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**"Alliance of Survivors": Iran and Syria and their Military-Technology Agreement**

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**Iran and Syria recently signed an agreement to expand military and technological collaboration. President Bashar al-Assad met with Mohammad Bagheri, Chief of Staff of Iran's Armed Forces, who came to Damascus for the signing ceremony, extended his support for the agreement, and declared that it reflects the high level of strategic and multi-dimensional ties between the countries. The agreement was formulated after many years of coordination and cooperation between Syria and Iran in the war against the rebels and the opposition in Syria, as well as attempts to intercept Israeli aerial attacks against Shiite axis forces in Syria, led by Iran. In a joint press conference, the Syrian Minister of Defense declared that the cooperation between the countries is excellent and ongoing, in spite of the increasing shared challenges confronting the two countries. While for Iran the agreement represents another layer in its ability to challenge Israel militarily, for Assad it is another stage in his struggle for survival. At present, Assad has tied his political future and the governance of Syria to the Islamic Republic of Iran, which also faces its own survival test.**

An agreement to expand military and technological collaboration was signed recently between Iran and Syria. President Bashar al-Assad met with Mohammad Bagheri, Chief of Staff of Iran's Armed Forces, who came to Damascus for the signing ceremony, and extended his support for the agreement. On the Syrian side it was signed by the Minister of Defense, General Ali Ayoub. According to Assad, the agreement reflects the high level of strategic and multi-dimensional ties between the countries and the shared experience they have acquired in the war on terror. As with previous pacts, this agreement seeks to strengthen military and security collaboration, enhance coordination vis-à-vis shared challenges and threats, and strengthen defense capabilities. At the same time, it is also intended to dispel rumors that ties between the countries are weakening and Iran is struggling under the burden of providing military and security assistance to Syria due to the sanctions and pressure it faces from the United States. During the signing ceremony, representatives of Iran and Syria called for the withdrawal of the foreign forces that invaded Syria illegally. Ayoub described Israel as a US ally in the war against Syria, and Bagheri

for his part blamed Turkey for dragging its feet in implementing its commitments under the Astana process regarding the withdrawal of "terror groups" from Syria.

A central component of the agreement is Syria's air defense system. According to the Iranian Chief of Staff, the aim of strengthening Syria's air defense and the military collaboration with Iran in this regard is to reduce Israeli, Turkish, and American freedom of action in Syrian airspace. A senior Syrian spokesman also announced that Syria would receive Iranian air defense systems. According to a report from Iran, it will provide Syria with advanced air defense systems: the Bavar-373 surface-to-air missile system – a long-range system that is an Iranian reconstruction of the Russian S-300 with an operating range of 250 km – as well as Khordad-3 medium-range surface-to-air missiles with an operating range of 50-75 km, and which Iran used to shoot down an American Hawk UAV in June 2019. Iran also committed to improve the Syrian aerial defense systems, which are Russian systems operated under Russian advisers (this reported pledge was likely not coordinated with the Russian military).

The ceremony also included several references to the goal of strengthening the "axis of resistance" (more commonly known as the "Shiite axis") which stretches from Iran through Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon. This declared aim presumably hints at another purpose of the Syrian-Iranian agreement – to strengthen Hezbollah's military capabilities by transferring advanced weapon systems to it, including air defense, from Iran through Syria to Lebanon.

A few possible explanations – not mutually exclusive – for the timing of the agreement include:

- a. *A response to rumors that Iranian forces and its proxy forces will withdraw from Syrian territory* due to the difficulty Iran faces in maintaining and supporting these forces given its economic plight, along with the demand by the US and Israel that Iranian forces and proxies be removed from Syria. The agreement gives additional validity to the Iranian military presence in Syria, as this presence was invited by the Assad regime to assist it in the battle against rebel cells and against the intervention of foreign parties in the country (which were not invited by the "legitimate" Assad regime) – Israel, the US, and Turkey.
- b. *A response to the US sanctions against the Assad regime*: Bouthaina Shaaban, President Assad's media advisor, asserted that American economic sanctions against the Syrian regime – the Caesar Act – constitute a continuation of the war against Syria and the "axis of resistance." Shaaban noted that Syria has several possibilities for "breaking" the Caesar Act and that the signed agreement with Iran is merely the first move. She noted that Syria will work to strengthen the cooperation among the countries in the "Axis of Resistance" (reports have appeared of the Syrian market being flooded with Iranian goods) and open up further to

