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THE RACE FOR THE RUINS

Jonathan Spyer

[Breaking Israel News](#), May 29, 2017

Events taking place in a remote stretch of south east Syrian desert in recent days reveal the current direction of US Middle East strategy. An observable ratcheting up of US and allied air and special forces activity in eastern Syria is currently under way. This in turn appears to derive from a new, hard-nosed understanding of the nature of the strategic game in the large, strife-ridden area covering what was once Syria and Iraq.

On Thursday, May 18th, US aircraft launched strikes on a column of Assad regime vehicles including tanks and earth-movers, 18 miles from the town of al-Tanf, on the Syrian-Iraqi border. The strikes took place after the vehicles entered an agreed deconfliction zone around the town. US and British special forces are currently training 'vetted partner forces', ie Syrian Sunni Arab rebels in the town.

This was the second occasion in recent weeks that US aircraft have directly engaged against Assad's forces. On the first occasion, the target was the al-Shayrat airbase. That raid took place on April 6. It was a clear retaliation for the regime's use of sarin gas at Khan Sheikhoun on April 4. The Shayrat raid was generally interpreted as a belated attempt to enforce the American 'red line' against further regime use of chemical weapons. As such, it was not widely seen as indicating a more general change of policy.

The attack on the column near al-Tanf, by contrast, was not preceded by any unusual regime activity, apart from the approach of the column itself, and its too close vicinity to western forces. On Monday, the pro-opposition website Syria Direct quoted an un-named US military spokesman as saying that 'if pro-regime forces move further south or east from their current positions, this will be

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considered a threat.' The website also reported that regime forces are preparing to move toward the Badia area, a stretch of desert to the north east of al-Tanf.

What is the significance of this butting of heads? The battle against the territorial holdings of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria is reaching its final phase. The reconquest of Mosul is almost done. The assault on Raqqa city, the capital city of the Caliphate is about to begin. It is set to be a hard and bloody fight. But its eventual outcome is not in question. Islamic State as an entity controlling ground will be destroyed. At which point the movement will revert back to its former status as a clandestine terror network. As the eclipse of the Caliphate draws near, the race is opening up to inherit its former domains.

The competitors in this contest are Iran and its various allies and proxies, and forces associated with the west and the Sunni Arab states. The Iranians and their allies want to penetrate IS territory from west to east - with the Iraqi Shia militias pushing westwards from Tel Afar and Assad regime forces and pro-Assad militias (including Hizballah) probing east. The regime forces nosing around in al Tanf are in the process of seeking to seize border areas with both Jordan and Iraq. The US is determined to prevent that. The town of Deir al-Zour and the surrounding oil rich areas will form an important part of the prize.

Pro-western forces, meanwhile are pushing north from Jordan and south from the Kurdish-controlled area north of the IS enclave. The forces engaged on this side are the Syrian Democratic Forces, dominated by the Kurdish YPG, and the Maghawir a-Thawra (Commandos of the Revolution, formerly the New Syrian Army) rebels, supported by the US, UK and Jordan, from the south. The outcome of this contest is of strategic significance, despite the remote and arid nature of much of the territory concerned. The Iranians want to create a contiguous line of territory controlled by themselves and their allies stretching from Iraq into Syria, and thence to the Mediterranean Sea and the border with Israel.

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Islamic State has formed a buffer against the achievement of this goal. But Islamic State, in the usual manner of Sunni Salafi organizations when they control territory, declined to be satisfied with the stewardship of a small domain. Instead, the Sunni jihadis elected to declare war on the west, using the territory as a base to hold and execute captured western prisoners, to prepare attacks against western civilian targets, to administer a regional network of franchise groups, and to attempt genocide against a non-Muslim population, the Yezidis. As a result, the west, unsurprisingly, made it a goal to destroy the Islamic State. The question now is who will inherit. The Americans, it appears, have understood that to stand a chance of re-establishing influence and standing in the region, and beginning the process of turning back the Iranian advance, it is necessary to have skin in the game, ie to develop reliable proxies and have them control ground, in this pivotal area.

