



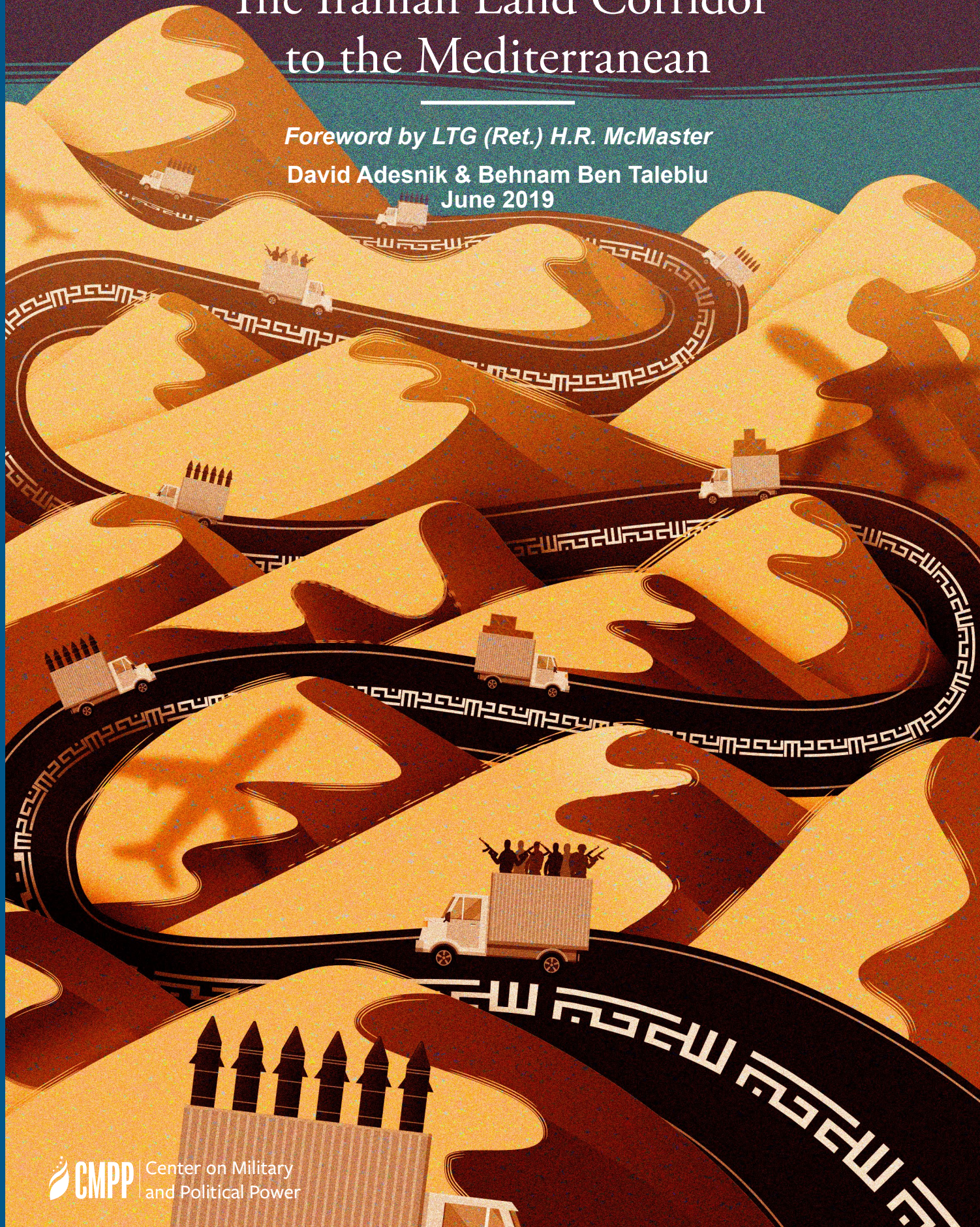
# Burning Bridge

## The Iranian Land Corridor to the Mediterranean

Foreword by LTG (Ret.) H.R. McMaster

David Adesnik & Behnam Ben Taleblu

June 2019







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## Foreword

*By LTG (Ret.) H.R. McMaster  
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In “Burning Bridge: The Iranian Land Corridor to the Mediterranean,” David Adesnik and Behnam Ben Taleblu shed fresh light and understanding on Iran’s sustained campaign to pursue hegemonic influence in the Middle East, export its revolutionary ideology, and threaten Israel and the West. Iran’s effort to establish a land bridge across Syria and Iraq is connected to a four decade-long proxy war that Iran is waging to pursue its revolutionary agenda. This study is important because it reveals the Islamic Republic’s intentions, describes in detail a critical element of Iranian strategy, and recommends practical steps necessary to counter that strategy and promote peace.

There has been a tendency to base U.S. Iran policy on wishful thinking rather than an understanding of the Islamic Republic’s actions and how they reveal its true intentions. For example, many hoped that the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, or Iran nuclear deal – with its enticements of a cash payout up front, influx of foreign investment, and increased trade after the lifting of sanctions – would convince Iranian leaders to abandon their revolutionary agenda and end their hostility to Arab states, Israel, and the West. Instead, Iranian leaders, who are the beneficial owners of many of the companies that stood to profit from the contracts and letters of agreement signed after sanctions were lifted, used the influx of funds to intensify their proxy war in the region. Conciliatory approaches to Iran that gained in popularity in the United States and Europe in recent years failed because the principal assumption that underpinned those approaches was false. Treating Iran as a responsible nation state did *not* moderate the regime’s behavior. Wishful thinking led to complacency in confronting Iran’s most egregious actions and operations. The Iranian regime took full advantage of that complacency.

Iran’s strategy aims to weaken Arab states that are friendly to the United States and other Western nations. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps

(IRGC) is perpetuating a sectarian civil war that is the fundamental cause of the humanitarian and political catastrophe across the region. It is the fear of Iran’s Shiite proxy armies that allows jihadist terrorist organizations to portray themselves as patrons and protectors of beleaguered Sunni communities. The cycle of sectarian violence allows Iran to export its ideology and apply the Hezbollah model broadly in the region. Iran wants weak governments in the region that are dependent on the Islamic Republic for support. The IRGC grows militias like Hezbollah in Lebanon that lie outside those governments’ control, which Iran can use to coerce those governments into supporting Iran’s designs in the region and reducing U.S. influence. Iran has that coercive power in Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq. The IRGC is also pursuing control of strategic territory in Yemen through its support of Shiite Houthi militias engaged with forces supported by the Saudis and Emiratis in that devastating civil war. The chaos that Iran’s strategy promotes sets conditions for the establishment of its land and air bridge across the region.

Wishful thinking on Iran among policymakers was based, in large measure, on the hope that a conciliatory policy would support moderates who would abandon the “Great Satan” and “Death to America” language and end their decades-long proxy wars. But policymakers should pay more attention to the regime’s actions as the principal means of assessing its intentions. The superb research in “Burning Bridge” reveals Iran’s determination to become the dominant power in the Middle East. That determination is based in an ideology that blends Marxism with Shiite millenarianism and imagines a world without the West. The true believers in the Islamic Revolution, from Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei to the leaders of the IRGC, are in charge in Iran. Moderate reformers are in jail or out of the country. That is why policy must be based in an approach that is clearly aimed at countering the regime across the region and encouraging a shift in the nature of the Iranian regime such that it ceases its permanent hostility to its Arab neighbors, Israel, and the West. The Trump administration has adopted that approach and deserves support from the U.S. Congress as well as ally and partner nations.

The IRGC has been effective due, in large measure, to its unscrupulousness and talent for deception. The IRGC and the Iranian regime are vulnerable to a concerted multinational effort that aims to force a choice between continuing its murderous proxy war or behaving like a responsible nation. Concerted multinational action to shut down Tehran’s air bridge to Damascus and prevent a land bridge from becoming operational provides an opportunity to begin a sustained campaign to counter Iran’s destructive behavior. The clear recommendations at the end of this report are an excellent starting point for launching that campaign.

## Executive Summary

- Iran and its proxy forces are establishing an unbroken corridor – dubbed a “land bridge” by Western analysts – from Tehran to the Mediterranean. The land bridge has the potential to accelerate sharply the shipment of weapons to southern Lebanon and the Golan front in Syria.
- The greater the strength of Iran and Hezbollah along Israel’s northern border, the greater the risk of escalation, leading to a regional war that directly threatens U.S. allies and U.S. interests across the Middle East.
- Iran has already opened one of the three primary routes from its own borders to the Mediterranean by retaking the key Syrian border town of Albu Kamal<sup>1</sup> in November 2017. There are reports Iran has already begun to ship weapons through the town.<sup>2</sup>
- At present, the critical supply route for Iran remains the “air bridge” to Damascus, across which Iran has shipped advanced weapons to Hezbollah and tens of thousands of fighters to Syria since 2012.

- Iranian officials and proxy forces rarely mention the land bridge. Rather, their statements emphasize the struggle of the Iranian-led “Axis of Resistance” against the U.S. and its allies.
- The U.S. and its local partners currently hold blocking positions that have closed two of the three potential land bridge routes across the Middle East. The U.S. garrison at al-Tanf in eastern Syria sits astride the main highway from Baghdad to Damascus, obstructing one route. In addition, U.S. forces and their local partners in northern Syria block the northernmost route.
- Disrupting the land bridge should be a key U.S. objective, but Iran’s ambitions go far beyond an effective logistics supply route to southern Lebanon and the Golan front. Tehran’s goal is to subvert the regional order, export its revolution, and displace the U.S. as the leading power in the region.
- President Trump’s closest advisors have advocated a sustained effort to counter Iranian influence, yet unexpected policy reversals, such as the announcement of a withdrawal from Syria, have seriously damaged U.S. credibility in the region.

## Introduction

President Trump’s closest advisors have repeatedly warned of Tehran’s determination to carve out a land bridge, or ground corridor, across the Middle East. “The regime continues to seek a corridor stretching from Iran’s borders to the shores of the Mediterranean,” explained Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, “Iran wants this corridor to transport fighters and an advanced weapons system to Israel’s doorsteps.”<sup>3</sup> Shortly before his appointment as national security adviser, Ambassador John Bolton wrote, “Iran has established an arc of control from Iran through Iraq to Assad’s regime in Syria to Hezbollah in Lebanon.” This “invaluable geo-strategic position” enhances Tehran’s ability to threaten

1. Also occasionally transliterated as Al-Bukamal or Abu Kamal. From the Arabic: البوكمال.

2. Sune Engel Rasmussen and Felicia Schwartz, “Israel Broadens Fight Against Iran,” *The Wall Street Journal*, July 15, 2018. (<https://www.wsj.com/articles/israel-broadens-fight-against-iran-1531684841>)

3. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, “After the Deal: A New Iran Strategy,” *Speech before the Heritage Foundation*, May 21, 2018. (<https://www.state.gov/after-the-deal-a-new-iran-strategy/>)



ⓘ The northern (red) and southern (green) routes of the land bridge. The southern route has upper and lower branches that pass, respectively, through al-Qaim/Albu Kamal and al-Tanf. Source: Adapted from map by Franc Milburn in *Strategic Assessment* (Israel)

Israel, Jordan, and U.S. allies in the Persian Gulf.<sup>4</sup> The president himself noted, “We don’t want to give Iran open season to the Mediterranean.”<sup>5</sup>

The concept of a land bridge has become integral to Washington’s assessment of Tehran’s strategic objectives. Lawmakers, scholars, and foreign correspondents emphasize its importance, yet have rarely examined the concept systematically. More importantly, it remains unclear how Iranian leaders think about the land bridge, a phrase they do not employ. Instead, Tehran speaks of an “Axis of Resistance” that unites Iran with Lebanese Hezbollah, the Bashar al-Assad regime, and other like-minded actors.

This report traces the evolution of the land bridge concept and places it in proper strategic context. Iran has already unblocked one route to the Mediterranean

and would derive real strategic advantages from consolidating control over this route and the others that link Tehran to Baghdad, Damascus, and Beirut. Yet building a land bridge is just one element of Tehran’s strategy to establish itself as the dominant power in the Middle East. Logistical routes are necessary, but political and ideological similarities serve as the bedrock for the Axis of Resistance. Furthermore, Iranian ambitions include dominance in the Gulf, not just those countries along the route of the land bridge. A myopic focus on the land bridge would prevent the U.S. from addressing this broader threat.

Still, disrupting the land bridge should be one important objective within a comprehensive strategy to reverse the gains Iran has made across the region, measured both in geographic terms and in its ability to intimidate or co-opt regional governments. The U.S.

4. John Bolton, “Thanks to Obama, America is two steps behind Iran in Middle East,” *The Hill*, October 23, 2017. (<https://thehill.com/opinion/white-house/356667-thanks-to-obama-us-is-two-steps-behind-iran-on-middle-east-strategy>)

5. The White House, “Remarks by President Trump and President Macron of France in Joint Press Conference,” April 24, 2018. (<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-president-macron-france-joint-press-conference/>)



military presence in the region, especially in Iraq and Syria, serves the dual purpose of blocking certain land bridge routes and amplifying Washington's diplomatic leverage. Rushed withdrawals, whether from Iraq in 2011, or the partial withdrawal now under way in Syria, have reinforced perceptions of the United States as less than dedicated to this fight.

Escalating sanctions pressure can constrain Iran's access to the land bridge, to some extent. In the first months of 2019, the U.S. began to sanction select Shiite militias under Iranian control in Syria and Iraq,<sup>6</sup> yet much work remains. For the moment, Iran actually derives greater strategic value from its aerial routes to Syria, or "air bridge," which have comprised the main conduit since 2012 for sending weapons to Hezbollah and other Shiite militants to fight on Assad's behalf. Accordingly, the U.S. has begun to intensify sanctions pressure on the commercial airlines that operate the air bridge.<sup>7</sup> Capable diplomacy can also help to build regional and transatlantic support for shutting down Iran's air bridge.

The cost of failure could be quite high. In the absence of decisive U.S.-led efforts to counter Iranian influence across the region, Iran may fully subordinate Iraq, increase deployments of the Shiite militias that serve as its foreign legion, and transform Syria into a forward base for Iranian aggression against Israel. Iran may thus plunge the region into war, even drawing in the United States. By taking preventive measures now, Washington can curtail the risk of such conflict.

