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Kaitlin Coulter

University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, wzb884@mocs.utc.edu

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Iran's Involvement in the Syrian Civil War Before and After JCPOA

Kaitlin Coulter

Departmental Honors Thesis
The University of Tennessee at Chattanooga
Political Science and Public Service

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Dr. Saeid Golkar
Assistant Professor of Political Science
Thesis Director

Dr. Rita Boyajiah Groh
Lecturer of Political Science
Department Examiner

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I. Abstract

The Syrian civil war has been going on for over a decade and has caused the death of over 500,000 people and the displacement of thirteen million more. Ending the war has been difficult for policy makers worldwide due to the number of outside actors involved in the conflict. The most prominent actor that has made this task so difficult is Iran. Syria and Iran have been staunch allies since the inception of the Islamic Republic in 1979. Despite religious differences, their support for each other through the decades has proven extremely beneficial for both countries. When the Syrian civil war broke out in 2011, Iran quickly aided its long-standing ally, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. Iran's support of the Assad regime is a significant reason why the war has continued for so long and why Assad is still in power today. The war took many turns during its decade long endurance; however, one of the most impactful events didn't even occur on the battlefield in Syria, but rather from a nuclear treaty between Iran and Western countries. This thesis looks at the history of the Syria-Iran alliance. It evaluates Iran's motives for joining the war, while comparing and contrasting Iran's involvement in the Syrian civil war, before and after the signing of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), to see the extent to which the deal affected Iran's involvement in the war.

II. Introduction

The anti-government protests during the Arab Spring movement significantly impacted the Middle East. Violent government suppression of protests led many Arab Spring countries to impose harsh restrictions on freedom.¹ Syria is one of the countries still reeling from the Arab Spring. The spark for the anti-government protests began in Dara'a, a town on Syria's southern border, in early 2011 after the Syrian government arrested and tortured a group of teenage boys for spray painting "Freedom" and "Down with the Regime" on a wall.² Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's violent suppression of the anti-government protests that followed the events in Dara'a, and his total dismissal of the protesters' sentiments, plunged the country and region into a violent and lengthy civil war.³

The Syrian civil war has become a major conflict that has led to hundreds of thousands of deaths and the largest refugee crisis of this century. Global and regional powers like Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Russia, the United States, and Iran have gotten involved to secure their national interests on either the side of the rebels or the Assad regime; thereby turning the conflict into a proxy war. Since early 2012, Iran has provided billions in economic, military, and strategic aid, making it the most prominent supporters of the Assad regime since its involvement. There was hope that Iran would stop its participation in the Syrian civil war after signing the Iran nuclear agreement, officially known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), with the P5+1 (United States, China, Russia, United Kingdom, France, plus Germany) in 2015. However, Iran's

¹Kali Robinson, "The Arab Spring at Ten Years: What's the Legacy of the Uprisings?," Council on Foreign Relations (Council on Foreign Relations, 2020), <https://www.cfr.org/>.

²Jamie Tarabay, "For Many Syrians, the Story of the War Began with Graffiti in Dara'a," CNN (Cable News Network, March 15, 2018), <https://www.cnn.com/>.

³Joe Sterling, "Daraa: The Spark That Lit the Syrian Flame," CNN (Cable News Network, March 1, 2012), <https://www.cnn.com/>.

involvement in the conflict has only increased since then. Why and how has Iran gotten involved in the Syrian civil war? To what extent has Iran's involvement been rooted in ideology, sectarianism, or only real politics? And why didn't Iran reduce their involvement in the Syrian civil war after signing the nuclear agreement? These are the main questions this paper will try to answer.

III. Literature Review

Scholarship on civil wars over the years is expansive. There are many lenses scholars have chosen to look at this phenomenon through. Many authors focus on exploring civil wars as a concept and seek to determine the elements that contribute to the continuation of a war. Mundy (2011)⁴ broadly defines a civil war as “an armed conflict between at least two sovereign entities within the same territorial state.” Sambanis (2004)⁵ more specifically defines a civil war as “any armed conflict that involves (a) military action internal to the metropole, (b) the active participation of the national government, and (c) effective resistance by both sides.” He compares data from the late twentieth century and early twenty-first century to find correlations between major civil wars. Similarly, Wood (2003)⁶ seeks to determine the common causes of civil wars and successful peacemaking tactics through case studies of well-documented civil wars like those of Columbia, Sierra Leone, and Angola. Collier and Hoeffler (1998)⁷ do the same but through an economic lens, attempting to determine if the biggest factor in the development of a civil war is a country's economics. Blattman and Miguel (2009),⁸ and Lai and Thyne⁹ examine the long-lasting effects a civil war can have on a country through statistical analysis of that country’s educational institutions, technology, and social norms.

Kaufula (2017)¹⁰ combines the theoretical approach with an in-depth analysis of the Syrian civil war to determine if the Syrian conflict is truly a civil war by definition. Working

⁴ Jacob Mundy, “Deconstructing Civil Wars,” *Security Dialogue* 42, no. 3 (2011): pp. 279-295.

⁵ Nicholas Sambanis, “What Is Civil War?,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 48, no. 6 (2004): pp. 814-858.

⁶ Elisabeth Jean Wood, “Civil Wars: What We Don’t Know,” *Global Governance: A Review of Multilateralism and International Organizations* 9, no. 2 (2003): pp. 247-260, <https://doi.org/10.1163/19426720-00902011>.

⁷ Paul Collier and Anke Hoeffler, “Greed and Grievance in Civil War,” *Policy Research Working Papers*, 1999, <https://doi.org/10.1596/1813-9450-2355>.

⁸ Christopher Blattman and Edward Miguel, “Civil War,” 2009, <https://doi.org/10.3386/w14801>.

⁹ Brian Lai and Clayton Thyne, “The Effect of Civil War on Education, 1980—97,” *Journal of Peace Research* 44, no. 3 (2007): pp. 277-292, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343307076631>.

¹⁰ Mphatso Kaufulu (The University of Southern Mississippi, 2017).

under a similar definition as that of Mundy and Sambanis, Kaufula requires a civil war to have at “least a dual political entity,” and suggests that despite elements of organization there was “no real entity on the ground which would constitute an organized challenge to the Syrian government.” Berti and Paris (2014)¹¹ focus less on the theoretical aspect of the war and instead focus on examining how sectarianism contributed to the war.

