

# Assad Is Finished... Iran Should Take Heed

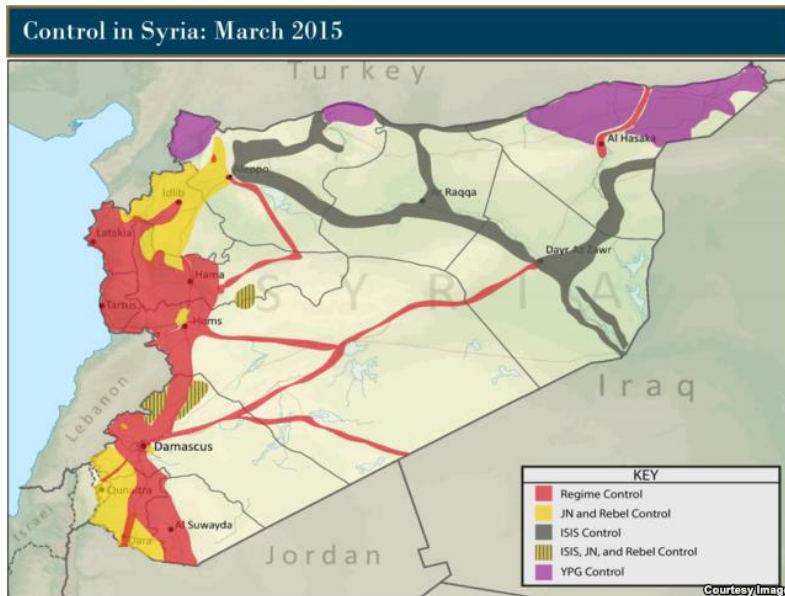
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Syria's civil war and roving chaos and political vacuum continue unabated for a fifth consecutive year. The assets President Bashar al-Assad's regime boasts to still possess are in dwindling supply as moderates and Islamist opponents score victories in the south, east, and north and threaten the capital Damascus. It is indeed time to ask whether the end in Syria is nigh and wonder whether a political solution is still possible after the millions of dead, injured, and internally and externally displaced Syrians and the wholesale destruction of most of the country.

## Clear Signs of Regime Defeat

After a series of military victories in 2013 – made possible mostly by major assistance from Hezbollah and Iraqi Shi'a fighters and a fractured opposition – the Syrian regime is suffering some debilitating and morale-sapping defeats. In the south, opposition forces control all points on the Jordanian-Syrian border and have recently occupied a major military outpost near the city of Der'a on their way to Damascus whose coming battle looms as decisive for regime survival. In the east and northeast, regime forces have basically lost control over the Syrian-Iraqi border to the self-described Islamic State or are in a seemingly unwinnable battle to hold on to the city of Hasakah.



Territorial control, March 2015. April offensives changed areas of control in the north and south

*The battle for Damascus will obviously be most decisive but, if lost, may not dash Iran's hopes for a friendly state in 'Alawi areas in western Syria.*

In the north, the regime is on the ropes. Opposition forces have overrun regime strongholds in Idlib Province and are about 40 miles from the city of Latakia, a core base for the regime. The opposition is also closing in on the city of Aleppo to the northeast, long an arena for the protection of supply

routes to the `Alawite areas to its west and to the cities of Hamah and Homs to its south. Indeed, news accounts speak of the `Alawite population of the western provinces of Latakia and Tartous as girding for a coming battle on whose outcome may rest the fate of the entire `Alawi sect in Syria.

### **Alarm in Iran**

Arguably no other country is as concerned about the fate of the Syrian regime as the Islamic Republic of Iran. Syria has been a cherished ally, a geopolitical partner, and a strategic territorial extension that served Iran's interests on the shores of the Mediterranean, be they proximity and threat to Israel or a challenge to the status quo Arab order. In addition to Iraq where Iranian strategists have long secured reliable allies, and Lebanon where Hezbollah keeps a chokehold on constitutional and political life, Syria over the last four years has come to represent Iran's push to assert regional hegemony in the Levant. It is thus no wonder that Iran supports the Syrian regime today materially and financially with cash, weapons, and fuel to the tune of \$6 billion annually according to estimates by the United Nations Special Envoy to Syria, Staffan de Mistura.



Hezbollah supporters of President Assad

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Iran has also put its military might and its influence with the Shi'a everywhere behind its effort to prop up the Syrian regime. There is a renewed influx of Iranian advisors and Iraqi Shi'a militiamen to the `Alawite provinces to compensate for the regime's inability to recruit fighters or hold on to territory. Hezbollah is fighting Islamist fighters in the Syrian Qalamoun area abutting northeastern Lebanon in a battle to secure the Damascus-Homs highway and thus the regime's heartland. The London-based *al-Quds al-`Arabi* reported (June 7, 2015) that Iranian officers took over operational command of the Idlib-Hamah-Latakia front. It also reported that the new commanders felt empowered enough to execute three high-ranking Sunni Syrian army officers after accusing them of treason for withdrawing their troops during the latest opposition offensive.

