



Discussion Paper (2)

Iran in Syria: Decision-Making Actors, Interests and Priorities

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Introduction

Since the onset of the Syrian crisis in 2011, Iran has provided political, economic and military support to save a friendly government in Damascus and has become a key component of the Syrian equation. Syria's location in the Levant places it at the heart of the Iranian national security doctrine, as Syria is key to maintaining land access to Hezbollah in Lebanon, preventing terrorism from destabilising Iran, and challenging the dominance of Iran's rivals in Syria. However, achieving these goals in Syria is problematic in both the short and long term. Despite their agreement on preserving the Assad government, Tehran is not in full agreement with Moscow and Damascus on a post war political system, the role of Iranian forces, Syrian-Israeli relations, and reconstruction policies and contracts.

Despite the strong positions against the US and the Syrian opposition, Iran is ready to compromise in Syria. Iran has become more accepting of the Syrian opposition playing a role in the future political structure, but such an acceptance is defined by their real power on the ground and conditioned by respecting Iran's interests in Syria. Once the West is ready to accept Iran's interests in Syria and include Iran in the UN peace process in Geneva, the Islamic Republic could relax its positions on post-war political and military structures, which would significantly contribute to ensuring a peaceful political transition in Syria.

Iranian Decision-Making Actors in the Syrian Case

Multiple Iranian institutions coordinate their efforts to manage the Iranian military and diplomatic involvement in Syria. These are the Supreme Leader's Office, the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), the Ministry of Defence (MoD), Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), the Supreme National Security Council, and the National Security and Foreign Policy Commission in the Iranian Parliament.

Given the existence of an Islamic aspect, the Iranian Supreme Leader, as the symbol of Islamism in the Islamic Republic, plays the key role in determining the general outlines of Iran's Middle East and Syria policy. Ayatollah Khamenei generally sees the Syrian crisis as a foreign [conspiracy](#) against Iran and the *Axis of Resistance* propagated by the United States and its regional allies. As such, supporting Damascus is of vital importance for Iran, mainly because the fall of the Assad government would have a significantly negative impact on the anti-Israel front in the Middle East.

Iran's involvement in Syria occurred in stages. In the beginning of the crisis Iran did not [intend](#) to intervene directly, but focused instead on providing political support to Assad. Nonetheless, Assad's resort to violence to suppress the opposition has led to militarization that invited the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) to come to the Syrian government's assistance. Later, the rise of ISIS and Nusra Front, with their connections to other violence groups in Iraq, highlighted the risk of the spread of terrorist activities into the Iranian territories, which then lead to the increased role of IRGC's elite Quds Forces in Syria.

The Ministry of Defence is not independent of the IRGC, but rather has been defined in connection with it. However, in the political sphere, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has been tasked with [translating](#) military achievements into political and diplomatic gains within the Astana framework. Meanwhile, the Supreme National Security Council bears the task of coordinating all aspects of Iran's Syria policy within the framework of the Islamic Republic's

general policies. The council is presided over by the Iranian president, while its secretary is introduced by the president and confirmed by the Supreme Leader.

The National Security and Foreign Policy Commission in the Iranian Parliament is another actor that influences Iran's Syria policy by monitoring both military and political aspects of the issue, although its role is comparably intangible and less important than other institutions.

Iran's Interests and Priorities in Syria

Iran's main interests and priorities in the Syrian crisis are preserving the Assad government, maintaining the land access to Hezbollah in Lebanon via Syria and Iraq, combating terrorism, and preventing the dominance of rivals in Syria.

The decades-long "alliance" between the Assad family and Iran is a driving factor behind Tehran's adamant and comprehensive support to Damascus. This support is not necessarily for Assad himself, but more for lack of an alternative that could guarantee Iranian's interests in the Levant. Assad has so far been the [only option](#) to satisfy these conditions.

Iran perceives that keeping Hezbollah forces prepared at the Israeli border is a deterrent to any potential Israeli aggression to the Iranian mainland. Iran takes the Israeli decade-long [threats](#) to its nuclear program seriously, and to counteract this threat, protecting Hezbollah is part of the Iranian defensive strategy. Iran's concern over terrorism in Syria could be understood by the connection between the terrorist groups in Iraq and Syria and their activities in Iran's immediate neighbourhood. Iran's security approach has changed since the end of the Iran-Iraq war, and is now [focused](#) on eradicating threats at their source, instead of fighting them at its borders. This explains Iran's assertion on the need to eradicate all the terrorist groups inside Syria.

