



**Officer and fighter in the Iranian Revolutionary Guards, senior Hezbollah officer, and Shiite militia operatives killed in ISIS attacks in Albukamal. The Albukamal border crossing is of major importance to Iran since a route promoting Iran's strategic interests in Syria and Lebanon passes through it.**

June 17, 2018

## Overview

► During the first half of June 2018, **ISIS carried out several attacks against the city of Albukamal** near the border between Syria and Iraq. The city and its surroundings are defended by **forces of the Syrian army, supported by Shiite forces handled by Iranian officers of the Revolutionary Guards**. The fatalities of these ISIS attacks were an officer and a fighter from the Iranian Revolutionary Guards, a senior Hezbollah operative, and operatives of the Afghan Fatemiyoun Brigade handled by Iran. Furthermore, a Syrian army division commander and about 30 Syrian army soldiers were killed. Due to the many losses, **Qods Force Commander Qassem Soleimani was quick to arrive at the area**. In the ITIC's assessment, this was the reason for his unusual absence from the Jerusalem Day events in Iran (June 8, 2018).



**Right: Fighters of the Iranian-handled Fatemiyoun Brigade in the Albukamal area (Facebook, June 10, 2018). Left: Qods Force Commander Qassem Soleimani meeting with fighters of the Afghan Fatemiyoun Brigade which recently took part in the fighting against ISIS and sustained heavy losses. The meeting took place during Soleimani's visit in eastern Syria (Fatemiyoun Brigade's Telegram channel, June 10, 2018)**

► Hezbollah and Iranian-handled Shiite forces, led by Qassem Soleimani, **played a major role in the takeover of the city of Albukamal**, marking the end of the Islamic State (November 2017). When the takeover was completed, the Syrian army had sent a considerable part of its troops in the area to other fighting zones, **and then Shiite forces supported by Iranian advisers remained in the area**. They represent a significant military

force supporting the Syrian army which controls the area. On the Iraqi side of the Albukamal crossing, there are also Shiite militias operating under Iranian sponsorship, which belong to the Popular Mobilization.

► About 10 km southeast of the city of Albukamal there is **an important border crossing between Syria and Iraq**. After the area had been taken over, **recommissioning work started on the site in advance of its reopening**, scheduled for April 2018 (Syrian TV, March 29, 2018). However, due to the precarious security situation and the fighting against ISIS, which reestablished itself in the area, the crossing has not opened yet. In the ITIC's assessment, as long as the Albukamal crossing does not open, the **Iranians** will find it difficult to make effective use of the overland supply route from Iraq to Syria.



**Right: Albukamal crossing from the Syrian side of the border. The sign reads: “General Customs Directorate – Albukamal Customs Secretariat.” Left: Recommissioning work in the area of the crossing (Syrian TV, March 29, 2018)**

The military presence of the Iranian-handled Shiite forces on both sides of the Syrian-Iraqi border and Qassem Soleimani’s visits in the area **indicate the tremendous importance attributed to the Albukamal crossing by Iran**. This crossing **represents a key area on the overland supply route which Iran seeks to establish between Syria and Iraq**. This supply route **was intended to enable the Iranians to transfer weapons and forces from Iran to Syria and from there to Lebanon by land, thereby serving Iranian strategic interests**. This is why Iran left in the city of Albukamal and its environs Hezbollah forces and Iranian-handled Shiite militias, even after the Syrian army reduced the scope of its forces there (at the same time, Popular Mobilization Shiite militias, also handled by Iran, operate on both sides of the border). It seems that these Shiite forces, under Iranian command, **play an important role in the current fighting against ISIS**, trying to stabilize the security situation in the area in order to allow uninterrupted vehicle traffic through the crossing.

