

False talk of peace: the US turning a blind eye to the activities of Iraq's Shi'a militias

Recently, Qasim Suleimani, head of the Iranian Quds Force, personally supervised the transfer to Damascus of one of the plethora of Iraqi Shiite militias which report directly to Khamenei's personal office in Tehran. This helped taxidermists to stuff yet more straw into Assad's corpse, and Russia to continue its Middle-Eastern expansion based on the 'legitimate invitation' of a régime which not only continues to enjoy the official 'Syrian' UN seat unchallenged, but seems to enjoy also the [complicity of UN bodies](#) without which it couldn't have survived. The permanence of the strategically vital Russian airbase at Khmeimim depends on this official sanction.

The 1000 fighters from Akram al-Qa'bi's *Harakat Al Nujaba al Shi'iyya al Iraqiyya* landing at Damascus airport in troop transport planes, joined other Iraqi militias operating in Syria since 2012: *Asa'ib Ahlulhaq*, *Liwa'a Thulfiqar*, *Liwa'a Abul Fadl Al Abbas*, and *Kata'eb Hezbollah*. *Kata'eb Hezbollah* isn't to be confused with the *Lebanese Hezbollah* which is also helping to prop up Assad régime.

The Syrian army having more or less been decimated over the past 5 years, these are now the effective core of Assad's ground troops. The loss of 60,000 soldiers by the Syrian Army has been interpreted by many as a sign of the ferocity of the onslaught by Sunni fighters on the Assad régime. However, it is more accurate to say that the death of some 400,000 civilians and the displacement of 15 million people (4.8m of them refugees) is a testament of the ferocity of the attack by the régime on its own people. It is this aggression which elicited the creation of a [veritable multitude](#) of local opposition groups, only some of which have been drawn into alliance with nationwide groups, such as *Jabhat al-Nusra*, funded by Gulf States.

If, therefore, Shi'a militias organised by Iran represent the 'boots on the ground' that are keeping the régime in place, the blood they have shed in Syria is considerable, and these losses included Qasim Suleimani's own second in command in the Quds Force, Hossein Hamadani. This in turn has led Iran to recruit new militias his personnel from Shi'a outside Iraq, [as far afield as Afghanistan](#), to form separate militias such as *Liwa al-Fatimiyyun* to fight alongside the Iraqis and Lebanese in Syria.

Peace conferences on Syria have come and gone. The latest in Lausanne, Switzerland, involving all parties involved in the conflict aside from Syrians themselves, [ended with a whimper](#). There are many problems with achieving any political solution in Syria at the moment.

Firstly, the Higher Negotiating Committee (HNC) set up by Saudi Arabia this year to represent the opposition in negotiations with the régime fails to include the most

successful Sunni forces on the ground in Syria; namely *Jabhat al-Nusra*, now known as *Jabhat Fath al-Sham*, and its allies *Ahrar al-Sham*. The US has failed to create a replacement ‘moderate’ force for these elements, ever since 2012 Hillary Clinton dismissed the Syrian National Council as a waste of time and a ‘[talking-shop](#)’, which non-plussed its participants at the time, given that they were actually supposed to provide a political solution to the Syrian problem.

Secondly, the *Kurdish Democratic Union Party* (PYD) representing the Syrian Kurds refuses to join the HNC, just as they earlier refused to join the Syrian National Council (SNC) in 2012, when initial negotiations with the régime in Damascus were being envisaged. The PYD is angling for its own state. The *People’s Protection Units* (YPG), the military arm of the PYD went, like *Jabhat al-Nusra*, gone through a process of rebranding to the ‘Syrian Democratic Forces’ (SDF), to make their nation-building project [more palatable](#). However, this fig leaf quickly fell apart, as a leader of the Sunni Arab contingent of the SDF, Abdel-Karim el-Obeid, explained in a [recent interview](#). El-Obeid, who has now left the SDF, explains how decision-making was concentrated in the hands a small clique of Kurdish YPG elements in collaboration with US Special Forces.

Thirdly, Iran is now so deeply ensconced in Damascus that any specifically UN or international negotiations on Syria, which aimed as a serious political resolution would uncover the extraordinary fragility of the Assad régime, and would bring into question the continuance of Shia militias and Quds force personnel located in Syria. This is situation which both Russia and Iran want to avoid, and suggests future resolutions which they will want to control.

The Question of Israel’s Change of Attitude

The one important thing to try to explain is why the Israelis might want to support this new Russian/Iranian status quo. Netanyahu has been remarkably quiet over the occupation of Damascus by what are, presumably, Israel’s deadliest enemies: Iran and the *Lebanese Hezbollah*.

