

Iran Remains Committed to Syria Despite Ongoing Pandemic and Economic Collapse

Featuring Nicholas Heras, John Dunford, and Kyra Rauschenbach



MAY 21, 2020

Iran views Syria as an integral component of its military power in the Middle East. Despite converging public health and economic crises severely straining Iran's resources, the country is sustaining, and possibly increasing, its military investment in Syria. In this episode of Overwatch, Middle East Program Manager Nicholas Heras, Syria Research Assistant John Dunford, and CTP Iran Analyst Kyra Rauschenbach discuss the nature of Iran's attachment to Syria and what it may mean in the future.

Kim Kagan:

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Nicholas Heras:

Hello everyone, and thank you for joining us for today's segment of the Overwatch podcast. My name is Nicholas Heras and I'm the Middle East security program manager here at the Institute for the Study of War. Today, we'll be discussing Iran's campaign in Syria with two smart analysts working on the subject, Kyra Rauschenbach and John Dunford

Kyra is an analyst at the Critical Threats Project at the American Enterprise Institute, where she focuses on Islamic Republic of Iran. John is a research assistant at the Institute for the Study of War, where he focuses on Syria. Kyra and John, it's great to have you here today. Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Core, the IRGC and it's Quds force, have used the opportunity provided by the Syrian Civil War, to expand Iranian influence inside of Syria. The IRGC and it's proxy forces have a wide footprint throughout Syria territory, and the IRGC seems to be in the process of not only embedding itself deeply into the security structures of the Assad Regime, but also is actively seeking to build lines of influence across Syrian civil society. But it's an open question exactly what Iran's goal is for its expanded and strengthened presence in Syria, and whether Iran's campaign in Syria brings Iran closer to achieving that goal. Kyra, I want to start by asking you, what is Iran trying to do in Syria?

Kyra Rauschenbach:

Syria is very important to Iran since shortly after the Iranian Revolution, decision makers in the Islamic Republic viewed the Assad regime in Syria as a friendly ally that would facilitate Iran's access to its most important proxy Hezbollah in Lebanon. A friendly Syrian territory also gives Iran strategic depth, which is an essential pillar of Iran's defense doctrine. The Assad regime has never shared Iran's ideology and has never been a direct proxy of Iran. Before 2011, it was an important but independent ally.

The Arab spring changed Syria's relationship with Iran. Iranian leaders after the outbreak of the Syrian Civil War shifted from thinking about how to work with this ally to whether they could afford for the Syrian territory to turn hostile. Iranian leaders decided they couldn't lose Syria. Starting in 2011 therefore, they sent limited paramilitary forces to prevent Assad from falling. Limited Iranian help was not enough though, and as Assad started losing the war, Iranians doubled down and committed more forces ultimately including conventional ground forces of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Core. Iranians have thus been trying to keep Assad in power for almost a decade. They have succeeded to this point, but at a very high cost. Syria has been important to Iran since 1982 in part because of the access it gives Hezbollah to a safe rear area through which Tehran can send supplies. Hezbollah, part of Iran's axis of resistance, along with Syria is essential to Iran's strategy to threaten and deter Israel.

Kyra Rauschenbach:

Iran's leaders have consistently seen having Hezbollah's massive rocket and missile arsenal on Israel's border as one of its best and most important capabilities. Hezbollah has provided Iran a relatively stable base from which to threaten and deter Israel for decades. It's gained great influence in Lebanon over the years, but remain technically only one of several parties in the Lebanese government until recently. The protests against government mismanagement and ineffectiveness erupted in Iraq and Lebanon in Fall 2019, quickly taking on anti-Iranian and anti-Hezbollah overtones. These protests significantly influenced Iran's calculus in the region and likely changed the way Iranians viewed Syria. The protests and the difficulty Hezbollah had managing them and addressing the grievances that drove them suddenly made Lebanon look like a less reliable base for a credible strategic deterrent threat to Israel than it had been before. The collapse of Lebanon's economy, resulting in part from internal dynamics and in part from the collapse of Syria's economy due to sanctions in war, further threatens Hezbollah's and Lebanon's stability.

The Iranians and Lebanese Hezbollah thus now face a potentially more dangerous scenario if they threaten to use some or all of Hezbollah's weapons arsenal. The resulting conflict with Israel might restabilize Hezbollah and Lebanon as happened in the 2006 war, but it also might trigger the collapse of the Lebanese state and the unraveling of Hezbollah's control over it. The prospect of the latter scenario could affect the Israeli calculation about the likelihood that Iranians would try to use part of that arsenal and thereby potentially reducing some of its deterrent effects.

