



Syria Transition Challenges Project

Discussion Paper (9)

Iran's Involvement in Syria during the COVID-19 Pandemic: Continuity or Change?

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The Geneva Centre for Security Policy (GCSP)

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A multilateral dialogue and research project that aims to build bridges between the EU, Russia, Turkey, and the US on the three issues of Reform, Refugees Return, and Reconstruction. The project is run by the GCSP in collaboration with European University Institute (EUI), Syrian Centre for Policy Research (SCPR), and swisspeace.

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Introduction

Iran is trying to maintain its political and military position in Syria until it recovers from the impact of COVID-19. Protection of its interests via securing Damascus, driving out the military forces of the United States, and maintaining control of the areas that allow access to Lebanon (and the Eastern Mediterranean) are still priorities. The deteriorating economic situation and the slump in oil prices will most likely relax Iran's control over its proxies in Syria, such as the Fatemiyoun and local tribes existing in Deir ez-Zor. The consolidation of the Turkish military presence in Idlib and the northeast will only make Iran more determined to expel American forces after the COVID-19 crisis subsides. The real challenge for Iran is losing the competition with Russia over influence in the security and economic sectors in Syria.

Iran's Defence Budget Under Pressure

Iran has been the worst-hit country in the Middle East by COVID-19 in terms of number of deaths. This has meant that almost all sections of the Iranian establishment have focused their attention on the crisis. As of 23 May 2020, more than 131,500 people have been infected with COVID-19, with a death toll of 7300.¹ The pandemic, and the subsequent lockdown measures to curb its spread, have also created new economic challenges for a country already struggling with plummeting oil prices and increasing US sanctions.

The Iranian administration developed the country's budget for the current fiscal year (21st of March 2020 to 21st of March 2021) based on an estimated breakeven oil price of \$50 per barrel and an average export of 1 million barrels per day (bpd).² However, not only has the actual price of Iranian oil dropped to less than one-third of this estimate, but a combination of US sanctions and decreased global demand for the commodity has caused Iran's oil exports to decrease by 60% (average 70,000 bpd in April, down from 287,000 bpd in March).³ Moreover, Iran's non-oil export for the period between March 21 and April 21 [decreased by 36%](#).⁴

The Islamic Republic is expected to experience a considerable deficit in its 2020/2021 budget, creating challenges for the pursuit of its domestic and external objectives. This is also expected to influence Iran's operations in Syria as defence expenditure will be hit. Indeed, as the face of the Islamic Republic's involvement in the Syrian crisis, the Islamic Revolutionary

¹ Coronavirus: Iran reopens Shia Muslim shrines after two-month closure, BBC, 25 May 2020 (accessed in 25 May 2020). <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-52797959>

² سناریو برای درآمدهای نفتی ایران در سال ۹۹/کاهش ۵۰ درصدی اعتبار برای دلار ۴۲۰۰ تومانی! +جنول، اقتصاد نیوز، ۱۵ اردیبهشت ۱۳۹۹ (تاریخ بازدید: ۵ خرداد ۱۳۹۹). <https://bit.ly/2B0gQLs>

³ Alex Lawler, Hit by Coronavirus and Trump, Iran's Oil Exports Dwindle to Record Low, Reuters, 14 May 2020 (accessed in 25 May 2020). <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-oil/hit-by-coronavirus-and-trump-irans-oil-exports-dwindle-to-record-low-idUSKBN22Q0U3>

⁴ عباس آرگون، آسیب‌های تجارت خارجی فروردین ۹۹ حاصل چه بود؟، دنیای اقتصاد، ۳۱ اردیبهشت ۱۳۹۹ (تاریخ بازدید: ۵ خرداد ۱۳۹۹). <https://bit.ly/3ghsIsJ>

