



## PERSPECTIVES

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# Iran Wants to Leverage Aleppo into a Campaign Against the Gulf States and Israel

by Yossi Mansharof

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** Events in Aleppo are playing an important role in Iran's strategic plan to establish an overland corridor that would give it access to the Mediterranean coast. Since the city's fall, Tehran has been urging non-state groups to come under its wing in return for massive and comprehensive support. The intensification of the Shiite-Sunni conflict acts as a barrier between Iran and its potential clients.

The Islamic Republic of Iran has touted the decisive victory over the rebels in Aleppo, and the city's return to the control of the Syrian government, as a turning point that will transform not only the crisis in Syria but also other centers of regional conflict. The leading adviser to Supreme Leader Khamenei, Ali Akbar Velayati, and the Secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council, Ali Shamkhani, have declared that the Aleppo victory reflects Tehran's triumph over the Western-Sunni coalition. Iran is portraying itself as ascendant over the Western states, led by the US, and the Sunni states in the region, led by Saudi Arabia and Turkey.

The victory was of course largely achieved through the Russian military intervention, but Tehran appears to have benefited from the event more than Moscow. Aleppo is a crossroads on the overland corridor to the Mediterranean coast that Iran has been attempting to construct since 2014. According to a *Guardian* report based on reliable sources, the envisaged corridor would pass through Baghdad, the Kurdish town of Sinjar, the Kurdish region of northeastern Syria, Aleppo, Idlib, and Homs, and culminate on the strategic coastal strip of Latakia.

It is therefore hardly surprising that Tehran has expressed great enthusiasm about the return of Aleppo to the bosom of the Syrian regime, which placed the city within the Iranian sphere of influence. During his Friday sermon (the platform for declarative pronouncements by the Islamic Republic), Tehran's prayer leader, Kazem Sediqi, proclaimed that the Aleppo victory meant not simply the liberation of the city but the triumph of the (Shiite) faith of the Islamic Revolution. Commander of the Revolutionary Guards Mohammed Ali Jafari also declared Aleppo to be Iran's front line of defense. Ever since the formation of the Islamic Revolution, he said, Tehran has sought to establish the widest possible defense margins against the West, Israel, and the Sunni states in the region.

During the Aleppo campaign, Tehran relied on a network of Shiite militias acting under the auspices of the Revolutionary Guards. According to reports, campaign commander Javad Ghafari was appointed by the commander of the Quds forces, Qassem Soleimani. These forces included the Lebanese Hezbollah and other militias sponsored by Tehran, such as the Iraqi al-Nujba'a; the Afghani Fatemiyoun; the Pakistani Zainabiyoun; and local militias established by the Revolutionary Guards and Hezbollah. According to various estimates, Hezbollah's role in these battles went far beyond its numbers (it sent approximately 5,000 troops to Syria). Naim Qassem, the organization's Deputy Secretary-General, claims that five Hezbollah activists in Syria serve as commanders of 25 non-Lebanese armed groups.

Encouraged by the Aleppo victory, Tehran and Hezbollah began to leverage the event's significance. It was a turning point, they argued, not only with regard to Syria but also with regard to other foci of conflict throughout the Middle East – first in Bahrain, but in Saudi Arabia and Yemen as well.

Ever since the Islamic Revolution, Tehran has applied a strategy of supporting Arab and other militias that agreed to accept its patronage as tools against Sunni, pro-American governments in the region, as well as against Israel and the US. At present, the inclination is to use the "Syrian model," whereby militias and forces under Iranian auspices act in tandem with local forces against Sunni factions in the region.

On December 9, 2016, Hezbollah chief Hassan Nasrallah declared that the Aleppo victory would influence "all the campaigns in the region." For his part, the Revolutionary Guards' second-in-command, Hossein Salami, sent a public invitation to the Shiites in Bahrain to replicate the model used by Tehran in Aleppo, declaring that the victory was the "first step" towards the liberation of Mosul, Bahrain, and Yemen. Ramazan Sharif, the head of public relations for

the Revolutionary Guards, also declared that the victory in Aleppo would have an impact on the solution of the crises in Yemen and Bahrain. Naim Qassem underscored Hezbollah's significant role in Tehran's subversive strategy by expressing Hezbollah's readiness to help would-be liberation movements whenever he believed in the righteousness of their struggle.

Iran's policy of exporting the Islamic revolution thus continues at full strength, with Tehran using the threat of the Islamic State (IS) as a pretext for maintaining an offensive military presence in other countries and in Sunni areas. The nuclear deal, which is favorable to Iran, must be viewed in this context. Because the West considers IS a threat, it is prepared to tolerate Iranian and pro-Iranian forces in Sunni areas.

This is why Tehran expects the victory in Aleppo to encourage Shiite circles in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia to be responsive to its subversive aid. The daily *Kayhan*, which is close to Supreme Leader Khamenei, anticipated that the victory would increase attraction to the Islamic revolution among non-state groups in the region.

However, Hamas's harsh reaction to the systematic killing and massive eviction of Sunnis from Aleppo shows the challenge facing Iran's attempt to export the revolution. Hamas expressed solidarity with the Sunnis of Aleppo, once again highlighting its dispute with Tehran over who is the oppressed party in Syria. This dispute dates back to Ayatollah Khomeini's indifference to the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood's pleas in the face of Hafez Assad's offensive that culminated in the 1982 Hama massacres.

Rejecting this type of criticism and other critiques leveled at Tehran following the Aleppo battle, including the accusation by *Al-Jazeera* that the Iranians had subjected the city's Sunnis to a *nakba* similar to that experienced by the Palestinians in 1948, Iranian government officials and journalists launched a social media campaign entitled "From Aleppo to Jerusalem." This campaign represented the anticipated victory of Iranian forces in Jerusalem as a continuation of Tehran's accomplishment in liberating Khoramshahr in southern Iran in 1982 during the Iran-Iraq war and Aleppo in 2016. The second-in-command of the Revolutionary Guards, Salami, declared that the experience gained by Hezbollah in fighting in built-up areas of Aleppo would be extremely useful during its future campaign against Israel.

While Tehran appears to have turned its attention to other areas inside Syria since the fall of Aleppo, a prospective Iranian campaign against Israel is not unrealistic. Tehran looks forward to exploiting the Syrian crisis as a means of deploying on the Syrian side of the Golan Heights. This would widen the

northern front facing Israel and threaten it substantially. Khamenei expressed this aspiration publicly, declaring that “Iran takes pride today in having forces near the borders of the Zionist regime and over its head,” as “the enemy must be destroyed in its own borders.”

In contrast to the proclamations of victory by leading lights of the Iranian regime, Mir Mahmoud Mousavi, formerly a senior official of the Iranian foreign ministry under Mohammed Khatami (1997-2005), has offered a more sobering prediction. According to Mousavi, joy in Tehran will be short-lived. Iran is likely to confront a considerable challenge for the foreseeable future, as it may be blamed for the fallout of the Syrian civil war with its hundreds of thousands dead and over 12 million refugees and displaced persons.

*Yossi Mansharof is a doctoral student in the Department of History of the Middle East at Haifa University and a scholar at the Ezri Center for Iran and Persian Gulf Studies.*

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