## Shiite forces involvement in the fighting in the Albukamal area

- ▶ Iranian-handled Shiite forces, including Hezbollah and Shiite militias, played a major role in taking over **the city of Albukamal** (November 2017), marking the end of the Islamic State as an entity with a territory and governance. The takeover of Albukamal was accomplished with the participation of a Hezbollah force, a force of the Iraqi Shiite militia Nujaba Movement, and fighters of the Afghan Fatemiyoun Brigade and the Zeynabiyoun Brigade (a Pakistani militia force). **These forces were led by Qods Force Commander Qassem Soleimani, who was on the ground during the takeover of the city.**
- ▶ In the ITIC's assessment, after the Syrian army had redirected a considerable part of its forces in the area to other fighting zones, **Hezbollah and the Shiite militias**, the most significant of which is the Afghan Fatemiyoun Brigade, **were left in the Albukamal area.** The Shiite forces, led by Iranian advisers, assist the Syrian army in repelling ISIS attacks against Albukamal and its environs. These forces and the Syrian army soldiers have sustained many losses in ISIS's recent attacks in Albukamal and its surroundings.



**Right: Qods Force Commander Qassem Soleimani with one of the fighters of the Nujaba Movement during the takeover of Albukamal (Enab Baladi, November 17, 2018). Left: Soleimani talking on the radio with Shiite militias fighting in the city (Twitter account of Hezbollah's Central Military Information Unit, November 20, 2018)**



**Qassem Soleimani and fighters of the Nujaba Movement in Albukamal  
(Araby 21, November 16, 2018)**

- ▶ During the first half of June 2018, **ISIS carried out several attacks in the area of Albukamal**. Especially significant were the attacks carried out on June 7-10 by ISIS operatives who came from bases in the Syrian Desert west of the Euphrates River. During the attacks, ISIS operatives took over positions west and northwest of the city of Albukamal (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, June 10, 2018; Syrian NORS Institute for Strategic Studies).
- ▶ **The Syrian army and the Shiite forces, most of them from the Afghan Fatemiyoun Brigade, sustained heavy losses.** The Syrian media **reported on 20-30 fatalities**. Among the fatalities were also **high-ranking commanders and officers** from the Syrian army, from Iran, and from Hezbollah (see appendix). **At least 21 ISIS operatives** were also killed in the attack, including dozens of suicide bombers who blew up car bombs or explosive belts (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, June 9, 2018).



**Bodies of Syrian soldiers and operatives of their supporting forces killed by ISIS in the area of Albukamal  
(Deir ez-Zor 24, June 10, 2018)**

## Appendix

### Syrian division commander, Iranian Revolutionary Guards operatives and a senior Hezbollah commander killed in Albukamal

#### Syrian army

► In the ISIS attack near Albukamal on June 9, 2018, **Maj.-Gen. (*Liwa*) Ali Mohammad al-Hussein (Abu Hussein)**, commander of the Syrian army 11th Armor Division, was killed.<sup>1</sup> After his death, he was promoted to the rank of lieutenant general (*Imad*). Ali al-Hussein was a resident of the city of Al-Duraykish, in the Tartus Province, northern Syria. In the past, he took part in many battles against ISIS in Syria (Enab Baladi, June 9, 2018).



**Ali Mohammad al-Hussein, commander of the Syrian army 11th Armor Division (Right: Enab Baladi, June 9, 2018; Left: Facebook page of Ali Sarem, June 9, 2018)**

#### Iranian Revolutionary Guards

► The Iranian Fars News Agency and other media outlets reported that **on June 6, 2018, two Revolutionary Guards members had been killed in the area of Albukamal, one of them an officer.**<sup>2</sup> The officer killed was **Khalil Takhti Nezhad**, and the fighter was **Mohammad-Mehdi Fereidouni** (Twitter account of Mahdiibakhtiari@, Fars News Agency reporter, June 6, 2018). The Fars News Agency and other media outlets in Iran reported that the two men had

<sup>1</sup> According to one of the reports, General Ali Mohammad al-Hussein died of a heart attack during the fighting against ISIS near Albukamal (Facebook page of Ali Sarem, June 9, 2018).

