



IRAN: BE CAREFUL WHAT YOU WISH FOR

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The collapse of the regional order in the Middle East, with the subsequent reshuffling of regional balance, has led many to warn of an Iranian land bridge stretching from Iran to the Mediterranean. Indeed, as argued by Professor Vali Nasr, it was regional instability that allowed Iran to enhance its relative power and influence over the region: Iran did not cause, but definitely benefited from the collapse of the old order in the Arab world¹.

In particular, the rise of Daesh across Iraq and Syria was the main justification for Iranian involvement in these two countries. Both the Syrian and the Iraqi campaigns were portrayed as crucial to the prevention of terrorist attacks at home, thus representing a matter of national security. The official narrative of “resistance” outweighed more pragmatic concerns about the negative repercussions on both the financial and the ideological levels of Iran’s involvement abroad. As outlined in this paper, “The handling of the Syria crisis represented the first real example of Iran’s foreign policy being outsourced to the IRGC”².

Iran’s resistance-narrative was not only tied to its counter-terrorism effort but also, more importantly, included Iran’s effort to maintain its strategic depth in the region. The strategy of forward defense – through the use of proxies and the support of friendly governments – was used in order to overcome Iran’s “strategic loneliness”. The loss of Syria would have been detrimental to Tehran’s need to preserve its supply lines and channel of communication with Hezbollah in Lebanon, a crucial element in order to exercise deterrence against enemies in the region, Israel in particular. This was even truer for Iraq: having historically been a significant regional actor for Iran – at various points a foe, a rival, and a strategic partner³ – Iraq could not be lost to Daesh. As its fighters were marching close to the Iranian border, Tehran increased its involvement in the country.

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Today, with Daesh in territorial retreat, Iran maintains its presence – although in different ways – in both Syria and Iraq.

As far as Syria is concerned, the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) maintains a presence aimed at preserving its military gains, but at the same time a parallel diplomatic effort – the so-called Astana process – has been launched by the Iranian Supreme National Security Council in order to bring about ceasefires and pave the way for a negotiated solution to the war⁴. For Iran, the priority is still to preserve Syria's strategic orientation, i.e. keeping it on the "allied side", but at this late stage of the conflict the concern is also to begin extracting dividends from the impressive war effort. It is in this spirit that Iran, as well as other regional players, has begun to eye reconstruction. The award of contracts to construction companies linked to the pasdaran would achieve the double result of compensating the IRGC's war effort and keep Syria close.

In Iraq, the overall strategic objective remains to make sure that Baghdad is strong enough but not too strong: Iran does not want Iraq to represent a threat anymore, whether in the form of an overarching, strong, state or in the form of a fragmented, chaos-prone, entity. Here, the main instrument for Iranian leverage are the Popular Mobilization Units (PMUs), at least those linked to the IRGC such as the Badr Organization, Asaib Ahl al-Haq, and Kataib Hezbollah. Although it is not possible to say that the PMUs are a mere pawn in Iran's hands, it will be equally important in the next months to focus on the evolution of their role vis-à-vis the Iraqi state⁵. Besides the fact that some of them have

already entered politics – thus showing the will to replicate the Hezbollah model – there is another issue to watch: for how long will the marjyya of Najaf, a non-state authority, be able to ensure their allegiance to the state?

Thus, the future of Syria will be inevitably linked to the future evolution of Iran's involvement not only in the region stretching across Syria and Iraq, but more widely in the two countries as a whole. In Syria, the strategy adopted by Damascus and Tehran, in the first phase of the conflict, of radicalizing the opposition ended up fuelling terrorism. At this stage, the genie is out of the bottle but the outcome of next months' negotiations between Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and the rebels will be crucial for the future of the region. In Iraq, the sectarian card played by former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, Tehran's close ally, as well as the politics of retribution carried out by some PMUs in villages inhabited by Sunni Arab tribes, have stained the Iraqi social fabric. The de-politicization of religious identities and the strengthening of the Iraqi national identity, with the transfer of allegiance to the state, will be key to effective state-rebuilding.

As Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif pointed out at the 2017 Munich Security Conference, "the conflicts in Iraq, Syria, Yemen and Bahrain do not have military solutions. Each requires a political solution where no genuine actor is excluded from the process or marginalized in the outcome"⁶. The future of Syria as well as the region, thus also rests on Iran's ability to shape, or its willingness to allow, a truly inclusive post-conflict process.



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 2. A. Bassiri Tabrizi, R. Pantucci (ed), *Understanding Iran's Role in the Syrian Conflict*, RUSI, Occasional Paper, August 2016, p. 3.
 3. D. Esfandiary, A. Tabatabai, "Iran's ISIS Policy", *International Affairs*, vol. 91, no. 1, 2015, pp. 1-15.
 4. Iran's Priorities in a Turbulent Middle East, International Crisis Group, Middle East Report no. 184, 13 April 2018
 5. R. Redaelli, *The Osmotic Path: The PMU and the Iraqi State*, ISPI Commentary, 30 October 2018.
 6. Speech by Iranian Foreign Minister at the Munich Security Conference, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Islamic Republic of Iran, 19/02/2017.