IRAN MAKES AN EPIC BLUNDER IN SYRIA

Gary Gambill

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The growing infusion of Iranian-backed Lebanese and Iraqi Shiite fighters into the Syrian civil war is causing some veteran pundits to panic. Vali Nasr, dean of the School of Advanced International Studies at Johns Hopkins University, warns that "Iran is beating the U.S. in Syria." Former Bush administration deputy national security adviser Elliot Abrams sees "a humiliating defeat of the United States at the hands of Iran."

Nothing could be further from the truth. Setting aside the matter of how Washington can be losing a war it is not fighting, the claim that Iran is winning is dead wrong. The Islamic Republic's headlong intervention in Syria is akin to Nazi Germany's surge of military forces into the Battle of Stalingrad in the fall of 1942 - an operationally competent, strategic blunder of epic proportions.

To be sure, the influx of thousands of foreign (mostly non-Iranian) Shiite fighters into Syria in recent months has enabled pro-regime forces to regain some ground in the Damascus suburbs and a belt of territory linking...
the capital to Homs and the coast. The town of Qusayr, critical to both rebel and regime supply lines into Lebanon, fell on June 5.

That's a shame, but the Iranian surge won't prevent the overwhelmingly Sunni Arab rebels from eventually prevailing on the battlefield. Sunni Arabs have a 5-to-1 demographic edge over the minority Alawites who comprise most uniformed and paramilitary pro-regime combatants, and a 2-to-1 advantage over all of Syria's ethno-sectarian minorities combined. The rebels are strongly supported by the overwhelming majority of Arabs and Muslims worldwide who are Sunnis, and their four principal sponsors - Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Jordan - have a GDP well over twice that of Iran. Russia continues to do business with the regime, but it won't intervene decisively enough to change the math.

Like the vaunted German Wehrmacht in the Stalingrad kessel, Iran's expeditionary forces have been thrown into a tactical military environment for which they are woefully unprepared. Although Hezbollah wrote the book on guerrilla warfare against conventional militaries, it has little experience fighting battle-hardened insurgents on unfamiliar terrain - and it shows. At least 141 Hezbollah fighters were killed in the span of just one month fighting in the battle for Qusayr, many of them elite commandos who cannot easily be replaced.

Iran's mobilization of Lebanese and Iraqi Shiites to fight for their distant theological cousins in Syria is unlikely to keep pace with such losses, or with the increased influx of foreign Sunni Islamists sure to come in reaction to it. In the wake of Hezbollah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah's May 25 declaration to his Shiite followers that the Syrian war is "our battle," the Qatar-based spiritual leader of the Muslim Brotherhood, Yusuf al-Qaradawi, issued a fatwa calling on all Muslims with military training to fight in Syria (something he never did with respect to Israel) and characterizing the conflict as a worldwide struggle between "100 million Shiites" and "1.7 billion [Sunni] Muslims."

Of course, divisions among both the rebels and their external sponsors have greatly slowed the march to Damascus. Because Syrian President Bashar Assad's ultimate defeat is a foregone conclusion, all of the major players (the United States included) are focused more on bolstering their equity within the eventually-to-be-victorious rebel camp than on hastening its advance. But the eventual aggregation and coordination of sufficient rebel manpower and resources to decisively defeat pro-regime forces (first in Damascus, later in the rest of Syria) is inevitable so long as none of the players bow out or switch sides.

Iran's only hope of avoiding this path is to make the humanitarian cost of a decisive rebel military victory so horrific that the international community will step in and force the rebels to accept a Lebanon-style "no victor, no vanquished" political compromise. This would leave pro-regime forces intact and well poised to subvert the post-war transition, much as Hezbollah's militia survived and thrived following the end of Lebanon's 1975-1990 civil war.

But this scenario necessitates a rebel leadership willing to accept, and united enough to enforce, a ceasefire that leaves pro-regime forces in control of large swaths of the country during the transition process. With Jabhat al-Nusra and other militant jihadist groups in Syria continuing to grow in strength, neither condition will obtain for the foreseeable future.

Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei could have cut his losses early on by allowing the Assad regime to die a natural death and building bridges with its successor. Such an accommodation would have greatly impaired Iran's ability to transport heavy weapons to Hezbollah, but its Lebanese proxy would still have remained Israel's deadliest security threat for years to come. Hamas, which effectively severed its alliance with Tehran as a result of the Syria conflict, would probably have kept at least one foot in the Iranian axis. Khamenei likely declined to take this path for the same reason that Hitler refused to disengage from a no-win military confrontation in Stalingrad - a deeply metaphysical confidence in ultimate victory.

