

# Iran's Land Bridge to the Mediterranean: Possible Routes and Ensuing Challenges

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## Iranian Objectives in the Region

Tehran has a number of overlapping strategic goals in its quest to reestablish a secure land bridge from Iran to Syria and Lebanon – a link that was severed following the onset of the Syrian civil war, and from 2014, damaged by the loss of large areas of Iraqi territory to the Islamic State. Iranian objectives include: road and rail access along secure main supply routes (MSRs) controlled by Iran, its Shiite proxies, and axis of resistance allies Hezbollah and the Assad regime, from Iran to the Mediterranean coasts of Syria and Lebanon. This is an Iran-dominated Shiite Crescent, encompassing Iran, Iraq, Syria, Yemen, the Gulf, Red Sea, Bab-el-Mandab, the northern Indian Ocean, and encircling the GCC states.

Iran also needs MSRs to complement its vulnerable air bridge to its allies: as an alternative to sea routes; for long term economic domination of the region; to circumvent sanctions via third countries; and with Moscow, to supplant the United States as the preeminent actor in the Middle East. The land bridge is likewise the key element in Iran's forward defense and strategic deterrence of Israel, as Tehran seeks to develop its ballistic, cruise missile, and nuclear capabilities. If unchecked, this arguably presents the most serious long term existential threat to Israel and other regional states, given current circumstances whereby:<sup>1</sup>

- a. Iran and Russia have established increasing dominance over the Assad regime.
- b. Hezbollah exercises increasing influence over Lebanon's political and security structures.

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- c. Iran seeks a second front in southeast Syria opposite Israel in the Golan Heights and aims to pressure Jordan from two directions.
- d. Hezbollah has greater numbers of rockets, precision missiles, and UAVs than in the 2006 war, and is able to threaten Israeli population centers and infrastructure, potentially with WMD, and deter attacks on Iranian strategic facilities.
- e. The axis has established advanced weapon production facilities in Lebanon and Syria.
- f. Hezbollah and Syria can threaten military and civilian shipping, onshore/offshore infrastructure, and aircraft with long range anti-ship missiles and SAMs.
- g. Iranian influence is present in Gaza.
- h. Israeli/US/NATO operations over and adjacent to Syria are complicated by Russian anti-access area denial (A2/AD) capabilities, which benefit the axis while threatening the Bosphorus and Suez choke points.
- i. The Russian military is supporting axis forces in Syria to reestablish MSRs.
- j. Iran could deploy SAMs such as S-300 or future clones to protect MSRs.
- k. Axis activities are complemented by sophisticated cyber capabilities.
- l. A totally Iran-dominated Iraq would result in Tehran controlling the world's largest proven oil and second largest gas reserves. This is in addition to the billions Iran has received under the JCPOA.

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However, there are a number of elements likely to impede progress and provide obstacles to achievement of Iran's objectives, possibly leading Iran to overstretch its capabilities and those of allies and proxies. These include: the topography of proposed MSRs, human terrain and religious issues, competing objectives and capabilities of global, regional, and sub-state actors, and not least, axis military and financial resources. This article will examine the most plausible direct MSR options for Iran and examine the complicating factors associated with each potential course.

## Land Bridge vs. Sea and Air Routes

While Tehran may be interested in establishing port facilities on the Mediterranean coast, for the foreseeable future Iran will not have the naval capacity to ensure protection of long sea routes to Syria and is vulnerable to Israeli and US military power; previous weapons shipments to Hezbollah have been intercepted.