## Iranian Strategy and the Land Bridge

Less than three years ago, references to an Iranian land bridge were infrequent. Moreover, they did not refer to the same routes under discussion today. Before the autumn of 2016, it seemed implausible that Iran could establish control of a corridor from Tehran to the Mediterranean. By 2017, however, assessments evolved rapidly in response to developments on Syrian and Iraqi battlefields. By early 2018, there was a rough consensus on the meaning of "land bridge," although its significance is disputed.

The Islamic Republic has had designs on the Middle East since its inception in 1979. Exchanging the pro-American orientation and nationalism of its predecessor for pan-Islamist, anti-Western, and anti-Zionist ideals, the new Iranian government sought to export its revolution,<sup>8</sup> hoping to undermine U.S.-aligned governments in the Middle East. In the early 1980s, Iran saw an opportunity to confront Israel and support the cause of Lebanese Shiites. The regime deployed several thousand members of the newly formed Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) to the Bekaa Valley to begin training Lebanese fighters that would become Hezbollah.<sup>9</sup> Iran also forged close ties with the Assad regime in Syria,<sup>10</sup> whose proximity to Lebanon made it a critical source of support for the Lebanese group. Both the IRGC expedition to Lebanon and Iran's drive to overthrow its Ba'athist adversary during

6. David Adesnik, "State Department Adds Iranian-backed Militia in Iraq to Terror List," *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, March 7, 2019. (<https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2019/03/07/state-department-adds-iranian-backed-militia-in-iraq-to-terror-list/>)

7. Emanuele Ottolenghi, "Treasury rightly clips wings of Iran's Mahan Air," *The Hill*, July 19, 2018. (<https://thehill.com/opinion/international/397915-treasury-rightly-clips-wings-of-irans-mahan-air>)

8. Steven R. Ward, *Immortal: A Military History of Iran and its Armed Forces* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2007), pages 267-268.

9. Nader Uskowi, *Temperature Rising: Iran's Revolutionary Guards and Wars in the Middle East* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019), page 39; Nicholas Blanford, *Warriors of God: Inside Hezbollah's Thirty-Year Struggle Against Israel* (New York: Random House, 2011), page 44.

10. For example, see: Dilip Hiro, *The Longest War: The Iran-Iraq Military Conflict* (New York: Routledge, 1991), page 117.

the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988), are early examples of Iran's efforts to export its revolution.<sup>11</sup>

With good reason, analysts today describe Lebanese Hezbollah as “the most successful, and the most deadly, export of the 1979 Iranian revolution.”<sup>12</sup> Emboldened by revolutionary ideology but also cognizant of its own conventional military shortcomings, Tehran's regional security strategy came to rely on a constellation of non-state actors like Hezbollah.<sup>13</sup> Iran's cultivation, arming, financing, and training of such forces enabled the regime to advance the cause of Iranian hegemony at a comparably low cost, while limiting the prospects for escalation or direct retaliation against Iran, since its role was indirect.

The U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 removed Saddam Hussein from power and opened the door to a long-term Iranian effort to co-opt the government of Iraq. Nonetheless, establishing control of a land corridor across Iraq remained out of the question because of the Sunni insurgency that raged in western Iraq along the Syrian border. The insurgency subsided in 2007-2008, but the continuing U.S. military presence posed a similar challenge. The U.S. began to draw down its forces in 2009, but in 2011, the Assad regime lost control of eastern Syria to Sunni rebel forces, thereby threatening Iran's regional designs.

The outbreak of war in Syria sparked discussions in Washington about an Iranian land bridge, yet the phrase initially had a different meaning. Instead of a corridor from Tehran to the Mediterranean, the term described a set of shorter routes from Syrian airports and seaports to regions in Lebanon under Hezbollah control. In 2012, *Washington Post* editor Jackson Diehl observed, “The Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad is Iran's closest ally, and its link to the Arab Middle East. Syria has provided the land bridge for the transport of Iranian weapons and militants to Lebanon and the Gaza Strip.” “Without Syria,” he added, “Iran's pretensions to regional hegemony, and its ability to challenge Israel, would be crippled.”<sup>14</sup>

In 2013, Matthew Levitt, an expert on Hezbollah, said it was imperative for Assad to “maintain a land bridge for the resupply of Iranian weapons” to the Lebanese group by preserving control of Syria's Mediterranean coastline.<sup>15</sup> Shipments that arrived in the ports of Tartus, Baniyas, and Latakia could then move directly southward into Lebanon. Although cargo vessels are more cost effective than aircraft and have far greater capacity, they are also far more susceptible to interdiction. Thus, Assad became increasingly dependent on shipments via air, which began in early 2012, when Iraq first opened its airspace to Syria-bound flights from Iran. Iraq suspended the flights shortly after an April phone call from President Obama to Prime Minister Nouri

11. The war, which was initially a defensive effort for Iran, turned offensive in 1982 as Tehran's war aims evolved from evicting Saddam Hussein's army from Iranian territory to enacting regime change in Iraq. See: *Dar justju-yi rah az kalam-i Imam: Jang va Jihad az bayanat va i'lamiyah'ha-yi Imam Khomeini az sal-i 1341 ta 1361* [In Search of the Path From the Words of the Imam: War and Jihad From the Statements and Declarations of Imam Khomeini From the Years 1341 to 1361], Vol. 2, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. (Tehran: Amir Kabir Publishing Institute, 1984/1985), pages 72-74; Sepehr Zabih, *The Iranian Military in Revolution and War* (London: Routledge, 1988), page 183. On the enduring impact of the war, see: Behnam Ben Taleblu, “The Long Shadow of the Iran-Iraq War,” *The National Interest*, October 23, 2014. (<https://nationalinterest.org/feature/the-long-shadow-the-iran-iraq-war-11535>)

12. Jeffrey Feltman, “Hezbollah: Revolutionary Iran's Most Successful Export,” *Brookings*, January 17, 2019. (<https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/hezbollah-revolutionary-irans-most-successful-export/>)

13. For more on this strategy, see: Behnam Ben Taleblu, “Countering Iran's Proxies in Iraq,” *Testimony before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Terrorism, Nonproliferation and Trade*, September 26, 2018. (<https://docs.house.gov/meetings/FA/FA18/20180926/108719/HHRG-115-FA18-Wstate-TalebluB-20180926.pdf>)

14. Jackson Diehl, “Obama's Iran and Syria muddle,” *The Washington Post*, June 10, 2012. ([https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/obamas-iran-and-syria-muddle/2012/06/10/gJQAr6nITV\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/obamas-iran-and-syria-muddle/2012/06/10/gJQAr6nITV_story.html))

15. Mark Snowiss, “Syrian Opposition Accuses Hezbollah of Widening War,” *Voice of America*, April 25, 2013. (<https://www.voanews.com/a/syria-opposition-accuses-hezbollah-of-widening-war/1648619.html>)

al-Maliki, yet the flights resumed several months later.<sup>16</sup> In effect, Iran was employing an air bridge to send manpower and weapons to Syria, some of which would move by land into Lebanon.

## The Land Bridge Evolves

Iran's growing influence in Iraq, thanks to the rise of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMFs), spurred a redefinition of the land bridge as a corridor from Tehran to the Mediterranean, not just Damascus to Lebanon.<sup>17</sup> While the PMFs are neither exclusively Shiite nor uniformly pro-Iran, they served as a vehicle for Iranian proxies such as Kataib Hezbollah, Asaib Ahl al-Haq, and others to expand their influence. In late 2015, Ali Khedery, formerly a top adviser to several U.S. ambassadors in Iraq, warned, "Iran may play a spoiler role and seek to preserve its ability to attack Israel by securing its land bridge across Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon."<sup>18</sup>

The first thorough assessments of the extended land bridge to the Mediterranean appeared in the fall of 2016, beginning with a *Wall Street Journal* story about Sunni Arabs' fear that the fall of the Islamic State would be followed by "a potentially more dangerous challenge: a land corridor for Tehran to Beirut" under Iranian control.<sup>19</sup> In October, the UK's *Guardian* published the first detailed map of the alleged route, which crossed from Iran into central Iraq, then swung to the northwest, passing through the town of Sinjar, before entering Syria at the Rabia border crossing.



⬇ The northern land bridge route as originally conceived in October 2016. Source: *The Guardian* (UK)

The accompanying story presented the emerging bridge as an "historic achievement more than three decades in the making." According to correspondent Martin Chulov, the land corridor was one of Tehran's "most coveted projects – securing an arc of influence across Iraq and Syria that would end at the Mediterranean Sea."<sup>20</sup> Drawing on anonymous sources he identified only as "regional officials," Chulov asserted that Iran had a specific and well-established plan for building the land bridge, "coordinated by senior government and security officials in Tehran, Baghdad, and Damascus," all under the guidance of IRGC Quds-Force (IRGC-QF) commander, Major General Qassem Soleimani.<sup>21</sup>

Other Western observers agreed that a northerly route was the most plausible. As part of their drive toward Mosul, PMF units loyal to Tehran increased their presence in northwest Iraq. Following the PMF units' capture of the airport in Tal Afar, a key city on the road from Mosul to Sinjar, analyst Hanin Ghaddar warned, "Iran May Be Using Iraq and Syria as a Bridge to Lebanon." She noted, "If Iran succeeds, the three

16. Michael R. Gordon, "Obama's Iran and Syria muddle," *The New York Times*, September 4, 2012. (<https://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/05/world/middleeast/iran-supplying-syrian-military-via-iraq-airspace.html>); For an assessment of air bridge operations during the first years of the war, see: Will Fulton, Joseph Holliday, and Sam Wyer, "Iranian Strategy in Syria," American Enterprise Institute and Institute for the Study of War, May 2013, pages 15-19. (<http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/IranianStrategyinSyria-1MAY.pdf>)

17. PMF is the English equivalent of the Arabic: *al-Hashd al-Shaabi*. (Arabic: الحشد الشعبي)

18. Ali Khedery, "Iraq in Pieces," *Foreign Affairs*, November/December, 2015. (<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/iraq/2015-09-22/iraq-pieces>)

19. Yaroslav Trofimov, "After Islamic State, Fears of a 'Shiite Crescent' in Mideast," *The Wall Street Journal*, September 29, 2016. (<https://www.wsj.com/articles/after-islamic-state-fears-of-a-shiite-crescent-in-mideast-1475141403>)

20. Martin Chulov, "Amid Syrian chaos, Iran's game plan emerges: a path to the Mediterranean," *The Guardian* (UK), October 8, 2016. (<https://theguardian.com/world/2016/oct/08/iran-iraq-syria-isis-land-corridor>)

21. Ibid. Chulov remains the only Western correspondent to affirm Soleimani's direct involvement in planning for the land bridge.



countries caught in the midst of this strategy could lose whatever is left of their sovereignty.”<sup>22</sup>

## The Southern Route Emerges

Ideas about the land bridge continued to evolve along with developments on the battlefield. In 2017, an Iranian-led coalition that included Shiite foreign militias and Assad regime forces began moving eastward toward the Syrian border with Iraq, eventually reaching the border town of Albu Kamal in the Euphrates River valley. In May, Israeli journalist Ehud Yaari assessed that Iran was “building two land corridors to the Mediterranean.”<sup>23</sup> The first was the northern corridor that crossed through Sinjar. The second route followed the Euphrates out of Baghdad, snaking through the desert to the west and north until it reached the border town of al-Qaim before crossing into Syria. In October, Iraqi government forces and PMF units took the Rabia border crossing, previously controlled by Iraqi Kurds, reinforcing concerns about the northern route.<sup>24</sup>

As summer ended in 2017, government officials, journalists, and policy experts began to discuss the land bridge with greater frequency. The Associated Press and Reuters both ran stories examining the land bridge and the Shiite militias that operated along its path.<sup>25</sup> A key indicator of sustained interest

in the land bridge was the work of INSS, an Israeli government-sponsored think tank, which published two lengthy treatments of the subject. The first article specified in detail three potential routes for the land bridge. In addition to the northern route and the southern route along the Euphrates, it identified a second southern route coming out of Baghdad and running toward the intersection of the Iraqi, Syrian, and Jordanian borders. The second article emphasized the indispensable role of Iranian-backed Shiite militias in securing a land corridor.<sup>26</sup>

**“Iran’s preference for the term Axis of Resistance indicates the prioritization of co-opting states and non-state actors to serve as vehicles for the regime’s foreign policy ... [the] land bridge is a tool that can be used to supply this axis and actualize its strategic designs for the region.”**

Michael Pregent of the Hudson Institute has produced maps that illustrate the presence of these militias across most of Iraq. “Call it Iran’s land-bridge, a permissive environment, or a FastPass to Syria – whatever you want to call it – it exists,” he told Congress.<sup>27</sup> The phrase “permissive environment” underscores that important sections of the land bridge consist of

22. Hanin Ghaddar, “Iran May Be Using Iraq and Syria as a Bridge to Lebanon,” *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, November 23, 2016. (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/iran-may-be-using-iraq-and-syria-as-a-bridge-to-lebanon>)

23. Ehud Yaari, “Iran’s Ambitions in the Levant,” *Foreign Affairs*, May 1, 2017. (<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/iran/2017-05-01/irans-ambitions-levant>)

24. Jennifer Cafarella and Omer Kassim, “Barzani Resigns as Iraq and Iran Threaten Kurdistan’s Border Crossings,” *Institute for the Study of War*, October 29, 2017. (<http://iswresearch.blogspot.com/2017/10/barzani-resigns-as-iraq-and-iran.html>); Florian Neuhof, “Forces Fighting ISIS Turning on Each Other as Iran Opens Land Corridor to Syria,” *The Daily Beast*, May 25, 2017. (<https://www.thedailybeast.com/return-to-sinjar-the-forces-fighting-isis-turn-on-each-other>)

25. Bassem Mroue and Qassim Abdul-Zahra, “Iran extends reach with fight for land link to Mediterranean,” *Associated Press*, August 23, 2017. (<https://www.apnews.com/e4f3608d718a413baf674d5373d14695>); Babak Dehghanpisheh, “The Iraqi militia helping Iran carve a road to Damascus,” *Reuters*, September 22, 2017. (<https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/mideast-crisis-iraq-nujaba/>)

26. Ephraim Kam, “Iran’s Shiite Foreign Legion,” *Strategic Assessment* (Israel), October 2017. (<http://www.inss.org.il/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/irans-shiite-foreign-legion.pdf>); Franc Milburn, “Iran’s Land Bridge to the Mediterranean: Possible Routes and Ensuing Challenges,” *Strategic Assessment* (Israel), October 2017. (<http://www.inss.org.il/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/irans-land-bridge.pdf>)

27. Michael Pregent, “Iran’s Land-Bridge is Operational. The IRGC-QF and its Proxies Have Primacy, Freedom of Movement, and a Permissive Environment to Further Destabilize the Middle East,” *Testimony before the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform Subcommittee on National Security*, April 2018, page 3. (<https://docs.house.gov/meetings/HM/HM05/20180417/108155/HHRG-115-HM05-Wstate-PregentM-20180417.pdf>)

zones of political influence rather than stretches of road or strategic border crossings. Throughout much of Iraq, Iranian-backed militias can operate without interference from security forces under the prime minister's control. Thus, when moving illicit cargos, the militias can choose whichever route is most suitable at the moment.

