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Iranian Stakes in Syria

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Against the backdrop of its military involvement in Syria, Iran has taken a series of steps since 2014 to reinforce its standing in Syria and Lebanon and enhance its military preparedness there, as well as that of its proxies – first and foremost Hezbollah. These steps are of two types. One consists of steps designed to influence Syria’s internal situation and bind it to Iran for the long term, including economic agreements on reconstruction, resettlement of Shiites in Syria, introduction of Iranian religious and cultural values into the country, and establishment of Syrian Shiite militias modeled on Hezbollah in Lebanon. These steps are of great importance to Israel because they entrench and empower Iran’s position close to Israel’s border. The second type is of even greater significance for Israel, because they are meant inter alia to amplify the direct Iranian threat against it. Steps include the construction of strategic axes, e.g., the improved land corridor through Iraq that connects Iran with Syria and Lebanon; the convergence of Iranian, Iraqi, and Syrian railroad tracks that will link the Persian Gulf with the Mediterranean; and the use of the Syrian seaport in Latakia, which will represent an Iranian foothold on the Mediterranean shore. Other steps of this type include the manufacture of high quality weapon systems for Hezbollah and their transfer to the organization. Any external entity trying to stop Iran’s penetration of the domestic Syrian arena will encounter great difficulty. At the same time, Iran has yet to find an effective response to Israel’s aerial attacks on Iranian and Shiite targets in Syria and Iraq aimed at blocking the construction of the land corridor. Nonetheless, Iran is liable to craft a response with enough deterrence to be of concern.

There is no doubt that for the long term, Iran hopes that the military forces it sent to Syria remain there, including Hezbollah and other Shiite militia units, as well as the Revolutionary Guards and Quds Force personnel that oversee them. The ongoing Iranian/Shiite military presence in Syria is of great strategic importance to the Islamic Republic. First, and most importantly, while Bashar al-Assad’s regime may have stabilized, its survival is by no means guaranteed, and the Islamic State is liable to return and endanger Iran’s interests in Syria and Iraq. Therefore, leaving troops in Syria under Iranian command is intended to preserve and reinforce the Assad regime’s connection with Iran and its dependence on Tehran in future challenges to its stability. In addition,

Iran seeks to protect its standing in and around Syria should the Assad regime be replaced.

Second, Iran wants to use its presence in Syria to magnify the threat to Israel via Hezbollah and other Shiite militias and to expand the front with Israel from Lebanon to Syria. In this sense, for Iran, its military deployment in Syria is the vanguard against its enemies, far from its own borders. Third, Iran's presence in Syria enhances its influence on neighboring Iraq and Lebanon, which is important to Iran because of their large Shiite populations. Syria links Iran, via Iraq, to Lebanon and the Mediterranean Sea. This connection allows Iran to strengthen the Shiite sphere, while continuously improving Hezbollah's military capabilities. Intervention in Syria allows Iran to display before the Sunni world a multinational Shiite force with combat experience that can be deployed in other locations important to the Iranian regime.

To a great extent, the key to the continued presence of the Iranian/Shiite forces in Syria is in Assad's hands. So far, Iran has succeeded in leaving its troops on Syrian soil despite the pressure to remove them, by claiming that its intervention in Syria was a response to a direct invitation from the Assad regime. Even Russia has admitted that it will be hard to remove these troops from Syria as long as Assad wants them to remain. And in fact, Assad is signaling that he wants and needs their presence for a variety of reasons. Assad owes his political survival to Iran (as well as to Russia). Syria has begun a difficult, complex, and long process of reconstruction, which depends on extensive Iranian economic and military aid. The Assad regime still has enemies liable to endanger it; resisting them would involve Iranian help, including the troops already on Syrian ground. At the same time, Iran has presumably understood that the tide may turn. Assad still needs Iran, but less than he did four or five years ago, because the major threat to the survival of his regime is for the most part over. Furthermore, Assad is liable to realize that the cost of a long term presence of Iranian forces in his country outweighs any benefit, partly because it repeatedly places him in conflict with Israel and sparks friction in his relationship with Russia. Syria will likely continue to suffer external pressure from Israel and the United States – perhaps Russia and Turkey as well – to remove the Iranian forces. Also, Iran cannot ignore the possibility that the Assad regime, despite its current stability, might not survive in the long term and may be replaced by a regime that would prefer to keep its distance from Iran.