There is limited scholarship on Iran's involvement in the Syrian civil war. Yolcu (2016)¹² looks at Iran's historical relationship with Syria to find their background motives for getting involved with the war. Terrill (2015)¹³ examines Iran's political motives for getting involved in the war. Ali (2019)¹⁴ examines the Syria-Iran-Hezbollah relationship until 2011 and explains how Iran has supported Hezbollah's actions in Syria. Landau (2018)¹⁵ looks at JCPOA from a U.S. foreign policy perspective to see how U.S. politics affected power dynamics in the Middle East and by extension, the Syrian civil war.

Overall, previous research on civil wars had been largely theoretical in nature. Scholarship on the Syrian civil focuses mainly on the internal aspects of the war peaked in the early-2010s before JCPOA was put into effect. My research will seek to fill the gap in post-2015 research related to the outside actors of the Syrian civil war to see how Iran's involvement in the region has changed, and why JCPOA didn't reduce their participation in the conflict.

¹¹ Benedetta Berti and Jonathan Paris, “Beyond Sectarianism: Geopolitics, Fragmentation, and the Syrian Civil War,” Strategic Assessment, 2014, <https://www.inss.org/>.

¹² Furkan Yolcu. "Iran's involvement with Syrian Civil War: Background, reasons, and alternatives." *Bilgi Dergi* 18, no. 2 (2016): 35.

¹³ Andrew Terrill, "Iran's strategy for saving Assad." *The Middle East Journal* 69, no. 2 (2015): 222-236.

¹⁴ Mohanad Ali, *Power Points Defining the Syria-Hezbollah Relationship*. (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2019).

¹⁵ Landau, Emily B. "In the Aftermath of the JCPOA: Restoring Balance in the US-Iran Deterrent Relationship." *Institute for National Security Studies* (2018).

IV. Historical Analysis

A. Iran-Syria relationship before and after the 1979 Iranian revolution.

Broadly speaking, Iran's relationship with Syria can be viewed around one major event-- the 1979 Islamic Revolution. Prior to the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Iran was ruled by the Pahlavi monarch. The Pahlavi monarch relied heavily on the U.S. for support and pushed for Western styled secular modernization often at the expense of Islamic values.¹⁶ As one of the United States closest allies in the region, Iran viewed Syria, "with its close ties with the USSR and support for radical Arab movements, as a menace in the region."¹⁷ However, after the 1979 Revolution, the new government in Iran formed an unlikely defensive alliance with Syria to combat the growing power of their common enemies, Israel and Iraq.

The Iranian Revolution occurred when Syria was losing regional influence and being threatened on multiple fronts. Syria and Israel have been engaged in a perpetual war since Israel's creation in 1948. Syria has never recognized Israel as a legitimate state and Israel views Syria as a hostile state.¹⁸ After the 1978 Camp David Accords, a peace treaty between Egypt and Israel was ratified, leaving Syria isolated in its perpetual war against Israel. At the same time, Syria began to feel threatened by the rival wing of the Ba'ath party in Iraq, which wanted to establish Iraq as the pan-Arab hegemony in the region.¹⁹ Despite their ideological differences, the threats from Israel and Iraq lead Syria to welcome the revolution in Iran in hopes of a new partner to counter Israeli military force and Iraqi pan-Arabism.

¹⁶ Soudabeh Marin, "Cultural Expertise in Iran: From the Pahlavi Dynasty to Contemporary Diasporas," *Law and History Review* 38, no. 1 (2019): pp. 6-7, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0738248019000762>.

¹⁷ Jubin M. Goodarzi, in *Syria and Iran: Diplomatic Alliance and Power Politics in the Middle East* (London: Tauris, 2009), pp. 12-13.

¹⁸ Moshe Ma'oz. "From Conflict to Peace? Israel's Relations with Syria and the Palestinians." *Middle East Journal* 53, no. 3 (1999): 393-416.

¹⁹ Goodarzi, *Syria and Iran*, 14-16.

After the revolution, the newly formed Islamic Republic of Iran had an uphill battle to fight for recognition and respect in regional and international politics. The success of the Shia Islamic uprising created fears in many of Iran's Sunni neighbors, most notably Iraq, that their oppressed Shia minorities would feel empowered by the revolution and try to recreate it in their own states. Sectarian tensions escalated when Iran argued that "Iraqi Ba'athists [were] atheists who adhered to a godless ideology,"²⁰ and Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein argued that the rivalry between Iran and Iraq was an "age-old conflict between Persian and Arabs," and the 1979 revolution was "un-Islamic."²¹ The two states began calling for the overthrow of the others regime and relations hit rock bottom when Iraq blamed Iran for an attempt on the Iraqi foreign minister's life. In a move to protect his own power, Saddam Hussein invaded Iran in September of 1980, officially starting the Iran-Iraq war. The world watched to see how the barely one year old Islamic republic would hold their own against a well-established country like Iraq. After Iran's resiliency become clear, Syria publicly condemned Saddam's invasion. Syria's support for Iran in the war was vital for the new government's survival. In a region dominated by Arabs, Syria's support prevented the formation of an Arab coalition against Iran, and the idea that this was solely an ethnic conflict. Furthermore, Syria's decision to close the Syrian IPC pipeline and support Iraqi opposition groups was a major action that initiated a turning point in the war and allowed Iran to go on the offensive.²²

Fearful, of an imminent invasion by Iran, Saddam turned his attention to Lebanon in hopes of weakening the Syrian-Iran alliance. In 1982, after an attempt on the life of the Israeli ambassador to Britain, thought to be orchestrated by Iraq as a convoluted way to weaken Syria

²⁰ Ibid, 28.

²¹ Ibid, 38.

