



Syrian Conflict—April 4, 2019

(U) Increased Iranian Operations in Eastern Syria Likely to Secure Land-Bridge and Circumvent International Sanctions



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(U) Iran is likely to shift the focus of its Syrian influence-operations by redirecting its assets to rural eastern towns in Syria, which is likely in reaction to Russian gains, and if successful is almost certain to result in multiple key Iranian foreign policy victories. Iran and Russia are currently competing for contracts in various Syrian industries. Due to Russia's success in the urban regions of Syria, Iran has increased its focus on the rural, underserved areas.ⁱ Iran is likely to continue pushing for the populations of these rural areas to convert to Shiism.ⁱⁱ

- The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) has control over police stations and are using the power to distribute food and supplies to villagers in the area.ⁱⁱⁱ Residents also reported that the IRGC offered up to \$200 to those willing to convert to Shiism and join a local Shia militia, when this area is historically a Sunni-majority region.^{iv v}
- The Hussein Organization, an Iranian charity, has been extremely active in Deir ez-Zour, distributing food, generators, and school supplies to villages in the region in an attempt to raise further support for Iranians in the province.^{vi}
- Iran has committed to a railroad project, spanning from Shalamche, Iran to a border crossing in Basra, Iraq, finishing in Latakia, a Mediterranean port town in Syria. The railroad will give Iran additional economic and trade privileges within Syria and will be the first contribution to the Iranian land-bridge.^{vii}

(U) Iran will likely need to diversify its investments and sphere of influence towards rural eastern Syrian towns given the current power vacuum in the area, the opportunity to recruit vulnerable Syrians for Iran's paramilitary model, and the losing zero-sum game country leaders are playing against Russia. Russia has carried significant influence over the Assad Regime after saving the regime from collapse in 2015, giving them significant leverage in the lucrative post-war reconstruction business. The Assad regime likely sees Russia as a benefactor that brings more international legitimacy to Syria when compared to Iran. To counter this, Iran has grown its presence in areas that have seen considerably less Russian development and aid through the growth of Shia paramilitary groups.^{viii}

- Eastern Syria is currently a vacuum for power. The region was previously dominated by Islamic State (IS) militants and is now under the control of a thinly spread Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and monitored by the United States' al-Tanf military base. Iran is now attempting to fill this void as seen by the opening of the border in al-Qaim.^{ix}
- Deir ez-Zour has historically been a low-income area, and the effects of the civil war have magnified its issues with poverty, making the residents susceptible to recruitment into the various Shia paramilitary forces by the IRGC.^{x xi} As seen in Iraq with the Popular Mobilization Units (PMU), in Lebanon with Jihad al-Bina, and in Iran with the Basij, Tehran has used these domestically recruited forces to cement its influence in country and is now doing so in Syria with Jaysh al-Shabi, the National Defense Forces, and the Local Defense Forces.^{xii xiii xiv xv xvi}

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- Iran has made little progress on projects it announced in 2017, including oil refineries and phosphate mines. Meanwhile, Russian investments in Syria have grown with its recent developments in the phosphate and energy sectors.^{xvii}

(U) If Iran successfully secures the eastern Syrian border, it is almost certain the land-bridge from Tehran to the Mediterranean will be completed and Iran is to likely to see financial returns on its most substantial foreign investment and create another resource for circumventing international sanctions.

- Iran has provided approximately \$15 billion in support to the Assad regime since 2012, making it Iran's most expensive foreign commitment.^{xviii xix} Securing the border and finalizing the land-bridge to the Mediterranean would provide Iran with unfettered access to the Mediterranean as well as yield expanded connection with its sphere of influence across the Middle East.^{xx xxi}
- Iran is rapidly progressing towards its goal of engaging Israel in direct conflict. By attaining free shipment access to Syria, Iran creates yet another front and supply line Israel will have to defend if this war is to occur.
- Earlier this year, Iran and Syria agreed to create a joint Chamber of Commerce between the relevant ministries of each country. The Secretary-General of the Federation of Syrian Chambers of Commerce Mohammad Hamshou stated that cooperation between Syria and Iran, "foils the embargo imposed on the two states," and will work to circumvent international sanctions imposed on the two countries.^{xxii}

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ⁱⁱ Abdulrahim, Raja, and Benoit Faucon. "Iran Moves to Cement Its Influence in Syria." *The Wall Street Journal*, Dow Jones & Company. 26 Mar. 2019. Retrieved from: www.wsj.com/articles/iran-moves-to-cement-its-influence-in-syria-11553632926.

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^v "ANALYSIS: How Iran Continues Its Entrenchment in Syria." *Israel National News*. Retrieved from: www.israelnationalnews.com/News/News.aspx/261080.

^{vi} Ibid ²

^{vii} Zeed, Adnan Abu. "Iran Moving Forward with Railway Link to Syria via Iraq." *Al*, 6 Dec. 2018. Retrieved from: www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2018/11/iran-iraq-syria-railway.html.

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