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THE IRANIAN INTERVENTION IN SYRIA

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JCSP 46

Solo Flight

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THE IRANIAN INTERVENTION IN SYRIA

By Lt Col Salem Alblooshi

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THE IRANIAN INTERVENTION IN SYRIA

INTRODUCTION

The revolution against the Assad government in Syria was mainly regarded in the context of the Arab Spring that swept across Syria and challenged its dictatorial order. Iran oversaw the unique changes as a prism of the 'Islamic Awakening.'¹ The Syrian uprising enabled the Islamic Republic to reclaim a sense of unity with the individuals in the region over their unfair rulers since the revolution was an inspiration by the radical capability to overthrow Shah. Conversely, with regard to Syria, the perception of Iran on the uprising was different. Tehran was fully aware of the necessity to uphold one of its key essential alliances in the area. The outcome is that the Islamic Republic has pursued to present the war in Syria as a broader part of fighting against violence, an activity that has so far gained resistance especially with the rise of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syrian (ISIS). It is important to note that Iran is leading to foreign intervention and its relations with the al-Assad government can be traced back before the civil conflict.

The Iranian government intervention through monitory, military, logistic and political support in Syria has played a major role in ensuring that the governments of al-Assad remain relevant over the past 8 years since the civil war began. This research project is a case study of Iranian intervention in the Syrian civil war. The study will show what were the motivations and the strategies of the Iranian government, and demonstrate that this intervention had as its major effect to save the Syrian government from collapse. In essence, this thesis achieved through the use of themes such as Iranian government

¹ Payam Mohseni, Hassan Ahmadian. "What Iran Really Wants in Syria." Foreign Policy. Last modified May 10, 2018. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/05/10/what-iran-really-wants-in-syria/>.

intervention, contributions, and how the conflict in Syria was achieved through the use of military cooperation and economic support before the Russian intervention.

BACKGROUND ABOUT THE SYRIAN CONFLICT

It is important to note that the relationship between Iran and Syria started way back before the civil war emerged in 2011. Syria has been the only Arab country consistent ally of Iran since the Islamic revolution that took place in 1979.² Additionally, the Syrian government over the years provided vital thoroughfare support to the Hezbollah organization situated in Lebanon. Syrian Support to the Hezbollah group strengthened their relationship with Iran. The two nations have been close allies over decades through trade and other strategic duties in the region.³ The Syrian civil war broke started in 2011 as a nonviolent demonstration, but the momentum gained and persistent violence from multiple actors over many years has devastated the nation, as well as its neighbouring countries. It is believed that the civil war in Syria has so far claimed half a million lives, including civilians and security personnel in the country.⁴ In addition to this, more than 10 million civilians have been displaced from their homes, and another one million people are believed to have sustained injuries as a result of the conflict.⁵

Due to the involvement of numerous states, terrorist organizations and rebel groups, the Syrian conflict can only be described as highly complex and a wicked

² Fulton, Will, Joseph Holliday, and Sam Wyer. "Iranian Strategy in Syria (Washington, DC: Institute for the Study of War and American Enterprise Institute Critical Threats Project, May 2013)."

³ Ibid, 3.

⁴ Juneau, Thomas. "Iran's costly intervention in Syria: A pyrrhic victory." *Mediterranean Politics* 25, no. 1 (2020): 26-44.

⁵ Wastnidge, Edward. "Iran and Syria: An Enduring Axis." *Middle East Policy* 24, no. 2 (2017): 148-159.

problem for international peace and security and resulted in a lot of Syrian refugees in the surrounding countries and worldwide and it also resulted in empowering ISIS group to spread in many places. The Syrian conflict has attracted numerous external forces, including from its long-standing ally Iran. It has also attracted different forces that can be described as overlapping proxy confrontations between world powers such as Russia and the United States as well as some regional forces like the kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Qatar, internationally and regionally respectively

The Iranian government has continued to render its support to the Syrian government, headed by Bashar al-Assad, as head of the state. Such Iranian support and intervention in Syria range from economic to military support since the outbreak of the civil conflict in the country. On the other hand, the Syrian opposition has also been receiving support from the external forces since 2011, following their protest against the sitting government.⁶ For example, in the past eight-years, the opposition led by the Syrian National Coalition has continued to receive logistical, financial, military and political support across the Sunni states from the region including Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United States of America.⁷ The opposition has been agitating for political changes, economic empowerment for the poor, freedom of speech and media within the country.

