



Violent power struggles in the Euphrates Valley between rival militias affiliated with Iran and the Syrian regime

September 2, 2018

Overview

In August 2018, several cities in the Euphrates Valley witnessed violent clashes between the Syrian army and Syrian militias affiliated with it on the one hand, and Shiite militias handled by Iran on the other. **The clashes took place in the region between Albukamal and Deir ez-Zor, and both sides sustained dozens of casualties.** In the background, **there were violent power struggles and conflicts on the extortion of money from local residents,** mainly by collecting “crossing fees” in return for the use of crossings between the two banks of the Euphrates River. During the clashes, attempts were made to find local solutions to defuse the situation: the militias were supposed to stop running the crossings and the Russian Military Police was supposed to take their place. However, since late August 2018, the clashes stopped and **a reconciliation committee was convened in the city of Albukamal,** to resolve the conflicts.

- ▶ Most of the militias operating in the Euphrates Valley **are handled by Iran, which attributes major importance to the Albukamal area, as the overland route between Iraq and Syria passes there.**¹ In contrast, the forces affiliated with the Syrian regime are in an inferior position in this area, because when the campaign against the Islamic State ended, most of the Syrian army forces were transferred to the other battle zones.
- ▶ **The fact that these clashes lasted for quite some time, the difficulty to contain and stop them immediately after they began, indicate, in the ITIC's assessment, the loose control by the Iranian Qods Force and the Syrian General Headquarters of the militias operating on their behalf in the Euphrates Valley.** In the ITIC's assessment, this stems from the distance between the remote area of the Euphrates Valley and the Syrian regime's center in Damascus; the fact that there are several rival militias with different orientations (some of them with a record of harassing the population); the sense of power experienced by the Shiite

¹ See the ITIC's Information Bulletin from June 19, 2018: “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.”

militias, and the lack of strong and effective military force which will maintain security and enforce law and order.

► In the ITIC's assessment, at this stage, **the clashes between the rival militias in the Euphrates Valley didn't have significant impact on the relations between Syria and Iran**, as these relations are based on **common strategic interests**. This is why **it is expected that Iran and Syria will make an effort to defuse the situation**. However, the events in the Euphrates Valley may **create suspicion** between the Syrian regime and the Iranian Qods Force, as they **demonstrate the problematic nature involved in Shiite militia forces affiliated with Iran establishing themselves in an important and sensitive area under Syrian sovereignty**. Furthermore, **on the local level**, if they persist, the rivalry and power struggles may help ISIS, which conducts intense activity in the area, **and make it difficult to stabilize the fragile security situation in the Euphrates Valley**.

The violent clashes in the Euphrates Valley in August 2018

The violent clashes in the Euphrates Valley between the Shiite militias affiliated with Iran on the one hand, and the Syrian army and the militias affiliated with it on the other, lasted several weeks. They probably started in clashes in Albukamal (August 8, 2018), and spread to other cities in the Euphrates Valley (up to the area south of Deir ez-Zor). As far as we know, the events lasted at least until August 31, 2018. It seems that since then, quiet has prevailed between the rival sides in the area, with a tense atmosphere, while a reconciliation committee convenes in the city of Albukamal to resolve the conflict.

Sites of the clashes in the Euphrates Valley



The towns and villages where clashes occurred in August: Al-Muhsin (1); Al-Mayadeen (2); Al-Asharah (3); Al-Duweir (4); Albukamal (5) (Google Maps)

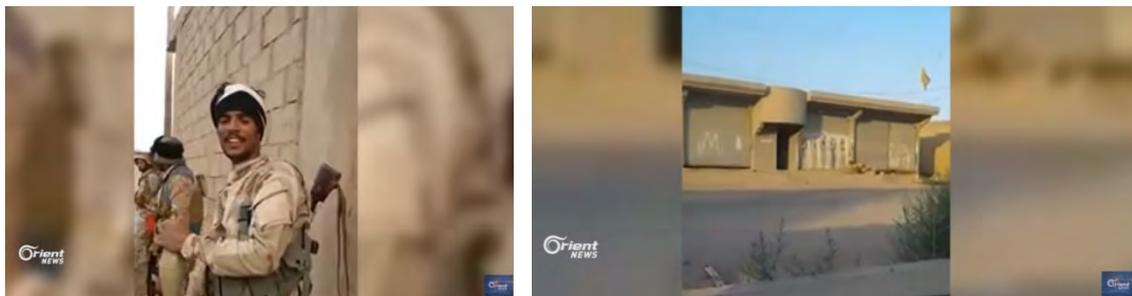
► Following is a summary of the main incidents known to the ITIC (based on partial information):

◆ **Albukamal (August 8, 2018):**

- In the city of Albukamal, clashes broke out between members of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards and Shiite militias affiliated with Iran on the one hand, and the National Defense Forces (militia affiliated with the Syrian army with a record of criminal activities against civilians²). During the clashes, five militia operatives affiliated with Iran were killed, including a local senior commander in the Shiite militias, codenamed Hajj Salman (Orient News, August 11, 2018; Al-Sharqiya 24, August 18, 2018).
- In the background of the clashes in Albukamal, there were cases where the Shiite militias accused the Syrian National Defense Forces of **stealing property remaining in residents' homes in the city** (many residents fled the city during the campaign against the Islamic State and left their property behind). Hajj Salman, senior commander of the Shiite militias, threatened to disband the local

