



The Pro-Iranian Militias in Syria Dr. Eli Galia

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Introduction¹

- ▶ Syria is the geographical center of the Iranian-controlled radical axis and the arena where pro-Iranian militias operate, some of them brought in by Iran and others formed locally by the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps. They have one main purpose: to ensure the continuation of Bashar Assad's regime, accomplished on the pretext of "defending the Shi'ite shrines." The Syrian Civil War began in 2011 and was won by the forces supporting Assad, who continues his efforts to stabilize the government institutions and rebuild his army. The pro-Iranian militias serve as another tool for establishing Iranian strategy in Syria and Lebanon.
- ▶ Today there are more than 60,000 operatives in the pro-Iranian militias, deployed in several areas, the most important of which are along the Euphrates, in and around Aleppo and the greater Damascus area, and in the depths of the Syrian desert and the southern part of the country. Some operatives are Asian Shi'ites and are considered auxiliary forces but there are also locally-recruited forces who make up the most of the militias' battle order and are called "the forces defending the shrines."
- ▶ There is a particularly great concentration of militias in eastern Syria, an area of such great strategic importance it has been referred to as an Iranian colony. It is an overland corridor used to transport weapons from Iran through Iraq to Syria, and from there to Lebanon, bolstering the military buildup through local weapons manufacture. The main purpose of their presence in the Syrian desert is to secure vital facilities and defend them against ISIS attack, while in the south and around Damascus they have made connections with the local Syrian communities.
- ▶ Since the middle of 2021, and with greater intensity since the beginning of 2022, the pro-Iranian militias have expanded their presence to other areas in Syria. Some of the changes in

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eastern and southern Syria were apparently the result of Russia's withdrawing its forces² and the attempts of the militias to avoid Israel and American attacks.

► Of all the militia forces and armed groups operating in Syria under Iranian aegis, Hezbollah-Lebanon poses the greatest conventional military threat to Israel. The organization's operatives are constructing a system for collecting intelligence along the Golan Heights border, which is meant to serve as a base for planning attacks orchestrated by Iran, which aspires to preserve the "resistance axis," threatening Israel through proxy organizations.

► The militias are part of Iran's overall intervention in Syria to increase its sphere of influence and establish a permanent presence, ensure the continuation of Syrian dependence on Iran and gain a foothold in the Levant, in addition to its unreserved support of Hezbollah-Lebanon.

Background Information

► Iran began its intervention in Syria when the civil war broke out in 2011, with the short-term objective of preventing the collapse of the Bashar Assad regime. Its long-term, unprecedented objective was to gain an Iranian foothold in Syria as a forward base for penetrating the Middle East. One of its moves has been to use the Asian Shi'ite militias under the command of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) Qods Force. The militias were brought into Syria to tip the balance towards Assad during the war and turned into a kind of Iranian Shi'ite Foreign Legion.³

► Until September 2015 Iranian intervention in Syria was limited to a few hundred Iran advisors and a few thousand Shi'ite fighters, but the combined achievements of ISIS and the Sunni rebel organizations, especially the jihadists in the Idlib and Aleppo provinces, led Iran to significantly increase its support of the Assad regime and send several thousand additional fighters to Syria. The takeover of Aleppo, the restoration of the Damascus Ghouta⁴ to the Syrian regime and the collapse of the Islamic State, the three main factors that turned the tide of the Syrian Civil War, enabled Iran to thin out its own forces and rely mainly on the presence of the Hezbollah operatives and foreign Shi'ite militia forces to support the Syrian

² In the wake of the Russian-Ukrainian war which began in February 2022.

³ Ephraim Kam, "Iran's Shiite Foreign Legion," Strategic Assessment, Volume 20, No. 3, October 2017, p. 1.

⁴ *Ghouta* in Arabic means "basin." The Ghouta is the eastern part of Damascus, an area with intensive agricultural and horticultural production, which was under rebel organization control.

army.⁵ As actual combat dwindled, the IRGC could turn its attention to increasing Iran's sphere of influence in Syria at multiple levels, and between 2016 and 2019, to gain the massive foothold envisioned by Qassem Soleimani,⁶ the architect of consolidating Iran's influence in Syria.