In the fall of 2017, the land bridge took center stage for the first time at a congressional hearing titled "Confronting the Full Range of Iranian Threats." In his opening remarks: Rep. Ed Royce (R-CA), then chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, said,

[It is] critical that we stop Iran from completing a "land bridge" from Iran to Iraq to Syria to Lebanon. This would be an unacceptable risk and, frankly, a strategic defeat. It is not just Israel's security on the line. I feel that if Iran secures this transit route, it will mark the end of the decades-long U.S. effort to support an independent Lebanon. Jordan's security, too, would be imperiled.<sup>28</sup>

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu began to express similar concerns. In June 2017, Netanyahu made a brief reference to the Iranian pursuit of a land bridge.<sup>29</sup> He elaborated further during a March 2018 address in Washington, saying the bridge would trace a route from "Tehran to Tartus on the Mediterranean," enabling Iran "to attack Israel from closer hand."<sup>30</sup>

## Iran's "Resistance Highway"

Iranian officials have made few explicit references to a "land bridge." Persian-language publications often use the term "land corridor"<sup>31</sup> when they re-report Western analysis that refers to the land bridge.<sup>32</sup> Persian-language sources do pay considerable attention to strategic geography, however. For Tehran, the "Axis of Resistance" (Persian: *Mehvar-e Moghavemat*) remains the relevant framework for its strategy in the region. The axis is a political construct that comprises a constellation of actors including Iran, allied states such as Syria, and non-state actors – principally Shiite militias – with varying degrees of ideological loyalty and operational independence, several of whom the U.S. has designated as terrorist organizations.<sup>33</sup>

Iran's preference for the term Axis of Resistance indicates the prioritization of co-opting states and non-state actors to serve as vehicles for the regime's foreign policy. Entities in the axis do not necessarily share an ethno-sectarian affiliation but rather an anti-Western disposition that Tehran can underwrite through political and material support. Seen in this light, Iran's land bridge is a tool that can be used to supply this axis and actualize its strategic designs for the region.

There is no geographic criterion for membership in the axis, yet Iranian officials and pro-regime media outlets are cognizant of the strategic implications of axis

28. Representative Ed Royce, "Confronting the Full Range of Iranian Threats," *Testimony before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs*, October 11, 2017. (<https://docs.house.gov/meetings/FA/FA00/20171011/106500/HHRG-115-FA00-Transcript-20171011.pdf>)

29. Benjamin Netanyahu, "Excerpts from PM Netanyahu's Remarks at the Jerusalem Post Diplomatic Conference," *Speech before the Jerusalem Post Diplomatic Conference*, June 12, 2017. ([http://www.pmo.gov.il/English/MediaCenter/Speeches/Pages/speech\\_jerusalempost061217.aspx](http://www.pmo.gov.il/English/MediaCenter/Speeches/Pages/speech_jerusalempost061217.aspx))

30. Benjamin Netanyahu, *Speech before the American Israel Public Affairs Committee*, March 6, 2018. (<https://www.timesofisrael.com/full-text-of-netanyahus-2018-address-to-aipac/>)

31. (The New Yorker: Iran's Land Corridor is Connected to the Mediterranean Sea)," *Mashregh News* (Iran), June 13, 2017. (<https://www.mashreghnews.ir/news/736595/نیویورکر-کریدور-زمینی-ایران-به-دریای-مدیترانه-وصل-شد>)

32. (The Guardian Claims: Iran Seeks to Create a New Corridor to the Mediterranean)," *Iranian Students News Agency* (Iran), May 16, 2017. (<https://www.isna.ir/news/96022717683/گاردین-مدعی-شد-ایران-به-دنبال-ایجاد-کریدوری-جدید-به-سمت-مدیترانه>)

33. For a thorough assessment of the axis as an alliance, see: Brian Katz, "Axis Rising: Iran's Evolving Regional Strategy and Non-State Partnerships in the Middle East," *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, October 11, 2018. (<https://www.csis.org/analysis/axis-rising-irans-evolving-regional-strategy-and-non-state-partnerships-middle-east>); Many assessments include Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad as part of the axis.

geography.<sup>34</sup> As the late Iranian President Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani explained to an Iraqi official in 2012, “Syria must not turn out in such a way that your and our paths are shut. We must possess Syria. If the thread from Lebanon to here is cut, bad events will happen.”<sup>35</sup> Rafsanjani’s comments underscore how Syria – more so than Iraq – is central to Iran’s regional designs.<sup>36</sup> Iran needs Syria, and the land bridge is what logistically permits Iran to scale up its commitment to that front. More recently, then-IRGC Commander Major General Mohammad Ali Aziz Jafari said in 2017, “Syria’s bordering<sup>37</sup> of occupied Palestine and its closeness to Iraq has created a decisive position for the Islamic Republic.”<sup>38</sup> The importance of Syria was most acutely reflected in a 2013 comment by Hojjat al-Eslam Mehdi Taeb, the leader of a hardline think tank who said, “Syria is the thirty-fifth province and

a strategic province for us... If we lose Syria, we cannot keep Tehran.”<sup>39</sup>

Relying on Iranian public statements has its problems given the regime’s penchant for hyperbole and deception. But Persian-language statements in open source publications remain one of the few indicators of the regime’s strategic intentions. Navigating this minefield is key to divining Iranian intentions, yet there is always a need to be cautious and guard against mirror imaging and self-deception.<sup>40</sup>

In at least three instances, Iranian officials have echoed Western talk of a land bridge. In a pro-IRGC outlet in 2015, IRGC Brigadier General Yadollah Javani asserted that America knows that “with a land connection through Iraq and Syria, [Iran] has become a decisive power on the Mediterranean coast.”<sup>41</sup> In the summer of 2017, the senior adviser to the supreme leader for

34. See quotes by Saeed Jalili and Ali Akbar Velayati in: Jubin Goodarzi, “Iran and Syria at the Crossroads: The Fall of the Tehran-Damascus Axis?” *Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars*, August 2013. ([https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/iran\\_syria\\_crossroads\\_fall\\_tehran\\_damascus\\_axis.pdf](https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/iran_syria_crossroads_fall_tehran_damascus_axis.pdf)); Famously, the founding father of Iran’s Islamic Revolution, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, said during the Iran-Iraq War, “The path to Quds [Jerusalem] goes through Karbala.” See: “شعارهای اصولی در جنگ (Principal Slogans in The War),” *Imam-Khomeini Website* (Iran), accessed April 16, 2019. ([http://www.imam-khomeini.ir/fa/c78\\_123960/کتاب\\_کندرE2%80%8Fدفاع\\_مقدس\\_جنگ\\_تحمیلی\\_در\\_اندیشه\\_امام\\_خمینی\\_س\\_اره\\_قدس\\_از\\_کربلا\\_می](http://www.imam-khomeini.ir/fa/c78_123960/کتاب_کندرE2%80%8Fدفاع_مقدس_جنگ_تحمیلی_در_اندیشه_امام_خمینی_س_اره_قدس_از_کربلا_می)). While Khomeini was discussing the prioritization of the war effort with Iraq, the contiguous geography of the countries to which he alluded, coupled with the Persian term for road/path, “راه,” in hindsight appears to have foreshadowed Iran’s land bridge. Some analysts have even drawn the connection between the function of the land bridge and pre-Islamic Persia’s “royal road.” See: Seth Jones, “War by Proxy: Iran’s Growing Footprint in the Middle East,” *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, March 2019, page 5. ([https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/190312\\_IranProxyWar\\_FINAL.pdf](https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/190312_IranProxyWar_FINAL.pdf))

35. Hashemi Rafsanjani quoted in: “کشتار مردم، اوضاع را سخت تر می کند” (“The Killing of People Makes Things More Difficult”), *Hashemi Rafsanjani Website* (Iran), September 3, 2013, accessed via archive.org. (<https://web.archive.org/web/20130909102857/www.hashemirafsanjani.ir/fa/node/209295>)

36. See the framing of Syria in: Abbas Farzandi, “اهمیت راهبردی سوریه برای جمهوری اسلامی ایران” (The Strategic Importance of Syria for the Islamic Republic of Iran), *Fars News Agency* [originally *Basirat*] (Iran), September 5, 2012. (<https://www.farsnews.com/news/13910614000696/اهمیت-راهبردی-سوریه-برای-جمهوری-اسلامی-ایران>)

37. Literal translation: “Neighboring.”

38. Mohammad Ali Aziz Jafari quoted in: “جنگ کنونی سوریه برای حفظ حکومت بشار اسد نیست” (The Current War in Syria is Not to Maintain the Rule of Bashar al-Assad), *Eghtesad Online* (Iran), September 27, 2017. (<https://www.eghtesadonline.com/بخش-عمومی-30/221896-جنگ-کنونی-سوریه-برای-حفظ-حکومت-بشار-اسد-نیست>)

39. Mehdi Taeb quoted in: “رئیس قرارگاه عمار: سوریه استان سی و پنجم است/ اگر دشمن بخواهد سوریه یا خوزستان را بگیرد اولویت حفظ سوریه است / تحریم ها مثل قبل نیست (The Head of the Ammar Base: Syria is the Thirty-Fifth Province/If the Enemy Wants to Take Syria or Khuzestan, the Priority is Preserving Syria/The Sanctions are not Like Before),” *Asr Iran* (Iran), February 14, 2013. (<https://www.asriran.com/fa/news/257730/رئیس-قرارگاه-عمار-سوریه-استان-سی-و-پنجم-است-اگر-دشمن-بخواهد-سوریه-یا-خوزستان-را-بگیرد-اولویت-حفظ-سوریه-است-تحریم-ها-مثل-قبل-نیست>)

40. See: Ali Alfoneh and Reuel Marc Gerecht, “Persian Truths and American Self-Deception: Hassan Rouhani, Muhammad-Javad Zarif, and Ali Khamenei in their own words,” *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, April 2015. (<https://s3.us-east-2.amazonaws.com/defenddemocracy/uploads/publications/Truths-and-American-Self-Deception.pdf>)

41. Yadollah Javani, “مذاکره-تنها-الترناتیو-مذاکره (Negotiations, the Only Alternative to Negotiations),” *Basirat* (Iran), June 8, 2015. (<http://basirat.ir/fa/news/276147/مذاکره-تنها-الترناتیو-مذاکره>)



international affairs, Ali Akbar Velayati, touted the construction of a “resistance highway”<sup>42</sup> connecting Tehran to Beirut through Mosul and Damascus.<sup>43</sup> In 2018, the pro-Khamenei *Khatt-e Hezbollah* newsletter noted that resistance forces had “reopened a land corridor of resistance between Tehran, Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon, and now, they have provided the necessary infrastructure in the Golan to create the upper hand of resistance against the Zionists.”<sup>44</sup>

Several Iranian analysts have also used the term “land corridor of resistance.” One Iranian foreign policy watcher opined in the semi-official *Tasnim News Agency* that U.S. military aims in Syria are fundamentally two-fold: “contesting Iran’s power and preventing the establishment of a land corridor of resistance.”<sup>45</sup> Others have used the term to describe the dividends that battlefield developments in Syria afford Iranian strategy. “Albu Kamal was the last Daesh [Islamic State] base in the border area of Syria, and it is expected that in the next few days this city will be fully liberated,” wrote one analyst in a hardline news outlet. “The liberation of this city also means the completion of the

last ring of the land corridor of resistance, upon which, for the first time Tehran will reach the Mediterranean coast and Beirut by land; a development which has been rare in the several thousand year history of Iran.” He added that America sought to “avoid the realization of this land route.”<sup>46</sup>

The paucity of Persian-language references to the land bridge may be deliberate. “Iranian leaders avoid publicly speaking about their aim to link to so-called ‘axis of resistance,’” wrote Associated Press correspondents Bassem Mroue and Qassim Abdul-Zahra in 2017.<sup>47</sup> Similarly, Tehran has often under-reported its fatalities in the Syrian conflict,<sup>48</sup> while emphasizing their sacrifice when it suits the regime’s purposes.<sup>49</sup>

However, Tehran’s proxies are less discrete about their ambitions. “Our aim is to prevent any barriers from Iraq to Syria all the way to Beirut,” a spokesperson for the Iraqi Shiite militia Kataib Hezbollah told Mroue and Abdul-Zahra, “The resistance is close to achieving this goal.” Likewise, the Syrian minister of information said, “The aim is for a geographical connection between

42. Literal translation: “Autobahn”

43. See: “امروز اتوبان مقاومت از تهران شروع و به موصل و دمشق و بیروت می رسد” (Today, the Resistance Highway Starts from Tehran and Reaches Mosul, Damascus, and Beirut), *Mehr News Agency* (Iran), July 1, 2017. (<https://www.mehrnews.com/news/4018572/>)

44. “زمان-به-نفع-تل-آویو-نیست” (Time Does Not Favor Tel Aviv), *Fars News Agency* (Iran), June 9, 2018. (<https://www.farsnews.com/news/13970318001096/زمان-به-نفع-تل-آویو-نیست>)

45. “راهبرد آمریکا در سوریه و عراق چیست؟” (What is America’s Strategy in Syria and Iraq), *Tasnim News Agency* (Iran), October 21, 2017. (<https://www.tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1396/07/29/1551546/راهبرد-آمریکا-در-سوریه-و-عراق-چیست>)

46. “دو-راهی-آمریکا-در-سوریه-با-پایان-داعش” (America’s Dilemma in Syria with the End of Daesh), *Defa Press* [originally *Javan*] (Iran), November 15, 2017. (<http://defapress.ir/fa/news/266446/دو-راهی-آمریکا-در-سوریه-با-پایان-داعش>)

47. Bassem Mroue and Qassim Abdul-Zahra, “Iran extends reach with fight for land link to Mediterranean,” *Associated Press*, August 23, 2017. (<https://www.apnews.com/e4f3608d718a413baf674d5373d14695>); Dexter Filkins also observed in his coverage of the land bridge that “no Iranian official has spoken publicly about it.” Dexter Filkins, “Iran Extends Its Reach in Syria,” *The New Yorker*, June 9, 2017. (<https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/iran-extends-its-reach-in-syria>)

48. For instance, see: Ali Alfoneh, “Shiite Combat Casualties Show the Depth of Iran’s Involvement in Syria,” *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, August 3, 2015. (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/shiite-combat-casualties-show-the-depth-of-irans-involvement-in-syria>). The regime has also reduced coverage of its ballistic missile flight testing, which can account for gaps in public reportage.

