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# IRAN'S STRATEGIC OPTIONS IN SYRIA AFTER THE FALL OF ASSAD'S REGIME

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## Abstract

This study examines Iran's strategic options regarding Syria and the broader region following the fall of the Assad regime in November 2024. The new government has significantly undermined Iran's influence in Syria, stripping it of a critical regional asset and a key component of its security doctrine. Analyzing Iran's options at this juncture is crucial, given its efforts to reestablish its role and influence in the region after significant setbacks to its regional proxies and allies — amid unprecedented regional and international pressure to curb its behavior, which has undermined regional security. The study explores the dimensions of Iran's declining influence by addressing the contours of Iran's clout in Syria before Assad's fall, Iran's vulnerabilities in this arena, the current conditions posing challenges to Iran's efforts to restore its presence in Syria and the region and the strategic options available to Iran to mitigate the impact of this significant decline.

**Keywords:** Iran, Syria, Assad regime, Iranian influence in Syria, Syrian opposition.

## **Introduction**

On November 27, 2024, Syrian opposition forces launched Operation Deterrence of Aggression against the Syrian regime, culminating in the fall of the Assad regime on December 8 of that year. The dramatic collapse of this five-decade-long regime presented Iran with a substantial geopolitical setback, the loss of one of its most prominent regional allies.

Under the Assad regime, Syria was far more than Iran's conventional ally. The country served as a vital bridge connecting Tehran with its regional depth to the eastern Mediterranean, while facilitating logistical and military support to its allies. The formation of this alliance involved decades of sustained effort and coordination, starting from former President Hafez al-Assad and culminating under Bashar al-Assad, resulting in a strategic alliance that entrenched Iranian influence across all facets of Syria.

Iran's loss of its Syrian ally coincided with the shocking decimation of the Lebanese Hezbollah through unprecedented Israeli strikes, eliminating its leadership and vital bases. As a result, the group could no longer confront Israel militarily. Moreover, Iran's nuclear facilities at the sites of Natanz, Fordow and Isfahan were targeted by the United States. Thus, Iran is facing a double strategic vulnerability: externally, with the loss of its Syrian ally and the decline of its influence due to the weakening of one of its most prominent regional arms; and internally, with the targeting of its nuclear facilities that undermines the Iranian security precept of maintaining a balance of deterrence.

In light of this complex landscape, this study examines the implications of the Assad regime's fall on Iran's regional influence. It traces the trajectory of Iran-Syria relations since 2011, analyzes the underlying factors that contributed to the fragility of bilateral relations, and reviews Iran's strategic pathways amid its loss of allies and regional vulnerability. This study attempts to answer the following critical question: What are Iran's strategic options in light of the loss of its Syrian ally and its increasing regional vulnerability?

## **The Manifestations of Iranian Influence in Syria After the 2011 Revolution**

Following the outbreak of the Syrian revolution in 2011, Iran emerged as one of the most prominent regional actors shaping the trajectory of events. Its multifaceted intervention had been a long-term strategic influence project that transcended the temporary alliance with the regime to become an institutionalized, structural and operational presence on the ground. The features of Iranian influence in Syria after 2011 can be explained as follows:

### **Military Influence**

Through its direct military support to the former Assad regime, Iranian influence in Syria was unrivalled. Iran's military presence expanded to about 570 sites, including 55 military bases and 515 outposts.<sup>(1)</sup> It was augmented by combatants integrated within pro-Iran militia brigades, deployed into 42 military divisions

and about 128 battalions. Additionally, 70,000 personnel from Basij volunteer battalions were tasked with securing Syrian cities and villages.<sup>(2)</sup> The Lebanese Hezbollah was the second most significant military force in Syria after the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), followed by the Iraqi militias. In Syria, Iran replicated the infiltration strategy that it had previously undertaken in Iraq via the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), an approach it had also followed in other countries within its sphere of influence. This involved building military formations to ensure the sustainability of its influence even in the event of regime change. To this end, it sought to establish paramilitary groups composed of thousands of fighters known as the People's Army (al-Jaysh al Sha'bi) and the Syrian National Defense Forces.<sup>(3)</sup>

This military entrenchment in Iran could be attributed to the Syrian army's degradation, which lost much of its cohesion due to divisions and defections. In 2013, around 6,500 senior military personnel were estimated to have defected. The remaining forces were deployed to protect only the capital and its surroundings.<sup>(4)</sup>

In order to institutionalize and legalize the presence of its elements in Syria and to enable their integration within the structure of the Syrian army, Iran invested in the construction and development of the remnants of the army while infiltrating its formations.<sup>(5)</sup> For example, in 2018, Iran signed a military cooperation agreement with the regime, which stipulated the continued deployment of military advisers, efforts to enhance defense infrastructure and assistance in the reconstruction of the Ministry of Defense facilities. Another agreement was signed in 2020 to strengthen military and security cooperation and reinforce air defense systems. This contributed to significantly increasing Syria's security dependence on Iran, which evolved into an organic strategic bond with the regime.<sup>(6)</sup>

