Sepah's units in Kurdistan, where he led the campaign against the guerrilla movement there. He is said to be Iran's main strategist in guerrilla and urban warfare and has written a book about that. US and European officials say he is playing "a central role" in implementing similar strategies in Syria.³⁸ As already mentioned in this and the previous chapters, Hamedani has made a number of statements about the Iranian regime's role in Syria. He was the one who said Bashar al-Assad was fighting the war in Syria as "our deputy."

Another prominent person in the Iranian regime's command structure in Syria – and perhaps *the* most important – is Major-General Qassem Soleimani, the commander-in-chief of Sepah Qods. According to one media report, quoting a Sepah member in Tehran "with knowledge about deployments to Syria," Soleimani was personally appointed by Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei to "spearhead military cooperation with al-Assad and his forces."³⁹ He was indeed one of the first senior Iranian commanders to visit Damascus after the escalation of the war in Syria in late 2011, according to US officials.⁴⁰

Another report quotes "a prominent Iraqi official who met with Soleimani months ago" saying the latter's mission in Syria was "not limited to protecting the [Syrian] regime from collapsing [but] also has to preserve Iranian interests in Lebanon and Syria should the regime fall."⁴¹ The

same report quotes pro-Iran Iraqis saying, in October 2012, Soleimani "directly took charge of the 70,000 best Syrian fighters, in addition to 2,500 from Hezbollah and 800 Iraqis, most of whom have lived in Syria since the 1980s."⁴² More information about Soleimani and his role in Syria is provided in the box below.

Needless to say, the chief commander of Sepah Pasdaran Maj. Gen. Mohamad Ali Jafari and Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei should also feature in this command structure.⁴³ Besides the well-known fact that Khamenei has the final say in all important state matters in Iran, there are a number of indications that he has personally been guiding the Iranian regime's policy in Syria. For instance, in August 2013, the director of Iran's Central Council of Friday Prayer Leaders in the city of Jiroft in eastern Iran said in a speech that the Supreme Leader

35 Farnaz Fassihi, Jay Solomon and Sam Dagher, 'Iranians dial up presence in Syria', *The Wall Street Journal*, 16 September 2013, available: <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424127887323864604579067382861808984>.

36 For Sepah Pasdaran's command structure in general, see for example: Will Fulton, *The IRGC Command Network: Formal Structures and Informal Influence*, AEI's Critical Threats Project, July 2013, available: http://www.irantracker.org/sites/default/files/pdf_upload/analysis/The_IRGC_Command_Network.pdf.

37 Will Fulton, Joseph Holliday and Sam Wyer, *Iranian Strategy in Syria*, AEI's Critical Threats Project and Institute for the Study of War, May 2013, available: <http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/IranianStrategyinSyria-1MAY.pdf>

38 Farnaz Fassihi and Jay Solomon, 'Top Iranian official acknowledges Syria role', *The Wall Street Journal*, 16 September 2012, available: <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10000872396390443720204578000482831419570>.

39 Farnaz Fassihi, 'Iran said to send troops to Bolster Syria', *The Wall Street Journal*, 27 August 2012, available: <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10000872396390444230504577615393756632230>.

40 'US: Iran supplying weapons for Syrian crackdown', *Now*, 14 January 2012, available: https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/nownews/us_iran_supplying_weapons_for_syrian_crackdown.

41 Mushreq Abbas, 'Iran's man in Iraq and Syria', *Al-Monitor*, 12 March 2013, available: <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/03/soleimani-iraq-syria-difference.html>.

42 *Ibid.*

43 For more details about the Iranian decision-making structure under Khamenei, see, for example: Frederick W. Kagan, *Khamenei's Team of Rivals: Iranian Decision-Making*, American Enterprise Institute, July 2014, available: http://www.irantracker.org/sites/default/files/imce-images/Khameneis_Team_of_Rivals_20140729.pdf.

was “guiding [the operations] in southern Lebanon and, by virtue of his guidance, Gaza has raised its head and Syria has opposed the infidels.”⁴⁴

Another indicator is the deployment of members of Iran’s Law Enforcement Forces (LEF) to Syria, which was discussed in the previous chapter. As the above-mentioned report *Iranian Strategy in Syria* points out, the deployment of LEF personnel in support of the Syrian regime indicates that the Iranian strategy in Syria has been formulated and is being implemented by “the senior-most leadership of Iran.”⁴⁵ This is because, in theory, LEF falls under the control of the Interior Ministry, which reports to the President. In practice, however, LEF, like all Iranian security services, is overseen by the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC), which reports directly to the Supreme Leader. It is therefore very likely, as the report suggests, that the SNSC developed a plan for supporting al-Assad that the Supreme Leader would then have approved, and that this plan is now being executed. The presence of LEF officers in Syria, the authors add, is “the clearest possible evidence that Iran’s whole-of-government strategy in Syria is being controlled directly by Khamenei rather than Soleimani, the IRGC, or any other single individual or entity in Iran.”⁴⁶

The authors of this report slightly disagree with the wording: the Iranian strategy in Syria may involve various authorities and departments but is being implemented by the Iranian regime rather than the government, that is, Khamenei and Sepah Pasdaran, not Iranian President, Hassan Rouhani, and his ministers. In February 2014, Iranian Foreign Minister, Mohammad Javad Zarif told his American counterpart that he “did not have the authority to discuss or to negotiate on Syria,” suggesting that such powers remained in the hands of Gen. Qassem Soleimani.⁴⁷

Qassem Soleimani, the *de facto* ruler of Syria

In May 2014, shortly before the sham presidential ‘elections’ that were held in Syria on 3 June 2014, *Naame Shaam* launched a mock ‘election campaign’ calling on Syrians to vote for Gen. Qassem Soleimani as president of Syria and for Bashar al-Assad as his deputy.⁴⁸ The aim of the campaign was to mock the sham elections and to highlight the Iranian regime’s role in Syria. As the group put it, “if presidential elections are to be forced upon Syrians in regime-held areas on 3 June 2014, why not vote for the one who really has the power and vote the puppet Bashar al-Assad as his deputy?”

Interestingly, later that month, an Iranian news website quoted al-Assad declaring his ‘love’ for Soleimani during a meeting with Iranian MPs. “Major-General Soleimani has a place in my heart,” he reportedly said. “If he had had to run against me, he would have won the election. This is how much Syrian people love him,” he added.⁴⁹

Jokes and al-Assad’s unwitty comments aside, Soleimani has been described as the principal Iranian military strategist and “the single most powerful operative in the Middle East today.”

Born in 1957, Qassem Soleimani grew up in the south-eastern Iranian province of Kerman. After the 1979 Islamic Revolution, he joined Sepah Pasdaran. A few years later, he joined Sepah Qods, a division of Sepah that conducts special operations abroad in order to “export the Islamic revolution.” He was later promoted to Major General by Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. The relationship between the two is said to be “very close.”

Early in his career as a guard in his 20s, he was stationed in northwestern Iran and helped to crush a Kurdish uprising. He later actively took part the eight-year war between Iran and Iraq. He spent his early years at Sepah Qods combating Central Asian drugs smugglers and the Taliban in Afghanistan, which provided him with a considerable experience in the inner workings of international trafficking and terrorism networks. He was reportedly one of the principal architects and brains behind restructuring Hezbollah Lebanon in 1990s. He is also said to have been the mastermind behind a bomb plot aimed at killing the Saudi Arabian ambassador to the US in Washington D.C., which later led the US and some EU countries to include him in their sanctions lists.

Between 2004 and 2011, Soleimani was in charge of overseeing Sepah Qods’s efforts to arm and train Shiite militias in Iraq in a proxy war against the US. He is reportedly “familiar to every senior Iraqi politician and official.” This provided him with a rich experience, which he would later skillfully apply. According to media reports, Ayatollah Khamenei personally put him in charge of arming, training and directing the Syrian regime forces and militias, as well as Hezbollah fighters and the Iraqi militias fighting in Syria.⁵⁰

Another crucial question is who in the Syrian regime and in Bashar al-Assad's inner circle has been liaising with the Iranian commanders and whether the latter's involvement resulted in any changes in the Syrian command structure.

The clearest example of fundamental changes in the Syrian command structure and institutions is the creation and rise of the *shabbiha*. Like the Iranian Basij, the *shabbiha* were created to substitute the 'unreliable' regular army, and have indeed done so. The previous chapter has detailed how this happened and what the Iranian regime's role was in it. Furthermore, the Syrian army has been literally destroyed by the current 'internal' conflict to the extent that it is incapable of defending the country against any outside aggression, as the repeated Israeli attacks on Syrian sites over the past three years have shown.

Another example is the exclusion and inclusion of senior government and army officials in accordance with Iranian desires or orders. The most well-known case is that of Farouq al-Shara', the former vice-president who has been reportedly under house arrest in Damascus for over a year, after he was prevented from flying to Moscow at the Damascus airport in early 2012. According to one Iraqi politician, quoted by an Arabic media report in February 2014, the reason behind this measure had more to do with the position held by al-Shara' on Iran's interference in Syria than his opposition to the military response to the peaceful protests at the beginning of the Syrian revolution, as reports claimed at the time.⁵¹ Others claimed he was secretly coordinating with the Russian government to form a 'national reconciliation government' that would exclude Bashar al-Assad and his brother Maher.

According to the Iraqi source, Al-Shara' was opposed to Sepah Pasdaran, Hezbollah Lebanon and Iraqi Shia fighters' being brought in to fight in Syria, because he believed this will encourage other regional powers to interfere in the country and militarise the uprising – which is, indeed, what happened. He was apparently also pushing for a more prominent role for Russia and Saudi Arabia in reaching a political settlement, which the Iranian regime apparently felt would threaten its influence in Syria and limit its own role.

More surprising, perhaps, is the claim that al-Shara' has been under house arrest not by Syrian police or army but by Sepah Pasdaran. According to the Iraqi source,

44 'Iranian religious leader: Syria, Gaza and South Lebanon in the hands of Khamenei' (in Arabic), *Al-Arabiya*, 20 August 2013, available: <http://tinyurl.com/kybmkhf>. For English, see: Y. Man-sharof, 'Despite denials by Iranian regime, statements by Majlis member and reports in Iran indicate involvement of Iranian troops in Syria fighting', The Middle East Media Research Institute, 4 December 2013, available: <http://www.memri.org/report/en/print7623.htm>.

45 Will Fulton et. al., *idem*.

46 *Ibid*.

47 'Zarif tells Kerry he can't talk Syria (See Pasdaran)', *Iran Times*, 21 February 2014, available: <http://iran-times.com/zarif-tells-kerry-he-cant-talk-syria-see-pasdaran/>. See also, 'FT interviews: Hassan Rouhani', *Financial Times*, 29 November 2013, available: <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/22bbf304-58e2-11e3-a7cb-00144feabdc0.html#axzz3BEfH9AAu>.