Iran's use of an air bridge for power projection and logistics is vulnerable for several reasons. Airlines operating as "IRGC Air" are threatened by terrorism sanctions the Trump administration imposed on the entire group in October 2017. This could prompt difficulties in obtaining spare parts and technical assistance for US-manufactured aircraft and parts and foreign aircraft; reluctance of foreign companies to do business with IRGC-associated airlines and entities; recourse to old, dangerous-to-maintain airframes; loss of international status; and reverberations throughout Iran's economy, given the pervasiveness of IRGC business activities. Even before new sanctions, Iran's aviation purchases risked violating the JCPOA's prohibition on selling aircraft for military purposes with the possibility of their being used to support terror activities, sanctions evasion, nuclear proliferation, and war crimes – though prior to October, these were ignored because of complex political and commercial factors and the potential to undo the JCPOA. The key vulnerability of the air bridge, however, is the ability of external actors like the US, GCC, or Israel to intercept Iranian/Syrian military and pseudo-civilian aircraft during conflict. In contrast, one principal advantage of land MSRs is the ability to move bigger loads more cheaply. Another is Iraqi or Syrian flagging of convoys, making it much harder militarily and politically to identify and destroy legitimate targets; yet another advantage lies in obviating potential airport denial in Syria and Lebanon.

Tehran has also posited a rail link to the Mediterranean. Whether through the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) or from the Gulf through central Iraq, the project would be subject to the range of factors listed below, as well as financing and sanctions issues. Both Iraqi and Syrian rail networks are dilapidated and have been subject to insurgent activity. Roads are easier and cheaper to repair/circumvent, while railways have advantages of capacity and speed.

## Northern Route from Iran through the KRI to Syria

Achievement of a secure route through the KRI via Mosul and Tal Afar to Syrian territory controlled by the YPG (Syrian Kurdish group) and PKK is problematic (see map). First, the orange, yellow, and red MSRs traverse the rugged Zagros Mountains on both sides of the Iran-Iraq border, presenting choke points and environmental hazards during winter and Ramadan. The Zagros range, vital ground for Iran, is seeing renewed insurgency from armed Kurdish groups opposed to Tehran.<sup>2</sup> The red MSR passes through the Qandil region stronghold of the PKK and PJAK (the Iranian Kurd sister group). It is not just immediate local force protection that concerns Iran; the Zagros represent a key element of Tehran's control of disparate ethnic and religious groups, a region that it has long struggled to subjugate and a black hole sucking in military resources needed elsewhere. External support to Iran's Kurds would complicate the situation considerably. Another source of threat (ironically) in the Zagros is the Islamic State, which may have made inroads with local Iranian Kurds traditionally associated with al-Qaeda and projected into northern Iraq from Iranian sanctuaries.

### *Enlisting the PKK*

In November 2016, Quds Force commander Qassem Soleimani approached the PKK, which holds vital terrain around Sinjar and the Syrian border. This ploy likely aimed to have the PKK rein in PJAK operations inside Iran and secure access through PKK/YPG territory in Syria to the Assad regime. The Syrian Kurds might in turn receive a westward outlet through the KRI.<sup>3</sup> However, this ran afoul of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) in Erbil, which resisted Iranian pressure to act as a conduit to Syria and experienced a tense stand-off with the PKK/YPG and affiliated Yezidi units around Sinjar, and aroused consternation in Ankara, the KDP's ally against the PKK. Turkish concerns were exacerbated by the prospect of Iranian-backed Iraqi Shiite Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) entering the Turkmen town of Tal Afar, with Ankara threatening intervention, heightening Iraqi-Turkish and Turkish-Iranian tensions. The long term disputes between the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and Baghdad, put on hold during the fight against IS, are now coming to the fore while exploited by Tehran.



### *Turkish Concerns*

Recognizing that the red MSR passes through areas of northern Iraq that Ankara considers within its historical sphere of influence, recent Iranian overtures to Turkey have reiterated common ground, such as opposition to the PKK/YPG/PJAK and de jure KRI independence, which both fear for domestic Kurdish reasons. Tehran has cleverly exploited the referendum crisis to align Ankara with its goals in Iraq. These are: preventing KRI independence, decoupling energy-rich Erbil from Ankara and Washington, tightening control over Baghdad, and consolidating MSRs through northern Iraq. While Ankara was broadly supportive of a de facto KDP-dominated KRG, historically Tehran has been closer to the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) in Sulaymaniyah and has used the crisis to exacerbate intra-Kurdish tensions and secure Peshmerga withdrawal from vital ground it seeks to dominate.<sup>4</sup> Tehran has regularly engaged in meddling and military operations affecting the KRI and now seeks to split the autonomous region further, control KRI border crossings, and gain access to KRI airports. A unified, de jure KRG threatens to make use of northern MSRs much more problematic for Iran, together with the proximity of Turkish and US military power, Western and Israeli support to the KRG, and long term Sunni insurgent significant activity (SIGACTs).<sup>5</sup> The orange MSR passes through relatively secure PUK territory.