### **Political Influence**

Iran's support was not confined to the military domain but also extended to extensive political backing of the Syrian regime. This was evident when Iran opposed US military intervention in 2013, after the regime used chemical weapons in Eastern Ghouta. In coordination with Russia, Iran successfully persuaded the regime to surrender its chemical arsenal to the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW).<sup>(7)</sup> However, Iran declined to participate in the second round of the Geneva conference, which proposed a ceasefire and the formation of a transitional government, arguing that it opposed any preconditions for its participation.<sup>(8)</sup> In addition, there are indications that Iran included the Syrian conflict in its agenda during nuclear negotiations with the United States and European powers at that time. This suggests that an understanding of Syria was reached, ultimately contributing to the consensus for the nuclear agreement in 2015.

Iran also put forward several initiatives to reach a political solution for Syria, most notably the four-point plan proposed by former Iranian Foreign Minis-

ter Mohammad Javad Zarif. It outlined a ceasefire, the establishment of border control, the prevention of foreign fighter infiltration, the delivery of humanitarian aid and the formation of a transitional government. However, this initiative overlapped with the 2012 initiative of UN Envoy Lakhdar Brahimi, which called for forming a national government, amending the constitution and holding elections.<sup>(9)</sup>

Iran likely engaged in resolving the Syrian crisis, yet avoided any proposal involving the president's relinquishment of power, since it was aware of the consequences this would have on its interests. Consequently, it worked to undermine any agreement between the opposition and the regime that involved relinquishing or handing over power, just as it thwarted the Jordanian king's attempt to broker a new Taif Agreement between the opposition and the regime.<sup>(10)</sup>

### **Economic Influence**

To cement its economic influence, Iran provided substantial support to the Syrian regime through direct loans, credit lines, massive investments and financial facilities to fund oil and related product imports. UN Special Envoy for Syria Staffan de Mistura estimated Iran's annual spending to support the regime from 2014 to 2019 at approximately \$6 billion. However, if you take into account the value of credit lines, estimated between 2011 and 2015 at \$5.87 billion,<sup>(11)</sup> in addition to the costs of recruiting foreign fighters and oil aid, ranging between \$3.5 billion \$4 billion annually,<sup>(12)</sup> Iran's total support likely far exceeded the figure stated by the UN envoy. In fact, former Chair of the Iranian Parliament's National Security and Foreign Policy Committee Heshmat Falahatpisheh revealed in 2020 that his country spent nearly \$30 billion to ensure Assad remained in power.<sup>(13)</sup>

Iran signed several commercial agreements and contracts with the Syrian regime. Among these was the conclusion of the 2013 deal to finance Syrian imports, stipulating that a substantial proportion must consist of Iranian products and be supplied through Iranian companies. In July 2013, the regime exempted Iranian companies specialized in exporting foodstuffs from duties and taxes.

Iran's economic presence was enhanced in 2017 when it secured licenses to invest in nearly 5,000 hectares to establish an oil port, as well as to modernize and operate one of the country's ports. It also invested \$300 million in a new telecommunications operator and the establishment of an oil facility in Homs. This reflected Iran's transformation from playing a limited economic role before 2011 into a prominent economic actor driven by clear strategic interests.<sup>(14)</sup>

According to the 2017 Foreign Direct Investment Report in Syria, Iranian investors ranked first in direct investment projects. Their investments focused primarily on purchasing real estate in the destroyed residential areas for which the regime allocated exclusive reconstruction tenders to them. The Iranian government encouraged its companies to purchase real estate in Syria and provided them with foreign currency credit lines to invest in this sector.<sup>(15)</sup> This was an ef-

fective way to cement its influence by creating a demographic change in Damascus and its surroundings.

Accordingly, Iran's presence in Syria yielded numerous geopolitical opportunities and capabilities. It activated its logistical support channels for its regional allies, enhanced its access to the Mediterranean Sea and became more competitive with Türkiye while counterbalancing its ambitions in the region. Furthermore, it strengthened its deterrence against Israel by demonstrating its capabilities to establish allied fronts (the Lebanese Hezbollah front, along with the Syrian front). Additionally, its intervention also created extensive investments for Iranian entrepreneurs and opened new economic avenues that circumvented the imposed economic sanctions.