48 'Election campaign: #Vote_for_Qassem_Soleimani president of Syria', *Naame Shaam*, 22 May 2014, available: http://www.naameshaam.org/vote_for_qassem_soleimani-president-of-syria/. As part of the campaign, *Naame Shaam* also called for 'election rallies' at Iranian embassies and consulates around the world on 2 June 2014. See: <http://www.naameshaam.org/videos-of-qassem-soleimanis-syria-election-rally-at-iranian-embassy-in-london/>.

49 'Interesting comments by Bashar al-Assad about General Soleimani' (in Persian), *Khedmat*, 24 June 2014, available: <http://khedmat.ir/vdcjyaev.uqeaizsffu.html>. For an English translations, see: <http://www.naameshaam.org/al-assad-gen-soleimani-has-a-place-in-my-heart-and-would-have-won-the-elections/>.

50 For more on information on Maj. Gen. Qassem Soleimani, see, for example: 'Iran's Master of Iraq Chaos Still Vexes U.S.', *The New York Times*, 2 October 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/03/world/middleeast/qassim-suleimani-irans-master-of-iraq-chaos-still-vexes-the-us.html>; 'The Shadow Commander', *The New Yorker*, 30 September 2013, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2013/09/30/the-shadow-commander>; 'Qassem Suleimani: the Iranian general 'secretly running' Iraq', *The Guardian*, 28 July 2011, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/jul/28/qassem-suleimani-iran-iraq-influence>; 'Qassim Suleimani: commander of Quds force, puppeteer of the Middle East', *The Guardian*, 16 June 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jun/16/qassim-suleimani-iraq-iran-syria>; 'Iran's Man in Iraq and Syria', *Al-Monitor*, 12 March 2013, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/03/soleimani-iraq-syria-difference.html>.

51 'Al-Shara' banned from leaving Damascus and the [Iranian] Revolutionary Guards are in charge of guarding him', *Al-Seyasah*, 12 February 2014, available: <http://tinyurl.com/kfkhhcc>. For English, see: <http://www.naameshaam.org/en/assad-trusts-sepah-pasdaran-more-than-his-own-armed-forces/>. See also: Bassam Barabandi and Tyler Jess Thompson, 'A Friend of my Father: Iran's Manipulation of Bashar al-Assad', *Atlantic Council*, 28 August 2014, available: <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/a-friend-of-my-father-iran-s-manipulation-of-bashar-al-assad>.

Sepah commanders asked Bashar al-Assad to guard al-Shara's two houses in Damascus themselves, because they feared that any Syrian armed forces that guard him, including the elite Republican Guards, who are known to be loyal to al-Assad and his brother Maher, could "collude with him [al-Shara'] and smuggle him out of Syria."⁵²

These changes in Syrian state institutions resulting from the Iranian regime's intervention are arguably a grave breach of Article 47 of the Fourth Geneva Convention, which provides that people in occupied territory "shall not be deprived, in any case or in any manner whatsoever, of the benefits of the present Convention by any change introduced, as the result of the occupation of a territory, into the institutions or government of the said territory, nor by any agreement concluded between the authorities of the occupied territories and the Occupying Power."⁵³

Various reports have identified Mohammed Nasif Kheirbek, the former deputy director of Syria's General Security Directorate and later the vice-president for security affairs, as the main 'interlocutor' between the Syrian and Iranian regimes and the main contact for many Iranian-backed militias.⁵⁴ A leaked US diplomatic cable described him as Syria's "point-man for its relationship with Iran."⁵⁵ He is said to be the most senior adviser who "has the ear" of Bashar al-Assad, especially since the outbreak of the revolution. In June 2011, Nasif reportedly travelled to Tehran to meet Gen. Qassem Soleimani. They are said to have discussed opening a supply route that would enable Iran to transfer military hardware to Syria via a new military compound at Latakia airport.⁵⁶

But while Nasif was inherited by Bashar al-Assad from his father and was kept, and even promoted, during the current war, others in the president's inner circle were not.

Case study: Who assassinated the Syrian 'crisis cell'?

On 18 July 2012, a bomb was allegedly detonated in the National Security HQ in Damascus, killing a number of top military and security officials from what was known as the Syrian regime's 'crisis cell'. Those killed included then Defence Minister, Dawoud Rajha, his deputy and Bashar al-Assad's brother-in-law, Assef Shawkat, and the Deputy Vice-President, Hassan Turkmani. The head of the National Security and al-Assad's security advisor, Hisham Ikhtyar (or Bakhtyar), was seriously injured and

was announced dead two days later. Interior Minister Mohammad al-Sha'ar, was also injured in the attack.⁵⁷

Both the Free Syrian Army and what was then known as the Islam Brigade claimed responsibility for the bombing. The FSA's logistical coordinator Lou'ay al-Moqdad claimed the attack was carried out by a group of FSA members in coordination with some of the officials' drivers and bodyguards. His claim was even furnished with minute details, such as that two bombs were used, not one, "one hidden in a packet of chocolates and one in a big flower pot." They had been "planted in the room days before," he said, and were "remotely detonated by defectors."⁵⁸

But a high-ranking and reliable source in the Syrian opposition told *Naame Shaam*, quoting a Western intelligence official, that the high-profile operation had nothing to do with the FSA or other opposition armed groups. It was carried out by Sepah Pasdaran, possibly with direct orders from Gen. Qassem Soleimani himself. Some members in the "crisis cell" had been opening communications channels with Arab Gulf states and the US to make a deal behind the back of Iran. The Pasdaran struck to prevent such a deal and, since then, fully control President Assad who *de facto* became their hostage.

Local residents who live next door to the building also told *Naame Shaam*'s correspondent in Damascus that they did not hear any explosions on that day, and were "very surprised and bewildered" when they heard the news. The BBC's correspondent at the time reported that the building's windows were "not shattered."⁵⁹ In an interview the following year, Hisham Ikhtyar's son, who was present inside the building when the incident took place, said he "felt a shake but did not hear any explosions and did not see any fire. Only the walls fell down and there was darkness."⁶⁰

All these pieces of circumstantial evidence suggest that the operation was an inside job. It is possible that the device was small, controlled explosives hidden in the dropped ceiling of the meeting room, as some reports have suggested,⁶¹ but this cannot be independently verified without a forensic examination of the site, which has obviously not been possible (the Syrian authorities did not even publish pictures of the crime scene).

Interestingly, the person who is alleged to have planted the bombs is said to be, according to Western intelligence sources, the office manager of Hisham Ikhtyar, who was apparently 'arrested' by the Syrian authorities but his whereabouts and fate are unknown to date.

The crucial question is: why were these top officials and commanders assassinated? Some clues may be found in who was present at the meeting and who was not.

A few months before the incident, a civilian secretary who worked for the 'crisis cell' defected from the regime and leaked some internal security documents that were made public by *Al-Arabiya* TV channel.⁶² The documents reveal the 'cell' was headed by Bashar al-Assad himself, who received the reports and commented on them before they were discussed by the other officials; his brother Maher, who only attended the cell's meetings occasionally; and the Vice-Secretary-General of the Ba'th party, Mohammad Shaed Bkhaitan, who was later replaced by Hassan Turkmani as the chair of the cell. The other eight members included the four victims of the 18 July operation (Asef Shawkat, Dawoud Rajha, Hisham Ikhtyar and Mohammad al-Sha'ar) as well as the head of the Air Force Intelligence, Jamil Hasan, the head of the Military Intelligence, Abdul-Fattah Qudsiyyeh, the head of the Political Security Directorate, Deeb Zeitoun and the head of the General Intelligence, Ali Mamlouk.

According to the leaked documents, these eight members met every day at 7pm (which presumably changed after the documents were leaked). Why were Mamlouk, Hasan, Qudsiyyeh and Zeitoun not present at this meeting?

Western intelligence sources claim that Bashar and Maher al-Assad received intelligence (most probably from the Iranian regime) that the assassinated officials were "plotting an internal coup," in coordination with Russia, that would have removed Bashar and Maher from power and replaced them with a transitional government led by Farouq al-Shara', aided by a military council headed by Dawoud Rajha and Assef Shawkat. As mentioned above, al-Shara' has been placed under house arrest and the other two were assassinated in this attack. In December 2012, Mohammad al-Sha'ar escaped what appears to have been another attempted assassination.⁶³

A few days after the 'crisis cell' incident, Ali Mamlouk was appointed as the head of National Security, replacing Ikhtyar. Deeb Zeitoun replaced Mamlouk and Abdul-Fattah Qudsiya became Mamlouk's deputy. Qudsiya was replaced by Ali Younes, who is considered one of 'Maher al-Assad's men' within the regime. Finally, Rustum Ghazaleh, the former chief of Syrian intelligence in Lebanon and most recently the head of intelligence in Damascus, took over from Zeitoun. As to Rajha's Defence Minister post, it was given to Gen. Fahd Jasem

52 *Ibid.*

53 ICRC, 'Article 47', *Convention (IV), idem.*

54 'Factbox: Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's inner circle', *Reuters*, 4 May 2011, available: <http://uk.reuters.com/article/2011/05/04/us-syria-assad-circle-idUSTRE7433TN20110504>.

55 'Treasury Team's Damascus consultations on financial sanctions', Cable ID: 07DAMASCUS269_a, *Wikileaks*, 15 March 2007, available: https://www.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/07DAMASCUS269_a.html.

56 'Bashar al-Assad's inner circle', *BBC*, 30 July 2012, available: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-13216195>.

57 See, for example, 'Damascus blast 'kills' top Assad officials', *Al-Jazeera*, 19 Jul 2012, available: <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2012/07/20127189355415804.html>; 'Syria attack: Security chief Ikhtiar dies from wounds', *BBC*, 20 July 2012, available: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-18920733>.

58 'Syria: Fresh fighting in capital as hundreds flee regime reprisal attacks', *The Telegraph*, 19 July 2012, available: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/9410184/Syria-Fresh-fighting-in-capital-as-hundreds-flee-regime-reprisal-attacks.html>.

59 'Top Syrian security officials killed in suicide bomb' (in Arabic), *BBC*, 18 July 2012, available: http://www.bbc.co.uk/arabic/middleeast/2012/07/120718_syria_wrap1.shtml.

60 'Son of Gen. Bakhtyar tells Asia [news agency] the details of his father's assassination', 10 November 2013, available: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OCcNkcpFW8>. For text (in Arabic) see: <http://www.alhadathnews.net/archives/81116>.

61 Nizar Nayouf, 'Where have Bashar al-Assad and his brother hidden the perpetrator of the crime, the office manager of Hisham Ikhtiar' (in Arabic), 19 July 2013, available: <http://tinyurl.com/mhluhal>. See also: 'A Friend of my Father', *idem.*

62 'Al-Arabiya reveals leaked documents about the Syrian crisis cell', *Al-Arabiya*, 17 April 2012, available: <http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/04/17/208475.html>.

