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Iran's Land Route: A Strategic Threat

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Attached please find the 33rd issue of *Persian Gulf Observer*, titled "Iran's Land Route: A Strategic Threat" by The Ezri Center's research fellow, Mr. Yossi Mansharof.

The Persian Gulf Observer: Perspectives on Iran and the Persian Gulf is published periodically by The Ezri Center for Iran & Persian Gulf Studies at the University of Haifa, expressing the views and analysis of the Ezri center's researchers on various issues concerning the Persian Gulf region and the countries which lay by its shores.

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Iran's Land Route: A Strategic Threat

By Yossi Mansharof

Establishing a land route (or, a bridge or corridor) from the Persian Gulf to the Mediterranean Sea is a central pillar of Iranian policy in the region. Iran saw the threat to it from ISIS as an opportunity in this regard. Despite the real threat to Iran's territorial integrity and the stability of the Iranian regime posed by ISIS, the international crisis created by the latter's conquests and terror attacks provided Iran with a golden opportunity to realize its ambitions for regional expansion.

ISIS attacks on Iranian territory and the possibility that it would gain widespread attraction from Sunni minorities in Iran were a real threat to Iran. Nevertheless, as a result of Iranian leader Khamenei's strategic decision according to which Iran needed to fight against ISIS in Syria and Iraq or it would be compelled to fight against it in the streets of Teheran, and thanks to the assaults on ISIS by the international coalition led by the United States – Iran was rescued from this threat and used it to strengthen its military presence in Syria and Iraq. This Iranian military deployment consists of Iranian forces – the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), the Iranian army and the Basij – as well as a variety of Shi'ite militias under the control of IRGC Quds Force leader, Qassem Soleimani.

The land route extends from Iran to Iraq, and from there to Syria's Abu Kamal by way of Al-Qa'im, and then to the Syrian Golan Heights and Lebanon, and would be under the control of Iran or its proxies. The latter include trans-national Shi'ite militias made up of the Lebanese Hezbollah, the Afghan Fatemiyoun, the Pakistani Zeinabiyoun and the various Iraqi Shiite militias under the banner of Al-Hashd al-Shaabi (Popular Mobilization Forces)

At its inception, the route was to accomplish two of Teheran's strategic goals in the region:

First, considering the Assad regime's major territorial losses to the Syrian rebels, Al-Qaeda affiliates and ISIS (until the Russian intervention in the Syrian Civil War in 2015), Iran prepared itself for the possible overthrow of that regime and sought to secure independent and direct access to Hezbollah and to the Syrian-Israeli border. As per the declarations of senior Iranian officials, Tehran sought to assure that the area around the Syrian-Israeli border would continue to serve as a possible launching ground for attacks against Israel and that Hezbollah would continue to receive military assistance from Iran. Hence the ground route was designed to preserve and deepen Iran's grip in Syria and Lebanon even in the case that Assad's regime would fall.

Second, Tehran sought to leverage the crises of the Arab Spring and ISIS in Syria in order to widen the front against Israel's northern border, to include the Syrian Golan Heights as well as Lebanon. In the framework of such a project, the Syrian-Israeli border was slated as an Iranian outpost. The outpost was meant to include a forward base for Iran – whether in order to launch rocket attacks against Israel or to initiate ground incursions within the context of Hezbollah's intentions to conquer territory in northern Israel. According to the plan devised by Iran, the intervention force would come from the IRGC Quds Force, and it was also expected to include militants from Hezbollah and Iraqi militias supported by Iran, including Al-Nujaba and apparently Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq as well.

So far, Israel has shown great determination to prevent the Quds Force and Hezbollah from establishing a missile base on the Syrian Golan Heights. In this context, Israel eliminated a senior Quds Force officer, Mohammad Ali Allahdadi, along with five other Quds Force members accompanying him, in the Syrian Golan Heights near Quneitra in January 2015. It did the same to members of a cell in Hezbollah's elite Radwan Unit, including Jihad Mughniyeh, the commander of the Hezbollah forces operating in the Syrian Golan Heights. In retaliation, Hezbollah ambushed and killed two IDF soldiers at Har Dov.

Moreover, Israel attacked Hezbollah bases in the Syrian Golan Heights through hundreds of Israeli aerial strikes in Syria in recent years. Likewise, and as a preventive measure, in October 2017 Israel revealed the identity of the Hezbollah commander appointed by Nasrallah in June 2016 for the Syrian Golan Heights front as Munir Ali Naim (Haj Hasham).

Israel has additionally shown its resolve to prevent the advance of the land route in Iraqi territory as well. According to reports in Persian Gulf state media, Israel carried out aerial attacks in July 2018 against Shi'ite militia installations that were being used to transfer weapons to Syria, as well as against Iraqi Shi'ite militias on the Iraqi-Syrian border near Abu Kamal.

The land route is part of Iran's overarching strategy to put Israel under siege composed by considerable threats on its fronts. Iran has created the threat of a massive missile assault from Hamas and the Islamic Jihad in the south of Israel and from Hezbollah in the North; and it would like to create the same type of threat from Syrian territory as well. Moreover, Iran encourages terrorist attacks in the West Bank, primarily through Unit 133 of Hezbollah – the unit specifically designated to help the Palestinians. According to Iran's strategy, this siege will deter Israel from attacking Iran's nuclear facilities by forcing it to occupy itself with the neutralization of these Iranian-backed organizations instead.

