



Iran's Syria Gambit:

Regional and Global Implications

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Together with Russia, Iran has established a strategic foothold in Syria that ensures that it will play a decisive role in shaping the geopolitical future of the country in general, and the Assad regime in particular. Indeed, given the recent advances by the Syrian Army and its allies into the province of Deir ez-Zor — a major strategic position along the southern end of the Euphrates River — Tehran will have established the basis for a contiguous land corridor running from Tehran to Beirut.

Iran's rivals, including the United States, Israel, and Saudi Arabia, argue that this outcome constitutes part of a long-standing and aggressive effort to expand its influence, if not to “control” the region. But we would be mistaken to interpret these actions as an example of an all-determining Iranian strategic “expansionism,” or of a sectarian or ideologically driven plan to create a “Shia Crescent.” Iran's actions have been largely opportunistic, driven by a long-standing defensive doctrine with its roots in the tumultuous events that shaped the early years of the Islamic Republic. They are shaped by a perception of mistrust, exacerbated in no small part by the eight-and-a-half-year war of attrition against Saddam Hussein's Iraq.

As Iran begins to explore the new geopolitical landscape afforded to it (part by good strategy and part by good fortune), it will have to reconcile its historic defensive posture with its newfound “victory” in Syria, along with all of the new challenges it brings with it. Its forces and allies have all but defeated ISIS, thus eliminating what Iran saw as a near-existential threat to the homeland from Saudi-supported Sunni Jihadist forces. But heavy sits the crown of victory. Iranian forces now find themselves in close geographic proximity to old rivals, among them American military advisers, rebellious Kurdish militia, the remnants of Free Syrian Army forces, and the Israeli Defense Forces. Tehran's gains have deepened the fears of its regional rivals, insuring that Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq will continue to suffer from multiple interventions — political, strategic and military — directed by Israel, Saudi Arabia, and potentially Turkey. Tehran will have to forge a subtle policy that consolidates its gains without provoking further conflict or confrontation with its rivals in Syria and beyond.

Iranian policymakers will have to forge a stable equilibrium for Syria, one that does not deteriorate into a quagmire or draw Tehran into a proxy conflict with Saudi Arabia. Such a strategy must also take into account the significant prospective financial and business gains that Tehran has reaped in the tepid normalization process that followed the July 2015 nuclear accord (the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action). That the Trump administration is pulling away from this agreement — and has repeatedly threatened to abandon it — will not *necessarily* undermine these economic and trade gains, especially if Western European states continue to believe Iran has not violated the agreement. As it stands, it appears unlikely that the rest of the P5+1 will re-impose sanctions and treat as a sunk cost their increasingly hefty investments in Iranian re-integration.

In short, the growing division between the Trump administration and Western European states offers a huge *geo-strategic asset* for Tehran. Thus, the Islamic Republic has good reason to make sure that its presence does not lead to a US-Iranian military clash, as such a confrontation could harm Tehran's efforts to present itself as a more responsible player on the international stage. The prospect of economic development offers strong incentives for more tempered reactions, and also serves to bolster Tehran's growing strategic, military and economic alliance with Russia and its wily leader, Vladimir Putin. The combination of the above suggest that the strategic logic of Iranian foreign policy will be one of prudence and diplomatic nuance.

The need for prudence could create openings for Iran to forge a more constructive role in any efforts to rebuild Syria—a goal that Tehran will support so long as it plays a major role along with Russia and Turkey in defining or negotiating the terms of any reconstruction plan. This role would fit squarely into Scenario 1—the *Survival of the Assad Regime*. It could also fit into Scenario 2, *Syrian Partition*, an outcome that could unfold in uneasy but still workable tandem with Scenario 1. Indeed, Partition seems increasingly likely given the efforts of rival military forces to protect and consolidate their respective battlefield gains having defeated ISIS. But it would not work with Scenario 3, “*Military Escalation*,” because in this scenario Iran (and Hezbollah) would reenter the Syrian arena as a military protagonist in a renewed civil war that could reopen opportunities for extremist forces like ISIS, many of which apparently escaped the battle fields of Ar-Raqqah (ISIS’s former “capitol”) and other former strongholds relatively unscathed. Iran has no interest in this outcome.

Anticipating Iran’s evolving approach to Syria requires a sober grasp of the contending logics animating its foreign policies. Echoing a famous remark by Henry Kissinger, one Iranian analyst has noted that Iran’s leaders have never decided whether to view the Islamic Republic as a “nation or a cause.” The latter view highlights the particular religious and ideological nature of a revolutionary state born in 1979, while the former highlights the rational, security-centric concept of national security that is said to animate all “normal” states—including Iran. There is no doubt that the revolutionary vision of Iran – and those forces that defend it, first and foremost of which is the Revolutionary Guard – considerably constrains the readiness and capacity of Iran’s more pragmatic leaders – especially reformists – to engage with the West and the US in particular. But despite these constraints, security and geo-strategic concerns chiefly animate Iran’s approach to its immediate region and Syria in particular.

