Overview

In recent months, Iran has increased its control in the area of the Albukamal border crossing between Syria and Iraq by Shiite forces affiliated with it. Iran attaches major strategic importance to this crossing since the overland supply route leading to Iraq, Syria and Lebanon passes through it (the “Land Corridor”). It seems that during recent months, vehicle traffic through the Albukamal area has begun, but it is not yet at full capacity. In the future, when the traffic volume increases, it will enable Iran to reduce its dependence on the aerial route between Tehran and Damascus; to increase its presence in Syria; and to facilitate the passage of operatives and weapons to Hezbollah in Lebanon and to the Shiite militias in Syria. All these might improve the Iranian capabilities of terrorism and subversion in the heart of the Middle East and promote the Iranian vision of establishing a regional space of a revolutionary Shiite character.

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Albukamal: a key area on the overland supply route between Iraq and Syria

The establishment of an overland supply route connecting Iran, Iraq, Syria and Lebanon is perceived by Iran as an important strategic interest. This is how the Iranians can transfer weapons and forces from Iran through Iraq and Syria, and from there to Lebanon. The overland supply route enables Iran to reduce its dependence on the aerial
route between Tehran and Damascus, **to increase and deepen its presence in Syria**, and to facilitate the **passage of weapons and operatives to Hezbollah in Lebanon and to the Shiite militias in Syria**.

In the summer of 2017, towards the final collapse of the Islamic State, **Qods Force commander Qassem Soleimani and the Iraqi Shiite militias examined several alternatives to establish an overland supply route between Iraq and Syria**. The overland supply route was regarded by Soleimani and the Iranians as an important prize that can be achieved at the end of the fighting against the Islamic State. The alternative found the most suitable, according to senior sources in the Popular Mobilization (the umbrella framework of the Shiite militias) **was the road leading to Al-Mayadeen and Deir ez-Zor and from there, through Palmyra, to Damascus**; that is, **the main road passing through the Albukamal crossing** (Theguardian.com, June 16, 2017).

**Why is Albukamal perceived by Iran as the most important border crossing?** Baghdad and Damascus are connected by two main overland routes which, in the ITIC’s assessment, are perceived as preferable by the Iranians. The **first route**, which is the shorter one, leading from Baghdad to Damascus, **goes through the Tanf border crossing** near the tri-border area between Iraq, Jordan, and Syria. For the time being, Iran cannot make logistical use of this route because the Tanf area is controlled by the US and US-affiliated rebel organizations. If an agreement is reached providing for the departure of the Americans from Tanf and the Syrian regime forces take control of the crossing and its surroundings, Iran may also use this route in order not to rely on one route only.

The **second route**, the longer one, **goes from Baghdad through the Euphrates Valley and passes through the Albukamal crossing**. This route is for the time being the only one that can be used as an overland supply route, hence its importance. Indeed, passing through it involves **security difficulties** (ISIS’s guerrilla activity). However, it does not go through an area controlled by the US and US-affiliated rebel organizations (such as Tanf). This is why the Iranians currently give priority to establishing themselves in the area of the Albukamal crossing, the only border crossing in Syria where they enjoy considerable influence, through Iraqi Shiite militias and a Hezbollah force handled by the Iranians. In the Albukamal region, **Revolutionary Guards officers (in the ITIC’s assessment, mainly from the Qods Force) are constantly present, supporting the Shiite forces in command, professional consultation, and guidance.**
The establishment of Iranian-affiliated Shiite forces in the Albukamal area

Iraqi Shiite militias and Lebanese Hezbollah (handled by Iran) played a major role in the takeover of the city of Albukamal, which symbolized the end of the Islamic State as an entity with a territory and governance (November 9, 2017). The takeover of Albukamal was accomplished with the participation of a Hezbollah force, a force of the Iraqi Shiite militia Nujaba Movement, a force of the Fatemiyoun Brigade (a military unit established by Iran, consisting of Shiite Afghan refugees), and the Zeynabiyoun Brigade (a military unit established by Iran, consisting of Pakistani operatives).
The Shiite forces are commanded by Iranian Revolutionary Guards officers who, in the ITIC’s assessment, belong to the Qods Force, in the capacity of commanders and professional advisors (several Iranian officers were recently killed in the area during the fighting against ISIS). Qassem Soleimani, Qods Force commander and the most senior figure on the terrorism and subversion scene in the Middle East, shows personal interest in the Albukamal area and has visited there when unusual events took place.