Only thus can a contiguous line of Iranian control from the Iraq-Iran border to the Mediterranean and Israel be prevented. Only thus will the US be able to prevent an eventual outcome in Syria and in Iraq entirely favorable to the Iranians. Hence the development by the US Department of Defense of the relationships with the YPG and elements among the Jordan-supported Sunni Arab rebels in the south.

It is worth also noting that the outcome in eastern Syria is not of primary interest to the Russians. Russia wants to preserve the regime in existence and to keep its naval investments in Latakia Province. Neither of these interests is threatened by events further east. Controlling the east is an Iranian and Assad regime goal only.

The outcome of this emergent contest will be of deep interest also to Israeli strategic planners. While some recent analysis has suggested that Israel favors or should favor allowing IS to continue in existence as a quasi-state, it is obvious that this is no longer an option. Syria as a state has largely ceased to exist. The question now, as it is parceled out into zones of influence, is who will gain and who will lose. Alongside the military jockeying on the ground, the diplomatic processes in Astana and Geneva will sputter on. Their eventual outcome, though, will depend on the balance of forces on the ground. Iran wants its contiguous line not least in

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order to move weaponry and fighters both in preparation for and no less importantly in the course of a future war with Israel. Preventing this is an Israeli national security interest par excellence.

This emergent US strategy has not yet been officially confirmed. Indeed, Defense Secretary James Mattis was quoted by Agence France Presse after the al-Tanf strike as denying that the raid heralded any ‘increased role’ for the US in the Syrian war. The pattern on the ground suggests otherwise. The United States Administration has defined the Iranians and the Sunni jihadis of IS as its main adversaries in the region. Eastern Syria is an area where the defeat of the latter by pro-western forces will constitute also a setback also for the former. This is a game which is now afoot. Much depends on its outcome.

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IRAN’S FOREIGN LEGION IN SYRIA

Col. (ret.) Dr. Jacques Neriah

[JCPA](#), May 28, 2017

Since the beginning of the civil war in Syria and especially since the advent of the Islamic State (ISIS) and its franchises in the Arab Middle East and Africa, world attention has been focused on the foreign volunteers who flocked by the thousands to boost the ranks of the jihadist militias, mainly the ranks of the Islamic State and Al-Qaida. The attacks perpetrated in Europe, the United States, and throughout the world, by terrorists who were trained and inspired by the jihadist organizations, emphasizes the need to understand the phenomena to combat it better. Many analysts concentrated on the hordes of jihadi volunteers from more than 80 nations and warned about the dangers of those fighters returning home to become sleeper operatives.

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By contrast, while there is considerable media coverage about the foreign jihadists and while the Western coalition tries to contain the flow of new recruits to ISIS, under the radar and almost unnoticed, Iran managed to deploy in Syria its own fighters and proxy armies to fight for the Assad regime’s survival in Syria. While the jihadist organizations recruited their volunteers from the Sunni Muslim world, Iran turned to the Shiite populations to supply the needed manpower for Iran’s Syrian front.

Reluctant to get involved directly in the civil war, the Iranians chose to send a limited operational force to Syria, mainly advisers from the Revolutionary Guards and other elite units. The assessment is that there are about 1,500-3,000 Iranian Revolutionary Guard officers present in Syria and serving mainly as advisers responsible for logistics, intelligence gathering, and training. As a result, regional Shiite forces answer directly to Tehran’s orders since they were created by Iran and made to serve first and foremost Iranian policy in the region. According to an Iranian Revolutionary Guard officer, the Guard has formed and trained 42 brigades and 138 battalions, all sent to defend the Assad regime!