THE REASONS BEHIND THE IRANIAN INTERVENTION AFTER THE ARAB SPRING UP TO THE RUSSIAN INTERVENTION

⁶ Saouli, Adham. "Hizbollah's intervention in Syria: Causes and consequences." In *The War for Syria*, pp. 69-85. Routledge, 2019.

⁷ Hokayem, Emile. "Iran, the Gulf States and the Syrian civil war." *Survival* 56, no. 6 (2014): 59-86.

The Iranian government's motive for intervention and participation in the Syrian conflict continues to be clear and poses a threat to regional security. This section will outline those reasons that have materialized since the outbreak of the Arab Spring and developed further up to the Russian intervention.

Since the 19th century, Iran together with the Islamists countries has struggled to build a strong political unit within the Middle East, among them, the Shiite community which is mainly found in Iran Bahrain, Lebanon, Iraq and Syria. The extension has been made to the Houthis, Shiite's close cousins found in Yemen, to northeast Lebanon and further towards the northwest. Syria will not only be taken from the control of the Shiite Islamists but also Hezbollah's mood of life found in Lebanon will be damaged.⁸

The Threat of the Arab Spring

The Arab Spring began towards the end of 2010 from North Africa and spread to the Middle East. The revolution was geared towards overthrowing long-lasting, most powerful and reactive violent governments in countries such as Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, Syria and Yemen. The wave of Arab Spring that emanated from Tunisia reached Syria by March 2011.⁹ It is important to note that there are so many other factors that led to the Syrian civil war, however, the Arab Spring stands out as the spark that ignited it. The success that was realized by Egyptians and Tunisia citizens from their revolts motivated several Syrians to embrace pro-democracy activism. It started with 15 teenagers who were inspired by the Arab Spring to paint what can be described as radical slogans on the wall of the school. The teenagers were arrested as well as tortured for embracing the Arab

⁸ Ibid, 3.

⁹ Mohammed Sergie, Grant Smith and Javier Blas, 'Saudi Arabia and Russia to Freeze Oil Output at Near Record Levels', Bloomberg, 17 February 2016. 24.

Spring through their writings. Unfortunately, one of the students died from police beatings and this is what led to the countrywide protest.¹⁰

Notably, people took to the street and demanded the release of the detained school children. In addition to this, Syrian citizens demanded other things like freedom of speech and media and expanded democracy with the borders. The situation got worse when the government led by Bashar al-Assad as the president opened fire on demonstrators, leading to the death of more than 2900 citizens.¹¹ These rebel forces fought to overthrow the government of Bashar al-Assad and slowly the country slid into the ongoing civil war that has claimed more than 500, 000 thousand lives.¹²

Supporting Hezbollah

Iranian intervention in Syria is also informed by its role to support and form the Hezbollah fighting group. Notably, the government of Iran has been using Zabadani city located in Syria as a logistical hub to train and supply necessary military support to the Hezbollah organization.¹³ Before the outbreak of the Syrian civil war, it is believed that Iranians had more than 3000 Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps known as IRGC within the borders of Syria. IRGC provided basic training to the local troops as well as managed the supply of many and other military equipment to their sponsored group in Lebanon.¹⁴

Supporting al-Assad

¹⁰ Ibid, 122.

¹¹ Fulton, Will, Joseph Holliday, and Sam Wyer. "Iranian Strategy in Syria (Washington, DC: Institute for the Study of War and American Enterprise Institute Critical Threats Project, May 2013)."

¹² Michael Stephens and Omar Mohamed, 'Casus Belli: Are Turkey and Saudi Arabia Weighing Up Military Options in Syria?', Newsweek Middle East, 25 May 2016

¹³ Ibid, 16.

¹⁴ Fulton, Will. "Iran's Global Force Projection Network: IRGC Quds Force and Lebanese Hezbollah." *American Enterprise Institute* (2013).