² The **National Defense Forces** (*Quwwat al-Difa' al-Watan*) are a militia established by the Syrian regime during the civil war (2012). According to Syrian media reports, the number of the militia operatives reached 100,000 and they have operated throughout Syria. The National Defense Forces was previously known for acts of stealing, abduction and arbitrary arrests against civilians. Since 2014, there were rumors that the Syrian regime and Iran intended to disband this militia since it was out of control (Al-Hal, Syrian opposition news website, September 17, 2016).

operatives of the National Defense Forces and even gave them an extension to remove their forces from Albukamal (Orient News, August 11, 2018); Al-Sharqiya 24, August 18, 2018).



Right: Yellow flag of one of the Iraqi Shiite militias above a building at the border of the control areas in one of the neighborhoods in the city of Albukamal. Left: Operatives of the Popular Mobilization (Iraqi Shiite militias) in an area under their control in Albukamal (Orient News YouTube channel, August 19, 2018)

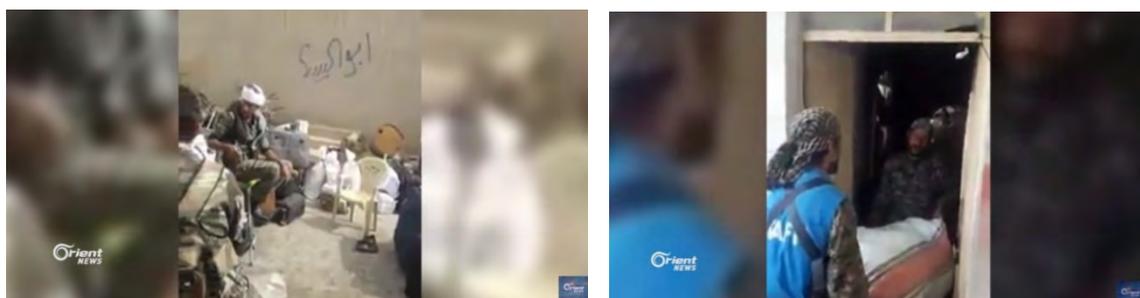
◆ **Albukamal and other populated areas along the Euphrates River (August 18, 2018):**

- In Albukamal, clashes resumed between militias affiliated with Syria and the Shiite militias affiliated with Iran, using light and medium weapons. Both sides sustained casualties (Al-Sharqiya 24, August 18, 2018). The escalation started after the National Defense Forces had taken over three neighborhoods regarding which it was agreed that they would be controlled by the Shiite militias.³ During the clashes, **the commander of the National Defense Forces in Albukamal was detained by the Iranian Revolutionary Guards.** The detainees were reportedly transferred to an Iranian prison located at the compound of the Shrine of Set Zaynab, south of Damascus (Orient News YouTube channel, August 19, 2018).
- Following the clashes, **the Iranian Revolutionary Guards reinforced Albukamal.** More than seven Shiite militias subordinate to the Revolutionary Guards were reportedly deployed in various areas in Albukamal (Orient News YouTube channel, August 19, 2018). In order to defuse the situation, the Russian Military Police took over bridges and crossings connecting the two banks of the Euphrates River (Furat Post YouTube channel, August 19, 2018; Interview with a Furat Post reporter on the Orient News website, August 19, 2018).

³ The neighborhoods in question are Al-Jam'iyat, Al-Massaken, and Al-Sina'ah.



Right: Fighters of one of the militias (apparently, the Afghan Fatemiyoun Brigade) during the clashes in the city of Albukamal. Left: Fighters of the National Defense Forces during activity in Albukamal (Orient News YouTube channel, August 19, 2018)



Right: Fighters of the National Defense Forces looting residents' homes in Albukamal. Left: Fighters of the National Defense Forces with property looted from residents' homes in the city of Albukamal (Orient News YouTube channel, August 19, 2018)



Right: Fighters of Shiite militias affiliated with Iran in the Albukamal area (Al-Sharqiya 24, August 18, 2018). Left: Local commander of the National Defense Forces, codenamed Firas al-Iraqi, detained by the Shiite militias in Albukamal (Orient News YouTube channel, August 19, 2018). The insignia of the National Defense Forces can be seen on his sleeve (right).

◆ **Al-Asharah** (August 25, 2018):

- In the town of Al-Asharah, southeast of Al-Mayadeen, clashes broke out between operatives of Hezbollah, the (Afghan) Fatemiyoun Brigade and the Popular Mobilization (Iraqi Shiite militias) on the one hand, and militias affiliated with the Syrian regime (National Defense Forces, the Military Security Branch) on the other. In the background of these clashes were the elimination of a National Defense Forces operative by Hezbollah and the confiscation of the weapons of National Defense Forces operatives by Hezbollah operatives at one of the

checkpoints (Furat Post; Enab Baladi, August 25, 2018). **Clashes also took place in the town of Muhsin**, southeast of Deir ez-Zor (Khotwa, August 25, 2018).