These are the reasons Iran decided, apparently some years ago, not to make do with providing Syria with economic and military assistance, including military involvement. Iran's intention was and remains to exploit Syria's upheaval and destruction to try to generate as much influence as possible on several ethnic and economic components in the Syrian system, thus forging an indissoluble tie between Syria and Iran, independent of

Assad and his regime. Iran's socioeconomic penetration of Syria has thus become a central component of Iran's Middle East policy.

The Iranian-Syrian Agreements

Iran's extensive military support for Syria since 2012, and especially since 2014, was apparently rooted in a set of signed agreements meant to regulate Iran's military involvement in Syria and the extensive economic aid it provided. The full content of these agreements has never been revealed, but there is no doubt that the assistance played a key role in the survival of Assad's regime and the beginning of its recovery. Since 2018, when it became clear that the regime was no longer on the brink of collapse, more general information emerged about the bilateral agreements that would affect the nature of a future Iran-Syria relationship. At the same time, some of these agreements, primarily those related to military issues – including those that presumably involve the conflict with Israel – have apparently not been revealed, even in general terms.

In August 2018 and March 2019, Iran and Syria signed another set of agreements relating to increased military cooperation and the reconstruction of Syria's military forces and infrastructures. These agreements confirmed the continued presence of "Iranian military advisers" in Syria – a formulation apparently meant for the Revolutionary Guards, the Quds Force, and assorted Shiite militias. In 2018 and 2019, the two also signed a series of economic agreements on Iranian investments in Syria, construction and reconstruction in areas destroyed in the fighting, Iranian oil provision to Syria, transportation (particularly trains), and the access to quarries.¹

Both sides are greatly interested in expanding their military and economic ties. From Syria's perspective, Iran provides it with the largest amount of economic assistance it has seen in years and is unmatched by others. Iran's economic support has been especially important to Syria in recent years as it begins to tackle the destruction resulting from the civil war. It is therefore unlikely that the Assad regime will imperil its relations with Iran despite the pressure exerted on it. As for the Iranian regime, the economic aid it extends is a major way to bind itself to Syria and entrench its influence from Iran to the Mediterranean. Moreover, given the economic sanctions on Iran and its own difficult economy, as well as the domestic criticism in Iran over the aid given to Syria, it is important to the Islamic Republic to be able to demonstrate that its ties with Syria net actual economic value, partly by means of Iran's investments there.

Resettling Shiites in Syria

One of the most significant steps Iran has taken – in coordination with the Assad regime – is the resettlement of Shiite families in Syria at the expense of the Sunni population. This move was enabled by the confluence of several factors: a mutual Syrian-Iranian

interest in changing Syria's demography in favor of Alawites and Shiites; the opportunities that emerged following the extensive damage caused by the civil war, including the displacement of millions of Sunnis from their homes; and the presence of Iranian and Shiite forces in Syria.

Clearly, the relatively small number of Shiites in Syria – about 1 percent of the total population – will not effect a dramatic change in the overall demographic makeup of the nation. Therefore, Iran seems to be trying to change the balance in certain areas and tilt the population composition to favor the Shiites. There are reports that Iran is especially invested in relocating Shiites to the region between Damascus and Homs to strengthen its hold on western Syria and the regions with access to Lebanon, thus giving Hezbollah an eastern rear.² To this end, Iran is now encouraging Iraqi Shiite families, the families of Revolutionary Guards fighters, and the families of the various Shiite militias to move, and is resettling them in the greater Damascus area and areas in eastern Syria that were abandoned by Sunni residents.

