



**Syria is preparing to open the new, upgraded Albukamal Border Crossing with Iraq, with Iran support. The crossing is expected to serve as an Iranian land bridge through Iraq to Syria and from there to Lebanon.**

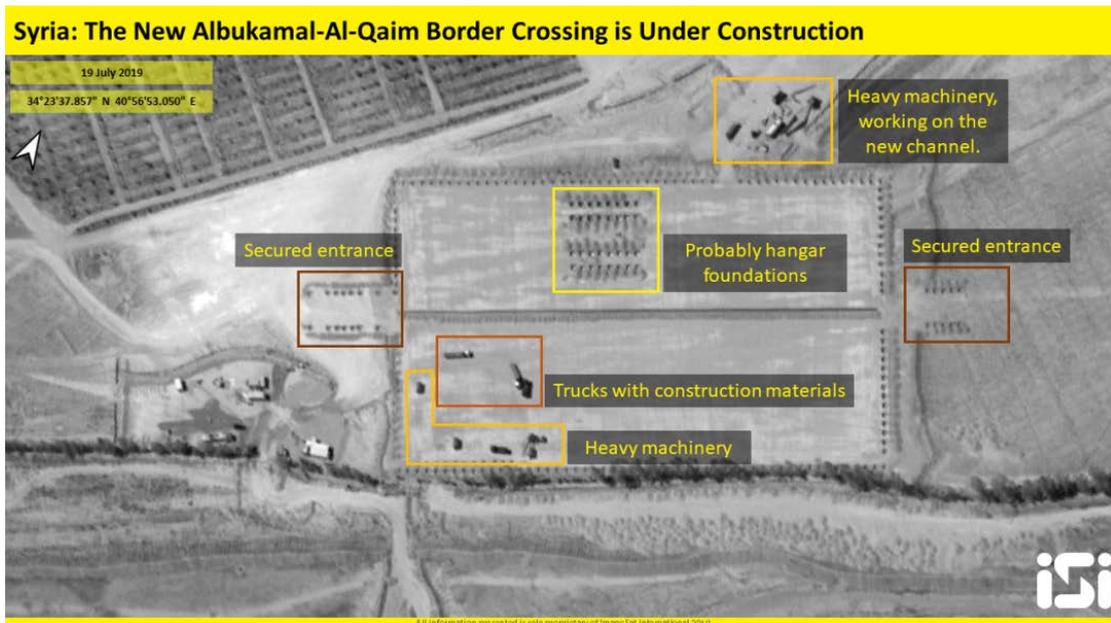
July 24, 2019

## Overview<sup>1</sup>

The Iraqi, Syrian and Lebanese media recently reported that **preparations were made to open the Albukamal border crossing between Syria and Iraq**. So far no formal statement has been issued regarding the date of its opening. According to a number of reports the crossing is supposed to open within two months. The preparations included security coordination meetings **held in Damascus and attended by high-ranking Syrian, Iraqi and Iranian military commanders**. Satellite image analyses show new foundations being laid at the new crossing site, including for large hangars and secured entrances. **Thus it is a new, upgraded crossing being built with facilities at standards similar to those at international border crossings**. On the other hand, the old border crossing is blocked and no signs of significant activity were identified by satellite image in recent months. At this stage the fate of the old crossing is unclear (there may be plans to use it as an additional or alternative crossing). So far, on the Iraqi side no similar preparations have been identified (for reasons unclear to the ITIC).

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<sup>1</sup> This document was written by the Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center in collaboration with ImageSat International (iSi).