This delusion will cost him a great deal more than Syria. Even before the surge, Iran's massive infusions of cash into Syria (12.6 billion dollars, according to one estimate) and stepped up training of pro-Assad forces had greatly inflamed animosity toward the Islamic Republic and its proxies throughout the Arab-Islamic
world. After years of successfully mobilizing Arabs against Israel (as recently as 2008, polling still showed Nasrallah to be the Arab world's most popular public figure), Tehran has managed to incite even greater hostility to itself in a fraction of the time. A recent survey by James Zogby shows that Iran's favorability ratings have fallen to an all-time low in majority Sunni countries (dropping from 85 percent to 15 percent in Saudi Arabia between 2006 and 2012, for example). Syria, he writes, has become the "nail in the coffin" of Iran's standing in the region. The inflamed sectarianism wrought by Iran, according to a detailed study by Geneive Abdo of the Brookings Institution, is likely to supersede the Israeli-Palestinian conflict "as the central mobilizing factor for Arab political life."

In addition to sabotaging its regional hegemonic ambitions, intervention in Syria may also have dire domestic political consequences for the Islamic Republic. The regime's involvement in a chronic sectarian conflict is sure to steadily alienate its own restive Sunni minority, while the strain on its sanctions-riddled economy will only get worse. Most importantly, the ignominious collapse of its claim to pan-Islamic leadership erodes one of the main pillars of its legitimacy in the eyes of Shiites. There are no silver linings.

While Abrams insists that the United States should be working to "deter" Iran "from sending more fighters to help save Assad," he's got it all wrong. The Obama administration should copy the late Soviet General Georgy Zhukov and focus not on combating the foolhardy Iranian surge, but on exploiting the strategic and political flanks left exposed by it.

Gary C. Gambill is a frequent contributor to Foreign Policy, The National Interest, and The National Post.

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HAVE SYRIA’S KURDS HAD A CHANGE OF HEART?

Daniel Nisman

*Hurriyet Daily News* (Turkey), Apr. 12, 2013

“Deal with your friends as if they will become your enemies tomorrow, and deal with your enemies as if they will become your friends tomorrow.” It’s a proverb passed along through Kurdish generations – and a telling pretext to the Kurdish strategy in today’s conflict in Syria. In recent weeks, this once dormant player has awoken from its slumber, and may just provide Syria’s desperate rebels with a much needed boost to break their deadlock with the Bashar al-Assad regime.

Reports indicate that Kurdish People’s Defense Units (YPG) militiamen and Syrian rebels have agreed to share control of the strategic Sheikh Maqsoud District of northern Aleppo, cutting off regime supply routes to a hospital, prison, and other key positions. Rebel fighters entered the district largely unopposed on March 31.

Further east, Syrian military units attacked a checkpoint manned by Kurdish militiamen in the northeastern city of Qamishli on April 4. Hours later, militiamen from the YPG attacked two Syrian military positions on the outskirts of Qamishli. The attacks resulted in a number of deaths on both sides and marked the first such incident to occur in the predominantly Kurdish Hasakah Governorate since the Syrian military withdrew from the region’s urban centers in the summer of 2012.

Increasing violence between Kurdish militias and the Syrian military indicates a notable shift in the policy of the Syrian Kurdish leadership’s policy of neutrality. The rebel capture of Aleppo’s Sheikh Maqsoud area on March 31 was coordinated and facilitated by local Kurdish militias, effectively ending that district’s neutral status in the battle for control of the city. Subsequent aerial bombardments of the district indicate that the Syrian military now views Kurdish militias in the region as a hostile entity.

The Syrian Kurdish leadership has likely been influenced by cease-fire developments taking place between its Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) counterparts and the Turkish government. Since October 2012, the Turkish government has conducted negotiations for a draw-down of PKK fighters from Turkey with Abdullah Öcalan, a currently imprisoned, though highly influential Kurdish leader. During the Nevruz holiday in late March 2013, the PKK agreed to a cease-fire with the Turkish military and an Öcalan-approved
timetable for withdrawal. In early April 2013, the leader of the Democratic Union Party (PYD) of Syrian Kurds, Salih Muslim, stated that his constituents support cease-fire efforts being conducted between the Turkish government and Kurdish PKK separatists.

Subsequent statements of support by Syrian Kurdish leaders for the talks have been followed by increasing coordination of Kurdish militias with Syrian rebels, including the March 31 withdrawal from Aleppo’s Sheikh Maqsoud. Despite the current shift of support to the rebels, Syrian Kurds still prioritize the protection and independence of their communities above the nationalist-revolutionary aspirations of the country’s Arab Sunnis. Any agreement with the Syrian opposition is thus likely to remain fragile and subject to change.