49. See comment by Ali Alfoneh in: Hugh Naylor, “Iranian media is revealing that scores of the country’s fighters are dying in Syria,” *The Washington Post*, November 27, 2015. ([https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/iranian-media-is-revealing-that-scores-of-the-countrys-fighters-are-dying-in-syria/2015/11/27/294deb02-8ca0-11e5-934c-a369c80822c2\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/iranian-media-is-revealing-that-scores-of-the-countrys-fighters-are-dying-in-syria/2015/11/27/294deb02-8ca0-11e5-934c-a369c80822c2_story.html)). Alfoneh also suggests Iran has ceased to report fatalities in Syria at the hands of Israeli air strikes. See: Ali Alfoneh, “Tehran’s not-so-mixed signals to Israel,” *The Arab Weekly*, February 3, 2019. (<https://theArabweekly.com/tehrans-not-so-mixed-signals-israel>)

Syria, Iraq and the axis of resistance.”<sup>50</sup> On background, authorities in Tehran are sometimes as forthcoming as their proxies. An unnamed IRGC official told the *Wall Street Journal*, “Creating a land corridor through Iraq and Syria is a key goal for Iran to bolster its defense against regional enemies.”<sup>51</sup>

Iranian media have certainly reported on plans to build transportation infrastructure for a land bridge, although without commenting on its military utility. Re-reporting Arab press, the Iranian media has said that a major highway stretching 1,700 kilometers will connect Iran to Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon.<sup>52</sup> It is unclear if this highway is what Iran’s Minister of Roads and Urban Development Mohammad Eslami may have been referring to in February 2019 when he hailed the construction of a new highway linking three cities in western Iran, and gave notice of plans to extend it into Iraq and Syria.<sup>53</sup> In April 2019, Iran’s First Vice-President Eshaq Jahangiri declared Iran’s intention to “connect the Persian Gulf from Iraq to Syria and Mediterranean via railway and road.”<sup>54</sup>

In August 2018, an Iranian official announced that Iran intended to build a rail link connecting the Persian Gulf to the Mediterranean, from Basra in southern Iraq to Albu Kamal on the Iraq-Syria border, proceeding towards Deir Ez-Zour in northeast Syria.<sup>55</sup> He suggested the project would be attractive to China, with whom Iran is eager to enhance its economic relationship to offset U.S. sanctions. During Iranian President Hassan Rouhani’s March 2019 trip to Iraq, Iran reportedly signed a memorandum of understanding for a railway project designed to “connect Iraq’s southern oil-rich city of Basra to Iran’s border.”<sup>56</sup> It is unclear if this project is part of the rail link to the Mediterranean envisioned in August 2018. In April 2019, the head of the Iraqi Republic Railways Company also echoed news about a transnational railway between Iran, Iraq, and Syria.<sup>57</sup>

Although China has not announced plans to develop a rail network through Iraq and Syria, it has worked with Iran in the context of its One Belt One Road initiative.<sup>58</sup> China has also invested heavily in Iran’s domestic rail network, and aims to connect Iran to Central Asia via rail.<sup>59</sup> Additionally, a Chinese firm built the high-speed

50. Bassem Mroue and Qassim Abdul-Zahra, “Iran extends reach with fight for land link to Mediterranean,” *Associated Press*, August 23, 2017. (<https://www.apnews.com/e4f3608d718a413baf674d5373d14695>)

51. Sune Engel Rasmussen and Felicia Schwartz, “Israel Broadens Fight Against Iran,” *The Wall Street Journal*, July 15, 2018. (<https://www.wsj.com/articles/israel-broadens-fight-against-iran-1531684841>). The quote from the *Journal* is a paraphrase of remarks made on background.

52. “تهران از طریق بزرگراه به عراق، سوریه و لبنان وصل می‌شود” (Tehran to be Connected via Highway to Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon), *Alef* (Iran), March 22, 2018, accessed via Google Cache. (<https://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:ds8ouhciccYJ:https://www.alef.ir/news/3970120216.html%3Fshow%3Dtext+%&ccd=1&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=us>)

53. Tom O’Connor, “Iran Begins Building Road Connecting it to Syria through Iraq as Trump Warns of Need to Spy on U.S.,” *Newsweek*, February 2, 2019. (<https://www.newsweek.com/iran-building-road-connect-syria-iraq-1319034>)

54. Eshaq Jahangiri quoted in: “First VP: Iran to Connect Persian Gulf to Syria, Mediterranean,” *Fars News Agency* (Iran), April 7, 2019. (<http://en.farsnews.com/newstext.aspx?nn=13980118001073>)

55. Paraphrasing Official. See: “شبکه ریلی ایران به کشورهای شرق مدیترانه وصل می‌شود” (Iran’s Rail Network Connects to Eastern Mediterranean Countries), *Islamic Republic News Agency* (Iran), August 18, 2018. (<http://www.irna.ir/fa/News/83004528>)

56. Natasha Turak, “Iran just struck a hoard of deals with Iraq, and Washington isn’t happy,” *CNBC*, March 20, 2019. (<https://www.cNBC.com/2019/03/20/iran-just-struck-several-deals-with-iraq-and-washington-isnt-happy.html>)

57. “Transnational Railroad to Link Iran, Iraq, Syria,” *Fars News Agency* (Iran), April 13, 2019. (<http://en.farsnews.com/newstext.aspx?nn=13980124000965>)

58. Christopher K. Johnson, “President Xi Jinping’s ‘Belt and Road’ Initiative,” *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, March 28, 2016. (<https://www.csis.org/analysis/president-xi-jinping%E2%80%99s-belt-and-road-initiative>); Jonathan Hillman, “China’s Belt and Road Initiative: Five Years Later,” *Testimony before The U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission*, January 25, 2018. ([https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/ts180125\\_hillman\\_testimony.pdf](https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/ts180125_hillman_testimony.pdf))

59. Thomas Erdbrink, “For China’s Global Ambitions, ‘Iran Is at the Center of Everything,’” *The New York Times*, July 25, 2017. (<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/25/world/middleeast/iran-china-business-ties.html>)

trains used on the existing Baghdad-Basra rail line.<sup>60</sup> Restored U.S. sanctions, however, may raise the costs of Chinese infrastructure partnerships with the Islamic Republic. Already, Chinese banks appear skittish to process Iran-related transactions.<sup>61</sup>

## Debating the Land Bridge

Is the construction of the land bridge an epochal event or merely a footnote to the 40-year struggle between Iran and its adversaries? Ambassador James Jeffrey, who now serves as Special Representative for Syria Engagement, told Congress that he disagreed with all those who “have pooh-poohed the idea of a land bridge.” He explained, “The Iranians, for good reason ... fear our ability to intercept and force down aircraft if we really get upset.” He continued, “We control the air in the Middle East. We don’t control the sand. That is what they want to do.”<sup>62</sup>

With the Assad regime now stabilized and the war in Syria at a low boil, there is arguably no urgent need for Iran to open a land-based supply route. Yet the uncertainty of the future provides ample motivation for Iran to find an alternative to its air corridor. So far, Israel has restricted itself to interdicting shipments of advanced weapons once they are on the ground. Yet it could also attack cargo planes in flight, as could the United States. For now, the risk of antagonizing Russia may prevent this kind of escalation, but Tehran cannot take for granted that this will always be the case.

The following three sections analyze the relative utility of the land bridge, versus the air bridge, for moving personnel, weapons, and other supplies.

## Moving Personnel

Iran and Syria currently rely on civilian airliners to rotate wave after wave of militia fighters into Syria, where they have fought on Assad’s behalf. Whereas Hezbollah fighters can cross the Lebanese-Syrian border by land, that is not an option for Afghans, Pakistanis, or even many Iraqis. These foreign fighters usually serve in Syria for only several months at a time and take heavy casualties, so there is a constant need to bring in reinforcements.

In early 2018, an FDD study estimated that Iran maintains about 15,000 Shiite foreign fighters in Syria, not including those deployed by Lebanese Hezbollah.<sup>63</sup> Air transport is likely sufficient to enable their rotation; Farzin Nadimi of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy estimated that Iranian and Syrian aircraft brought more than 21,000 passengers into Damascus in a two-month period in 2017.<sup>64</sup>

Still, because of sanctions, Iran and Syria rely on a small and aging fleet of commercial aircraft. Nadimi lists about a dozen commercial aircraft that have been responsible for most of the air bridge flights.<sup>65</sup> After the conclusion of the Iran nuclear deal in 2015, Tehran placed orders for hundreds of planes worth tens of billions of dollars from Western manufacturers. Only

60. Keith Barry, “After Decades of War, Iraq Adds Fleet of New Trains to its Aging Railway,” *Wired*, March 24, 2014. (<https://www.wired.com/2014/03/iraq-trains/>)

61. Note the case of Kunlun bank: Chen Aizhu and Shu Zhang, “As U.S. sanctions loom, China’s Bank of Kunlun to stop receiving Iran payments,” *Reuters*, October 23, 2018. (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-iran-banking-kunlun-exclusive/exclusive-as-u-s-sanctions-loom-chinas-bank-of-kunlun-to-stop-receiving-iran-payments-sources-idUSKCN1MX1KA>)

62. Ambassador James F. Jeffrey, “Confronting the Full Range of Iranian Threats,” *Testimony before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs*, October 11, 2017. (<https://docs.house.gov/meetings/FA/FA00/20171011/106500/HHRG-115-FA00-Transcript-20171011.pdf>)

63. David Adesnik and Amir Toumaj, “FDD Profiles of Leading Iranian-Backed Militias,” *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, February 28, 2018. (<https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2018/02/28/fdd-profiles-of-leading-iranian-backed-militias/>)

64. Farzin Nadimi, “Iran Is Still Using Pseudo-Civilian Airlines to Resupply Assad,” *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, April 13, 2017. (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/iran-is-still-using-pseudo-civilian-airlines-to-resupply-assad>)

65. Ibid.



a handful arrived before the U.S. withdrawal from the nuclear deal in 2018 forced the orders' cancellation.<sup>66</sup>

If too many of Iran and Syria's commercial aircraft age out of service, a land bridge may become a necessary alternative to moving fighters by air. Furthermore, road transport is far less expensive per mile. Road vehicles can also adjust their routes quickly, make stops as necessary, and blend in with civilian traffic. Moving personnel on the ground also conserves air transport capacity for higher-value value cargos such as advanced weapons.

### Moving Weapons

A land bridge would have substantial utility as a means of shipping weapons, such as light arms or shorter-range rockets and missiles.<sup>67</sup> Yet thus far, the air bridge has also proven sufficient to meet Iran's needs in this regard. Nadimi estimates that Iranian and Syrian aircraft were able to move 5,000 tons of supplies into Damascus during the two-month period he monitored.<sup>68</sup>

Moving that same cargo over land would require 125-250 trucks, since a tractor-trailer typically carries 20-40 tons of cargo, or the contents of two standard shipping containers.<sup>69</sup> Yet given that trucks are readily available, whereas Iran and Syria have a small and aging fleet of commercial aircraft, a land route may become the more viable option. It even has the potential to expand Iran's logistical capacity considerably.

While moving cargo by sea is more efficient than either air or ground transport, the risk of naval interdiction is considerable. In 2009, the U.S. Navy intercepted the *MV Monchegorsk*, which was carrying 2,000 tons of explosives from Iran en route to Syria.<sup>70</sup>

### Moving Supplies

Iran certainly has had some success with seaborne transport of supplies other than weapons. After losing control of northeast Syria, which produced more than 90 percent of the country's crude oil before 2011, the Assad regime became increasingly reliant on Iran for imports. Tankers dispatched by Iran, each holding nearly one million barrels of crude, offloaded their cargo at the Syrian port of Baniyas on a regular basis in 2018, although tougher enforcement of U.S. sanctions has created new barriers.<sup>71</sup>

Even so, Assad has also trucked in oil from northeast Syria, which the regime purchased from the Islamic State when it controlled the oil fields. The Syrian Kurds who displaced the Islamic State have continued to trade with Assad.<sup>72</sup> However, given that one tanker can transport as much as 4,000 trucks, shipping oil by land is inefficient. It is also subject to disruption from the air, as demonstrated by U.S. strikes on Islamic State convoys.<sup>73</sup> A secure land bridge may facilitate the trade of oil and other commercial goods, but not in quantities that have much strategic significance.