### **The Strategic Paradoxes of Iranian Influence in Syria**

Although the Iranian presence in Syria appeared strong, it remained limited for several reasons, including:

#### **The Absence of the Shiite Incubator**

Shiite incubators are one of the most important pillars upon which Iran has depended on to cement its presence within its vital sphere. This is implemented through a dual strategy aimed at supporting and empowering Shiite minorities inside their countries and establishing a network of operatives within Shiite communities with direct ties to Iran, thereby enhancing its regional influence.<sup>(16)</sup>

The extent of Iran's regional influence clearly demonstrates the successes of this established strategy in Iran's foreign policy doctrine. In Iraq, where Shiites constitute the majority, Iran played a pivotal role in supporting and empowering the Shiite community, especially those who embrace the theory of Wilayat al-Faqih. This has granted Iran an entrenched influence that can be described as prominent. In Afghanistan, despite the small Shiite component — estimated at 15%-29% of the total population<sup>(17)</sup> — Iran has successfully transformed this component into an effective pressure group in Afghanistan. Conversely, Syria is devoid of a significant Shiite component. Sunni Muslims constitute the majority of the population, while Twelver Shiites and Ismailis are no more than 2% of the total population. The Alawite component constitutes only 12% of the total population and is ideologically divergent from the Shiite sect. Efforts were undertaken to align the Alawite community with Wilayat al-Faqih, as exemplified by the declarations of Musa al-Sadr and Ayatollah Shirazi in the 1970s, recognizing Alawites as Shiite Muslims — primarily aimed at providing religious support to President Hafez al-Assad and legitimizing his rule.

However, these attempts failed to engender spiritual or ideological solidarity between the two groups,<sup>(18)</sup> as the Alawites view themselves as a distinct third path within Islam, as expressed by several of their leaders, “we are not Shiite, and we reject the fatwas of the Shiite marjaya, asserting that the Alawites represent a branch of Shiism.”<sup>(19)</sup> Therefore, Iran resorted to implementing policies of reli-

religious identity and demographic change to build a Shiite base in order to secure its presence inside Syria and alter any equation that might affect its strategic interests.

These policies were implemented through two paths. The first is the dissemination of Shiism among Syrians. The second focused on the settling of Shiites from Syria's neighboring countries (Lebanon and Iraq) in areas of strategic and demographic importance to Iran.<sup>(20)</sup> According to the first path, Iran bet on spreading Shiite beliefs to secure permanent loyalty. It expanded the establishment of universities aimed at spreading Shiite ideology, with the number reaching six by 2021, five of which were founded after 2011. It also opened Shiite schools such as the Great Prophet schools, which were opened in several Syrian cities,<sup>(21)</sup> in addition to many religious seminaries, whose number rose to about 69 and 500 hussainiyyas by 2019.<sup>(22)</sup> Regarding the second path, Iran sought to settle its proxy militias by purchasing and confiscating real estate, especially in the capital Damascus and its suburbs, and in Deir ez-Zor near the Iraqi border.<sup>(23)</sup> This was accompanied by forced evacuations and the clearing of specific areas of their original inhabitants, replacing them with Shiite militias.<sup>(24)</sup>

Despite the intensive efforts made by Iran to enhance its influence in Syria, whether through proselytization or demographic change, these policies failed to yield sustainable results. Proselytization efforts were unfruitful in establishing a solid social base within the predominantly Sunni sphere. This was because the strategy relied heavily on economic tools, such as financial incentives and service provision, rather than on ideological tools based on religious persuasion and cultural integration. The settlement projects failed to build a cohesive and resilient sectarian bloc capable of exerting political and social influence. This was starkly illustrated when the Assad regime entered the phase of precipitous decline, resulting in the retreat of Iran's traditional power levers.

### **The Turkish-Russian Presence**

Iran's presence in Syria was not unilateral or unrestricted, but emerged within a competitive context involving other regional and international actors. This presence clashed with both Türkiye and Russia. Türkiye, which shares a long border with Syria, believes that instability in Syria will have repercussions on its national security and threaten its internal ethnic balance.<sup>(25)</sup>

With the outbreak of the Syrian revolution and the emergence of the growing role of Kurdish armed groups, particularly the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which controlled vast areas in northeastern Syria,<sup>(26)</sup> Türkiye perceived the Kurds as a direct threat to Turkish national security. This forced Ankara to engage in the Syrian crisis. Initially, Türkiye's policy supported the opposition and called for the regime's overthrow, with Ankara assisting numerous opposition factions.<sup>(27)</sup> However, the regime's recapture of extensive territories from these factions between 2016 and 2018 prompted Türkiye to change its approach by establishing a direct military presence. This move created a tangible barrier to Iranian expan-



sion in those areas. On the other hand, Russia viewed its presence as a vital foothold in the Middle East region. Consequently, it supplied military equipment to the Syrian regime, offered political support at the UN Security Council and voted against resolutions that would legitimize military intervention.<sup>(28)</sup>

