

Syria and Iran Sign Defense Agreement: Defying Outside Pressure

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Global Research, August 30, 2018

[Strategic Culture Foundation](#) 29 August
2018

Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)

Theme: [Intelligence](#), [US NATO War Agenda](#)

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Iranian Defense Minister Amir Hatami visited Damascus Aug. 26-27 in order to have a new military cooperation agreement signed. The move is evidently a response to [US and Israeli](#) demands to withdraw Iranian forces from Syria. No details have been provided about the document's content but it's logical to surmise it contains a list of mutual obligations in the event that the Iranian military is attacked in Syria.

The deal [mentions](#) Iran's role in the reconstruction of Syria's defense industry, thus ending any hopes that its military presence in that country will end. [According to](#) the Iranian defense chief, the "defense and technical agreement" provides for the continued "presence and participation" of Iran in Syria. He [added](#) that an agreement had been reached with Syria that Iran would have "presence, participation, and assistance" in the reconstruction and that "no third party will be influential in this issue."

The agreement was signed just as the Russia-Turkey-Iran summit was announced, which is scheduled for Sept. 7 in Tehran. Such events normally require thorough preparations. The parties are expected to reach an agreement on further joint steps to achieve progress in Syria. It's important to align their positions before the UN talks in Geneva, which are slated for Sept. 11-12. UN Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura has invited the "big three" to participate. They can come up with joint initiatives while the US has nothing to offer but its demands for Iran's withdrawal. It risks being left out in the cold, while diplomatic efforts initiated by other states bear fruit.

This turn of events will hardly be welcome news for those who would like to stymie the peace efforts and impose their own conditions for reaching any settlement of the problem.

The need to end Iranian assistance to Lebanon's Hezbollah was emphasized during last week's visit of US National Security Adviser John Bolton to Israel. The parties did not declare war on Iran, but there is no way to stop the supplies from reaching Hezbollah in Lebanon without cutting off the land routes going through Syria. The US official insisted before the visit to Israel that the withdrawal of Iran's forces from Syria is a prerequisite to any resolution of the conflict.

The US and its allies in Syria find it important to scuttle Syria's plans to liberate the province of Idlib from the rebels. A false-flag [chemical attack](#) is expected to be staged soon, to create a pretext for military action. Once Syria and Iran are in the same boat, it makes no

difference which of them is attacked first or where. There have been [media reports](#) that a large-scale military operation is in the works and can be expected in August or September.

There is no way to know what exactly Mr. Bolton discussed with the Israeli authorities during his visit to Jerusalem on Aug. 19 but the [reports](#) about the military activities at the US al-Shaddadi base in the Syrian province of al-Hasakah emerged soon afterward. The facility has been reported to have been updated to enable the landing and takeoff of heavy cargo aircraft. Ayn al-Arab (Kobani) has also been expanded. In August, shipments of ammunition and military hardware [were delivered](#) to several US-controlled facilities in Syria and Iraq. [Radars](#) have been transported to the [SDF](#)-controlled areas east of the Euphrates River.

Meanwhile, several thousand militants with heavy weaponry and armored vehicles in Syria's Idlib province [are getting ready](#) to launch an offensive against government-controlled regions of Hama and Aleppo. The attack will be targeted at Syrian as well as Iranian and pro-Iranian forces that have been invited in by the Syrian government.

It looks like plans are underway to force Syria to plunge into turmoil once again. In reality, the combat actions have already started. The US and Israel conducted their [first joint operation](#) against the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Quds Force and the Iraqi Shiite Khata'ib Hezbollah, their allies, on Aug. 23 near Abu Kamal, which is situated on the highway between Syria and Iraq. President Trump has said so many times and on so many occasions that he wants the Americans to leave Syria but US foreign policy is known for its flip-flops. Whatever is said today may be forgotten tomorrow.

This time, Lebanon may [become a new front](#). It's [widely believed](#) that a war between Israel and Hezbollah is inevitable. In February, US and Israeli troops [held an exercise](#) to practice for a potential war with Hezbollah in Lebanon, a country that holds a [military agreement](#) with Russia. The offshore [drilling contracts](#) Lebanon has signed with other countries, without solving its border dispute with Israel, are spurring the war preparations.

Syria and Iran have defied pressure and demonstrated their resolution not to bow but to protect their right to make independent decisions. They are offering a challenge. If the defense agreement just signed between those two allies provokes a military conflict, it will most certainly spill over to other countries, such as Yemen, Lebanon, and Iraq. It would lead to a long, protracted, and costly war.

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Peter Korzun is an expert on wars and conflicts.

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