- countries in the Far East, especially China. The Caesar Act, similar to the maximum pressure exerted by the United States on Iran, is meant to spur change in Syrian and Iranian policies, or to cause an economic collapse that would lead to the toppling of the regimes. As the Syrian Minister of Defense said at the signing ceremony, "If the US administration could bring Iran, Syria, and the resistance to their knees, it would not hesitate to do so."
- c. *Joint Iranian-Syrian preparation for a possible withdrawal of US forces from Iraq and eastern Syria:* According to assessments in Damascus and Tehran, such a development would probably allow increased Israeli air strikes along the Iraqi-Syrian border. This is likely the reason for the need to reinforce Syrian aerial defense capabilities across the entire Syrian space, which currently is unable to intercept and thwart Israeli Air Force attacks against Iranian outposts in Syria.
  - d. *Possible Iranian intent to set up an option to attack Israel from or through Syrian territory* in response to Israeli attacks on Iranian military assets. This Iranian interest gained additional urgency after an explosion at a facility for assembling centrifuges at Natanz on July 2, 2020, which was attributed to Israel (though not officially by Iran). The commander of the Revolutionary Guard's Quds Force, Esmail Ghaani, publically threatened that "Israel and the United States should expect difficult days, and very difficult events will befall them." Hence the Iranian operational need to strengthen the air defense protection circuits between Iran and Israel, in order to thwart possible Israeli and perhaps even American air attacks along the axis from Lebanon through Syria and Iraq and into Iran.
  - e. *American plans to press the UN Security Council to extend the embargo on arms sales to and from Iran:* In late June the US urged the UN Security Council to extend the weapons embargo on Iran (imports and exports) scheduled to expire this coming October. Iran might be seeking to establish facts on the ground in this respect, through the military-security-technology agreement with its closest ally – Syria.

### **Significance and Implications**

Iran, one of the main allies of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, has in the past denied that it sent Iranian forces to fight in Syria, and claimed that it only sent military advisors. Will this Iranian claim now change, and does Tehran intend to deploy batteries of advanced surface-to-air missiles operated by Iranian crews in Syrian territory? If this takes place and Bavar-373 air defense batteries are deployed in Syria, as the senior Syrian speaker threatened, Israeli planes will be threatened from the moment they take off from airports deep within Israel. In such a scenario, it is likely that Israel will destroy the batteries during their operational deployment.

As for President Assad, until now he has carefully maneuvered between Russia and Iran vis-à-vis military assistance in building up and operating Syrian military forces, while

refraining from assigning preferential status or greater influence to either side. The military-security agreement with Iran indicates that he prefers his military alliance with Iran to that with Russia. Thus against the backdrop of the agreement and the tension between Iran and Russia, Iran has apparently won the leading position for political influence in Syria, as well as for building and operating Syrian military and internal security forces.

Three background factors presently troubling President Assad must be taken into account: first, rumors that he has fallen out of favor in Moscow and his desire to signal to the Russians that he has an alternative support structure; second, that Russia has delayed the transfer of operations of S-300 air defense systems to Syrian teams, and has allowed Israel and Turkey to act freely within Syria skies; and third, a need to respond to pressure on him, whereby his ability to retain the palace in Damascus is conditioned on removing Iranian military capabilities from Syrian territory and being willing to discuss governance reforms as part of the Geneva process.

In Assad's current struggle for survival, he has tied his future to that of the Islamic Republic of Iran, whose leadership is also challenged by domestic and international pressure and itself is struggling for survival.