At least five national entities were to provide the manpower to serve the Iranian agenda in Syria: Hezbollah - the Lebanese, Shiite, Iranian-backed military organization; Afghan “Fatimiyoun and Khadem el-‘Aqila Brigades”; Pakistani “Zainebiyoun Brigade”; Yemeni Houthis “Liwa Al-Saada”; Iraqi Shiite militias, of which “Al-Nujaba Movement” has a special significance for Israel. All military units receive their orders from the Iranian Revolutionary Guards. Their salaries, equipment, and training are totally under Iranian supervision and control. They are coordinated by the Quds Division of the Revolutionary Guards, commanded by Qasem Soleimani, even though each division enjoys a relatively high degree of autonomy.

Hizbullah’s presence in Syria was first publicized in the battle of Al-Qusayr (Homs Directorate) in 2013 and is at the center of public debate in Lebanon. While

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Hizbullah has been criticized because of its participation in the battle against Sunni rebel movements, no political force in Lebanon has dared to challenge its autonomy and force. Hizbullah's militia answers to the command of the Lebanese army. Hizbullah has been parading U.S. equipment (M-113 armored personnel carriers) provided by the United States to the Lebanese Army while claiming that these were Israeli armored vehicles seized during the 2006 Second Lebanese war.

The "Fatimiyoun Brigade" (Liwa' Al-Fatimiyoun): The Brigade (3,500 fighters) was founded in 2013 by the Revolutionary Guard and was recruited from Afghani refugees residing in Iran. Hizbullah in Lebanon utilized this same source of manpower, becoming a so-to-speak "Hizbullah of Afghanistan." Both Iran and Hizbullah took advantage of the economic and political plight of the Afghan refugees seeking asylum in Iran, enrolling them in the military units meant to fight alongside Assad's forces in Syria. The Afghans, originating mostly from southern Afghanistan, an area adjacent to the Pakistani-Iranian borders, spent large amounts of money to finance their illegal entry to Iran. They travel from the Afghan province to Pakistani Baluchistan bordering the Pakistani frontier, their first stop before arriving in Iran. Iran represents not only a political safe haven for those Afghans fleeing the war in their country but presents an opportunity to acquire economic benefit. An average Afghan receives a monthly salary of \$80 in Afghanistan, while he could be paid almost four-fold in Iran (\$320). According to some sources, the Afghans repatriate almost \$500 million dollars annually to their mother country from their Iranian "employer."

However, being an illegal Afghan resident in Iran is not without disadvantages. The Afghans are mistreated and can be jailed for no apparent reason for periods of time sometimes extending to a few months. Still 500 to 600 illegal Afghans enter Iran per month. While hundreds are confined at the end of their journey in refugee camps in Iran, the luckiest will obtain a work permit; others will get involved in drug trafficking or try to find a way to filter themselves to Europe. Hundreds of them are routinely caught at the borders and deported back to Afghanistan.

When Iran looked at the dire situation of the Assad regime and tried to find ways

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to assist Assad without getting involved with Iranian “boots on the ground,” the alternative offered by the Afghans was ideal. They were Shiites, of Farsi-speaking ethnicity (the Hazara). With \$350-500 for monthly pay and with a permanent residency permit granted to the Afghan refugee after his return from Syria, the Iranian regime succeeded in recruiting the necessary manpower needed to bolster the Syrian regime. Moreover, unlike an Iranian fighter, as an illegal migrant with an unknown identity, an Afghan killed in action would not be a burden to the Iranian treasury. Most importantly, Iran could easily deny its involvement and its intervention. Were it not for the scores of Afghans killed in battle and others taken prisoners by the rebels, Iran would not have had to accept any responsibility concerning the Afghani presence. When Iran finally decided to relate to the Afghans, Iran stated that they died while protecting the Shiite shrines in Syria...

