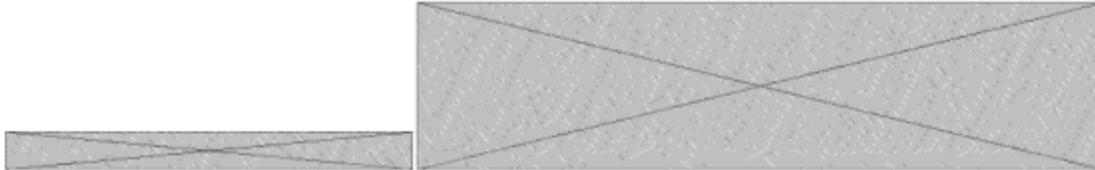


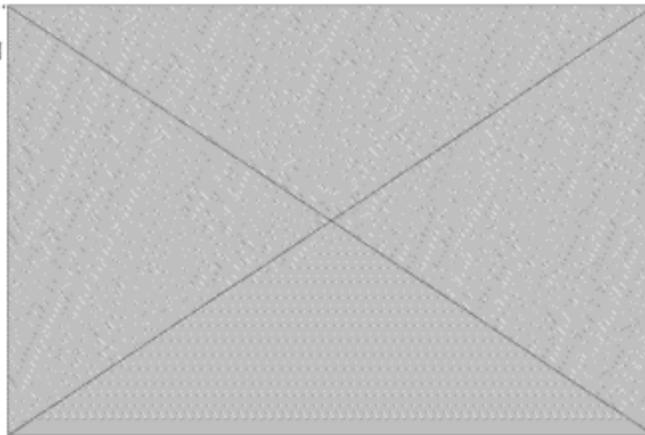
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Amid nuclear talks, Iran forges ahead with Mideast power play



The nuclear talks between world pow

Amid nuclear talks, Iran forges ahead with Middle East power play

By Alina Dain Sharon/JNS.org

While the outcome of the latest phase in nuclear negotiations between Iran and P5+1 powers remains uncertain, Iran is forging ahead with its quest for dominance in the Middle East region.

A March 31 deadline for a framework agreement in the nuclear talks has not yet brought about a deal, and any pact would be just a precursor to a final deal before a June 30 deadline. How the outcome affect Iran's regional ambitions, and what is the current extent of the Islamic Republic's influence in the region, JNS.org spoke with experts for a snapshot of Iran's influence in Yemen, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq and Egypt.

Yemen

Judging from images appearing in Iranian media of airplanes loaded with humanitarian aid

and of Shi'a-Muslim Houthi rebels being shipped to Iran for medical treatment, it seems that the effort to hide its affinity for the Houthis, said Dr. Emanuele Ottolenghi, senior fellow at the Foreign Policy Defense of Democracies.

While it is not necessarily possible to verify precisely what materials are being shipped from Iran, Ottolenghi described "a track record of Iran sending ships of aid" containing weapons.

"We've seen it in shipments to Gaza [and] shipments to Lebanon," Ottolenghi told JNS.org.

The establishment of direct flights between Iran and Yemen by the Iranian carrier Mahan Airlines is a sign of Iran's interest in the Yemenite conflict. That airline has coordinated with the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps-Qods Force (IRGC-QF) by "secretly ferrying operatives, weapons, and funds on its flights," said the Secretary for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence David S. Cohen said in 2011.

Gregory Gause, head of the International Affairs Department at the Bush School of Government and Public Service of Texas A&M University and a non-resident senior fellow at the Brookings Doha Center, said the Houthis are the more interested party in the Iranian-Houthi relationship.

"The Houthis are aligned with Iran, but they're not the creation of Iran. They have more of an affinity with the Iranians than the other way around," Gause told JNS.org.

Dr. Hooshang Amirahmadi—a professor of planning and public policy at New Jersey-based Rutgers University and a candidate in Iran's 2013 presidential race—argued that while the Houthis are Shi'a Muslims, the Iranian regime, the Houthis should not be equated with Hezbollah, a Shi'ia terror group that is loyal to Iran.

"Iran's strategy toward Yemen is not a military strategy because Yemen is too far away from Iran," Gause told JNS.org.

Yet Reuters has reported that Iran provided significant military and financial support to the Houthis after their takeover of Sana'a (Yemen's capital) last September, quoting an anonymous senior U.S. security official as saying, "Before the entrance into Sana'a, Iran started sending weapons and providing support with money via visits abroad."

Lebanon and Syria

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