### *Problems with Northern Syria*

Across the border from Sinjar, the red MSR presents a multitude of problems for Iran. First are long term PKK/PYD objectives<sup>6</sup> in seeking to join the divided Syrian-Kurd cantons they control, aspirations to a Kurdish Mediterranean port, and the drive to link up with PKK/PJAK territory in the Qandil Region of northeastern Iraq. US support to the YPG-dominated Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), including ground forces and airpower, if only as long as anti-Islamic State operations last, is another factor. The Turkey-PKK/YPG conflict in northern Syria and Iraq, together with Iranian-Turkish competition in those areas and empowerment of local proxies, increases the risks of military confrontation where spheres of influence collide, despite current alignment against Iraq's Kurds.

A fundamental dichotomy of Tehran-Ankara relations is that the former seeks the preservation of the Assad regime, while the latter has supported rebel groups and allowed Sunni jihadists to cross Turkish territory en route to Iraq and Syria, complicating Iran's ground link to axis allies. Ankara

has been alarmed by perceived Iranian acquiescence toward Kurdish autonomous zones along Turkey's southern border, the influx of Syrian refugees, and threats to Sunnis and Turkmen. Ankara sees Iran trying to reestablish a Persian Empire with Shiite characteristics in formerly Ottoman provinces of Iraq and Syria. It views use of Shiite militias to maintain Alawite minority rule as stimulating Sunni insurgency, including terrorism affecting Turkey. For its part, Iran has carried the military and financial burden of supporting a key ally and earning the enmity of much of the Sunni world in the process.

### *Balancing the PKK*

Tehran must carefully balance the PKK/YPG as local tactical allies in Iraq and Syria, against a source of long term strategic threat, given Iran's own Kurdish problem as well as a thorn in relations with Ankara. Even though Iran and the PKK share a short term interest in defeating the Islamic State, long term interests do not align. Iran seeks to preserve the existing order, the PKK/YPG to overturn it. Territorial gains, US and Russian support, and Assad's relative weakness gave the PKK/YPG confidence that any Ankara-Tehran cooperation against them could be neutralized. That and pursuit of further territorial objectives has already put them on a collision course with Turkey and Iran in Syria and northern Iraq as Islamic State territory shrinks. In military terms, Iran is faced with US-supported YPG/Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), plus Turkish airpower and ground units in close proximity to axis forces. Additional challenges are the Islamic State, as well as rebel activity, especially in Idlib and Homs.

### *The Arab-Kurd Trigger Line and Islamic State Regeneration*

The blue MSR, snaking from the Iranian border town of Qasr-e Shirin northwest toward Kirkuk and Mosul, initially traverses relatively secure PUK territory, but then essentially follows the Arab-Kurd "trigger-line," areas subject for the foreseeable future to ongoing Islamic State and Sunni insurgent activity.<sup>7</sup> Ironically, this was also an Iranian MSR for projection of Sunni terrorists into northern Iraq, both during and after the US occupation, and has seen regular SIGACTs since then. At the time of this writing, Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) and Iranian-dominated PMF are seizing vital ground along the whole length of the trigger-line stretching from the Iranian border to Sinjar, to secure Iranian use of this MSR.

