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Official business visits between Iran and Syria 2019/18

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Special Report

Omran for Strategic Studies

An independent think tank and policy center focusing on presenting an objective understanding of Syria and the region to become a reference for public policies impacting the region.

Omran began in November 2013 in Istanbul, Turkey. It publishes studies and policy briefs regarding Syrian and regional affairs in the areas of politics, economic development, and local administration. Omran also conducts round-table discussions, seminars, and workshops that promote a more systematic and methodical culture of decision making among future leaders of Syria.

Omran's work support decision making mechanisms, provide practical solutions and policy recommendations to decision makers, identify challenges within the Syrian context, and foresee scenarios and alternative solutions.

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Executive Summary

- The Syrian-Iranian Business Forum opened in Damascus in January 2019. In attendance were Ishaq Jahangiri, the first vice president of the Islamic Republic of Iran, and Syrian Prime Minister Imad Khamis, as well as a broad swathe of businessmen and company representatives from both countries. This was the first official economic meeting between the two countries that took place in Syria in 2019.
- In October 2018, a delegation of Syrian businessmen headed by Mohammad Hamsho, secretary-general of the Federation of Syrian Chambers of Commerce, traveled to Tehran. There they met with deputy minister of roads and construction for the Iranian cities of Akbar, Fakhri, and Kashan to discuss ways to expand cooperation between the private sectors in Syria and Iran in various economic, developmental, and industrial fields.
- The 2018 delegation and the 2019 Business Forum events are the key pillars for the development of a stronger economic relationship between Iran and Syria.
- An economic relationship between Iran and Syria did exist in previous years, but it was largely conducted quietly behind the scenes due to the challenging political and military conditions. With the improving conditions and the re-emergence of the Syrian-Iranian Business Forum, it has become easier for Iran to increase its economic role in Syria.
- The Syrian-Iranian Business Forum is expected to play an influential role in Syria in 2019. Iran will increase its dependency on local Syrian brokers to do its business in the country so that its activities will not be detected and targeted by sanctions.

This report will provide a brief overview of the October 2018 and January 2019 economic visits between Syria and Iran and what resulted from them. Future reports will focus in greater depth on the Syrian-Iranian Business Forum activities in Syria in 2019.

The Re-emergence of the Syrian-Iranian Business Forum

In October 2018, a 50-person delegation of Syrian businesspersons and Parliament members visited Iran to participate in the Syrian-Iranian Business Forum. The delegation, which was headed by Mohamed Hamsho, Secretary General of the Federation of Syrian Chambers of Commerce, met with Iranian officials to discuss customs, investment, stock exchange, development projects, and free trade agreements.

This visit was the first of its kind since 2011. It happened after the Iranian ambassador to Damascus put significant pressure on the Syrian regime to stimulate economic relations and commercial trade between Syria and Iran, especially after the reopening of Syria's southern Nasib border crossing with Jordan. Tehran wants to use Syria as a terminal to export Iranian goods to Arab markets through the Nasib crossing.

Iran also hopes to build relationships with prominent pro-regime Syrian merchants in order to establish business partnerships and apply for investment contracts. One example is the growing partnership between Iran and the businessman Mohamed Hamsho following the latter's purchase of the Sultan Company's share in the Syrian-Iranian automotive manufacturing company "Siamco."

The Syrian delegation to Tehran followed a number of preparatory visits by Iranian economic and political delegations to Damascus. It also followed a visit by the Syrian Minister of Electricity to Tehran, during which he announced the conclusion of various agreements related to the construction and maintenance of power plants in Latakia, Aleppo, and Deir Ezzor.

One of the most important outcomes of that visit to Tehran was the signing of an MOU between the Syrian delegation and the Tehran Chamber of Commerce for cooperation in various fields. The Syrian delegation also obtained initial approval from the Iranian side to reduce tariffs on 88 different Syrian exports from 4% to 0%.

