

IRAN'S ASSAD REGIME

This report was produced with the Critical Threats Project. The insights are part of an intensive multi-month exercise to frame, design, and evaluate potential courses of action that the United States could pursue to defeat the threat from the Islamic State in Iraq and al Sham (ISIS) and al Qaeda in Syria. Related reports in the series are available [here](#).

Key Takeaway: Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's regime is neither sovereign nor a viable U.S. partner against ISIS and al-Qaeda. Russia and Iran have penetrated the Syrian Arab Army's command-and-control authorities at all levels and propped up the force by providing the bulk of its offensive combat power. The pro-regime coalition cannot secure all of Syria and primarily serves as a vehicle for Moscow and Tehran's regional power projection. Any U.S. strategy in Syria that relies on pro-regime forces will fail to destroy Salafi-Jihadists while empowering Iran and Russia.

Both former [U.S. President Barack Obama](#) and current [U.S. President Donald Trump](#) have considered deeper cooperation with Russia – and thereby Iran and Assad – against ISIS and al-Qaeda in Syria. This idea is based on two fundamental fallacies. First, Russia, Iran, and the Assad regime cannot recapture Salafi-Jihadist safe havens and secure them over the long-term given their severe manpower shortages and shortfalls in command-and-control. Second, Assad is not sovereign. Iran and Russia have both inserted themselves deep into the framework of the state. Both states aim to entice the U.S. into actions that advance their own [strategic interests](#) and ultimately facilitate the expulsion of the U.S. from the Middle East.

Regime Manpower Shortage

The Syrian Arab Army (SAA) no longer exists as a unified or coherent fighting force capable of independently securing the entire country. Six years of defections, desertions, and combat attrition have more than halved its pre-war combat strength to an estimated [100,000](#) soldiers as of 2014 – primarily ill-equipped and poorly-trained conscripts. Only a [fraction](#) of these forces can reliably deploy in offensive operations – perhaps as few as 30,000-40,000 soldiers. These units largely consist of 'elite' forces such as the Republican Guard, Special Forces, and Fourth Armored Division that recruit heavily among Syrian Alawites.

The regime struggled to overcome these structural weaknesses due to a severe manpower shortage. The SAA intensified an indiscriminate [conscription campaign](#) in late 2014 amidst reports that the conflict had killed as many as [one-third](#) of fighting-age males among Syrian Alawites.

Activists [reported](#) the conscription of underage children and prisoners into units that received less than one week of training before battlefield deployment. Assad [acknowledged these strains](#) in a public speech in July 2015, noting an ongoing “shortfall in human capacity” that forced the state to “give up some areas” in order to focus on more “important regions” in Syria.

Russia's intervention in Syria in September 2015 has not altered these underlying shortfalls. Reinforcements from Russia, Iran, and Lebanese Hezbollah helped in part to close this gap between the regime's requirements and capabilities. The regime nonetheless remains fragile and unable to muster sufficient forces for major simultaneous operations. Most notably, ISIS [recaptured Palmyra](#) in Eastern Homs Province in December 2016 and [increased its attacks](#) against regime positions in Deir ez-Zour City while pro-regime forces [focused their main effort](#) against opposition-held districts of Aleppo City. This zero-sum allocation of resources will not be alleviated unless an outside actor conducts a major ground deployment – a step neither Russia nor Iran have been willing to pursue to date.

Breakdowns in Command-and-Control

The Syrian Civil War also forced the regime to surrender control over pro-regime forces on the ground. The regime mobilized tens of thousands of paramilitary and foreign fighters not beholden to the state in order to mitigate and reverse its operational immobility. The regime directs this coalition through an increasingly decentralized and ad hoc network of command-and-control structures that grants expanded operational

authority to junior officers in the field. These structures have been coopted by local strongmen as well as Iran and Russia.

The SAA has fractured as a result of policies undertaken to survive internal security threats. Former Syrian President Hafez al-Assad first implemented a system of military decentralization called the '[quta'a system](#)' in 1984. This system assigned each combat division to a specific geographical region, assigned it responsibility for local population centers, and granted wide discretionary powers to the commanding officer. These '[quta'as](#)' – or sectors – became fiefdoms for senior military officials, giving commanders a stake in preserving local security at the cost of reduced dependence on the state.