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JORDAN'S SYRIAN ADVENTURE

Prof. Eyal Zisser

[Israel Hayom](#), May 14, 2017

In 1970, Syrian forces invaded Jordan to assist the Palestine Liberation Organization in its fight against King Hussein, the father of King Abdullah, and bring down the Hashemite Kingdom. At the request of the U.S., Israel stepped up to help Jordan. The IDF was put on alert and the Syrians received a stern message from Jerusalem via Washington that if the Syrian forces continued to advance into Jordan, Israel would intervene in the ensuing battles. The aggressive message was effective, and the Syrians had other good reasons to stop before it was too late.

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The Syrian forces retreated back into Syria, and Jordan and the U.S. were in Israel's debt.

Almost 50 years have passed, and now it's Jordan that, according to reports in the Arab media, is about to deploy forces to Syria. The Jordanians want to establish a security buffer zone along their border with Syria that will keep the Islamic State at bay, but will also serve as a barrier in case Iranian or Hezbollah operatives try to gain a foothold in southern Syria.

All these events are taking place against the backdrop of the ongoing Syrian civil war. It hasn't come to any surprising halt, and anyone who erroneously thought a few months ago that the capture of Aleppo, the country's second-biggest city, by Syrian President Bashar Assad's forces and his allies meant that victory was already in the hands of Assad, Russian President Vladimir Putin, and the Iranians, is now finding out that Damascus and Moscow were too quick to celebrate. The Russians lack the forces, whether Syrian or Iranian, to be able to put down the rebellion and deploy across the entire country to maintain peace and quiet. The rebels continue to fight, and are even landing blows to the Syrian army.

So the Russians are promoting the establishment of protected areas, which in effect mean that Syria is divided into areas of influence for the various players. The Turks will keep the area in northern Syria they currently control; the Americans and the Kurds will keep their hold in the eastern part of the country (if they can drive out the Islamic State), and even the Jordanians will be given their own area in the south of Syria. The Russians, on the other hand, will go unsatiated and will have to give up about three-quarters of Syrian territory, but by doing so will ensure that Assad remains in power in western Syria, the populated and important part of the country.

Like Israel, Jordan is faced with a difficult challenge. The Islamic State is digging in along its northern border. The group has an active affiliate in the area of the

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Yarmouk Basin (the Khalid Ibn al-Walid Army), and its fighters are also present to the east, along hundreds of kilometers of the Jordanian-Syrian border. Two years ago, Islamic State even tried to breach Jabal al-Druze in southwest Syria, but was repelled. The organization is responsible for a long list of terrorist attacks along the border and what's worse, its terrorist activity is penetrating the kingdom. Islamic State operatives have already carried out a number of painful attacks within Jordan. But if in the past the obvious conclusion was that Assad was preferable to the Islamic State, the choice today is between the Islamic State and Iran's Revolutionary Guards, and the Jordanians don't want either. So Jordan is being forced to consider intervening in Syria with the help of the Bedouin tribes on the Syrian side of the border, and possibly even some Druze who are afraid of what will befall them.

Israel, on the other hand, cannot allow itself to intervene in the Syrian civil war directly, and it's also clear that the good will it is acquiring on the other side of the border by providing medical and humanitarian aid is not enough. For now, Jerusalem is pinning its hopes on Moscow preventing an Iranian presence on the Syrian side of the Golan Heights, but the Russians have their own interests in Syria, and has been proven repeatedly in the past. This might be the time to look into other creative solutions. Once, Israel was concerned about the development of a hostile eastern front that would stretch from Rosh Hanikra to Aqaba. Today, Israel shares a peaceful eastern border with Jordan, but it wouldn't hurt if the Jordan buffer zone were to extend north to the Golan.

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SYRIA, A MODERN DAY HOLOCAUST?

Seth J. Frantzman

[Jerusalem Post](#), May 16, 2017

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In a press conference Monday, the US accused the Syrian regime of using a crematorium to dispose of bodies to cover up extensive mass murders by the government. The United States is upping its rhetoric to encourage Russia to exercise influence over Damascus and stop the abuses. It is a clear message to Syrian President Bashar Assad and Moscow on the eve of President Donald Trump's Middle East trip. The stark black-and-white photos of the alleged crematorium also echo images from the Holocaust.