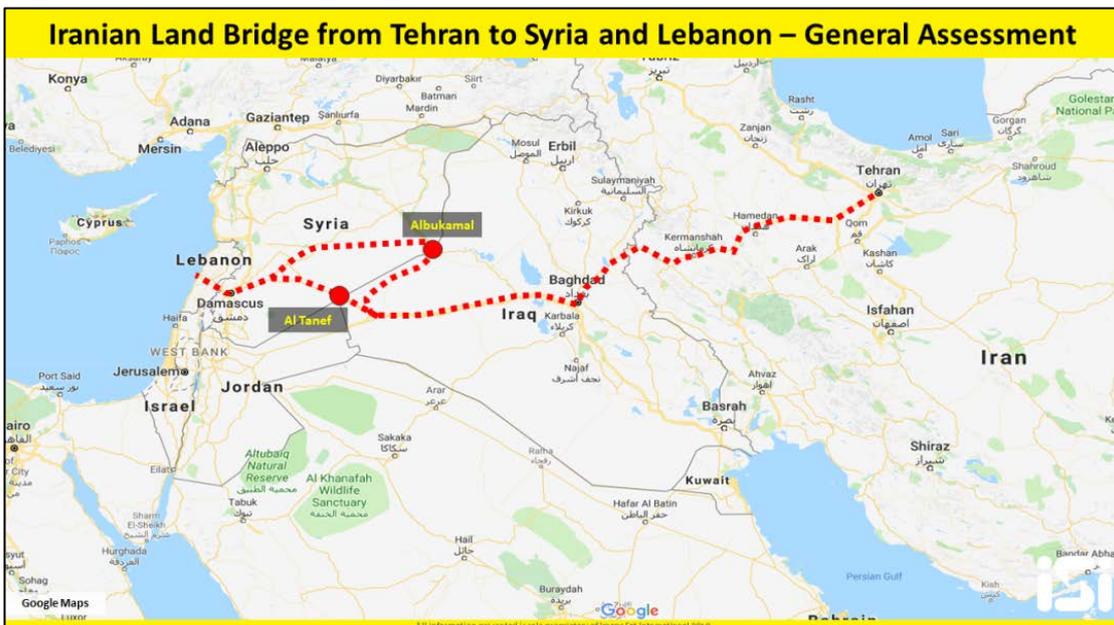
The construction of the new border crossing between Syria and Iraq (satellite image analysis and interpretation, iSi, July 19, 2019).

► The new border crossing between Syria and Iraq at Albu Kamal is considered strategically important by Iran. That is because the crossing is vital for the land bridge Iran seeks to construct between its territory and the Mediterranean Sea. The route allows Iran to send forces, supplies and weapons through Iraq to Syria and from there to Lebanon. It can be assumed that Iran is of the opinion that the land bridge will enable it to reduce its dependence on risky aerial and naval routes. The new crossing, when it opens, will enable larger numbers of vehicles to enter Syria and make it easier to preserve secrecy (since it is farther from residential buildings). Therefore it is likely that the new crossing is being constructed with Iranian aid, and possibly with Iranian involvement. In addition, Iran participates in securing the area between Albu Kamal in Syria and al-Qa'im in Iraq by using Shi'ite militias deployed permanently in the region.

### Syria-Iraq: While the Official Border Crossing is Located Within Populated Areas, the roads leading to the New Crossing Bypass Them.



The location of the new border crossing at Albukamal, farther from residential buildings (satellite image analysis and interpretation, iSi)



The land bridge from Iran to Syria and from Syria to Lebanon through the Albukamal border crossing (iSi map). For the Iranians, using the shorter route through the al-Tanef Crossing is currently not practical because of the presence of American forces and rebel organizations operating under American aegis.

### The importance of the Albukamal Crossing for the Iranians

► Why do the Iranians regard Albukamal as a key region? Between Baghdad and Damascus there are two main overland routes: **one is shorter** and runs from **Baghdad to Damascus through the al-Tanef Crossing** (which is in the border triangle of **Iraq, Jordan and Syria**). However, Iran **cannot make logistic use** of the route (at least at this point in time) because **the al-Tanef Crossing is controlled by the United States** and rebel organizations

operating under its aegis. **The other route is longer** and runs from Baghdad through the Euphrates Valley and crosses the border at Albukamal. **For the time being, the longer route is important because currently it is the only overland route that can be used to move supplies.** Although using the route presents security difficulties (because of ISIS's continued guerrilla activities), the Iranians currently give it priority. For that reason the Iranians are **upgrading the Albukamal Crossing**, over which they have **considerable influence, and possibly control.**

► In view of Iran's strategic interest, **Hezbollah and the Shi'ite militias sponsored by Iran played an important role in taking control Albukamal from ISIS (November 2017).** The crossing was put to use immediately after the occupation of the region. The Shi'ite militias, handled by Iran and supported by Iranian advisors, **remained in the Albukamal region even after the fighting against ISIS had ended, and today they are a significant force,** supporting the Syrian army in holding the area. On the Iraqi side of the border as well, in ITIC assessment the dominant military forces are the **Shi'ite militias supported by Iran and belonging to the "popular mobilization."**<sup>2</sup> It can be assumed that the Iranian-sponsored Shi'ite militias on both sides of the border will be integrated into securing the regions of the crossings between Iraq and Syria.