66. Emanuele Ottolenghi, "Iran Ramps Up Purchases of Commercial Aircraft from U.S. and Europe," *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, August 2, 2017. (<https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2017/08/02/iran-ramps-up-purchases-of-commercial-aircraft-from-u-s-and-europe/>)

67. John Irish and Ahmad Rasheed, "Exclusive: Iran moves missiles to Iraq in warning to enemies," *Reuters*, August 31, 2018. (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-iraq-missiles-exclusive/exclusive-iran-moves-missiles-to-iraq-in-warning-to-enemies-idUSKCN1LG0WB>)

68. A Boeing 747 can transport as much as 150 tons. "Boeing Freighter Family: Leading the Air Cargo Industry," *Boeing*, accessed May 23, 2019. (<https://www.boeing.com/commercial/freighters/>); The Airbus 300-series planes have a capacity of 60-70 tons. "Freighter Aircraft," *Airbus*, accessed May 23, 2019. (<https://www.airbus.com/aircraft/freighter.html>)

69. "Full Container Load (FCL) Guide," *Freight Filter*, accessed April 2, 2019. (<http://freightfilter.com/full-container-load-fcl-guide/>)

70. Jeffrey Lewis, "Saga of the Mochevorsk," *Arms Control Work*, July 13, 2011. (<https://www.armscontrolwonk.com/archive/204248/saga-of-the-monchegorsk/>)

71. David Adesnik, "Fuel Shortage Persists in Syria Amidst Tougher Sanctions Enforcement," *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, March 21, 2019. (<https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2019/03/21/fuel-shortage-persists-in-syria-amidst-tougher-sanctions-enforcement/>)

72. Benoit Faucon and Nazih Osseiran, "U.S.'s Syria Ally Supplies Oil to Assad's Brokers," *The Wall Street Journal*, February 8, 2019. (<https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-s-syria-ally-supplies-oil-to-assads-brokers-11549645073>)

73. Jim Michaels, "Record airstrike hits over 100 ISIL oil trucks gathered in Syria," *USA Today*, December 9, 2016. (<https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2016/12/09/airstrike-syria-united-states-coalition-islamic-state/95210166/>)

## Operationalizing the Land Bridge: Routes and Impediments

Is the land bridge merely an aspiration, or is it already an operational supply route? If operational, how prone is it to disruption? Answers to these questions are unclear. In part, the confusion stems from conflicting premises about what would constitute an operational bridge. One can discern both minimalist and maximalist definitions. For minimalists, the land bridge exists if one can chart a course from Tehran to the Mediterranean without crossing terrain under the firm control of either the Islamic State or the U.S. For maximalists, the land bridge will remain incomplete until Iran and proxies can secure the entire corridor, enabling them to transport men and materiel without hindrance. In between these definitions lies a spectrum of intermediate options.

When the *Guardian* published the first major story about the land bridge in October 2016, it described a route whose viability depended on the cooperation of local powerbrokers, such as Syrian Kurdish militias and an Iraqi tribal sheikh. According to a follow-up report the next May, Iran had to shift the route 140 miles to the south to avoid the growing concentration of U.S. forces in northeast Syria.<sup>74</sup> The next month, *New Yorker* correspondent Dexter Filkins described how Iran finally “secured” the land bridge in June when “pro-Iranian Shiite militias captured a final string of Iraqi villages near the border with Syria.” However, Filkins noted, “No Iranian trucks or other vehicles have apparently used the

route yet.”<sup>75</sup> Iran’s apparent breakthrough was temporary; within several months, the growing partnership between U.S. troops and Syrian Kurdish forces in northeast Syria compromised the land bridge’s original route.

In November 2017, the Syrian regime and Shiite militia forces with Russian support expelled Islamic State fighters from Albu Kamal on the Syrian-Iraqi border. This enabled them to cooperate with Iranian proxies in al-Qaim on the Iraqi side. Thus, according to the *Jerusalem Post*, “Iran [Put the] Finishing Touches on its ‘Bridge’ to the Golan.”<sup>76</sup> Some accounts were more cautious, however. An article in the Israeli journal *Strategic Assessment* presented the first systematic evaluation of multiple routes for the land bridge, finding them all to be tenuous. It described Tehran’s pursuit of the land bridge as a “quest,” not a fact.<sup>77</sup> In contrast, a French analyst concluded the land bridge is now “firmly established.” In his view, the capture of Albu Kamal represented a turning point in the history of the Levant, akin to the British victory at Fashoda in 1898 that established the empire as the premier colonial power in Africa.<sup>78</sup>

Who is correct? To address this question more thoroughly, it is necessary to examine the three principal routes associated with the land bridge: the northern route and the two branches of the southern route.

**“A French analyst concluded the land bridge is now “firmly established.” In his view, the capture of Albu Kamal represented a turning point in the history of the Levant...”**

74. Martin Chulov, “Amid Syrian chaos, Iran’s game plan emerges: a path to the Mediterranean,” *The Guardian* (UK), October 8, 2016. (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/oct/08/iran-iraq-syria-isis-land-corridor>); Martin Chulov, “Iran changes course of road to Mediterranean coast to avoid US forces,” *The Guardian* (UK), May 16, 2017. (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/may/16/iran-changes-course-of-road-to-mediterranean-coast-to-avoid-us-forces>)

75. Dexter Filkins, “Iran Extends Its Reach in Syria,” *The New Yorker*, June 9, 2017. (<https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/iran-extends-its-reach-in-syria>)

76. Jonathan Spyer, “Iran Puts Finishing Touches on its ‘Bridge’ to the Golan,” *The Jerusalem Post* (Israel), November 18, 2017. (<https://www.jpost.com/Opinion/Iran-puts-finishing-touches-on-its-bridge-to-the-Golan-514475>)

77. Franc Milburn, “Iran’s Land Bridge to the Mediterranean: Possible Routes and Ensuing Challen,” *Strategic Assessment* (Israel), October 2017. (<http://www.inss.org.il/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/irans-land-bridge.pdf>)

78. Fabrice Balanche, “The Iranian Land Bridge in the Levant: The Return of Territory in Geopolitics,” *Telos*, September 14, 2018. (<http://www.telospress.com/the-iranian-land-bridge-in-the-levant-the-return-of-territory-in-geopolitics/>)

## The Northern Route

<b>Open to Iran</b>	No
<b>Key border crossing</b>	Rabia (Iraq) to al-Ya'rubiyah (Syria) <sup>79</sup>
<b>Key roads</b>	Highway 1 and Highway 47 in Iraq; Highway 6 and Motorway M4 in Syria

### **Assessment:**

If the U.S. maintains its strong partnership with Syrian Kurdish forces, this route will remain effectively closed to Iran. Yet if a U.S. withdrawal from Syria undermines that relationship, the People's Protection Units (YPG), the primary Syrian-Kurdish militia, may open the northern route to Iran. This would be consistent with YPG cooperation with Iran and the Assad regime in pursuit of mutual interests during the first years of the war in Syria.<sup>80</sup>

Maps often identify Tehran as the starting point for any route associated with the land bridge. In practice, shipments would likely originate from wherever the regime produces and stores its materiel. Geography and political factors are likely to govern where Iranian shipments cross into Iraq. The border between the two countries runs for just under 1,000 miles, so there are numerous options.<sup>81</sup>

The northern crossings from Iran into Iraq lie within the Zagros Mountains, which present "choke points and environmental hazards during winter." On the Iraqi side, some areas are under the control of Kurdish guerrillas resentful of how Iran treats its Kurdish population.<sup>82</sup> Other Iraqi Kurds maintain cordial relations with Iran, but may not want to provoke Washington by cooperating

with its main regional adversary. Thus, Iran might prefer to employ crossings further south where sympathetic elements of the Iraqi government or even Iranian-backed Shiite militias exercise control.

Once in Iraq, shipments along the northern route would make their way to the Rabia border crossing with Syria, which lies northwest of Mosul. There are also informal tracks that cross the border into Syria from northern Iraq. However, Kurdish forces aligned with the U.S. – at least for now – control the territory on the Syrian side of the border, so the route cannot become a major logistical artery.

## Southern Route – Upper Branch

<b>Open to Iran</b>	Yes
<b>Key border crossing</b>	al-Qaim (Iraq) to Albu Kamal (Syria)
<b>Key Roads</b>	Highway 12 (Iraq); Highway 4 (Syria)

### **Assessment:**

The upper southern route is now open to Iran, although it may not be fully secure.

As with the northern route, the choice of border crossings from Iran into Iraq is likely to reflect a combination of geography and politics. Crossing into Iraq's Diyala province would shorten the distance to Baghdad, yet Diyala is where the Islamic State has made the most headway in re-establishing itself after the fall of the caliphate.<sup>83</sup> Therefore, it would likely make sense to cross into Iraq further to the south, where the population is overwhelmingly Shiite.

79. All highway names, as well as the names of the towns near the crossings, are visible on Google Maps.

80. Rodi Said, "Syrian Kurds seek Damascus deal regardless of U.S. moves," *Reuters*, January 4, 2019. (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-kurds/syrian-kurds-seek-damascus-deal-regardless-of-us-moves-idUSKCN1OY1ET>); "The PKK's Fateful Choice in Northern Syria," *International Crisis Group*, May 4, 2017, pages 1-4. (<https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/eastern-mediterranean/syria/176-pkk-s-fateful-choice-northern-syria>)

81. Central Intelligence Agency, "Iraq," *The World Factbook*, accessed April 2, 2019. (<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/iz.html>)

82. Franc Milburn, "Iran's Land Bridge to the Mediterranean: Possible Routes and Ensuing Challenges," *Strategic Assessment* (Israel), October 2017, page 38. (<http://www.inss.org.il/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/irans-land-bridge.pdf>)

83. Brandon Wallace, "ISIS Re-establishes Historical Sanctuary in Iraq," *Institute for the Study of War*, March 7, 2019. (<http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/isis-re-establishes-historical-sanctuary-iraq>)



From Baghdad, the upper southern route follows the Euphrates River northwest through Anbar province to the border town of al-Qaim. Anbar is the most uniformly Sunni region of Iraq, where both the anti-U.S. and Islamic State insurgencies were strongest. However, Kataib Hezbollah, an Iranian-backed Shiite militia, now has a strong presence near the border, including along roads in and out of al-Qaim.<sup>84</sup>

Across the border from al-Qaim is the Syrian town of Albu Kamal. As noted above, pro-regime forces took control of the town in November 2017. The official border crossing has not yet re-opened, yet Israeli reports suggest that Shiite militias are using dirt bypass roads built by the Islamic State.<sup>85</sup> Last June, Israeli airstrikes targeted a town south of Albu Kamal, reportedly killing 20 members of Kataib Hezbollah who were apparently bringing Iranian weapons into Syria. An unnamed Israeli official told the *Wall Street Journal* that the purpose of the strikes was to show Iran that Israel would not tolerate a land bridge.<sup>86</sup> This indicates that Tehran and its proxies may be close to activating the upper southern route.

While the Islamic State no longer controls territory in eastern Syria, there have been recent attacks near

Albu Kamal. In early February, Russian jets conducted air strikes against Islamic State targets after an attack on pro-regime forces in the vicinity.<sup>87</sup> According to a pro-Assad news outlet, attacks by the Islamic State forced Assad's "Syrian Arab Army to reinforce their lines to prevent any potential infiltration."<sup>88</sup> These developments suggest the supply route running through Albu Kamal remains less than secure.

**“An unnamed Israeli official told the *Wall Street Journal* that the purpose of the strikes was to show Iran that Israel would not tolerate a land bridge.”**

Another risk associated with Albu Kamal is the proximity of U.S. forces and their Syrian partners, since the town lies just across from the Euphrates and areas under control of the anti-Islamic State coalition. In 2018, the coalition launched more than 350 strikes on Islamic State targets in the vicinity of Albu Kamal.<sup>89</sup> Past Albu Kamal, the terrain is flat and there would be few obstacles to crossing the remainder of Syria. The T4 air base, from which Iran launched an armed drone into Israel in 2018, lies about 200 miles west of Albu Kamal, across open desert.<sup>90</sup>

84. Tamer El-Ghobashy and Mustafa Salim, "As Iraq's Shiite militias expand their reach, concerns about an ISIS revival grow," *The Washington Post*, April 17, 2019. ([https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/as-iraqs-shiite-militias-expand-their-reach-concerns-about-an-isis-revival-grow/2019/01/09/52da575e-eda9-11e8-8b47-bd0975fd6199\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/as-iraqs-shiite-militias-expand-their-reach-concerns-about-an-isis-revival-grow/2019/01/09/52da575e-eda9-11e8-8b47-bd0975fd6199_story.html))

85. Sune Engel Rasmussen, "Iraq to Open Vital Border Crossing With Syria," *The Wall Street Journal*, March 18, 2019. (<https://www.wsj.com/articles/iraq-to-open-vital-border-crossing-with-syria-11552946617>); "Increasing Iranian control of the Albukamal border crossing area – part of Iran's strategy of establishing an overland supply route connecting Iran with Iraq, Syria and Lebanon (in collaboration with ImageSat International – ISI)," *The Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center* (Israel), July 15, 2018. ([https://www.terrorism-info.org.il/app/uploads/2018/07/E\\_177\\_18.pdf](https://www.terrorism-info.org.il/app/uploads/2018/07/E_177_18.pdf))

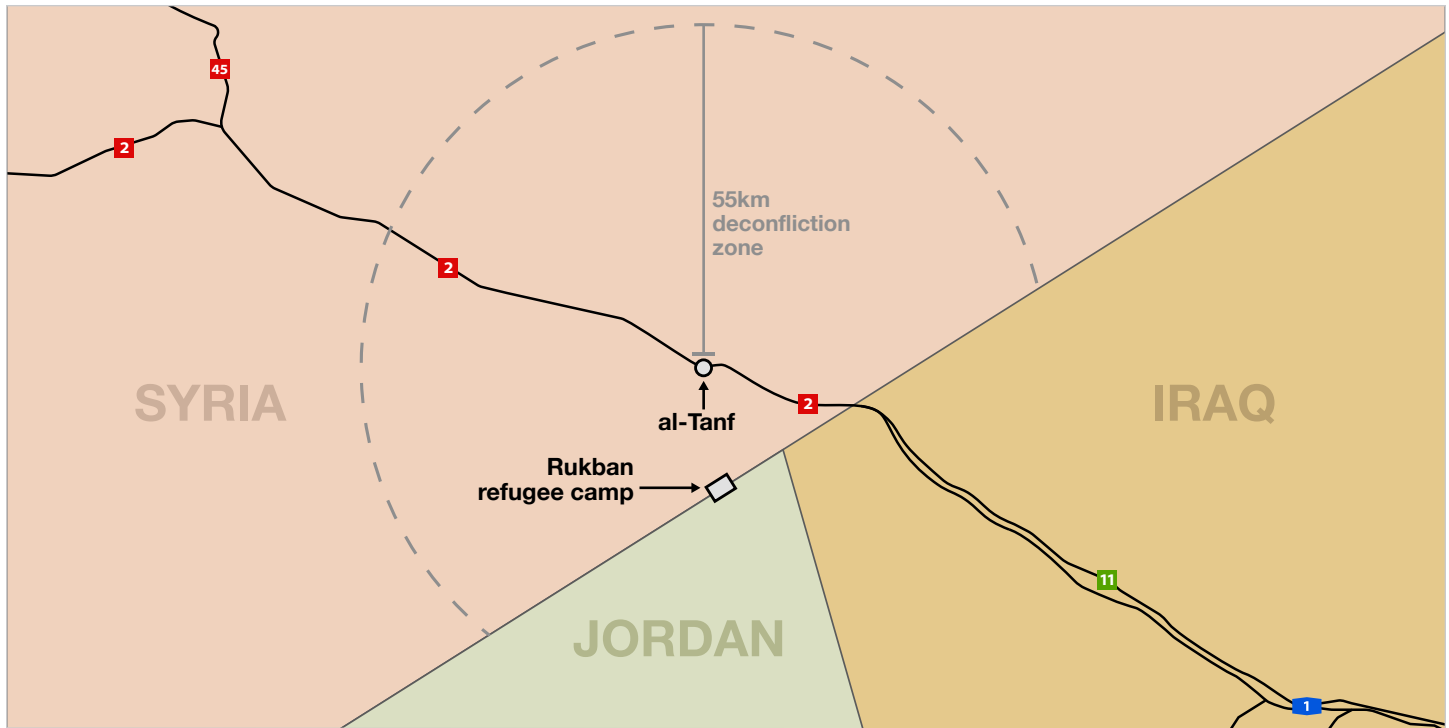
86. Sune Engel Rasmussen and Felicia Schwartz, "Israel Broadens Fight Against Iran," *The Wall Street Journal*, July 15, 2018. (<https://www.wsj.com/articles/israel-broadens-fight-against-iran-1531684841>)