Tehran thus has an interest in establishing similar capabilities in Syria to diversify Iran's deterrent assets shifting that calculation and possibly restoring reliable threatened deterrents. Since the end of 2019 as Hezbollah's focused on domestic Lebanese economic and political problems to a much higher degree than it had been previously, the Iranians have been escalating efforts to move strategic capabilities into Syria. We saw first in December 2019, then twice more in recent weeks, the commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Core Aerospace Force, Hajizadeh, visit different bases around Syria. Hajizadeh's been responsible for the development and deployment of Iranian missile and drone technology for over a decade. So his multiple unprecedented visits to Syria in the past six months suggest that Iranians are likely deploying more advanced weaponry in Syria. This Iranian realignment of capabilities likely also results in part from U.S. troop consolidation in Iraq and Syria. U.S. forces consolidated in mid March from parts of western Iraq, including Al-Qa'im Iraq, which neighbors Albu Kamal in Syria.

The Albu Kamal, Al-Qa'im border crossing is an essential area for Iranian forces to facilitate transportation and military operations in Iraq and Syria. Hajizadeh visited Albu Kamal just two weeks after U.S. forces withdrew from neighboring Al-Qa'im in Iraq. I will now turn it over to my colleague John Dunford, who will lay down some of the operational specifics of what the Iranians are doing in Syria.

John Dunford:

Thank you Kyra for that great rundown. I would like to expand on the points about Iran's advanced weapons capabilities in Syria. I'd also love to talk more on Iran's campaigns throughout Syria. Iran is present throughout regime held Syria and prioritizes several areas. These areas include Eastern Syria, along the Syrian-Iraqi border, Central Syria to allow Iran to connect its logistic routes in the east to Southwestern Syria and Lebanon. Southern Syria, along the Israeli border, as well as several other areas including Damascus and its suburbs, the Syrian-Lebanese border and Aleppo city.

Hajizadeh's most recent visit occurred in the town of Albu Kamal along the Syrian and Iraqi border in Eastern Syria. Albu Kamal has served as a key logistics node to Iran and its proxies for moving ground shipments from

Iraq into Syria. Iranian presence at this border allows for it to control these shipments and their dispersal, as well as control their proxy network that operates inside of Eastern Syria. Lebanese Hezbollah secretary general Hassan Nasrallah reiterated the importance of Albu Kamal and the need for forces to operate there in a recent speech on May 13th.

John Dunford:

Iran began construction of a new base south of Albu Kamal, along the Syrian-Iraqi border in the summer of 2019. Recent satellite images of this facility indicate Iran is building underground storage for advanced weapons at the base. This base was likely one of the reasons for Hajizadeh's recent visit to Albu Kamal.

Now moving from the Syrian-Iraqi border, a key component of Iran's campaign is the movement of weapons and forces from Eastern Syria onto Western Syria and then to Lebanon. Iranian forces and proxies are present at several bases along the major logistics route in Central Syria that connects Albu Kamal on the Syrian-Iraqi border to Western Syria. Iran possesses drone capabilities at some of these facilities, including at a base near Palmyra in Central Homs province. Iran has previously used this facility to launch drone attacks on Israel. Iran is additionally present at several air fields in Central Syria that allow it to directly fly shipments into Syria as opposed to moving these shipments overland from Iraq and into Eastern Syria for dispersal.

Moving into Western Syria, Iranian forces and their proxies are present in several areas. For example, Lebanese Hezbollah is active along the Syrian-Lebanese border, including managing smuggling networks that move between Syria and Lebanon. In Syria's capital of Damascus, Iranian forces manage a headquarters at one of Damascus' major airports as well as Iranian proxies are housed in the Southern Damascus suburbs near a key Shia shrine.

Further south, since Assad regained control of Southern Syria and the Syrian-Israeli border area in the summer of 2018, Iran has increased its presence in Southern Syria. Iran and Lebanese Hezbollah are working closely with Syrian-Arab army forces that operate in this region, including stationing at Syrian bases and collocating with regime forces. Iran is likely storing advanced capabilities at these facilities.

Iran is also recruiting former Syrian opposition fighters into new Syrian militia structures. Iran's presence in Southern Syria provides it with direct access to the border with Israel, allowing it to apply additional pressure on Israel from the Syrian side of the border. Now Iran's efforts in these areas are not limited to just housing military forces and capabilities, and managing logistics routes. Iranian forces are actively working on building cultural and religious connections with the local population. This includes establishing cultural centers, teaching Farsi, establishing Iranian educational programs for children, and conducting religious outreach in an effort to convert elements of the population. So before I turn it back to Nick, I will just close by saying that Iran is positioning itself for a longer term influence in the future of Syria.

