



Syria Transition Challenges Project

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Syria in the US and Israeli debate on Iran

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The Geneva Centre for Security Policy (GCSP)

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Syria Transition Challenges Project

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

With presidential elections in the United States underway in November 2020, the only possible scenarios for Washington in the Middle East are either continuation and solidification, or a change in its Iran policy, each with different potential impacts on the geopolitical conflict between the United States, Israel, and allied Arab countries on one side and Iran and its regional Axis-of-Resistance on the other. Analysing current convergences and divergences between the United States and Israel on Syria and Iran is important to anticipate potential changes in both countries' positions following the US election, as such changes may impact the effectiveness and even the prospect of the continuation of the United States' so-called 'Maximum Pressure' campaign. The policies of the two countries on Syria and Iran became varyingly intertwined as Iran entrenched itself deeply in Syria. Nonetheless, it is important to note that Israel and the United States differ in their approaches to tackling Syria.

This contribution attempts to assess the US campaign against Iran, the cost it is likely to have inflicted upon it in Syria, and the outlook of an agreement with Iran. Although we are considering US policy on Iran, the analysis here also includes the Israeli perspective. Private conversations with Israeli current and former officials have provided important insights into how Israeli officials see US policy in Syria and vis-à-vis Iran, and can add a unique contribution to the dialogue.

In this analysis, we sought to address several issues. First, whether there are any incentives for Iran to concede to US demands or reach a meaningful bargain, and whether under a Biden¹ or Trump administration a new Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) could be renegotiated to include Iranian expansion in the region. We also examined the form and incentives structure that could entice Iran to offer a constructive contribution to the stability of Syria and the region. In addition, we assessed to what extent the Maximum Pressure campaign affects Iran, and whether targeting Syria with sanctions would incentivise both the Syrian government and the Syrian locals (who are working with Iran as fighters) to break with Iran. Finally, assuming that Iran is in Syria to protect its own interests, we question whether more threats to Tehran would lead to reduced presence in Syria.

The Iran–Syria disconnection in US policy

Despite the effect of the United States' Iran policy on Syria, American analysts close to White House and US State Department policy circles have acknowledged in private conversations that President Donald Trump sees no connection between his administration's policies in Syria and

¹ This paper was written before the US presidential elections of 2020.

Iran. His advisers praise the sanctions on Iran as having squeezed Iranian forces in Syria,² but the President's calculations on Syria do not make this link. According to analysts, US policy on Syria is "confused", with essentially a "tug of war" occurring between Trump and his advisers over the administration's calculus in Syria. The President only wants to fulfil his promise to end wars and bring troops home; a large segment of his advisers, on the other hand, argue that the United States learned how to be effective in Syria with a small number of troops and by relying on partners and proxies. In addition, it seems the President has a "blind spot" when it comes to Turkey because he overestimates President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's will and ability to help the United States achieve its objectives. How that affects the United States' ability to push back against Iran in Syria remains an unsolved question and one that does not seem to concern the White House.³ Such an Iran–Syria dichotomy could also occur under an administration led by President Elect Joe Biden, but for different reasons. On one hand, progressives in the Democratic Party are likely to pressure Biden to withdraw from Syria. On the other hand, policy professionals such as former Deputy Secretary of State and former Deputy National Security Advisor, Antony Blinken, possibly the next National Security Advisor, has expressed regrets not doing more for Syria under the Obama administration, and has already said that there would be no troop withdrawal from Syria, although he still has not articulated a clear Syria policy.⁴

Finally, while the Trump administration and Netanyahu's government have been fully aligned in terms of their Iran policy, including on the Maximum Pressure campaign, Israeli analysts do not necessarily see eye-to-eye on Syria in the way they do on Iran. The US team concerned with Syria at least frames their motivation partially as moral, hoping that it will lead to a political process and that it will force President Bashar al-Assad to step down eventually.⁵ Israelis, despite their views of Assad's brutality, have long ago come to terms with his staying in power and wish to see stability on their northern front. For this reason, although they have not been public about it, they question the merit of US sanctions on Syria.⁶

The Goal and Impact of the Maximum Pressure Campaign on Iran's Presence in Syria

The current US approach to Iran, which enjoys full Israeli backing, known as the 'Maximum Pressure' campaign, —is predicated upon crippling economic sanctions, according to some accounts, aimed at making Iran compromise its positions and, by other accounts, designed to lead

