

Pushing Back on Iran in Syria: Beyond the ‘Boots’

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Brief Analysis

Apart from its military intervention, Tehran has pursued a wide range of economic and social tactics for increasing its sway in Syria, but Washington can still push back with targeted assistance, innovative sanctions, and strategic messaging.

During his January 10 speech in Cairo, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo asserted that the United States will use “diplomacy and work with our partners until every last Iranian boot is expelled” from Syria. The emphasis on Iranian “boots” underscores how Washington and its regional partners have long focused on the military facets of Iran’s entrenchment in Syria—namely, its deployment of forces to ensure the Assad regime’s survival, threaten Israel, and secure a land bridge connecting Tehran to Beirut via Baghdad and Damascus.

Yet Iran’s leaders also recognize that securing long-term influence in Syria requires more than military means. Accordingly, they are applying best practices from their experience with Hezbollah in Lebanon, where the powerful Iranian proxy has entrenched itself not only militarily, but also politically, religiously, and culturally. To extend this model to Syria, Tehran is pursuing two lines of effort:

1. Purchasing real estate, changing demographics, and developing networks of support between Damascus and the Lebanese border, with the ultimate goal of establishing a geographical area of control similar to Hezbollah’s

stronghold in Beirut's southern suburbs.

2. Pushing social, religious, and economic programs designed to woo underserved communities who may not be ideologically aligned with Tehran but lack viable alternatives.

If curbing Iran's presence in Syria remains a priority for the United States, policymakers should quickly adopt new methods to counter these soft-power activities.

CONFISCATING SUNNI PROPERTY IN WEST SYRIA

Iran is heavily invested in securing Damascus, its suburbs, and the zone extending from the Shia Muslim shrine of Sayyida Zaynab to the Lebanese border. In Tehran's view, this requires systematic demographic changes. Over the past year, Sunni communities have been pushed out of their long-time homes and replaced by people friendly to Iran and the Assad regime.

To provide a legal basis for such measures, the regime issued Law No. 10 last April. This legislation gave Syrian property owners thirty days to find a local regime administrator and file an ownership claim in person—a clear attempt to wrest land from Sunnis, who constitute the bulk of wartime refugees and were largely unable or unwilling to return in time to file claims. Hezbollah and Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps have exploited this situation to purchase numerous properties. According to reports quoting Syrian officials, more than 8,000 properties in the Damascus area have been transferred to foreign Shia owners in the past three years.

Iran is also transforming local Sunni mosques into Shia religious centers and shrines, as well as constructing new Shia meeting halls, mosques, and schools. Anecdotal reporting suggests that the Assad regime has closed some of these Shia centers in Russian-controlled areas of the country, but has failed to do so in the Iranian-controlled areas around Damascus and Sayyida Zaynab.

EXPANDING INFLUENCE IN THE SOUTH AND EAST

Outside the nascent Damascus-area stronghold, Iran's efforts center on cementing its land bridge across Syria and controlling the country's border with Iraq. Since the U.S.-Russia-Jordan agreement in south Syria collapsed last year, Assad's forces (with Moscow's facilitation) have pressured local fighters and communities into reconciliation agreements and relocation to opposition-held areas in northwest Syria. Iran has taken advantage of these forced population movements, though with a different mix of tools given their predominantly Sunni and tribal makeup.

Over the past six months, Iranian personnel have established military posts and security networks across the southwestern province of Deraa. Concurrently, they and their Hezbollah proxies have constructed at least eight local Shia religious centers and five religious schools. Recognizing the area's abysmal economic and security situation, Iran is also reportedly offering jobs to young Sunni residents without requiring them to take up arms. For about \$200 a month, many of these unemployed young men would rather join Iran's militias in noncombat roles than be arrested, conscripted, or killed by the Assad regime.

To the east, Iran has deployed a tribal engagement strategy in the Deir al-Zour area, buying local loyalty and providing material assistance. For example, many members of the Baggara—a Sunni tribe whose connections with Tehran date back to 1988—are now working openly with the Iranians to establish religious schools and centers.

EDUCATIONAL SWAY

Another development that indicates Iran's goal of establishing a multigenerational presence in Syria is the Assad regime's decision to open Farsi-language departments in several educational institutions, including Damascus University, Baath University in Homs, and Tishreen University in Latakia. The courses offered by these departments come with a wide array of incentives to boost the number of Syrians they reach: students are not required to enroll in full-degree programs to attend; youths below university age are eligible; regular university fees may not apply; and

the courses include trips to Iran.