In 2015, it intervened militarily to support the regime in confronting opposition factions by controlling Syrian airspace. It also backed the political track through conferences held under its direct sponsorship, most notably the Sochi and Astana summits. These aimed to reach a comprehensive political settlement between the regime and its opponents, preserving territorial integrity and ensuring the survival of its influence.<sup>(29)</sup>

Although Russia and Iran were aligned in their support for the regime, Russia was a competitive partner to Tehran. Recognizing the importance of maintaining a balance of power in Syria, it approved Israeli airstrikes against Iranian targets,<sup>(30)</sup> pressed for restructuring the Syrian army to diminish the power of pro-Iran militias<sup>(31)</sup> and consolidated its own economic clout through major investment contracts in the oil and phosphate sectors.<sup>(32)</sup> These moves confined Iranian influence in Syria within defined frameworks and contexts that ran counter to Tehran's strategy of control and influence.

Collectively, these actions were key factors that prevented Iran from establishing exclusive control over the Syrian interior and contributed to limiting — or more accurately — confining its influence to specific areas. This outcome was achieved through direct military intervention, diplomatic pressure or political arrangements, with Syria being an open arena for several parties, each prioritizing its own strategic interests and goals. This rendered the consolidation of a sustainable Iranian influence in Syria a profoundly challenging task.

### **The Israeli Role in the Equation**

Iran's influence in Syria has long been a persistent concern for Israel, prompting it to adopt an active deterrence policy aimed at rolling back the Iranian presence while expanding Tel Aviv's military and logistical footprint.

During his meeting with the Russian president in September 2015, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu stressed that Iran's growing presence in Syria posed an existential threat to his country. He warned that Tehran's provision of weapons to Hezbollah might lead to the formation of a joint military front against Israel in southern Syria.<sup>(33)</sup> The potential merger of these two fronts would pose a significant threat to Israel. This was echoed by former Israeli Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman, who warned that any future military confrontation in the north would likely make Israel face not only an active Lebanese front but also the Syrian front, thereby facing a unified northern theater in any potential conflict.<sup>(34)</sup>

Based on this security calculation, Israel intensified its operations to degrade Iran's military entrenchment and disturb the supply routes to its proxies on the ground. This campaign heightened the challenges Iran faced in establishing a se-



cure military presence. Israel has conducted hundreds of airstrikes inside Syrian territory since early 2013, targeting Hezbollah weapons depots and supply convoys.<sup>(35)</sup>

However, these strikes were far less intense than they would become in subsequent years, as their frequency escalated sharply within a proactive framework aimed at eliminating Iranian influence and striking Hezbollah.<sup>(36)</sup> These attacks included targeting weapons depots of Iran or Hezbollah at the Mezzeh military airport near Damascus;<sup>(37)</sup> striking a military facility of the Syrian Scientific Studies and Research Center near the city of Masyaf in the countryside of Hama which was used for developing chemical weapons and advanced missiles;<sup>(38)</sup> the assassination of the IRGC adviser and the main official in charge of Iranian interests in Syria Seyed Reza Mousavi in December 2023; the January 2024 attacks on the Mezzeh area west of Damascus which killed about five senior IRGC members<sup>(39)</sup> and the April 2024 strikes on the consular section of the Iranian embassy in Damascus which killed seven IRGC members — including General Mohammad Reza Zahedi.<sup>(40)</sup>

Thus, Israeli aggression played a decisive role in diminishing Iran's ability to establish a sustainable military influence inside Syrian territory. Its regular strikes, which targeted weapons depots, senior IRGC commanders and logistical support centers, were a direct deterrent factor that hampered Iran's entrenchment and the transfer of its capabilities to allies, particularly Hezbollah. Moreover, these strikes heightened the Syrian regime's caution about excessive entanglement with Iran. The regime feared being drawn into a direct escalation with Israel, which could target its senior leadership or critical military assets, thereby diverting its exhausted forces from combating the opposition factions. Contrary to its longstanding posture, the Syrian regime went beyond merely avoiding confrontation with Israel. It took unusual steps to contain and avoid provoking it. Following exchanges of attacks between Iran and Hezbollah on the one hand, and Israel on the other, the regime refrained from its usual supportive statements for its allies.<sup>(41)</sup> It also asked the Houthi representatives to leave Damascus and closed their affiliated Yemeni embassy, and it did not stop there but also reopened the embassy of the internationally recognized Yemeni government.<sup>(42)</sup>

At its core, this approach was an additional factor that constrained Iranian influence inside Syria. It imposed limits on Tehran's military and political movements, particularly given the former Syrian regime's desire to avoid being drawn into broader conflicts that could threaten its survival. Consequently, this relative divergence of positions may partly explain Iran's lukewarm support for the regime during its fall.

