

# Pentagon braces for emboldened Iran after Syria gains



## ARTICLE SUMMARY

The Pentagon's top commander in the Middle East told lawmakers today that Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's gains in the yearslong civil war will bolster Iran's ability to frustrate US aims in the region.

REUTERS/Omar Sanadiki

A Syrian army soldier is seen securing Syrian Arab Red Crescent trucks carrying aid at the entrance of Wafideen camp in Damascus, Syria, March 5, 2018.

America's top military commander in the Middle East told Congress today that President Bashar al-Assad's recent gains in the Syrian civil war will enhance Iran's ability to support proxy groups in the region.

Chief of US Central Command Joseph Votel told the Senate Armed Services Committee that the intervention by Iran and Russia has proven decisive in bolstering the embattled Syrian leader. Assad appears on the verge of regaining opposition-held holdouts in Idlib province and the Damascus suburbs.

"From a civil war standpoint, it would appear that the regime is ascendant here," Votel told Sen. Lindsey Graham, R-S.C. "It means that we will contend with the influence of Iran."

Votel did not disagree with the senator's characterization that Assad's forces had "won" the war with the help of Iran and Russia.

Iran is believed to have as many as 125,000 troops and Shiite-backed proxy forces in Syria under the watch of Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps commander Qasem Soleimani. That includes 8,000 Hezbollah fighters in the Middle Euphrates River Valley, the centerpiece of the US-backed battle against the Islamic State (IS).

At the conclusion of the conflict, Votel told lawmakers, "Iran could be in a position where they could support Lebanese Hezbollah better."

Speaking at Stanford University in January, ousted Secretary of State Rex

Tillerson called for an open-ended US presence in Syria to counter Iran. He also insisted that the United States is seeking a political transition away from Assad.

It's not clear if CIA Director Mike Pompeo, who President Donald Trump named as Tillerson's successor today, will aim to continue the policy, and Votel provided no clarity today on whether US officials still sought Assad's dismissal. "I don't know that that's our particular policy at this point," he said.

"Well, if you don't know, I doubt if anybody knows, because this is your job, to take care of this part of the world," Graham responded. The South Carolina Republican recently visited Jordan and Israel and wrote a Wall Street Journal op-ed on March 12 decrying the lack of a "coherent strategy" to deal with Iran's influence in Iraq and Syria. Graham also called for no-fly zones within Syria to allow the return of refugees and the continuation of efforts to train and equip Syrian rebel forces.

Some 2,000 US troops remain in Syria, officially, to train rebel forces to fight remnants of IS. The Pentagon, however, appears to be curtailing the use of Incirlik Air Base in nearby Turkey to provide air support in the fight against the militant group. The Defense Department has asked for \$300 million to train Syrian fighters, including the Kurdish-dominated Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), in the fiscal year that begins in October, a 40% cut from the current year's request.

Though US forces have tried to stay out of the wider war, special operations forces recently repelled a pro-Assad attack on the US-backed SDF near oil fields in territory once held by IS. Votel said he didn't think that rebel forces in Ghouta and Idlib could topple Assad within the next year.

As pro-Assad forces continue to hit the rebel-held Damascus suburb of eastern Ghouta with bombs and chlorine gas, the Pentagon is discouraging Trump from launching military operations to try to stem the humanitarian crisis. Trump has mentioned eastern Ghouta in recent calls with US allies, including French President Emmanuel Macron, British Prime Minister Theresa May and German Chancellor Angela Merkel.

"The best way of doing this is through political and diplomatic channels," Votel said.

Yet as the White House is set to formulate a tougher policy on Iran, with Pompeo replacing Tillerson at the State Department, the Pentagon is carefully watching Trump's May 12 deadline to determine whether the United States will continue suspending sanctions as called for under the 2015 nuclear deal. Last fall, US Defense Secretary James Mattis called on the United States to remain in the deal, and Votel appeared to reiterate that position in testifying before lawmakers today.

The nuclear agreement "addresses one of the principal threats that we deal with from Iran," Votel said. If the deal ends and Iran resumes prohibited nuclear activities, the Middle East commander said, the United States will need "another way" to deal with the threat.



Jack Detsch is Al-Monitor's Pentagon correspondent. Based in Washington, Detsch examines US-Middle East relations through the lens of the Defense Department. Detsch previously covered cybersecurity for Passcode, the Christian Science Monitor's project on security and privacy in the Digital Age. Detsch also served as editorial assistant at The Diplomat Magazine and worked for NPR-affiliated stations in San Francisco. On Twitter: @JackDetsch\_ALM, Email: jdetsch@al-monitor.com.

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Source: <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2018/03/pentagon-braces-em-boldened-iran-syria-gains.html>

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