To encourage Shiite population growth in Syria, Iran is providing money, food, public services, and free education. Iranian Shiite militias have seized control of mosques and holy sites in eastern and central Syria. The Iranians have opened schools where the language of instruction is Persian and offer scholarships for studies in Iran.³ Iran may see Shiite emigration as fair exchange for the extensive backing it gave to the Assad regime in its darkest hour. For his part, Assad takes a positive view of the growth of the Shiite population in Syria, as this group can be expected to support his regime in times of unrest. Furthermore, the influx of Shiites is desirable in Syria because it brings humanitarian assistance and basic services to the population at the expense of Iran. In addition, some feel that the Assad regime is using Shiite resettlement in Syria to block the return of Sunni refugees to their homes.⁴

While the Syrian regime is apparently welcoming the Shiite immigrants, Sunni entities – and perhaps also Alawites loyal to the regime – are worried by the process. They are concerned about the change in the religious nature of the villages and neighborhoods settled by Shiites with Iranian financial help, and especially by the effect of the religious radicalism Iran is trying to introduce to these areas.⁵ Whatever the case, it is clear that the Shiite resettlement project in Syria, should it reach significant scope, will strengthen Iran's base of influence and concurrently that of Hezbollah in large parts of Syria.

The Syrian Hezbollah

When the Syrian civil war broke out, Iran conceived the idea of building a Shiite militia in Syria that would be strongly linked to the Islamic Republic in order to help Assad's regime. In the middle of 2012, Iran helped the regime construct local and regional

militias in many villages, and at the end of that year, Iran started to unite these southern Syrian militias into a Shiite military organization by means of Iranian advisors under the auspices of the Quds Force and the Revolutionary Guards, and with the help of the Lebanese Hezbollah and Iraqi militias. Iran provided the organization with manpower it had recruited in Shiite villages in Syria; it went on to train the organization and provide it with equipment and high salaries. The organization, called Brigade 313, was made up of Syrian Shiites and Alawites as well as Iraqi Shiites living in Syria, and included Shiite volunteers from Iran, Iraq, and Afghanistan. It was supposed to be incorporated into the Syrian army, or at least operate under its command.⁶

The organization's modus operandi and operational approach were greatly influenced by the Lebanese Hezbollah model – including positioning a cleric at the head of the organization – given the involvement of the Lebanese organization in building the Syrian organization and guiding their Syrian counterparts. Many details about the Syrian organization and its activities are lacking, but there is no doubt that the Syrian Hezbollah's primary military activity in its early years was connected to the fighting in Syria, including in the areas of Damascus, Aleppo, Kalmon, Tartus, and Latakia, as well as Homs and its environs and the Syrian-Jordanian border zone. However, at the same time that Iran encouraged the connection and coordination between the Syrian Hezbollah and other Shiite militias, especially the Lebanese Hezbollah and Iraqi Shiite militias, some of this fighting was conducted in cooperation with Assad regime forces and the Lebanese Hezbollah.

It is doubtful that Iran will deploy the Syrian Hezbollah similarly to the deployment of the Lebanese counterpart. The Lebanese organization is, to a large extent, independent, even if it bears some responsibility to the Lebanese government and in extreme situations might act on the basis of Iran's instruction even if contrary to the government's interests. The Syrian Hezbollah will be tied to Iran and its purpose will be to strengthen Iran's influence over Syria; nonetheless, it is apparently subordinate to the Syrian army, and thus Iran will likely not deploy it contrary to the interests of the Syrian regime.

Strategic Transportation Axes

Operating Iranian forces and Shiite militias in Syria and building up Hezbollah both in Lebanon and Syria greatly depend on the existence and maintenance of secure access from Iran to Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon. In recent years, this dependence has grown because of the Syrian civil war, the activities of Islamic State units in Syria and Iraq; the presence of US forces in eastern Syria; and above all, Israeli Air Force attacks on Iranian and Shiite militia targets, first in Syria and more recently in Iraq as well. Iranian efforts to confront these challenges focus on securing the land axis from Iran to Syria and Lebanon

through Iraq, connecting Iranian, Iraqi, and Syrian railroad tracks, and positioning in Syria's seaport of Latakia.

A new Syrian-Iraqi border crossing at al-Bukamal is scheduled to open at the end of 2019. This crossing is a critical point along the land corridor Iran seeks to construct from Iran, through Iraq, to Syria and Lebanon and the Mediterranean. This corridor is meant to allow the rapid transit of combat units, high quality weapons, and supplies for the Iranian and Shiite forces in Syria and, even more so, for Hezbollah buildup. Iran has never admitted that it intends the corridor to serve military needs, but the issue has been on its agenda since 2017. Iran means to control this corridor by using the Shiite militias stationed nearby after they repelled Islamic State units that operated in the area.

