



Iranian Action in Syria: Military Operations, Soft Power Influence, and Implications for the United States

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Abstract

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The following summary highlights the key points of the discussion, with particular attention paid to the challenges and opportunities that Iran's presence in Syria could pose for the US over the long term.

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Iranian Action in Syria

Military Operations, Soft Power Influence, and Implications for the United States

A National Security Seminar Event Note

Introduction

On April 18, 2019, CNA hosted a National Security Seminar to examine Iranian military operations and influence activities in Syria and to discuss the potential ramifications of these actions for the United States and its regional allies. The event convened a panel of subject matter experts from the diplomatic, defense, and academic communities and featured an active audience of US government members. As the US prepares to downsize its Syrian presence to a cohort of 400 troops, Iran is redoubling its commitment to become a long-term power broker in Syria. Seminar participants reviewed how Iran has skillfully exploited the conflict in Syria, deploying hybrid warfare—including military action, influence operations, and diplomatic networking—to insinuate itself into local politics.

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Key Points of the Discussion

- Tehran views its alliance with the regime of Bashar al-Assad as vital to its national security and regional policies. Damascus is considered the lynchpin in the so-called Axis of Resistance¹, both for its role in facilitating Iranian links to Lebanese Hezbollah and as a staging ground for threatening Iran's regional archrival, Israel. Iran's presence in Syria allows it to play an outsized role on the regional stage, outflanking other competitors such as Saudi Arabia and Turkey.
- Iran is at an inflection point in Syria. The regime's leadership regards its military intervention in the Syrian conflict as successful, having made a decisive contribution to preserving the Syrian regime, defeating Sunni extremists, and, from Tehran's perspective, thwarting the US and its regional allies. Tehran is now attempting to consolidate its gains in the conflict and recoup its investments.
- It could be difficult for Tehran to capitalize on its success in Syria moving forward. Iran lacks the funds to contribute substantially to Syrian reconstruction efforts. There is also a growing potential for divergence between Iran and its Shia militia allies on the one hand, and the Syrian government and Russia on the other.
- Iran, Russia, and Syria are uneasy allies. They share a set of critically aligned interests, not the least of which is the preservation of the Syrian regime. However, they disagree on a number of issues, ranging from Iran and Hezbollah's willingness to court risk by provoking Israel, which the Syrians and Russians generally oppose, to the nature of the post-conflict political settlement (Russia favors an approach that leaves a little more room for the inclusion of political opposition groups).
- Information operations and other soft power activities are critical components of Iranian involvement in Syria. The Quds Force—the external operations arm of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)—has a strong track record and deep practical expertise with these types of campaigns.
- The US still has opportunities to engage with non-state actors in Syria, particularly with Sunni Arab tribes in the country's Eastern regions that are unlikely to view Iran's presence in a positive light.

¹ Iranian officials use the term "Axis of Resistance" to refer to countries and groups that are aligned with Iran against Israel and its Western allies.

- The US needs to assess its long-term regional interests, and consider how those interests could be affected if Iran succeeds in its efforts to become a major power broker in the region.

Discussion

The phases of Iranian military involvement in Syria, 2011–2019

Iran's military involvement in Syria can be broken down into several distinct phases. Between 2011 and 2015, the Quds Force conducted an advise and assist operation mounted by small numbers of personnel working closely with Lebanese Hizballah. During this phase, Iran's forces helped the Syrian government set up the National Defense Force, a pro-government paramilitary militia modelled on Iran's paramilitary Basij. The Syrian government's loss of Idlib in 2015 set the stage for the next phase: expanded Iranian involvement in Syria. The loss raised deep concerns in Tehran that the Syrian government was in imminent danger of collapse, and precipitated a significant influx of Iranian forces. To borrow an American military term, Iran "surged" into Syria with both irregular troops (Shia militias from neighboring countries, especially Iraq) and regular Iranian soldiers (mainly IRGC but also Artesh (Iran's conventional armed forces)). Iranian forces began to sustain significant losses with this campaign, including the deaths of several high-profile generals. As casualties mounted, Iran began to rely more heavily on proxy forces to engage in the majority of the fighting – particularly the Zeinabiyoun and Fatemiyoun brigades, whose fighters are recruited primarily from Pakistani and Afghan refugee populations in Iran.

The war in Syria reached a turning point in 2016, when the four-year Battle of Aleppo culminated in the defeat of the rebel forces. From that point on, events began to align in favor of the Syrian regime and its allies. By 2017, Iranian operations in Syria had entered their final, current phase, marked by a consolidation of territorial gains and a gradual drawdown. This phase is designed to prime Syria for a long-term Iranian presence, which would allow Tehran to recoup its investments in the conflict both materially and politically.