Although the Iranian government defended its intervention to the civil war in Syria as a way of defending democracy, many scholars have argued otherwise. Many leaders across the world believe that the intervention in Syria by the government of Iran is self-centred and ill-informed. Deputy Foreign minister of Iran in 2014 stated that they do not intend to sustain or install Bashar al-Assad as the President in Syria for life. Rather he explained that the foreign policy reasoning for assisting in Syria is to counter terrorism and extremist forces which they are planning to overthrow the Syrian government headed by al-Assad.¹⁵ It is important to note that Iranian intervention in Syria in 2011 received serious criticism from the leaders globally. For instance, the president of the United States of America Barack Obama faulted Iran's government for aiding al-Assad to quell peaceful protests. It was established that Iran provided useful technology to al-Assad, which included the advanced technology that was used to monitor cell phones, e-mails as well as social media.¹⁶ These technologies used to monitor and control the population of Syria from Iran, are said to be among the most sophisticated across the world. Moreover, the Iranian government's support to Syria over 9 years since the civil war started has enabled the Assad government to survive the long civil war. It is believed that chlorine and sarin chemicals that Bashar al-Assad used against the civilians came from Iran's government.¹⁷

WHAT IRAN REALLY WANTS IN SYRIA

There are many reasons for the Iranian government's involvement in Syria. Iran wishes to leverage their influence and increase the regional power, and Iran wants to control

¹⁵ Ibid, 10.

¹⁶ Ibid, 12.

¹⁷ Ibid, 16.

all of the Syrian resources and also they want to own a gate at the Mediterranean Sea and they want to be close to support Hezbollah in Lebanon and lastly to keep the power in the hands of the Alawi government (SHIAA) and to keep Sunni away from leading the country. The survival of the Syrian government and its stability in the region is the greatest interest of the Iranian government since it plays a crucial role in regional politics and economics as well.

In essence, the survival of the Syrian government will boost Iranian influence in regional affairs. Originally, Iran maintained its support to the prevalent revolution in the Middle East countries after realizing that the Western Arab monocracies that were in Egypt, Tunisia, and Yemen were on the verge of collapsing. The high-ranking Iranian officials like the former minister of foreign affairs, Ali Akbar Velayati, refer to Syria as a “golden ring of resistance against Israel.”¹⁸ Clearly, if Iran could not have rendered its help to Syria, the government could have been not able to stand alone. The belief, however, remains that Tehran has stood with Syria in the conflict due to the fact that the two governments; the Syrian government and the Iranian government continue to share religious heritages. The ruling elites have received sympathy from the unorthodox Shia, the lesser group in the Islam domain that is populated by the mainstream Sunnis.

Iran’s involvement is because of its wish to unite its hardly achieved spot through the competition amongst the major participants in the Syrian uprising. Indeed, Syria offers Iran essential deliberate penetration which permits it into Hezbollah thus improving the Iranian government restriction of Israel. Clearly, the downfall of the Assad government and the division of the Syrian states would bring a substantial setback to Iran as it will lose its scarce

¹⁸ Ibid, 2.

vital associates from the Arab world. Consequently, with regard to Iran's perception, it is the Assad party that is facing threats in Syria. The opinion is rooted in the Iranian leaders when the Syrian war began since Iran was positioned to defend Al-Assad, whose survival chances seemed to be minimal. Certainly, the belief by the Iranian government that the Syrian revolution was indeed a foreign conspiracy, undermined Iran due to threats of not preserving Tehran in case the conflicting parties lost the war to Syria.

The Assad government is backed up by the Iranian uprising guards and the president of Russia has been able to make the Eastern Ghouta an area of bloodbath during the attacks in Damascus.¹⁹ A total of five hundred individuals were murdered, within which more than 120 of the killed individuals were children. However, the security council of the UN agency was able to maintain a truce or rather ceasefire for 30 days with the purpose of building up corridors and refuge for the civilians who were under siege. Nonetheless, Major General Mohammad Bagheri, the chief of staff of IRGC, confirmed that Assad militias would continue fighting the insurgents.²⁰ All this is taking place at the time when a state of calmness has been achieved in Syria after the six-year of a series of vigorous conflicts. Expectations of a ceasefire amongst the Syrian government and the objectors, which would further bring about the formation of a temporary government towards peace and harmony, existed.

The question as to why the war stirred up in Syria once more has been running in the minds of many, and they think that it is somehow connected to the Iranian government being put under extreme pressure in both Iran and the larger parts of the

¹⁹ Parchizadeh, Reza. "The Shiite Crescent: The Middle East's Arc of Crisis." *Foreign Policy Blogs*. Last modified February 28, 2018. <https://foreignpolicyblogs.com/2018/02/28/the-shiite-crescent/>.

²⁰ Ibid, 1.