On this score, the legacy of the Iran-Iraq war looms large. Iraq’s unprovoked attack on Iran and the support that was provided to Iraq by successive US administrations shaped a comprehensive Iranian defensive doctrine that calls for sustaining an advance guard to protect the Shia state and its ruling regime. Iran’s enemies view its quest for both a ballistic missile system and a domestic nuclear fuel capacity as offensive and thus dangerous. But for Iran’s leaders and the wider populace, these programs – supplemented by regional allies such as Syria and Hezbollah – exist not for the purpose of “expansionism,” but rather as a mechanism of defense and deterrence that Iran needs to counter security threats from multiple directions: from Sunni jihadists inside and outside its extensive borders, from the Gulf Arab states who finance “Wahhabi terrorism,” from Israel, and of course, from the US. The territorial buffer and missile program can thus be thought of as the shield and sword, respectively, of Iran’s defensive posture.

Rouhani’s election in July 2013 widened the domestic space in Iran for those forces espousing a defensive-pragmatic approach. Rouhani’s slogan of “a world without violence,” the subsequent efforts by him Foreign Minister Zarif to engage European states, and the signing of the Iran nuclear accord in July 2015 all seemed to favor an emerging coalition of reformists, right-of-center leaders and pragmatic conservatives. But paradoxically, the JCPOA provoked a hardline backlash – not so much against the agreement but rather against Rouhani and his allies. The escalating military role played by the Revolutionary Guard and various Iranian-backed Iraqi, Pakistani and Afghani Shia militias in Lebanon further strengthened the leverage of Iranian hardliners. Led by Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, they warned that the US would never adhere to the nuclear agreement. Everything the Trump administration has done since January 2017 has confirmed these warnings of American “duplicity.” Indeed, Secretary of State Tillerson’s June 14, 2017 statement, in which he spoke of a

“peaceful transition of government,” in Iran, and even more so, the hostile language animating Trump’s October 13 speech on the JCPOA, has narrowed the space for any Iranian leaders seeking to move from confrontation to engagement with the US.

Despite these challenges, Rouhani has proven a skillful leader. Reelected in May 2015, he has repeatedly defended the economic benefits of the nuclear agreement – which have been many – thus claiming something of a mandate for a technocratic and growth-focused approach. President Trump’s move to decertify the JCPOA complicated Rouhani’s efforts, but his insistence on adhering to the agreement has won him much support inside Iran and abroad. Although his hardline foes have tried to leverage the situation to their advantage – an effort signaled by orders to place former President Khatami under virtual house arrest in October 2017 – Rouhani’s popularity and the legitimacy of his government with ordinary Iranians remain intact and even enhanced. The flurry of trade and investment deals that Tehran has struck with the French, German, Chinese, Italian and other companies – described in some detail in this report – bode well for Rouhani, providing that he can avoid an inadvertent military confrontation with the US, and providing that the secondary spill-over effects of existing or reinstated US economic sanctions do not wreck Iran’s widening efforts to gain foreign investment, especially in its antiquated, state-owned oil company and growing natural gas industry. The Rouhani administration is attempting to walk a fine line, but the resulting pressures have incentivized a policy of strategic prudence.

Of further interest is the role (if any) that the Iranian Revolutionary Guard (IRGC) might play. Iran’s economic opening represents a challenge to the IRGC. Under former President Ahmadinejad, the IRGC drastically expanded its role in the economy, aided paradoxically by a Western, US-led sanctions policy that rewarded those Iranian forces best positioned to leverage assets to economic rents and arbitrage. Even though the IRGC’s military prestige has been enhanced by the role it played in defeating ISIS in Syria, Rouhani has scored some successes in his effort to limit or even roll back some of the organization’s economic influence. Supported (or at least tolerated) by the Supreme Leader, these efforts – which have also featured a very public campaign against “corruption” – have not as yet trimmed the IRGC’s sails in a dramatic manner. But they have helped to somewhat normalize a constrained but still pluralistic domestic playing field. This dynamic could have a significant and potentially beneficial impact on Iran’s evolving political arena, particularly given a potential struggle over the succession of the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei.

Ultimately, that horizon will be shaped by the security challenges that Iran faces along its extensive borders and by its evolving and increasingly tense relations with the Gulf Arab States. Iranian leaders, especially those in the IRGC, argue that the porous and uncontrolled nature of its borders with Pakistan and Afghanistan not only oblige Iran to seek allies in both countries but also to take a more prominent role in Afghani politics itself – an effort that has included reaching out to certain members of the Taliban leadership. The election of Trump and meteoric rise of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) has put into the driver’s seat those Arab leaders who see these initiatives as simply another example of Iranian perfidy and imperialistic expansionism. The escalating Saudi-Iranian cold war threatens not only to complicate efforts to stabilize Syria but could also escalate a myriad of domestic and region-wide sectarian conflicts that would severely destabilize Lebanon and Iraq, as well as to further punish Yemen, a country on the brink of humanitarian catastrophe. If Riyadh’s bombing campaign against Yemen’s Houthis helped to bring this situation about, MBS’s efforts to escalate the diplomatic and military confrontation with Iran in Yemen and far beyond may be backfiring. As one Iranian analyst notes, Iran can now pose as “the only friend of the Yemeni people.” Moreover, the forging of an anti-Qatar alliance consisting of Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt and Bahrain has torn

