

SYRIA

■ IRAN

A long-time supporter of Syria's Assad regime, Iran has directed its Lebanese protégé, the powerful Hezbollah militia, to join the fight against Syrian rebels and dispatched Iranian Revolutionary Guard units in aid of Assad forces.

THE GOAL: To safeguard a pro-Iranian regime.

■ SAUDI ARABIA

Riyadh has supported *jihadi* rebels in Syria since the start of the civil war, seeing an opportunity to oust Iranian-backed dictator Bashar al-Assad. The rebels have captured large parts of north, east and south Syria, and are nearing the capital.

THE GOAL: To replace the Assad regime with a Sunni government.

■ ISLAMIC STATE

IS fighters hold large parts of eastern and northern Syria, though they lost the battle for the Kurdish city of Kobani. Most recently IS forces crept closer to Damascus, occupying the Palestinian refugee area of Yarmouk on the outskirts of the capital.

THE GOAL: To establish a Sunni caliphate in as much of Syria as possible.

■ COALITION

The U.S.-led coalition, including half a dozen Arab state members, is conducting aerial assaults against IS positions in Syria, the effect of which benefits the Iranian-backed regime of Bashar al-Assad. Canada recently joined in these attacks.

THE GOAL: To degrade and destroy Islamic State forces.

RUSSIA

Russian President Vladimir Putin on April 13 ended a self-imposed ban on delivering an anti-missile rocket system to Iran. Despite widespread international sanctions against the Tehran regime, Moscow will deliver the sophisticated defence system in exchange for up to 500,000 barrels of Iranian oil a day from the cash-strapped Shia republic.

AFGHANISTAN

■ IRAN

A fifth of Afghans are Shiites, strongly influenced by Iran, giving Tehran some clout in the country. Seeking "stability," Iran has sometimes supported the radical Taliban; at other times worked against it. Recently, Iran hired Afghan Shiites to fight in Syria and Iraq against IS fighters.

THE GOAL: To maintain regional influence.

■ SAUDI ARABIA

Riyadh has long had good relations with Sunni Afghan groups including the Taliban. They helped them expel the Russians who occupied the country in 1979, and expect them to resist any spread of Iranian power.

THE GOAL: To avert Iranian power.

ISRAEL AND PALESTINE

■ IRAN

The Palestinian enclave of Gaza has long received Iranian support, originally through the militant Islamic Jihad group. More recently, backing has come through Hamas, the Islamic resistance movement that seized control of Gaza from the Palestinian Authority of Mahmoud Abbas in 2007.

THE GOAL: To promote armed resistance against Israel.

■ SAUDI ARABIA

Riyadh backs President Abbas, who controls the West Bank and is attempting to reassert authority in Gaza. Saudi policies here and in the region, tend to align Riyadh with Tel Aviv – both oppose Iranian power.

THE GOAL: To counter the spread of Iranian power.

LEBANON

■ IRAN

Lebanon's Shiites have long had connections to Iran and its religious institutions. Hezbollah, the powerful Shia fighting force, was trained by Iran in the 1980s. Through it, Iran enjoys considerable political influence.

THE GOAL: To maintain Iranian sway right to the Mediterranean.

■ SAUDI ARABIA

To offset the Iranian-backed Hezbollah's might, Saudi Arabia supports the political movement of Saad Hariri, a moderate Sunni with whom many Lebanese Christians are comfortable.

THE GOAL: To reduce the Shia power.

EGYPT

Cairo supports the Saudi-led coalition against Yemeni rebels. Washington has rewarded Egypt by expediting the release of all armaments destined for Cairo that had been withheld pending Washington's acceptance of the new Egyptian administration.

SAUDI ARABIA

Saudi Arabia fears the spread of Iran's Shiism, a doctrine Saudis view as heretical and not deserving even to be referred to as a branch of Islam.

BAHRAIN

■ IRAN

Popular uprisings against the Sunni al-Khalifa monarchy in Bahrain in 2011 sought greater rights for the majority Shia population. Tehran likely supported the uprising but not overtly. Many Bahraini Shiites look to Iran for guidance, and 15 per cent even speak Farsi at home.

THE GOAL: To broaden Iranian influence in the Gulf.

■ SAUDI ARABIA

Faced with the Shia challenge to the Sunni al-Khalifa monarchy, Saudi Arabia led an assault by forces of the Gulf Co-operation Council to restore order and safeguard the Bahraini royals.

THE GOAL: To keep the Shiites at bay.