It is unclear how Iran intends to secure the forces and weapons traveling along the corridor. Israel has demonstrated its aerial and intelligence superiority regarding Iranian and Shiite targets, a capability that has left Iran without an effective response. Iran's concern that Israel might harm its troops and damage its systems using the corridor could well account for the fact that the corridor has been used only in a very limited fashion so far, especially since the summer of 2019 when Israel started striking at Iranian and Shiite targets located in Iraq. The transmit of Iranian military convoys through the corridor serves as an early warning system to Israel, providing it with more time to take action than do the aerial convoys. It may be that Iran is also worried about US strikes on convoys in the corridor, as the United States has troops stationed in eastern Syria.⁷

Therefore, it is possible that Iran might opt for a deterrent response to Israel, i.e., it might try to strike a heavy blow against Israel to deter it from continuing its aerial strikes on Iranian targets. It could be that the success of the attack on the Saudi oil installations, which has not yet seen a response, might encourage Iran to pursue this course. The extent to which the al-Bukamal border crossing may affect Iran's deliberations on sending military convoys down the land corridor remains an open question.

Concurrent with the opening of the border crossing, work on the railroad track from Shalamcheh in western Iran to Basra in southern Iraq was scheduled to begin in the fall of 2019. This is part of a project that is ultimately meant to connect the Gulf with the Mediterranean. Iran, Iraq, and Syria are currently discussing a railroad extending from Bandar Khomeini in southwest Iran to Latakia. Most of this project was already completed before the Syrian civil war, but large sections of the tracks were destroyed by shelling, and the laying of the additional tracks was delayed for eight years.⁸ Once the project is completed, the tracks will transport goods from Iran to Latakia, though it is safe to assume it will also be used to ferry weapons to Syria and Lebanon. It may be that in

Iran's estimate, Israel will find it difficult to strike trains for fear of large scale harm to civilians.

Moreover, Iran for years has sought to gain a foothold on the Mediterranean shore and have direct access to the sea, thus constructing an additional supply axis to Syria and maintaining rapid access to its Syrian ally by land, air, and water. Therefore, already in 2011, Iran asked Syria to supply it with port services in Tartus, Syria's second largest seaport. However, Russia, which has used the port in Tartus for many years, opposed the request. Once the Assad regime stabilized, the request resurfaced. In January 2019, the Syrian government agreed to put Latakia, north of Tartus, under an Iranian management company that is perhaps under the Revolutionary Guards starting October 2019. Again, Russia was opposed, not wanting an Iranian stronghold so close to its own naval base in Tartus and its air base in Hamimim, but this time the Assad regime ignored Russia's interests.

Building an Iranian stronghold in Latakia is an important development, because it is part of Iran's efforts to connect the Persian Gulf and western Iran with the Mediterranean Sea by road and train. Iranian functionaries have claimed that the Latakia port will be used to make naval oil shipments from Iran to Syria. But this is an obvious ruse, meant to camouflage the fundamental goal: creating yet another axis for shipping weapons to Hezbollah and Iranian and Shiite forces by sea and for supporting an Iranian presence on the Mediterranean for a time of need.⁹

Obstacles Confronting Iran

There is no doubt that Iran's efforts to forge a strong, long term bond with Syria have resulted in significant achievements. Still, the efforts face several serious difficulties that might neutralize these successes and even endanger those involved.

First, Israel is determined to prevent the establishment of the Iranian stronghold in Syria and is engaged in serious efforts to damage the military activities of Iran and the Shiite militias in Syria, and recently also in Iraq. A long series of air strikes, made possible by high quality intelligence, has damaged many Iranian and Shiite targets in Syria, leaving Iran – as of now, at least – without an effective response. However, despite the success of the airstrike, Iran has not given up its intention to build a significant, long term military base in Syria that would amplify the threat to Israel. Moreover, while Israel is taking active steps against Iranian military buildup, it has not yet developed an effective response to Iran's civil, economic, and religious penetration of Syria.