Guard Corps (IRGC) is not entirely dependent on the state budget and has its own independent income sources from conducting infrastructural projects to running numerous well-capitalized firms and conglomerates. However, the economic situation has also created economic difficulties for the IRGC. In this vein, Parviz Fattah, the head of the Mostazafan Foundation of Islamic Revolution (a semi-governmental foundation, which is owned by the Supreme Leader's office and is the second-largest commercial enterprise in Iran), recently confirmed in a controversial interview that the IRGC has had difficulties in paying salaries to its proxy groups in Syria.⁵

Thus, Iran has begun to adjust its activities in Syria within the context of its new financial restraints. The changing *modus operandi* of the other actors involved in the Syrian crisis has also compelled the Islamic Republic to adjust its activities inside Syria. The current situation has already convinced Iran to reduce its military activities in Syria and this situation is expected to last until the end of the COVID-19 crisis, if not longer. However, this does not mean a change in Iran's priorities in Syria or a shift in Tehran's attitude toward its main interests. Iran still sees the return of the entire Syrian territory to the control of the central government, as well as keeping Assad in power, as its top priorities. Trying to end the American military presence in Syria will also remain among Iran's main objectives.

Challenges for Iran's role in Syria amid the COVID-19 crisis

The deteriorating economic situation is the most imminent challenge facing Iran in Syria. This could be especially reflected in Iran's decreased financial resources to sustain the operations of its allied and proxy groups. This is also expected to complicate Iran's long-term plans to assume an active role in Syria's economic reconstruction. However, the COVID-19 crisis could also impact power equations among the other actors involved in Syria, thereby making the Islamic Republic's concern about its status vis-à-vis its rivals more important. The same is also true for Russia, its main partner in Syria.

- Impacts on the proxies

One of the main elements of Iran-backed forces operating in Syria has been the Afghan and Pakistani fighters affiliated to the Fatemiyoun and Zainebiyoun Brigades.⁶ Unlike Lebanese Hezbollah forces and the Iraqi Popular Mobilization Units (PMU), which have strong ideological ties with the Islamic Republic, the Fatemiyoun and Zainebiyoun Brigades consist

⁵ Former IRGC Official Says Soleimani Asked Him For Money To Pay Proxies In Syria, Radio Farda, 6 April 2020 (accessed in 25 May 2020). <https://en.radiofarda.com/a/former-irgc-official-says-soleimani-asked-him-for-money-to-pay-proxies-in-syria/30532758.html>

⁶ سینا فرهادی، بازدید قائلانی از خطوط مقدم سوریه همزمان با تداوم تلفات مبارزان در گروه‌های شبه‌نظامی مورد حمایت ایران، المشارق، ۲۳ خرداد (تاریخ بازدید: ۵ خرداد ۱۳۹۹). https://almashareq.com/fa/articles/cnmi_am/features/2020/03/27/feature-01

of mercenary forces, who need to be consistently financed by Tehran. Restricted financial resources mean that Iran will have increasing problems to keep these forces satisfied. It is also worth remembering that providing financial incentives for local tribes has been one of the factors that has strengthened Iran's influence in areas like Deir ez-Zor.⁷ Reducing financial incentives could weaken the commitment of these tribes.

The anti-pandemic protection measures have also restricted the mobility of forces within Syria. In addition, there are incidents where a significant number of Hezbollah and PMU forces operating in Syria return to their home countries to help fighting the virus outbreak in Lebanon and Iraq.⁸

- *Impact on Iran's reconstruction plans*

Declining economic resources could also influence Iran's plans to play a role in Syria's economic reconstruction. Since 2018, Iran has managed to sign a number of important economic agreements with the Syrian government.⁹ The agreements cover a range of sectors from transportation to construction and energy. However, most of these agreements are yet to be implemented, and a reduction in Iran's financial resources could delay their implementation by at least 2-3 years. According to earlier announcements,¹⁰ Iran was expected to take over the management of the cargo port of Latakia on Syria's Mediterranean coast by 20 March 2020. However, this plan has been delayed.