87. "Syria Situation Report: January 23 – February 6, 2019," *Institute for the Study of War*, February 8, 2019. (<http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/ISW%20Syria%20Direct%20-%20Syria%20SITREP%20Map%20-%2020190206.pdf>)

88. Leith Aboufadel, "Desperate ISIS terrorists attempting to breakout of eastern Euphrates through Syrian Army lines," *Al-Masdar News* (Lebanon), February 7, 2019. (<https://www.almasdarnews.com/article/desperate-isis-terrorists-attempting-to-breakout-of-eastern-euphrates-through-syrian-army-lines/>)

89. Alexandra N. Gutowski and Sarah Nadler, "US has launched over 500 strikes against the Islamic State since May," *FDD's Long War Journal*, August 3, 2018. (<https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2018/08/roundup.php>); Alexandra N. Gutowski, "Is the Pentagon About to Hand Iran a Major Border Crossing?" *Real Clear Defense*, August 10, 2018. ([https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2018/08/10/is\\_the\\_pentagon\\_about\\_to\\_hand\\_iran\\_a\\_major\\_border\\_crossing\\_113709.html](https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2018/08/10/is_the_pentagon_about_to_hand_iran_a_major_border_crossing_113709.html))

90. Ben Hubbard and David M. Halbfinger, "Iran-Israel Conflict Escalates in Shadow of Syrian Civil War," *The New York Times*, April 9, 2018. (<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/09/world/middleeast/syria-russia-israel-air-base.html>)



↑ The U.S. military base at al-Tanf sits astride the main highway from Baghdad to Damascus, blocking the lower branch of the land bridge’s southern route. Source: Foundation for Defense of Democracies

### Southern Route – Lower Branch

<b>Open to Iran</b>	No
<b>Key border crossing</b>	al-Walid (Iraq) to al-Tanf (Syria)
<b>Key roads</b>	Highway 11 or Expressway 1 <sup>91</sup> (Iraq); Highway 2 (Syria)

**Assessment:**

The lower branch of the southern route traces the shortest path from Baghdad to Damascus, although it runs directly through al-Tanf, the strategic town held by U.S. troops just west of the Syria-Iraq border.

From Iran to Baghdad, the lower branch is the same as the upper one. Then, about 75 miles west of Baghdad,

the lower branch splits off and heads westward through the desert to the Syrian border. The route is ideal for trucks because it follows Iraq’s newly built toll road, the first in the country.<sup>92</sup> After departing Iraq via the al-Walid border crossing, the southern branch reaches al-Tanf, which hosts roughly 200 U.S. troops and 300 fighters from Jaysh Maghawir al-Thawra (“Army of the Revolutionary Commandos”), a Syrian Arab partner force. In addition to conducting operations against the Islamic State, these troops maintain a “deconfliction zone” with a 55-kilometer (35-mile) radius.

Adversaries have continually tested the readiness of the U.S. and its partners to enforce the zone. In June 2016, the Pentagon criticized Russia for air strikes nearby that endangered U.S. and coalition forces.<sup>93</sup> In May 2017,

91. Literal translation: “Fast Traffic Road 1” (Arabic: رقم السريع المرور طريق 1), to distinguish it from the older road known as Highway 1 (sometimes translated as Freeway 1).

92. Tim Arango, “U.S. Sees a Vital Iraqi Toll Road, but Iran Sees a Threat,” *The New York Times*, May 27, 2017. (<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/27/world/middleeast/iraqi-toll-road-national-highway-iran.html>). The toll road ends about 80 miles before reaching the Syrian border, but there is an older highway that can handle cargo traffic.

93. U.S. Department of Defense, Press Release, “DoD Officials Express Strong Concerns Over Russian Airstrikes in Syria,” June 18, 2016. (<https://www.defense.gov/News/Article/Article/803053/dod-officials-express-strong-concerns-over-russian-airstrikes-in-syria/>)

U.S. aircraft struck a convoy of Iranian-backed forces that included tanks and armored construction vehicles, which attempted to build fighting positions.<sup>94</sup> In June 2017, the U.S. struck another convoy and shot down an Iranian drone. The U.S. downed a second Iranian drone later that month.<sup>95</sup>

Assad and Putin also sought to dislodge the U.S. from al-Tanf by delaying or blocking assistance to the Rukban refugee camp, which lies within the U.S. exclusion zone. By blaming the U.S. for conditions at Rukban, Moscow and Damascus hope to shame the U.S. into withdrawal from al-Tanf. The camp has a population of 40,000-50,000 refugees who depend entirely on humanitarian aid. Russia and Assad stonewalled UN requests to deliver aid throughout 2018 while the Russians insisted that a U.S. departure from al-Tanf would solve the problem.<sup>96</sup> Aid convoys finally arrived in November 2018 and February 2019. A UN official said there is no doctor in the camp and multiple children have died from the cold.<sup>97</sup>

Past al-Tanf, there are no major impediments to the land bridge. Shipments could follow Syrian highways for 150 miles directly to Damascus.

## Clarifying U.S. Strategy toward Iran and the Land Bridge

President Trump’s sudden announcement of a U.S. withdrawal from Syria in December 2018 – partially reversed just two months later – reflects the uncertainty of U.S. strategy. Trump has pursued a policy of challenging Iran, reflected in his withdrawal from the JCPOA nuclear deal and reinstatement of comprehensive sanctions. Yet he has resisted his top advisers’ endorsement of a comprehensive effort to counter Iranian influence across the region, especially in Syria.<sup>98</sup> Until the White House resolves this inconsistency, the administration will lack a clear framework for dealing with the land bridge.

Recognizing Iran’s determination to become the dominant power in the Middle East and export its revolution<sup>99</sup> is the prerequisite for an effective strategy.

Iran prefers to employ asymmetric approaches that magnify its political and ideological advantages while neutralizing the superior wealth and conventional

<sup>94</sup> Carla Babb, “Mattis: Pro-Syrian Government Forces in Deconfliction Zone Were ‘Iranian-Directed,’” *Voice of America*, May 19, 2017. (<https://www.voanews.com/a/jim-mattis-pro-syrian-government-forces-deconfliction-zone-iranian-directed/3862614.html>); U.S. Department of Defense, Transcript, “Department of Defense Press Briefing,” May 19, 2017. (<https://www.defense.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript-View/Article/1188225/departments-of-defense-press-briefing-by-secretary-mattis-general-dunford-and-sp/>)

<sup>95</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, Central Command, Press Release, “Coalition statement on near At Tanf, Syria,” June 6, 2017. (<http://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/PRESS-RELEASES/Press-Release-View/Article/1204884/coalition-statement-on-actions-near-at-tanf-syria/>); Barbara Starr, Ryan Browne, and Zachary Cohen, “US aircraft shoots down Iranian-made drone in Syria,” *CNN*, June 9, 2017. (<https://www.cnn.com/2017/06/07/politics/us-led-coalition-syria-strike-at-tanf/index.html>); The U.S. shot down a second drone later in June. U.S. Department of Defense, Central Command, Press Release, “Coalition shoots down armed UAV in Syria,” June 20, 2017. (<https://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/PRESS-RELEASES/Press-Release-View/Article/1219863/coalition-shoots-down-armed-uav-in-syria/>)

<sup>96</sup> Toby Dershowitz and Dan Katz, “Syria’s Rukban Refugee Camp: U.S. Strategic and Humanitarian Interests,” *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, December 14, 2018. (<https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2018/12/14/syrias-rukban-refugee-camp-u-s-strategic-and-humanitarian-interests/>); See also: Aron Lund, “Blame Game over Syrians Stranded in the Desert,” *The Century Foundation*, June 18, 2018. (<https://tcf.org/content/report/blame-game-syrians-stranded-desert>)

<sup>97</sup> Lisa Schlein, “UN Official: Conditions in Syrian Rukban Camp Throwback to ‘Stone Age,’” *Voice of America*, February 12, 2019. (<https://www.voanews.com/a/syria-rukban-camp/4783585.html>)

<sup>98</sup> For an overview of the administration’s policy toward Iran and Syria, see: Mark Dubowitz, “Midterm Assessment: Iran,” *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, January 31, 2019. (<https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2019/01/31/midterm-assessment-iran/>); David Adesnik and Toby Dershowitz, “Midterm Assessment: Syria,” *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, January 31, 2019. (<https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2019/01/31/midterm-assessment-syria/>)

<sup>99</sup> Central Intelligence Agency, Directorate of Intelligence, “Iran: Export of the Revolution—A Status Report,” February 15, 1983, approved for release August 11, 2010. (<https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP85T00287R000700560001-5.pdf>)



forces of the U.S. and its allies. This preference has led to an emphasis on ballistic missiles,<sup>100</sup> a nuclear weapons program, and the patient cultivation of foreign proxies.

Iran's greatest asset in the Levant and Iraq is its relationships with the other members of the Axis of Resistance. The land bridge helps to operationalize those relationships; it is one supporting element, not the centerpiece of Iranian strategy. Thus, the U.S. cannot afford to focus myopically on the land bridge. The administration's mistake, however, has thus far been insufficient attention. This applies both to the land bridge and to the strategic significance of northeast Syria more broadly.

Secretary of State Pompeo has asserted, "Iran will be forced to make a choice: either fight to keep its economy off life support at home or keep squandering precious wealth on fights abroad. It will not have the resources to do both."<sup>101</sup> Syria is the most expensive of Tehran's foreign adventures, so relieving U.S. pressure on the Assad regime would be self-defeating. The State Department estimates Iran spent \$16 billion to prop up Assad since 2012.<sup>102</sup> Much of Iran's support was in the form of crude oil, since the Assad regime lost control of its oil fields in northeast Syria, which passed through the hands of the Islamic State before coming under the control of the U.S. and its Syrian partners. Northeast Syria also has valuable agricultural land, natural gas,

and hydroelectric resources. A U.S. withdrawal would likely return these assets to Assad, substantially reducing the cost to Iran of supporting him.<sup>103</sup>

Similarly, a full U.S. withdrawal from Syria would remove substantial barriers to Iranian control of two potential routes for a land bridge, enabling Tehran to move men and weapons more efficiently. If U.S. troops departed from al-Tanf, the road from Baghdad to Damascus would effectively be open to Iranian traffic. An American withdrawal would also damage – perhaps irreparably – the close U.S. partnership with the YPG in northeast Syria. Fearing Turkish predation, the YPG would likely seek to secure protection from Assad and Tehran. In exchange for protection, Assad and Tehran would likely insist on freedom of movement within northeast Syria, among other things.

Disrupting the land bridge must be part of a broader effort to counter Iranian influence across the region, elements of which are already in place.<sup>104</sup> The administration has escalated financial and political pressure on the IRGC by imposing additional Treasury Department sanctions and formally designating the IRGC as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO).<sup>105</sup>

The administration is also using Iranian missile launches, which have become harder to track due to delayed Persian-language public reporting, as flashpoints to highlight Iran's habitual contraventions

**100.** For instance, see: Michael Eisenstadt, "The Role of Missiles in Iran's Military Strategy," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, November 2016. (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/pubs/ResearchNote39-Eisenstadt.pdf>); Behnam Ben Taleblu, "Missing The Point On Iran's Ballistic Missiles," *War on the Rocks*, April 28, 2017. (<https://warontherocks.com/2017/04/missing-the-point-on-irans-ballistic-missiles/>)

**101.** Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, "After the Deal: A New Iran Strategy," *Speech before the Heritage Foundation*, May 21, 2018. (<https://www.state.gov/after-the-deal-a-new-iran-strategy/>)

**102.** U.S. Department of State, Iran Action Group, "Outlaw Regime: A Chronicle of Iran's Destructive Activities," September 25, 2018. (<https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Iran-Report.pdf>)

**103.** David Butter, "Syria's Economy: Picking up the Pieces," *Chatham House* (UK), Jun 2015. ([https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/field/field\\_document/20150623SyriaEconomyButter.pdf](https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/field/field_document/20150623SyriaEconomyButter.pdf))

**104.** The White House, "President Donald J. Trump's New Strategy on Iran," October 13, 2017. (<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/president-donald-j-trumps-new-strategy-iran/>)

**105.** U.S. Department of the Treasury, Press Release, "Treasury Designates the IRGC under Terrorism Authority and Targets IRGC and Military Supporters under Counter-Proliferation Authority," October 13, 2017. (<https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/sm0177.aspx>); U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Public Affairs, "Designation of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps," April 8, 2015. (<https://www.state.gov/designation-of-the-islamic-revolutionary-guard-corps/>)

of UN Security Council Resolution 2231.<sup>106</sup> The U.S. also seeks to expose<sup>107</sup> Iran's weapons proliferation by exhibiting captured Iranian weapons from battlefields across the region.<sup>108</sup> However, none of these measures is a substitute for pushing back on Iran in the heart of the Middle East – Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon.<sup>109</sup> Tackling the Iran issue in the three countries through which the land bridge passes would operationalize Washington's nominal commitment to pushing back against Iranian influence across the region. In the absence of sufficient pushback, Iran will continue to escalate, gradually increasing the risk of a major conflagration.