Even General Qassem Sulaimani, commander of the Quds Force of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps, has visited the northern front to re-assess regime needs. He is reported to have promised battlefield 'surprises.' A conservative group in Iran called the 'Partisans of Hezbollah'

also called for the dispatching of 50,000 Iranian infantry troops to help defend the Syrian coastal areas, prevent the collapse of the regime, and maintain control of the land between Lebanon's northern border and the city of Tartous. If Iran has so far not directly sent combat troops to Syria, Tehran's discourse now sounds like the Islamic Republic may have decided that the stakes have become too high for it not to do just that.

### **Tepid Hopes for a Political Solution**

While it is still early to write off President Assad and his regime, the military situation on the ground does not augur well for either. Barring an ill-advised but possible direct Iranian military involvement, it appears that chances for a political solution are slim at best. When President Assad became confident of his military situation in 2013, he refused to compromise during meetings in Geneva (Geneva II). As is normal with all political and military strongmen, Assad was sure that his triumphs were enough to sustain him and bolster his regime.



UN Special Envoy to Syria Staffan de Mistura

Now that the military situation has dramatically changed, it is hard to fathom why the opposition will accept a political compromise short of the President's full surrender. Indeed, attempts since the beginning of last May in Geneva to convene fruitful negotiations seem to fizzle as a direct result of the situation on the ground. Speculation has also been rampant about a possible American-Russian deal allowing Assad to live in exile in Moscow, a possibility that will necessarily entail radical political change in Damascus. What Washington, Moscow, and many regional capitals – most importantly Riyadh – worry about are the survival of state institutions and dealing with the myriad extremist Islamist factions fighting in Syria. No one wants another Libya where state collapse and an abundance of extremist armed militias have created a security nightmare.

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It also remains to be seen what Iran decides to do in the short and medium terms in view of regime setbacks. If Iran decides to keep supporting Assad, it will be merely postponing the inevitable. It will also be mortgaging its reputation, political effectiveness, and long-term hope of securing the role it wants to play in the region. On the other hand, if Iran is counting on the possibility of the

creation of a friendly `Alawi enclave in western Syria as part of a partition plan, it will have to commit tens of thousands of active Iranian troops and their surrogates to the battle. Such a prospect will however be ill-advised just when Iran needs to be rational and evaluate serious options for its future and geopolitical survival.

## **Conclusion**

The military solution in Syria seems at the moment to have trumped any political alternative that can end the long war and widespread devastation. But the sooner Assad and his regional and international supporters – namely, Iran, Hezbollah and other Shi`ite militias, and Russia – decide to throw in the proverbial towel, the better the chances for a successful beginning to build the political and security framework for a future Syria. Only then will a war be successful against the Islamic State and extremist Islamist factions on the ground. And just as importantly, only then will the fate of the `Alawi and other minority communities in Syria be safeguarded in a pluralistic democracy in which everyone's interests are institutionally protected.

Images accessed June 11, 2015

Syria conflict map:

[http://gdb.voanews.com/EDE3F6B7-0913-436A-98C9-233A4135F97F\\_w640\\_s.png](http://gdb.voanews.com/EDE3F6B7-0913-436A-98C9-233A4135F97F_w640_s.png)

Hezbollah supporters

<http://static01.nyt.com/images/2013/01/31/opinion/global/31iht-ednisman31/31iht-ednisman31-articleLarge.jpg>

De Mistura image

[http://1.yimg.com/bt/api/res/1.2/DMcBgk5T8fw7s14u.BmC3Q--/YXBwaWQ9eW5ld3M7Zmk9ZmlsbDtoPTYzOTtpbD1wbGFuZTtweW9mZj0wO3E9NzU7dz05NjA-/http://media.zenfs.com/en\\_us/News/afp.com/Part-PAR-Par8165323-1-1-0.jpg](http://1.yimg.com/bt/api/res/1.2/DMcBgk5T8fw7s14u.BmC3Q--/YXBwaWQ9eW5ld3M7Zmk9ZmlsbDtoPTYzOTtpbD1wbGFuZTtweW9mZj0wO3E9NzU7dz05NjA-/http://media.zenfs.com/en_us/News/afp.com/Part-PAR-Par8165323-1-1-0.jpg)