In general, it can be concluded here that Iran's strategy of expanding influence in its vital periphery has overlooked the specificity of each country. While the strategies employed in both Iraq and Afghanistan were suited to their specific circumstances, they were incompatible with the Syrian state. Iran lacked a reliable Shiite base in Syria, and its intervention faced multiple challenges. Beyond

the conflict of interests with international and regional actors, its intervention incurred massive financial costs, exacerbating domestic pressures. Furthermore, it was labeled as an “occupying power” by Syrian society. The latter viewed the Iranian presence as a foreign force that must be resisted. As a result, the Syrian Revolutionary Command Council — comprising numerous military factions and civil society — declared that Syria was under Iranian occupation.<sup>(43)</sup>

### **Iranian Trajectories in Post-Assad Syria**

Iran's strategic options and potential pathways in Syria and the region post-Assad can be projected as follows:

#### **Iran's Course Toward Syria**

Iran's loss of its Syrian ally is unlikely to prompt it to accept the new reality. Recognizing the imperative to adapt, Tehran will likely seek to reconfigure its presence by adopting a new strategy aligned with emerging challenges. In the aftermath of the regime's fall, the Iranian government adopted conciliatory rhetoric, referring to the opposition forces as “armed forces” instead of “terrorists”<sup>(44)</sup> and floated the concept of a “new resistance” against Israel.”<sup>(45)</sup> However, the feasibility of this approach is unlikely in the near term, given the new Syrian government's prevailing orientations.

However, this path confronts several obstacles. Foremost is the Syrian regime's decision to distance itself from Iran, compounded by regional and international containment efforts. Moreover, Iran's acute economic crisis severely limits its capacity to engage actively in reconstruction. Consequently, this approach appears more tactical than strategic.

On the other hand, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei perceives developments in Syria as a grave threat and alluded to the rise of what he called the “honorable and strong” who are able — according to his description — to restore the prior state of affairs <sup>(46)</sup> — an implicit reference aimed at undermining the new regime.

His statements in January 2025 <sup>(47)</sup> reinforce this stance. He issued direct warnings to the new Syrian leadership, signaling a clear shift toward a policy of incitement and political pressure. This rhetoric not only aligns with Iran's strategic framework but also appears to be a means to bolster domestic morale in Iran, particularly given the negative psychological repercussions caused by the rapid fall of the Syrian regime. This event sent shockwaves through the Iranian elite and eroded the confidence of its regional allies in Iran's capacity for decisive action and influence.<sup>(48)</sup>

It can be noted that Iran's strategic trajectory toward the new Syrian regime involves efforts to undermine it and limit its ability to establish control. Among the indicators of this course are the following:

■ Withdrawing its forces and proxies from eastern Syria, particularly Deir ez-Zor, and handing over control to the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). <sup>(49)</sup>

■ Its attempts to revitalize the networks of the Islamic State (ISIS) by negotiating with the SDF to hand over former elements of the group and facilitating the smuggling of weapons to its cells in the Badia region.<sup>(50)</sup> This indicates attempts to repurpose these cells to target the new government.

■ Its attempts to reconstitute proxy militias inside Syria. The IRGC reportedly has initiated a plan to destabilize Syria by supporting Iraqi Shiite groups.<sup>(51)</sup> The Syrian authority conducted security operations against these militias in Deir ez-Zor, arresting around 70 elements between June and July 2025.<sup>(52)</sup>

■ Its continued support and involvement in smuggling weapons and narcotics to Lebanon, activities which the Syrian authority confronted in areas such as Hawsh al-Sayyid Ali and al-Qusayr.<sup>(53)</sup>

Despite this, Iran's ability to undermine the Syrian regime remains limited due to several critical factors: the absence of a strategic ally (the Assad regime), whose fall eliminated the institutional structure that enabled Iran to establish military bases and extensive economic and security networks; a nominal Shiite presence inside Syria, which constraints Iran's mobilization ability compared to the Iraqi or Lebanese contexts; Iran's worsening economic crisis which imposes pressure on financing external networks and proxies; the rise of rival regional powers (Türkiye and the Gulf states); creating an effective counterbalance to Iran's attempts to reassert influence and the internal divisions within the Iranian regime regarding the alignment of priorities. This may lead to reduced funding for external operations and compel Tehran to rebalance its strategic priorities between domestic and international demands.

Iran's ability to reestablish its traditional influence in Syria has significantly diminished due to the absence of the former regime, shifting power balances and growing internal and external pressures. However, Iran will unlikely relinquish its foothold in Syria and adopt a dual strategy: maintaining open channels with the new government to prepare for potential future changes, while concurrently strengthening militia influence in the border areas, especially along the Syrian-Iraqi crossings, as a strategic pressure card. However, the key factor limiting Iran's ability to intervene will be the success of the new Syrian government in attracting international and regional support and establishing strong state institutions.