63 'Syrian interior minister in Beirut for treatment', *Al-Arabiya*, 19 December 2012, <http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/12/19/256035.html>.

al-Frej.⁶⁴ Apart from the latter, all these men are said to be closer to Bashar and Maher al-Assad than the ones they replaced.

Other indicators may be found in the media coverage of the incident at the time. Iranian media, such as *Press TV*, were quick to report that Hisham Ikhtyar had been killed, even though he was still in hospital and had not died yet.⁶⁵ A few days later, when Syrian state media were still saying the attack was carried out by a suicide bomber, *Fars News* published a report, quoting a Syrian member of parliament, that claimed the Syrian authorities had arrested the person who carried out the 'bomb attack', describing him as a security staff member who worked in the same building.⁶⁶

The 'crisis cell' incident was not the first time that the Syrian and Iranian regimes had been accused of orchestrating attacks against Syrian security officials and sites and blaming them on 'terrorists'. The previous chapter has already mentioned the twin car bomb attacks in May 2012, which killed 55 people outside a military intelligence complex in the Qazzaz area of Damascus. A high-ranking regime defector claimed at the time that the regime was behind this and other apparent suicide bombs.⁶⁷ Leaked security documents, obtained also by *Al-Arabiya* in September 2012, seem to back up this claim.⁶⁸

'He killed the killed and walked in his funeral'

Another controversial death was that of Hilal al-Assad, a cousin of Bashar al-Assad who was killed in March 2014. Hilal was the notorious chief of the NDF in Latakia. The Syrian regime and the Free Syrian Army both claimed he was killed by rebels during battles in Kasab that were raging at the time.

But Syrian opposition sources told *Naame Shaam* at the time that Hilal al-Assad was assassinated by Sepah Pasdaran and/or Hezbollah Lebanon because he had become a "loose cannon" and "was not obeying orders."⁶⁹

In May 2014, *Al-Arabiyya* TV reported that Gen. Qassem Soleimani had made a 'secret trip' to Syria to pay tribute to Hilal al-Assad's family in person.⁷⁰ A picture showing an ageing Gen. Soleimani sitting with Hilal al-Assad's wife and son was circulated online without a date or source.

If this turns out to be true, a Syrian proverb sums up the situation pretty well: 'He killed the killed and walked in his funeral' (قتل القتيل ومشي بجنارته).

New narrative

In July 2014, *Naame Shaam* wrote a long "discussion paper" and sent it to various Syrian and Iranian opposition groups and figures.⁷¹ The aim of paper was to "clarify some facts and misconceptions about Iran's role in Syria and develop a new, joint narrative about the Syrian revolution in light of new realities on the ground." This chapter has provide further factual and legal bases for some of the relevant points in that paper, namely, those related to the Iranian regime's occupation of the regime-controlled parts of Syria.

The chapter has argued that the Iranian regime is in overall control of the Syrian regime's military strategy and that Sepah Pasdaran and their foot soldiers in Hezbollah Lebanon and the Iraqi militias are leading and fighting all major, strategic battles in Syria on behalf of the Syria regime. This, we argued, amounts to surrendering national sovereignty and to a foreign power's establishing and exercising authority as defined by the Hague Regulations, both directly through its armed forces and militias and indirectly through the Syrian regime.

As the discussion paper put it, "It is no longer accurate to say that al-Assad's troops are fighting against the rebels with the support of Hezbollah fighters and Sepah Pasdaran 'advisors'." It is the other way round and the Assad regime is little more than a puppet government serving the interests of a foreign power (the Iranian regime).

In other words, the war in Syria should be regarded as an international conflict that warrants the application of the four Geneva Conventions and the regime-held areas of Syria should be considered occupied territory – not metaphorically but in the strict legal sense of the word. The *de facto* ruler of 'Occupied Syria' is Gen. Qassem Soleimani and his colleagues in Sepah Qods and Sepah Pasdaran, who dominate the new military command structure in Syria. As indicated above, it does not matter if the Syrian and Iranian regimes deny or refuse to acknowledge this.

The discussion paper urged the Syrian opposition to accept this new reality and adapt its political and communications strategies accordingly. This chapter has also

pointed out the possibility of using Article 1 of the 1977 Additional Protocol I to the Geneva Conventions, which recognises the struggle of people fighting against “colonial domination and alien occupation” as an international conflict that warrants the application of the four Geneva Conventions.

The right to struggle for liberation from colonial and foreign domination has been recognised by the UN and other international bodies as legitimate. To quote a 1978 UN General Assembly resolution, the Assembly “Reaffirms the legitimacy of the struggle of peoples for independence, territorial integrity, national unity and liberation from colonial and foreign domination and foreign occupation by all available means, particularly armed struggle.”⁷² The UN General Assembly has even “strongly condemned” governments that “do not recognize the right to self-determination and independence of peoples under colonial and foreign domination and alien subjugation.”⁷³ The authors of this report would argue that the Syrian people’s struggle against the Syrian and Iranian regimes can legitimately be called a *liberation struggle*.

But this requires the Syrian opposition to unite in its discourse and demands and to act as one recognised representative of the Syrian people fighting against the colonial domination represented by the Syrian and Iranian regimes in Syria. The other legal requirement is that the conduct of the Syrian rebels remains subject to international humanitarian law and excludes terrorist acts, as defined by international law.⁷⁴

It is the view of the authors that, unless the Syrian opposition united in pushing in this direction, the US and other Western powers are likely to continue with their ‘slow bleeding’ policy towards Iran and not publicly admit that the war in Syria is one against the Iranian regime, not just the Syrian regime, so as to avoid being pressured into taking concrete steps to end the bloodshed in Syria and the wider region. This is the subject of the next chapter.

Recognising the war in Syria as an international conflict that involves a foreign occupation and a people struggling for liberation may also provide another ‘legal weapon’ against the Iranian regime, namely that it is committing “grave breaches” of the Fourth Geneva

64 ‘Assad names new security chief after bombing’, *Reuters*, 24 July 2012, available: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/07/24/syria-assad-security-idINDEE86N0BO20120724>.

65 ‘Damascus blast: More than meets the eye’, *Press TV*, 19 July 2012, was available: <http://www.presstv.ir/detail/251727.html> (the report appears to have since been removed).

66 The report was picked up by various international media, see, for example, ‘Syria says arrests person responsible for Damascus bombing’, *Reuters*, 24 July 2012, available: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/07/24/us-syria-crisis-bombing-idUSBRE86N0B320120724>.

67 Ruth Sherlock, ‘Exclusive interview: Why I defected from Bashar al-Assad’s regime, by former diplomat Nawaf Fares’, *The Sunday Telegraph*, 14 Jul 2012, available: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/9400537/Exclusive-interview-why-i-defected-from-Bashar-al-Assads-regime-by-former-diplomat-Nawaf-Fares.html>.

68 ‘Assad’s regime carried out deadly Damascus bombings: leaked files’, *Al-Arabiya*, 30 September 2012, available: <http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/09/30/241008.html>.

69 ‘As part of his Syria ‘election campaign’ tour: Qassem Soleimani visits family of killed Syrian *shabbiha* commander Hilal al-Assad’, *Naame Shaam*, 29 May 2014, available: <http://www.naameshaam.org/as-part-of-his-syria-election-campaign-tour-qassem-soleimani-visits-family-of-killed-syrian-shabbiha-commander-hilal-al-assad-2/>.

70 ‘Sepah Qods chief visits Hilal al-Assad’s family in Damascus in secret’ (in Arabic), *Al-Arabiya* 24 May 2014, available: <http://tinyurl.com/ob45dct>.

71 The paper has not been published as it was intended for internal discussion among Syrian and Iranian opposition groups. However, a brief summary of some of the relevant points can be found in another, open appeal by *Naame Shaam* addressed to opposition groups and activists in Syria and Iran: ‘Syria is an occupied country and Sepah Pasdaran are the ones who rule it’, *Naame Shaam*, 9 May 2014, available: <http://www.naameshaam.org/en/syria-is-an-occupied-country-and-sepah-pasdaran-are-the-ones-who-rule-it/>.

72 United Nations General Assembly, *Resolution A/RES/33/24*, 29 November 1978, available: <http://unispal.un.org/UNISPAL.NSF/0/D7340F04B82A2CB085256A9D006BA47A>.

73 United Nations General Assembly, *Resolution A/RES/3246 (XXIX)*, 29 November 1974, available: <http://unispal.un.org/UNISPAL.NSF/0/C867EE1DBF29A6E5852568C6006B2F0C>.

74 For a legal discussion of the difference between legitimate armed struggle and terrorism, see, for example: John Sigler, ‘Palestine: Legitimate Armed Resistance vs. Terrorism’, *The Electronic Intifada*, 17 May 2004, available: <http://electronicintifada.net/content/palestine-legitimate-armed-resistance-vs-terrorism/5084>.

Convention, which are considered even more serious war crimes than the ones outlined in the previous chapter. This is because, as an occupying force, Iran has certain “duties” towards the Syrian population under its occupation.

There are almost 150 substantive articles in the Fourth Geneva Convention that deal with these duties, including the prohibition of mass deportations and population transfers (Article 49), guaranteeing care and education for children (Article 50), the prohibition of unnecessary destruction of private and public property (Article 53), providing adequate food and medical supplies (Article 55), public health and hygiene (Article 56), religious freedom (Article 58) and so on.

There is abundant evidence – some of which has been outlined in this and the previous chapters – that the Iranian regime and its forces and militias fighting in Syria have repeatedly violated many of these rights since March 2011. For instance, the mass destruction of private and public properties in vast areas of Syria has not always been necessitated by the war (against the rebels) and is a clear and repeated breach of Article 53. Similarly, the mass evacuations of entire villages and districts in Homs and elsewhere, and reports of empty properties being registered to Syrian and Iranian regime supporters from elsewhere (including foreigners such as Afghan fighters) are a clear and repeated breach of Article 49 and may even amount to ethnic cleansing.⁷⁵

For these and similar arguments to be used, one obviously needs to gather concrete evidence with well-documented cases and examples.⁷⁶ One should also be careful not to use this sort of arguments in a way that may let the Syrian regime off the hook and blame everything on the Iranian regime.⁷⁷

Based on this new narrative, the above-mentioned discussion paper also proposed a new set of demands addressed to the US and its allies in the Friends of Syria group, as well as the UN and other international bodies. The main ones relevant to this chapter include demands to support the moderate Syrian rebels with *all means necessary* to enable them to actually win the war against the Syrian and Iranian regimes, which this chapter has proposed describing as a *liberation struggle*.

Another relevant demand was linking the Iran nuclear negotiations and sanctions with the Iranian regime's intervention in Syria and the wider region. As the discussion paper put it, “without direct military intervention [by international forces or Western powers], this represents the only realistic chance of ending the bloodshed in Syria, Iraq and Lebanon at the moment.” Both these and other demands will be fleshed out further in the Recommendations at the end of the report.⁷⁸

75 See, for example: ‘After Assad’s New Regulations.. Who Acquires Syrians Houses?’, Syrian Economic Forum, 28 August 2014, available: <http://www.syrianef.org/En/?p=3803>.