In the short briefing, acting assistant Secretary of State Stuart Jones outlined how the Syrian conflict had left more than 400,000 dead. Basing his claims on reports of international and local NGOs as well as intelligence assessments, Jones provided a laundry list of regime abuses that he said underscored the depth of support from Russia and Iran. "The regime has abducted between 65,000 and 117,000 [people] between 2011 and 2015," the statement said. In addition, up to 50 prisoners a day at Saydnaya prison were executed. Many were buried in mass graves, but the US says a building modified after 2013 may be a crematorium. Jones, who was present at the recent deescalation talks in Astana, stressed that Russia must "bear responsibility to ensure regime compliance" with stopping attacks on civilians.

Tough language, but why now? Jonathan Spyer, director of the Rubin Center for Research in International Affairs at the Interdisciplinary Center Herzliya, said this is not the first time evidence has emerged of Assad's role in widespread mass murder of prisoners and detainees. An Amnesty International report titled "Human Slaughterhouse," published in February, included interviews with prisoners who said up to 100 people were hung a week. "What we are hearing that is new is the claim that the regime built a crematorium to do away with corpses. They have released overhead photographs and one needs to take a look and experts would need to assess the veracity; all we can do is think of the feasibility of it. You have a large number of corpses and need to get rid of them, one [method] is burning or mass burials. It's not in anyway beyond the realm of possibility."

Burning people would remove the evidence of war crimes at a prison only 45 minutes from Damascus. Mohammed Ruzgar, a Syrian journalist, said he has heard

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rumors that the regime was burning bodies from many sources, but could not verify it. “It’s to remove evidence,” he said. At the beginning of the conflict, the regime often detained Syrians, and tortured and killed them. Ruzgar said that in the old days, the bodies would be returned to families, “but later we did not hear about families receiving dead bodies.” Even mass graves would eventually be found, he said. “The US is [bringing up this issue] to use as leverage against Russia.”

Spyer agrees that what we are seeing is a change in tone from the US. “This is not the first instance, this is a tougher tone, and put that together with Tomahawk missiles [launched against Syria on April 7], a sense of some kind of shift. Does that presage a major policy shift by US administration? It is hard to imagine how that can happen,” he said. Spyer argues that the deepening Russian role in the last years means the US cannot go to war with the regime without going to war with Russia. He forecasts a toughening of the US tone and increasing diplomatic pressure. “It’s an insane regime and good that the administration is telling people about it.”...

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[Israeli Minister Calls for Assassination of Syria's Assad: Anna Ahronheim, *Jerusalem Post*, May 16, 2017](#)—Housing Minister Yoav Galant on Tuesday condemned the genocide taking place in Syria, adding that “it is time to eliminate” President Bashar Assad, following US accusations that the regime is using a crematorium to hide atrocities being committed outside Damascus.

[Assad’s Survival Is in Israel’s Best Interest: Dr. Edy Cohen, *BESA*, May 25,](#)

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2017—Unlike his immediate predecessor, US president Donald Trump did not stand idly by in the wake of a Syrian toxic chemical attack, but launched fifty-nine cruise missiles at the airport from which President Bashar Assad had carried out the strike.

Can ISIS Survive the Caliphate's Collapse?: Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, *Middle East Forum*, May 16, 2017—The Arabic word *baqiya* ("remaining") is one of the most common adjectives associated with the Islamic State (aka ISIS), dating back to its earliest incarnation that claimed to be a state: namely, the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI).

Assad's Hollow Crown: A Journey through Regime-Held Syria: Jonathan Spyer, *The Jerusalem Report*, May 9, 2017—The mortar shells came early in the morning. At about 5. At regular intervals. Solemn and sinister. They were a reminder of how close it all was.