### **Iran's Trajectories and the Challenges of Repositioning in Syria and the Region**

In this regard, Iran is pursuing several pathways:

■ Seeking to rebuild its proxy network: the year 2024 marked the decline of Iran's regional influence, especially following the fall of its Syrian ally. This loss weakened the logistical capabilities of Hezbollah, which simultaneously faced intensified Israeli strikes and growing pressure from the Lebanese government to disarm.<sup>(54)</sup> Hamas faced growing pressure as Israeli operations targeted its military infrastructure and funding resources. Iran-aligned Iraqi factions expe-

rienced a notable erosion in influence amid growing pressure from the central government, while the Houthis in Yemen continued to sustain significant territorial and military losses due to the intensive US air strikes.

Despite the aforesaid, these indicators may not be sufficient to depict the complete disintegration of Iran's regional influence network. This is primarily because the structure of most elements within its proxy network relies not merely on financial or military support, but on a deeper ideological and doctrinal system. Iran built this structure upon robust ties with specific organizations such as Hezbollah, the Iraqi factions and the Houthis, which all embrace the doctrine of Wilayat al-Faqih.

This ideological bond explains Iran's commitment to rebuilding its network as it provides strategic depth that transcends material resources and military capabilities. The current shifts may weaken Iran's ability to finance or secure supply lines, but the ideological dimension remains as an alternative leverage to maintain the loyalty of proxies and compel them to adopt resistance-oriented policies despite inadequate support.

What distinguishes Iranian influence from conventional alliances, therefore, is its capacity for reconfiguration—anchored in ideological legitimacy as a mechanism of resilience, and in the organizational flexibility of its proxy factions as a means of repositioning rather than contraction or disintegration.

Several indicators suggest that Iran has started to rebuild its network. In January 2025, Israel accused Hezbollah of attempting to rebuild its military capabilities with Iranian support.<sup>(55)</sup> Iran reportedly deployed the Quds 351 and Jamal 69 long-range ballistic missiles to allied Shiite militias in Iraq,<sup>(56)</sup> coinciding with the Iraqi government's discussion of plans to dismantle some armed organizations. This reflects Iran's determination to maintain a strategic foothold in Iraq as a pivotal arena for securing geopolitical depth and counterbalancing Western and regional pressures.

Iran's efforts to rearm the Houthis as a core pillar of its regional axis are also evident. In July 2025, Yemeni forces seized a massive arms shipment—approximately 750 tons—comprising cruise missiles, drone engines, and warheads, all destined for the Houthis with direct Iranian support, according to security reports. US sources described this as “the largest seizure of advanced Iranian conventional weapons.”<sup>(57)</sup>

It is clear that Iran does not view its proxy network as a transient tactical tool but rather as a fundamental strategic pillar of its regional security structure and a means for pursuing its project to impose favorable regional balances. Therefore, Iran is expected to continue to exploit opportunities to provide support to elements of its network. However, its capacity to rapidly restore its network remains constrained within narrow limits, owing to complex and interlocking factors. The intelligence and military capabilities of regional adversaries — such as Israel — influence Iran's support strategies, as any attempt to enhance proxy strength risks preemptive strikes that could undermine its effectiveness. Additionally, in-

ternational political and diplomatic pressures and Iran's internal economic challenges — including liquidity crises and inflation — define the scope of Tehran's support, compelling it to balance support for its proxies with the imperative of maintaining domestic stability.

Thus, the recovery of Iran's influence network depends on a combination of limited economic possibilities, international pressure and the field capabilities of adversaries as well as the internal stability of its proxies. This renders the reconstruction process a delicate strategy that necessitates a sustained balance between available resources and field and political objectives.

Faced with these pressures, Iran has resorted to multiple adaptation strategies, most notably the promotion of proxy self-financing. This should not be interpreted as disengagement from its proxies, but rather as a reformulation of the relationship, based on relative financial independence coupled with sustained ideological and military alignment. For example, Hezbollah's financial arm Al-Qard Al-Hasan discontinued compensation payments to its members,<sup>(58)</sup> reflecting financial austerity and the group's shift toward relying on local revenues and utilizing new funding channels. Among these is a cross-border fuel smuggling network between Iraq and Lebanon, which generates annual profits worth billions of dollars.<sup>(59)</sup>

The Houthi group has also increasingly depended on domestic resources, primarily by imposing maritime tolls across the Red Sea and Gulf waters, generating about \$180 million per month.<sup>(60)</sup> The ports of Hodeidah, Salif and Ras Issa are also major income channels, with the group generating about \$790 million between May 2023 and June 2024 in customs revenues.<sup>(61)</sup> Iran-backed Iraqi factions have consolidated their influence through local financial instruments, such as international loans and international payment systems,<sup>(62)</sup> while systemically integrating thousands of their elements into state security institutions to ensure sustained income and relative financial independence.