² Elizabeth Hagedorn, "Intel: US sanctions squeezing Iranian forces in Syria, says US envoy", *AI-Monitor*, 12 May 2020, https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/05/iran-sanctions-syria-james-jeffrey_amp.html?skipWem=1

³ An interview with a US think tank analyst in Washington, October 2020

⁴ "Joe Biden foreign policy adviser Antony Blinken on COVID shortfalls, failures in Syria," *CBS News*, May 20, 2020

<https://www.cbsnews.com/news/transcript-joe-biden-foreign-policy-adviser-antony-blinken-on-covid-shortfalls-failures-in-syria/>

⁵ An interview with a US think tank analyst in Washington, October 2020

⁶ An interview with a former official with Israel's National Security Council (NSC), October 2020

to capitulation and regime collapse in Tehran. From the US perspective, the approach is meant to make the Islamic Republic face a stark choice between its own survival and the abandonment of its nuclear ambitions and foreign aggression (and some would add grave human rights violations). In that regard, the approach is incremental with the expectation that, beyond a certain tipping point, the Iranian establishment would have no choice but to concede to US demands to ensure its own survival.⁷

In the Syrian context (as well as the Iraqi context that is beyond the scope of this paper), one of the goals of the Maximum Pressure campaign is to prevent Iran from bankrolling the Syrian government and Shia militias.⁸ Publicly, officials such as US special envoy for Syria policy and the fight against the Islamic State James Jeffrey have said that Iran has reined in its forces in Syria as a result of US-imposed economic pressure.⁹ And, indeed, former officials in the United States and Israel, interestingly representing both pro-Maximum Pressure as well as sceptics, acknowledge some erosion of Iran's ability to support the Syrian government. Yet, some officials have pointed out that it is difficult to measure the effect of sanctions and attribute causality to Maximum Pressure alone (without also considering military strikes; lack of ongoing fighting, which allows Tehran to have greater leeway; and the impact of the assassination of Qassem Soleimani, among other factors). One of the difficulties in estimating the extent to which Tehran's contributions in Syria have been scaled down stems from problems assessing their contributions prior to the inaction of the campaign – different reports cite figures ranging from \$7 to \$20 billion since 2011 up until the implementation of the Maximum Pressure campaign. The Foundation for Defense of Democracies (FDD) estimated the figure to be roughly \$15 billion in one year during the height of the push to retake the strategic city of Aleppo. It is also difficult to monetise accurately rotating deployment of thousands of troops.¹⁰ Although US press featured reports about the Lebanese paramilitary Hezbollah paying its people less due to economic sanctions on Iran, some Washington-based analysts who favour sanctions doubt these stories, and have dismissed them as anecdotal.

Israeli officials are in principle very supportive of the Maximum Pressure approach, but they know that its effectiveness is limited. In 2017, Israelis believed that the campaign would affect all elements of Iranian behaviour – including Iran's military-economic entrenchment in Syria – but exclude the nuclear programme.¹¹ Nonetheless, they did not assume that financial pressure alone

⁷ Mark Dubowitz and Behnam Ben Taleblu, "Two years on, the Trump Administration's Iran policy continues to make sense", Foundation for Defense of Democracies Insight, 7 May 2020, <https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2020/05/07/trump-administration-iran-policy-still-makes-sense/>

⁸ An interview with a US think tank analyst in Washington, October 2020

⁹ Hagedorn, Al-Monitor, May 12, 2020

¹⁰ An interview with a US think tank analyst in Washington, October 2020

¹¹ An interview with an Israeli former intelligence official, October 2020

would solve their Iran problem in Syria. Therefore, Israel's current strategy in Syria includes four elements, each of which, according to Israelis, contributes to the degradation of Iranian capabilities in Syria: 1) support for the US Maximum Pressure campaign; 2) airstrikes on Iranian and proxy targets; 3) strikes adjacent to Syrian facilities (with the aim of threatening Damascus and pushing it to re-evaluate its consent to Iranian military activity on Syrian soil);¹² and 4) working with Russia to limit Iran's deployments and operations.