In the near term, the stance of the Syrian Kurdish leadership regarding cooperation with the rebels is likely to be heavily influenced by Turkish policies. Reports indicate that the Syrian Kurdish leadership expects Turkey to begin negotiating directly with the PYD in a similar manner to the PKK. Until recently, Turkey had refused any contact with the PYD over fears of setting a precedent for recognition of an autonomous Kurdish entity in Syria.

In addition, the PYD reportedly expects Turkey to reduce its support for extremist Syrian rebels, including those who have clashed with the group in the past. Furthermore, any breakdown of the draw-down process with the PKK would likely hinder Kurdish-rebel cooperation in Syria, and an increase in hostility from the PYD toward the Turkish government. Lastly, attacks by jihadist Syrian rebel elements against Kurdish communities could also bring an end to cooperation in mixed cities and regions in northern Syria, threatening to derail the rebel effort to end the standoff in Aleppo.

In the long term, the maintaining of Kurdish-rebel coordination could result in considerable setbacks for the Syrian military, particularly impacting efforts to maintain control over outlying areas. Continued bombardments by the Syrian military against Kurdish populations are likely to result in an increase of reprisal attacks against Syrian military troops stationed in the area, who are already impacted by a breakdown in resupply routes. In Aleppo, Kurdish-rebel cooperation would further pressure regime forces, by opening the way for additional staging grounds for rebel offensives against the remaining southwest districts held by the Syrian military.

As far back as World War I, the Kurdish people have been cast as the historic losers to the spoils of conflict in the Middle East. In a region which is no stranger to ironic twists, it should come as no surprise that this long-persecuted ethnic group has emerged as a kingmaker in a battle which will undoubtedly shape the face of the region for years to come.

Daniel Nisman is the Middle East and North Africa section intelligence director at Max Security Solutions, a geopolitical and security risk consulting firm.

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HEZBOLLAH'S NECESSARY WAR OF CHOICE IN SYRIA

Aram Nerguizian

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While supportive of popular protesters and regime change in Bahrain, Egypt, Libya, and Tunisia, at no point has the Shi'a militant group Hezbollah signaled any intention of scaling back its support for the regime of Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad. To the contrary, its support has steadily escalated from threats in 2011 to shift attention away from Syria to potential escalation along the UN Blue Line separating Israel and Lebanon to an increasing military role in Syria starting in 2012. It was at least in part thanks to Hezbollah that the Syrian military was able to retake the strategic rebel-held town of Qusayr on June 5, 2013.

To many observers, Hezbollah's decision to commit to offensive military operations inside Syria in concert with Assad's forces borders on the irrational. The move has heightened precarious Sunni-Shi'a tensions in Lebanon exponentially and has further undermined the country's efforts to disassociate itself from the Syria conflict under the auspices of the so-called June 2012 "Baabda Declaration," a pledge that includes
The group prioritized its preliminary military efforts as follows: to defend the Sayyidah Zaynab Shrine, one of Shi'a Islam's holiest sites on the outskirts of Damascus, to protect Lebanese Shi'a villages east of the Bekaa Valley, to offer counterinsurgency training to pro-Assad forces, to protect key thoroughfares linking Lebanon to Syria, and to play a minor combat support role in Zabadani between Damascus and the Lebanese border. By early 2013, Hezbollah's priorities had significantly shifted to its combat and combat support roles with Assad's forces east of the Bekaa Valley.

Reports from Lebanon and Europe place the estimated number of Hezbollah fighters within Syria at up to 4,000 in support of Assad's forces. It is worth noting that other estimates on Hezbollah fighters in Syria vary from as little as 2,000 to as much as 10,000. The disparities reflect the challenges of getting an accurate picture of Hezbollah's force commitment level, never mind the current disposition of its overall fighting strength. However, it is important to remember that many of these estimates of Hezbollah's manpower levels in Syria are "guesstimates."

As of mid-June 2013, Hezbollah's involvement in Syria appears to have helped shape regime victories in areas opposite the Lebanese Bekaa Valley, especially in and around the town of Qusayr. Strategically significant as an opposition lifeline for aid, weapons, and fighters from Lebanon, the retaking of Qusayr secures the regime's western flank as it pushes to consolidate its hold on Homs and access to the mainly Alawite coast, cuts off rebel supply lines, and signals to the international community that the Assad regime is far from beaten. However, Qusayr may be even more important to Hezbollah. Qusayr sits on a direct road link to the mainly Shi'a Lebanese town of Hermel, a north-eastern stronghold of the Shi'a militant group and a key pipeline for overland weapons transfers from Iran via Syria. Qusayr is also ringed by Shi'a Lebanese villages inside Syria which Hezbollah feels both obligated and under pressure to protect.