76 Various Syrian and international human rights organisations and NGOs are already doing this work and can be contacted for help.

77 For an example of how these arguments may be used, see: ‘Israel’s obligations as an occupying power under international law, its violations and implications for EU policy’, European Coordination of Committees and Associations for Palestine, 29 January 2014, available: <http://www.eccpalestine.org/israels-obligations-as-an-occupying-power-under-international-law-its-violations-and-implications-for-eu-policy/>.

78 Some of the demands can be found in this open letter by *Naame Shaam* to the E3+3 powers negotiating with Iran about its nuclear programme: ‘Open letter to foreign ministers: Link nuclear talks with Iran’s role in Syria, Iraq and Lebanon’, *Naame Shaam*, 6 July 2014, available: <http://www.naameshaam.org/open-letter-foreign-ministers/>.



1 Poster of *Naame Shaam*'s mock election campaign to vote Qassem Soleimani as president of Syria and Bashar al-Assad as his deputy – May 2014.

2 Hezbollah Lebanon's *Al-Manar* report Hamza Haj Hassan, who died in Maaloula on 7 April 2014, posing in military uniform and carrying a heavy weapon.

III. Iran's Vietnam



Sepah Qods' commander-in-chief, Gen.Qassem Soleimani (weeping in the background) and Sepah Pasdaran's chief Mohammad Ali Jafari (front) at the funeral of Hassan Shateri, the head of the Iranian Commission for the Reconstruction of (South) Lebanon, who was killed in Syria. Tehran, 14 February 2013.

Source: *Fars News*

III. Iran's Vietnam

Most observers today agree that the Iranian regime's adventure in Syria is costing it a great deal – politically, economically and even socially. Indeed, many have started using the term 'Iran's Vietnam' (in reference to the catastrophic consequences of the Vietnam war for the US) to describe the 'Syrian swamp' in which the Iranian regime appears to be slowly drowning.¹ This chapter will shed some light on two main aspects of this 'Syrian Vietnam', namely the economic and human costs to Iran of the war in Syria and how it is impacting on the Iranian economy and ordinary Iranians.

While it may be obvious that the Iranian regime has made a choice to 'go for it' in Syria at any cost, this Syrian Vietnam is not just a consequence of this choice. It is also a deliberate policy by the US administration and its allies, which we describe here as a strategy of 'bleeding Iran in Syria.' The chapter will examine and assess this strategy and will argue that this 'slow bleeding' policy is being implemented at the disproportionate expense of the people of Syria and the wider region, and will inevi-

tably lead to more instability and extremism in the region and beyond. In other words, we will argue that Western hopes that a proxy war with the Iranian regime in Syria, coupled with economic sanctions, would eventually lead to the weakening and even collapse of the Iranian regime ('winning the Syria war in the streets of Tehran') are, at best, wishful thinking.

At any cost

After three and a half years of war, the Syrian economy is unsurprisingly in a state of acute distress. The full extent of economic losses are difficult to measure since the Syrian government has stopped gathering and releasing any meaningful statistics since 2011. Nevertheless, unofficial estimates indicate that Syria's gross domestic product (GDP) has dropped by at least 40-50 per cent during 2011-2013, with an estimated loss of 145 billion US dollars.²

Yet the Syrian regime has not collapsed economically, as many analysts were expecting it to do, basing their analysis on the experience of Iraq in the wake of the US



Naame Shaam's correspondent in Beirut toured several predominately Shia districts in the Lebanese capital. In one area, Amiliyeh school, he saw posters of one Amal and three Hezbollah 'martyrs' who had died in Syria. Local residents confirmed this.. Source: <http://www.naame-shaam.org/posters-of-hezbollahs-syria-martyrs-fill-beirut-streets/>

invasion in 2003, among other examples. And that is mainly thanks to the Iranian regime, and to a lesser extent to Russia and China, which have been propping up the Syrian regime over the past three and a half years.

Chapter I examined in considerable detail the Iranian regime's military involvement in Syria. In addition to Iranian commanders and fighters, there are also all the pro-regime militias fighting in Syria, which have been largely controlled *and financed* by Sepah Pasdaran. This includes the Syrian *shabbiha* and National Defence Force (NDF). According to Iranian officials and commanders themselves, the NDF has some 70,000 members. They are not volunteers, however, as these officials often describe them. They are, rather, mercenaries who receive regular salaries and financial rewards, as many of them have confessed (see chapter I).

The monthly salary of a normal NDF member is said to range between 15,000 and 25,000 Syrian pounds (100 to 160 US dollars). Multiply that by 70,000 and you will get a rough idea of how much this force alone is costing the Syrian and Iranian regimes every month. According to one regime defector, their salaries are paid through a "slush fund replenished with US dollars flown in from Iran."³ A US Treasury sanctions designation in December 2012 claimed that the Iranian regime was providing the NDF with "routine funding worth millions of dollars."⁴

Then there are all Iranian-backed Iraqi militias fighting in Syria. At least fighters from 'Asa'eb Ahl al-Haq

are known to be paid 500 dollars a month, according to confessions of Iraqi militiamen captured by Syrian rebels.⁵ The money is allegedly sent to them through Iraq by the militia's leader Sheikh Qais al-Khaz'ali, who is said to be based in Iran. Similarly, Afghan fighters are being offered 500 US dollars a month by Sepah Pasdaran to fight in Syria on the regime's side.⁶

With regard Hezbollah Lebanon, the force is known to have been receiving at least 100 million US dollars per year from the Iranian regime in supplies and weaponry, according to US estimates.⁷ Then there are all the running costs of the Syria operations, which are likely to be paid for by the Iranian regime too (food, training, transport, fuel, etc.). Add to that the militiamen's salaries and the money offered to the families of those killed in battle. In early 2014, *Naame Shaam's* correspondent in southern Lebanon was told by a number of families of Hezbollah members who had died in Syria that "the prize of martyrdom in Syria" was \$50,000 for each young and

¹ e.g. 'Why Syria could turn out to be Iran's Vietnam - not America's', *Foreign Policy*, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2013/05/13/how_do_you_say_quagmire_in_farsi_syria_iran_hezbollah; 'Syria's shadow lurks behind Iran nuclear talks', *Deutsche Welle*, <http://www.dw.de/syrias-shadow-lurks-behind-iran-nuclear-talks/a-17195356>; 'Is Syria becoming Iran's Vietnam?', *War in Context*, <http://warincontext.org/2014/03/30/is-syria-becoming-irans-vietnam/>; 'The consequences of slow bleeding', *Al-Hayat* (in Arabic), <http://tinyurl.com/n4r89ob>. Similar analogies have also been made about Hezbollah in Lebanon. e.g. 'Hezbollah's 'Mini-Vietnam' in Syria worsens on Beirut bombs', *Bloomberg*, 6 March 2014, available: <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2014-03-05/hezbollah-s-mini-vietnam-in-syria-escalates-with-beirut-bombs.html>. It should be noted that *Naame Shaam* was probably the first media outlet to systematically use the term 'Iran's Vietnam' to describe the Iranian regime's adventure in Syria. See: <http://www.naameshaam.org/?s=iran%27s+Vietnam&lang=en>.

² For more details on the state of the Syrian economy, see for example: *Squandering Humanity: Socioeconomic Monitoring Report on Syria*, UNDP, UNRWA with the Syrian Centre for Policy Research, May 2014, available: http://www.unrwa.org/sites/default/files/scpr_report_q3-q4_2013_270514final_3.pdf; Jihad Yazigi, *Syria's War Economy*, European Council on Foreign Relations, April 2014, available: http://www.ecfr.eu/page/-/ECFR97_SYRIA_BRIEF_AW.pdf; Mohsin Khan and Svetlana Milbert, 'Syria's economic glory days are gone', *Atlantic Council*, 3 April 2014, available: <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/syria-s-economic-glory-days-are-gone>.

³ James Hider and Nate Wright, 'Assad pays snipers "to murder protesters"', *The Times*, 26 January 2012, available: <http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/news/world/middleeast/article3298307.ece>.

⁴ US Department of Treasury, 'Treasury Sanctions Al-Nusra Front Leadership in Syria and Militias Supporting the Assad Regime', 11 December 2012, available: <http://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/pages/tg1797.aspx>.

⁵ 'Confessions of Iraqi mercenaries captured by the rebels in the suburbs of Damascus' (in Arabic), 31 December 2013, available: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LzNZOx-qii0>. See chapter I for more details.

⁶ Farnaz Fassihi, 'Iran pays Afghans to fight for Assad', *The Wall Street Journal*, 22 May 2014, available: <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424052702304908304579564161508613846>. See chapter I for more details.

⁷ Geneive Abdo, 'How Iran keeps Assad in power in Syria', *Foreign Affairs*, 25 August 2011, available: <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/68230/geneive-abdo/how-iran-keeps-assad-in-power-in-syria>.

unmarried fighter. The families of older men with children are apparently paid even more, and orphaned children are supported by Hezbollah for years.⁸

The weapons used by these fighters also cost money. As detailed in Chapter I, Iranian weapons have been shipped to Syria, despite a UN embargo, since the start of the war. In March 2013, *Reuters* described this as a “weapons lifeline to al-Assad.”⁹ But in addition to Iranian weapons, Tehran has reportedly also been footing the bill for at least some of the Russian weapons supplied to the Syrian regime.

A quick look at available estimates of the Syrian regime’s known stocks of weapons shows an increase in most types of weapons.¹⁰ Most appear to be Russian-made and many are believed to be paid for by Iran. For instance, according to Russian newspapers, part of the MiG aircraft deal between Russia and Syria was financed by Iran as “a back-door purchase” of similar aircraft by Iran (to circumvent sanctions).¹¹ No further details are known owing to the secrecy surrounding such deals. As David Butter, an associate fellow at Chatham House, put it in September 2013, “Syria has never paid for its weapons from Russia – it doesn’t have any money... There is a pipeline of resupply of weapons going from Russia to Syria, possibly with Iran involved in that, but it’s pretty obscure.”¹²

The Syrian regime’s economic ‘resilience’ is most obvious in loyalist areas in Syria. Despite three years of war and economic decline, most areas under regime control continue to enjoy a good level of provision of many of their basic needs and services, such as water, electricity, fuel, food supplies and so on. The regime has even been able to pay the salaries of most state employees in these areas, not to mention those of soldiers and militia fighters.

The answer to this apparent puzzle lies in another aspect of ‘help’ offered by Iran to the Syrian regime: financial loans and credit lines.