Obama’s nuclear deal with Iran (the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action or JCOPA) had been the subject of considerable friction between Netanyahu and Obama. Perhaps the fact that Netanyahu’s visit to the US Congress to appeal against Obama’s [policy on Iran backfired](#), or perhaps the fact that the bitter Iranian pill was sweetened with a [record-breaking military package](#), made all the difference. Nevertheless, JCOPA does mean that serious confrontation with Iran on the part of the US, unless a flagrant breach of the terms of the agreement occurs, is inconceivable in the context of an Obama administration. Furthermore, the outcome of this whole process has also put Israel in the novel position of being pushed by the UN to [join the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty](#).

Obama's Syrian policy on the other hand, left a void which gave Russia the opening enabling it to establish an unshakeable and unmistakable presence at the Khmeimim airbase. This has changed the balance of power in the Middle East as soon as Russia deployed [the S-400 anti aircraft system](#) there. As one UN or US brokered peace conference after another over Syria fails, Russia [digs its heels in](#), transferring yet more advanced weaponry to the naval base at Tartus, while Russian-Israeli relations in the region develop in new directions.

While a joint mechanism of "de-confliction" was set up to prevent mistaken air and ground clashes, this [has not prevented](#) Russian warplanes and drones infiltrating Israel at least 10 times in the past year testing and reporting on Israeli defences. When the Russians did the same in Turkey, after 11 warnings, the Turks shot a Russian fighter plane down. The Israelis, by contrast, held their fire. The arming of Khmeimim with the S-400, and Tartus with the S-300 solicited little comment from the Israel government, although Israeli media was [quick to point out](#) the consequent significant change in regional security architecture.

But that wasn't all. When Russia finally agreed to deliver on its long-standing promise to supply the S-300 to the Iranians to deploy around the Fordow nuclear base, which has been a major bone of contention between Israel, the US and Russia since 2005, the Israeli government said nothing, although the US said 'it was concerned'.

Since August 2015, Netanyahu has visited and phoned Putin more than [any other world leader](#). Clearly, Russia's arrival in Syria on the tail of Obama's abdication there required a new pragmatic attitude, especially when it came to Israel's plans to export gas from the Leviathan field through Turkey to Europe. These Netanyahu declared were [crucial to Israel's future](#), and required that Israel acquiesce to the new [Russian suzerainty](#) over the region.

The matter of the Shi'a militias

Reflecting the plethora of rebel groups in Syria, the creation of the innumerable militias in Iraq reporting directly to the Quds Force and thus to Iranian leader Khamenei's office are an important tool of asymmetric warfare for Iran. Other than Ali al-Sistani's *Al-Housa al-Diniyya Fil Najaf al-Ashraf*, and Muqdata al-Sadr's *Saraya al-Salam*, which espouse Iraqi nationalism, and are not present in Syria, the over 50 other Shi'a militias in Iraq report directly to Iran. But where the multitude of Syrian rebel groups represent a groundswell of popular rebellion in different localities against oppression, the large number of Iranian militias represent a mobilisation of competing groups to ensure enduring the direct Iranian control of the battlefield.

While the US is clearly antagonistic towards the Assad régime, little criticism of Iranian policy in Syria and of the Shi'a militias, either in Syria or Iraq is forthcoming from the US at present. Particularly striking in the context of the Iraqi situation has been the Iraqi government's aggressive denunciation in regard to the 600 Turkish troops stationed at Camp Ba'ashiqah, over which it had previously been in agreement. In fact, the camp had been invested by the Turks at Iraq's invitation. It is pretty clear that this attitude on the part of Haidar el-Abadi is as a result of mounting Iranian pressure on him as the potential Iraqi seizure of Mosul opens up new strategic considerations in northern Iraq.

While Turkey has been giving military training to Kurdish peshmerga forces loyal to Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) President Massoud Barzani and certain Sunni Arab tribes, called *Hashd al-Nineveh*, Iran has traditionally backed Jalal Talabani, Barzani's main opponent, and explicitly supporting *Hashd al-Shaabi* or Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), which is currently headed for Tal A'far to try to create a supply bridge for Iranian forces with its Syrian contingents.

The battle of Mosul has been called at short notice by the US, as a response to its abject defeat in northern Syria by the Russians, in an attempt to re-establish itself in the Middle East 'game'. But this battle is merely a precursor, although an important one, for a further battle, this time in Syria, for Raqqa. While the US may still have some role in Iraqi politics, its position in Syria is totally non-existent since the Russian intervention. A battle for Raqqa the Syrian stronghold of DEASH/ISIL, therefore, will be last opportunity for the US to re-establish a position in Syria.

The US turning a blind eye to the heavy involvement of Iran in Iraq and Syria through its militias seems to indicate a certain degree of thrashing about in search for a strategy for its re-insertion into the Middle-East game. This is an approach no different to its covert use for Sunni jihadi fighting groups ever the campaign against the Russians in Afghanistan in the 1980s, and therefore has some pedigree in the US pantheon of disastrous Middle-eastern policies.