

Middle East & Syria: Iran hails victory in Aleppo as Shia militias boost Syria's Bashar al-Assad

Thursday 15 December 2016, by [CHULOV Martin](#), [KAMALI DEHGHAN Saeed](#), [WINTOUR Patrick](#) (Date first published: 14 December 2016).

Iranian military chief boasts of Tehran's role in retaking Syrian city.

Iranian leaders have claimed a military victory in Aleppo, with the Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's chief military aide boasting that Syrian president Bashar al-Assad's forces would have been unable to retake the besieged city without support from Tehran.

"Aleppo was liberated thanks to a coalition between Iran, Syria, Russia and Lebanon's Hizbollah," said Seyed Yahya Rahim-Safavi. "Iran is on one side of this coalition which is approaching victory and this has shown our strength. The new American president should take heed of the powers of Iran."

Iran's defence minister called his Syrian counterpart to congratulate him and Mohsen Rezaie, a former commander of Iran's Revolutionary Guards, wrote on Instagram that Iran's aim was to cleanse "terrorists and *takfiris* [a term used in Iran for Sunni jihadists]" from Syria and Iraq.

The parliamentary speaker, Ali Larijani, also congratulated Assad's government, saying that US and British policies had hit a dead end in Syria, Iraq, Libya and Yemen.

The comments underline the key role played by Iranian-backed Shia militias – but they also signalled a new phase in the power struggle for Syria's second city, the fate of which will largely determine who wins the war.

Tuesday's Russian-Turkish deal to spare the last of the opposition was brokered with little input from Iran or the Syrian leadership [1], who had controlled the battle since Russia scaled back its bombardment.

Pro-Assad forces which had cornered the city's last holdouts were startled by the ceasefire agreement, and were determined to transform their momentum into all-out conquest of the rebel-held areas.

The militias resumed their offensive before dawn on Wednesday [2], not long before the first of tens of thousands of trapped civilians were supposed to be evacuated.

Airstrikes, believed to be Syrian, soon followed, and a hard-won diplomatic reprieve was in peril, as in all previous attempts to broker peace in Aleppo.

Until recently, Russian firepower has been decisive. But after the air campaign gave way to a ground offensive earlier this month, Iran's proxies took the lead, giving them a driving role in what happens

next.

According a spokesman for one of the Aleppo factions, the ceasefire was immediately in doubt after Iran imposed conditions the rebels could not meet [3].

Yasser al-Youssef, of the Nouredine al-Zenki militia said Iran's demands included the lifting of a rebel siege on Shia villages in Idlib, province, as well as deals on prisoners and missing members of Iranian-backed militias.

"Iran has prepared to invade our besieged areas and has defied Russia's agreement," said al-Youssef.

Iran and the Syrian government do not want to compromise on the battlefield or at the negotiating table, believing that total domination will give them a better hand to shape the aftermath. Russia, on the other hand, sees a benefit in transitioning from bludgeoning superpower to peace-broker.

The clash is the first serious divergence between Tehran and Moscow, whose heavyweight interventions have saved Assad but greatly diminished Syria's sovereignty. But with the endgame in sight, the "win first, settle up later" approach has reached a nadir.

Iran's role in the Aleppo crisis is set to dominate Thursday's regular meeting of EU heads of state in Brussels, with leaders of the Syrian opposition calling for economic sanctions to be imposed on Russia and Iran.

The EU, increasingly marginal to a crisis being resolved by Russia, Iran and Turkey , is certain to make it clear that it will not supply any cash for economic reconstruction unless there is a negotiated political settlement - and not a military resolution imposed by Iran or the Syrian government.

In a letter to EU leaders, Dr Riyad Hijib, the co ordinator of the Syrian High Negotiating Committee (HNC), called for "targeted unilateral sanctions against Russian and Iranian entities and individuals directly enabling war crimes in Syria through the supply of material assistance".

The HNC also called for an urgent review of economic ties with Iran , including commercial airlines used by Iran to send weapons and fighters to Syria.

Many EU states will be deeply reluctant to re impose sanctions on Iran so soon after lifting them as part of the wider deal on Iran's nuclear programme.

But the renewed emphasis on Iran reflects the key role played by Iranian artillery in the capture of east Aleppo.

Shia militias have also played a decisive role. Raised by Iran's Revolutionary Guards, the militias have been far more effective than Syrian units [4]. Their numbers had built around east Aleppo since early last year to an estimated force of 6,000-8,000 troops, many of them battle-hardened in Iraq or southern Lebanon.

The militias report to the Iranian Maj Gen Qassem Suleimani [5], who was tasked more than a decade ago by the supreme leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, to export the values of the Islamic Revolution into the Arab world. Suleimani's Quds Force is one of the Guards' most elite units, attracting ideological cadres who believe in Shia supremacy.

Under Suleimani's control are several Iraqi units, Asa'ib ahl al-Haq, Abu al-Fadhil al-Abbas, and the

Nujaba Front, which is affiliated with the Keta'ib Hezbollah militia [6]. All are power players in Iraq's political-military sphere. Lebanese Hezbollah plays the same role in Beirut and southern Lebanon, where it is interwoven into the political and security apparatus.

Hezbollah was the first of the Iranian proxies to join the fight alongside Assad, and has paid a heavy price for doing so. Party loyalists in Beirut say at least 1,600 of its fighters had been killed in Syria before the conquest of east Aleppo.

Shia graveyards in Najaf have similarly been filling up, with several thousand Iraqi fighters known to have been killed in Syria and buried in large dedicated plots bought by the militias over the past three years.

Most casualties from the Iranian side have been Afghan refugees, recruited on the promise that their families would gain the right to reside in Iran. But an Iranian official said recently that as many as 1,000 Iranians had died in Syria since the conflict began.

The blood and treasure expended by Iran has focused on Aleppo and the western suburbs of Damascus, the site of the Zainab shrine – a pilgrimage point for Shia Muslims.

Iran has framed its war effort in sectarian terms, insisting the men it has sent to fight are in Syria to defend the shrine from Sunni extremists. In addresses inside Syria, Akram al-Ka'abi, the leader of the Nujaba Front, has exhorted his followers to seek revenge for battlefield losses to Sunni figures in the founding years of Islam.

On Tuesday, President Hassan Rouhani, meeting with the prominent Iraqi cleric Ammar al-Hakim, in Tehran, said his government would spare no efforts in supporting “the oppressed nations of the region, including Iraq and Syria”.

In a departure from his hitherto cautious stance on Syria, Rouhani telephoned Assad on Wednesday to “congratulate” him on the “liberation of Aleppo”, Fars news reported. “We see it as our duty to support those trying to force takfiri terrorism out of their territory,” he told his Syrian counterpart.

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P.S.

* The Guardian. Wednesday 14 December 2016 18.16 GMT:
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/dec/14/iran-aleppo-syria-shia-militia>

* This article was amended on 15 December 2016. Because of an editing error, an earlier version mistranslated the word “takfiris”.

Footnotes

[1] <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/dec/13/deal-reached-to-evacuate-rebels-and-civilians-from-aleppo>

[2] <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/dec/14/aleppo-residents-evacuation-uncertainty-cea>

[sefire-deal-assad](#)

[3] ESSF (article 39759), [Call for international community – Aleppo civilians plead for help as airstrikes resume: 'Save us'](#).

[4] <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/sep/29/aleppo-attack-foreign-syrian-fighters-plan-shi-a-islamic>

[5] <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jun/16/qassim-suleimani-iraq-iran-syria>

[6] <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/mar/12/iraq-battle-dead-valley-peace-syria>