Middle East. Indeed, the US and EU have put more effort to help bring the government into negotiations concerning the missile or rocket creation and regional intrusion.

The result will be the balance in power among the Middle East countries. This is because the Shiaa camp found within the Shiaa crescent will be broken and no more exists. The land border between the Iranian government and Israel will be lost. Iran will also not be able to access the strategic locations found in the Mediterranean region in case of Syria's fall. Due to these effects, the Iranian government needs to uphold its status quo in Syria which has been in terms of frozen conflicts.

Iran had a significant interest in Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Bahrain and Yemen to accomplish the establishment of the Shiite crescent as it is considered to be the east gate, this is considered one the most important goals for the Iranian government. This goal for Iran can be only achieved if they control the capitals of the mentioned countries, already Iran has a huge presence in Lebanon through Hezbollah and in Iraq after the US invasion and of course in Yemen through the Houthi group. In this case, Syria is the only remaining country that Iran is seeking to has control over the Alawi Shiaa government in order to achieve this goal which will lead to change the demography in Syria by sending Iranian, Lebanese and Iraqi Shiaa population to live in some Shiaa holy areas in Syria like Eastern Maza and some other holy places and this is very important to make sure that the Shiaa support will be in Syria forever.

PRIMARY CONTRIBUTIONS IRAN PROVIDED TO THE SYRIAN GOVERNMENT

Over the years, Iran has been perceived as a strong and steadfast supporter and sympathizer of the Assad government in the Syrian War. Surprisingly, it is evident that

the support that Iran-Syria has in terms of the alliance is neither linked to the religious values and shared national interest.²¹ However, it is considered as a tactical-cum-strategic partnership that binds the two authoritarian governments. The history of the partnership is considered to emerge from the mutual contempt of Saddam Hussein in 1980 that helped in uniting Iran and Syria.²² The mutual collaboration was also facilitated by the loathing and fear posed by Israel and the United States of America and this is the element that has sustained the alliance since then.²³ Iran's support and the alliance is something that has been there over many years, However, in Syria, things were different as Tehran embarked on offering unwavering support to the parametric al-Assad government while at the same time denouncing those opposing Syrian actions and terming them as a terrorist. In essence, they did not only termed those opposing the actions as the terrorists but also the motley alliance of Israel, Gulf Arab States and the United States of America.²⁴

One of the major contributions that Iran has made to Syria is the provision of intelligence support. In essence, the need for intelligence support in Syria over the years has grown and this is based on the rapid and increasing protests that the country has been facing since the spring of 2011.²⁵ Thus, according to the United States of America data source from the Department of Treasury (USDOT), it is clear that Iranian organizations have always been involved in Syrian intelligence support. Some of the Iranian

²¹ SADIQPOUR, KARIM. "Iran's Unwavering Support to Assad's Syria – Combating Terrorism Center at West Point." Combating Terrorism Center at West Point. Last modified November 16, 2017. <https://ctc.usma.edu/irans-unwavering-support-to-assads-syria/>.

²² Ibid, 2.

²³ Ibid, 5.

²⁴ Djalili, Mohammad-Reza, and Thierry Kellner. *Iran's Syria policy in the wake of the Arab Springs*. No. ARTICLE. 2014.

²⁵ Piotrowski, Marcin Andrzej. "'Mosaic Defence:' Iran's Hybrid Warfare in Syria 2011–2016." *The Polish Quarterly of International Affairs* 26, no. 3 (2017): 18-67.

organizations that have been involved in this process include the Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS), Law Enforcement Forces (LEF) as well as the larger defence contractor Iran Electronics Industries (IEI). In this case, the support from the departments have shown designations and shed light on the immense and tight relationship that exists between Iranian and Syrian Security Department institutions. In 2011, Tehran embarked on dispatching the Law Enforcement Force personnel (LEF) to assist and advise Al-Assad. In essence, the USDOT or U.S. Department of the Treasury report documented that, “LEF Deputy Commander Brigadier General Ahmad Reza Radan travelled to Damascus [in April 2011] where he met with Syrian security services and provided expertise to aid in the Syrian government’s crackdown.”²⁶ The report further states that the LEF “provided material support to the Syrian General Intelligence Directorate (GID) and dispatched personnel to Damascus...to assist the Syrian government in suppressing the Syrian people.”²⁷

In this context, Tehran has always helped the Syrian government in creating a paramilitary group that comprises of 50,000 members that are also known as Jaysh al-Shabi or the People’s Army.²⁸ In this regard, the role that Iran played in Syria cannot go unnoticed because Iran had a combination of both technical know-how and training experience that helped Syria in managing the popular unrests in the streets of Syria.