Like the blue MSR, the pink and turquoise routes pass through Diyala Province, which recent scholarly analysis indicates could be an area for Islamic State regeneration after the loss of territory elsewhere in Iraq. Northern Diyala is likely to be a focal point for Islamic State efforts to exploit Arab-Kurd, Shiite-Sunni, and Kurdish-Iranian seams. It could also become a principal IS safe haven, together with Tarmiyah, the Jallam Desert, Hamrin Mountains, Iranian border, and eastern approaches to Baghdad.<sup>8</sup> Analysis indicates that Diyala is currently seeing “a more intense insurgency than at any time since al-Qaida in Iraq’s heyday in the province in 2007-2008.” Significantly, in both Diyala and Salah al-Din, the deployment of non-local Shiite PMF coincided with “the strong and near-immediate bounce-back of the insurgency to 2013 levels.”<sup>9</sup>

### Resurgent Iraqi Shiite Nationalism

Iranian military planners may have more confidence in the green and pink MSRs, as these pass through Shiite-majority areas of southern and southeastern Iraq, where Sunni jihadist activity has had far less impact.<sup>10</sup> Potential problems derive from intra-Iraqi Shiite politics and, as viewed from Tehran and Qom, resurgent Iraqi Shiite nationalism affecting Iran’s regional ambitions. Muqtada al-Sadr’s courting of Saudi Arabia and his maverick existence as a third force in Iraq’s Shiite community are deeply troubling for Tehran. Sadr has called for the disbandment of the PMF, the essential and largely Iranian-controlled proxy force and power broker in Baghdad, which Iran has trained, supplied, and deployed across Iraq and Syria to fight the Islamic State, crush Sunni populations, reestablish MSRs, and bolster axis forces.

Iran has clipped al-Sadr’s wings before, but the Shiite leader should not be underestimated as a populist nationalist cleric able to cause problems, despite the weakening of his movement and splitting away of various pro-Iran groups. He launched a 2004 uprising in Baghdad and towns across the Shiite south, denied the Baghdad-Fallujah MSR to American use, took on the Iraqi army and coalition forces in Basra in March 2008, stormed Baghdad’s international zone in 2016, and put thousands of supporters on the streets in 2017. If one Shiite cleric can defy Iran, then others can too. Interestingly, Iraq’s ambassador to the United States recently highlighted the need to redeploy ISF back to Basra, likely to counter local forces and regionalism.<sup>11</sup>



Tehran must also factor in Ayatollah Ali Sistani and “the fierce debate between the [Iraqi] Najaf and [Iranian] Qom schools.”<sup>12</sup> The former represents Shiite opposition to clergy in political power; the latter represents the *velayat-e faqih* doctrine that gives supreme state power to a religious figure. While the division gradually widened with Iraq’s descent to instability, it now encompasses detailed issues of state politics. Thus Qom, Najaf, and Sadr all compete for the hearts and minds of Iraq’s Shiites, and both Sadr and Sistani command loyalty from substantial armed groups. Sistani’s camp has also called for PMF disbandment, citing their use as Iranian attempts to expand power and influence in Iraq.

### ISF and PMF Fault Lines

The PMF, together with the ISF’s Iranian-dominated interior ministry and army units, are at the heart of a larger contest for power inside Iraq’s divided Shiite camp. The winners will likely control the government and guide the post-Islamic State reconstruction and the very nature of Iraq’s identity. Key challenges involving the ISF and PMF will determine Iraq’s political and security futures.<sup>13</sup> Both contain three distinct factions, with respective allegiances to Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the Supreme Leader of Iran; Sistani; and al-Sadr. Both are central to the growing intra-Shiite power struggle, pitting pro-Iran figures such as former Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki, who seeks to use them as a vehicle to return to office, against Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi, who is trying to maintain power and who advocates controlling the PMF and Sadr and Sistani, who are wary of Iranian influence.