²² Ibid, 55.

by forcing them to engage with the Israeli military, Israel received the "internationally-recognized provocation" they needed to invade Lebanon to expel their long time enemy, the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and establish a government there that was friendly to Israel.²³ Lebanon is strategically located on Israel's northern border and Syria's eastern border. An Israeli occupation of Lebanon would make a full-scale invasion of Syria possible— so stopping this occupation became very important to Syrian national security.²⁴ Intent on expanding its revolution to Lebanon and confronting its largest rival in the region, Iran sent volunteers, a small number of troops, and supplies to Syria to help them fight off the Israeli invasion of Lebanon. However, Assad rejected Iran's proposal for a major offensive against Israel in Lebanon.²⁵ He understood that the Israeli military was more powerful than his own, even with the help of Iran, and also knew that Iran's imminent invasion of Iraq would keep Baghdad occupied, so they would be unable to provoke further development of the conflict in Lebanon.²⁶

On July 13th 1982, Iran launched Operation Ramadan: the formal invasion of Iraq that resulted in much more losses for Iran than it did for Iraq.²⁷ Operation Ramadan gave Iraq a boost on the international stage by showing just how determined Iran was on exporting its Islamic revolution, at any cost. This invasion made some Arab countries, the USSR, France, and the United States come out in support of Iraq against Iranian aggression.²⁸ As the greatest ally of Iran, this also weakened Syria's position in the Arab world and their concurrent battle against Israel in Lebanon.

²³ Ibid, 61.

²⁴ Ibid, 71.

²⁵ Edward Wastnidge, "Iran and Syria: An Enduring Axis," *Middle East Policy* 24, no. 2 (2017): pp. 150-151, <https://doi.org/10.1111/mepo.12275>.

²⁶ Cristin Cappelletti, (Middle East Technical University, 2018), pp. 21-22.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Goodarzi, *Syria and Iran*, 14-16.

As these wars continued, the differing foreign policy goals of Syria and Iran, particularly in Lebanon, caused a rift in the alliance. Iran, intent on expanding its revolution to Lebanese Shias, partnered with the militant group Hezbollah. The Lebanese Hezbollah was founded in 1982 as a Shiite resistance movement to the Israeli invasion of Lebanon. Since its inception, Hezbollah has been Iranian backed, supported, funded, and supplied, making it essentially, a proxy group of the IRGC.²⁹ Syria, on the other hand, put its weight behind the Shia group Amal. Amal was started long before Hezbollah as a secular reformist movement that aimed to improve the quality of life for Lebanese Shias caught in the crossfire of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Hezbollah sought fundamental change in the government of Lebanon, while Amal looked more for stability.³⁰ During the mid-to-late 1980s, Hezbollah and Amal clashed many times, threatening the alliance between their respective supporters. However, both Syria and Iran were able to reach compromises when it came to the proxy conflicts, showing the depth of this alliance and long-term nature.³¹

The Iran-Iraq war came to an end in August of 1988 when both countries accepted UN Security Council Resolution 598. Even though war the itself was over, the alliance remained strong. Syria and Iran both viewed Saddam Hussein as a major threat to the region and were still opposed to the Israeli occupation of Lebanon. Additionally, tensions between the U.S. and Iran were growing, making the need for the alliance even more important. The alliance also took a more defensive and controversial turn when "Syria and Iran embarked upon a joint program to

²⁹ Ante Lucic, "Hezbollah: An Iranian Project?" *National security and the future* 10, no. 1 (2009): 77-88.

³⁰ Augustus Richard Norton, "The role of Hezbollah in Lebanese domestic politics." *The International Spectator* 42, no. 4 (2007): 475-491.

³¹ Cappelletti, *Dynamics of the Iranian role in the Syrian civil war*, 27.

acquire the capability to manufacture ballistic missiles domestically, with the support of Russia, China, and North Korea."³²

An unexpected win for the alliance came in early 2000 when Israel withdrew from Lebanon. However, not long after, on September, 1st 2001, the Islamic terrorist group, known as al-Qaeda, flew two planes into the World Trade Centers in New York City, successfully perpetrating the largest terrorist attack in U.S. history and throwing the entire middle east into the global spotlight.

Al-Qaeda is a Salafi jihadist organization. Salafi jihadists believe that their form of Islam is the only true form of Islam and often view adherents of other branches of the religion as apostates.³³ Concerned with the growing power and influence of this organization in the region, both Iran and Syria supported U.S counter-terrorism efforts in the middle east. Iran provided economic and military support to help the U.S. fight the Taliban in Afghanistan, and Syria provided essential intelligence regarding al-Qaeda to the CIA.³⁴ Despite this essential support, in his 2002 State of the Union address, President George W. Bush said that North Korea, Iraq, and Iran "constitute an axis of evil, aiming to threaten the peace of the world by seeking weapons of mass destruction."³⁵ This statement was a stab in the back after the help Iran had provided the U.S in the immediate aftermath of the September 11th attacks.

Relations worsened in 2003 when the U.S. invaded Iraq and quickly ousted Saddam Hussein on bogus charges of possession of weapons of mass destruction (WMD). U.S. intelligence also accused Syria of having WMDs, so after seeing the outcome of the U.S.

³² Ibid, 32.

³³ Assaf Moghadam, "The Salafi-jihad as a religious ideology." *CTC Sentinel* 1, no. 3 (2008): 14-16.

³⁴ Cappelletti, *Dynamics of the Iranian role in the Syrian civil war*, 34.

³⁵ "President Bush's 2002 State of the Union Address." The Washington Post. WP Company.

invasion of Iraq, and having both been accused of possessing or seeking WMDs, Syria and Iran feared they were next. Consequently, both countries turned against the U.S. and began using their alliance and resources to fight U.S. presence in the region in the following years.

B. History of Syria under the Assad regime and the emergence of the Arab Spring and Civil War in Syria

Hafiz al-Assad, an Arab nationalist with goals of confronting and defeating Israel, came to power in 1971 by taking control of the Syrian military and arresting political opponents. His rise to power marked the end of Sunni rule in Syria, replacing it with an era of alwite presidents.³⁶ While not exactly the same, Alawism is most closely related to Shia Islam. Until the ninth century, Alawism was a sub-branch of Shiism until they split their belief in the divinity of the fourth Islamic caliph.³⁷

Assad's alwite connections allowed him to provide relative stability in Syria for many years, even though he ruled as an oppressive dictator. In the early 1980's, Assad's determination to defeat Israel led to Syria incurring large debts on military equipment. This debt resulted in the economic crisis of 1985 which in turn began the anti-government sentiment that would play out years later during the Arab spring.³⁸ When Hafez al-Assad died in 2000, his son, Bashar al-Assad took over as president of Syria. At the beginning of his rule, many thought that Bashar al-Assad would offer chances of limited democracy in Syria, and a better relationship with the West.³⁹ Syria even assisted in the War on Terror after the September 11th terrorist attacks. However, after

³⁶ Chelsea Marie Baltés, "Causes and Consequences of the Syrian Civil War," University of South Carolina, 2016, <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/>.

