



# Curtailing Tehran:

Breaking down the validation of Israeli conjectures that Damascus is constraining Iranian military activities

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The Israeli 'Walla' news website published a report that Syrian President Bashar al-Assad has reorganized the deployment of military forces in Syria, and has restricted the movement of Iranian forces internally in order to prevent internal frictions and achieve peace and stability.

Walla deems the change in Damascus's stance towards Iran to be in response to the political, economic and military pressures implored on the former. The website has also indicated that the Iranian presence in Syria has also weakened for other reasons, including the continuous Israeli and US pressures on Iranian presence there.

While there were no sources confirming such notions, considering the policies of regional and international powers' concerning the Syrian crisis, there might be some truth to this notion, pushing Damascus to embrace such tactics

## Challenges facing Iran

Despite Iran's strong military presence in Syria, it has lately been under evident pressures, especially by Russia, which can be illustrated as follows:

**1- Restricting the Iranian military presence:** Iran has about 28 military base and security observation points within Syria, especially in Al-Hasakah, Deir ez-Zor and Southern Damascus, in addition to the proliferation of its militias across multiple areas in Syria. This military presence witnesses escalating threats not only by Israel, which strikes at it from time to time, but also by Russia, which has recently

sought to reinforce the influence of its Fifth Corps in the province of Daraa, which is located Southwest of Syria. Furthermore, Russian forces launched a new military base in Al Bukamal on the borders with Iraq, which is a precedent since its military intervention in the country.

**2- The decline of the Iranian economic role:** Iran was seeking to control the Syrian economy by investing in its major sectors, but found strong Russian competition, as both countries compete to obtain oil-extraction contracts. Russia was finally able to resolve this conflict to its favor and to acquire five oil contracts between 2013 and 2020. Meanwhile, Iran was able to win its first Syrian oil contract last year.

The Syrian government has recently granted Russian companies exclusive rights to explore and

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develop its oil and gas industry within the Syrian exclusive economic zone at the Mediterranean Sea over about 2,250 km<sup>2</sup>. Meanwhile, the Russian army has seized control over the Al-Thawra oil field Southwest of Raqqa, after expelling the Iranian Fatimiyoun militias. It also got control over the Toynan gas field, located at Tabqa in the Raqqa countryside. The Syrian government has signed contracts with Velada and Mercury, two Russian firms in the fields of oil excavation, drilling and production at Deir ez-Zor.

Syria had initially promised Iran a contract to extract phosphate, but then changed its direction and granted it to a Russian company in 2018. Furthermore, in the spring of 2019, Damascus has announced its plan to lease the port of Tarsus to Russia, and to hand over the container terminal at Latakia port to Iran. However, this latter contract did not see the light due to Russian pressures.

On a separate front, Russia is seeking to help Syria rebuild bridges with the wider Arab world to be able to face the Western isolation, while Iran opposes these directions, given the impact this may have on limiting its role and constricting its gains within Syria.

**3- Attempted Iranian cultural expansion:** Tehran is seeking to spread Shiism through cultural centers, in addition to attempting to teach the Persian language at schools that it is in charge of restoring. However, it has so far failed to convince the Syrian government to make Persian the official language in education. On the other hand, Russia was able to include the Russian language as a second language in education in lieu of the French language.

**4- Fostering the diplomatic presence:** Iran maintains strong relations with the Syrian government, which is reflected in the number of official visits between both countries, in addition to the inauguration of the Iranian consulate in Aleppo on May 22, 2020. This indicates Iran's desire to reinforce its economic presence there, in case its military presence faces greater pressures over the coming phase.