Tehran wants strong PMF allies to curb the Iraqi state were Baghdad ever to pursue anti-Iran policies. Some pro-Khamenei PMF leaders have attempted to assume a political role to leverage popularity to win votes in Iraq’s 2018 elections, or could be used in a Baghdad coup scenario. A crucial factor that will help determine who gains the upper hand will be whether the PMF are integrated into ISF loyal to Baghdad and used to reinforce the political status quo, or if they remain a separate parallel force used to increase Tehran’s control over Iraq. Pro-Khamenei PMF are supportive of fighting in Syria under the Quds Force to achieve Iran’s strategic objectives, while the Sadr and Sistani factions are opposed to Iraqi Shia fighting abroad. Another fault line is the perception of popular protests against the government’s inability to provide basic services, with pro-Iran PMF groups calling for a heavy handed response, Sistani showing sympathy,

and Sadr's active involvement; yet another is the pro-Iran camp's control of PMF purse strings.

### From Baghdad to the Border

The magenta and green MSRs run from Baghdad through Iraq's Anbar Province to the Iraq-Syria border crossings of al-Qaim/Abu Kamal and al-Walid/al-Tanf, respectively; they are likely to present significant force protection challenges for Iran, its proxies, and allies for the foreseeable future. The open western desert spaces bordering Syria in Anbar and Ninawa Provinces are large, porous, and difficult to control. Despite successes in the ISF's 2015 Anbar campaign, there are many reasons to be concerned about potential Islamic State resurgence in Anbar.<sup>14</sup> The proximity of Syria and the difficulty of securing the border mean that IEDs and heavy weapons may continue to move into Iraq as long as the Syrian conflict continues. The Islamic State has been mounting hit-and-run rural insurgency in Anbar, using the ungoverned spaces to mount attacks where mainly non-local Shiite PMF and their Iranian advisors are deployed to control roads to Syria. Analysis suggests that "embedded advisor and intelligence cells" will be needed for years to come to maintain the tempo of counterinsurgency operations in Anbar, Salah al-Din, and the Baghdad belts."<sup>15</sup>

### Syria Confliction

Across the Syrian border, Russian-supported axis formations are in close proximity to US-backed SDF forces around al-Tanf, Raqqa, and Deir ez-Zor.

The Trump administration needs a comprehensive regional strategy toward Iran that mobilizes key US allies; collectively, they far surpass the Iran/axis-Russia alliance in terms of military and financial resources.

Despite the capture of the latter and the crossing of the Euphrates, Iran and its allies face the difficult task of capturing vital ground, and holding towns and key terrain along the Euphrates River valley, Iraqi border crossings, and vast interior spaces of Syria. The axis offensive into Deir ez-Zor Province is heavily dependent upon Russian air support and Russia's negotiation of de-escalation zones that freed up pro-regime troops. The challenges posed by US air dominance and confliction were highlighted in June 2017, when the US air force shot down a Syrian warplane and Iranian drone, and in September,

when Russian aircraft engaged SDF across the Euphrates from Deir ez-Zor. The US attacked pro-Syrian regime forces, including Iraqi Shiite militias,

near al-Tanf close to the tri-border area of Syria, Iraq, and Jordan. There is an ever-present risk of armed contacts as axis forces continue operations towards the Iraqi border.

### Israeli Red Lines

In Syria's far west, Hezbollah, regime forces, and the Lebanese Army have successfully conducted operations through August 2017 to clear the Qalamoun region of the Islamic State and al-Qaeda-linked groups. The axis has been less successful in southwestern Syria in opening MSR to the Golan (black MSR), as Israel has used a combination of kinetic and non-kinetic means and deterrence to enforce red lines regarding the proximity of Iranian proxies and allies with sophisticated weaponry. Israel remains wary of de-escalation zones, and its strategic depth is shrinking. Observers will be closely monitoring future US involvement in Syria and Iraq (if any) and wondering whether Iran will be left to fill completely the void left by the Islamic State. Another question is whether this results in an Israeli-axis conflagration (in the absence of plausible US-Iran or Saudi-Iran showdowns), and if Russia will constrain or enable axis activities that threaten Israel. In a conflict scenario, Moscow might protect axis forces in Syria that are vital to support Damascus and thus Russia's position.

