

Iran May Be Using Iraq and Syria as a Bridge to Lebanon

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Brief Analysis

While liberating territory from the Islamic State is vital, the consequences of ceding portions of Iraq and Syria to de facto Iranian control could be just as dire as leaving them in jihadist hands.

In recent days, two developments took place near Syria's borders that suggest the intentions Tehran and its proxies hold for that country and the surrounding region. To the west, the Lebanese Shiite militia Hezbollah held a high-profile military parade in al-Qusayr, Syria, while to the east, the Shiite militias known as Popular Mobilization Units (PMUs) captured Tal Afar airport in Iraq. Both incidents align with Iran's repeated message to the international community: that it will do whatever it takes to be a decisionmaker in the corridor stretching from Iraq to Lebanon via Syria.

After taking the airport last week, Hadi al-Ameri, a former Iraqi minister who heads the Iranian-linked Badr Organization, made a telling declaration cited by Reuters: "Tal Afar will be the starting block for the liberation of all the area...to the Syrian border and beyond." Although the PMUs have not announced any specific plans for moving onward, the town just north of the airport could be their next target. Iran does not have a border crossing with Syria, but Tal Afar -- located some forty miles west of Mosul on the main road to Syria -- could provide one. If its proxies do in fact capture the town, Iran would likely be able to establish a corridor from the Iraqi border province of Diyala, up through the Hamrin Mountains northeast of Tikrit, and all the way up to Tal Afar en route to Sinjar on the Syrian border. On the other side of Syria, Iranian-backed forces already have multiple routes to Lebanon via al-Qusayr and other towns in the Qalamoun region.

Although a land bridge might not be of major significance to Tehran in terms of transferring weapons, it would provide a larger platform for projecting power and establishing an uninterrupted Iranian presence in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon. In that scenario, would these countries be able to survive as independent and sovereign nations? Another

question is whether a strengthened Iranian presence along this corridor would add fire to the radical anti-Shiite narrative espoused by the Islamic State (IS), exacerbating the area's existing sectarian conflicts.

MARKING TERRITORY

On November 11, Hezbollah held its first-ever military parade on foreign soil, according to a report from NOW Lebanon. The display was conducted in al-Qusayr, which fell to the group in 2013. Typically, this annual "Martyr Day" celebration is held in the southern suburbs of Beirut, Hezbollah's headquarters, but this year the group staged the commemoration in Syria, presumably for two reasons: to highlight its robust presence in the country, and to signal the international community that it is an organized army ready and willing to join the international campaign against IS.

When Hezbollah took over al-Qusayr and other towns in the suburbs of Homs and Damascus, local Sunnis were evacuated. Bashar al-Assad's "starve or surrender" tactics around the capital have forced many rebels to give up in exchange for basic humanitarian needs such as food and medicine. As Sunni families were sent to northern Syria, Tehran brought in Shiite families from Iraq and Lebanon to take their place, seeking to cement its influence over the Assad-controlled zone that Iranian leaders regard as "[useful Syria \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/irans-useful-syria-is-practically-complete\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/irans-useful-syria-is-practically-complete)."

A SHIFT IN HIERARCHY

The acceleration of Iran's apparent bridge strategy was also preceded by shakeups in the hierarchy of Shiite militias in Syria. When Hezbollah entered the war in 2012, it was Tehran's most trusted and capable force on the ground, and the conquest of al-Qusayr confirmed its status as the right hand of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps in Syria. Working directly under the IRGC, Hezbollah was trusted to head all ground operations and manage other Shiite militias. Although Iraqi Shiites fought for the group Liwa Abu Fadl al-Abbas (LAFA), they were essentially under Hezbollah's leadership, as were the numerous Shiite foreign fighters from Pakistan and Afghanistan.

But the battle for Aleppo changed everything. When Hezbollah began to show weakness on that front and suffered more losses than expected, Iran called in Iraqi militias to assist the group. Today, the main Iraqi Shiite militia fighting in the Aleppo area is the Badr Organization, a political party with a massive military wing and one of the main components of the PMUs. According to a number of Hezbollah members who fought there, when Badr personnel arrived in Aleppo, they were not comfortable taking orders from Hezbollah. Given Badr's string of successes in Iraq and Syria, Iran decided to change the operational leadership in Syria: Hezbollah still controls Qusayr and the Damascus suburbs, but Badr was placed in charge of military operations in Aleppo and reports directly to the IRGC.

Despite the Badr Organization's recent rebranding and its role in Iraqi politics, it retains very strong ties with Iran. The group was originally formed in 1983 to bring Iran's Islamic Revolution to Iraq. Later, it launched a brutal sectarian war against the Sunni population from 2004 to 2006. And following the Islamic State's successful campaigns in Anbar and other areas in 2013-2014, Badr mobilized forces for a series of victories against the group, including last year's "liberation" of Diyala province. Yet many violations against Diyala's Sunni community were reported, and Badr became notorious for its sectarian rhetoric and abuses.

IMPLICATIONS

With the Badr Organization on one border and Hezbollah on the other, Tehran could be planning to expand the land bridge to southern Lebanon soon. Sectarian violence and rhetoric -- along with steady salaries -- have enabled Iran to successfully recruit numerous Shiite fighters over the past four years, so these factors will likely be the main mobilizers once again. Tehran's considerable investment in recruiting, training, logistics, and weaponry for

such proxies is a strong signal that it intends to stay abroad and win.

If Iran succeeds, the three countries caught in the midst of this strategy could lose whatever is left of their sovereignty. Yet an even more pressing problem is that intensifying Shiite rhetoric and power will only bolster the Islamic State's sectarian narrative and help mobilize local Sunnis around it and other radical groups that feed on such sentiment. Winning the war against IS requires seeing all brands of extremism and terrorism in the Middle East for what they are and understanding how they feed on one another. The Shiite axis under Iran's aegis has been enforcing sectarian narratives and empowering two notoriously violent Shiite militant groups in Lebanon and Iraq for some time. Thus, even if completing a land bridge takes years to accomplish or proves to be an impossible or fleeting goal in the end, the various processes that have been set in motion toward that end require continual sectarian violence and ever-widening efforts to turn Arab Shiites into armed adherents of Iran's revolutionary ideology. Meanwhile, IS and whatever radical groups follow in its wake will take advantage of this situation to mobilize Sunnis for similarly violent ends.

For now, it remains unclear whether Iran's Shiite militia proxies will actually take Tal Afar, and how long it would take them to do so. One thing is clear, however: eastern Syria is significant to both the United States and Iran, but for completely different reasons. The U.S. priority is to fight IS, while Iran sees that campaign as an opportunity to expand its regional presence and power. While liberating Iraqi and Syrian territory from IS forces is vital, Washington and other actors need to carefully consider the consequences of handing these lands over to Iran.

Hanin Ghaddar, a veteran Lebanese journalist and researcher, is the inaugural Friedmann Visiting Fellow at The Washington Institute. ❖

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