Positive outcomes for Iran

Iran's leadership believes that its intervention in the Syrian conflict has been successful. The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) is defeated, and the prospects for the Syrian opposition are bleak. Iran has demonstrated that it is an indispensable ally to Damascus and can now "call in favors" for the sacrifices it has made on behalf of the Syrian government. Tehran has become a major power broker in the conflict and effectively defeated US, Israeli, and Saudi efforts to marginalize its presence. Above all, Iran has managed to preserve—and even strengthen—the so-called Axis of Resistance.

Iran's intervention has also been successful from a tactical-operational perspective. The war in Syria is the first time that the Iranian military has mounted a sustained operation beyond the countries on its borders since the pre-revolutionary period, when the Shah's army deployed to Oman during the Dhofar Rebellion. Although Syria is a permissive host, Iran's military presence has required considerable logistical and intelligence support to sustain itself in country. By fighting alongside Russian forces, the IRGC and other elements of the Iranian military have also acquired valuable experience with conducting tactical air support and area clearance operations.

Challenges for Iran

Although Iran's leadership can justifiably claim that its operations in Syria were successful, Tehran still faces considerable obstacles to sustaining its positive momentum on the ground. The Iranian military's experience in Syria is valuable, but it has been gained against an irregular force with very limited technological capabilities. One of the seminar panelists questioned whether the Iranian military was now any better prepared to confront

a high-end adversary, such as the US. Sanctions and a stagnating economy are also taking their toll on the regime's support for its regional proxies. Lack of funding may also make it difficult for Iran to contribute to post-conflict reconstruction efforts in Syria. While IRGC-affiliated companies have been involved in some reconstruction initiatives, particularly in the transportation and telecommunications sectors, Russian and Chinese companies are increasingly sidelining Iranian efforts. Diplomatically, Iran faces a divergence of regional interests between itself, Russia, and Syria—particularly regarding Israel. Domestically, Iran's population has not been unilaterally in favor of the war. Sanctions have made resources sparse, and some citizens disapprove of their country expending its limited finances on a foreign venture.

The character of Iranian influence operations in Syria

Iran's maneuver to secure a land bridge to the Levant has deep ideological roots. One panelist recalled an Iranian soldier's confusion when asked for his opinion on the land bridge—he and his peers had never heard the term, instead referring to the concept as Wilayat Imam Ali. This Arabic term, which refers to the Shia first Imam, is deeply symbolic, expressing concepts of identity and belonging within the broader Shia Islamist community, irrespective of borders.

One seminar speaker detailed the nature and scope of Iranian information operations in Syria, explaining that Iranian soft power influence is prevalent in three regions of the country:

- **South Western Syria** is of key importance to the Iranian strategy, largely given its utility as a prime staging ground for pressuring Israel. However, Iran currently maintains a small footprint in the area due to an informal political deal between Israel and Syria—brokered by Russia—that limits the presence of Iranian and other Shia militias in the region. Iran has subsequently avoided making overt deployments of its troops to the area, although Hezbollah and other Iranian-affiliated Shia militia are still present—particularly in the Jezreel Valley. Also, a panelist noted, Hezbollah has integrated some of its units into the Syrian military, with the acquiescence of Damascus. By wearing Syrian uniforms, these Hezbollah members can simultaneously operate in situ and avoid overtly flouting the terms of the agreement. To reduce the risk of a local groundswell against the Hezbollah infiltration, Iran has distributed aid to the local Sunni population. Additionally, Iranian agents have built five religious schools and eight religious centers to raise the profile of Shia Islam in the region, particularly among the vulnerable youth population.
- **Damascus** has long served as the nexus of Iranian operations in the Levant. It is where Iran first deployed large numbers of ground forces, charged ostensibly with protecting the Shia shrine of Sayyida Zeinab. One seminar panelist claimed that Iran and Hezbollah have orchestrated a sectarian-cleansing operation in the neighborhood around the shrine aimed at the eventual expulsion of the district's Sunni residents. According to the panelist, Shia militia members have severely curtailed local Sunnis' access to food and infrastructure and banned the Sunni refugees sheltering in Lebanon from returning to their homes in Damascus. After effectively driving out the bulk of the Sunni population, Iran and its allies legalized the expulsions via a Syrian government regulation known as Law No. 10. The panelist explained that if a refugee claims to own property in Damascus, he or she must return to claim it within 30 days. However, Iran's pro-Shia legal and social engineering prevents many Sunnis from returning to the city. When the refugee is unable to physically claim the property, the government can legally seize and sell it at auction—often to buyers backed by Iran. Iranian agents have also established religious educational centers and Hussainiyat in the district around the Sayyida Zeinab Shrine to propagate Shia religious traditions and ceremonies.