In terms of economic sanctions, Israeli officials believe that the Maximum Pressure campaign is helping to limit Iran's involvement in Syria. Israelis claim that the reduction in forces is notable and, further, that comparison of early intelligence revealing Iran's plans in Syria with Syria's inability to implement such plans is indicative of the success of economic pressure.¹³ Even sceptics admit that financial sanctions on Iran have made it more difficult for Tehran to support proxy and allied forces abroad, including Hezbollah and Iraqi militias, for simple reason – that less money is available. On the other hand, Israeli press reported in May that Iran is significantly reducing its military footprint in Syria and closing bases due to the escalation of Israeli airstrikes and not necessarily only financial deficiencies.¹⁴ Israeli analysts and former officials say that both assertions are overblown, and that it is the combination of these elements, in addition to the absence of significant ongoing fighting, that has led to the recent reconsolidation of Iranian military presence in Syria.¹⁵

Indeed, the leeway that Iran has enjoyed in Syria is now more limited, yet numbers do not reflect the full picture. Outside official circles, analysts are doubtful that financial pressure can affect Iran's core capabilities, motivations, and strategic thinking in Syria. They liken it to an onion – the external peel layers are damaged but the core remains intact; Tehran maintains its ability to affect strategic decision-making in Damascus as well as its operational tactical capabilities.¹⁶

Economic Sanctions on Syria and Their Effect on Iran

US officials and analysts say in public and private discussions that the economic sanctions on Syria should also have an impact on Iranian calculations in Syria. The Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act (known as the Caesar Act) sanctions governments or private companies that conduct financial transactions with the Syrian government, thus making Iranian involvement in Syria even more costly. Coupled with the Maximum Pressure campaign, these sanctions add another financial burden on Iran, which is assumed to increase the campaign's impact, pushing

¹² Judah Ari Gross, "Defense officials: Iran pulling out of Syria as Israel pummels its forces there", *The Times of Israel*, 5 May 2020, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/defense-officials-iran-pulling-out-of-syria-as-israel-pummels-its-forces-there/>

¹³ An interview with a current official with Israel's NSC, October 2020

¹⁴ Gross, *The Times of Israel*, May 5, 2020

¹⁵ An interview with an Israeli former intelligence official, October 2020

¹⁶ An interview with an Israeli former intelligence official, October 2020

Iran to eventually re-evaluate its continued presence in Syria. Despite not having achieved this goal yet, advocates of the sanctions approach call for “more of the same”.¹⁷ Ultimately, they hope, this dual pressure will force Iran to choose between its own survival and that of Assad’s, and force it to leave Syria. They see it as a long game of who blinks first, one that will lead to change once the environment is altered and Russia shifts its priorities. However, even advocates of this approach admit that President Trump is unconvinced by this linkage, between Syria and Iran policies, thereby leading to farcical decision-making on this issue.¹⁸

While Israeli officials do not publicly cast doubt on the US approach to Syria, behind closed doors they are critical of the policy. Israel is content with Assad remaining in power and seeks stability in Syria. Israelis are sceptical of the effectiveness of using only financial sanctions to completely push Tehran out of Syria and focus instead on minimising volatility on its northern border. Some Israelis are concerned about the Caesar sanctions, which they see as hindering Syrian reconstruction and effectively pushing the Syrians even further into Tehran’s arms.¹⁹ It has been reported that professional analysts within the Israeli government tried to make this claim to their American counterparts last year and examined ways to link Damascus with other Arab countries to reduce the Syrian government’s dependency on Tehran, but they were snubbed by the US side and since then have kept quiet so as to not upset the “friendliest U.S. administration Israel has ever had”.²⁰ US analysts dismiss this criticism, arguing that Assad and Iran cannot get any closer anyway.²¹ They believe that Iran (and Russia) demonstrated their loyalty to Syria and that there is no real prospect of Gulf or other countries replacing Tehran in Syria.²² This illustrates the difference between the US and Israeli perspective on Syria. It also demonstrates another problem – that as long as Trump is in office, Israeli professional analysts within the government would not feel comfortable challenging the orthodox Israeli and US views on anything that has to do with Iran, especially in Syria and the Levant.²³

Is Returning to an Agreement Possible?

