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Iran's Catalyser Role in Port Balances Around the Gulf

Iran plays the role of catalyser in recent port deals around the Gulf region. As a matter of fact, Tehran and Russia, its main ally, have consolidated strategic positions along the Eastern Mediterranean coast; at the same time, the United States signed a significant agreement in the Western Indian Ocean, aiming to contain also Iran's projection.

Iran has started talks for operating the port of Latakia, in the majority Alawite, pro-Assad coastal region of Syria. In this case, the outcome is not open-ended, given the fundamental role the Iranian played (and are playing) in Syria's Alawi areas: the Islamic Republic is likely to operate the commercial port starting from October 2019 [*The Syria Observer*, "Iran to take Latakia port", March 18, 2019]. Latakia port was previously operated by Syria and a French company.

In so doing, Iran will gain direct access to the Mediterranean Sea, adding a third maritime route for transport and communications to its Gulf-Caspian strategic depth, beyond the bottlenecks of the Hormuz and the Bab el-Mandeb Straits and of Suez. The Iranian presence in Latakia can provide further supply and logistical support to Tehran's proxies in the Middle East, first of all Hezbollah (Lebanon) and the Hashd al-Shaabi (Iraq).

Russia announced that an agreement for the leasing of the port of Tartus, next to Latakia, is to be signed soon [Dan Arkin, "Russia to lease Syria's Tartus port for 49 years", *Israel Defense*, April 21, 2019]. The contract should foresee a 49-year leasing; Russian companies plan to build also an airport in Tartus, where the only Russian permanent military base in the region is located.

Moscow disclosed talks on the Tartus port few days after Iran's negotiations on Latakia port went public, in what appeared as a quick move by Russia to consolidate its influence on the area, and a further maritime gate to the Mediterranean. Turkey's attitude in the medium-term is crucial of course regarding the Bosphorus passage.

Looking at the Western Indian Ocean, the United States and the Sultanate of Oman extended in March 2019 their defence agreement ("Strategic Framework Agreement"): according to the new text, the US

will be granted to access ports and airports in Oman [*Muscat Daily*, “Oman, US, sign defence pact to bolster ties”, March 25, 2019], with a specific focus on Duqm port (which is able to host US aircraft carriers) and Salalah port in Dhofar. Under the previous agreement, signed in 1980 and latest renewed in 2010, the Americans could access with advance notice and for specific reasons the military airfields of Muscat, Thumrait, Masirah island and Musnanah [*Congressional Research Service*, “Oman: Politics, Security and U.S. Policy”, updated March 28, 2019].

The American deal on Duqm aims to balance somehow China’s commercial penetration in the Western Indian Ocean; but it regards also oil trade, freedom of navigation, maritime security in Hormuz’s neighbouring waters and the protection of Arab Gulf allies *vis-à-vis* Tehran.

Recent developments in Middle Eastern port geopolitics underline the role of Iran as geopolitical catalyser. In fact, Tehran’s choice for Latakia port twinned Russia’s one to secure its presence in Tartus port; in the same way, Washington opted for an enhanced agreement on the Duqm and Salalah ports also to gain a geostrategic edge with respect to Tehran in this Hormuz-close sub-region.

In this perspective, while China has been pivoting on the Lebanese Tripoli port for weekly shipments [*Xinhua*, Interview: Lebanon’s Tripoli port becomes central destination for weekly shipments from China to Eastern Mediterranean: director”, December 25, 2018], the Gulf monarchies will likely search for a strategic commercial port lease/concession, or military facility, in the crowded Eastern Mediterranean coasts. The United Arab Emirates (UAE) already won two concessions for the management of the port authority of Limassol (Cyprus, since 2016), and for the development of Ain Sokhna port and area (Egypt, since 2010).

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