

Iran in Syria: Deal-maker or deal-breaker?

Since the outbreak of the conflict in Syria, Iran has been a steadfast supporter of Bashar al-Assad's regime, and ensuring its survival is Iran's primary objective. This is unsurprising, given that Tehran needs a friendly regime in Damascus to protect its strategic interests in the region. At the same time, there is an expectation of more constructive engagement from Iran following the signature of the nuclear deal with E3/EU+3 countries.

A marriage of convenience

The [alliance](#) between Syria and Iran has been built on the need to defend against common threats: the hostile regime of Saddam Hussein in Iraq, the United States' hegemonic policies, and the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territory. [Cooperation](#) between Damascus and Tehran became particularly close following the US-led invasion of Iraq, with the primary aim to ensure that no hostile regime seizes power in Baghdad once the United States withdraws. Iran's engagement in Syria is currently motivated by a number of [factors](#). Firstly, Iran's clergy backs the religious status of [the Alawites](#) – the Shia minority to which Syria's ruling family belongs. Secondly, to maintain its leverage in [regional politics](#), Iran needs to be able to provide money and weapons to its proxies – Lebanese Hezbollah, Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad – which the Assad regime facilitates. Thirdly, Syria and Iran share concerns about the balance of power in the region. Both are interested in keeping the regional Sunni bloc – including Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Egypt – in check. Both want to ensure that Iraq remains committed to the Shia alliance in the region. Finally, the alliance between Syria and Iran is cemented by their stance on the Palestinians' conflict with Israel, which also explains Iranian support for Lebanese Hezbollah and groups operating in the Gaza Strip. Many countries view toppling Assad's regime as the primary condition for limiting Iran's influence in the region. The financial and military [support](#) provided by Saudi Arabia and [Qatar](#) to anti-Assad militias has transformed the civil war into a proxy war between major regional powers. [Saudi Arabia](#) is Iran's main challenger in Syria and has provided military equipment and financial assistance to the Syrian opposition. In December 2015, Riyadh [announced](#) the formation of a 34-nation military alliance against terrorism, reaching beyond the Middle East, whose role will include information-sharing, providing training, equipment, and forces if necessary. The alliance, composed of mainly Muslim countries, excludes Saudi Arabia's regional rival Iran as well as Iraq and Syria.

Diplomatic engagement

A number of political initiatives to find a solution to the conflict have been unsuccessful, leaving the UN-led process as the only viable option. However, until recently, Iran was not invited to the negotiating table and opted for an alternative path. With Russian and Chinese support in the UN Security Council, Iran has been spearheading [diplomatic](#) efforts aimed at ensuring the survival of Bashar al-Assad's regime and Syrian ownership of the political process. At the core of Iran's evolving [four-point plan](#) for Syria, laid out by Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif, are: a ceasefire, followed by the formation of a national unity government, fighting terrorism, constitutional reforms, and creation of a permanent government structure based on the new constitutional institutions. Iran has been unwavering in claiming that people and governments outside Syria should not set preconditions for a political solution in Syria. In July 2015, the UN Special Envoy for the Syrian crisis, Staffan de Mistura, presented a [new approach](#), deepening the Geneva consultations format through the establishment of intra-Syrian working groups to address the key aspects of the Geneva Communiqué. The aim of the process is to steer the consultations towards the emergence of a 'Syrian-owned framework document' on the implementation of the Geneva Communiqué. The UN Security Council [endorsed](#) this new approach on 29 July 2015 and implementation began in September 2015. Iran's role within this process was significantly boosted following the signature of the [Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action](#) in July 2015. In October 2015, after Washington and Riyadh [lifted](#) their objections, Iran was invited to

[attend](#) peace talks on Syria for the first time, along with representatives from the USA, Russia, Turkey and Saudi Arabia. Following two rounds of negotiations in [October](#) and [November](#) 2015, the process has yielded significant progress, including an agreement to hold UN-supervised elections in 18 months, and that the political process will be 'Syrian led and Syrian owned, and the Syrian people will decide the future of Syria'. Differences remain over whether President Assad should be allowed to participate. Analysts highlight the fact that both Washington and Tehran have [softened](#) their respective approaches on the future of the Syrian president. The bottom line for Iran, however, is to ensure that whatever the outcome of this process, the next leader of Syria will be willing to accommodate Iran's interests. In the meantime, no side has [shifted](#) its position to an extent that will tip the balance towards a political solution.