As early as July 2011, media reports revealed that Iran was considering offering the Syrian regime financial assistance worth 5.8 billion US dollars in the form of cash and oil supplies. According to French business daily *Les Echos*, citing a confidential report by a think-tank linked

to Iran’s Supreme Leader called the Strategic Research Center, the plan was approved by Khamenei himself.¹³ The offer reportedly included a three-month loan worth 1.5 billion US dollars to be made available immediately. Iran would also provide Syria with 290,000 barrels of oil every day over the following month, the report said.

In January 2013, Iran deposited 500 million US dollars in Syria’s Central Bank vaults to prop up the Syrian pound, which was on the brink of crashing. In July 2013, Tehran granted Damascus two credit lines worth 4.6 billion US dollars. The first, worth 1 billion US dollars, was intended to fund imports. The second, worth 3.6 billion US dollars, was dedicated to the procurement of oil products. In return, Iran would acquire equity stakes in investments in Syria.¹⁴

In an interview with the *Financial Times* in June 2013, Qadri Jamil, then deputy prime minister for the economy, said that Syria actually had “an unlimited credit line with Tehran for food and oil-product imports,” adding that his government was borrowing 500 million US dollars a month.¹⁵ A Syrian government consultant confirmed this in another interview in July 2013.¹⁶

As to how these credit facilities were used, Syrian Minister of Oil, Suleiman Al-Abbas provided a clue when he announced, in December 2013, that three Iranian oil tankers were docking in Syrian ports every month, paid for by the Iranian oil credit line. Around the same time, the Syrian General Foreign Trade Organization also issued two tenders to buy large quantities of food products, such as flour, sugar and rice, to be paid for through the other Iranian credit line (meaning sellers had to accept payment through Iranian funds under an agreement between the Commercial Bank of Syria and the Export Development Bank of Iran).¹⁷ Mostly Iranian companies, offering food products “available inside Iran,” took part in both tenders. In April 2014, Iran shipped 30,000 tonnes of food supplies to Syria to “help the Syrian government deal with shortages.”¹⁸

Needless to say, none of this food made its way to the people who need it most: people in destroyed or besieged areas. It may also be interesting to compare the above-mentioned amounts to the level of bilateral trade between Syria and Iran before the current war, which stood at 316 million US dollars in 2010, according to official Syrian statistics.¹⁹

In addition to money to buy (Iranian) food and oil, the Iranian regime has also been helping the Syrian regime get cheap oil from elsewhere, mainly for military purposes (diesel for military vehicles, etc.). A investigation by *Reuters* in December 2013 revealed that “millions of barrels” of Iraqi crude oil had been delivered that year, under the radar, to the Syrian regime through Lebanese and Egyptian trading companies, on board Iranian ships.²⁰ The investigation, based on an examination of previously undisclosed shipping and payment documents, said these previously unknown shipments, in addition to more known ones of Iranian crude oil, kept the Assad armed forces “running” in spite of the international sanctions.

Syria has lost almost all its oil exports, primarily because the regime surrendered or handed over the main oil wells in Syria to Islamist armed groups. So it has been depending mostly on Iran for its fuel needs, in addition to buying some oil from these Islamist groups, as detailed in chapter I.

So how much exactly has the Iranian regime spent on its Syria adventure so far, and where is this money coming from?

In August 2013, French newspaper *Libération* citing the Syrian Center for Political and Strategic Studies as a source, reported that Iran had already “wasted around 17 billion dollars of its foreign currency reserves” on the war in Syria.²¹ Other sources estimate that the Iranian military efforts in Syria are costing about 1.5 billion US dollars per

month.²² But how are these estimates calculated? And do they include all the aspects mentioned above?

An obvious place to start looking is military expenditure databases. However, the data on Iran in most of these databases is often not only unreliable or unavailable (owing to Iran’s secrecy regarding its military activities), it also does not include spending on paramilitary forces.

8 ‘Pictures of Hezbollah fighters killed in Syria’, *Naame Shaam*, 10 February 2014, available: <http://www.naameshaam.org/pictures-of-hezbollah-fighters-killed-in-syria/>.

9 Louis Charbonneau, ‘Exclusive: Iran steps up weapons lifeline to Assad’, *Reuters*, 14 March 2013, available: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/03/14/us-syria-crisis-iran-idUSBRE92D05U20130314>.

10 e.g. <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/syria/army-equipment.htm>. See also: ‘Arms transfers to Syria’, *SIPRI Yearbook 2013*, available: <http://www.sipri.org/yearbook/2013/files/sipri-yearbook-2013-chapter-5-section-3>; Jonathan Saul, ‘Exclusive: Russia steps up military lifeline to Syria’s Assad – sources’, 17 January 2014, available: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/01/17/us-syria-russia-arms-idUSBREAOGOMN20140117>.

11 ‘Syria’s Russian weapon buys’, *Defense Industry Daily*, 29 May 2014, available: <http://www.defenseindustrydaily.com/syria-buying-mig31s-mig35s-for-1-billion-03391/>.

12 ‘How Putin’s Russia props up Assad’s military’, *Channel 4*, 10 September 2013, available: <http://www.channel4.com/news/syria-russia-weapons-arms-chemical-fighters-missiles>.

13 Yves Bourdillon, ‘Téhéran apporte son soutien financier à Damas’, *Les Echos*, 15 July 2011, available: http://www.lesechos.fr/15/07/2011/LesEchos/20974-039-ECH_teheran-apporte-son-soutien-financier-a-damas.htm?texte=Iran. For English, see: ‘Tehran ready to give Syria \$5.8 billion: report’, *Reuters*, 15 July 2011, available: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/07/15/us-syria-iran-idUSTRE76E3C720110715>.

14 Suleiman Al-Khalidi, ‘Iran grants Syria \$3.6 billion credit to buy oil products’, *Reuters*, 31 July 2013, available: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/07/31/us-syria-crisis-iran-idUSBRE96U0XN20130731>.

15 Michael Peel, ‘Iran, Russia and China prop up Assad economy’, *Financial Times*, 27 June 2013, available: <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/79eca81c-df48-11e2-a9f4-00144feab7de.html#axzz3C-j9eJw6O>.

16 Anne Barnard, ‘Syria weighs its tactics as pillars of its economy continue to crumble’, *The New York Times*, 13 July 2013, available: <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/14/world/middleeast/government-in-syria-searches-for-answers-as-economy-crumbles.html>.

17 Maha El Dahan, ‘Syria issues second food tender using Iranian credit’, *Reuters*, 24 December 2013, available: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/12/24/syria-flour-idUSL6N0K30WC20131224>.

18 Barbara Surk, ‘Iran sends Syria 30,000 tons of food supplies’, *AP*, 8 April 2014, available: <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/syria-iran-sends-30000-tons-food-supplies>.

19 Central Bureau of Statistics, ‘Statistical Abstract for 2011’ (in Arabic), available: www.cbssyr.sy.

20 Julia Payne, ‘Exclusive: Assad’s secret oil lifeline: Iraqi crude from Egypt’, *Reuters*, 23 December 2013, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/12/23/us-syria-oil-idUSBRE9BM0RI20131223>.

21 Jean-Pierre Perrin, ‘Téhéran devient tête de Syrie’, *Libération*, 25 August 2013, http://www.liberation.fr/monde/2013/08/25/teheran-devient-tete-de-syrie_927028. For Persian, see: <http://www.persian.rfi.fr/node/94821>.

22 Mohamad Amin, ‘Les dix fardeaux de l’économie en Iran’, *Les Echos*, 25 April 2014, available: <http://www.lesechos.fr/idees-debats/cercle/cercle-95955-les-dix-fardeaux-de-leconomie-en-iran-1007493.php>. For an English translation, see: <http://www.ncr-iran.org/en/news/economy/16863-the-ten-economic-burdens-of-iran>.

For instance, the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute's Military Expenditure Database states in a footnote: "The figures for Iran do not include spending on paramilitary forces such as the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC)."²³ Given that this force, Sepah Pasdaran, and its external arm Sepah Qods are the ones that are in charge of most of the Syria operations (save for some technical assistance provided by the Ministry of Intelligence and Security and the Ministry of Defense and Armed Forces Logistics, as indicated in chapter I), such databases are of little use for our purposes.

Sepah Pasdaran's declared budget is allocated by the Iranian government every year and must be approved by parliament, like all other government spending. The budget allocated to the force this year was just over 44 trillion Iranian rials (around 1.7 billion US dollars), a 30 per cent increase compared to the year before.²⁴ Sepah's budget has been constantly increasing in the last few years, which is presumably to do with the force's adventures in Iraq, Syria and elsewhere. As to how this money is divided within the force (e.g. how much goes to Sepah Qods and external operations), that is a well-guarded secret.

To put things in perspective, 44 trillion Iranian rials is nearly equivalent to the budgets allocated to health and education combined. The health budget for the current year is 25 trillion rials and the education budget is 21 trillion.²⁵

In addition to the official budget allocated by the government, eight per cent of Iran's infrastructure budget also goes to Sepah Pasdaran. This is, in fact, only what is publicly announced; in reality it may be as high as 60 per cent. Sepah or its affiliates are often the sole winners of the most profitable construction and oil-related contracts in Iran. The force also controls much of the import-export industry and has a monopoly over many other vital economic sectors in the country. Nonetheless, the force is not subject to the Iranian tax law.

Like Sepah, the Supreme Leader also controls a massive economic empire known as Setad, or the Setad Ejraiye Farmane Hazrate Emam (Headquarters for Executing the Order of the Imam). Setad manages and sells properties 'abandoned' or expropriated mainly from members of the opposition. The company's holdings of real estate,

corporate stakes and other assets are estimated to be worth about 95 billion US dollars, according to calculations by *Reuters* in November 2013.²⁶

Finally, there are also many foundations and businesses affiliated with or close to Sepah and Khamenei, many of which are known to give generous 'donations' to the force. There is no space here to look into this but it is worth mentioning in the context of who is funding the Iranian regime's adventure in Syria and how Iranian public and private money is being wasted.

'Eat just once a day or fast'

The impact of the war in Syria on the Iranian economy and ordinary Iranians cannot be separated from that of the international sanctions on Iran and Iran's nuclear programme. There are intrinsic reasons for this.

The main reason for the Iranian regime's uncompromising determination to save Bashar al-Assad's regime at any cost is to maintain its ability to ship arms to Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Gaza via Syria, so as to keep these strong deterrents against any possible Israeli and/or Western attacks on Iran's nuclear facilities. Together, these two 'lines of defence' (Hezbollah and Hamas and the nuclear bomb) are meant to secure the Iranian regime's survival. If the Assad regime falls, Iranian arms shipments to Hezbollah are likely to stop and Hezbollah would no longer be the threatening deterrent against Israel that it is now. The Iranian regime would therefore feel more vulnerable and would not be able to negotiate from a strong position during nuclear talks with the E3+3 powers in Vienna and Geneva, as it is doing now. It may even have to give up its nuclear dreams for a while. All available resources (human, economic, military) must therefore be mobilised to achieve this strategic aim.