**Right: Qassem Soleimani, commander of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps' Qods Force, with an operative from the Movement of the Noble Ones (harakat al-nujaba) during the conquest of Albukamal (Enab Baladi, November 17, 2017). Left: Soleimani contacts the Shi'ite militias fighting in Albukamal (Twitter account of Hezbollah's central combat information, November 20, 2017).**

<sup>2</sup> In al-Qa'im a force of the "popular mobilization" is deployed, called **the Imam Ali Battalions**, commanded by Abu Sajad. An additional force of about two hundred operatives is deployed at Albukamal on the Syrian side of the border. Imam Ali Battalions force operatives routinely used to cross the border (al-Monitor, July 20, 2019).

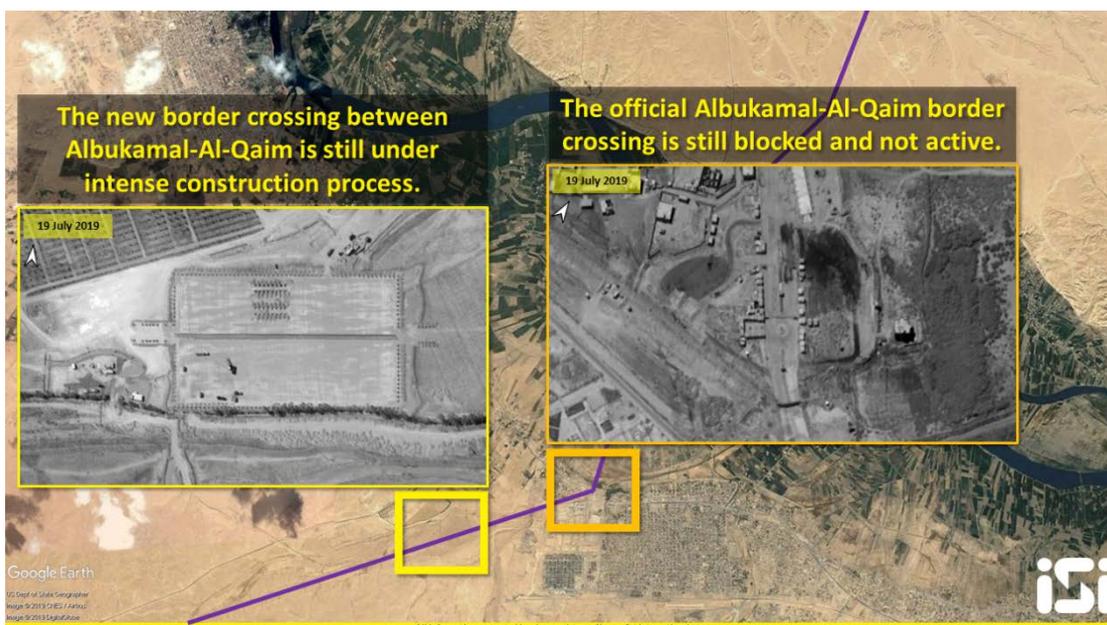


**Right: Operatives of the Afghan Fatemioun Brigade, sponsored by Iran, who fought in the Albukamal region (Friends of Assad's Syria [Arabic] Facebook page, July 10, 2018). Left: Qassem Soleimani, commander of the IRGC's Qods Force, during a visit to the Fatemioun operatives in eastern Syria (Fatemioun Telegram channel, June 10, 2019).**

## Upgrading the New Albukamal Crossing

► After ISIS was expelled from the region, work began on the Syrian side of the border to prepare the Albukamal Crossing for reopening. At the time the Syrian media reported that the crossing would reopen in April 2018 (Syrian TV, March 20, 2018). However, it did not open as planned. It can be assumed that it was mainly because of the fragile security situation caused by ISIS's continued control of the lower Euphrates Valley.