- Sources reported that the clashes **stemmed from conflicts concerning the management of the crossings over the Euphrates River**, as those who ran them received revenues from fees paid by residents crossing the river. In addition, a conflict broke out regarding **the collection of revenues received from the security checkpoints in the city of Albukamal** (Sky News, August 25, 2018).

- ◆ **Al-Mayadeen (August 23, 2018):** In the area of the automated bakery in Al-Mayadeen, there were clashes between the National Defense Forces and Shiite militias handled by the Iranian Qods Force (Iraqi Shiite militias and a force from the Fatemiyoun Brigade). During these clashes, five fighters were killed, one of them probably an Iranian officer (Furat Post, August 25, 2018).

- ◆ **Muhsin (August 25, 2018) and the village of Al-Duweir (August 26, 2018):** In the town of Muhsin, there were clashes between Iranian handled militias and militias affiliated with the Syrian regime. In the background, there were conflicts concerning the collection of money from residents passing at the crossings over the Euphrates River, and stealing money from residents' homes in the rural area east of Deir ez-Zor (DeirEzzor24 Twitter account, August 25, 2018; Furat Post YouTube channel, August 27, 2018; Interview with a Furat Post reporter on the Orient News channel, August 27, 2018). On August 26, 2018, there were reportedly clashes between Hezbollah and the Syrian army Fourth Division soldiers **in the village of Al-Duweir south of Al-Mayadeen**. A Syrian army force dispatched to the scene resolved the conflict (Al-Sharqiya 24, August 28, 2018).

- ◆ **Albukamal (August 25, 2018):** The Syrian army fired mortar shells at **the Al-Jam'iyat neighborhood, where the main headquarters of the Shiite militias handled by Iran is situated**. In response, the Shiite militias attacked headquarters of the Syrian army in Albukamal. Over 25 Syrian soldiers and operatives of militias supporting the Syrian army were killed. A curfew was imposed on the city of Albukamal (Furat Post, August 25, 2018).

- ◆ **Albukamal (August 27, 2018):** Clashes occurred once again in several neighborhoods in Albukamal between soldiers of the Syrian army Fourth Division and

the National Defense Forces on the one hand, and operatives of Hezbollah and the Shiite militias on the other. Medium and heavy weapons were used in the clashes. The Shiite militias reinforced their checkpoints and deployed snipers on rooftops in the city (Al-Sharqiya 24, August 28, 2018).



**Checkpoint of the Shiite militias in the city of Albukamal
(Al-Sharqiya 24, August 28, 2018)**

- ◆ **The Albukamal area (August 28, 2018):** In the vicinity of the city, there were clashes between the Syrian army Fourth Division and Shiite militias handled by Iran. A force of the Popular Mobilization (Iraqi Shiite militias) entered into Syria from Iraqi territory to assist the Shiite militias in taking over one of the Syrian positions near the border. A Syrian reinforcement arrived at the scene and joined the fighting. Both sides probably sustained casualties (Al-Badiyah 24 Facebook page, August 29, 2018).
- ◆ **Albukamal area (August 30-31, 2018):** Near the Al-Sway'iyah crossing (south of Albukamal), there were clashes between Popular Mobilization forces and the National Defense Forces and the Syrian army Fourth Division (Furat Post Facebook page, September 1, 2018).



**Force of a Shiite militia handled by Iran in the Albukamal area
(Al-Badiyah 24 Facebook page, August 29, 2018)**

During the clashes, the rival sides attempted to reach local solutions in order to defuse the situation. Thus, for example, it was reported that an agreement was reached between the Syrian regime and the Kurdish forces (SDF) regarding **the re-opening of the Al-Salehiya crossing over the Euphrates River** (about 40 km northwest of Albukamal). It was agreed that **the Russian Military Police and the Syrian Military Security Branch would run the crossing instead of the Palestinian Al-Quds Brigade.** In addition, it was agreed that **control of the crossings and bridges connecting the two banks of the Euphrates River would be taken from the hands of the Shiite militias and the militias affiliated with the Syrian regime** because they were collecting fees from residents in return for crossing between the two banks of the river⁴ (Furat Post YouTube channel, August 27, 2018; Interview with a Furat News reporter on the Orient News channel, August 27, 2018). **However, on August 31, 2018, a meeting was held between members of the reconciliation committee in the city of Albukamal to resolve the conflict between the rival sides** (Furat Post Facebook page, September 1, 2018).

⁴ There are several crossings between the two banks of the Euphrates River, and residents are forced to use them since most of the bridges were destroyed by the Coalition forces during the campaign against the Islamic State. The clashes between the militias were mainly concerning the collection of “crossing fees” from residents using them (Syrian Journalism Center YouTube channel, August 27, 2018; Orient News, August 27, 2018).



**Ferry loaded with vehicles and people before crossing the Euphrates River
(Orient News, August 27, 2018)**