## Consensus over curbing Tehran

Examining the stance of all parties involved within the Syrian crisis, it can be deduced that there is a consensus on the part of the Syrian government, its supporters, and even its opponents, to limit the

Iranian role. This stems from each party's own estimates, which can be detailed as follows:

**1- Restoration of Syrian Sovereignty:** Damascus is gradually seeking to restore its independence and sovereignty, at least in facing Tehran, after its authority had severely regressed by the civil war since 2011, illustrated by the following:

**a) Relationships of cooperation, not domination:** the Syrian government desires to own full political and military decision-making capacities in its domains of control, in favor of its interests and without being committed to Tehran's political directions, as Tehran seeks to use Syria as a base for enhancing its regional influence and settling accounts with Israel. Therefore, it is expected that the Syrian government will be keen on continuing this progressive coordination with Iran, while maintaining its own space of movement and ensuring that this relationship does not negatively impact its high priority ties with Russia.

**b) Resentment within the Syrian security and military circles:** influential circles within the Syrian political and military institutions are expressing their concerns regarding the Iranian militias' heightened influence, and their implementation of field operations that are outside the control of the Syrian army and security services. Particularly, these movements have led the exposure of some Syrian regions to sudden and repeated air attacks from Israel and the US, some of which impact Syrian military sites and cause the destruction of some of the country's infrastructure.

**c) Rejection of Iranian sectarianism:** Syrian authorities are concerned about some sectarian transgressions by the Shiite militias, which are affiliated with Iran, especially at the Sayeda Zeinab neighborhood in Damascus, some villages in Aleppo's countryside, as well as villages at Deir Ez-zor and Al-Qalamoun, which may cause the Syrian government to lose part of the support of the Sunni forces.

**2- Enhancing the Russian presence:** Russia adopted a consistent stance. It was announced by Russian President Vladimir Putin, as he stressed in 2018 the need for all foreign powers to exit Syria, including Iran and its militias. Therefore, Moscow has been conducting the following:

**a) A progressive alliance with Iran:** Moscow has



formulated a temporary alliance with Iran within the developments of the Syrian crisis. This was evident politically through the Astana track, and militarily, to confront the armed opposition. After securing the Syrian regime, Moscow commenced its besieging of the Iranian military deployment in Syria.

**b) A tract of bargaining with the West:** Moscow is well aware that its endeavors to ease US and European pressures on the Syrian government and to reach some common grounds with Washington concerning Syria will require curtailing the Iranian military presence, particularly since Moscow believes that the practices of some Shiite factions in Daraa and Aleppo are disrupting Russian efforts to restore stability in those areas.

**c) Anticipating the outcome of Vienna talks:** Moscow anticipates that the Vienna talks and the possible revival of the nuclear agreement may enable Iran to gain further international legitimacy, in addition to the lifting of sanctions and the release of Iran's frozen financial assets. This would all help Iran enhance its military presence in Syria, which Moscow dreads.

**3- A US-Israeli consensus on expelling Tehran:** Both Washington and Tel Aviv are seeking to weaken the Iranian presence in Syria, evident below:

**a) Damascus's leaning towards curtailing Tehran:** the US and Israel both consider the Iranian military presence, with its various tactics in Syria, to be a central obstacle in dealing with the Syrian government. Multiple sources in both countries confirm that any achievements in the issues of besieging this Iranian presence may create a positive atmosphere for moderate approaches in dealing with the Syrian government.

**b) Securing Israel:** Israel considers restraining the Iranian presence in Syria as a strategic goal. It is supported by the US in that respect for the purpose of securing Israel by preventing Iran from finding a forward base to attack Tel Aviv. This comes in addition to the Israeli army's desire to prevent the construction of a land bridge that would be used for transporting weapons from Iran to Hezbollah in Lebanon.


In conclusion, these developments indicate the existence of serious shifts in the Syrian stance towards Iran, which is linked to Damascus' desire to restore its sovereignty, and to the existence of several disagreements between Syria and Iran. Damascus' success in this respect requires the continuation of Russian, US and Israeli pressures on the Iranian military presence in Syria.

## ABOUT FARAS

Future for Advanced Research and Studies (FARAS) is an independent think tank founded on April 4, 2014 in Abu Dhabi, U.A.E. FARAS seeks to enrich public dialogue, support decision-making and enhance academic research pertaining to future trends that currently constitute a real problem in the Middle East region. In light of instability and unpredictability, the overarching goal of FARAS is to help ward off future shocks regarding these developments.

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