³⁷ Leon Goldsmith, "Alawites for Assad," Foreign Affairs, March 2, 2016, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com>.

³⁸ Baltés, "Causes and Consequences," 43.

³⁹ Ibid, 45.

the U.S invasion of Iraq in 2003, Syria feared they would be next. Additionally, their partnership with the anti-Israel militant group Hezbollah, meant that any type of good relations with the West were severely limited.⁴⁰ Assad quickly came to follow in his father's footsteps; he adopted a hardliner stance towards Israel that further eroded Syria's relationship with the West, allowed corruption to spread through the government, and used economic policies that drastically increased the wealth gap.⁴¹

The Syrian people's discontent with their oppressive dictator came to a tipping point in a town called Dara'a, in March of 2011—during the height of pro-democracy movements in the Middle East, known as the Arab Spring. In February, at least fifteen teenagers were arrested for painting anti-government graffiti on the walls of a school. When the children's parents inquired about their release, they found out that their children were being beaten and tortured while in the government prison. On March 16th, protestors lead a sit-in in Damascus to demand the release of the children. These non-violent forms of protest were met by police dragging protesters out by their hair and beating them. Two days later, on March 18th, citizens organized another protest in Dara'a. Once again, their demonstrations were met with nonproportional violence by the government. Human Rights Watch reported that "security forces opened fire, killing at least four protesters and within days, the protests grew into rallies that gathered thousands of people."⁴² As word spread of the events in Dara'a, more people began to rise and protest.⁴³ Having just seen Tunisian dictator, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, ousted by citizens protests, the Syria people had a

⁴⁰ Ibid, 46.

⁴¹ Ibid, 47.

⁴² "Crimes against Humanity by Syrian Security Forces," Human Rights Watch, June 1, 2011, <https://www.hrw.org/>.

⁴³ Sterling, Joe. "Daraa: The Spark That Lit the Syrian Flame." CNN. Cable News Network, March 1, 2012.

new sense of hope about their future. However, during a speech addressing the events in Dara 'a, Assad blamed the protests on a foreign conspiracy and said that stability in Syria depended on him staying in power.⁴⁴ The government's actions in Dara 'a, and Assad's total dismissal of the protester's sentiments, was the last straw for a country looking for change since 1985. Only days after Assad's speech, weekly anti-government protest erupted across Syria. These protests quickly became violent and a full-scale civil war ensued in a matter of months.

⁴⁴ Baltes, "Causes and Consequences," 49.

V. Pre-nuclear Deal Involvement

A. Iran's involvement in the Syrian civil war before the nuclear deal (from 2012 to 2015)

Iran's interests in the Syrian civil war stems from various regional situations. First and foremost, Syria, specifically Assad, provides essential support and assistance to Iran's national security strategy. As mentioned earlier, Iran's principal enemy in the region is Israel, and their most effective fighting tool against Israel is Hezbollah. Hezbollah's strategic location in Lebanon means that it has the "ability to strike at Israel, and therefore acts as a deterrent against potential Israeli strikes against Iran."⁴⁵ Syria's utility to Iran doesn't stop at Israel. Their commitment to the Axis of Resistance – an anti-West, anti-Israel, and anti-Saudi, network of political parties and armed groups that span Palestine, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Yemen – has helped Iran keep its regional dominance over the past few decades. If Assad were to be overthrown and replaced by a Saudi or Turkish-backed government, Iran would not only lose a reliable military ally, but also their air and land bridge to Hezbollah, thus leaving them vulnerable to Israeli attacks and virtually isolated in the region. In addition to security threats from Israel, Saudi Arabia and Turkey are long-time allies that pose religious threats to Iran. Overall, Iran's support of Syria is deeply strategic and, in many ways, vital to Iran's continued influence in the region.

In the early days of the Syrian conflict, most people expected the anti-government protests to end with a government victory rather quickly. Iran's initial gameplan in Syria was to help the Assad regime quash the protests like they had done with the Green Movement in 2009. Tehran supplied Assad with "crowd-control gear, internet surveillance technology, as well as advice on how to handle demonstrations."⁴⁶ However, as the protests grew, the Syrian army

⁴⁵ Zaccara, Luciano, ed. *Foreign Policy of Iran under President Hassan Rouhani's First Term (2013–2017)*. Springer Nature, 2020. 110.

⁴⁶ Hosenball, Mark. "Iran Helping Assad to Put down Protests." Reuters. Thomson Reuters, March 23, 2012. <https://www.reuters.com/>.

began frequently firing on unarmed protestors, carrying out mass arrests, and perpetrating numerous other human rights violations, the nature of the protests and the government response lead many Syrian Armed Army (SAA) members to join newly formed resistance groups. After refusing to fire on their people, roughly 60,000 SAA soldiers joined the newly formed Free Syrian Army (FSA) by early 2012.⁴⁷ The FSA was founded in Dara 'a at the onset of the anti-government protests with the goal of "[protecting] peaceful protesters demonstrating against President Bashar al-Assad's regime and to [initiating] resistance operations against his security forces."⁴⁸ As former SAA members joined the ranks of the FSA the group began to provide "leadership to dozens of Armed Opposition Groups (AOGs) heavily staffed by civilians."⁴⁹ They solidified themselves as Syria's main opposition group in 2012 when they "established official relations with the exiled political opposition, the Syrian National Council (SNC)."⁵⁰ The SNC was formed in August 2011, shortly after the anti-government protests started in Syria. Based in Istanbul, Turkey, this government in exile seeks a modern democratic state in Syria and offers a credible alternative to Assad's regime.⁵¹ The development of these militant and political resistance groups allowed citizens to systematically organize against the government for the first time, quickly turning this conflict into a full-scale civil war.

Seeing the development of the conflict, Iran amped up their support for Assad. At the onset of the conflict, their primary role had been advising and training Syrian militiamen. However, as the situation intensified and the Assad's army fell short of manpower, Iran looked

⁴⁷ Laub, Zachary. "Syria's War and the Descent into Horror." Council on Foreign Relations. Council on Foreign Relations, March 17, 2021. <https://www.cfr.org>.