From a military standpoint, Hezbollah's engagements east of the Lebanese Bekaa Valley have not been without cost. According to Syrian opposition and anti-Hezbollah Shi'a sources, the number of Hezbollah fighters killed in the first week of the main offensive to retake Qusayr was between 70 and 110. This reflects in part the reality that although well trained, many of Hezbollah's fighters in Qusayr were largely untested in combat. The high initial death toll may also point to the Syrian rebels' use of some of Hezbollah's own sniping and booby-trapping techniques; techniques that the Shi'a group shared in joint training exercises with Hamas and that the Palestinian militant group may have passed on to the rebels in turn.
While these initial losses are significant, Hezbollah can continue to absorb more combat deaths, largely thanks to the dramatic expansion of the group's armed wing in the wake of the 2006 Israeli-Hezbollah war. Compared to some 3,000 fighters in 2006, Hezbollah's current fighting strength may be estimated at around 20,000-30,000, of which some 25 percent may be full-time active duty personnel. Meanwhile, preliminary reports indicate that Hezbollah's forces in Qusayr were far more disciplined and employed superior tactics, communication, and were better coordinated than their Syrian rebel opponents. Difficult battles like the one in Qusayr against similarly committed and ideological opposition fighters ensure that tomorrow's veterans from the war in Syria will form a combat-tested Hezbollah fighting core that may complicate future engagements against the IDF, to say nothing of Lebanese or Syrian Sunni militants. 

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**ON TOPIC**

**Let Them Eat Kebabs:** T.A. Frank, *The New Republic*, April 25, 2013—When she first became known to the world, Asma Al Assad, first lady of Syria, stood out for her efforts to put a twenty-first-century gloss on Middle Eastern dictatorship, a profession widely seen as hidebound and heavily mustachioed.

**Did Israel Bomb Latakia Last Week?:** Michael Weiss, *Real Clear World*, July 11, 2013—Last Thursday, a day after Americans were nursing Fourth of July hangovers, tracking the Trayvon Martin case at home, or the fallout from the coup in Egypt, mysterious explosions occurred at a weapons depot in the Mushayrafet al-Samouk district of the Syrian coastal city of Latakia.

**The Arab World Fears the ‘Safavid’:** Dore Gold, *JCPA*, June 9, 2013—In an interview on *Al-Jazeera* this past May, the commander of the Free Syrian Army, Brig. Gen. Salim Idris, explained that the diversion of Hezbollah forces from Lebanon to Syria to take part in the civil war was part of a “Safavid” plan for the Middle East region.

**Hezbollah Spying on Golan Heights from Syria:** Tzvi Ben-Gedalyahu, *Jewish Press*, July 11th, 2013—The IDF is forming a new division to operate in the Golan Heights, which faces a new threat of Hezbollah terrorists and weapons that had been limited to the Lebanese border before Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah sent his army to fight with Assad loyalists against Syrian rebels.

**Syria Jihadists Lose Support As Abuses Mount:** Serene Assir, *Fox News*, July 11, 2013—In the early days of the Syrian uprising, when opponents of the regime were desperate for assistance from any quarter, jihadist fighters were welcomed but a spate of abuses is fuelling a backlash. Things have changed.

**Face-to-Face With Abu Sakkar, Syria's 'Heart-Eating Cannibal':** Paul Wood, *BBC News*, 5 July 2013—It sounded like the most far-fetched propaganda claim - a Syrian rebel commander who cut out the heart of a fallen enemy soldier, and ate it before a cheering crowd of his men.

**Seduced by War, Europeans Join the Fight in Syria:** Nadette De Visser, *The Daily Beast*, June 11, 2013—Men from The Netherlands and other European countries are taking up arms in Syria. But are they even more dangerous than the local fighters? Nadette De Visser reports.

**U.S. Arms Showing up in Hands of Pro-Assad Militias:** Oren Dorell, *USA TODAY*, July 10, 2013—U.S. and Western weapons have been reaching Iranian-backed Shiite militias fighting to keep Bashar Assad's forces in power in Syria. Analysts say it's unclear if the weapons were captured, stolen or bought on the black market in Syria, Turkey, Iraq or Libya.

Ber Lazarus, Publications Editor, *Canadian Institute for Jewish Research/L'Institut Canadien de recherches sur le Judaïsme*, www.isranet.org Tel: (514) 486-5544 - Fax:(514) 486-8284