Military assistance

Iran's leverage in the political negotiations has significantly increased through its [military support](#), both to government forces and also to pro-regime militias, including the National Defence Forces and militia drawn from criminal networks (*shabiha*). While the former is meant to ensure Assad's survival, the support for militia units is meant to serve as an insurance policy, whereby Iran will continue to exercise influence on Syria's internal politics through proxies – should the Assad regime be removed from power. Iran's military involvement in Syria has taken different forms, ranging from training and intelligence-gathering to active participation in combat operations. Even though Iran has denied any military involvement, claiming that Iran's engagement is purely in an 'advisory' capacity, numerous [media reports](#) suggest that, since the beginning of the offensive in Syria, at least 57 Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) members have been [killed](#). It is [estimated](#) that Iran has deployed around 1 300-1 800 IRGC personnel in total to Syria. Iran's military training efforts in Syria are led by the foreign arm of the [IRGC](#) – the Quds Force, which is responsible for all Iranian external operations. There are also reports of IRGC Ground Forces – responsible for Iranian internal security and conventional operations – involvement, which suggests that Iran is also sharing its experience with counter-insurgency operations. Iran's Law Enforcement Forces (LEF) and the Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS) have also provided support to the Syrian General Intelligence Directorate (GID) and dispatched personnel to Damascus to assist the regime to [suppress](#) opposition forces. Iran has also ensured the deployment of the Lebanese Hezbollah (about [2 000-4 000](#) combatants) and [foreign fighters](#) from Iraqi Shia militia groups and Pakistan, totalling up to [10 000](#) troops. Another key element of Iran's assistance is [aerial resupply](#), which is used as a primary channel for transporting personnel and weapons. The UN has also reported that Syria is a top destination for [illicit arms](#) shipments from Iran.

Economic and humanitarian support

Equally important has been Iran's support in keeping Syria's plunging economy and power generation capacities afloat. Torn by the civil war, Syria's economy has become increasingly dependent on financial support from Russia, Iraq, China and most importantly Iran. According to the UN Special Envoy, de Mistura, Iran's aid to Syria – including military and economic aid – may total about US\$6 billion per year, with some researchers [estimating](#) that Iran spent around US\$14 billion in military and economic aid to the Damascus regime in 2012 and 2013. Even though no official statistics exist that would demonstrate the scale of IRGC's external support, media reports provide an idea. In July 2013, for instance, Syria and Iran [agreed](#) a US\$3.6 billion credit line, mostly used for oil imports, and extended another US\$1 billion credit line, half of which will be destined for electric power projects in a barter arrangement that has helped Syria to export textiles, phosphates and some agricultural produce. In May 2015, Iran agreed to provide Syria with an around US\$1 billion credit line – involving the Export Development Bank of Iran and the Syrian Commercial Bank – to finance the import of goods and commodities as well as implementing various projects. The two countries [signed](#) several agreements in the fields of electricity, industry, oil and investment. Iran also [supplies](#) Syria with approximately 60 000 barrels per day of crude oil to ease Syria's problems with crude oil and refined products. In November 2015, Iran's Ambassador to Syria, Mohammad Rauf Sheybani, [announced](#) that the Iranian Red Crescent Society (IRCS) will act as an agent for the distribution of international humanitarian aid in Syria. In recent years, IRCS has also been involved in providing humanitarian assistance (i.e. medicine, food, clothing and tents) to Syrians, including [refugees](#) in Jordan and Lebanon and [Palestinians](#) living in Syria. Some observers [suggest](#) that the July 2015 Iran deal may eventually benefit the Assad regime, since 'more money for Iran means more money for Syria'.