- **Deir Ezzor** is a tribal area with many cross-border ties to Iraq; many of Iran’s efforts in Syria have come to fruition here. With the help of Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces, Iran is successfully propagating its version of Shia political Islam among Shia Arab tribes. Even some local Sunnis have been receptive to Iran’s soft power efforts, accepting jobs and services proffered by Iranian-affiliated Shia religious establishments.

The US has maintained a strategy of not leaving Syria until the last Iranian boot is gone. With an eye to maintaining its influence, even in the face of international pressure, Iran has embraced a soft power strategy aimed at winning over segments of Syrian society. Iran and its Shia militia allies have recruited supporters by exploiting financial need, appealing to ideological and sectarian similarities, and heightening identity politics among targeted segments of the population. This strategy was successful for Hizballah in Lebanon and is proving just as effective in Syria. Although the spread of Iranian influence concerns the Assad regime, the Syrian government is currently not in a position to monitor or regulate Iran’s efforts effectively.

The future of the Iran-Russia partnership

Iran’s relationship with Russia, although problematic from a US perspective, should be neither underestimated nor overstated. The two entities are allies, but discernably diverge on a number of issues. Russia would be more comfortable with a Syrian military security apparatus more malleable to Russian influence and not pursuing its own objectives. The anti-Israel element of Iran’s agenda is particularly problematic for Russia, as the Kremlin values its relationship with Israel. Unless Israel seriously upsets the balance of power in Syria, Russia is not motivated to engage the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) as an adversary. However, Moscow and Tehran are also aligned in several ways: they agree that the government in Damascus must stay, that the Syrian Arab Republic must remain united, and that US influence in the region must be reduced. Russia also appreciates Iran’s help battling ISIS and other extremists in Syria, expecting that victory in Syria would dampen extremist movements in Central Asia, the Caspian Sea region, and the Caucasus. Overall, Russia is content to work with Iran in Syria, but their partnership has significant strategic limitations.

Challenges and considerations for the US

The US faces a difficult situation in Syria. Washington’s interests in the country are scattered, not clearly articulated, and potentially misaligned with those of US regional allies. As the Syrian regime, with Iran and Russia’s help, consolidates its hold over its territory, and the US reduces its footprint on the ground, Washington is likely to lose much of its ability to shape the region post-conflict. At this stage, neither Iran nor Russia appears to be interested in supporting US counterterrorism initiatives. The US military’s only outpost in southern Syria, at Al-Tanf along the Iraqi border, has proven ineffective in stemming Iranian ground supply lines through Iraq to eastern Syria. As one speaker noted, the Iranians have bypassed Al-Tanf, using northern routes along the Euphrates River instead. The matter is further complicated by the large refugee population that has grown around Al-Tanf; international norms and legal conventions oblige the US, as the occupying power, to care for these refugees. The longer the US maintains its presence in Al-Tanf, the more problematic the refugee presence is likely to become from both legal and moral perspectives.

In northern Syria, the US faces an even bigger quandary with the Kurds, who played an indispensable role in defeating ISIS. Washington’s continuing support for the Syrian Democratic Forces and its ongoing military presence in the Syrian northeast pose a serious risk to the US relationship with Turkey. One of the speakers succinctly summarized the challenge facing the US in Syria: American forces are entrenched in a region where withdrawing too much risks ceding the region to Iranian and Russian control, but continuing to engage could engender “mission creep,” as well as diplomatic and military costs.

Conclusion

As the discussion closed, a broad spectrum of questions remained for future analysis:

- What does the future hold for the Syrian Defense Force's prisoners of war, and how does that issue interact with US obligations to humanitarian efforts?
- How does the Golan region figure into Iran and Israel's delicate, adversarial relationship?
- Will the Assad regime's diplomatic calculus change as US forces draw down and inadvertently create more openings for Russia, Iran, and other foreign actors?
- What are the US options for countering Iranian influence in Syria? What opportunities exist among the tribal populations?
- How can the international community address Iran's most problematic incursions into the region? Should Law No. 10 be publicly denounced on the international stage?

This seminar was designed to bring attention to critical ongoing issues in Syria, the ways that Iranian hybrid operations are shaping the situation there, and how these actions affect the future of the United States in the region. For more information on this event or the National Security Seminar series, please contact Ms. Sarah Vogler (voglers@cna.org) or Mr. Doug Jackson (jacksond@cna.org).



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This report was written by CNA's Strategy, Policy, Plans, and Programs Division (SP3).

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