Thus, if we add all the above costs (hundreds of billions of dollars) to the costs of Iran's nuclear programme (which is estimated to have cost well over 100 billion US dollars so far²⁷) and the costs of the sanctions imposed on Iran because of the nuclear programme (which are estimated to be around 100 million US dollars each day²⁸), the burdens on the Iranian economy are enormous.

One indicator of the this economic burden is the inflation rate, which has more than tripled in the last five years (from 10 per cent in 2009 to over 30 per cent in 2014)

and has increased by about 10 per cent since the start of the war in Syria.²⁹ Official reports also indicate that Iranian household purchasing power has decreased by about 25 per cent. A price list of basic food items published by *BBC Persian* in March 2014 showed that consumer prices in Iran had at least tripled in the past four or five years.³⁰ According to the Ministry of the Economy, in July 2014, almost a third of all families in Iran (31 per cent) lived below the poverty line.³¹ Three months before, in March 2014, Iranian MP Mousareza Servati said 15 million Iranians (about 20 per cent of the population) were living below the national poverty line. Seven million of them were not receiving assistance of any kind.³²

Despite Iranian media's celebration of President Hassan Rouhani's economic 'achievements',³³ the reality is that Iran's economic problems are unlikely to go away any time soon unless there are fundamental shifts in its foreign policies. And that is certainly not in the president's power. The same applies to Hezbollah Lebanon.³⁴

In March 2014, *The New York Times* published an article entitled "Hopes fade for surge in the economy."³⁵ The article argued that people in Iran had voted for President Hassan Rouhani in the hope for a revival of the country's ailing economy. But more than six months after he took office, "hopes of a quick economic recovery are fading, while economists say the government is running out of cash."

*On taking office, he discovered that the government's finances were in far worse condition than his predecessor, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, had ever let on. Now, with a lack of petrodollars and declining tax revenues, Mr. Rouhani has little option but to take steps that in the short-run will only increase the pain for the voters who put him into office.*³⁶

The article also quotes Saeed Laylaz, an economist and an advisor to President Rouhani, saying Iran is heading to a "black spring" and only a "miracle" could save it from political damage caused by the economic problems. "I am worried we might witness turmoil," he added.

But is it true, as this and other media reports claim, that Iran is so short of cash that the government has "no other option" but to take "painful steps" such as printing

money (therefore pushing inflation further up) and cutting down on public spending? While phasing out energy subsidies, Iran has been sending millions of barrels of oil to Syria at discount prices, paid for by Iranian credit, as indicated above. While winding down social assistance

23 'Military expenditure of Iran', SIPRI Military Expenditure Database, <http://milexdata.sipri.org/>.

24 'Are Iranian families earning so little?' (in Persian), *Iranian Economy*, available: <http://tinyurl.com/nl4kugo>. See also: 'Iranian military gets budget increase', IHS Jane's 360, available: <http://www.janes.com/article/31540/iranian-military-gets-budget-increase>.

25 See: <http://tinyurl.com/orlseg8> and <http://tinyurl.com/ooam3k3>.

26 See *Reuter's* three-part investigation into SETAD: <http://www.reuters.com/investigates/iran/#article/part1>; <http://www.reuters.com/investigates/iran/#article/part2>; <http://www.reuters.com/investigates/iran/#article/part3>.

27 See, for example: Ali Vaez and Karim Sadjadpour, *Iran's Nuclear Odyssey: Costs and Risks*, Carnegie, April 2013, available: http://carnegieendowment.org/files/iran_nuclear_odyssey.pdf.

28 David Blair, 'Sanctions costing Iran \$100 million every day', *The Telegraph*, 13 Nov 2012, available: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/iran/9675487/Sanctions-costing-Iran-100-million-every-day.html>. See also: www.al-monitor.com/pulse/business/2013/10/oil-sanction-harm-iran-economy.html. There are no reliable official Iranian figures for the impact of the sanctions on the economy because the Iranian government either denies altogether that the sanctions are having any impact on Iran, or they describe the impact in vague terms, such as "high costs", etc.

29 See: <http://www.tradingeconomics.com/iran/inflation-cpi>. See also: IMF, *Country Report: Iran*, April 2014, available: <http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/scr/2014/cr1493.pdf>.

30 'How expensive have food items been in Iran in the past five years' (in Persian), *BBC Farsi*, 22 March 2014, available: http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/business/2014/03/140322_food_iran_inflation.shtml.

31 'Ministry of Economy: 31% of families below the poverty line' (in Persian), *TA Bank*, 5 July 2014, available: <http://tinyurl.com/k2tc4at>.

32 '15 million people below poverty line in Iran – think government incompetence' (in Persian), *Fars News*, 5 March 2014, available: <http://farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=13921214001320>.

33 e.g. 'Iran puts end to economic stagnation: Rouhani', *Press TV*, 7 September 2014, available: <http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2014/09/07/377945/iran-economic-stagnation-over-rouhani/>.

34 See, for example, Ana Maria Luca, 'The other costs of Hezbollah's Syrian campaign', *Now*, 28 April 2014, available: <https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/reports/features/545007-the-other-costs-of-hezbollahs-syrian-campaign>.

35 Thomas Erdbrink, 'In Iran, Hopes Fade for Surge in the Economy' 20 March 2014, available: <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/21/world/middleeast/cut-in-energy-subsidies-iran.html>.

36 *Ibid.*

payments to nearly 60 million poor Iranians (about 12 US dollars a month), Iran has been sending millions of tonnes of food and cash to Syria. It just doesn't make sense, as more and more Iranians are starting to realise.

It is worth noting that Iranian officials generally tend to avoid blaming the sanctions or Iran's foreign policy for economic hardship, as that might be interpreted as a victory for the West. Instead, they often focus on mismanagement, corruption and 'unwise management'. Not that this is not true too.³⁷

Iran's 'resistance economy'

In February 2014, Ayatollah Khamenei renewed his call to implement a "parallel economic plan" that he had first announced in 2010, which he dubbed "resistance economy."³⁸ Based on the principle "self-sufficiency," the plan is an attempt to thwart the impact of the sanctions. The Supreme Leader promised that his strategy would "lead to welfare and improving the condition of the life of all of the people, especially the poor." Except it didn't. Rouhani nonetheless "endorsed" the plan and wrote to various government institutions urging them to implement it.³⁹

Meanwhile, as Iran's economy 'deteriorated' further and the new government proved unable to solve the country's 'chronic' financial problems, Iranian officials seemed to raise the tone of their warnings to the Iranian public that things will only get worse, clearly preparing them for more inflation and more poverty and hardship. Here are a few examples:

- In March 2014, Ali Fallahian, a member of Iran's Assembly of Experts and a former intelligence minister who is most famous for killing Iranian intellectuals in the 1990s, defied the Western sanctions and said, if they got harsher, "we will eat just once a day or fast."⁴⁰

- A few days before, Ali Saidi, Khamenei's representative at Sepah Pasdaran in the Ahwaz region, had said: "We are heading toward many challenges and sanctions, but we are not going to give up what we have achieved with blood only to get some bread. The people of Iran should prepare themselves for more suffering."⁴¹

- In that same month, Iranian state-controlled media published pictures of Ayatollah Khamenei wearing worn-

out sandals, in a symbolic message that the Supreme Leader is 'suffering' like poor Iranians and he expects everybody to do the same.⁴²

Counting the dead

Chapter I cited many examples of Sepah Pasdaran, Hezbollah Lebanon and Iraqi militia commanders and fighters killed in Syria and the official funerals held for them in Iran, Lebanon and Iraq respectively. A number of websites and blogs have collected pictures and videos of these funerals, along with their owners' names and stories.⁴³

However, most of the Iranian and Lebanese funerals referred to above were for senior Sepah and Hezbollah commanders. Funerals for ordinary fighters were either held in secret or not held at all. This makes the task of assessing Sepah's and Hezbollah's losses in Syria very difficult, if not impossible.

In August 2014, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said it had documented the death of 561 Hezbollah Lebanon fighters in Syria. The number of deaths from other Shia militias documented by the organisation was 1,854.⁴⁴ However, as the report points out, the real figures are likely to be much higher as a result of the secrecy surrounding most of these forces' casualties.

Following the publication of some of the above-referenced reports and the issue of Hezbollah Lebanon's involvement in Syria and its mounting casualties there becoming a hot topic, the party reportedly started to 'bribe' the families of its 'martyrs' – allegedly offering them between 20,000 and 25,000 US dollars, according to some media reports – if they accepted not to announce the death in public and not to hold a public burial ceremony.⁴⁵ Some funerals may have also been kept low-key and not publicised online, making it difficult for outside observers and researchers to document them.⁴⁶

In March 2014, a poll by a leading Lebanese analytical firm found that more than 70 per cent of the 600 participants queried, who were all residents of al-Dahiyeh, Beirut – a Hezbollah stronghold – knew someone (from their family, neighbourhood or village) who had been killed in Syria.⁴⁷ In April 2014, *Naame Shaam's* correspondent in Beirut conducted a short tour of several predominately Shia districts in the Lebanese capital. In one area, within

approximately 20 metres of the 'Amiliyeh school, he saw posters of one Amal and three Hezbollah and 'martyrs' who had died in Syria (see photos, p.94).⁴⁸

The number of Hezbollah fighters who have died in Syria since March 2011 is certainly higher than that publicly admitted by the party (a few hundred, at best). In the al-Qusayr battle alone, well over 100 Hezbollah fighters were killed, according to Syria opposition sources, of whom some 100 were confirmed by Hezbollah (see chapter I). In the Yabroud battle, at least as many were killed, if not more.⁴⁹ In one week alone, Hezbollah held an official funeral for 56 of its fighters killed in Yabroud after their bodies were returned to Lebanon.

Moreover, many corpses were not retrieved, according to Syrian and Lebanese sources.⁵⁰ In April 2014, a Free Syrian Army commander was quoted by *Al-Hayat* newspaper saying:

*A big number of [corpses of] Hezbollah members who were killed in al-Qusayr are still in corpse refrigerators and Hezbollah cannot take them out. It is important to distinguish between the Shia and Hezbollah, because many honourable [Shiites] are opposed to Hezbollah and strongly refuse to send their sons to participate in the killing of the Syrian people. So the party [Hezbollah] has found itself in a trap. Families [of martyrs] are told their sons are in Southern Lebanon, at the border with Israel. That's why there are more than 175 corpses in refrigerators in Hasbayya since the Qusayr battle, and the party cannot tell their families about them.*⁵¹

37 See, for example, 'President of the illiterate regrets reading critics' (in Persian), *Fars News*, 11 March 2014 <http://farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=13921218001123>.

38 'Resistance Economy: A model inspired by Islamic economic system and an opportunity to realise an economic epic' (in Persian), *Fars News*, 19 February 2014, available: <http://www.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=13921130000154>. For English, see: Bijan Khajehpour, 'Decoding Iran's 'resistance economy'', *Al-Monitor*, 24 February 2014, available: <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/02/decoding-resistance-economy-iran.html>.