Iran has also assisted the operations in Syria by offering financial support. In essence, the Iranian government is considered as the largesse shareholders and financiers

²⁶ Jaafar, Hadi H., Rami Zurayk, Caroline King, Farah Ahmad, and Rami Al-Outa. "Impact of the Syrian conflict on irrigated agriculture in the Orontes Basin." *International Journal of Water Resources Development* 31, no. 3 (2015): 436.

²⁷ Will Fulton, J. H. "Iranian strategy in syria." *USA: Institute for the Study of war*. Retrieved January 14 (2013): 2017.

²⁸ *Ibid*, 12.

of the Syria operations. In 2013 alone, Iran credited Syria with \$1 billion which was followed an additional amount of \$3.6 billion credit line.²⁹ The amount was largely used for funding and financing petrol and associated products purchased within Syria. In addition to this, Iran is reported to have assisted Syria in expanding its overall chemical weapons as well as its arsenals. In essence, the overwhelming support of the Iranian for Syrian in terms of the expansion of the chemical weapons programs is depicted in the Iranian deployment, equipment supply as well as in the precursor of chemical as well as technical training. All this is achieved through the financial aids that the Iranian government has continued to offer to Syria over the years.

IRANIAN INTERVENTION IN THE SYRIAN CONFLICT WAS ACHIEVED THROUGH

Iran and Syria are very close allies, and Iran has significantly supported the government of Syria in the civil war, by providing both training services and combat troops, as a result of the self-interest that Iran has on Syria. During the war, Iran Defense Forces were trained in both Iran and Syria. The sole purpose of the Iranian intervention on the Syrian conflict was to preserve Bashar al-Assad's power. In 2013, Iran deployed almost 10,000 of its operatives to Syria for direct military support to the Assad forces in the civil war. Iran has also played a large role in supporting Syria's physical sovereignty, as it has been crucial in border security.

Military cooperation

²⁹ Ahmadian, Hassan, and Payam Mohseni. "Iran's Syria strategy: the evolution of deterrence." *International Affairs* 95, no. 2 (2019): 341-364.

The constant war in Syria has spread disasters and distress to the citizens with subsequent instabilities in the whole of the Middle East region. This conflict remains to be the most challenging and dangerous in the 21st century. The battle is considered hazardous in terms of casualties and the number of combat troops involved in the conflict directly. External involvement with foreign countries, together with their coalitions, has made the Syrian war more complicated.

The external involvement and support by foreign countries have helped in the shaping of the Syrian conflict. US coalition intervened in the war in the year 2014 by supporting the groups that were against Assad. Moreover, it launched a public fight against the terrorist activist working outside Syria. US concentration included putting much effort against ISIS.

Religious motivations

Numerous aspects have been used in explaining the unending public help that Iran has been providing to Syria. To begin with, the government has been able to validate the strategy used by Iran in Syria by the use of conceptual language. Iran's Shiite fighters in Iran are referred to as the "Defenders of the Shrine", which is a mosque near Damascus called Sayyidah Zeinab, which acted as a burial place to the daughter of the prophet and a respected figure in the Shiite family. The vandalism of the mosque together with other respected tombs of the Shiite community by the Syrian insurgents has become a continuous call for the Shiite community found in Iran and other Islamic governments. Research shows that defending this shrine has inspired the soldiers to move to Syria, with reasons being that of protecting the shrine. A recently conducted study indicates that

almost 89% of the support that goes to the protection of the Shiite shrines is an objective of the Iran policy in the Syrian government.

Economic Support

Iran has been contending to be granted access to the economy of Syria. Other than providing credit lines and direct funds, their primary purpose for entering into the Syrian market is to be given contracts of investment for the conglomerates and companies.

Tehran has provided credit lines worth 6.6 billion dollars to Syria to help in its recovery after the conflict. The sectors targeted throughout this competition include the agricultural industry, tourism, energy, and private sectors. Iran is building up constituencies in business communities within Syria. However, Iran is fully committed to seeing the development of the affected Syrian government. Therefore, Iran has continued to give financial support or aid in various ways.