PAKISTAN

Pakistan's parliament voted unanimously April 10 to say "no" to a Saudi request for troops to join the coalition against the Houthis in Yemen. Islamabad is mindful of tensions between Pakistan's majority Sunni and minority Shia populations, as well as its rocky relations with Iran. Saudi Arabia, however, will continue to push Pakistan to join.

YEMEN

■ IRAN

Houthi rebels, members of the Zaidi Shia sect, have wrested control of Yemen from Sunni President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi, who sought refuge in Saudi Arabia. Iranian naval vessels have sailed to the area, where Egyptian and Saudi ships already are deployed.

THE GOAL: To restore former dictator Ali Abdullah Saleh, a Zaidi.

■ SAUDI ARABIA

Riyadh assembled a coalition of Gulf States, Egypt, Jordan and Sudan to repel the rebels, said to be backed by Iran. Scores of fighter jets have bombed Houthi positions and thousands of troops are preparing to invade. Washington is providing logistical support and expediting weapons' delivery.

THE GOAL: To restore Sunni President Hadi.

□ IRAQ

Iraq's Shia Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi told U.S. President Barack Obama April 15 that the battle unfolding in Yemen will engulf the entire region unless Saudi Arabia is stopped.

CONTROL OF THE STRAITS

■ Egypt moved quickly to secure the Bab el-Mandeb Straits, gateway to the Red Sea and Egypt's vitally important Suez Canal. Its naval vessels reportedly shelled Houthi positions in Yemen.

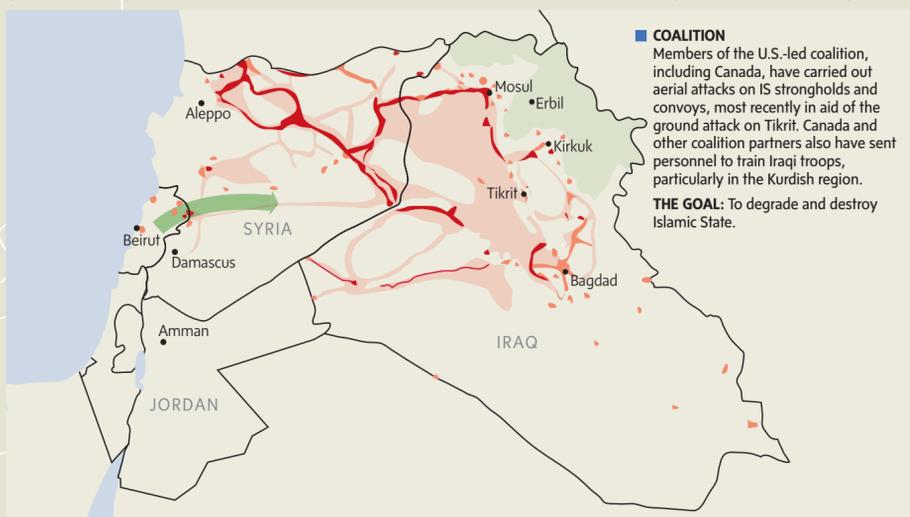
■ Iran has deployed a destroyer and another naval vessel to the area where Saudi vessels normally patrol.

■ The United States has condemned Iran's support for Houthi rebels in Yemen and is providing the Saudi-led coalition with intelligence and logistical support as well as expediting weapons' delivery to coalition countries.

■ COALITION

Members of the U.S.-led coalition, including Canada, have carried out aerial attacks on IS strongholds and convoys, most recently in aid of the ground attack on Tikrit. Canada and other coalition partners also have sent personnel to train Iraqi troops, particularly in the Kurdish region.

THE GOAL: To degrade and destroy Islamic State.



IRAQ

■ IRAN

Iraqi Shia militias are supplied, trained and sometimes led by members of Iran's Revolutionary Guard. They've driven Islamic State forces from central parts of Iraq including the strategic city of Tikrit. The Shia militias' ruthless campaign has scared many Sunnis into leaving the country.

THE GOAL: To safeguard a strongly Shia government in Iraq.

■ SAUDI ARABIA

Riyadh has long supported Sunni religious movements in Iraq and Saudi-based Wahhabi extremists have raised money and volunteers for *jihadi* groups, including Islamic State, that waged sectarian battles with Iraqi Shiites.

THE GOAL: To safeguard Sunni Iraqis and prevent Shia domination.

■ ISLAMIC STATE

IS forces swept across Iraq in 2014, coming close to the Iranian border, drawing Iran into battle inside Iraq. Recently IS fighters were forced to retreat from Tikrit and some central Iraqi districts, but have launched a new assault in Anbar province.

THE GOAL: To establish a Sunni caliphate in as much of Iraq as possible.