### Legal Challenges to the U.S. Mission

The authorized mission of U.S. forces in Syria and Iraq is to fight the Islamic State. During testimony in early 2018 before both the House and Senate Armed Services Committees, General Joseph Votel, then-head of U.S. Central Command, stressed that “countering Iran is not one of the coalition missions in Syria.”<sup>110</sup> In practice, this means that U.S. forces cannot initiate operations against Iranian personnel, Shiite militias, or Assad regime forces. However, U.S. troops may act in self-defense if any of those forces pose a threat. For example, when

Shiite militias and Iranian drones entered the exclusion zone around al-Tanf,<sup>111</sup> this authority enabled the U.S. military to respond with force.

**“Despite such legal restrictions, American forces currently constitute the most effective impediment to Iran’s land bridge in Syria, simply because their presence serves as a deterrent.”**

Despite such legal restrictions, American forces currently constitute the most effective impediment to Iran's land bridge in Syria, simply because their presence serves as a deterrent. Thus, after reiterating that countering Iran is not the mission of U.S. troops in Syria, Votel said that U.S. troops could “impede Iran's objectives of establishing lines of communication through these critical areas and trying to connect Tehran to Beirut.”<sup>112</sup> Similarly, U.S. Special Representative for Syria James Jeffrey told Congress that the U.S. military presence in Syria “has the ancillary effect of blocking further Iranian expansion.”<sup>113</sup> Votel, Jeffrey, and other senior officials understand they must thread the needle of

**106.** Behnam Ben Taleblu, “As Europe Dithers, Iran’s Arsenal Gets More Deadly,” *Bloomberg*, December 13, 2018. (<https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2018-12-13/iran-s-arsenal-gets-more-deadly-as-europe-dithers>)

**107.** Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo, “Confronting Iran: The Trump Administration’s Strategy,” *Foreign Affairs*, October 15, 2018. (<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2018-10-15/michael-pompeo-secretary-of-state-on-confronting-iran>)

**108.** Ambassador Nikki Haley, “Remarks at a Press Conference on Iranian Arms Exports,” *United States Mission to the United Nations*, December 14, 2017. (<https://usun.state.gov/remarks/8215>)

**109.** John Hannah, “Midterm Assessment: Iraq,” *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, January 31, 2019. (<https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2019/01/31/midterm-assessment-iraq/>); David Adesnik and Toby Dershowitz, “Midterm Assessment: Syria,” *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, January 31, 2019. (<https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2019/01/31/midterm-assessment-syria/>); Emanuele Ottolenghi and Tony Badran, “Midterm Assessment: Hezbollah,” *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, January 31, 2019. (<https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2019/01/31/midterm-assessment-hezbollah/>)

**110.** General Joseph L. Votel, “Terrorism and Iran,” *Testimony before the House Armed Services Committee*, February 27, 2018. (<http://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/TRANSCRIPTS/Votel-HASC-Testimony-27-FEB-2018/>); U.S. Department of Defense, Central Command, “13 Mar 18: V4 Testimony Before the Senate Armed Services Committee Transcript,” March 13, 2018. (<http://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/Votel-SASC-Testimony-13-MAR-2018/>)

**111.** Shawn Snow and Mackenzie Wolf, “A showdown is looming between the US, Syria and Iran at Tanf,” *Military Times*, May 30, 2017. (<https://www.militarytimes.com/news/pentagon-congress/2017/05/30/a-showdown-is-looming-between-the-us-syria-and-iran-at-tanf/>)

**112.** General Joseph L. Votel, “Terrorism and Iran,” *Testimony before the House Armed Services Committee*, February 27, 2018. (<http://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/TRANSCRIPTS/Votel-HASC-Testimony-27-FEB-2018/>)

**113.** Ambassador James F. Jeffrey, “U.S. Policy Toward Syria (Part II),” *Testimony before the House Foreign Affairs Committee Subcommittee on the Middle East and North Africa*, November 29, 2018. (<https://docs.house.gov/meetings/FA/FA13/20181129/108766/HHRG-115-FA13-Wstate-JeffreyJ-20181129.pdf>)

explaining how an American troop presence constrains Iran even if doing so is not those troops' mission.<sup>114</sup>

Not all lawmakers appreciate this. Rep. Seth Moulton (D-MA), who sits on the House Armed Services Committee, challenged one administration official to explain National Security Advisor John Bolton's comment that U.S. troops would remain in Syria until Iranian-backed forces leave. "That sounds to me like an operation against Iran," which would be illegal, Moulton said.<sup>115</sup> In the Senate, several Democrats introduced the Prevention of Unconstitutional War with Iran Act of 2018, barring any use of force in or against Iran without congressional authorization.<sup>116</sup> Journalists have also raised questions regarding whether "mission creep" in Syria and Iraq could lead to accidental escalation of hostilities with Iran.<sup>117</sup>

For over a decade, Congress has proven incapable of updating and revising its 2001 authorization for counterterrorist missions, despite a firm consensus that it has become outdated. Until conditions change on Capitol Hill, the administration should stand by the reasonably clear position it has elaborated: The threat posed by the Islamic State justifies the deployment of troops to Syria and Iraq, but it is prudent and appropriate to consider how those troops' presence and posture also contributes to blocking Iran.

<sup>114</sup>. For example, see Robert Karem's explanation: U.S. Department of Defense, "DoD Official Explains U.S. Strategy in Syria to House Panel," September 26, 2018. (<https://dod.defense.gov/News/Article/Article/1646188/dod-official-explains-us-strategy-in-syria-to-house-panel/>)

<sup>115</sup>. Katie Bo Williams, "Trump Officials Target Iran, Raising Question of US Military's Role in Mideast," *Defense One*, October 4, 2018. (<https://www.defenseone.com/politics/2018/10/trump-officials-target-iran-raising-question-us-militarys-role-mideast/151747/>); Kyle Rempfer, "DoD faces scrutiny on mission creep in Syria to 'counter Iran,'" *Military Times*, September 27, 2018. (<https://www.militarytimes.com/news/your-military/2018/09/27/dod-faces-scrutiny-on-mission-creep-in-syria-to-counter-iran/>)

<sup>116</sup>. Prevention of Unconstitutional War with Iran Act of 2018, S. 3517, 115<sup>th</sup> Congress (2018). (<https://www.congress.gov/bill/115th-congress/senate-bill/3517>); Prevention of Unconstitutional War with Iran Act of 2018, H.R. 7277, 115<sup>th</sup> Congress (2018). (<https://www.congress.gov/bill/115th-congress/house-bill/7277>)

<sup>117</sup>. Kyle Rempfer, "DoD faces scrutiny on mission creep in Syria to 'counter Iran,'" *Military Times*, September 27, 2018. (<https://www.militarytimes.com/news/your-military/2018/09/27/dod-faces-scrutiny-on-mission-creep-in-syria-to-counter-iran/>); Lara Seligman, "How U.S. Mission Creep in Syria and Iraq Could Trigger War With Iran," *Foreign Policy*, February 4, 2019. (<https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/02/04/how-u-s-mission-creep-in-syria-and-iraq-could-trigger-war-with-iran/>)

<sup>118</sup>. Mark Landler and Helene Cooper, "In Latest Shift, Trump Agrees to Leave 400 Troops in Syria," *The New York Times*, February 22, 2019. (<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/22/world/middleeast/trump-troops-syria.html>); Lara Seligman, "How John Bolton Won the Beltway Battle Over Syria," *Foreign Policy*, February 22, 2019. (<https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/02/22/how-john-bolton-won-the-beltway-battle-over-syria/>)

## Policy Recommendations

The U.S. should rely on all elements of national power to contest Iranian influence in the Middle East. The recommendations below focus on disrupting the land bridge and integrating that objective into a coherent regional strategy.

### Military

- **Reinforce the U.S. and allied military presence in Syria.** President Trump prevented a calamity of his own making by allowing 400 U.S. troops remain in Syria.<sup>118</sup> However, the size of this force reflects political calculations, rather than military ones. The administration should prepare a contingency plan for deploying reinforcements, if 400 troops are incapable of executing a mission originally assigned to a contingent of 2,000. The White House should also persuade members of the anti-Islamic State coalition to send additional units, so the total force is closer to its pre-withdrawal number. This should ensure that the northern land bridge route remains closed to Iran.
- **Keep U.S. troops at al-Tanf.** News reports indicate that the 400 U.S. troops to remain in Syria will include a garrison of 200 at al-Tanf. Even before the reversal of Trump's withdrawal



order, senior officials were considering how to maintain the force at al-Tanf because of its ability to block Tehran's optimal route for a land bridge.<sup>119</sup> The base may also prove its continuing value as a launch point for operations against the Islamic State, which would solidify the justification for a U.S. presence. Last May, for example, the Arab partner force at al-Tanf, Jaysh Maghawir al-Thawra, intercepted a \$1.4 million shipment of illegal drugs intended to finance the Islamic State.<sup>120</sup>

The U.S. should also continue working to ensure humanitarian aid reaches the refugee camp at Rukban. This would help to defuse accusations that the U.S. presence at al-Tanf is the cause of the refugees' misery, even though Damascus and Moscow's obstructionism is at fault. The U.S. should also lean on Jordan to facilitate aid provision, since Rukban lies directly on the Jordanian border. Washington should reassure Amman that cooperation would not result in requests to absorb tens of thousands of additional refugees, in addition to the hundreds of thousands already in Jordan.

- **Prepare contingency plans for an operation to retake Abu Kamal.** Iran and its proxies currently hold the upper hand in Abu Kamal. If a resurgent Islamic State – or a guerrilla force born from its ashes – ever reclaims the town and its environs, the coalition should consider retaking it. Doing so would close off the upper branch of the land bridge's southern route, the only one now open to Iran.

- **Build an enduring military partnership with Iraq.** The U.S. should maintain current force levels in Iraq and expand efforts to train Iraqi units that are proficient, non-sectarian, and resistant to Iranian influence. The White House should also re-open discussion of the U.S. Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) and update the Strategic Framework Agreement that outlines the future of the U.S.-Iraq relationship.<sup>121</sup> The Trump administration should offer to deepen the security relationship if politicians in Baghdad demonstrate resolve to counter Iran. It remains unlikely that Baghdad would dispatch its security forces to confront Iranian proxies operating the land bridge, yet they have the potential to deter such activity and share information with the U.S. military.
- **Help the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) become a self-sufficient partner.** There is an ongoing need for counterterrorist and defensive security operations now that the Islamic State has entered an insurgency phase. The U.S. should provide the SDF, which encompasses both Kurdish and Arab local partner forces, with the training and equipment necessary to smother the insurgency and maintain stability. These partner forces sacrificed several thousand fighters in the campaign against the caliphate and demonstrated their effectiveness on the battlefield. They should also develop the ability to defend northeast Syria against limited incursions across the Euphrates or its international borders.
- **Support Israeli targeting of shipments that cross the Iranian air and land bridges.** Israel has acknowledged carrying out more than 200 air strikes in Syria. The proximity of many Israeli targets to the Damascus airport suggests it is

119. Missy Ryan and Karen DeYoung, "Trump administration plans to leave 400 troops in Syria," *The Washington Post*, February 22, 2019. ([https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/trump-administration-plans-to-leave-400-troops-in-syria/2019/02/22/20dd9c3e-36b5-11e9-854a-7a14d7fec96a\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/trump-administration-plans-to-leave-400-troops-in-syria/2019/02/22/20dd9c3e-36b5-11e9-854a-7a14d7fec96a_story.html)); Lara Seligman, "U.S. Considering Plan to Stay in Remote Syrian Base to Counter Iran," *Foreign Policy*, January 25, 2019. (<https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/01/25/us-considering-plan-to-stay-in-remote-syrian-base-to-counter-iran-tanf-pentagon-military-trump/>)

120. Lisa Ferdinando, "Coalition, Partners Continue Progress Against ISIS in Iraq, Syria," *DoD News*, June 19, 2018. (<http://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/NEWS-ARTICLES/News-Article-View/Article/1555296/coalition-partners-continue-progress-against-isis-in-iraq-syria/>)

121. U.S. Department of State, "Strategic Framework Agreement for a Relationship of Friendship and Cooperation between the United States of America and the Republic of Iraq," November 17, 2008. (<https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/09-101.1-Iraq-Defense-Coop.pdf>)

targeting weapons that arrive via Iran’s air bridge. Israeli strikes can also prevent the land bridge from becoming operational, or at least degrade its utility. The U.S. should employ its intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) assets to support Israeli missions, as appropriate. The U.S. should also make clear to Russia that Moscow should not interfere with Israeli operations, either directly or by indirect means such as allowing Iran to locate assets in proximity to Russian forces or selling advanced anti-aircraft systems to Assad.

- **Request from Congress a narrowly tailored Authorization for the Use of Military Force (AUMF) to interdict illicit Iranian shipments of weapons crossing the Iraqi-Syrian border.** For over a decade, lawmakers have agreed on the need for a new AUMF for counterterrorism, but lacked bipartisan common ground. Lawmakers should consider a new AUMF that includes authorization to interdict terrorist organizations’ illicit shipments of weapons across the Iraqi-Syrian border, which is likely to be the most important chokepoint on the land bridge. This authorization could serve as a powerful deterrent, since Iran is betting that weak American resolve will prevent Washington from using force to prevent the shipment of weapons to its proxies or by them. By scoping the AUMF as narrowly as possible, Congress can alleviate concerns that it is authorizing anything more than operations against designated terrorist organizations within a strictly limited geographic area.

## Economic

- **Ground the airlines that operate Iran’s air bridge to Syria.** Four commercial carriers operate air bridge flights. The two Iranian carriers are Mahan Air, the country’s second largest, and Pouya Air, owned by the IRGC. The Syrian carriers are Syrian Arab Airlines and Cham Wings, a private firm. The U.S. has designated all four as terrorist entities, yet the impact has been limited. Mahan Air continues to serve destinations in Europe, the Gulf, and Southeast Asia.

