

Subject: How Iran wins from America's withdrawal?

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Today's announcement about the US withdrawal from Syria, gives Iran the opportunity to obtain a massive stronghold in Syria, and finally have a ground corridor to transfer weapons and soldiers from Tehran to Damascus and Beirut.

Iranian efforts to create a ground corridor axis based on highways, roads and railways, commenced with the change of regime in Iraq in 2003 but was put on hold due to the Syrian civil war. Nonetheless, defeating ISIS in Iraq and capturing most of its territories in Syria, including the border crossing in Al-Bukamal, has enabled the Iranians to open a ground corridor from Tehran to Damascus, through Iraq. Though this corridor still suffers from instability in some areas, it may enable the Iranians to transfer weapons beyond Damascus; namely, to the border with Israel or into the hands of Hezbollah in Lebanon.

So far, three potential routes may provide a continuous road-link connecting Iran with Syria and Lebanon:

- **The Northern Route: Tehran-Mosul-Aleppo-Latakia**
This road passes through Kurdish-controlled territories and areas under control of the Syrian opposition in Idlib Province. **Therefore, thus far it has been closed to Iranian free movement.**
- **The Middle Route: Tehran-Baghdad-Al-Bukamal-Damascus-Beirut**
This road has been open since November 2017. Yet, the road at times closes or there are disturbances in the flow of traffic between Al- Bukamal and Dir a-Zour due to clashes in the area. This middle route is relatively longer than the other two.
- **The Southern Route: Tehran-Baghdad-Tanf-Damascus-Beirut**
The shortest route; however, it is presently closed at the mid-point due to the US military presence at the Tanf border crossing with Iraq.

There have been multiple reports concerning a signed Iraqi-Syrian-Iranian agreement to build a new 1050-mile highway complex to connect Tehran to Damascus. One highway will run north to south, from the Turkish border to the Jordanian border, and another east to west, from Iraq to the Syrian shoreline. This second highway will reportedly stretch from Tartus in the West up to Tanf at the Iraqi border (about 351 km/ 218 miles in length).

Construction is projected to last about five years and will be carried out by Iranian infrastructure companies, with the apparent aim of allowing the transfer of Iranian goods to the Mediterranean through Damascus and from there to Beirut.

Iran's preferred route is based on an existing infrastructure – the Iraqi road No. 1 – extending from Baghdad to Tanf.

As for railway infrastructure - the railway between Iran and Syria via Iraq is incomplete at present. However, the gaps are not large (93 miles) and could be closed by new construction within two years. Meanwhile, it is now possible to use ordinary vehicles to transit freight between the breaks

in the railway line and where railway bridges are non-existent. This prospect enables redundancy and may help in concealing activity and contents of deliveries.

Use of a land route permits Iranian forces and supporters of the Shiite axis (Shiite proxy militias, Hezbollah, etc.) to move about more freely in the region, and to transfer forces and weapons, for the first time, by an established ground route. Until now, this has been very limited and required passing through several arenas, sometimes controlled by forces hostile to Iran, by land as well as sea. Furthermore, in economic terms, the use of land routes may enable Iran to export goods to Europe more easily, while laundering profits in Syria if necessary, and thereby bypassing US and/or international sanctions as well.

Alternative routes in the air and the sea have their shortcomings. Air routes, for example, are visible and exposed to sanctions that make it difficult to operate transport aircrafts. The same is true of long, slow, long-haul sea lanes, due to monitoring and control by Israel and the United States, especially when passage is required through the Red Sea and the Suez Canal on the way to the Mediterranean.

Recent reports concerning Iranian use of civilian flights to transfer weapons to Lebanon, amply demonstrate the need the Iranians have to create a ground corridor that will provide greater logistical ease for sending supplies.

The importance that Iran and its allies attribute to the land corridor issue is high. Moreover, it appears that Iran is acquiring real estate and working to rehabilitate structures in strategic areas along the corridor, for example, in the Al-Bukamal crossing area.

The shortest and fastest route between Tehran and Damascus (the Southern Route) is presently closed to Iranian traffic, thanks to the US presence at the border crossing in Tanf.

US presence provides control over the connection route between Syria and Iraq, by controlling an area along the Iraqi border and a mere 8 miles from Jordan keeping the route out of the hands of the Iranians. In this space, around the border crossing, is a pocket of rebels and forces opposed to the Assad regime, who are under the protection of a US military umbrella - much to the dismay of the Syrians, Iranians, and Russians, who emphasize that this presence exists without invitation and coordination with the Assad regime, and thus, is contrary to international law.

As long as the border crossing is held by the US, Iran cannot use the route. Thus, it is highly important to preserve American presence there, as part of the efforts to stop Iran from supporting terror in the middle east in general – and against Israel in particular.