

Iran

Iran's president visits Syria as he seeks to bolster Tehran's sway over ally

Islamic republic pushes for 'upper hand' in war-torn country's reconstruction



Iran president Ebrahim Raisi in parliament last week. Tehran's military and financial backing for Syria in its civil war strengthened the bond between the two countries © Icana News Agency/ZUMA Press Wire/dpa

Najmeh Bozorgmehr in Tehran AN HOUR AGO

Iran's president visited Syria on Wednesday for the first time since a civil war that broke out in 2011 shattered the Arab state, seeking to extend Tehran's sway over its longtime ally as it prepares for reconstruction.

President Ebrahim Raisi's trip comes as some Arab states, which cut ties with the Syrian regime and backed the opposition, are tentatively [re-engaging with Damascus](#), a regime reliant on alliances with Iran and Russia for more than a decade.

"Raisi's visit is a show of power to say that we managed to help keep Assad in power and are going to continue to keep our strong presence in the region," said one Tehran-based political analyst. "Iran wants to have an upper hand in the peacetime too."

The Saudi foreign minister [hosted his Syrian counterpart](#) in Riyadh last month, while Saudi Arabia also agreed to normalise relations with its arch-rival Iran under a Chinese-brokered agreement in March.

Tehran's military and financial backing for President Bashar al-Assad was crucial in his battle against rebels and strengthened Syria's bond with the Islamic republic, an ally since the 1979 revolution. With support from Russia and [Iran](#), Assad regained control of most of the country, with the remnants of the armed opposition controlling

enclaves in north-west Syria.

Raisi told his Syrian counterpart that Iran would continue to “stand by” the war-ravaged Arab state during its reconstruction, according to Iranian state media. Raisi was accompanied by senior cabinet members including the oil, transport, telecommunications, foreign affairs and defence ministers.

Iran’s foreign ministry spokesperson, Nasser Kanaani, said this week Tehran would “have a determining role in helping repair war damage”.

Keyvan Kashefi, a member of Iran’s chamber of commerce involved in [Syria](#) trade ties, said: “We hope Raisi’s visit can help create a mechanism by which we can have a return on loans and credit lines to Syria [during the war]. We need a new platform by which Iran will be more involved in trade with Syria and help the reconstruction of that country.”

Although no Iranian president visited Damascus during the war, Assad has been to Iran twice since 2011 to meet Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. Iran’s supreme leader has offered unwavering support for Syria and the Lebanese militant movement Hizbollah as part of his strategy to contain Israel, Tehran’s main regional foe, beyond the Islamic republic’s borders.



Syrian president Bashar al-Assad, left, with Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei in Tehran in 2019 © Iranian Leader Press Office/Anadolu Agency/Getty Images

Iran’s [accord with Saudi Arabia](#) would ease political and economic pressure on the

republic and boost regional trade, said analysts in Tehran.

Bilateral trade between Damascus and Tehran is worth about \$250mn a year, with Iran accounting for the majority of exports, but could reach at least \$1bn if obstacles such as Syria's high tariffs were eased, Kashefi said. He acknowledged that the risks of Israeli attacks on Iran's cargoes via sea or land had deterred trade. Syria is Iran's main landbridge to send military and financial aid to Hizbollah.

"The official border crossing [through Iraq] is not safe for Iranian trucks, as some trucks carrying fuel have been set on fire," said Hamid Hosseini, a petrochemicals trader who added that trade routes through Iraq could become less risky after Iran's "warming up of relations with Saudi Arabia".

Iran's leaders hope increased regional trade will also boost Tehran's economic independence from the west. The nuclear accord Iran signed with world powers has been moribund since then US president Donald Trump unilaterally abandoned the deal in 2018 and imposed waves of sanctions on the republic.

"Syria is not a big market for Iran but we cannot afford to lose even small markets," said Saeed Laylaz, an analyst of Iran's political economy. "Iran prefers to sell crude to Syria even if it doesn't pay on time instead of not selling at all and losing that market."

Tehran has gained control of some of Syria's phosphate mines, a crucial source of feedstock for Iran's fertiliser production, while it hopes to export more food products, petrochemicals, construction materials and engineering services to Syria. It is also seeking investment in its telecommunications sector.

"If the land route to Syria via Iraq becomes safe, then Iran will have something to say in Syria," said Hosseini. "But under the current circumstances, the transportation costs and risks of trade with Syria make a major expansion very difficult."