The establishment of the Iranian-handled Shiite forces in the area of the Albukamal border crossing represents a strategic achievement for Iran. This is the first time that the Iranians managed to acquire major control, through organizations affiliated with them, over a border crossing between Syrian and Iraq.
The importance of the Shiite forces in securing the Albukamal area increased in the period after the city had been taken over. This is because the Syrian army removed part of its forces from the area and dispatched them to other war zones of higher priority, while the Shiite militias and probably also a Hezbollah force stayed there to maintain security. It seems that after the Albukamal crossing was taken over, the forces were reinforced with additional Iraqi Shiite militias, such as Hezbollah Battalions. In the Iraqi side of the border with Syria (Al-Waleed crossing), there are also Iranian-affiliated Iraqi Shiite militias, so Iranian-affiliated Iraqi Shiite militias are present on both sides of the border.

The Shiite forces, commanded by Iranian officers, secure the area in collaboration with a Syrian army force. It seems that the Syrian army focuses on maintaining security mainly inside the city of Albukamal while the Shiite forces are deployed on the outskirts of the city and in the surrounding areas. The Shiite forces and the Syrian army are facing ISIS attacks, mainly hit-and-run attacks carried out by ISIS operatives operating from the desert area west of the Euphrates River (from Albukamal until Palmyra). During the first half of June 2018, ISIS carried out several attacks against the city of Albukamal, killing an officer and a combat soldier, both members of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards. In addition, operatives of the Afghan Fatemiyoun Brigade were also killed. Other fatalities were about 30 Syrian army soldiers and officers, including a high-ranking Syrian officer. Due to the many losses, Qods Force Commander Qassem Soleimani was quick to arrive in the area.
Two Iranian Revolutionary Guards members who were killed in an ISIS attack against Albukamal. Right: Iranian officer Khalil Takhti Nezhad. Left: Mohammad Mehdi Fereidouni (Mahdiibakhtiari@ Twitter account, June 6, 2018)

Right: Nasser Jamil Hadraj, senior Hezbollah operative killed in an ISIS attack against Albukamal. According to Syrian media reports, he had been Hezbollah’s rocket battalion commander in Syria. Left: Nasser Jamil Hadraj (Twitter account of Sayyid Adam, June 8, 2018)

Preparation of physical infrastructure: reconstruction work in the Albukamal border crossing, using dirt bypass roads in the meantime

After the takeover of the Albukamal area (November 2017), the Syrian government started to carry out reconstruction work in advance of its reopening. The opening was supposed to take place in April 2018 (Syrian TV, March 29, 2018). However, due to lower priority of the Syrian regime, the lack of security owing mainly to the continuation of ISIS’s guerrilla activity, and the other constraints of the Syrian regime - reconstruction work is still ongoing. In July 2018, the Iraqi ambassador to Syria said that Iraq was holding discussions with Syrian officials concerning the opening of the crossings, mainly the Albukamal-Al-Qaim crossing (SANA, July 9, 2018; Enab Baladi, July 10, 2018; Iraqi independent news agency Buratha, July 10, 2018). Satellite photos clearly show that the crossing hasn’t opened yet and that it’s still under construction.
Reconstruction in the Albukamal crossing and the road passing through it
(ImageSat International – ISI)

