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Iran and the New Land Corridor

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Reports emerged recently suggesting that Iran-backed forces are closer to controlling the Syria-Iraq border. This would mean Tehran will now be able to link up with its Lebanese proxy, Hezbollah. If this scenario is correct, after 12 years of conflict in Iraq and another conflict in Syria, Iran is steadily transforming into a more powerful geopolitical player whose influence will be projected hundreds and maybe thousands of kilometers beyond its borders.

In the early 620s CE, just before the Arab/Muslim invasions of the Middle East, the Sasanian Shah, Khosrow II, besieged Constantinople, the capital of Byzantium, with his large armies. His forces had already occupied Egypt, Syria, Palestine, and other former Byzantine lands. This was a momentous event in world history, as the Iranians had not reached the Mediterranean Sea since the end of the Achaemenid Empire in 330 BC.

However, the Iranian success proved short-lived. Iranian ambitions were checked for the next 1,400 years, until hints emerged recently that Iran-backed forces have moved closer to control the Syria-Iraq border.

If this turns out to be accurate, this is an exceptional moment. It means that at long last, Iran once again has a contiguous land bridge from its territory, through northern Iraq and Syria, right through to the Mediterranean coast.

The Iranians will be able to link up with their foremost regional proxy, the Lebanese Hezbollah. After 12 years of conflict in Iraq and Syria, Tehran is transforming into a powerful geopolitical player whose influence will be projected hundreds and maybe thousands of kilometers beyond its borders.

Still, that is not the whole story. The route is quite complex as it weaves across Arab Iraq, via Iraq's Kurdish north, into Kurdish northeastern Syria, and

through the battlefields north of Aleppo, where Russia, Iran, and their allies won an important battle earlier in 2017.

In addition to the geographic dilemma, the Iranian route could be threatened by independent actors. The Kurds of Syria, who populate the northeast corner of the country and who operate separately from the Kurds of Iraq, could forestall the nascent Iranian corridor.

Despite the serious obstacles the corridor faces, the development remains important. For the first time, the route would physically link a range of Iranian allies: Hezbollah in Lebanon; the Assad regime in Syria; and the Iran-influenced government in Baghdad.

The corridor was built up gradually over the course of the Syrian civil war. Israel, always wary about any extension of Iranian influence, has tried to employ a policy of prevention.

Israel has good reason to be worried, as the successful operation of a contiguous Iranian route to the Mediterranean would mean Tehran and Hezbollah can complement and strengthen each other. Above all, Hezbollah not only lends military expertise to its Iranian patron (as was seen on the Syrian battlefield), but also offers Arabic-speaking leaders and operatives who are familiar with the Arab world at large.

Putting the Iranian corridor in context

Geography is key to Tehran's grand strategy. Iran's major population centers are surrounded by almost impregnable mountains and deserts, as well as water barriers. To the west and northwest are the Zagros Mountains, which separate Iran from resource-rich and fertile Iraq. To the north, the Elburz Mountains and Armenia's mountainous lands have always served as a defensive shield. The Caspian Sea in the north and the Arabian Sea in the south are yet more impregnable barriers. To the east and northeast, the harsh climate of Afghanistan and Pakistan, alongside Turkmenistan's semi-barren steppe lands, have kept Iran's provinces more or less safe (except for occasional attacks by nomadic peoples).

This mountainous and desert geography, while defensively advantageous, has also limited the projection of Iranian power abroad. Due to poor geographic conditions, it has never been economically or militarily feasible to project Iranian power into Central Asia, Afghanistan, or Pakistan. Strategically, the most advantageous territory into which Iran can attempt to project its power is the western frontier, or modern-day Iraq (Mesopotamia) – long rich in

population and natural resources, and therefore worth controlling. This at least partially explains Iran's ambitious corridor to the Mediterranean.

History shows how crucial Iraq has been in Iran's calculus. Take, for example, the Achaemenid Empire, followed by Parthia and the Sasanian State. They all hung onto Mesopotamia and even had their capital, Ctesiphon, located along the Euphrates River near modern-day Baghdad.

Iranians have always worried about a foreign presence in the territories surrounding the Iranian plateau. Any foreign influence close to the heart of Iran would represent a strategic weakening of the state. This could also explain modern-day Tehran's behavior and great interest in Iraq.

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