### Conclusions and Recommendations

Recommendations concerning restraint of Tehran's ambitions in Syria and Iraq have recently been recently explored elsewhere;<sup>16</sup> this paper adds to these with some specific courses to counter Iranian power projection via MSRs.

- a. Overall, the Trump administration needs a comprehensive regional strategy toward Iran mobilizing key US allies; collectively, they far surpass the Iran/axis-Russia alliance in terms of military and financial resources. US military credibility and leadership are critical. Tehran has long acted on its own strategy and arguably poses a greater long term threat to the US and its allies than Sunni jihadism, while stimulating the conditions that drive insurgency; watch for al-Qaeda exploiting the decline of the Islamic State. The US should lay down red lines (as it did with Syrian WMD followed up with cruise missile strikes) and use its footprint and airpower to curtail Iran's power projection, control of Iraq and Syria and Iranian/Shiite/Alawite sectarian policies that fuel Sunni alienation. The US needs to demonstrate that it is "the strongest tribe."<sup>17</sup>

- b. The US should carry out strikes on Iranian personnel and associated designated terrorists for attacks on Americans and allies.
- c. Israel/US/GCC should consider covert support to Iranian-Kurd Peshmerga and other select forces opposed to Tehran, so as to impose costs for malicious behavior and complicate power projection. If Iran favors operating in a grey zone short of conventional conflict, then this can work both ways. If Tehran is preoccupied with internal security and regime survival, it will have fewer resources available and less inclination towards destabilizing regional activities.
- d. The same logic can be applied in Syria, with new support for non-Islamist rebel groups, increased pressure on Assad over war crimes and WMD and on Russia, Tehran, and Damascus over weapons transfers to Hezbollah.
- e. Israel should consider supporting the YPG if US assistance ends. This would provide leverage against the axis, stymie Iranian plans for an MSR through northern Syria and Iraq, and counter Turkish support to Hamas.
- f. The US should draw an immediate red line against offensive Iraqi operations towards the KRI, backed up with military force. US armor and heavy weapons used against the Kurds should be threatened with destruction and the Peshmerga provided with the means to defend themselves. In the long term, an independent Kurdistan would make a stable ally, deny Tehran a route to the Mediterranean, and present both Iran and Iraq with insecure flanks.
- g. Support for the Abadi camp in Baghdad should be developed against pro-Iran elements. Military and other assistance should be leveraged toward integration of PMF groups into the ISF, with disbandment of all existing pro-Tehran units. Iranian-inspired power shifts must be countered and the detrimental effects to Baghdad of having designated terrorists in the ISF highlighted. Saudi/GCC elements should reach out to anti-Iran Shiite and Sunni leaders.
- h. Reconstruction assistance in Iraq and Syria can be used to counter Iranian influence.
- i. The US and allies should continue to spotlight Iran as a dangerous, destabilizing, proliferating, subversive state sponsor of terror across the region and globe.
- j. New terrorism sanctions against the IRGC and affiliated individuals and entities should include a terror designation. Sanctions should be

- applied to the Artesh (regular armed forces), given their involvement in Syria and presence in Iran's economy. Any and all sanctions on Iran and the axis make power projection and malign activities more problematic.
- k. The US should revoke export licenses for US aircraft and parts destined for Iran.
  - l. The international community needs to pursue inspections of Iranian military facilities and undeclared sites, as well as investigation of a possible parallel nuclear program. Increased pressure is required to curtail ballistic and cruise missile projects. The JCPOA should be tightened, leaving to Iran the hard task of returning to crippling sanctions.
  - m. Given that that the Lebanese political and military leadership are all Hezbollah-aligned, military assistance to the Lebanese Armed Forces should be suspended (as Saudi Arabia has done). Existing sanctions against Hezbollah must be strictly enforced, sources of its global financing targeted further, its terror designation among certain US allies tightened, and it should be designated as a transnational criminal organization.
  - n. Threats posed by axis and Russian A2/AD need to be framed in Israeli/US/NATO/EU/regional terms and dealt with accordingly.

## Notes

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