- *Changing power equations*

Tehran's main concern is that rivalling actors may take advantage of the current situation and try to expand their influence in Syria to Iran's detriment. In northern Syria, Iran has been worried about Turkey's actions to strengthen its foothold in the region. Since the March 5th ceasefire deal between Moscow and Ankara, Turkey has increased the number of its observation posts in Idlib province.¹¹ Ankara has also set up a military base on the Tal Abyad-Raqqah highway.¹² This means that it is becoming more difficult for the Syrian Army and its allies to

⁷ Hamidreza Azizi, Iran's Multi-Faceted Strategy in Deir ez-Zor: From Fighting Terrorism to Creating a Zone of Influence, SWP, 15 March 2020 (accessed in 25 May 2020). <https://www.swp-berlin.org/en/publication/irans-multi-faceted-strategy-in-deir-ez-zor/>

⁸ Eric Knecht, Hezbollah Asserts Role in Lebanon's Coronavirus Fight, Reuters, 1 April 2020 (accessed in 25 May 2020). <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-lebanon-hezbollah/hezbollah-asserts-role-in-lebanons-coronavirus-fight-idUSKBN21J537> and Tamer Badawi, Iraq's PMU Throws Weight Behind Countering COVID-19, Al-Monitor, 8 April 2020 (accessed in 25 May 2020). <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/03/iraq-pmu-coronavirus-covid19.html>

⁹ Hamidreza Azizi and Leonid Issaev, Russian and Iranian Economic Interests In Syria (Pre-2010 and intra-war period), GCSP and Omran for Strategic Studies (a Discussion Paper for the Workshop on 'the Politics and Modalities of Reconstruction in Syria', Geneva, Switzerland, 7-8 February 2019). <https://dam.gcsp.ch/files/2y10nlGNueBJ3zh4kU5wS7N66uuFm35TYDmJjO9jyzKVQYbDoO7vybkfq>

¹⁰ واگذارى مدیریت بندر لاذقیه سوریه به ایران اجرایی می‌شود، دویچه وله فارسی، ۲۹ فروردین ۱۳۹۹ (تاریخ بازدید: ۵ خرداد ۱۳۹۹). <https://www.dw.com/fa-ir/iran/a-49470922>

¹¹ Turkey Increases Military Observation Posts to 56 in Idlib, Asharq Al-Awsat, 7 April 2020 (accessed in 25 May 2020). <https://english.aawsat.com/home/article/2220736/turkey-increases-military-observation-posts-56-idlib>

¹² Turkish Forces Set Up Military Base in Rural Tal Abyad, The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, 18 April 2020 (accessed in 25 May 2020). <https://www.syriaahr.com/en/?p=160647>

retake Idlib and ultimately Syria's north-eastern areas. One of Iran's main goals entering the conflict in Idlib was to facilitate a rapid takeover of the whole north-western territory, so that Syrian and Iranian forces could be freed up to next advance east of the Euphrates for an ultimate face-off with the American and US-backed forces stationed in the area.¹³

In the southern and central parts of Syria, what concerns Tehran is the persistent Israeli attacks against Iranian and Iran-linked positions. It is perceived that Israel is trying to seize the opportunity provided by Iran's struggle with COVID-19. In less than a month since the outbreak of the pandemic in Iran, Israel has targeted Iran-linked positions in Syria's Homs province at least twice.¹⁴ Israel has also stepped up its attacks against Lebanese Hezbollah commanders active in Syria.¹⁵

Thus, as far as Iran is concerned, the most likely area of conflict for a potential escalation is southern and central Syria, where Israel has been trying to eliminate the Islamic Republic's influence. Iran has so far been patient and silent in the face of Israeli attacks. However, if these attacks cause serious damage, e.g. the killing of high-ranking Iranian military commanders, there is a high likelihood of a dangerous escalation.