⁴⁸ Lister, Charles. "The Free Syrian Army: a decentralized insurgent brand." *The Brookings Project on US Relations with the Islamic World, Analysis Paper 26* (2016) 3-4.

⁴⁹ Lister, "The Free Syrian Army" 5-6.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 6.

⁵¹ "Q&A: Syrian Opposition Alliance." BBC News. BBC, November 16, 2011. <https://www.bbc.com>.

to make systemic changes to Syria's military makeup. As a result, they organized the "Assad regime's armed Shabbiha and Popular Committees into a militia of about 100,000-150,000 fighters known as the National Defense Forces (NDF)."⁵² The NDF was modeled after Iran's own covert paramilitary group, known as the Basij, and it is believed that the IRGC directs the operations of the NDF. Additionally, Iran deployed senior members of its elite clandestine Quds force to advise Syrian military personnel.

The chaos in Syria was exasperated in early 2012 when al-Qaeda's Syrian franchise, Jabhat al-Nusra, was established. Al-Qaeda's leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri, called for Sunnis worldwide to fight against Assad in Syria leading to at least 3000 joining ranks with Jabhat al-Nusra to fight Assad. Jabhat al-Nusra was more organized and centralized, allowing them to outdo grassroots rebel groups like the FSA. However, the situation went downhill for Assad just over a year later, in 2013, when an organization arose from the remnants of al-Qaeda in Iraq known as the Islamic State of Iraq or ISIS.⁵³ Known for its brutality, ISIS was quick to gain control over parts of eastern Syria and western Iraq and at its height, controlled about a third of Syria and forty percent of Iraq.⁵⁴

Seeing the likelihood of victory for Assad dwindle, Iran took significant steps to support their long-term ally. For the first time, they gave hundreds to thousands of IRGC ground force members to bolster the NDF. Also, they used religious connections to supply an additional 4000 to 5000 Shia militiamen from Hezbollah, Iraq, Afghanistan, and

⁵² Michael Eisenstadt, "Iran's Military Intervention in Syria: Long-Term Implications," The Washington Institute, 2015, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/>.

⁵³ Timeline: The Rise, Spread, and Fall of the Islamic State." Wilson Center. Accessed January 31, 2023. <https://www.wilsoncenter.org>.

⁵⁴ Laub, Zachary. "Syria's War and the Descent into Horror." Council on Foreign Relations. Council on Foreign Relations, March 17, 2021. <https://www.cfr.org>.

Pakistan.⁵⁵ They have also been an economic lifeline for Syria during the war by providing them billions of dollars in cash and oil. Finally, their strategic investments into Syrian property, business, and government contracts, have allowed them influence and control in this conflict at every level.

While religion has not played a driving role in this conflict, religion is at the core of Iran's existence, and that played out in their non-military involvement in the war. In October of 2014, "Assad decreed that Syria's Education Ministry must provide Shia studies as part of the curriculum in schools, colleges, and universities nationwide. Additionally, limits were placed on the role of Sunni ulama in public education."⁵⁶ Prior to this decree, Iran operated many Syrian schools, but the number increased significantly after 2014. Iran also provided academic scholarships that brought many foreign students to these Shia schools.⁵⁷ This investment into Shia-ran schools in Syria truly highlights Iran long-term strategic goals in Syria.

Despite Iran's support, things were not looking good for Assad in 2015. With ISIS and rebel groups controlling a significant part of Syrian territory, and Iran's investments into the war being stifled by international economic sanctions, many thought Assad was on the road to defeat. However, the tables began to turn in late 2015 with the Russian intervention into the conflict and the finalization of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action.

⁵⁵ Eisenstadt, Michael. "Iran's Military Intervention in Syria: Long-Term Implications." The Washington Institute. Accessed January 31, 2023. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org>.

⁵⁶ Alrifai, Oula A., Nakissa Jahanbani, and Mehdi Khalaji. "Iran's Long Game in Syria." The Washington Institute, March 2021. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org>.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

B. Overview of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA)

Starting in the early 2000s, reports began circling that Iran had built nuclear facilities and was enriching uranium to build nuclear weapons. In 2003 "The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Board of Governors [adopted] a resolution that called for Iran to suspend all [nuclear] enrichment and reprocessing- related activities."⁵⁸ Even though Iran agreed to the terms of the deal, it would not cooperate with IAEA inspectors. From 2004 to 2009, Iran went back and forth with the IAEA and U.N. Security Council on inspection cooperation. They would agree to terms but wouldn't follow through, which would lead to more sanctions placed on them by the U.N. Tensions escalated in 2009 when the West discovered that Iran had been constructing a secret "uranium-enrichment facility parallel to the one monitored by the IAEA in Natanz."⁵⁹ This discovery made the West realize how strong Iran's nuclear ambitions were, and they began exploring options that would restrict Iran's ability to make a nuclear bomb. In 2012 the E.U., which bought 20% of Iran's oil exports at the time, passed a resolution that banned all member countries from importing Iranian oil. Iran's economy relies heavily on oil, so any sanction on oil does significant harm to it. During that same year, the P5+1— China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States; plus Germany— began meeting with Iran to negotiate a deal where "Iran would take steps to increase cooperation with the IAEA and carry out confidence-building measures in return for a gradual easing of sanctions."⁶⁰ Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu created a sense of urgency surrounding Iran's nuclear program when he stated at the U.N. General Assembly that Iran enriching uranium to 20% was a red line for an Israeli attack on

⁵⁸ Bedard, John, and Kelsey Davenport. "Nuclear Diplomacy with Iran." *Timeline of Nuclear Diplomacy with Iran* | *Arms Control Association*, <https://www.armscontrol.org>.

⁵⁹ Traynor, Ian, and Julian Borger. "Iran Admits Secret Uranium Enrichment Plant." *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 25 Sept. 2009, <https://www.theguardian.com>.

⁶⁰ Bedard and Davenport. "Nuclear Diplomacy with Iran."