Second, the more Assad's regime stabilizes, the greater the disagreements between Russia and Iran. Some of these concern military and economic aspects of Iran's

penetration of Syria. For example, Russia tried to stop the construction of the Iranian stronghold in Latakia and pressured Syria – unsuccessfully – to prevent Syrian-Iranian economic agreements, such as the operation of mobile phone services and investments in phosphates.¹⁰

Third, within Syria itself there is opposition to Iran's presence, particularly on the part of Sunnis, but apparently also on the part of Alawite entities supporting the regime that oppose Iran's radical style of Islam. So far, these reservations have had no effect on Assad, who has demonstrated a strong commitment to Iran, thanks to its critical military aid and his expectation of more generous economic aid crucial to Syrian reconstruction. But in the long term, it is possible that Assad or a subsequent regime might conclude that Iran is more of a burden than an asset and will prefer to stop further Iranian penetration. Finally, there is also opposition in Iran to the investments in Syria. Iranian protest rallies of recent years have often been marked by "death to Syria" calls, expressing opposition to Iranian aid to Syria from those suffering from Iran's own dire economic situation, from Iran's military involvement in Syria, and from the loss of the billions of dollars invested in Syria. These protests have not changed the Iranian regime's Syria policy and have been quashed with relative ease. But should the Iranian economy continue to deteriorate even further and the protests renew with greater intensity, the regime will be hard pressed to continue its Syrian efforts.

Conclusion and Significance

Against the backdrop of its military involvement in Syria, Iran has taken a series of steps since 2014 to reinforce its standing and enhance military preparedness and that of its proxies in Syria and Lebanon. This goal reflects Iran's desire to fashion a bloc of nations of Shiite dominance stretching from western Afghanistan to Lebanon and the Mediterranean Sea. It reflects Iran's strategy of positioning its vanguard against its enemies far from its own western border, placing it instead in the Syrian-Lebanese sphere. These steps are also meant to bind the Syrian regime to Iran for the long term, even if at some point it is forced to withdraw its troops from Syria and/or if the Syrian regime collapses and is replaced.

These steps are of two types. One consists of steps designed to influence Syrian's domestic situation and bind it to Iran, and includes economic agreements on Syria's reconstruction to help Assad deal with the destruction he wrought on his nation. These agreements will also guarantee Iran's role in the reconstruction process, and include Iranian plans – which the Assad regime has accepted and even encourages – to relocate Shiite populations to Syria and introduce Iranian religious and cultural values there. As these all have to do with Syria's domestic situation, it is difficult for external parties,

including Israel, to stop or affect them to a significant degree, even though Iran's heightened role in Syria has negative ramifications for Israel.

The second type is of much greater significance for Israel, because these steps are meant, *inter alia*, to amplify the direct Iranian threat against it, especially reinforcing the capabilities of Hezbollah in Lebanon and those of other Shiite militias in Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq. These steps include the transfer of massive amounts of high quality weapons, particularly ballistic missiles, rockets, and anti-tank and anti-ship missiles, to Syria and Lebanon, and the establishment of manufacturing plants in Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq to produce and improve weapons. But the distance from Iran requires the Islamic Republic to build a secure system of strategic axes to guarantee their use and reduce disruption by hostile entities, first and foremost Israel. This system consists of three major components: the land corridor from Iran, through Iraq, to Syria and Lebanon; the convergence of Iranian, Iraqi, and Syrian railroad tracks to link Iran and the Persian Gulf with the Mediterranean; and the ability to use a Syrian port – in this case, Latakia – to grant Iran a foothold on the Mediterranean shore.

However, in constructing its strategic stronghold in Syria, Iran has encountered the Israeli obstacle. In most ways, Iran has so far not developed an adequate response to Israel's military edge in this confrontation. The roots of the problem lie in Iran's geographic distance from the Syrian arena, which makes it difficult for Iran to deploy its forces in the Syrian sphere, and Iran's inferior air force compared to Israel's. In light of this, the Iranian air force has not been involved at all in the Syrian arena. Furthermore, Iran's aerial defense is insufficiently effective, and Russia has not helped Iran prevent these attacks. Thus, the Israeli Air Force has essentially free rein to attack Syrian forces and Shiite militias in Syria. To date, Iran and its proxies have barely responded against Israeli targets.

What this means is that even if Iran manages to complete its planned system of axes, it will still face the same difficulty: the superiority of the Israeli Air Force and its proven ability to strike at important targets in Iran's transportation system thanks to precise, high quality intelligence. This is true also of the new components in the system – the railroad and the use of the port in Latakia. Iran will therefore have to try to construct new and more painful capabilities of response capable of deterring Israel from continuing its attacks.

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