Nicholas Heras:

Thank you Kyra and John for this detailed breakdown of what Iran is doing in Syria. I'd like to broaden the aperture of the discussion a bit. Even as Iranians are actively engaged in Syria, there are major domestic challenges inside Iran that could distract the Islamic Republic's leaders from Syria. Iran's economy continues to strain under the burden of tough U.S. and international sanctions. The COVID-19 crisis has hit Iranian society hard and might not go away for a long time. And Iran's internal ethnic and sectarian fault lines are becoming more pronounced. These challenges inside of Iran raise doubts whether the Iranians can sustain a campaign inside of Syria. Kyra, has the COVID-19 crisis changed what Iran wants to do in Syria?

Kyra Rauschenbach:

No, economic challenges from COVID-19 have not changed Iran's strategy in Syria. Iran has shown over the past few months that it will escalate efforts to present new strategic threats in Syria despite unprecedented economic challenges from COVID-19 and budget mismanagement. Hajizadeh's unprecedented spring visits to Syria, which signal an escalated effort to move expensive weaponry into Syria, came at the height of COVID-19 crisis. And on May 17th, Supreme Leader Khamenei underscored the importance of driving U.S. troops from Syria and Iraq.

Additionally, on May 20th, an Iranian parliamentarian emphasized that Iran wants to see a return on its investments in Syria over the past few years. Iran sees its presence in Syria as potentially a profit making venture. Iran and Hezbollah controlled Lebanon both face unprecedented economic challenges particularly within the past few months since the outbreak of COVID-19. We are not seeing Iran stop at venturism in Syria as a result of these economic challenges and in fact, they're seeing Iran escalate efforts to increase weapons capabilities in Syria. This tells us that the Iranians see their efforts in Syria not only as a political and military necessity, but likely also believe they can profit economically over the longer term. John can elaborate a bit on how Iran is profiting in Syria.

John Dunford:

Thanks Kyra. I'd love to talk a little bit about Iran and how it is profiting inside of Syria. Iran seeks to economically gain from the future reconstruction of Syria and from Syria's natural resources. As you noted, Iran has spent significant amount of money to- and forces to keep Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in power. Iran has provided the Syrian regime with an economic lifeline through Iran's oil shipments to the regime during the war. Iran provided this oil on a credit. Iran likely seeks to call aid on that credit through reconstruction projects and control of Syria's natural resources. The Syrian regime recently indicated its intention to begin partially repaying Iran through new oil contracts. Syria's Ministry of Oil announced that the Syrian regime and Iran reached a preliminary agreement that gives Iran oil exploration rights in the desert area south of Albu Kamal on the Syrian-Iraqi border. The Ministry of Oil actually stated that the deal is part of Assad's efforts to pay off that credit line.

Oil is not the only economic sector that Iran is interested in gaining rewards from. Iran has attempted unsuccessfully, to gain access to Syria's telecommunications sector that has been dominated historically by two companies. An Iranian bid to launch a third company in 2010, before the war, failed. However, Iran and the Syrian regime signed a memorandum of understanding in 2017 that would allow an Iranian company to enter this sector. The Syrian telecommunication sector is currently facing unprecedented upheaval due to a feud between Assad and one of his most prominent financial backers who also owns one of the largest telecommunications company in Syria. Iran may exploit this to gain entry into the telecommunications sector either through a new company or through one of the two existing companies.

Iran has also expressed interest in investing in other projects in Syria, including a railroad that would connect Iraq to the Syrian coast in Western Syria, as well as investing in Syria's electric grid, and the creating new power plants. In addition to some of these larger projects, Iran has also built relationships with key Syrian businessman during the war. These businessmen will likely be involved in the regime backed projects to reconstruct regime held Syria. This includes a relationship with President Assad's brother Maher al-Assad. Maher is a commander of the Syrian-Arab armies fourth division and also has an extensive network of businessmen who work with him. Iran likely intends to leverage these types of relationships in order to invest in regime reconstruction projects as well as to allow international reconstruction funding to these projects to benefit Iran.

John Dunford:

So I'll close just by saying, Iran does see an economic opportunity in Syria both through direct contracts with the regime in order to perceive access to Syria's natural resources, as well as through working with regime businessmen and other entities that are leading the reconstruction efforts in regime held Syria.

Nicholas Heras:

Thank you very much Kyra and John for a comprehensive discussion of Iran's campaign in Syria and the interests that Iran is trying to protect as it expands its presence in Syria. We will need to maintain our persistent stare on Iran and Syria as it is important to Iran's larger strategy in the Middle East region. Thank you everyone for joining us today for this segment, the Overwatch Podcast.

Kim Kagan:

Thank you for listening to this episode of Overwatch. We look forward to your feedback on this episode and previous ones. Visit www.understandingwar.org to learn about ISW's work and to sign up for our mailing list.

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