<sup>2</sup> According to another version, the officer and fighter from the Revolutionary Guards were killed **in the Daraa area**. In the ITIC's assessment, this version (probably originating in the Free Syrian Army) is doubtful, because **in Albukamal clashes did indeed take place between ISIS and the Syrian forces and Iranian-handled forces**, while in the Daraa area there was relative calm.

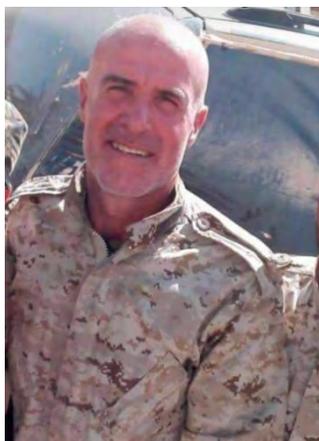
been sent to Syria about a month ago from the Iranian city of Bandar Abbas (Fars News Agency, June 6, 2018). On June 9, 2018, **Syrian media outlets reported the death of Nasser Jamil Hadraj (Abu Hussein), a senior Hezbollah operative** (see below), **along with Mohammad-Mehdi Fereidouni**, while fighting against ISIS in Albukamal (Khotwa; Zaman Al-Wasl, June 9, 2018).



**The two Iranian Revolutionary Guards members killed in Albukamal. Right: Iranian officer Khalil Takhti Nezhad. Left: Mohammad Mehdi Fereidouni (Twitter account of Mahdiibakhtiari@, June 6, 2018)**

## Hezbollah

► **Nasser Jamil Hadraj (Abu Hussein), a senior Hezbollah operative, was killed in the ISIS attack against Albukamal on June 7, 2018.** Nasser Hadraj was from the village of Al-Ghassaniyah, about 15 km south of Sidon, southern Lebanon (Zaman Al-Wasl, June 9, 2018). Hadraj was reportedly close to Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah (Khotwa, June 9, 2018; Twitter account of a Syrian journalist, June 12, 2018).



**Right: Nasser Jamil Hadraj, seen in an archive photo shaking hands with Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah (Twitter, June 10, 2018). Left: Nasser Jamil Hadraj (Twitter account of Sayyid Adam, June 8, 2018)**

► According to several Syrian media outlets, Nasser Hadraj was **Hezbollah's rocket battalion commander in Syria** (Nidaa Suriya; Enab Baladi, June 9, 2018). On June 7, 2018, Hezbollah published on websites affiliated with it a death notice on the “jihadi commander” **Hajj Nasser Jamil Hadraj** from Al-Ghassaniyah. The photos show Nasser Hadraj **near a rocket launcher and near a gun** (Twitter account of Sayyid Adam, June 8, 2018).



**Nasser Jamil Hadraj near a rocket launcher and near a gun  
(Twitter account of Sayyid Adam, June 8, 2018)**

► **Nasser Jamil Hadraj** was buried on June 8, 2018, in an official ceremony which Hezbollah held for him in the village of Al-Ghassaniyah, southern Lebanon. The funeral was attended by Hezbollah senior officials, including the head of the Hezbollah faction in the Lebanese Parliament, **Mohammad Raad**; **Hajj Ali Daoun**, an area commander in southern Lebanon; the mayor of Al-Ghassaniyah, and clerics (Al-Ahed website, June 9, 2018). **On June 12, 2018**, Hezbollah held a memorial ceremony for him in Al-Ghassaniyah, attended by **Hassan Nasrallah's representative, Sheikh Ali Jaber**, and the head of the Hezbollah faction in the Lebanese Parliament, **Mohammad Raad** (Al-Ahed website, June 12, 2018).



**Hezbollah fighters carrying the coffin of Nasser Jamil Hadraj in the village of Al-Ghassaniyah (website of the village of Tir Daba, June 9, 2018)**