The land route plan was born out of the disruption of Iran's original intentions to create a sea route to the shores of Lebanon and Syria. However, since Iranian ships are not allowed passageway through the Suez Canal on account of the volatility of relations between Teheran and Cairo, current geo-political conditions prevent Iran from realizing such a strategy. And even though the IRGC claimed in November of 2018 that Iran had a naval foothold on the Mediterranean Sea, it does not appear that this claim has any basis. Rather, it appears that due to Russian influence on Syria, Iran is not permitted to hold any naval bases there and must content itself to being hosted by the Russian naval base in Latakia. According to a report from November 2017, Assad also denied an Iranian request for the fifty-year lease of a Syrian port. Hence the route will currently not extend to the Syrian coastline.

Considering the Israeli attacks in Syria, the land route would represent an important complement to the Iranian airlift to the airports of Damascus and Beirut. The IRGC use this airlift to transfer weapons and missile technology as a part of the plan to improve the precision of Hezbollah missiles. However, by its very nature, the airlift limits the size of the parts that can be transferred. And since the land route would provide greater flexibility in the size and quantity of the material transferred to Hezbollah, it would better serve Iran's needs. Recently a third dimension was added to the route when Iran and Iraq signed an agreement to build a rail line from Shalamcheh in southern Iran to Basra, and from there to Latakia in Syria.

Senior Iranian government officials refrain from publicly declaring their strategy of a land route. This is in line with Iran's policy of tireless efforts to quietly establish a foothold in Syria and Lebanon, with an eye to the inherent internal sensitivity towards attempts by Iran to establish itself in Syria. Nonetheless, elements close to the IRGC have referred to the land route on several occasions. Mashreghnews, a website close to the IRGC, called the land route, "Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu's nightmare," and "a game changer in East Asia, and even in the world." Ja'afar al-Husseini, the spokesman for the Iraqi Kataib Hezbollah militia, declared that the Iraqi militias were deployed to safeguard the artery from Iraq to Syria, and from there to Beirut. Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, the commander of the Iraqi Shi'ite militia umbrella organization, Al-Hashd al-Shaabi, and an ally of the Quds Force Commander, Qassem Soleimani, declared that the establishment of the land route is an inalienable right of the Axis of Resistance.

The actors seriously preventing Iran from advancing its strategy of a land route are Israel, the United States and the Kurds. As senior Israeli officials have stated, ongoing Israeli attacks have prevented Iran from fully implementing its plan to establish itself in Syria; and therefore, the weaponry and the order of battle that Iran brings through the land route is far from what was envisioned in its original plan. So, for example, Iran had planned on installing enhanced anti-aircraft capabilities, as well as advanced UAVs.

American forces however are only allowed to fight against ISIS forces, and not against Iran. Nevertheless, they are stationed at the strategic junction of Tanf on Syria's eastern border with Iraq and adjacent to the Iranian land route, and so represent an additional obstacle dampening Iran's plans to advance its land route strategy. Hence it would have been important for the United States to maintain its military presence in Syria. Yet it was this very military presence that made the United States particularly vulnerable to attacks by the Quds Force and its proxies. And so, it would appear that American vulnerability was an additional consideration in the White House's decision to pull out of Syria. The United States is simply not interested in a direct military confrontation with Teheran. Of course, the American withdrawal will weaken the Kurdish position, given that the Kurds presence in nearby Sinjar in Iraq and in the area west of there in Syria also impedes the expansion of the Iranian route.

The Iranian land route is likely to present a serious threat to the stability of Jordan and to the rule of King Abdullah. As a result, it has produced great concern among Jordanian authorities. In line with King Abdullah's worries about the establishment of Iranian and pro-Iranian forces in the area and especially on his country's northern border, he had already warned about the creation of a Shi'ite crescent in the area as early as 2004. The IRGC have expressed their hope throughout the last decade to arm Palestinians in the West Bank by way of Jordan; however, they were met with Jordanian refusal. In the worst-case scenario, Jordan's King Abdullah could allow Iran to orchestrate terror attacks against Israel and Saudi Arabia from his territory so as to appease Iran and to try to prevent it from undermining his authority.

It seems that the Trump administration recently rejected the Israeli government's request to impose sanctions on the Lebanese army in view of the cooperation of some army circles with Hezbollah in order to allow the latter to smuggle technology designed to improve the accuracy of its missiles through Beirut International Airport. Nevertheless, it is critical that the American government enforce its sanctions against Iranian airlines – such as Mahan Air, Iran Air and Qeshm Air – that bring logistical and military aid as well as IRGC fighters and Shi'ite militiamen from Iran

to Syria and to Beirut. Lack of enforcement of the sanctions would allow these airlines, for example, to continue their flights to Europe.

Foiling the establishment of the land route is in the mutual interest of the Sunni camp, Western nations and Israel. Yet given Europe's determination to preserve the nuclear treaty with Iran and the refusal of the United States and the Sunni camp to directly engage Iran militarily, Israel remains the only one to fulfill its part in this objective. The United States' decision to withdraw its forces will obviously only further free Iran's hand in making the Shi'ite land route a reality.

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