

# Preparing for Iranian Expansion in Syria after a Nuclear Deal

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Brief Analysis

## The United States should capitalize on closer ties between its regional allies to combat Iranian expansionism, with a special focus on Syria.

If the United States and Iran reach a nuclear deal in the ongoing talks in Vienna, many who live in areas where Iran is attempting to expand its influence are concerned about the lifting of sanctions on Iran, given the ability of a potential influx in cash to allow Iran to further advance its regional goals. However, the United States will have a chance to combat the potential for increased Iranian activity in the region by leveraging the recent rapprochement between the UAE and Saudi Arabia on one side and Turkey and Qatar on the other—all U.S. allies. If mobilized in tandem with regional U.S. partners in Syria, this coordinated effort could effectively prevent Iranian regional expansion in Syria, where Iran is a significant threat to any hope of stability.

For years, Iran has used regional conflicts as bargaining chips during international dialogues and as fodder for nationalist aspirations of reviving the [Persian empire \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/iran-iraq-and-politics-civilization\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/iran-iraq-and-politics-civilization). Essential in that strategy are the Iran-backed militias and terrorist groups in Iraq, Yemen, Syria, and Lebanon, where Iran has become engaged in proxy wars.

Now, with the potential for a new nuclear deal to release frozen Iranian funds and lift U.S. sanctions on Iran, Hezbollah and Iranian-backed militias in Syria and Iraq are likely to see a significant financial boost. In turn, the newly empowered militias are sure to obstruct the implementation of U.S. goals in the region and further entrench themselves in eastern Syria, with particularly damaging effects on the stated goals of the temporary U.S. presence in Syria; combating ISIS, stopping Iranian expansion, and applying international legal resolutions, especially [UN Resolution 2254 \(https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s\\_res\\_2254.pdf\)](https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_res_2254.pdf).

Such increased activity in Syria should be especially concerning to U.S. policymakers considering Syria's critical position in the general success of Iranian regional activity. With increased Iranian control, Syria is turning into the keystone in a belt that connects Iran with three countries under varying degrees of Iranian influence—Iraq, Syria,

and Lebanon.

Increased Iranian influence will almost certainly negatively affect Syrian security and peace. As Iranian-backed terrorist and sectarian militias' gain freer reign to flex their strength, violence and killings are likely to intensify. In addition, releasing frozen Iranian funds would likely provide resources for missile tests in Syria, which are directly coordinated and backed by Iran, according to international intelligence agencies. And regarding economic issues, releasing frozen Iranian funds would have a negative effect on Syrians' already dismal economic circumstances—any Iranian economic recovery will come at the expense of the Syrian economy and the resources on which it relies, especially as Iran seeks greater control over the regions of Syria that are rich in oil and other natural resources. Moreover, a release of frozen Iranian funds would **help Iran in propping up the Assad regime** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/ar/policy-analysis/alathr-alaqlymy-lmkasb-ayran-ghyr-almtwqat-bd-rf-qlqwbaf>), which is largely hostile to U.S. interests; a stronger Assad regime means poor human rights conditions and an anti-U.S. government in control of Syria.

With the fates of Syria and Lebanon now closely intertwined, a nuclear deal with Iran could also provide Hezbollah with opportunities to resupply itself with precision missiles or replace the fighting forces it lost in Syria. Hezbollah has recently struggled with a severe reduction in financial resources, a result of low oil prices and pressure from U.S. sanctions on Iran, which has limited the scope of Hezbollah activities in Lebanon. A nuclear deal that frees Iranian funds would almost certainly relieve those financial pressures while doing nothing for the collapsing Syrian or Lebanese economies outside of Assad regime or Hezbollah control.

These anticipated risks make it imperative that the United States search for new mechanisms to combat Iran's regional activities beyond sanctions and Israeli air strikes as it attempts to move forward with a new deal on nuclear issues. As part of this effort, the United States should rethink the aid it is providing in Syria and work to support nationalist forces from all sectors of Syrian society, including Arabs, Kurds, Syriac Christians, and other forces that have been marginalized by current decision makers. The United States should also focus on encouraging its regional allies—Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the UAE—to continue to make progress in overcoming their differences, as this will allow a better coordinated effort against Iranian expansionism.

This strategy would capitalize on signs of tacit talks already taking place between Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, as well as a declaration from Saudi Arabia and the UAE that they will put aside previous conflicts with Qatar. All these countries are involved in the ongoing conflict in Syria, and they all have a strategic interest in reducing the Iranian presence in the region, which has been a destabilizing factor for their governments and countries. As its allies show signs of drawing closer to one another, the United States should encourage them to formulate shared strategic plans, especially in the areas where Iranian agents have been able to establish control.

By engaging its allies in cooperative operations in Syria, the United States could employ the important geographic position and military power of Turkey in combination with the financial resources of Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar to great effect. These efforts would be most effective if international resolutions on the Syrian situation are implemented. Most important of these resolutions would be **UN Resolution 2254** ([https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s\\_res\\_2254.pdf](https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_res_2254.pdf)), which designates a transitional authority to lead a transitional stage during which the Syrian people would approve a new constitution and provide the basis for civil democratic rule. While several Arab countries appear increasingly open to normalizing ties with the Assad regime, U.S. coordinated efforts may still allow for a transitional government to emerge that would oversee the complete reconstruction of Syria.

As such, in the event of a nuclear deal with Iran that goes without a multilateral parallel effort to stymy Iranian expansion, the United States will likely see a resurgence of terrorism and human rights violations in the region. In this scenario, Iran's emboldened efforts to control a corridor in Arab states via militia proxies could undermine the

trust of U.S. allies in the U.S. commitment to limiting Iranian expansion. It is therefore imperative that the United States engage its regional allies and capitalize on recent thaws in their relations, promoting multilateral efforts to manage Iranian expansion, with particular focus on Syria. ❖

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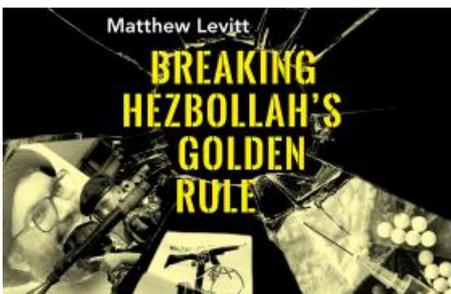
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