

An Iranian Land Bridge Is Not the End of the World

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Brief Analysis



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Fear that Iran is working to build a bridge to the Mediterranean as a path to regional hegemony is hanging over U.S. military thinking and actions in Iraq and Syria. Allowing this suspicion to drive strategy could drag America into an unpredictable conflict that may continue long after the Islamic State is gone.

The speculation started after Iran-backed Iraqi Shia militias created a role for themselves in the campaign against the Islamic State in Mosul, pursuing control of small towns in the desert south and west of the city. They made gains since October of last year: they surrounded the Islamic State-held town of Tal Afar and captured its airport, took a number of other small towns and villages around the town of Sinjar, cut Islamic State lines west of Mosul, and advanced south along the Iraq-Syria border.

The Iranian-backed militias' advance toward Kurdish frontlines in northern Iraq at that time alarmed Iraqi Kurdish leaders. The Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) is concerned mostly with defending their adjacent territory. These concerns grew more intense in the aftermath of the Kurdish region's controversial independence referendum on September 25. Kurdish **[anxiety spiked \(http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/10/kurds-high-alert-iraqi-forces-mass-kirkuk-171013081422969.html\)](http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/10/kurds-high-alert-iraqi-forces-mass-kirkuk-171013081422969.html)** this week with reports of Iraqi government forces and pro-Iranian militias concentrating around the disputed oil-rich city of Kirkuk. Kurdish leaders now think confrontation is imminent. To outside actors, the advance to the Iraq-Syria border from one side by the Iraqi Shia militias, and from the other side by pro-Assad forces, raised warnings of an Iranian project to connect with the Mediterranean shore.

Despite the fact that nobody has articulated how exactly this Iranian scheme would work, the administration seems to assume that Iran has a secret plan at work. The **[Washington Post reported \(https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/us-on-collision-course-with-syria-and-iran-after-fall-of-de-facto-islamic-state-capital/2017/06/21/b03d9620-55cc-11e7-ba90-f5875b7d1876_story.html?utm_term=.a8e81138a028\)](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/us-on-collision-course-with-syria-and-iran-after-fall-of-de-facto-islamic-state-capital/2017/06/21/b03d9620-55cc-11e7-ba90-f5875b7d1876_story.html?utm_term=.a8e81138a028)** on June 21, that senior White House officials now believe Iran to be “focused on making that link-up with Iran-friendly forces on the other side of the [Iraqi-Syrian] border...to block us from doing what our commanders and planners have judged all along is necessary to complete the [Islamic State] campaign.”

The two sides have been trying to assert their military presence in Eastern Syria. This has precipitated serious incidents, including, in May and June, the U.S. bombing of Syrian military convoys, shooting down Syrian aircraft

and Iranian drones, and brazen, if ineffective, Iranian ballistic missile launches.

The military tit for tat suggested, at least for a while, that the administration's yet-to-be finalized strategy for Syria's future involves keeping pro-Assad forces out of eastern Syria, but denying Damascus access to the border would be easier said than implemented.

Taken to its logical conclusion, this approach and mission creep could lead to U.S. troops permanently stationed in eastern Syria, or even to state-building to create a Sunni statelet in Iran's path. Obsessing over this vague land corridor notion can put the United States on a perilous path to another Middle East entanglement.

The lack of hostilities between the United States and Iran in eastern Syria in the last three months is hopefully a sign that cooler heads prevailed, but the unpredictability of the Trump White House could produce another escalation so long as **wary policy (<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/markaz/2017/09/12/the-syrian-crisis-a-reckoning-and-a-road-map/>) circles (<https://www.forbes.com/sites/heshmatalavi/2017/09/15/iran-north-korea-nuclear-deal/#5f7ee16e26d4>) continue to stoke the fears (<https://www.aipac.org/-/media/website/pdfs/america-needs-a-comprehensive-policy-approach-to-iran.pdf?la=en>)**.

Before letting this theory drive U.S. policy, we must consider whether such a path to the sea is a top Iranian priority. There are three primary reasons to think not.

First, Iran already sends fighters and supplies to Syria and Hezbollah on a significant scale. Improving Iran's transportation logistics through Syria to Lebanon is not, in itself, a convincing motive.

Second, a land corridor from Iran to the Mediterranean--the Baghdad-Damascus highway-- existed from 2003 until almost 2013, until the Islamic State cut the link. It was not a game-changer then. What would make it so now?

Third, a new corridor would pass hundreds of miles through Iraq under the watch of the U.S. military, Sunni tribes, Islamic State sleeper cells, and former insurgents. It is unlikely to be safer or more convenient than current air or sea alternatives.

There are five more likely explanations for the movements by Iran's affiliates.

In northern Iraq, Shia militias have been working to establish a strong presence that keeps Islamic State remnants from regrouping. That area south of Mosul was a staging ground for the group before Mosul's fall in June 2014. So much so, it **earned the nickname (<http://www.reuters.com/article/us-oil-iraq-mosul/at-donkey-springs-bombers-choke-off-iraq-oil-exports-idUSBREA391CF20140410>)** "Tora Bora" by dispirited Iraqi crews struggling to defend nearby strategic oil pipelines. Baghdad's announcement this week of plans to **repair the export pipeline (<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2017-10-10/iraq-plan-to-fix-oil-pipeline-to-turkey-bypasses-isolates-kurds>)** to Turkey makes securing this area a priority.

Further, Iran may consider it advantageous to establish a base west of Mosul close to KRG areas, in order to apply further pressure on the KRG and prevent them from incorporating these territories into a future independent Kurdistan. Following the Kurdish independence referendum, which Iran strongly condemned, this element will likely receive more emphasis as Iran seeks to deter the KRG from taking further steps toward secession from Iraq.

There may have been two counter-Turkish objectives in the minds of Iranian and militia planners. An outpost west of Mosul can enable Iran to support the nearby Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK)-affiliated Syrian Kurds who are under threat from Iran's rival Turkey. Ironically, these are the same Syrian Kurds the United States considers allies. Moreover, an Iranian outpost there would counterbalance Turkish military presence in Bashiqa to the north of Mosul. It would allow Iran to have a say in Mosul's future, perhaps to deter a push for autonomy by Sunni politicians backed by Turkey and Gulf Arab states.

These two considerations may become, at least temporarily, less important as Iran and Turkey explore joint action to

punish the KRG and prevent its secession from Iraq. Their strategic value, however, cannot be overlooked.

Finally, if Iran can claim some credit for helping Iraq and Syria defeat the Islamic State and reclaim control over their borders, it could improve Iran's - and its proxies'-image in the region.

The United States could be concerned that Iran's actions are shoring up Tehran's allies and working against the interests of U.S. regional allies. But, Washington needs to remember that even if a land bridge from Iran to Syria is Iran's goal, such a bridge existed before today. It would be a manageable geographic nuisance the United States could learn to mitigate, preferably by working with Iraqis on their side of the border. ❖

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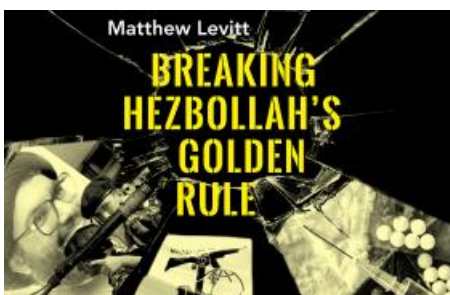
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