Iran’s influence wanes but regional threats persist

written by Ruth Wasserman Lande | 11.01.2025

First, the strongest arm of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Hezbollah, has been significantly weakened, having lost almost its entire leadership and the vast majority of its massive arsenal in Lebanon. Worse still, Iran’s most convenient smuggling route to Hezbollah in Lebanon, across Syria, is now closed.

Following the victory of Abu Mohammed al-Julani’s jihadist army, Syria has turned from Iran’s playground into Turkey’s President Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s backyard. The latter is reluctant to allow Iran to maintain its foothold in the region.

The magnificent tunnel network discovered along the Syrian-Lebanese border, which Iran used to smuggle weapons to Hezbollah, has become inaccessible, and the airspace over Syria has also been closed to Iran. This has heightened the ayatollah’s panic, due to the lack of alternative routes to continue arming Hezbollah.

Shi’ite militias in Iraq have declared their refusal to continue fighting for the axis, and Hamas is now at an unprecedented low in terms of its power in the Gaza Strip.

Despite this, Tehran still maintains convoluted ways to negatively influence the region.

Two significant arenas of influence remain for the ayatollah’s regime: the Jordanian kingdom and the West Bank. In both these arenas, there is a significant population of frustrated Palestinians who have, over the years, been convinced that the existing leadership – regardless of who it is – is not right for them and should be overthrown to gain what they currently lack: land, wealth, and national pride.

In the Jordanian arena, Tehran has long exploited the kingdom’s weakness, poor economic conditions, and inherent divisions among Jordan’s Bedouin tribes. It encouraged the Palestinian masses to support Islamist groups, such as Hamas,

Islamic Jihad, and others, to undermine King Abdullah and prepare for an invasion and attack against Israel from Jordanian territory.

Simultaneously, Iran uses Jordanian land as a convenient transit for smuggling Captagon drugs, which until recently funded Assad's regime in Syria, and Hezbollah in Lebanon. In addition, Iran has treated Jordanian territory as its own and smuggled a huge number of weapons through it to Hamas and Islamic Jihad in the West Bank.

Now, with the collapse of Bashar al-Assad's regime and the presence of rebel forces along the Syrian-Jordanian border, Iran faces new competitors for influence in Jordan. Still, as a wounded beast with its back to the wall, it might act in a far less calculated manner than before.

In the West Bank, Iran maintains its influence through Hamas and Islamic Jihad, which it has armed for years to undermine the rule of Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas.

The current skirmishes between his Fatah fighters and Hamas are not about sporadic outbreaks of local rivalry but the calculated results of Iran's long-standing cultivation efforts, aimed at replacing Abbas's corrupt regime and the Palestinian Authority with governance effectively controlled by Tehran. This would grant Iran almost direct access to Israel's border.

The Houthis are also not idle, reminding the world that they exist and are a force to be reckoned with. However, the connection between them and Iran seems less tight than Tehran might wish for. The arming of the Houthis so far, coupled with the leniency shown by the Biden administration when it removed them from the blacklist of terrorist organizations, has artificially inflated the group's self-confidence. It is crucial to bring them back to their natural proportions.

Iran's long-standing involvement in the African arena, for example, in Sudan, is also significant and should not be forgotten. By acting there, Tehran has effectively prepared the ground for using this devastated and battered state as a transit point for smuggling weapons to its desired targets.

IN ADDITION to these three arenas, Tehran is racing to achieve its ultimate goal: nuclear capability. Such capability would immensely enhance its bargaining power with regional competitors like Turkey and global powers such as the US.

Hence, it is of utmost importance to curb these capabilities now before Iran reaches the point of no return.

An arms race

A nuclear Iran would likely drag the region into an arms race, with other countries like Egypt, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia aspiring – and in some cases already working toward, the same goal.

Moreover, the Iranians, who view Sunni rebels in Syria as bitter enemies and have recently even begun publicly declaring so, are reluctant to label Turkey and its Turkish "sultan," Erdogan, as an adversary, even though the rivalry between them is evident and ominous.

Erdogan, the big winner in Syria's current situation, has become the central figure attracting regional actors to negotiate for their slice of the regional pie. That is, owing to the fact that he has gained control over an energy transport route bypassing the China-Iran-Europe route.

Erdogan is now able to transport energy through the bloc of Turkic nations (Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, etc.), Syria (now effectively under Ankara's control), and Saudi Arabia to Europe. This route is shorter and cheaper than the former, thereby granting Erdogan substantial power and influence in the region.

Consequently, we might see Tehran swallow its pride and approach Erdogan to negotiate its share. It is also likely that Iran will attempt to "buy" or bribe its way back into the Syrian-Lebanese smuggling tunnels to continue arming Hezbollah. All of this, of course, will undoubtedly come at the expense of Iranian citizens, who have been suffering for years due to the lack of resources diverted by the regime to achieve its imperial ambitions.

As the world examines the consequences of the jihadist uprising in Syria and how to deal with it, it is crucial to understand that a defeated enemy is often a most dangerous one. The Iranian threat remains alive and present in the region and must not be ignored.

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