Right: The Albukamal crossing from the Syrian side of the border. The sign reads: “General Customs Directorate – Albukamal Customs Secretariat.” Left: Reconstruction work in the area of the Albukamal crossing (Syrian TV, March 29, 2018)
Reconstruction work of the Albukamal crossing and the road passing through it. Work includes repaving with asphalt (ImageSat International – ISI)

The long period during which the Albukamal crossing and the main road passing through it were closed made the Iranians use dirt bypass roads. These dirt roads cross embankments constructed along the Syrian-Iraqi border and allow the passage of traffic between both countries. It seems that the bypass roads were constructed by ISIS during the time of the Islamic State, and they are now being used by Iran. These roads are mainly secured by the Shiite militias and possibly also by an Iraqi army force (on the Iraqi side of the border). These dirt roads enable the passage of vehicles from Syria to Iraq, including trucks, as can be seen from the satellite photos. One of these roads leads to the headquarters of the Shiite militias which was attacked and destroyed on June 18, 2018.
Dirt bypass roads crossing the dirt embankments on the border between Syria and Iraq (ImageSat International – ISI)

Dirt road leading from Iraq to Syria, passing through the headquarters of the Shiite militias which was destroyed in the airstrike (ImageSat International – ISI)
Airstrike against an Iraqi Shiite militias headquarters south of Albukamal

On June 18, 2018, an airstrike was carried out against a headquarters of the Iraqi Shiite militias south of Albukamal, near the Syrian-Iraqi border. The attack was unusual since the Shiite militias and Hezbollah operatives in the area had been subjected to ground attacks by ISIS operatives, but not to airstrikes. The attack killed dozens of Iraqi Shiite militia operatives, most of whom belonged to the Iraqi Shiite militia Hezbollah Battalions.

According to the interpretation of the satellite photographs, the headquarters was completely destroyed. According to the Popular Mobilization, the umbrella organization of Shiite militias in Iraq, the attack was directed against the headquarters of the 45th and 46th brigades of the Popular Mobilization near the Syria-Iraq border (Popular Mobilization website, June 18, 2018). The headquarters that was attacked apparently controlled the Iraqi Shiite militias operating near the border and the movement of vehicles on dirt roads that bypass the Albukamal crossing. According to the satellite photographs, the headquarters was located near a dirt bypass road originating in Iraqi territory. A few roads led from the headquarters to several other buildings in the vicinity (see satellite photos).

The Shiite militias headquarters before and after the airstrike. The headquarters was totally destroyed (ImageSat International - ISI)
The Shiite militias headquarters that was attacked and the dirt bypass road leading to it (ImageSat International - ISI)

Dirt roads that connected the headquarters that was attacked to other buildings in the area (ImageSat International - ISI)

In the wake of the many losses suffered by the Shiite militias in the airstrike in Albukamal, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, the deputy commander of the Popular Mobilization and the dominant figure in the organization, made a visit to the area. In the past (1983), Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis was involved in a series of terrorist attacks directed by Iran in Kuwait, against the US and French embassies, and served in the ranks of the Lebanese Hezbollah. During the fighting in Iraq against the US Armed Forces, he headed a Shiite militia called the Hezbollah Battalions (whose operatives are present in the
Albukamal area), which carried out guerrilla warfare and was handled by the Iranian Qods Force. In the ITIC’s assessment, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, who is handled by Qassem Soleimani, plays a key role in handling the Iraqi Shiite militias in Syria.

A total of 52 operatives were killed in the airstrike, 30 of whom belonged to the Iraqi Shiite militias handled by Iran. The Shiites who were killed were members of the Iraqi Shiite militias of the Popular Mobilization. According to an Iraqi source, the forces belonged to the Hezbollah Battalions, Asa’ib Ahl al-Haqq (the League of Righteous People), and the Nujaba Movement (the Noble Ones) (Iraq Al-Khayr, June 18, 2018). According to media reports, the casualties also included operatives of an Iraqi Shiite militia force called the Imam Ali Battalions. According to media reports, most of the casualties apparently belonged to the Hezbollah Battalions.