► Internally, the civil war greatly weakened the Syrian army. It lost massive quantities of weapons and its combat capabilities collapsed as its forces were depleted by the deaths of tens of thousands of soldiers and officers; in addition, large numbers of Syrians either avoided the draft or defected. The soldiers lacked training and the officers were unsure of the soldiers' loyalty. There was an insufficient number of recruits, and throughout the war, not even one of its twenty land divisions ever had a full complement of soldiers or could realize more than a third of its combat potential.⁷

► The severe shortage of military manpower led the Qods Force to recommend to the Syrian army that "new volunteer armed frameworks" based on religious, sectarian or political affiliation be organized under Qods Force command, composed of either foreign or local fighters. The result was the formation of hundreds of local militias of various size and nature which fought alongside the Syrian army according to combat mission. One of the largest and most dominant was the National Defense Force, more or less parallel to the Iranian Basij,⁸ an armed upgrade of the Popular Committees formed during the regime of the Baath Party.⁹ They were known as the "auxiliary" or "reserve" forces, and their role was to brutally oppress uprisings, without considering organized army forces. According to the opposition narrative which became popular in Syria and was based on the accumulation of eye-witness reports, on dozens of occasions the militias were involved in the slaughter and torture of Syrian civilians.¹⁰

As Iran's desire to increase its military and security influence in Syria grew, it integrated the local pro-Iranian militias into Assad's army as part of what were known as the National

⁵ Raz Zimmt, "Iran in the Post-Islamic State Era: Aims, Opportunities and Challenges Updated Review," <https://www.terrorism-info.org.il/en/iran-post-isis-era-aims-opportunities-challenges-updated-review/>, pp. 6-7.

⁶ Commander of the IRGC's Qods Force between 1998 and 2020, killed in an American attack.. The Qods Force operates beyond the borders of Iran..

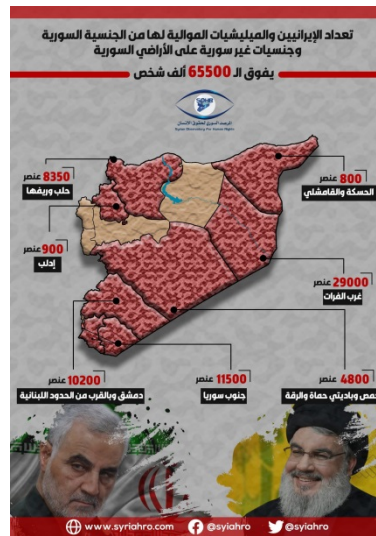
⁷ Tom Cooper, "What's Left of the Syrian Arab Army? Not Much," Souria Houria, May 27, 2016.

⁸ The Basij is a volunteer paramilitary organization operating under the IRGC, established in Iran in 1979, after the Islamic Revolution.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ 21.08.2022 أحمد طلب الناصر، بالتفاصيل والأرقام، رصد شامل للمليشيات الإيرانية في سوريا، <https://www.syria.tv>

Defense Forces¹¹ in order to give them legal status and protect them from Israeli and American aerial attacks. The Syrian army and the IRGC joined efforts to integrate officers from both sides into the command structure. In fact, during the past three years, as frontal combat against the rebel organizations has waned and fighting ISIS has become guerrilla warfare, Iran has strengthened the local militias and relies more and more on local Syrian fighters to replace a physical Iranian presence.¹² According to a report from the Syrian Human Rights Observatory in November 2021, the number of pro-Iranian militia operatives in Syria, Syrian and non-Syrian, was estimated at about 65,500.¹³



The Iranian presence and local militias (Syrian Human Rights Observatory Facebook page, January 3, 2023).

Methodology

► This study is based on open-source information, some of them exclusive, for the most part from local Syrian sources opposed to the Assad regime, to describe the presence of pro-Iranian militias in Syria and the ramifications thereof. The main categories into which the militias can be divided will be given, as well as a geographic cross section of the main locations of their deployment and the nature of their missions. As the militias remain in place and Iran makes a greater effort over time to preserve their capabilities, it will be possible to discern the extent and nature of their activities as they vary from location to

¹¹ National Defense Forces (NDF), and the Local Defense Forces (LDF).

¹² Yogev Elbaz, "Here to Stay: Iranian Involvement in Syria, 2011-2021," Strategic Assessment - Policy Analysis, Volume 24, No. 4, November 2021.

¹³ إيران ومليشياتها خلال 2021 أكثر من 160 قتيلاً في الاستهدافان الجوية والبرية.. وملف التغيير الديمغرافي يتصدر المشهد في ظل <https://www.syriahr.com>. التمدد والتغلغل الكبير على كامل التراب السوري، 29.12.2021.

location, whether because of Iranian interests or because of political, security or other local circumstances, including attempts made by the Assad regime to impose limitations on the Iranians, although not always successfully.