One new approach to hindering these carriers is for the U.S. to target the service providers, such as insurers and fuel suppliers, on which every airline depends to keep flying. In 2017, FDD’s Emanuele Ottolenghi identified 67 service providers that transact with Mahan Air. The Trump administration recently sanctioned several, but many remain.<sup>122</sup> The U.S. has also begun to pressure friends and allies to hold Mahan Air accountable, which led Germany and France to expel the airline.<sup>123</sup> Expanding this pressure campaign is urgent.

- **Impose terrorism sanctions on all Iraqi proxies under control or acting on behalf of the IRGC-Quds Force.**<sup>124</sup> The U.S. designated the Quds Force as a terrorist organization in 2007 pursuant to Executive Order 13224; any entity under its control also merits designation under the same order. In March, the State Department added Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba and its leader, Akram al-Kabi, to the U.S. list of Specially Designated Global Terrorists (SDGTs). Other targets likely eligible for

<sup>122</sup>. Emanuele Ottolenghi, “Unfriendly skies: Mahan Air should be grounded for good,” *The Hill*, January 29, 2019. (<https://thehill.com/opinion/international/427410-unfriendly-skies-mahan-air-should-be-grounded-for-good>); Emanuele Ottolenghi, “Increasing the Effectiveness of Non-Nuclear Sanctions Against Iran,” *Testimony before the House Financial Services Committee Subcommittees on Monetary Policy and Trade and on Terrorism and Illicit Finance*, April 4, 2017. ([https://s3.us-east-2.amazonaws.com/defenddemocracy/uploads/documents/4317\\_EO\\_Testimony.pdf](https://s3.us-east-2.amazonaws.com/defenddemocracy/uploads/documents/4317_EO_Testimony.pdf))

<sup>123</sup>. Grace Dobush, “Germany Bans Iran’s Mahan Air over Terrorism and Spying Fears,” *Fortune*, January 21, 2019. (<http://fortune.com/2019/01/21/germany-mahan-air-spying-terrorism/>); John Irish, “France bans Iran’s Mahan Air for flying arms, troops to Syria, elsewhere,” *Reuters*, March 25, 2019. (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-sanctions-france-airline/france-bans-irans-mahan-air-for-flying-arms-troops-to-syria-elsewhere-idUSKCN1R6103>)

<sup>124</sup>. For a more extended discussion of the pros and cons of designation, see: Behnam Ben Taleblu, “Countering Iranian Proxies in Iraq,” *Testimony before the House Foreign Affairs Committee Subcommittee on Terrorism, Nonproliferation, and Trade*, September 26, 2018. (<https://docs.house.gov/meetings/FA/FA18/20180926/108719/HHRG-115-FA18-Wstate-TalebluB-20180926.pdf>)

designation include Asaib Ahl al-Haq, Kataib Imam Ali, Kataib Sayyid al-Shuhada, Liwa Zulfikar, and Liwa Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas, along with their leaders. Kataib Hezbollah has been on the list since 2009 because of its earlier terrorist activities.<sup>125</sup>

The Iraqi government, unfortunately, often lacks the political will to confront pro-Iranian forces. Through its political wing, al-Sadiqun, Asaib Ahl al-Haq won 15 seats in the 2018 parliamentary elections. Nonetheless, the most effective strategy for discrediting Tehran's proxies is to demonstrate that they serve a foreign power. Contesting Iranian influence in Iraq will require a long-term effort that is mainly diplomatic and economic in nature.

- **Impose terrorism sanctions on all proxy forces in Syria under control or acting on behalf of the IRGC-Quds Force or Lebanese Hezbollah.** In January, the Trump administration designated two Shiite militias that the Quds Force deployed to fight on Assad's behalf: the all-Afghan Fatemiyoun Division and the all-Pakistani Zeynabioun Brigade.<sup>126</sup> The Quds Force has also helped the Assad regime to establish its National Defense Forces and Local Defense Forces. Other potential targets include Quwat Imam al-Rida and Liwa al-Sayydia Ruqayya (aka the Jaafari Force).<sup>127</sup> Hezbollah – itself an extension of the Quds Force in most respects – also plays an integral role in training and advising proxy forces in Syria.

- **Help Iraq reduce its economic dependence on Iran.** Baghdad's dependence on Tehran for imported electricity and other goods creates leverage that Iran can use to win concessions from Iraq for itself and its proxies.<sup>128</sup> The U.S. should support multilateral efforts to generate the investment and foreign assistance necessary to revive the war-torn Iraqi economy and provide the population with basic services such as power, fresh water, and sewage. This can help Iraq chart its own course and have the strength to rebuff Iran.
- **Escalate the U.S. economic pressure campaign against the Assad regime.** The U.S. has a broad interest in holding the regime accountable for its war crimes and weakening it to the greatest possible extent. If the Caesar Act (S. 1/H.R. 31) becomes law, likely this year, the executive branch will have a range of new authorities it can employ to intensify sanctions. The Trump administration has already taken important steps to prevent Iran from exporting crude oil to Syria, although additional enforcement remains necessary.<sup>129</sup>

Despite Europe's objections to U.S. policy toward Iran, it is more aggressive in some respects with regard to sanctions on Syria, so Washington and Brussels should coordinate their efforts.<sup>130</sup> Joint efforts could include the denial of reconstruction aid, unless Assad dramatically improves his record on human rights. The U.S. and EU should also work to reform the UN's humanitarian assistance

125. David Adesnik, "State Department Adds Iranian-backed Militia in Iraq to Terror List," *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, March 7, 2019. (<https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2019/03/07/state-department-adds-iranian-backed-militia-in-iraq-to-terror-list/>)

126. Behnam Ben Taleblu, "New U.S. sanctions a limited move against Iran proxy groups in Syria," *Axios*, January 25, 2019. (<https://www.axios.com/new-us-sanctions-a-limited-move-against-iranian-proxy-groups-in-syria-8b68b852-ec37-4f58-8936-ac25b5d2c56e.html>)

127. David Adesnik and Amir Toumaj, "FDD Profiles of Leading Iranian-Backed Militias," *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, February 28, 2018. (<https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2018/02/28/fdd-profiles-of-leading-iranian-backed-militias/>)

128. Charles Capel, "US Energy Secretary urges Iraq to cut gas imports from Iran," *The National* (UAE), December 11, 2018. (<https://www.thenational.ae/business/energy/us-energy-secretary-urges-iraq-to-cut-gas-imports-from-iran-1.801657>); Humeyra Pamuk and Ahmed Rasheed, "U.S. extends sanctions waiver for Iraq to import Iranian gas, power," *Reuters*, December 21, 2018. (<https://uk.reuters.com/article/us-iran-nuclear-iraq/u-s-extends-sanctions-waiver-for-iraq-to-import-iranian-gas-power-idUKKCN1OK1LL>)

129. David Adesnik, "Iranian Tankers Relieve Pressure of Oil Sanctions on Assad," *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, May 15, 2019. (<https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2019/05/15/iranian-tankers-relieve-pressure-of-oil-sanctions-on-assad/>)

130. Louisa Loveluck, "Syria is ready to court investors, but Europe wants to prevent that," *The Washington Post*, January 23, 2019. ([https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle\\_east/syria-is-ready-to-court-investors-but-europe-wants-to-prevent-that/2019/01/23/a40abe52-1e4b-11e9-a759-2b8541bbbe20\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/syria-is-ready-to-court-investors-but-europe-wants-to-prevent-that/2019/01/23/a40abe52-1e4b-11e9-a759-2b8541bbbe20_story.html))



to Syria, which Assad distorts to subsidize his regime.<sup>131</sup>

- **Escalate enforcement of sanctions on Hezbollah.** Hezbollah is a primary recipient of weapons that cross the air bridge and land bridge. Under Tehran’s direction, it fights on Assad’s behalf and trains other Iranian proxies. In the long-term, the U.S. should work to break Hezbollah’s grip on the Lebanese state and dismantle its transnational criminal network, which funds its activities. For the moment, the Trump administration should employ the new authorities created by the Hizballah International Financing Prevention Amendments Act of 2018, or HIFPAA. The administration could target those in both the Lebanese public and private sectors who facilitate the arrival of weapons for Hezbollah across the air and land bridge.<sup>132</sup>

## Political and Diplomatic

- **Support Baghdad’s efforts to wrest control of PMF units away from the IRGC-Quds Force.** This will be an uphill battle. Iraqi law has made the PMF into a recognized component of the country’s security forces, yet the prime minister’s authority over much of the PMF remains nominal. Regardless, the PMF receive substantial funding from Baghdad. The U.S. has worked to constrain the influence of these Iranian proxies, yet U.S. military commanders have praised them unnecessarily for their role in fighting the Islamic State. All American officials should now focus on exposing these proxies’ loyalty to Tehran, since Iraqi nationalism remains a potent force. The U.S. has a very limited ability to steer Iraqi politics, yet Iran’s proxies threaten the rule of law and popular government in Iraq. Their

role in operating a potential land bridge remains crucial to Tehran’s plans.

- **Work to resolve Turkish-Kurdish tensions in northeast Syria.** Ankara has repeatedly threatened to take military action against the YPG in northeast Syria, where U.S. troops are also present. Ongoing violence between Turkish forces and the YPG could break apart the SDF, in which the YPG plays the leading role. It could also undermine the U.S. relationship with the Syrian Kurds, leading them to seek protection from Damascus, Moscow, and Tehran.<sup>133</sup> In that scenario, the land bridge’s northern route would likely re-open. The U.S. should work to prevent such an outcome by informing Ankara that the U.S. will not tolerate a Turkish offensive in northeast Syria. At the same time, Washington could assure Ankara that the YPG will not support the Kurdish insurgency within Turkey, which is led by the PKK, a U.S.-designated terrorist organization.
- **Help preserve the independence of local Kurdish and Arab partners in Syria.** In addition to the ongoing military partnership necessary to prevent the resurgence of the Islamic State – see military recommendations above – the U.S. should maintain political relationships with local partners to help preserve their independence, principally from Damascus and its sponsors in Tehran and Moscow. While Assad and his partners may decline to mount a major military challenge to the security of northeast Syria, they have already begun to employ political and economic incentives to sow division from within. In that regard, the U.S. should provide stabilization funding on top of what its Gulf allies now provide. It should also help local partners

131. Annie Sparrow, “How UN Humanitarian Aid Has Propped Up Assad,” *Foreign Affairs*, September 20, 2018. (<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/syria/2018-09-20/how-un-humanitarian-aid-has-propped-assad>)

132. For additional recommendations to reduce Hezbollah influence in Lebanon, see: Emanuele Ottolenghi and Tony Badran, “Midterm Assessment: Hezbollah,” *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, January 31, 2019. (<https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2019/01/31/midterm-assessment-hezbollah/>)

133. For analysis of the Kurds’ relationship with regional powers, see: Behnam Ben Taleblu and Merve Tahiroglu, “Kurd Your Enthusiasm,” *Foreign Affairs*, November 8, 2017. (<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/syria/2017-11-08/kurd-your-enthusiasm>)

find a market for their oil to replace the income they are losing as the U.S. pushes to prevent sales and trading with the Assad regime.

- **Exploit the potential divergence of Russian and Iranian interests in Syria.** Russia is no less determined than Iran to preserve the Assad regime; yet unlike Iran, it seeks to maintain positive relations with Israel. Thus, Russian forces conduct operations with Iranian partners or Iranian proxies in Syria, yet take no meaningful action to resist or deter the waves of Israeli airstrikes targeting Iranian assets. If Iran seeks to escalate the conflict with Israel in a reckless manner, Russia may become amenable to quiet cooperation with the Netanyahu government to reduce the threat. If the threat draws heavily on weapons moving across the land bridge, Russia may indirectly support an effort to disrupt it. On the other hand, Russian passivity in the face of Israeli air strikes in Syria may increase its interest in finding ways to placate Iran.
- **Persuade the EU to hold Iran accountable for its destabilizing actions in the Middle East.** The Iran nuclear deal remains a major point of contention between the U.S. and Europe, yet the EU and its leading members continue to condemn Iran's destabilizing activities, especially its support for the Assad regime.<sup>134</sup> In early 2018, the EU sought to entice Washington to stay in the nuclear deal by offering to impose sanctions against Iran's ballistic missile program and against various militias and their commanders.<sup>135</sup> Later, the EU imposed its first new terrorism sanctions on Iran following Tehran's foiled attacks in Paris and Copenhagen, while Tehran has facilitated additional atrocities

in Syria.<sup>136</sup> Washington should explore whether its European partners are ready to take punitive measures against Iran and its proxies, including those involved in the land bridge.

## Conclusion

The U.S. should work to shut down Tehran's air bridge to Damascus and prevent a land bridge from becoming operational. These cannot be isolated efforts; they must be part of a comprehensive response to Iran's growing influence in the region. As President Trump said in April 2018, "We don't want to give Iran open season to the Mediterranean."<sup>137</sup> A failure to act would offer Tehran exactly that.

134. See: European Union, Press Release, "Iran: Council adopts conclusions," February 4, 2019. (<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2019/02/04/iran-council-adopts-conclusions/pdf>)

135. Robin Emmott and John Irish, "Exclusive: European powers propose new Iran sanctions to meet Trump ultimatum," *Reuters*, March 16, 2018. (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-trump-iran-eu-exclusive/exclusive-european-powers-propose-new-iran-sanctions-to-meet-trump-ultimatum-idUSKCN1GS2A7>)

136. Behnam Ben Taleblu, "With new EU sanctions, Europe takes a stricter approach to Iran," *Axios*, January 10, 2019. (<https://www.axios.com/with-new-eu-sanctions-europe-takes-a-stricter-approach-to-iran-71722a1e-0c0f-4ae3-abcd-a85112a56f71.html>)

137. The White House, "Remarks by President Trump and President Macron of France in Joint Press Conference," April 24, 2018. (<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-president-macron-france-joint-press-conference/>)

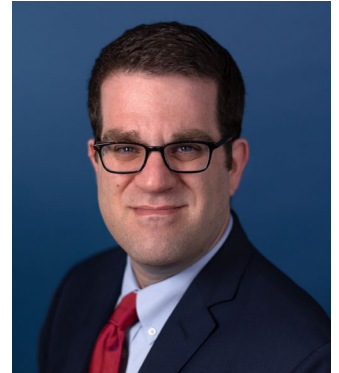
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