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**Research Report**

## Iran's multi-faceted strategy in Deir ez-Zor: From fighting terrorism to creating a zone of influence

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# SWP Comment

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## Iran's Multi-Faceted Strategy in Deir ez-Zor

From Fighting Terrorism to Creating a Zone of Influence

*Hamidreza Azizi*

One aspect of Iran's involvement in Syria that has come under the spotlight recently is Iran's growing presence and activities in Deir ez-Zor province in eastern Syria. Not only has Iran established its military presence in the region by deploying troops and constructing military bases, it has also been active in social, cultural, and economic spheres. Many observers believe that Iran's goal is to establish a "land corridor" to connect the country to Lebanon via Iraq and Syria. Others argue that Iran is attempting to expand its ideological influence in Deir ez-Zor by promoting Shi'ism. However, the Islamic Republic is pursuing a multifaceted strategy in the area. Tehran wants to establish an economic corridor to the Mediterranean to play a role in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Iran is also trying to create a zone of influence in Syria's east while strengthening its deterrence against Israel and the United States. Preventing the revival of the so-called Islamic State (IS) remains another priority.

In November 2017, the Syrian army, along with Iranian and Iran-backed forces, managed to retake the al-Bukamal area on the Syrian-Iraqi border from the so-called Islamic State. Earlier, Iraq's Popular Mobilization Units (PMU), supported by Iran, had liberated large swaths of Iraqi territory from the grip of the IS, bringing the town of al-Qa'im on the other side of the border under its control. The developments were particularly significant for Iran, as the other two – of three total – main border crossings connecting Iraq to Syria are controlled by American forces or their local allies. The United States has turned the areas adjacent to al-Tanf crossing in southeastern Syria

into its main military base in the country, and the al-Ya'roubiya crossing in the north is controlled by the US-backed and Kurdish-dominated Syrian Democratic Forces.

Over the past two years, Iranian and Iran-backed forces have been stationed in various areas in the southern half of Deir ez-Zor province. Furthermore, by recruiting local forces, Iran has created new paramilitary groups in the region, for example the so-called Villages Army (Jaish al-Qura), consisting of more than 2,500 Arab fighters from the province's villages. Iran has also built at least two military bases: in the western outskirts of the town of al-Mayadin and in al-Bukamal. At the same time, the



Islamic Republic has set up cultural centers in Deir ez-Zor to promote Shia principles and the ideology of the Islamic Revolution, and Iran's Jihad of Construction (Jihad al-Bina') organization has been active in carrying out reconstruction and infrastructure projects in the province. Iran has also sought to establish a network of loyal forces in the region by liaising with the heads of Deir ez-Zor tribes. Apart from trying to benefit from Iran's financial incentives and reconstruction projects, some local tribes see Iran as a more reliable partner than the Assad regime. All of these measures indicate a long-term Iranian strategy for the area.

### The "Land Corridor"

A dominant view among analysts and policy-makers in the West and the Arab world is that the Islamic Republic is seeking to establish a land corridor to connect the country to Lebanon via Iraq and Syria. According to this view, the corridor would allow Iran to support its proxy groups in the three countries more effectively, as well as to transfer weapons and equipment unhindered to Hezbollah in Lebanon. Yet, the priority of the corridor in Iran's Syria strategy appears to have been exaggerated. Since the early stages of the Syrian crisis up until the end of 2017, despite the lack of access to Iraqi-Syrian border crossings, Iran continued to support Hezbollah in a variety of ways, including the use of an air corridor. Meanwhile, given the US military presence in various parts of Iraq and Syria on the one hand, and Israel's information superiority over both countries on the other, a direct transfer of arms and equipment through this so-called land corridor would entail serious risks. Between 2016 and 2018, Israel reportedly struck Iranian targets in Syria more than 200 times.

The importance of the al-Bukamal/al-Qa'im border crossing for Iran from the military point of view is more about facilitating the passage of military and paramilitary forces across the Syrian-Iraqi border. Iran's control over the areas on both

sides of the border makes it easier for the Iranian and Iran-backed forces to move back and forth and be redeployed to other areas. For example, in February and March 2020, during the Syrian army's military campaign in the northwestern province of Idlib, some 400 Iraqi PMU forces were dispatched to the Idlib front, passing this border crossing. The increased mobility for the Iran-backed forces could make them partly immune to the occasional American and Israeli strikes. The withdrawal of American troops from a base in al-Qa'im in mid-March increases Iran's maneuvering power in the area.

### The Economic Dimension

Since 2013, realizing the BRI has been the main priority in China's foreign policy and is aimed at facilitating commercial exchanges between the East and the West. Initial plans for connecting China to Europe prioritized the northern land routes via Russia and Central Asia, as well as a maritime route through the Persian Gulf. However, Tehran has been trying to draw Beijing's interest to a southern land route linking Iran, Iraq, and Syria with the Mediterranean and then Europe.

In November 2018, Iran unveiled a plan to build a railway linking the Shalamchek border crossing at the Iran-Iraq border to the Port of Basra in southeastern Iraq. The railroad would then further expand toward the Syrian coast of the Mediterranean. Also, in Spring 2019, it was announced that Iran was planning to lease the container terminal of the Port of Latakia. There is no doubt that Iran's involvement in Syria has a strong economic component. Controlling the volatile and unstable areas of western Iraq and eastern Syria is essential to achieving its economic plans for the region.