► Moreover, the study does not aspire to describe all the levels at which Iran is involved to turn it into a regional sphere of Iranian influence. The objective of its involvement is to gain a long-term foothold in Syria and to construct strategic situations, especially to institutionalize the corridors through which it moves weapons for Hezbollah-Lebanon, which serves as a front for the so-called "resistance axis" against Israel. Iran has economic investments, joint Syrian-Iranian military projects, has formed a local network for the manufacture of advanced weaponry and set up terrorist squads, and has even attempted to infiltrate the corridors of the Syrian army establishment. In addition, Iran also invests in "soft power," founding social and cultural institutions, proselytizing Shi'a, moving the Shi'ite population, actions which are in no way related to the direct conflict between Israeli and Iran, but give Iran more power along Israel's borders.

The Pro-Iranian Militias

National Defense Forces (NDF)

► The NDF were formed in Homs in 2012 on Iran initiative and with its direct support. Its first operatives were Alawite and Shi'ite recruits who were later joined by Sunnis, Christians, Druze and Shabiha¹⁴ groups. As the NDF expanded, branches were set up in almost every governate, supervised and directed by Iranian advisors, and with about 90,000 operatives it eventually became the largest militia in Syria.

► The militia forces are deployed throughout Syria and in addition to being armed, also serve as a popular support base for the regime, providing it with intelligence about the local mindset. Some of the militias were disbanded because of faulty management, corruption or lack of discipline, which made the Qods Force abandon the NDF almost completely and focus instead on the local defense forces. The Qods Force also abandoned the NDF since Assad refused to integrate them into the army because their commanders, who had enormous influence and had become "war barons," were publicly prominent and posed a challenge to his authority. Concurrently, the Russians pressured the Assad regime to

¹⁴ A derogatory term for illegal armed gangs operating as militias in defense of the Assad against challengers.

disband the militias loyal to Iran, and on instructions from Russia, the Syrian security forces detained pro-Iranian militia operatives.¹⁵ Today, for the most part NDF branches are deployed in the districts of Deir ez-Zor, Hama, Homs, Rif-Damascus and al-Suwayda.

Local Defense Forces (LDF)

► In 2013 Iran began recruiting fighters living in the Aleppo district, calling them the LDF, based on ideology and not sectarian affiliation. Eventually they were joined by Syrians from the districts of Deir ez-Zor, Latakia, al-Raqqa, greater Damascus and the Hawran region. Their combat assignments are not necessarily linked to the location of their recruitment, tribe affiliation or place of residence, and once inducted into the militias they became part of the Syrian battle order, both the standing army and the reserves. About 50,000 armed LDF militia operatives participated in the battles against the rebel organizations and ISIS, following which most of them have been involved in routine policing and security missions in accordance with the needs of the Syrian army, directed and funded by Iran and Hezbollah-Lebanon. That enables Iran to increase its influence within the ranks of the Syrian army (which was not the case with the NDF), similar to its activity with the Popular Mobilization Units (PMU) in Iraq.¹⁶ Thus the pro-Iranian militias have been integrated into the Syrian army, a kind of replacement for compulsory military service, and it gradually became impossible to separate them. They serve to extend the political alliance between Syria and Iran, with the result that opposition to the pro-Iranian militias in Syria could actually dismantle the entire system.

► In April 2017 the Syrian government gave the LDF formal legal status. While the NDF were indirectly supported by Iran with funds and training, the LDF are identified with Iran far more closely, and every district sector is directed by an IRGC functionary whose salary and benefits are funded by Iran.¹⁷ Concurrently, the Qods Force merged local loyal militias into organic Syrian army frameworks, thereby decentralizing their influence. When in 2018 the Ghouta region in eastern Damascus was wrested from the hands of the rebel organizations and the regime regained control, it became known that the Shi'ite militias, such as the Liwa Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas militia into the 105th Brigade of the Republican Guard Division and the

¹⁵ O. Peri and H. Varulkar, "Struggle Between Russia, Iran For Control Over Syria's Centers Of Power," MEMRI, September 23, 2019. <https://www.memri.org/reports/struggle-between-russia-iran-control-over-syrias-centers-power>

¹⁶ Omer Behram Ozdemir, "Iran-Backed Militia in Syria: Profiles and Functions," Center for Middle Eastern Studies, 20.9.22, p.4