Both US presidential candidates said that they would like to return to an agreement with Iran. Hawks in Washington argue that the Trump administration left the JCPOA and adopted a policy that escalates all forms of pressure on Tehran with the goal of reaching a better agreement. Biden and his advisers have said that they are interested in returning to the JCPOA or its predecessor, the

¹⁷ An interview with a US think tank analyst in Washington, October 2020

¹⁸ An interview with a US think tank analyst in Washington, October 2020

¹⁹ An interview with a former official with Israel’s NSC, October 2020

²⁰ An interview with a former official with Israel’s NSC, October 2020

²¹ An interview with a US think tank analyst in Washington, October 2020

²² An interview with a US think tank analyst in Washington, October 2020

²³ Dalia Dassa Kaye and Shira Efron (2020) “Israel’s Evolving Iran Policy”, *Survival*, 62:4, 7–30, DOI: 10.1080/00396338.2020.1792095

Joint Plan of Action of 2013. Whether an agreement can include a limit on Iran's regional activities remains an open question. A mainstream view among conservatives in Washington and in Israel was that the JCPOA freed up large sums of money for Tehran to fund the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Quds Force (IRGC-QF), Lebanese Hezbollah, and pro-Iran militias in Iraq. Instead, according to hawks, Maximum Pressure has reversed this trend and "drained hundreds of billions of dollars from the Iranian treasury", hindering Tehran's ability to exert regional leverage.²⁴ Although only a minority view, some Israelis dismiss this assertion and argue that money tells only a small part of the story. Iran increased its military activity in the region not because it was suddenly flush with cash but rather in response to the rise of the Islamic State (IS) and growing chaos in the region. The Iranians were concerned about the stability and survival of their allies and the Axis-of-Resistance forces that stood up to IS and, through fighting, have managed to entrench themselves in Syria and in Iraq. According to this view, Iran's actions in the region are relatively inexpensive and are thus sustainable, although at a reduced level, even under crippling sanctions. Instead of cessation of activity and withdrawal, these analysts see more resilience, adaptation, and renewed prioritisation on Tehran's part, but not a different strategy.²⁵

With that said, Americans and Israelis believe that Tehran, which is pressured financially and severely hit by COVID-19, has a much weaker hand today and, therefore, in the aftermath of the US elections this month, it is more likely to enter negotiations on what the Israeli defence establishment calls JCPOA 2.0 – a more comprehensive agreement, which sets much longer sunset timelines; tackles Iran's ballistic missiles programme; and hinders its regional activity.²⁶ Some Israeli analysts believe that Iran will be willing to compromise only after the United States provides sanction relief. Framing negotiations as on a new agreement rather than fixing an old agreement would allow more flexibility for both sides and provide a face-saving pathway for concessions.²⁷ While Netanyahu himself is likely to oppose any agreement, he will have a harder time objecting to an agreement publicly if Trump is re-elected and pursues this path. If Biden wins, Netanyahu is likely first to use the transition period when Trump is still in office to make it as hard as possible for the next administration to return to negotiations with Iran. Subsequently, he will try to convince the new White House, as well as resort to his usual playbook, appealing to allies in Congress, that returning to an agreement would be a mistake. However, given his political and legal troubles at home, Netanyahu may not be able to forcefully attempt to derail such a development as he did before.²⁸ Security officials in Israel are pushing for a different strategy this time: instead of trying

²⁴ Dubowitz and Ben Taleblu, 7 May 2020

²⁵ An interview with an Israeli former intelligence official, October 2020

²⁶ An interview with serving Israeli Defence Forces officials, October 2020

²⁷ An interview with an Israeli former intelligence official, October 2020

²⁸ An interview with an Israeli defence analyst, October 2020

to derail an agreement, be effective at influencing the agreement and shape it to address Israel's concerns.²⁹

Although not a popular public view today, some in the defence establishment still believe, as they did in 2015, that reaching an agreement is the best option to help Israel address its concerns vis-à-vis Iran. In his retirement interview on 9 October with the Israeli daily *Ynet*, Brigadier General Dror Shalom, head of the research division of the Israeli Defence Forces' Military Intelligence (Aman), said, "we have not seen proof yet that withdrawal from the JCPOA served Israel's interests".³⁰ This statement reflects a division between the political and the defence establishments – while the former wishes to derail an agreement, the latter hopes to fix it. This division was much more obvious in the years leading up to the JCPOA during the Obama administration, but disappeared gradually after Trump entered office and instituted the Maximum Pressure policy.³¹ Israel predicts a Biden victory this month and it is likely that a change in policy in Washington will also affect the Israeli discourse on a renewed agreement with Iran with more voices publicly supporting this prospect.

²⁹ An interview with an Israeli defence analyst, October 2020

³⁰ "אם איראן תחליט תוך שנתיים יש לה גרעין. נסראללה במצב קשה, אבל הרשות הפלסטינית היא פצצה מתקתקת" יוסי יהושע, " *Ynet+*, 9 October 2020, <https://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-5811491,00.html>

³¹ Kaye and Efron, *Survival*, 2020