Name	State	Position
Muhammad Hamsho	Syria	Secretary-general of the Federation of Syrian Chambers of Commerce
Hussein Ragheb	Syria	Member of Syrian parliament
Firas Jijkli	Syria	Manager of the Federation of Syrian Chambers of Commerce
Hassan Zaidou	Syria	Businessman
Adnan Mahmoud	Syria	Syrian Ambassador in Iran
Iyad Muhammad	Syria	Member of Syrian Exporters Union
Muhammad Kheir Suriol	Syria	Member of Syrian parliament
Fahd Darwish	Syria	Chairman of the Supreme Committee for Investors in the Free Zone

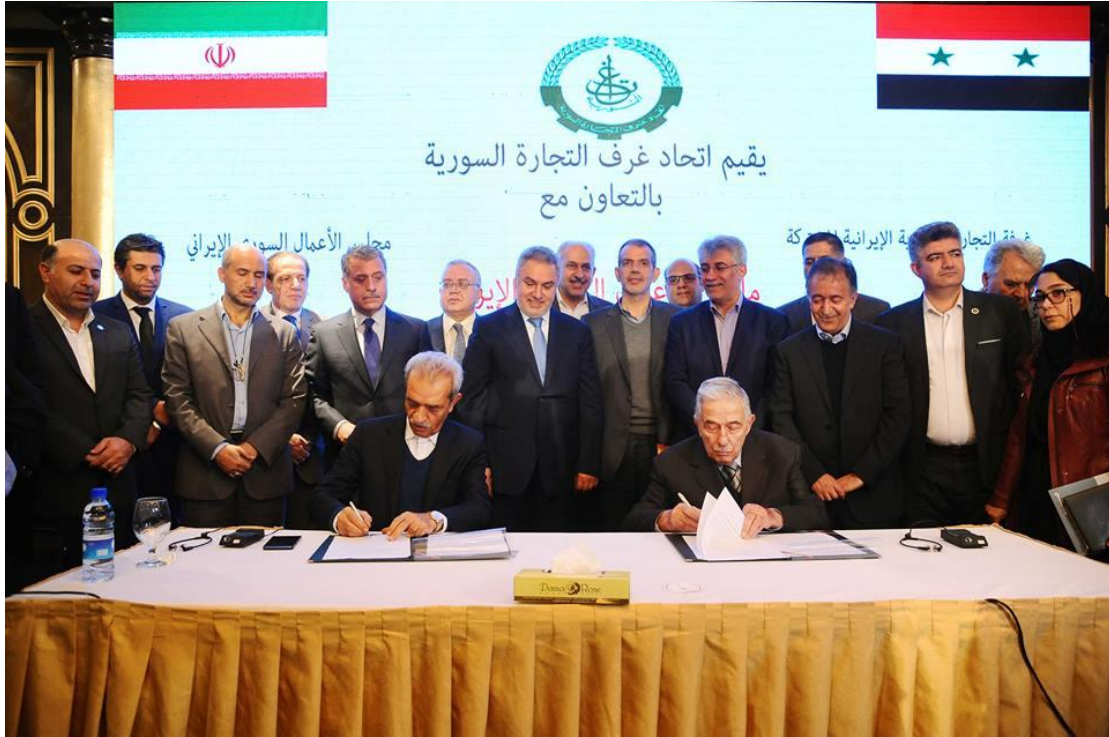
Syrian businessmen who attending the Syrian-Iranian business council meeting

Syria and Iran sign 11 agreements and memorandum of understanding

A number of Iranian officials and private sector representatives visited Damascus in January 2019 for the 14th session of the Syrian-Iranian High Joint Committee. Prior to this meeting, a number of Syrian officials and businesspersons had visited Tehran in preparation. The committee session in Damascus produced 11 signed agreements and memorandums of understanding (MOU) in various sectors:

- **Investment:** An MOU for cooperation between the Syrian Investment Commission (SIC) and the Iranian Organization for Investment, Economic and Technical Assistance.
- **Transportation:** An MOU between the General Establishment of Syrian Railways and the Iranian railways.
- **Economic:** An agreement on long-term strategic economic cooperation.
- **Government:** An MOU regarding the meetings of the High Joint Committee.
- **Trade:** An MOU between the Syrian Ministry of Economy and Foreign Trade and the Iranian Ministry of Industry, Trade and Mine.
- **Construction:** An MOU related to public works and construction.
- **Geomatics:** An MOU between the Syrian General Organization for Remote Sensing and the Iranian National Geographical Organization.
- **Entertainment:** An MOU for enhanced cooperation between the General Establishment for Cinema in Syria and Iran's Cinema Organization.

- **Culture:** An executive program for cultural cooperation was signed between the Syrian Ministry of Culture and the Iranian Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance for the years 2019, 2020, and 2021.
- **Banking:** An MOU regarding information exchange related to money laundering and terrorism financing was signed between the Syrian Anti-money Laundering and Counter-terrorist Financing Commission and the Iranian Money Transfer Unit.
- **Education:** An executive program in the educational field was signed for the years 2019, 2020, and 2021.





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