A main objective of Iran is to maintain the current status quo with regards to the borders in the Middle East. This is related to Iran's concerns over separationist tendencies within some Kurdish and Arab groups inside the country. Iran considers fragmenting the Middle East as an American [plot](#) to weaken Muslim countries by dividing them into smaller states. Iran is concerned that a change in the regional balance of power would be detrimental to its interests. Iran believes that any changes in the balance of power in the regional subsystem of the Levant would result in a subsequent power shift in the wider Middle East, with uncertain power shifts towards [Saudi Arabia](#) and Turkey and their Sunni Arab allies.

Iran and its Allies: Syrian Government and Russia

Iran's current support for Damascus does not mean they share the same vision for the future of their relationship. The Syrian government [does not want](#) its territory to become a battlefield for a direct or proxy war between Iran and the US or Israel. In the event that Assad maintains his power at the end of the war, Iranian officials do not expect his government to simply become the Islamic Republic's subordinate. Another point of disagreement is the extent to which the Syrian government is willing to cooperate with Iran in the reconstruction of Syria. Damascus has so far shown more [willingness](#) toward cooperating with Russia than Iran, especially in reconstructing the energy infrastructures, where Iran has more expertise.

In addition, the close partnership between Iran and Russia does not imply a complete coordination of policies between the two countries on Syria. Currently, Iran and Russia align on preserving Assad's rule over the country as a [tactical](#) objective for both, with more longer-term importance for Iran, combating terrorism and shortening the duration of the US presence in Syria

given Iran's opposition to Washington's role in the Middle East, and Russia's power rivalry with the US in the wider international context.

The differences between Iran and Russia include the future political structure of Syria, the future role of the Iranian-backed forces, the future role of opposition forces in the army, Syrian-Israel relations and post-war reconstruction contracts. For the political structure, Russia is more tolerant of a sort of federalism in Syria, whereas Iran opposes the idea and perceives it as a threat to territorial integrity, and to Damascus' central control. For the role of Iranian backed-forces, Russia perceives them as an impediment to creating a fully centralised, secular, and Moscow-dependent military and security structure in Syria. Iran, however, seeks to maintain at least a minimum level of ideological orientation in the Syrian army, as well as to continue its influence via the role of armed Shia groups through a more decentralised army structure.

Russia and Iran also disagree on the definition of opposition forces. While Russia defines some of the groups as moderates and eligible to have a role in the transitional process, Iran considers them terrorists to be eliminated. Iran's attempt to preserve the anti-Israel orientation in the future government of Syria is another point with which Russia disagrees. Finally, there is an on-going implicit Iranian-Russian competition over reconstruction contracts of Syria, which could further complicate their future relationship.

Will a Compromise be Possible?

Realities on the ground have changed Iranian perceptions of the Syrian military and political opposition. For some time after the outbreak of the Syrian crisis, Iran considered all anti-Assad armed groups as *terrorists*, and denied any political role for the opposition outside of Syria. Working with Russia and Turkey in the Astana framework has helped to alter this position. Iran has now fundamentally accepted the role of the opposition, while simultaneously attempting to contain them. Any political share to be given to the opposition should be based on realities on the ground and the real weight of each group or faction.

Based on the above, it appears that, with regard to Syria's future political structure, Iran would agree with the possible formation of a structure based on a *power sharing* system among different ethnic and religious factions, similar to Lebanon and Iraq. In such a scenario, Iran would be able to preserve its role and influence in the future of Syria by working with some pro-Iran factions in the government.

However, whether or not Iran is willing to work with the US in Syria will depend heavily on the willingness of the US to consider Iran's basic interests and concerns. Thus, if Iran were included in different multilateral political and diplomatic structures regarding Syria, particularly the Geneva Peace Process, a cooperative stance from the Iranian side regarding the future of Syria could be expected. Otherwise, Iran would most probably resort to unilateral actions – both directly and via its supported groups – to preserve its interest. This scenario would not only add to the complexities of the Syrian crisis, but also bears the risk of escalation between Iran and the US and Israel.