Iran.⁶¹ Nuclear deal negotiations between Iran and the P5+1 officially started in 2013; and in July of 2015, the two entities formally signed the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), more famously known as the Iran nuclear deal.⁶²

The JCPOA is a 159-page document that is very detailed and technical. However, in simplified terms, it does three main things to curb Iran's nuclear program.

1. It requires Iran to give up 97% of its enriched uranium.
2. It stipulates that Iran can only enrich its remaining uranium to 3.67%. For reference, weapons-grade uranium must be enriched past 90%.
3. It requires that Iran decrease its centrifuge inventory, the machines that separate uranium particles into usable materials, from 20,000 centrifuges to only 6,000 centrifuges that the IAEA will monitor.⁶³

The economic sanctions placed on Iran because of its nuclear program would be lifted in return for compliance. Some notable sanctions that were agreed to be lifted were: U.S. sanctions on Iran's oil and banking systems, which would allow them to reconnect with the international system; U.N. heavy embargo sanctions; and E.U. sanctions on banking transactions, crude oil, petrochemical production sales, and access to SWIFT. This would only happen if Iran followed through with its end of the deal, which IAEA inspectors would monitor.⁶⁴ When implementation day came in 2016, IAEA inspectors verified that Iran was in compliance with the deal. As a

⁶¹ Heller, Jeffrey. "Netanyahu Draws 'Red Line' on Iran's Nuclear Program." *Reuters*, Thomson Reuters, 28 Sept. 2012, <https://www.reuters.com>.

⁶² Westra, Renee. "The Iran Nuclear Deal-Facts, Issues, Stakeholders, and Australian Policy." 18 May 2018, <https://www.aph.gov>.

⁶³ "JCPOA at a Glance." *The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) at a Glance | Arms Control Association*, <https://www.armscontrol.org>.

⁶⁴ Bedard and Davenport. "Nuclear Diplomacy with Iran."

result, sanctions were lifted, and according to the Central Bank of Iran, the economy grew by 12.3% in 2016.⁶⁵

⁶⁵ “How Hard US Sanctions Have Hit Iran.” *BBC News*, BBC, 9 Dec. 2019, <https://www.bbc.com>.

VI. Post- nuclear deal involvement

A. Iran's involvement in the Syrian civil war after JCPOA (2015)

The most significant impact the Iran Nuclear Deal had on Iran's involvement in the Syrian civil war was due to the economic benefits it provided Iran. When the deal was signed, billions of dollars' worth of sanctions were lifted allowing Iran access to assets that had been previously restricted. Estimates suggest JCPOA unfroze anywhere from 20 to 150 billion dollars' worth of Iranian assets.⁶⁶ It's hard to quote a specific number because of the broad nature of the sanctions and assets. U.S. Treasury Secretary, Jack Lew, told lawmakers that Iran would gain access to at least \$56 billion.⁶⁷ Additionally, the U.S gave Iran 1.7 billion upon signing the deal for an arms contract that predated the 1979 revolution.⁶⁸

The Iran nuclear deal didn't just give Iran monetary benefits, it also gave them a chance to re-enter international politics. Prior to 2015, Western powers worked to limit Iran's regional influence. Their rhetoric and actions showed that they viewed Iran as an adversary not to be partnered with. Western countries alliance and support of Israel also meant that they were in frequent conflict with Iran. However, as President Obama began to lighten America's influence on the Middle East, and become more energy independent, Western interest and goals in the region changed.⁶⁹ In a 2015 interview detailing his view on the Middle East and the importance of the Iran Nuclear Deal, President Obama said,

⁶⁶ Bauer, Katherine, and Patrick Clawson. "How Much Would Iran Gain Financially from Returning to the JCPOA?" The Washington Institute. Accessed March 3, 2023. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/>.

⁶⁷ *Senate Foreign Relations Committee Testimony*. C-Span, 2015. <https://www.c-span.org>.

⁶⁸ "CRS Report on Iranian Sanctions." Congressional Research Service, February 2, 2022. <https://sgp.fas.org>.

⁶⁹ Munayyer, Yousef. "The Iran Nuclear Deal and Its Implications for the Region." Arab Center Washington DC, July 31, 2015. <https://arabcenterdc.org>.

"At this point, the U.S.'s core interests in the region are not oil, are not territorial... Our core interests are that everybody is living in peace, that it is orderly, that our allies are not being attacked, that children are not having barrel bombs dropped on them, that massive displacements aren't taking place. Our interests in this sense are really just making sure that the region is working. And if it's working well, then we'll do fine. And that's going to be a big project, given what's taken place, but I think this [the Iran nuclear deal] is at least one place to start."⁷⁰

The Iran nuclear deal signaled, what looked to be, an improved relationship between the West and Iran. While this relationship was bore more out of American concern and unhappiness with the long and costly military involvement in the Middle East, rather than mutual respect between the two parties, it nonetheless gave Iran more freedom in Syria because of their new found trust from the international community

Just over a week after the nuclear deal was signed, Quds force commanding general Qassem Soleimani visited Moscow to coordinate Russia's game changing intervention into the war.⁷¹ In September of 2015, additional IRGC members arrived in western Syria to set up military checkpoints throughout most of the area to slow SAA and FSA members.⁷² And at the end of September, less than three months after the nuclear deal was signed, Russia formally entered the war in support of Assad.

⁷⁰ Friedman, Thomas L. "Iran and the Obama Doctrine." The New York Times. The New York Times, April 5, 2015. <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/>

⁷¹ Solomon, Jay. "Russia, Iran Seen Coordinating on Defense of Assad Regime in Syria." The Wall Street Journal. Dow Jones & Company, September 22, 2015. <https://www.wsj.com>.

⁷² Fadel, Leith. "Russian Marines and Iranian Revolutionary Guardsmen Build a Protectorate in Western Syria." Al-Masdar News, September 26, 2015. <https://web.archive.org>.