Networking

Over the past years, Iran has developed economic conventions to help manage and establish relations with their corresponding Syrian business associates. However, Iran differs in their behavioural networking; for example, Iran has continued to work locally by building networks that are based on cultural, sectarian, and tribal relationships. A total of 91 Syrian companies in the SRBC have been involved in importing and exporting textiles, energy, petrol chemicals, clothing, and individual security cases. On the other hand, the Syrian-Iranian business council (SIBC), which was started in 2008, has had a tremendous economic impact on the Syrian economy. An example is seen in the case of Mazen Al-Tarazi, a businessman who has invested in tourism and the real estate sectors.

Oil and Gas

Syria is a small, oil-producing country. However, the petroleum industry was the leading industry before the civil conflict. The IMF statistics show that in 2010, oil sales made up 25% of the country's revenue totalling 3.2 billion dollars of its GNP.³⁰ After the war, the oil industry made significant losses. Due to this, Iran targeted the oil and gas industries in their focus on increasing economic cooperation in Syria. Today, Iran is known to be the leading producer of polished oil produce in Syria. Thus helping in meeting the energy demands in Syria, also, upon receiving the energy supply on credit, the government also charges the domestic suppliers for the distributions they make in the local Syrian markets

Electricity

The electric infrastructure has faced various devastations due to the civil war that is persistently experienced by the Syrian government. There has been a tremendous reduction in the domestic power plants aimed at meeting local requirements. The electric sector is known to generate revenues and increase the country's foreign exchange reserves.³¹ For this reason, Syria has considered the rehabilitation of this sector, one of its major concerns. Several MoUs have been signed by Syria in its constant mission to rehabilitate the electricity industry. Iran, on the other hand, has been reluctant to invest in the electricity sector since it gives the project lower importance. This is because "Syria's electricity infrastructure has been devastated by the war. Subject to neglect and attacks

³⁰ Gobat, Jeanne, and Ms Kristina Kostial. *Syria's conflict economy*. International Monetary Fund, 2016.

³¹ al-Ahmad, Ghaith. "Post-Conflict, How Will Iran Preserve Its Presence in Syria?." *The Atlantic Council* (2019).

perpetrated by different armed groups, the capacity of power plants to meet domestic needs has greatly diminished".³²

Agriculture

The agricultural sector is said to have generated almost 19% of Syria's GDP in 2011. However, estimates by the UN's Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) show that the country has made subsequent losses in its agricultural sector, amounting to 16 billion dollars since 2011.³³ However, the contract is still under discussion and has suffered setbacks due to the lack of a better agreement on the new credit conditions, which includes the demand by Iran to construct a seaport in Syria. Iran and Syria have been able to sign several MoUs that are meant to oversee the building of the flour and sugar mills in the southern part of Syria. Furthermore, Syria and Iran have made agreements concerning the exportation of the mechanical equipment for the agricultural sector as well as the marketing of the surplus agrarian produce on behalf of Syria.³⁴

Tourism and real estate

The tourism industry also significantly contributes to the economy of Syria. It accounted for almost 14.4% of Syria's GDP in the year 2011. The Syrian conflict has overseen a decline in the country's revenues allocation in the tourism sector. Iran's investments in the tourism sector have been made religiously. For example, the Iranian

³² Sinan Hatahet Middle East and North Africa Programme. "Russia and Iran: Economic Influence in Syria." International Affairs Think Tank | Chatham House. Last modified March 2019. <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/publications/research/2019-03-08RussiaAndIranEconomicInfluenceInSyria.pdf>.

³³ Jaafar, Hadi H., Rami Zurayk, Caroline King, Farah Ahmad, and Rami Al-Outa. "Impact of the Syrian conflict on irrigated agriculture in the Orontes Basin." *International Journal of Water Resources Development* 31, no. 3 (2015): 436.

³⁴ *Ibid*, 23.