Below the university level, Iran has opened a number of language schools and colleges in Damascus, Hama, and Deir al-Zour. Students receive financial incentives in these programs as well.

WIDENING THE U.S. POLICY APERTURE

The U.S. debate on Syria is currently seized by questions of timeline and conditions for withdrawing American forces. Yet this limits the debate geographically to the north and east while unnecessarily narrowing the discussion to military tools. If the administration is serious about pushing back on Iran inside Syria, then it is time to consider nonmilitary steps, particularly the following:

- **Restart U.S. stabilization assistance.** In August 2017, Washington froze more than \$200 million in U.S. stabilization assistance for communities liberated from the Islamic State. Although Saudi Arabia and other countries have pledged to fill the funding gap, restarting U.S. assistance would give Syrian communities an immediate alternative to Iranian patronage, particularly with regard to civilian protection, job creation, education, and basic services. Even without U.S. forces on hand, the State Department and U.S. Agency for International Development have developed robust programs for providing and monitoring aid in hard-to-reach places. These programs should be expanded to more meaningful levels.
- **Specify terms for U.S. reconstruction.** The administration has consistently maintained that it will provide reconstruction aid once a substantive political process to end the war is under way and Iran is out of Syria. Yet questions regarding U.S. follow-through in Syria and the broader debate about U.S. foreign assistance make it difficult to view any such pledge as meaningful without further details. Therefore, administration officials should clearly articulate the size and scope of what they are willing to contribute pending congressional approval. This vision should be paired with specific plans for burden-sharing with like-minded governments in Europe and the Middle East, international financial institutions, and the UN. Putting specifics on the table would provide tangible incentives to drive a wedge between Syria and Iran.
- **Impose meaningful sanctions on persons knowingly supporting Iran's nonmilitary activities.** For years, Congress considered imposing sanctions via legislation such as the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act. Among other steps, this act called for sanctions on any entities providing spare aircraft parts that allowed the Assad regime to continue dropping barrel bombs and chemical weapons; it also envisioned sanctioning persons who invested in sectors that allowed the regime to remain economically viable. Such innovative concepts can be applied to nonmilitary activities as well, including new sanctions targeting firms that finance or otherwise help Iranian entities build new structures on properties confiscated under Law No. 10. The choice should be stark: if companies choose to support Iran's agenda in Syria, they will be blocked from doing business in Europe, the United States, and the wider Middle East.
- **Use strategic messaging and awareness campaigns to counter Iran's cultural and educational agenda.** By understanding how Iran is working at the local level, policymakers can design targeted campaigns that emphasize its track record as an unreliable partner—from its frequent habit of under-delivering in other countries to its ultimate goal of future coercion and political domination. American voices may not be the most effective vehicle for this message at the moment, but Washington still has access to networks of free Syrian media that it previously cultivated (<https://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/3580.htm>), and it could use other people-to-people partnerships in this endeavor as well. For example, the Iranian regime has proven incompetent (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/irans-economy-is-stagnating-even-before-new-u.s.-sanctions-hit>) at environmental and water management at home, so helping local Syrian media report on this performance could generate skepticism about Iranian outreach in water-poor areas of the country. Tehran has also been known to distort foreign markets by dumping subsidized consumer projects (e.g., in southern Iraq); accordingly,

policymakers should show Syrian farmers and manufactures how casting their lot with Iran would open the door to economic subjugation.

- **Shape terms for Arab reengagement.** Recently, several regional governments have reached out to Syria, reacting to perceptions that the Assad regime is here to stay given Russia and Iran’s unconditional support. The United Arab Emirates and Bahrain are reopening their embassies in Damascus; Lebanon lobbied for the regime’s inclusion at the recent Arab economic summit in Beirut; Tunisia just launched its first commercial flight to Damascus; Jordan reopened the Nasib border crossing, paving the way for billions of dollars in renewed trade; and discussion on Syria’s readmission to the Arab League now seems a matter of when, not if. Yet such rapprochement should not be given away for free. The administration should press these governments to insist on specific conditions before reopening their embassies, such as reversal of the Law No. 10 land grab and the closing of Iran-sponsored religious institutions.

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