Based on the above, to speak about the breakdown of Iran's influence network sounds premature. This network has evolved into a soft structure that integrates hard tools, such as military capabilities, and soft tools, such as ideology, while increasingly relying on self-financing and alternative supply networks. Thus, the transformation affecting Iran's network is not one of collapse, but rather repositioning imposed by regional shifts and power balances. Under these circumstances, Iran is likely to entrench its presence rather than pursue unchecked expansion by redefining its relationship with its proxies to reduce costs and enhance adaptability to new developments. Expanding multilateral networks: This approach has emerged through Iran's efforts to strengthen relations with several states, most notably Russia and China. Strategic cooperation between Russia and Iran has witnessed remarkable growth over the past years, from tactical collaboration in Syria to a defense partnership evident during the Russia-Ukraine war, wherein Russia has relied on Iran for weaponry and other forms of support. Russia has also become the largest foreign investor in Iran, with cooperation extend-

ing to the storage of Russian oil inside Iranian territory and direct links between the Russian and Iranian banking systems. In addition, Russian energy companies have signed agreements to develop Iranian oil and natural gas fields.<sup>(63)</sup> This cooperation culminated in the signing of the strategic partnership agreement in January 2025, encompassing defense, trade, energy, finance, intelligence and counterterrorism.<sup>(64)</sup>

Relations with China are defined by an entrenched and expanding partnership. Iran is a pivotal element of the Belt and Road Initiative and serves as China's largest importer of Iranian oil. China regards its access to discounted Iranian oil as an integral component of its national security, prompting it to develop increasingly innovative strategies to enhance its energy security.

However, the boundaries of Russian and Chinese support for Iran were starkly exposed during the June war in 2025. In spite of rhetorical condemnation and diplomatic calls for de-escalation, neither extended tangible assistance to Tehran. Russia confined itself to condemning Israeli strikes and advocating for mediation, without activating any of the defense clauses in the agreements signed between the parties. China, in turn, pursued its traditional policy of non-intervention and only called for de-escalation and regional stability. This underscores the true nature of Iran's alliances, as tactical alliances grounded in economic and diplomatic interests, devoid of defense commitments — a reality that poses a significant challenge for Iran. This will prompt it to reassess its foreign strategy, especially as the prospect of relying on tangible support from international allies in times of need is dim.

It appears that Iran had long recognized the limits of Russian and Chinese support. This explains its pursuit of diversified international and regional partnerships and its engagement in multilateral frameworks by transforming the weak guarantees from major powers into opportunities for maneuver. For example, Iran continues work on mending its strained relations with Saudi Arabia, a process notably marked by the agreement to restore diplomatic relations in March 2023.<sup>(65)</sup> The two countries have held talks on enhancing defense cooperation, while media reports have circulated regarding the prospect of the formation of a naval alliance that would include several Gulf states alongside India and Pakistan.<sup>(66)</sup>

On a broader regional level, Iran established an expanded defense and technological alliance with Belarus through a strategic partnership agreement encompassing military cooperation and mutual economic development.<sup>(67)</sup> It has sought to strengthen relations with Central Asian states by signing several bilateral agreements. Furthermore, Tehran appears to be cultivating enhanced relations with neighboring states such as Armenia to form a regional counterbalance to Turkish influence, as well as Afghanistan, by courting the Taliban economically and militarily to prevent its territory from being used as a US base against Iran.

Iran is also pursuing further regional expansion beyond its traditional sphere. Iran seeks to expand its presence in Latin America by strengthening relations



with countries such as Venezuela, Cuba, and Bolivia, where cooperation agreements described as strategic have been signed.<sup>(68)</sup> However, these moves remain limited in their impact on the international balance of power, given the weak international influence of these countries and the challenges of establishing an effective technical or military exchange with them.

This policy, taken as a whole, reflects a deliberate shift toward “flexible balancing” in foreign relations, whereby Iran seeks to diversify its external network and expand its strategic maneuverability, thereby safeguarding its regional and international standing in the face of escalating US pressure.

■ Continued development of military capabilities: The 12-Day War between Iran and Israel, in which Iran’s nuclear facilities in Natanz, Fordow and Isfahan were hit, exposed one of the most significant security and military vulnerabilities in its modern history. While the conflict demonstrated Iran’s offensive capability and did not destroy its nuclear program nor accumulated scientific knowledge,<sup>(69)</sup> it laid bare the limitations of Iran’s defensive capability limits and the fragility of key strategic pillars in the face of US and Israeli technological and intelligence superiority.