Pilgrimage Organization made a treaty with Iranian Hajj by signing an MoU to boost the number of tourists that would go to the Syrian religious sites.³⁵ The focus of Iran on religious tourists indicates that its investments are focused on the Shia shrines that are located in Damascus and areas around the governorates of the Deir EzZor, Homs, and Aleppo, which have experienced substantial conflicts.³⁶ Iran is also committed to acquire real estate and land with the hopes that the country will benefit from after the war. For example, Iran asked the Syrian government for the large businesses in the old city of Damascus, Aleppo, Daraya, and Seit Zeynab. Iran has, therefore, mainly relied on Syria for the buying of real estate.³⁷

CHALLENGES FACED BY IRAN IN SYRIA INTERVENTION

Iran's Casualties in Syria

Iran's martial invasion in Syria has brought great losses to Tehran. Research by NCRI shows that over 12000 individuals from Iran have died as a result of the Syrian war. Besides these, Hezbollah also suffered dearly because of supporting Tehran. Hezbollah lost 2000 of its soldiers to the Syrian conflict. While the remaining 7000 casualties are Syrian militia that was trained by Iran.³⁸ Moreover, Tehran has lost count of its brigadiers located in Syria, among which includes the IRGC officer, Hossein Hamedan who was murdered while heading the Iranian forces in Syria back in 2015. He

³⁵ Shla News Association. "Saudi Arabia, Iran Sign MoU on Next Year Major Hajj." *International Shia News Agency*. Last modified December 19, 2018. <https://en.shafaqna.com/81017/saudi-arabia-iran-sign-mou-on-next-year-major-hajj/>.

³⁶ al-Ahmad, Ghaith. "Post-Conflict, How Will Iran Preserve Its Presence in Syria?." *The Atlantic Council* (2019).

³⁷ Ibid, 23.

³⁸ Jaafar, Hadi H., Rami Zurayk, Caroline King, Farah Ahmad, and Rami Al-Outa. "Impact of the Syrian conflict on irrigated agriculture in the Orontes Basin." *International Journal of Water Resources Development* 31, no. 3 (2015): 438.

also lost Mustafa Badreddine, the troupe leader who played the role of organizing and performing the 1984 bombing of the U.S marines' quotas in Beirut.

Harming Reputation

Also, another major challenge that Iran has been facing as a result of supporting Syria is the harming of its reputation. In essence, the reputation of Iran has largely been affected and harmed in the larger Sunni Arab world. Iran was once perceived as the champion for the popular resistance against the United States of America and the war in Iraq. However, today, due to its involvement in Syria, Iran has a reputation among the international community and the Middle East region as a nefarious and sectarian actor.³⁹ This is happening because of the support they have continued to offer to al-Assad. In essence, this same fate was suffered by the Lebanese Hizballah as a result of the support they offered to the same al-Assad team.

The threat of Losing Damascus Battle

There is also a looming threat that might come in case al-Assad loses in the Damascus battle. In this context, Iran will have to embark on a strategic decision that will either make them preserve the influence in the region by supporting the makeable of Alawite militia or to join and make friendship with the Sunni rebels. In essence, this will be a major challenge that will require it to have like-minded ideologies that will enable them to resist any premise of Israel and the United States of America in the region. This

³⁹ SADIJADPOUR, KARIM. "Iran's Unwavering Support to Assad's Syria – Combating Terrorism Center at West Point." Combating Terrorism Center at West Point. Last modified November 16, 2017. <https://ctc.usma.edu/irans-unwavering-support-to-assads-syria/>.

is as per the sentiments of the Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei stated that “We will support and help any nations, any groups fighting against the Zionist government across the world.

CONCLUSION

To sum up, the Iranian government intervention through monitory, military, logistic and political support in Syria played a major role in ensuring that the governments of al-Assad remain relevant over the past 8 years since the civil war began. The relationship between Iran and Syria started way back before the civil war. Iran is playing a major and pivotal role to keep the Assad government in power to preserve its interests in the Middle East region. These interests include the establishment of power balance. As such Iran is providing military aid, monitory, military, logistic and political support to benefit its national interests in the long term. In essence, the intervention offered by Iran in the Syrian Civil War is immensely important as it helped and provided Tehran with the needed support. In this process, Iran has been able to develop strong allies that have stimulated and build a strong relationship with the regional allies while at the same time simulating a more immense threat to Israel. The ability of Iran to buttress the Assad government in the region has shown its effective exemplify in the regional strategy. It is because the Turkish government has been supporting the Syrian rebels operating in the northern part of Syria. Despite the recommendable support that Iran is obtaining from its Citizens in terms of its operations in Syria, it will be important that the government consider seeking and reach to an agreement with other nations like Turkey and the United States of America. This will ensure that there is prompting difference that emerges that might halt their operation and bring them to work with these nations.

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