39 'Rouhani endorses Ayatollah Khamenei's 'resistance economy'', *Iran Pulse*, 20 February 2014, available: <http://iranpulse.al-monitor.com/index.php/2014/02/3941/rouhani-endorses-ayatollah-khameineis-resistance-economy/>.

40 'Trends of resistance economy to confront the West and the sanctions', (in Persian) *Tasnim News Agency*, 28 March 2014, available: <http://www.tasnimnews.com/Home/Single/323166>.

41 'Representative of Supreme Leader in Sepah in Ahwaz: The Iranian national and leadership are on the side of the oppressed and the barefoot', *Basij Khozestan*, 15 March 2014, available: <http://khozestan.basij.ir/?q=node/3429>.

42 See, for example, <http://farsi.khamenei.ir/photo-album?id=25683#202329>.

43 For Iranian casualties, see: Y. Mansharof, 'Despite denials by Iranian regime, statements by Majlis member and reports in Iran indicate involvement of Iranian troops in Syria fighting', The Middle East Media Research Institute, 4 December 2013, available: <http://www.memri.org/report/en/print7623.htm>; Phillip Smyth, 'Iran's Losses In the "35th Province" (Syria), Part 1', *Jihadology*, 14 June 2013, available: <http://jihadology.net/2013/06/14/hizballah-cavalcade-irans-losses-in-the-35th-province-syria-part-1/>. For Hezbollah Lebanon's casualties, see: 'Pictures of Hezbollah fighters killed in Syria', *Naame Shaam*, 10 February 2014, available: <http://www.naameshaam.org/pictures-of-hezbollah-fighters-killed-in-syria/>; 'How many Hezbollah fighters have died in Syria?', *Naame Shaam*, 16 April 2014, available: <http://www.naameshaam.org/how-many-hezbollah-fighters-have-died-in-syria/>; For a round-up of Iraqi militants killed in Syria in 2013, see this three-part collection by Phillip Smyth on *Jihadology*: Part 1: <http://jihadology.net/2013/05/11/hizballah-cavalcade-roundup-of-iraqis-killed-in-syria-part-1/>; Part 2: <http://jihadology.net/2013/05/17/hizballah-cavalcade-roundup-of-iraqis-killed-in-syria-part-2/>; Part 3: <http://jihadology.net/2013/06/02/hizballah-cavalcade-roundup-of-iraqis-killed-in-syria-part-3/>.

44 'More than 260 thousand killed and died in Syria since the outbreak of the revolution' (in Arabic), Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, 21 August 2014, available: http://www.syriahr.com/index.php?option=com_news&nid=22274&Itemid=2&task=displaynews#.U_ZtKPmSyyE.

45 'Pictures of Hezbollah fighters killed in Syria', *Naame Shaam*, *idem*.

46 See, for example: 'Hezbollah buries its Syria dead in secret' (in Arabic), 12 June 2014, available: http://www.alwatan.com.sa/politics/News_Detail.aspx?ArticleID=191029.

47 Available: http://www.shiawatch.com/public/uploads/files/%5BPolling%20Dahiyeh%20_ShiaWatch33%5D.pdf.pdf.

48 'Posters of Hezbollah's Syria 'martyrs' fill Beirut streets', *Naame Shaam*, 29 April 2014, available: <http://www.naameshaam.org/posters-of-hezbollahs-syria-martyrs-fill-beirut-streets/>.

49 See, for example: <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2014/Mar-10/249775-drastric-rise-in-hezbollah-death-toll-as-party-battles-for-yabroud.ashx#axzz3Cx10ChUV>; <http://tinyurl.com/kyxerbj>; <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Security-Watch/2014/0313/Fighting-for-Assad-Hezbollah-buries-its-own>.

50 'Hezbollah's and regime's dead in Yabroud number in tens and bodies have not been retrieved yet' (in Arabic), *CNN Arabic*, 15 March 2014, available: <http://arabic.cnn.com/middleeast/2014/03/15/syria-ghozlan>.

51 'Abu Uday: ISIS is selling grains to the regime while people are starving.. and we have infiltrated Hezbollah' (in Arabic), *Al-Hayat*, 28 April 2014, available: <http://tinyurl.com/pneorf2>.



Both Sepah Pasdaran and Hezbollah Lebanon have been very cagey about their casualties in Syria, right from the start. Both have been doing all they can to keep this information hidden from the public because it could show how heavily involved they are in the war there. It would also reveal how much they are losing, which could be damaging to the morale of their supporters. Suppressing such evidence is a classic war tactic aimed at avoiding public pressure demanding to 'bring the boys back home' before they too die out there.

Bleeding Iran in Syria

In the wake of the Ghouta chemical massacre in August 2013, US President Barak Obama threatened to use military force to punish the Syrian regime for crossing his famous 'red line', only to seize on an offer by Russia whereby Syria would dismantle and surrender its chemical weapons stockpile to avoid the attack. The deal surprised and disappointed many people around the world. Yet, portraying Obama as a reluctant, indecisive president who is lacking a strategy on Syria, as numerous media reports and commentaries have been doing, seems to miss an important point.

It may be true that the US and its Western allies have so far not been willing to intervene in Syria in any decisive manner. But that has not been out indecisiveness. Rather, Obama and his team appear to have adopted a policy of 'slowly bleeding Iran and Hezbollah in Syria' – that is, arming Syrian rebels just enough not to lose the war, but not to win either. A prolonged fight in Syria, according to this rationale, would not only weaken the Syrian army so that it is no longer a threat to Israel, both directly and indirectly, it would also significantly weaken the Iranian regime and Hezbollah Lebanon. Coupled with prolonged economic sanctions against Iran, this may eventually lead to the collapse of the Iranian regime, or at least weaken it to the point that it is no longer a threat and can be easily forced to comply with US agendas.



Naame Shaam activists held a demonstration in Berlin on 8 April 2014 against the Iranian regime's involvement in Syria. They demanded that Sepah Pasdaran and Hezbollah Lebanon pull out all of their fighters from the war-torn country. The activists held banners which read, "Syria is the Vietnam of Iran – Pasdaran and Hezbollah out of Syria now!" The peaceful protest took place outside a hotel where Mohammad Reza Nematzadeh, the Iranian Minister of Industry, Mines and Trade, along with other Iranian officials were attending a conference with German business representatives.

<<http://www.naameshaam.org/activists-protest-irans-involvement-in-syria-as-iranian-minister-attends-business-conference-in-berlin/>>

On the eve of the Syrian presidential elections, *Naame Shaam* activists staged a mock 'election rally' on 2 June 2014 in front of the Iranian embassy in London to highlight the role of Iran in fuelling the Syrian conflict. They mocked the upcoming elections by calling for the commander-in-chief of Sepah Qods, Gen. Qassem Soleimani, to be designated as President of Syria, and Syria's current President, Bashar al-Assad, as his deputy.

<<http://www.naameshaam.org/iranian-activists-stage-mock-syrian-election-rally-outside-london-embassy-to-highlight-irans-interference-in-syrian-conflict/>>

A report by *The New York Times* from October 2013, based on interviews with dozens of current and former members of the US administration, foreign diplomats and Congressmen, sheds some light on the reasoning behind the Obama's administration's position on Syria.⁵² According to the report, three of Obama's closest aides, who are said to have his ear on Syria, are all against

direct military intervention in the country: Denis McDonough, the White House chief of staff and a former deputy national security adviser, Tom Donilon, Obama's former national security adviser, and Susan Rice, the US ambassador to the United Nations.

During a day with a group of senior lawmakers to the Guantánamo Bay naval base in early June 2013, McDonough reportedly argued that the status quo in Syria could "keep Iran pinned down for years." In later discussions, he also suggested that a fight in Syria between Hezbollah and al-Qaeda would "work to America's advantage." The following month, Obama asked Rice, who had succeeded Donilon as national security adviser, to undertake a review of American policy in the Middle East and North Africa and to "make Syria part of a broader strategy involving both Iran and the Middle East peace process."

The strategy was made clear by President Obama himself during a long interview about Israel and Palestine in March 2014:

*I'm always darkly amused by this notion that somehow Iran has won in Syria. I mean, you hear sometimes people saying, 'They're winning in Syria'. And you say, 'This was their one friend in the Arab world, a member of the Arab League, and it is now in rubble'. It's bleeding them because they're having to send in billions of dollars. Their key proxy, Hezbollah, which had a very comfortable and powerful perch in Lebanon, now finds itself attacked by Sunni extremists. This isn't good for Iran. They're losing as much as anybody. The Russians find their one friend in the region in rubble and delegitimized.*⁵³

As a number of commentators observed at the time, the implication here is that Obama and his team "could be seeking to intentionally prolong the war, despite the catastrophic scale of the death and destruction that is taking place as a result, because it is bad for Iran and Russia."⁵⁴

The President even "rebuffed" a detailed plan, presented to him in summer 2012 by then Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and then CIA Director David Petraeus, to arm and train Syrian rebels.⁵⁵ After Petraeus resigned, his successor Michael J. Morell renewed his predecessor's pitch to arm the rebels; Obama was still not convinced,

despite new intelligence assessments warning that Syrian regime forces and militias were gaining the upper hand in the war, thanks largely to Iranian munitions shipments that had "replenished the stocks of [Syrian] army units," while the rebels were running out of ammunition and supplies.

By now, the debate had "shifted from whether to arm Syrian rebels to how to do it," according to the above-mentioned article in *The New York Times*. So Obama decided to make the rebel training programme a "covert action" run by the CIA rather than the Pentagon. He reportedly signed a secret order allowing the agency to begin preparing to train and arm "small groups of rebels in Jordan." Meanwhile, the Iranian regime continued to step up its military support to the Syrian regime, and Hezbollah Lebanon and Iraqi militias were "taking root" in Syria, as the CIA assessment presented to the president put it.⁵⁶

In June 2014, Obama claimed that the existence of a moderate Syrian force that was able to defeat al-Assad was "simply not true." The idea that they would suddenly be able to defeat "not only al-Assad but also highly trained jihadists" if the US "just sent them a few arms" was "a fantasy," he added.⁵⁷ In a longer interview in August 2014, Obama defended his position on

52 Mark Mazzetti, Robert f. Worth and Michael r. Gordon, 'Obama's uncertain path amid Syria bloodshed', *The New York Times*, 22 October 2013, available: <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/23/world/middleeast/obamas-uncertain-path-amid-syria-bloodshed.html>.

53 Jeffrey Goldberg, 'Obama to Israel -- Time is running out', *Bloomberg View*, 2 March 2014, available: <http://www.bloombergview.com/articles/2014-03-02/obama-to-israel-time-is-running-out>.

54 Omar Ghabra, 'Is Washington purposely bleeding Syria?', *The Nation*, 25 April 2014, available: <http://m.thenation.com/article/179545-washington-purposely-bleeding-syria>.