asunder any hopes for Gulf Council Cooperation (GCC) “unity” whilst simultaneously strengthening the economic and diplomatic bonds between Tehran and Doha. Though far from being pre-ordained, Iranian “expansionism” is feeding on a cycle of Arab-Iranian and Sunni-Shia confrontation that has been stoked by the actions of new and ambitious Arab leaders. If MBS is any example, these leaders have no coherent strategy for dealing with a veteran and skilled Iranian leadership with decades of experience in Middle Eastern politics.

Indeed, Iran’s leaders seem more determined than ever before to use all available means to defend Iranian internal and regional security. Iran’s expanding ballistic missile program – which is not covered in the nuclear agreement – is one example of a security policy that all political factions keenly support. Moreover, the June 7, 2017 terrorist attack on the Iranian parliament reinforced a perception across the elite and in the wider populace that domestic and regional security are more linked than ever before. This singular focus on security has helped to sustain popular support for the war in Syria even if this support appears premised on the assumption (or expectation) that the Syrian war – and the Iranian casualties suffered as a consequence of it – may now be reaching an end.

Elite and popular consensus on security issues is also reflected in Iran’s approach to Iraq. Iraq’s so-called power sharing system notwithstanding, the country’s political system is dominated by a Shia community that has long-standing religious, economic, and family ties to Iran. Despite or perhaps because of these linkages, Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi has attempted to maintain a measure of independence and nationalist legitimacy, which among other things means walking a tight rope when it comes to the escalating Saudi-Iranian conflict. Thus, for example, despite the worsening Iranian-Saudi cold war, he has supported recent efforts to reestablish Saudi-Iraqi diplomatic ties. But the simple fact is that Iran’s influence in a myriad of economic, educational, media, social, cultural and political arenas is everywhere ascendant. Given the crucial role that Iraq plays as a forward base for operations in Syria – and the first step in an emerging land corridor to Beirut – the IRGC will continue to take the lead in shaping Iran’s involvement in Iraq. As Major general Mohammad Bagheri, Chief of Staff for the Armed Forces of the Islamic Republic of Iran stated in February 2016, “Baghdad is our red line.”

Similar security concerns also sustain the IRGC’s approach to Kurdish Iraq and the question of Kurdish independence. Although the President of Iraqi Kurdistan, Massoud Barzani, has long touted Iranian support, the September 25, 2017 independence referendum – backed by 92% of 2.8 million voters – provoked a sharp response from Tehran and was met with similar tepidity by western and American allies. The former supported the incursion of Iraqi-Shia forces into Kirkuk, thus signaling that Tehran views Kurdish independence as a threat to its own national unity and internal security. This position has helped to nurture an ongoing reconciliation between Turkey and Iran. Although Turkey had previously advocated Assad’s fall and had effectively supported the jihadist opposition in Syria, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s October 4, 2017 visit to Tehran suggests that when it comes to the future of Syria and Iraq, the two countries are now be on the same geo-strategic page.

Moving forward, the durability of peace in Syria will be dependent on four factors. First, the evolution of Russian-Iranian cooperation. The alliance has been a marriage of convenience, bringing two increasingly isolated countries together in the pursuit of a common cause: the preservation of the Assad regime and the re-establishment of the status quo in Syria. Though Iran and Russia may be wary of each other (Iran is a substitute gas producer, and Russia has a long history of imperial expansion in the Persian Gulf), the coordination of their interests will most likely persist for the foreseeable future. What may prove to be more difficult to manage, however, is Russia’s diplomatic balance amongst the

various interested yet antagonistic parties. The maintenance of this balance represents the second pivotal factor. Moscow is the only international actor with working relations with *all* of the parties involved in the Syrian conflict: the preservation of these complex relationships (mainly, between Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Israel) will be largely dependent on the diplomatic prowess of the Russian foreign service and its able figurehead, Sergei Lavrov. Keeping this balance will be a challenge.

Related to the second is the status of Iranian forces following the establishment of ceasefire zones in Syria. One of the most contentious implications of recent Russian and Iranian military victories has been the encroaching presence of Shia militia (and IRGC) forces closer and closer to the Israeli border, along the Golan Heights. The successful non-kinetic resolution of this combination represents the third major challenge to establishing a peaceful settlement in the region. Lastly, considerations on the role of the Assad family in the future of Syrian politics may present a potentially indivisible issue cleavage around which Israel and Saudi Arabia may be drawn into an unlikely alliance. However, at this stage in the conflict, it remains to be seen whether the implications of such an eventuality will pose anything more than an impediment to the currently established Russian-Iranian status quo. Possessing a clear mandate and a unified overlap in strategic goals, it appears that the status quo will continue to favor the Shia-Russian axis for the foreseeable future.

Full report available by request.