

Iran's Syria Strategy: Heavy Meddle

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If the Assad regime falls in Syria, a key link in Iran's strategic chain across the region would be broken.

Mohsen Chizari gets around.

A top commander of the Quds Force of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps, Chizari was hit with sanctions last week by the Obama administration. Given his nationality, one might assume that he was sanctioned in relation to the Iranian regime's nuclear pursuits or its crackdown on dissidents. In fact, Chizari, the Quds Force Chief Qasem Soleimani, and the organization itself were targeted for abetting oppression somewhere else: Syria.

According to the U.S. government, the Iranians are complicit in the Assad regime's "human rights abuses and repression of the Syrian people."

If Chizari's name sounds familiar, it may be because he was arrested by U.S. troops in Baghdad in December 2006. According to media reports, Chizari was detained while inside the compound of Iraqi Shiite leader Abdel Aziz al-Hakim with another Quds Force commander. The two men were reportedly in possession of detailed reports about weapons shipments into Iraq, including of so-called explosively formed projectiles, which were responsible for the deaths of scores of U.S. soldiers. Chizari was subsequently expelled into Iran by the Iraqi government.

It should come as little surprise that Chizari has shown up in both hot spots. Wherever there's trouble, he'll be there to aid the troublemakers or stir things up himself.

The Quds Force reports directly to Iran's leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, and it serves as the linchpin in Iran's regional strategy. Iran funds and arms groups like Hezbollah to threaten Israel and thwart democracy-building in Lebanon. And it equips terrorists in Iraq and Afghanistan to stymie U.S. efforts to establish peace and security in those places. In all of these cases, the Quds Force is the regime's instrument of choice.

Iran's leaders crowed when popular uprisings unseated their old foes Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali in Tunisia and Hosni Mubarak in Egypt. But the travails of Syrian dictator Bashar Assad have clearly caused concern in Tehran. Assad is a

longtime ally of Iran, and under his rule Syria has served as a conduit eastward for foreign fighters to enter Iraq to fight U.S. troops, and for Iranian weaponry to flow westward to arm Hezbollah and Hamas. Damascus is essentially the bar scene from *Star Wars* for terrorists in the Middle East, providing a locale where Iranian allies such as Hamas and Islamic Jihad can coordinate unperturbed.

Were Assad to fall, a key link in Iran's strategic chain across the region would be broken. While Iran could possibly find work-arounds to supply Hezbollah, such as by sea or air, it would lose both strategic depth and an eager ally. Furthermore, if protesters in Syria were to inspire Iran's own democracy activists to redouble their efforts, the Iranian regime would find itself in serious peril. Thus it is unsurprising that it has dispatched the Quds Force to help Assad stop the Arab Spring at his doorstep.

Iran's latest involvement in Syria should be a wake-up call. Iran's direct assistance in the Syrian regime's crackdown has attracted criticism from many quarters; it's even put Tehran at odds with erstwhile allies such as Turkey. Iran's actions have also contributed to a shift in the Obama administration's approach toward Tehran. In addition to imposing sanctions on Chizari and his ilk, on April 22 President Obama said that Assad was mimicking Iran's "brutal tactics."

Ultimately, tough words and sanctions will not be enough. Chizari and his exploits in Iraq and Syria represent one facet of the threat posed by Iran. If our hopes for freedom and stability in the region are to be realized, we must defeat Iran's efforts to expand its power and influence -- above all by denying it the nuclear weapons that would further its destabilizing designs.

Michael Singh is managing director of The Washington Institute and former senior director for Middle East affairs at the National Security Council. ❖

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