



Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's revolutionary guard are spearheading an attempted regional takeover in the troubled Arab world, focusing on Syria, writes Jonathan Paris. Because the Obama administration was fixated on securing the 2015 nuclear deal, they gave a green light to Iran to do all sorts of things in the region. And this took place in 2013-15, when the Syrian rebels were at their peak and Iran's ally, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, was near his end. It was looking very grim for the Syrian regime, but they were able to call on Iran to backstop them. General Qassem Soleimani (Qassem), the head of the Al Quds division of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), persuaded Putin in 2015 that getting Russia involved in Syria was a great opportunity to save Bashar. Putin for reasons of his own did that.

QASSEM NEVER SLEEPS

Qassem is a workaholic who is reputed to sleep only three hours a day. He has been spreading Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's sectarian Shia ideology since the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s. Recently in October 2017, following the Kurdish referendum in northern Iraq, which was widely condemned by the international community, as well as by Iran, Qassem was able to persuade a key Kurdish clan, the Talabanis, rivals of the dominant Kurdish group in Iraq known as the Barzanis, to allow the IRGC and their Iraqi Shia proxies to enter the Kurdish state (KRG). Qassem in turn facilitated the recapture by the Iraqi government's Shia militias of Kirkuk and other territory that were taken by the Kurds at the beginning of the war against ISIS. Qassem moves quickly on the ground and does not talk in public too much. His move on the Iraqi Kurds took place less than a fortnight after President Trump's mid-October speech targeting Iran for its malign activities in the region.

The genius of Qassem is that he has created a transnational highly mobile group of Shia militias from Lebanon to Pakistan with the ability to fight and die in Yemen on one day, Syria on the next day, and Iraq on the following day, all in pursuit of the Supreme Leader's objectives. A block-Iran coalition comprising any of the US, UK, France, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, UAE, Bahrain, Israel and Egypt, can learn from Qassem's successes and organise an analogous set of Sunni

militias in the eastern and southern parts of Syria. Such a coalition could supplement and enhance the current US-supported SDF (Syrian Kurds and local Sunni Arabs) in trying to halt the Islamic Republic of Iran's highly destabilising sectarian-infused imperial expansion into the Levant.

Yet so far the Western response to the Iranian threat has been much talk and little action. There are glimmers of an emerging strategy, but until now the US has been operating on the ground de facto within former President Obama's policy of limited intervention. The title of a recent panel discussion at a major US think-tank, 'Are we overinvested in the Middle East?' sums up the current thinking in policy circles. As President Trump himself said, 'We are going to stop spending US\$7 trillion abroad and start focusing on infrastructure at home.'

What does Iran want in the Levant? An ayatollah once told me in London in 2004 that Iran does not want a war with Israel, but they want to have sticks (Syria, Hezbollah, Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad) to provoke and distract Israel when necessary so that Israel will think twice about targeting Iran's nuclear weapons infrastructure in the future.

Earlier this year, Qassem and the IRGC had become buoyed with success from Assad's improving fortunes against the Syrian rebels. One can see a pattern in the Middle East since 2003. The reality is that US-led coalitions keep defeating not Iran but Iran's enemies, such as Saddam's Iraq, the Taliban, and, most recently, ISIS. The IRGC has been clever – they come in after their enemies have been defeated by the US-led coalition, filling the political vacuum left by the departing American forces. Until now, they have managed to stay under the radar, while the US did the heavy lifting in manpower and treasure. The IRGC success on the ground has been in coordinating multinational Shia militias and Russian airpower to defeat untrained Sunni Syrian rebels who are without an air force or superpower ally. With that pseudo-success comes greater IRGC ambition on both sectarian and imperial levels. This is what we are seeing now in Iran's attempt to take over a hollowed-out Syria.

BUT THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN HAS MADE FOUR STRATEGIC MISTAKES

o First, the Iranian leadership thought that the Obama Administration's policy of retrenchment from the Middle East and allowing Iran to do whatever it wants in Syria and the wider region would continue forever. They did not count on a Trump, Pompeo and John Bolton replacing Obama and John Kerry in Washington. Even the Europeans are starting to complain about the IRGC's malign regional activities.

o Second, the surprising protests erupting in hundreds of cities and towns in Iran at the end of 2017 and beginning of 2018 revived global awareness of the Islamic Republic's Achilles heel. One street slogan was repeated over and over again: 'I die for Iran not for Palestine or Lebanon'. The impoverished Iranian people want more butter not more guns. The people are telling the ayatollahs to stop spending so much of the money from sanctions relief and Iranian oil exports on IRGC adventures abroad. They are saying: Bring it home and make Iran work again. Fomenting 'Resistance' against far away Israel does not appear to be a priority of the Iranian people.

o Supreme Leader Khamenei responds that it is better to fight enemies far away than to fight them at or closer to home. But here is the problem with his thinking: when you create strategic depth for yourself, you may think you are increasing your security, but you are also increasing

insecurity for your neighbours. This is what has happened in Syria with Iran's attempt to entrench itself there militarily. The IRGC strategy of entrenching itself militarily in Syria is making Israel insecure. In response, Israel is naturally looking for ways to make the Islamic Republic insecure. Will IRGC deployment of hundreds of Iranian missiles in Syria to threaten north Tel Aviv make north Teheran more or less secure? This is the Islamic Republic's third strategic mistake.

o A fourth strategic mistake is the geographic disadvantage Iran finds itself against Israel in Syria. The province where Damascus is situated is much closer to Israel Defense Forces (IDF) bases in Israel than it is to Iran. In any kinetic activity in the northern theatre, the IRGC and its proxies will be highly exposed. The more bases the IRGC establishes, the more targets they provide the Israeli air force. This phenomenon creates a paradox whereby the more the Iranians appear to win in Syria, the more they lose. The question is whether IRGC moves to further entrench Iran in Syria, and IDF moves to resist and strengthen Israeli deterrence will result in unintended consequences, similar to the 2006 Israeli-Lebanon war, where incidents initiated by Hezbollah on the border with Israel escalated into a war.

The US goal in the Mideast for the past several years is ending with the fall of ISIS. Now it is time to look ahead strategically to meet the challenges of the next few years.

UNANSWERED QUESTIONS

Israel's Benjamin Netanyahu has had a decent relationship with Russia's Vladimir Putin. Given the Western fallout from the spy poisoning in the UK, it is difficult to think of any other Western leader who has as good a relationship with Putin as Netanyahu. What happens to the Israeli-Russian relationship if Netanyahu steps down is unclear but not all that worrisome. What happens when Bibi has to choose the Trump Administration over Putin whenever the two superpowers come to loggerheads in Syria is a more fateful question.

Russia wants a Pax Russiana, a Russian-forged peace that consolidates Putin's success in Syria. This requires the stabilisation of the Syrian regime, with Bashar al-Assad or someone like him as the head. Russia does not share the Iranian/Hezbollah interest in opening up a second front against Israel along the 45 mile Syrian-Israeli border on the Golan Heights.

Iran appears to want something different, something more. Will we see General Qassem Soleimani's ambitious IRGC goal to take over Syria and threaten Israel, or a more limited Plan B inspired by President Rouhani's government, which seems less and less enthusiastic about the military, political, economic and social costs of IRGC's regional forays?

Either way, it is vital that the West understand that the Islamic Republic of Iran does not look at the Middle East the way outsiders do, as a region of separate states. The Islamic Republic sees the land mass extending westward from their border with Iraq to the Mediterranean as potentially one large Shia canvas. In that sense they are closer to the imperial Ottoman vision than to the Westphalian Sykes-Picot formula of separate states.

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