Russia and Iran had different reasoning for the same goal in Syria—prevent a government friendly to the West from establishing itself in Syria. Russia cared more about tampering outside influence into the Middle East than the survival of the Assad regime. Middle Eastern countries are Russia's neighbors to the east and historically act as a battlefield for superpower proxy conflicts. After the 9/11 terrorist attacks, U.S. involvement in the Middle East escalated exponentially, leading to U.S. military operations occurring right on Russia's doorstep. Ever since the fall of the Soviet Union, Russia has been trying to re-establish themselves as a global superpower and has been attempting to prove they are willing and able to replace the U.S. During the "P5+1 negotiations on Iran's nuclear program, Russia had acted as a mediator between the West and Iran to convince Iran to give away some concessions in exchange for the lifting of economic sanctions, hence gaining leverage" with all parties involved.⁷³ As the prospect of an Assad victory started to dwindle, Russia worried what the consequences of a government friendly to the West in Syria would mean for their larger goals. Because of this concern, Russia provided vital air support to Assad from 2015 until 2017. The combination of Russian air support, with Iranian ground support, turned the war around and ultimately led to victory for Assad.

The Russian intervention and benefits from the nuclear deal allowed Iran to step up its involvement in the Syrian civil war in different ways. While IRGC members were deployed on the ground in Syria, their numbers increased only slightly after the nuclear deal was signed.⁷⁴ This was mainly due to the heavy losses Iran suffered prior to 2015—about five percent of

⁷³ Yacoubian, Mona. "What Is Russia's Endgame in Syria?" United States Institute of Peace, February 17, 2021. <https://www.usip.org>.

⁷⁴ Kam, Ephraim. "Iranian Military Intervention in Syria: A New Approach," July 2017. <https://www.inss.org>.

deployed forces a month.⁷⁵ One thing that did change, however, was their indirect support. Providing hard numbers associated with Iran support of Assad can be challenging due to the various kinds of support Iran provides. Iran engages with Syria by ways of trade, direct cash loans, the sale of military equipment, investments into infrastructure, electricity, health, mills, food production and supply, on top of many other unreported ways. Nonetheless, conservative estimates suggest that prior to 2015 Iran spent at least six billion a year to keep Assad in power, while after 2015 estimates suggest that this number grew dramatically. Iran began to increase trade with Syria and, in 2017, exports of Iranian goods to Syria recorded a growth of over 80 percent.⁷⁶ Additionally, Iran supported Assad militarily through the use of military proxies. Supporting proxies, as opposed to direct military involvement, allowed Iran to "counter adversaries with deniability, reduce reputational repercussions, and cultivate its worldview among Shia communities abroad."⁷⁷ These proxies benefited by making a name for themselves and receiving weaponry from Iran that they would have been unable to attain otherwise. They also focused on building relationships with minority populations in Syria and the surrounding area, including the Druze, by providing "financial assistance, social services, and direct aid to families of martyrs."⁷⁸

As mentioned earlier, the primary way Iran carries out its objectives in Syria, is through the use of proxies, mainly Lebanese Hezbollah. Iran is Hezbollah's primary source of funding, giving the organization hundreds of millions of dollars a year. Iran has made funding Hezbollah's activities in Syria a priority, at whatever the cost might be. In a late 2015 Congressional hearing,

⁷⁵ Alfonch, Ali, and Michael Eisenstadt. "Iranian Casualties in Syria and the Strategic Logic of Intervention." The Washington Institute, March 2016. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org>.

⁷⁶ Salloum, Ahmad. "How Much Is Iran Spending in Syria?" IranWire, February 2020. <https://iranwire.com>.

⁷⁷ Alrifai, Oula A., Nakissa Jahanbani, and Mehdi Khalaji. "Iran's Long Game in Syria." The Washington Institute, March 2021. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org>.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

Dr. Matthew Levitt, former-Wexler Fellow and director of the Reinhard Program on Counterterrorism and Intelligence at The Washington Institute, explained how sanctions have affected Iran and Hezbollah's relationship and how increased funding embolden the group:

Iran is Hezbollah's primary benefactor, giving the Lebanese party and militant group some \$200 million a year, in addition to weapons training, intelligence, and logistical assistance. But over the past 18-plus months [2013-2014], Iran had cut back its financial support to Hezbollah, a collateral benefit of the unprecedented international sanctions regime targeting Iran's nuclear program and the fall in oil prices. The cutback mostly curtailed Hezbollah's political, social, and military activities inside Lebanon. Its social service institutions cut costs. Employees received paychecks late or were laid off.

Funding for organizations like its satellite television station Al-Manar were reduced. By contrast, Hezbollah's Syrian operations, which have been a priority for Tehran given its commitment to defending the regime of Bashar al-Assad, have shown no sign of financial hardship. Hezbollah is busier than ever, especially in Syria, where it is engaged in expensive militant operations and support activities... Today, there are between 6,000 and 8,000 Hezbollah operatives in Syria. Meanwhile, Hezbollah has transferred key personnel from its traditionally paramount southern command to Syria, Iraq, and Yemen.⁷⁹

Iran's actions with Hezbollah in Syria show just how important keeping Assad in power is to them. In September of 2015, only a few months after JCPOA was signed, and when Dr. Levitt testified before Congress, Iran was reportedly giving Hezbollah \$200 million a year. However, in

⁷⁹ "Hearing Before the House Subcommittee on the Middle East and North Africa." U.S. Government Publishing Office, September 2015. <https://www.govinfo.gov>.

2018, before the U.S. withdrew from JCPOA, U.S. intelligence reported that Iran gave Hezbollah over \$700 million in support.⁸⁰ That is more than triple the amount of money they gave in the years prior to the nuclear deal.

This dramatic increase in funding has led Hezbollah to increase operations that support the Assad regime. From 2015 to 2018 they amassed anywhere from 7000 to 10000 fighters to join their ranks in Syria. They also launched offenses outside of Syria, in Lebanon, against al-Nusrah to bolster Lebanese support for operations in Syria and solidify themselves as a protector of the Shia community. Hezbollah has begun to stockpile rockets and missiles that can reach adversarial countries like Israel, Jordan, and Turkey.⁸¹

Around the time the nuclear deal was being signed, Assad was quickly losing power to rebel groups. These groups didn't just include Syrian anti-government groups, but the terrorist group known as ISIS. ISIS was founded as al-Qaeda's regional affiliate in the Levant but became independent in 2014.⁸² ISIS adheres to a conservative fundamentalist philosophy known as Wahhabism or Salafism. Salafists believe that Salafism is the only true form of Islam and that the followers of all other Islamic sects or religions are infidels and should be put to death. One of their goals is "the annihilation of Shi'is and the establishment of an Islamic state in accordance with a fundamentalist reading of sharia law."⁸³ ISIS quickly rose to power in the Levant, amassing tens of thousands of fighters, and gaining control of about a third of Syria and 40% of Iraq by the end of 2014.⁸⁴ Their hard stance towards Shias and quick rise to power so close to

⁸⁰ "Country Reports on Terrorism 2018 - United States Department of State." U.S. Department of State. U.S. Department of State, December 2018. <https://www.state.gov>.