The regime further [task-organized](#) its maneuver units and consolidated loyal formations into larger units after the start of the Syrian Revolution in 2011 in order to exert command-and-control and improve their combat effectiveness during the Syrian Civil War. These reorganizations extended as low as the battalion level with individual companies, platoons, and soldiers being reallocated into new formations. Many formal combat brigades and divisions no longer exist in 2017 as meaningful frames of reference for operations on the ground.

The regime simultaneously organized a network of paramilitary auxiliaries to supplement its flagging combat forces. These paramilitary groups routinely evade efforts by the regime to impose state control and instead remain loyal to foreign powers, political parties, criminal networks, or individual benefactors, further degrading regime command-and-control. These units closely coordinate with the remnants of the formal military, blurring the lines between official and unofficial combat forces. This fragmentation of command authority granted the regime resiliency against immediate collapse at the cost of receding state sovereignty.

Initial efforts to consolidate these paramilitary groups under state control have regressed since 2015. The regime formed the [National Defense Forces](#) (NDF) in 2013 with assistance from Iran in order to bring disparate popular committees, criminal networks, and self-defense groups under a military umbrella. At its peak, the NDF incorporated between [80,000 to 100,000](#) fighters focused on rear-area security and static defense, freeing valuable manpower for other offensive operations. Over the past

year, the NDF reportedly fragmented and reverted to local groups outside the formal command structure as economic turmoil hampered the regime's ability to [match the salaries](#) offered by foreign or private actors.

Paramilitary groups linked to a wide variety of benefactors, causes, and ideologies fight alongside the regime, generating intense friction with the state. These factions include political militias organized by the [Syrian Arab Ba'ath Party](#) and [Syrian Social Nationalist Party](#), [Palestinians](#), private militias run by [wealthy businessmen](#), and tribal organizations. Several branches of the state security apparatus – including the four rival intelligence agencies – also recruit their own paramilitaries. These groups reportedly engage in a [wide range of criminal activity](#) that exploits local populations to bolster their meager incomes. Paramilitary groups have even engaged in [direct confrontations](#) with state authorities. For example, Assad reportedly [ordered the withdrawal](#) of nearly 900 individuals from two prominent paramilitary groups – the 'Desert Hawks' and 'Naval Commandos' – after their forces allegedly interfered with a presidential convoy in Latakia City in February 2017.

Foreign Dominance

Iran currently provides the high-end manpower capable of securing significant gains for pro-regime forces on the ground. Iran operates a coalition of nearly 30,000 fighters that includes the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), Lebanese Hezbollah, Iraqi Shi'a militias, and Afghan Shi'a fighters. These forces likely constitute one-sixth to one-eighth of total pro-regime forces – this ratio only increases when compared to the small number of combat-effective regime units.

Iran has deployed at least [7,000](#) of its own fighters to Syria. These forces include elements of the IRGC-Ground Forces and Iranian 'Artesh' that represent the first [expeditionary deployment](#) of conventional forces by Iran since the Iran-Iraq War. Iran also leads a coalition of roughly [20,000](#) foreign fighters in the country, including [6,000 to 8,000](#) from Lebanese Hezbollah, [4,000 to 5,000](#) from Iraqi Shi'a militias, and [2,000 to 4,000](#) Afghan Shi'a fighters. These totals exclude the wide array of local paramilitary groups supported by Iran in Syria. This coalition provides a disproportionate amount of the combat-capable infantry used in major pro-regime operations. For example, Iran and its proxies reportedly provided [more than half](#) of

the 10,000 fighters assembled for the year-long regime campaign to seize Aleppo City in 2015. These forces also played [key roles](#) in the two operations launched to recapture Palmyra over the past year.

Iran has created a self-sufficient method of combined force operations that excludes a major role for the regime's military. The IRGC has developed a model of [cadre-warfare](#) that allows Iran to implant military leadership over a base of irregular fighters that it organizes, funds, and equips in a host country. Iran operates sophisticated infrastructure – including a [strategic air bridge](#) from Tehran to Damascus via Baghdad – to train, equip, manage, and redeploy these forces across the region in line with its own strategic priorities. The IRGC – Quds Force and Lebanese Hezbollah lead key operations and relegate the SAA to providing heavy support including artillery, armor, and airstrikes to foreign infantry forces.