In northern Syria, the likelihood of a conflict between Iran and Turkey, which has escalated during the Syrian army's operation in February, has been considerably reduced. With regard to Idlib, Iran is expected to return to its former policy of refraining from getting directly involved and relying on the Astana process to limit Turkey's expansionism.¹⁶ This will cause a significant delay in Syrian-Iranian plans for fully retaking Idlib and advancing toward east of the Euphrates as a next step.

As a result, Russia is expected to maintain its upper hand in resolving the Idlib question and any new military campaigns by the Syrian government to recapture Idlib is expected to be gradual. This is also an indication of a gradual change in the nature of Iran's partnership with Russia in Syria. In fact, Russia, uncomfortable with the expansion of Iran's influence in Syria's military and security structures, has already taken steps to reduce the mobility of Iran-backed

¹³ ولایتی: خواب آشفته رئیس جمهور آمریکا به کابوس تبدیل می‌شود، ایسنا، ۱۰ بهمن ۱۳۹۸ (تاریخ بازدید: ۵ خرداد ۱۳۹۹). <https://bit.ly/3gl3B8f>

¹⁴ Syrian Media Says Israeli War Planes Attack Near Homs, The Times of Israel, 21 March 2020 (accessed in 25 May 2020). <https://www.timesofisrael.com/syrian-media-says-israeli-war-planes-attack-near-homs/> and, Syria Reports Israeli Airstrike on Targets in Homs Province, The Times of Israel, 21 April 2020 (accessed in 25 May 2020). <https://www.timesofisrael.com/syria-reports-israeli-airstrike-on-targets-in-homs-province/>

¹⁵ Seth J. Frantzman, Are Israeli Drones Targeting Hezbollah Officers In Syria?, The National Interest, 17 April 2020 (accessed in 25 May 2020). <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/middle-east-watch/are-israeli-drones-targeting-hezbollah-officers-syria-144947>

¹⁶ Hamidreza Azizi, Why Iran has been Quiet when it Comes to Syria's Idlib, Safe Zone, Al-Monitor, 26 August 2019 (accessed in 25 May 2020). <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2019/08/iran-silent-developments-idlib-syria-russia.html>

forces in Syria under the pretext of containing COVID-19.¹⁷ If this continues, Iran's influence in Syria's military and security sectors will be significantly impacted.

Iran response to the challenges

Attempting to address current challenges was one of the main reasons for Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif's visit to Damascus on 20 April, where he met with high-ranking Syrian officials, including President Assad.¹⁸ At the meeting, the Syrian President emphasised the need for preventing Turkey from using the ceasefire to expand its influence in Syria.¹⁹

Iran is concerned that if the new status quo that emerged as a result of the March 5th bilateral Russian-Turkish agreement lasts for a long time, the trilateral Astana format and Iran's role in it might gradually wane. This was the main reason for Iran's insistence on holding a [video-conference] meeting of Astana foreign ministers on 22 April,²⁰ so that there would be no interruption to the diplomatic process.²¹ However, the overall reduction of face-to-face diplomatic meetings as a result of COVID-19 complicates interactions between the Astana parties, as online meetings are perceived as being unfit for serious diplomatic exchanges, and especially, making joint decisions.

Despite these difficulties, Iran is expected to continue insisting on its role in the process of Syria's post-war transition, increasing its efforts to play a role in drafting a new constitution. It is important to note that Iran has not been able – or willing – to find an alternative to Assad for the future of Syria. As a result, Iran's desire to play a more active role in the process of drafting the constitution will be reflected in actively supporting the positions of the Syrian government.