Iran initiated a series of reviews and updates to its military strategies, including the establishment of the Supreme National Defense Council in August 2025, the first body of its kind since the Iran-Iraq War, aimed at unifying military planning and Defense Command, and the appointment of Ali Larijani as secretary of the Supreme National Security Council, a move interpreted as a shift toward a more rational approach, given his experience as a moderate mediator.

Thus, it appears that Iran is moving toward a dual approach: one that combines the continued military development with the use of conditional diplomatic tools to mitigate international pressure. This reflects Tehran’s recognition that superiority is not achieved through retaliatory capability alone, but through building a sustainable capability for deterrence.

In recent years, Iran has aimed to bolster self-sufficiency in its defense industries, which was clearly demonstrated during the 2025 revolution anniversary celebrations in which it unveiled new ballistic missiles, underground missile installations, advanced drones and a high-speed naval vessel.<sup>(70)</sup>

Following the Israeli-US attack, Iran embarked on rebuilding its military arsenal, leveraging Chinese technical support for missile production materials. It procured thousands of tons of ammonium perchlorate — a critical component for solid rocket fuel — from China, a move expected to boost its manufacturing capacity by approximately 800 medium-range ballistic missiles.<sup>(71)</sup> This enhanced Iran’s military maneuverability and also its ability to support its regional allies. In July 2025, it also tested the Qasid satellite launch vehicle, which uses a blend of solid and liquid fuels,<sup>(72)</sup> reflecting its efforts to enhance the operational and industrial capabilities of rocket and drone technology.

Iran’s future vision extends beyond merely rebuilding its missile infrastructure to reinforcing nuclear deterrence as a component of its security system. It



has reorganized its scientific personnel to safeguard technical knowledge and has initiated repairs to damaged facilities. Satellites imagery in June 2025 revealed Iranian construction teams commencing urgent repair work at the Fordow nuclear facility, a key center for uranium enrichment.<sup>(73)</sup>

In a strategic shift, Iran suspended cooperation with the IAEA. The Iranian Parliament passed a bill to halt cooperation with the agency, which the Iranian president ratified in early July 2025, signaling Tehran's desire to reduce international transparency while pursuing "nuclear ambiguity" as a tool for political pressure.

According to IAEA reports, Iran possesses about 400 kilograms of uranium enriched to 60%, while the reports of the Institute for Science and International Security confirmed that this stockpile is an advanced step toward nuclear weapons capability.<sup>(74)</sup> This quantity places Tehran tangibly closer to the threshold of a latent nuclear capability, providing Iran with a strategic tool for bargaining or escalation, depending on the context.

Within this complex reality, Iran stands at a strategic crossroads, necessitating a delicate balancing act between military threats and engagement in negotiating paths that preserve its incremental nuclear and military gains. On the one hand, it seeks to build a sustainable deterrent power to influence regional security equations. It realizes that uncontrolled escalation could trigger a comprehensive confrontation — distinct in nature and scale from its previous confrontation with the United States and Israel.

Thus, Iran is likely to rebuild its leverage without crossing the threshold into full-scale confrontation. This will involve continuing to develop its missiles, which are low-cost but high-impact, and drone capabilities, while controlling the pace of its nuclear program to maintain ambiguity.

Ultimately, Iran is not moving merely toward excessive militarization, but toward constructing a flexible deterrence umbrella that integrates its military and technical capabilities and diplomatic options. If sustained, this vision could lead to new security balances in the region, although it raises the risks of escalation if negotiations fail.

## **Conclusion**

Iran's capacity to reestablish its traditional influence in Syria has significantly diminished against the backdrop of the Assad regime's fall, balance of power shifts inside Syria and growing internal and external pressures. Iran is unlikely to relinquish its Syrian foothold and pursue a dual strategy: maintaining channels of communication with the new authority, while strengthening the influence of proxy militias across the border areas as a strategic pressure card. However, the decisive factor in limiting Iran's ability to intervene will be the Syrian government's success in attracting sustained international and regional support and in building strong state institutions.

The recovery of Iran's influence network depends on a combination of constrained economic capabilities, international pressure, the field capabilities of adversaries and the internal stability of allied proxies. This renders the reconstruction process a precise strategy that requires a sustained balance between available resources and political goals. Consequently, Iran is seen shifting toward a "flexible balance" in its foreign relations by diversifying its partnership network and expanding the strategic maneuvering margin to preserve its regional and international position, amid escalating pressure. In this context, Iran is likely to recalibrate its strategic leverage without crossing the threshold of full-scale confrontation. This will be achieved through the sustained enhancement of low-cost, high-impact missile and drone capabilities, coupled with deliberate pacing of its nuclear program—maintaining maximum ambiguity to wield it as a calibrated instrument of deterrence and diplomatic coercion.

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