### A Zone of Influence

Iran's primary goal of intervening in the Syrian crisis in 2012 was to keep its ally Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in power.

With the rise of the IS, fighting the terrorists and preventing them from advancing toward the Iranian borders was added to Iran's list of priorities. However, Iran's active contribution to the Syrian army's recapture of Aleppo at the end of 2016 – and then the collapse of the self-proclaimed IS caliphate in late 2017 – gradually led Iran to define new goals and interests in Syria. Since then, there have been signs of a more expansionist orientation in Iran's Syria strategy. Since 2018, Iran has signed a series of economic agreements with the Syrian government, signifying Iran's desire to assume an active role in Syria's post-war reconstruction. Also, in August 2018, Iran and Syria signed an agreement on military cooperation.

At the same time, Iranian decision-makers in the administration and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps are well aware that there is no guarantee that those agreements will be implemented, also in the long term. Iran's influence in Syria has so far been mostly based on its direct ties with Assad and pro-Iran circles in the Syrian government and army. However, even within the current structure of the Syrian government, there are some unfavorable views toward Iran's presence and intervention in the country, especially among the pro-Russia figures. In case of Assad's departure from power or a change in Syria's political system – for example, through decentralization – Iran's role and influence in Syria would be at stake.

In this vein, Iran appears to be pursuing the establishment of a geopolitical and social zone of influence in Syria as an alternative approach or a "Plan B." Moves such as promoting Shi'ism or creating new paramilitary groups in Deir ez-Zor should be seen as an attempt by Iran to establish a loyal social base in a specific area in Syria. Enjoying control over such a zone of influence could guarantee Iran's long-term interests in Syria in the face of any potential challenges. For example, if a federal system were to be established in Syria, Iran's position in one of the potentially crucial federal units in the east and south-

east would remain intact. Likewise, if the Islamic Republic succeeds in changing the social and cultural structure of Deir ez-Zor, representatives loyal to Iran would safeguard Tehran's interests in a potential parliamentary system in Syria. Having a specific zone of influence could also provide Iran with a valuable bargaining chip in negotiations for the future of Syria.

## An Extra Layer of Deterrence

Although Iran and Israel have never engaged in a direct military confrontation in more than four decades since the establishment of the Islamic Republic, building a set of effective and credible threats against each other is one of the main pillars of both countries' military and defense strategies. As far as Iran is concerned, this approach has been implemented in two main ways: developing its missile program, and creating a network of proxies throughout the region. Before the Syrian crisis, this network was mainly based in Lebanon and Palestine. However, the power vacuum that has emerged in Syria in recent years has allowed Iran to extend the network to Syrian territory.

Indeed, because of their geographical proximity to Israel, areas such as Dara'a would be more suitable for Iran to establish a long-term presence. However, Tel Aviv's complete military dominance over those areas, on the one hand, and Russia's opposition to the expansion of Iranian military influence in western and southwestern Syria on the other, have made it difficult for Iran to realize such ambitions. In this context, Deir ez-Zor's distance from the Israeli border, as well as Russia's apparent lack of interest in that part of Syria, has made the region the key goal in Iran's long-term plans. As it is located between the areas controlled by the United States and its allies in al-Tanf and the eastern Euphrates, Deir ez-Zor also puts Iran in a position to make a credible threat against US forces in Syria. Following the US assassination of Iran's Quds Force commander, Qassem

Soleimani, in January 2020, there were legitimate speculations about Iran's potential use of those areas to retaliate against the United States.

## Preventing the Revival of the IS

During the height of IS power, controlling the eastern areas of Syria in Deir ez-Zor and the province of Anbar in western Iraq allowed the terrorists to move freely on both sides of the Iraqi-Syrian border. Accordingly, the principal basis of Iran's strategy to combat the IS was to cut this link. Even after the official collapse of the IS caliphate, Iran's approach toward preventing the revival of the terrorist group has focused on these areas. Iran sees a military presence in Deir ez-Zor as being necessary to avert the rejoining of dispersed IS cells in Iraq and Syria.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

By trying to expand and consolidate its influence in Deir ez-Zor, Iran is eyeing the achievement of a set of long-term geopolitical, economic, security, and military goals. Another important reason is its concern of being completely sidelined by the other actors in the diplomatic processes.

Germany and its partners in the European Union should assume a more active role by trying to address the situation with a political solution and engage all actors, including Iran, in international diplomatic processes aimed at conflict settlement and an eventual withdrawal of all foreign troops from Syria. Seeking points of overlap between — and strengthening the joint efforts of — the different multilateral formats on Syria (the Astana Format, the Geneva Process, and the Small Group) would allow the Europeans to, among other objectives,

address the challenging aspects of Iran's strategy in Deir ez-Zor, that is, the extension of its military presence and the establishment of new paramilitary groups. At the same time, Iran's focus on combating IS remnants and the potential for extending the Chinese BRI to the Mediterranean would be aspects from which Europe could benefit.

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