**In all probability, after the fall of Baghouz and ISIS's takeover of the lower Euphrates Valley (March 2019), preparations for preparing the new crossing accelerated.** According to satellite image analysis, **intensive preparations for opening the Syrian side of the new border crossing are being carried out**, although at this point it is impossible to determine the status of the construction. Foundations were laid for the crossing, including for hangars and secure entrances. **The crossing is being built according to international standards.** On the other hand, **the old Syrian border crossing is blocked and during the past few months no significant activity has been identified there.**



The intensive construction at the new border crossing (left) and the lack of activity at the old crossing (right) (satellite image analysis and interpretation, iSi).

## Preparations for opening the Albukamal Crossing

### Coordination in Syria

- On July 22, 2019, according to a report from "a senior source in the Iraqi embassy in Damascus," **the Syrian and Iraqi governments reached advanced stages in preparations for opening the Albukamal-al-Qa'im Crossing** (Sawt al-Iraq YouTube channel, Syrian TV, al-Sumaria, July 22, 2019). An agreement has reportedly been reached between Syria and Iraq for **opening the crossing within approximately two months** (Syria Steps, July 23, 2019). On July 19, 2019, **General Othman al-Ghanimi, the chief of staff of the Iraqi joint forces,** announced **that in the coming days the [Albukamal] Crossing would open.** According to Agence France-Presse, al-Ghanimi made the statement during a press conference held in Damascus on July 18, 2019 after meeting with **Syrian Defense Minister Ali Abdallah Ayoub and Iranian army commander Mohammad Bakri** (al-Watan TV, July 19, 2019).
- At the beginning of July 2019, the Hezbollah-affiliated Lebanese newspaper *al-Akhbar* reported **that in less than a month the Albukamal-al-Qa'im Crossing would open for the passage of merchandise and travelers.** According to the report, the crossing will be opened in accordance with decisions made at a meeting of the military commanders from Syria, Iraq and Iran **held in Damascus in March 2019.** It was reported that "Iraqi security sources" said preparations were being made at Albukamal for the opening, including paving the road and renovating the crossing (al-Akhbar, July 5, 2019).

The meeting of the generals referred to by al-Akhbar was held **on March 17, 2019**. Present were Iranian army commander General Mohammad Bakri and senior Iraqi representatives. At the time, it was reported that **Syrian, Iraqi and Iranian representatives discussed military and security collaboration**, as well as increasing collaboration in the struggle against terrorism. While in **Syria Mohammad Bakri, the commander of the Iranian army**, visited the Deir al-Zor and Albukamal areas and met with local fighters (Fars, March 17 and 18, 2019). **Thus it is possible that opening the Albukamal Crossing, with all its security implications, was one of the issues discussed at the meeting in Damascus.**

### **Iraqi preparations for opening the crossing**

► **Ahmed Jidyan, the governor of the al-Qa'im district in Iraq** (located on the Iraqi side of the Syrian border), recently stated that **an agreement had been reached which would enable the opening of the crossing**. It was reached at a meeting held in al-Qa'im a number of months ago with the participation of Falih al-Fayad, director of Iraqi border crossings; Kazem al-Fayad, Syrian ambassador to Iraq; and representatives of the department of joint operations [of the Iraqi army]. Ahmed Jidyan said the meeting had determined that the site would open within six months, thus two months were left (Sputnik, July 22, 2019).

► **Note: No preparations are being carried out on the Iraqi side similar to those on the Syrian side.** Ahmed Jidyan, the governor of the al-Qa'im district, publicly complained about the situation, saying that no work was being conducted at the site of the crossing, whose location had been determined at the [aforementioned] meeting. He called the crossing a "desert area," with no foundations or even caravans or a road. Interviewed by Sputnik he asked why it was not necessary to provide everything necessary for reopening the border crossing (Sputnik, July 22, 2019). In addition, the interpretation of the satellite images did not identify construction for preparing the Iraqi side of the border similar to the work on the Syrian side. The reason is unclear. The crossing on the Iraqi side may be constructed after the upgraded Albukamal Crossing has opened.