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1 A Shiite militia in Iraq established in early 2007 by the Iranian Qods Force with the aim of expelling the Americans from Iraq. That militia plays an active role in the campaign against ISIS as part of the Popular Mobilization.
2 An Iraqi Shiite militia in Iraq established in 2006 by the Iranian Qods Force with the aim of expelling the Americans from Iraq.
3 An Iraqi Shiite militia operating in the Baghdad area. A force of this militia was sent to Syria. Handled by the Iranian Revolutionary Guards, it has been fighting against the rebel organizations.
In response to the airstrike on the headquarters, the Popular Mobilization issued a “clarification statement” admitting that its operatives had been present in the area of Albukamal in Syria since the area was liberated (November 2017). According to the announcement, its operatives are engaged in defending the border area, along with the Syrian army, with the knowledge of the Iraqi security forces and the Syrian government. The announcement states that the site that was attacked is a headquarters located near the Syrian-Iraqi border. According to the announcement, this area is militarily vital because the “terrorist operatives” are trying to penetrate into Iraqi territory, and by defending it the Popular Mobilization operatives are guarding Iraqi soil and defending Iraqi sovereignty. Thus, in this announcement, the Popular Mobilization attempted to legitimize the activity of its forces in Syria by portraying them as defenders of Iraq’s security (rather than Iranian interests).

No one has claimed responsibility for the airstrike. There are conflicting versions regarding the identity of the perpetrators: the Syrian regime is accusing the US-led International Coalition. According to a Syrian army source, “the American Coalition attacked one of its military posts southeast of Albukamal. As a result, people were killed and wounded” (SANA News Agency, June 18, 2018). The Iraqi Popular Mobilization, which sustained casualties in the attack, attributed the attack to the United States and asked the Americans to publish a clarification (Popular Mobilization website, June 18, 2018). On the other hand, a spokesman for the US Central Command said that no member of the US-led Coalition had carried out airstrikes near Albukamal (Reuters). A senior US official, who asked to remain anonymous, claimed that Israel had carried out the airstrike (CNN, June 18, 2018).

Has Iran begun to use the overland supply route that passes through Albukamal, and if so, to what extent?

The overland supply route leading from Iran to Iraq and Syria is not yet a fait accompli. In early 2018, US Defense Secretary James Mattis said that Iran had not yet managed to create a land bridge from Iraq to the Mediterranean Sea. According to him, the construction of the land bridge was delayed because of the ongoing fighting against what is left of the Islamic State. On the other hand, Iraqi sources, whose reliability is unclear, claimed that in mid-December 2017, a first Iranian military convoy traveled from Iraq to Syria in the direction of Deir ez-Zor (i.e., through the Albukamal area). The convoy comprised 20
trucks, whose cargo was unknown, and was escorted by forces of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards and the Iraqi militias. In the assessment of the aforementioned Iraqi sources, this was apparently the beginning of the operation of the land corridor from Iran to Syria⁴.

In the ITIC’s assessment, based on ISI’s interpretation of satellite photos, the overland supply route has been operating in recent months, but not yet on a significant scale. Trucks carrying unknown cargo passed through the Albukamal area, bypassing the main road by using dirt roads constructed in the area. The operation of the route on a significant scale requires an appropriate security response to the ongoing ISIS attacks and the completion of the reconstruction work on the Albukamal border crossing. The airstrike that recently destroyed the Iraqi Shiite militia headquarters may have been interpreted as a message to Iran that its establishment in the Albukamal area would not go unhindered and that in the future, the forces under its protection may have to withstand more significant threats than ISIS guerrilla attacks.

⁴ Ephraim Kam, INSS Insight No. 1021, February 14, 2018. From the article: “Is Iran about to Operate the Land Corridor to Syria?”