⁸¹ Jones, Seth, and Markusen. "The Escalating Conflict with Hezbollah in Syria." CSIS, June 2018. <https://www.csis.org>.

⁸² Esfandiary, Dina, and Ariane Tabataba. "Iran's ISIS Policy ." Chatham House, 2015. <https://www.chathamhouse.org>.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ "Timeline: The Rise, Spread, and Fall of the Islamic State." Wilson Center, October 2019. <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/>.

Iran's borders, made stopping this group a top priority for Iran. Iran sent IRGC commanding general Qassem Soleimani to Iraq to help the government fight against ISIS.⁸⁵ They began flying drones over ISIS territory in Iraq, deployed Iranian military personnel on the ground, and sent military equipment like SU-25 aircraft to Iraq.⁸⁶

While fighting anti-government rebel groups in Syria, Russia, and Iran simultaneously led operations to regain Syrian territory lost to ISIS. Iran allowed Russia to use its Hamadan Airbase in 2016 to help carry out assaults against ISIS and rebel groups. During their three-year involvement in the war, Russia conducted over 45,000 airstrikes in Syria. They claimed to be targeting only ISIS-controlled regions. However, a significant amount of these strikes were directed towards the areas controlled by Syrian rebel groups. These airstrikes, along with the ground support from Hezbollah and the IRGC, returned much of the rebel and ISIS-controlled land to the Assad regime.

Prior to the nuclear deal being signed, Iran was operating at an unsustainable rate in Syria and in the process of cutting funding to Hezbollah. However, after the nuclear deal was signed, Iran could increase operations in Syria, triple funding to Hezbollah, and conduct a war against ISIS in Iraq.

⁸⁵ Black, Ian, and Saeed Kamali Dehghan. "Qassem Suleimani: Commander of Quds Force, Puppeteer of the Middle East." The Guardian. Guardian News and Media, June 16, 2014. <https://www.theguardian.com>.

⁸⁶ Marcus, Jonathan. "Iranian Attack Jets Deployed' to Help Iraq Fight Isis." BBC News. BBC, July 2, 2014. <https://www.bbc.com>.

Conclusion

While Iran's relationship with Syria is one of a deep and complex nature, their reasoning for supporting Assad in the Syrian civil war is not. Keeping Assad in power, or at the very least, a government friendly to Iran and skeptical of the West, is a matter of national security for Iran. Iran's most significant and powerful regional adversary is Israel, and their most effective tool against Israel is Hezbollah. Lebanese Hezbollah, which is an Iranian proxy for all intents and purposes, acts as a deterrent against the ever-increasing threat of Israel's aggression against Iran. Hezbollah's location in Lebanon and Syria means they are within the airstrike distance of Israeli territory, therefore, curbing any actions Israel might take against Iran. Hezbollah also allows Iran to conduct covert operations throughout the region with some deniability. None of this would be possible without Syria. Syria acts as an air and land bridge between Iran and Hezbollah, allowing Iran to transport military equipment and personnel across the region and closer to Israel. Syria is also an important ally in Iran's resistance to Western influence in the region. In the early stages of the conflict, Iran often justified involvement in the war by citing the protection of religious relics in Syria. However, Iran's initial and continued involvement in the war had less to do with religion and more to do with the security reasons mentioned above. While the religious situation in Syria allowed for Iran's involvement in the war, it certainly did not cause it.

Iran's involvement in the Syrian civil war grew as the war did. At the onset of the protest in Dara'a, Iran gave minor support to Syria and mainly acted as an advisor providing crowd control equipment and training to the Syrian military. However, their involvement also grew as the protest turned into a full-scale civil war. Before signing the nuclear deal, Iran took many steps to strengthen Assad's regime. They reorganized Syria's military into what's now known as the National Defense Force (NDF). Not only is the NDF modeled after Iran's paramilitary group

known as the Basij, but it is also believed that the IRGC directs most of the operations of this group.

Additionally, Iran deployed members of its elite Quds force to advise NDF commanders and other leaders. They used their religious connections to bring Shia fighters to Syria and even deployed their IRGC members to supplement NDF forces. Finally, they acted as an economic lifeline for Syria through million-dollar trade deals and investments in education, real estate and other areas. This support was extremely costly and unsustainable for a country bogged down by Western economic sanctions. Before the nuclear deal was signed, most thought Assad would face imminent defeat. However, less than two weeks after the deal was signed, Russia and Iran joined forces in Syria to support Assad. Russian airstrikes targeting anti-government groups and ISIS, along with Iran's ground support, allowed Assad to regain control of most lost areas. Iran increased funding for Hezbollah, allowing them to deploy more personnel and engage in more operations in support of Assad. Had the nuclear deal not been signed, it was very probable that Iran would not have been able to continue its costly support of Assad, which in turn could have led to a victory for the anti-government groups in Syria.

The most intense fighting in the civil war ended in 2020 when the Syrian government regained control of most major cities. While the war is still technically going on, and there are clashes between groups in the area often, the frontlines of the war haven't changed in around three years.

In 2018, under the direction of President Donald Trump, the U.S. withdrew from the Iran nuclear deal, citing fundamental issues with the deal and Iranian non-compliance. This withdrawal came with the reimposition of economic sanctions on Iran. When President Biden was elected in 2020, he moved to negotiate a U.S. re-entry into the nuclear deal. The Biden

administration has said that they view a return to the agreement as a stepping stone for a stronger deal.⁸⁷ However, they have been ambiguous about how this deal differs from the original. The administration has claimed the deal is almost finalized, but the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and rising tensions between the U.S. and Russia, have complicated negotiations. As of now, it's unclear where exactly the talks stand.

⁸⁷ Erlanger, Steven, and David E. Sanger. "U.S. and Iran Want to Restore the Nuclear Deal. They Disagree Deeply on What That Means." *The New York Times*. *The New York Times*, May 9, 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com>.