55 Michael r. Gordon and Mark Landler, 'Backstage glimpses of Clinton as dogged diplomat, win or lose', *The New York Times*, 2 February 2013, available: <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/03/us/politics/in-behind-scene-blows-and-triumphs-sense-of-clinton-future.html>.

56 'Obama's uncertain path amid Syria bloodshed', *The New York Times*, *idem*.

57 'Obama: Notion that Syrian opposition could have overthrown Assad with U.S. arms a "fantasy"', *CBS News*, 20 June 2014, available: <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/obama-notion-that-syrian-opposition-could-overthrow-assad-a-fantasy/>.

Syria and repeated his 'fantasy' line, adding, *This idea that we could provide some light arms or even more sophisticated arms to what was essentially an opposition made up of former doctors, farmers, pharmacists and so forth, and that they were going to be able to battle not only a well-armed state but also a well-armed state backed by Russia, backed by Iran, a battle-hardened Hezbollah, that was never in the cards.*⁵⁸

Syrian rebels and opposition groups were clearly offended and disappointed by the US President's remarks. A spokesman for the Syrian opposition's National Coalition said Obama's statement was "meant to cover up the inability of his administration to prevent the deterioration of the political and humanitarian situation in the Levant, and to evade the growing criticism to his policies regarding the Syrian crisis."⁵⁹

Many also disagreed with the President's logic, including US presidential hopeful Hillary Clinton. In an interview with *The Atlantic* in August 2014, she said:

*The failure to help build up a credible fighting force of the people who were the originators of the protests against Assad – there were Islamists, there were secularists, there was everything in the middle – the failure to do that left a big vacuum, which the jihadists have now filled.*⁶⁰

Yet, in a speech on 10 September 2014 authorising the expansion of US air strikes against ISIS in Iraq as well as in Syria, Obama called on the Congress to authorise plans to "train and equip Syrian rebels" as part of a four-leg strategy to fight ISIS.⁶¹ Suddenly the "former doctors, farmers, pharmacists and so forth" became good enough to be partners in fighting the "highly trained jihadists." It remains to be seen whether the plan, which will apparently include training camps in Saudi Arabia, will go beyond two previous US promises to arm Syrian rebels and the small-scale, CIA-run training programme in Jordan mentioned above.

Refusing to coordinate with the Assad regime, which "will never regain the legitimacy it has lost," Obama said that supporting the Syrian opposition was "the best counter-weight to extremists like ISIS."⁶² However, this will be done, he added, "while pursuing the *political solution* necessary to solve Syria's crisis, once and for all." (emphasis added)

There was no mention in Obama's speech of Iran or any of the Iranian-backed militias fighting in Syria. Nothing about the wider wars in Syria and Iraq, in fact. It is likely therefore that the 'slow bleeding' policy against Iran and its proxies will continue until further notice.

Indeed, Obama's different approaches to dealing with ISIS in Syria and in Iraq is a crystallisation of his strategy on Iran. In Iraq, after ISIS took over Mosul in June 2014 and started to advance towards Erbil, Obama was very quick and decisive in authorising air strikes against ISIS forces and positions and in providing the Kurdish armed forces fighting ISIS with all sorts of weapons and support. This gave them significant advantages over the Iranian-backed government in Baghdad and the Shia militias controlled by Sepah Pasdaran. In Syria, however, over a year of massacres and military advances by ISIS have not prompted such reactions from the US administration, even though Syrian rebels have been battling ISIS as well as the regime and have been requesting similar assistance from the US and its allies.⁶³

For a few weeks after the start of the US air strikes against ISIS in Iraq, US officials kept repeating that Obama still "did not have a strategy" on dealing with ISIS in Syria and was seeking a broad international coalition before acting. The political circumstances in Syria "are very different," they added.⁶⁴ All that is different, in our view, is that Obama appears to be in no rush to put an end to the bloodshed in Syria because it is bleeding Iran and Russia.

Interestingly, the developments in Iraq and the US war on ISIS were seized on by both the Syrian and the Iranian regimes as an opportunity to naturalise their troubled relationship with the US and reach a comprehensive agreement, offering to be part of the new international partnership to 'fight terrorism'.⁶⁵ In August 2014, a number of media outlets reported that Iranian Foreign Minister had even offered cooperating with the US in Iraq against ISIS if the sanctions on Iran are lifted.⁶⁶ But the reports were apparently based on a misquote.⁶⁷ Iran has always insisted on keeping the two issues separate during the nuclear negotiations.

In any case, the US did not seem interested in such offers, denying any cooperation with Damascus and

Tehran.⁶⁸ President Obama and his team appear to be determined to continue with their 'slow bleeding' policy towards Iran and its proxies.

How long can the Iranian regime bleed?

While one may understand the political rationale behind this policy (weakening the Iranian regime and its proxies as much and as long as possible until a confrontation is inevitable), the authors of this report believe that the policy is immoral and politically dangerous, because it is being implemented at the disproportionate expense of the people of Syria and the wider region and because it will inevitably lead to more instability and extremism.

Furthermore, hoping that multiple conflicts or fronts with the Iranian regime, coupled with crippling economic sanctions, would eventually lead to the weakening and even collapse of the regime (i.e. winning the war against the Iranian regime in the streets of Tehran) is, at best, wishful thinking. Similar things were said about the Syrian regime at the beginning of the revolution. Sepah Pasdaran and the Basij have shown that they can and will ruthlessly crush any possible dissent movement inside Iran and that they can 'bleed' for much longer, so to speak. In fact, Sepah commanders are now arguably stronger than ever, militarily, politically and economically, not only in Iran but also in the whole Middle East.⁶⁹

There is no sign that Obama's 'slow bleeding' policy will change in the near future – unless all Syrian opposition groups unite in putting enough pressure on the US administration and its allies to change their position. It is true that Syria has become 'Iran's Vietnam' and that Iran is 'bleeding in Syria', but it may be capable of bleeding for a long time still, much longer than the Syrian people can endure.

58 Thomas I. Friedman, 'Obama on the World', *The New York Times*, 8 August 2014, available: <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/09/opinion/president-obama-thomas-i-friedman-iraq-and-world-affairs.html>.

59 'Syrian Coalition: Safi Regrets Obama's Remarks on Syria', National Coalition of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces, 23 June 2014, available: <http://en.etilaf.org/all-news/news/syrian-coalition-safi-regrets-obamas-remarks-on-syria.html>.

60 Jeffrey Goldberg, 'Hillary Clinton: 'Failure' to Help Syrian Rebels Led to the Rise of ISIS', *The Atlantic*, 10 August 2014, available: <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/08/hillary-clinton-failure-to-help-syrian-rebels-led-to-the-rise-of-isis/375832/>.

61 Obama's speech is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KvRd17vXaXM>. See also: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/09/11/us-iraq-crisis-obama-idUSKBN0H527Z20140911> and <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/09/10/us-iraq-crisis-obama-rebels-idUSKBN0H52K720140910>.

62 *Ibid.*

63 See, for example, <http://en.etilaf.org/press/president-obama-s-counter-isis-policy.html>.

64 See, for example, 'Obama says strategy not set to strike militants in Syria', *Bloomberg*, 29 August 2014, available: <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2014-08-29/obama-says-strategy-not-set-to-strike-militants-in-syria.html>.

65 See, for example: 'Iran 'backs US military contacts' to fight Islamic State', *BBC*, 5 September 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29079052>; 'Syria offers to help fight Isis but warns against unilateral air strikes', *The Guardian*, 26 August 2014, available: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/aug/26/syria-offers-to-help-fight-isis-but-warns-against-unilateral-air-strikes>.

66 See, for example, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/08/21/us-iraq-security-iran-idUSKBN0GL1QN20140821> and <http://www.businessinsider.com/iran-offers-help-with-isis-if-us-lifts-nuclear-sanctions-2014-8>.

67 'West media spin 'Iraq' yarn from Zarif's remarks on 'Arak'', *Press TV*, 22 August 2014, available: <http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2014/08/22/376166/west-spins-iraq-yarn-of-zarif-arak-talk/>.

68 See, for example, 'Daily Press Briefing', US State Department, 21 August 2014, available: <http://translations.state.gov/st/english/texttrans/2014/08/20140821306059.html#axzz3D6slbcaE>. See also: 'Washington denies cooperation with Tehran in Iraq: Al-Assad is part of the problem not the solution' (in Arabic), *Annahar*, 22 August 2014, available: <http://tinyurl.com/l8bj9x6>.

69 See, for example, this worrying poll of al-Dahiyeh, Beirut: http://www.shiawatch.com/public/uploads/files/%5BPolling%20Dahiyeh%20_ShiaWatch33%5D.pdf.pdf.



1 Iran shipped 30,000 tonnes of food supplies to Syria in April 2014 to “help the Syrian government deal with shortages.”

2 Iran deposited 500 million US dollars in Syria’s Central Bank vaults in in January 2013 to prop up the Syrian pound, which was on the brink of crashing. The Syrian regime has also been borrowing 500 million US dollars a month from Iran.

3 Iranians lining up for food supplies in southern Tehran in February 2014.

4 Ayatollah Ali Khamenei wearing worn-out sandals, in a symbolic message that the Supreme Leader is ‘suffering’ like poor Iranians and he expects everybody to do the same – March 2014.



1 On 12 May 2014, *Naame Shaam* activists staged a protest in front of the Iranian embassy in Vienna against the role of the Sepah Pasdaran in Syria. The peaceful protest took place a day before a meeting in the Austrian capital between the European Union's foreign policy chief, Catherine Ashton, and the Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad, Javad Zarif. The meeting was part of a new round of negotiations between the Iranian regime and the E3+3 group to discuss Iran's nuclear plans.

Source:

<<http://www.naameshaam.org/activists-protest-against-iranian-regimes-role-in-syria-in-front-of-iranian-embassy-in-vienna-ahead-of-nuclear-talks/>>
<http://www.naameshaam.org/activists-protest-against-iranian-regimes-role-in-syria-in-front-of-iranian-embassy-in-vienna-ahead-of-nuclear-talks/>

2, 3 Activists from *Naame Shaam* staged a protest on 13 May 2014 at the Austria Center Vienna, where the European Union's foreign policy chief, Catherine Ashton, and Iranian Foreign Minister, Mohammad Javad Zarif, discussed Iran's nuclear plans. *Naame Shaam* said that the EU and the US must link these negotiations with the Iranian regime's disastrous role in Syria. A nuclear deal and the lifting of sanctions on Iran should only be possible if the Iranian regime pulls out all its fighters from Syria. That means every single fighter from Sepah Pasdaran, Hezbollah Lebanon and the Iraqi militias that it has been sending to Syria. It must also end all the financial and military support that it has been providing to Bashar al-Assad's regime.

Source:

<<http://www.naameshaam.org/naame-shaam-activists-protest-outside-eu-iran-meeting-in-vienna/>>
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