Meanwhile, despite the possibility of a significant reduction in its military operations in Syria, Iran will continue seeking to maintain its hold in some strategically important parts of Syria. The Syrian-Iraqi border areas in Deir ez-Zor province are particularly important, as maintaining control over these areas is crucial for Iran's long-term plans to secure a land access to the Mediterranean. Thus, the COVID-19 crisis is not expected to lead to the withdrawal of

¹⁷ Anton Mardasov, Is COVID-19 Changing Astana Allies' Dynamics in Syria?, Al-Monitor, 31 March 2020 (accessed in 25 May 2020). <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/03/russia-iran-syria-turkey-coronavirus-subversion.html>

¹⁸ FM Zarif, Syrian President Meet in Damascus, the official website of Iran's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 20 April 2020 (accessed in 25 May 2020). <https://en.mfa.ir/portal/newsview/592145/FM-Zarif-Syrian-President-Meet-in-Damascus>

¹⁹ Zarif Hits Out at US's Refusal to Lift Sanctions on Iran, Syria, Aljazeera English, 20 April 2020 (accessed in 25 May 2020). <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/04/zarif-hits-refusal-lift-sanctions-iran-syria-200420151442389.html>

²⁰ Astana Ministerial Meeting Focused on Idlib, The Financial Tribune, 22 April 2020 (accessed in 25 May 2020). <https://financialtribune.com/articles/national/102987/astana-ministerial-meeting-focused-on-idlib>

²¹ ظریف: روند آستانه تنها سازوکار کاهش خشونت و ایجاد ثبات در سوریه است، ایلنا، ۱۴ اسفند ۱۳۹۸ (تاریخ بازدید: ۵ خرداد ۱۳۹۹). <https://bit.ly/36sdZq4>

Iran and Iranian-backed forces from the areas currently under their control in Syria. However, due to the deteriorating economic conditions, the Islamic Republic is likely to face challenges.

As for the increased Israeli attacks against Iranian positions, the Islamic Republic does not appear to have any specific or emergency plan to take action against Israel. Meanwhile, Iran has started to redeploy and reposition some of its forces to make them less vulnerable to Israeli attacks.²² However, this does not mean that Israel's military pressure has been successful in convincing Iran to withdraw its forces from Syria or to reconsider its military presence in the country.

Does the COVID-19 crisis present an opportunity for Iran's reconciliation with the West?

Although Iran's long-term plans for Syria –military, economic or political– are not expected to change as a result of COVID-19, the current situation may offer some opportunities for a (limited) reconciliation between Iran and the West regarding Syria. Iran's shifting focus from purely military to political measures could be an opportunity for the West. Yet, Tehran's insistence on the Astana process as the only viable format for resolving the Syrian crisis is due to its lack of other options to play a diplomatic role in Syria. At the same time, Iran's hard-line insistence on this issue has made a possible integration of the Astana formats into other political frameworks, such as the Geneva process, more difficult. If Iran shows a valid commitment to the political process, its inclusion in the other international frameworks could increase their chance for success.

Meanwhile, a very important development in Syria since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has been the apparent efforts by the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) to take advantage of the situation to ramp up attacks. In the past few months, ISIS terrorist cells have conducted several attacks in Syria.²³ This is thought to be due the major actors in Syria focusing their attention on tackling the COVID-19 at home. As a result, the longer the COVID-19 pandemic, the more likely that ISIS would intensify its activities in Syria. This would result in a new round of instability and insecurity in Syria. Attempting to prevent the revival of a common enemy could be considered as common ground between Iran and the West, increasing the likelihood of cooperation in Syria.

²² Iranian Militias and Hezbollah Redeploy their Troops in Southern Syria, Enab Baladi, 24 May 2020 (accessed in 25 May 2020). <https://english.enabbaladi.net/archives/2020/05/iranian-militias-and-hezbollah-redeploy-their-troops-in-southern-syria/>

²³ Charles Lister, ISIS' Attack in Syria's Badiya is Just the Beginning, Asharq Al-Awsat, 17 April 2020 (accessed in 25 May 2020). <https://english.aawsat.com/home/article/2239261/charles-lister/isis%e2%80%99-attack-syria%e2%80%99s-badiya-just-beginning>