Iran gradually co-opted the regime's remaining command structure as its combat forces became the most asymmetric advantage in the conflict. Iran reportedly assumed control of key operations rooms and *ad hoc* headquarters in both [Latakia](#) and [Dera'a](#) Provinces in 2015. The transitions were accompanied by widespread claims of purges, executions, and transfers of low-ranking regime officers to other fronts. The takeover also extended to senior officers who resisted the expansion of Iran's influence. In the most prominent example, Syria Political Security Directorate Head Rustom Ghazalah died in April 2015 following a [severe beating](#) rumored to be related to his resistance to the increased Iranian deployment to Southern Syria.

Iran also played an integral role in the development of pro-regime paramilitary groups ostensibly under regime authority in order to establish the long-term infrastructure of a '[Syrian Hezbollah](#).' Iran and Lebanese Hezbollah played a [foundational role](#) in building the NDF based on the Iranian 'Basij.' Iran also oversaw enlistment campaigns across the country – in some cases [competing directly](#) with the regime for new recruits by providing [competitive salaries](#) and military equipment. Iran nurtured its pool of future manpower through religious outreach including [funding](#) for theology schools and revolutionary youth groups among Alawites on the Syrian Coast. Iran worked to develop independent [infrastructure](#) against Israel on the Syrian Golan Heights as demonstrated by the deaths of key Lebanese Hezbollah operatives such as [Jihad Mughniyeh](#) in January 2015 and [Samir Kantar](#) in December 2015.

Russia, by contrast, strengthened the regime's military and security services' formal structures. Russia provides the majority of its military aid, including advanced weaponry and air support, directly to the SAA. This support included the provision of advanced armored vehicles such as [T-90](#) Main Battle Tanks and [BTR-82](#) Armored Personnel Carriers to elite units such as the Syrian 'Tiger Forces' and Republican Guard. Russia took great pains to present its military engagement as a bilateral agreement between two legitimate governments against terrorism through [high-profile basing deals](#) and [public coordination](#) with senior regime officials. These efforts complement the actions of Iran in Syria while simultaneously allowing Russia to develop an independent partner for long-term influence.

Russia also tried to reconsolidate paramilitary groups under state control via new headquarters and command structures. Russia drove the establishment of the [Fourth Storming Corps](#) in Latakia Province in October 2015 and the [Fifth Storming Corps](#) in Damascus in November 2016. These new corps structures [reportedly intend](#) to consolidate paramilitary groups under state control with Russian command-and-control support, funding, and [equipment](#). The Fifth Storming Corps [spearheaded](#) the pro-regime offensive that recaptured Palmyra from ISIS in March 2017 with backing from Russia, Iran, and Lebanese Hezbollah.

Russia has nonetheless eroded the regime's sovereignty. Russia took control over major operations in Northern Syria in late 2015, including key battlefronts in [Latakia](#) and [Aleppo](#) Provinces. Russia's increasing influence in operational planning and strategic decision-making generated [noticeable changes](#) in pro-regime campaign design, including the use of frontal aviation and major cauldron battles against the opposition in Aleppo Province. On the diplomatic front, Russia attempted to impose its own [constitutional draft](#) upon both the regime and opposition in order to resolve the Syrian Civil War under favorable terms that preserve its long-term basing rights on the Syrian Coast.

Implications

The U.S. will not find a partner willing or capable of advancing its national security interests within the pro-regime coalition. Pro-regime forces are not capable of independently expelling ISIS and al-Qaeda from Syria. Iran currently provides the high-end combat units that lead pro-regime offensives on the ground. Any policy that

leverages Russia and Assad against Salafi-Jihadist groups will thus empower Iran in Syria by default. Conversely, any effort to [drive a wedge](#) between Russia and Iran in Syria in the near-term will also fail due to the critical role of Iran in supporting both parties. Russia has no proxy in Syria without Iran. Russia and Assad cannot afford to divorce themselves from Iran even if they intended to do so. Neither Russia nor Iran requires an end to the Syrian Civil War or the defeat of ISIS in Syria. Rather, Russia and Iran have consistently intervened in the conflict in order to suppress the opponents of the regime, enhance their own regional freedom of action, and oust the U.S. from the Middle East. Their public appeals for political and military cooperation with the U.S. are disingenuous and unconstructive. The U.S. must focus on regaining leverage and extracting meaningful concessions from the pro-regime coalition rather than surrendering to the interests of strategic adversaries for unsustainable gains against ISIS and al-Qaeda.