¹⁷ Ibid.

al-Imam Hussein militia into the 42nd Brigade of the Fourth Division had been absorbed into the Syrian army.¹⁸

Hezbollah-Syria

► In addition to the Sunnis, Iran also encouraged the Shi'ite minority in Syria to form militias based on regional-sectarian affiliation on the pretext of defending the Shi'ite shrines near Damascus, in the Aleppo area and along the Euphrates. After they had been located and recruited into semi-military frameworks they were nicknamed **Hezbollah-Syria** (or, "the Islamic resistance in Syria") and sent for several months of military training to learn how to shoot, collect intelligence and other combat-support skills.¹⁹ Some of the training was conducted in Iran and Lebanon. The militia operatives were loyal to the Syrian regime and were linked to IRGC and Hezbollah-Lebanon operatives, who personally oversaw the militias' activities.

► Among the prominent Hezbollah-Syria militias were the Kata'iba al-Zahra, the Kata'iba al-Shaheed al-Mughrab, al-Aman al-Haja and Jaish al-Mahdi from the Aleppo area; Liwa al-Hussein and Liwa al-Raqiya (or the Jaafari force) from the Damascus area; the al-Imam al-Riza forces from the Homs area; Liwa Zayin al-Abidin from Deir ez-Zor; Liwa 313 from the Dara'a area; and Liwa al-Mukhtar al-Thaqafi from the Hama and Latakia areas. Their organizational and Hezbollah-Syria ideological concepts, as well as their decentralized structure, were inspired and greatly influenced by the models of Hezbollah-Lebanon and Hezbollah-Iraq, including the position of the cleric heading each organization.²⁰

► During 2022 the formation of two new pro-Iranian militias in Syria was revealed (possibly part of Hezbollah-Syria), the Iman Battalions and the Dawn of Islam. In recruiting new operatives, at that point between a few dozen and 150, preference was given to Syrian Alawites, local Shi'ites and anyone who had left non-Syrian Shi'ite militias. Dawn of Islam operatives were integrated into routine security missions along the main roads in the Syrian desert, and Imam Battalions operatives were integrated into security missions under the Syrian flag in the Dara'a, al-Suwayda and Quneitra districts near the Israeli border, and along

¹⁸ Haid Haid, "Syrian militias: Mechanisms, Actors and Shortfalls," 11.12.2018, <https://carnegie-mec.org>

¹⁹ Ephraim Kam, "Iranian Stakes in Syria," Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) Special Publication, October 7, 2019.

²⁰ 8.3.2016, <https://orobanews.com/2016/03/10> فيليب سميث, كيف تنشئ إيران حزب الله ثاني في سوريا?

the Damascus-Homs road, considered the lifeline of the Iranian presence in western Syria.²¹ The pro-Iranian militias continue recruiting in areas where in recent years the Syrian army conducted "reconciliation and order" processes (among Syrians wanted by the security service) under the aegis of and initiated by Russian police forces, which makes it possible to formalize the affairs of Syrians wanted for army and reserve army duty and to add them to its battle order.

► Among the important LDF militias is the **Liwa al-Imam al-Baqir**, composed of members of the al-Bekara tribe, who are Sunnis living in the Aleppo and Deir ez-Zor districts, some of whom converted to Shi'a and serve as Iran's long arm for spreading Shi'ite doctrine. The militia, which was founded by Khaled al-Hassan in 2012 with the support of IRGC officers, also has members of the al-Asana tribe from Deir ez-Zor and the A'al-Berri clan from the area east of Aleppo.²² The head of the al-Bekara tribe in eastern Syria is Sheikh Nawaf al-Bashir, who initially supported the Syrian revolution but returned to the bosom of the regime a number of years later. In recent years, since the Syrian army-Sunni rebel organization ceasefire went into effect in the Idlib district and combat waned, armed Liwa al-Baqir operatives have participated in the occasional army searches in the desert to locate and destroy ISIS squads. The militia commander, al-Hajj Khaled al-Mari', paid a visit to the elders and heads of the tribes that support the Assad regime in northern Syria to encourage enlistment in the militia "for the ongoing struggle with ISIS and to expel foreign forces from Syria, the Americans and the Turks," a nod to his good relations with Hezbollah-Lebanon and the al-Nujaba movement in Iraq.²³

► One of the prominent Hezbollah-Syria militias is the al-Imam al-Riza forces, the largest Shi'ite militia in Syria, its founding declared in the Homs region in 2014 by Brigadier General Hussein Hamdani, commander of the IRGC in Syria at the time, who said Iran had successfully established a second Hezbollah in Syria.²⁴ An estimated almost 21,000 armed

²¹ "Spotlight on Terrorism: Hezbollah, Lebanon and Syria (June 26 – July 9, 2022)," <https://www.terrorism-info.org.il/en/spotlight-on-terrorism-hezbollah-lebanon-and-syria-june-26-july-9-2022/>.

²² Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, "The Local Defence Forces: Regime Auxiliary Forces in Aleppo," 23.5.2016, <https://www.aymennjawad.org>

²³ الحاج خالد «الأمين العام للواء «الباقر» لـ «القدس العربي»: شكلنا «وحدات المقاومة العشائرية الشعبية» لطرد «القوات الأجنبية» من سوريا، 1.2.2021، <https://www.alquds.co.uk>
[The large al-Bekara tribe is spread through 176 villages in the Aleppo, Idlib, Hama and Deir ez-Zor districts and is composed of 29 sub-tribes \(or large extended families\).](https://www.alquds.co.uk)

²⁴ قبليبي سميث

Shi'ite Syrians served in the militia, based mainly in the town of al-Qusayr, close to the Lebanese border. Since then the al-Riza forces have been integrated into combat against ISIS and Sunni rebels. The organization leadership is composed of commanders from Hezbollah-Lebanon and Iranian advisors, who train, arm and support them financially so well that organization operatives expressed "the need to integrate the Shi'ite jihadist mentality, which is committed to the concept of wilayat al-faqih,²⁵ into concern for the 'precious homeland' and the connection to the Arab Syrian army."²⁶ In recent years the al-Riza forces have been deployed on the Idlib and Latakia fronts and in the Qutayfa area in the Rif-Damascus governate alongside other pro-Iranian militias.

► Another pro-Iranian military arm formed in Syria under the direction of the IRGC at the beginning of 2017 was **Liwa 313** (Brigade 313), based on the recruitment of young Sunni and Shi'ite Syrians from the Hawran region. The Brigade bears the number 313 which is an eschatological²⁷ number in Shi'a, and accepted operatives who left their previous military frameworks, such as the NDF and the popular committees, for higher salaries and other privileges. Since its formation, Liwa 313 has participated in combat against ISIS and the rebel organizations in Albukamal, the Damascus Ghouta, Latakia and Dara'a. It was recently claimed that Liwa 313 is used by Hezbollah-Lebanon to kill Syrian officers in the Dara'a district unwanted by Iran, under cover of the anarchy which has reigned in the region since the summer of 2018.²⁸

Foreign Syrian Militias, Proxies

► Hezbollah-Lebanon, the spearhead of Iran's involvement in Syria, was quick to support the Syrian army at the beginning of the Syrian Civil War, sending between 5,000 and 8,000 operatives, primarily to defend the greater Damascus area and the Syrian-Lebanese border. At the same time, during 2012 and 2013 Iran dispatched tens of thousands of armed Shi'ites from Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan to Syria. The foreign volunteers' mission was to "defend the Shi'ite shrines," especially the tomb of al-Sayyidah Zaynab²⁹ south of Damascus, from

²⁵ The transfer of all political and religious authority to the Shia clergy.

²⁶ مليشيا الرضا: الحساسية المزدوجة من النظام و"حزب الله" <https://www.almodon.com/arabworld>

²⁷ Eschatology is the "science of last things," the part of theology concerned with death, judgment, and the final destiny of the soul and of humankind.

²⁸ خالد المطلق، الميليشيات التي تديرها إيران في سورية، 20.12.2020، الميليشيات التي تديرها إيران في سورية - مركز حرمون للدراسات المعاصرة (harmoon.org)

²⁹ The shrine of al-Sayyidah Zaynab (also known, in the spoken language, as al-Set Zaynab) is located south of Damascus and is considered the holiest Shi'ite shrine in Syria. The Shi'ites believe that Zaynab, the daughter of Ali bin Abu Taleb, the main figure of Shi'a, is buried there. Zaynab is considered an

the rebel Sunni "infidel" organizations. Several thousand militia operatives were deployed to Syria, among them Kitab Hezbollah, the al-Nujaba movement, the Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas Battalion, the Dhu al-Fiqar Battalion, the al-Barad organization, the al-Imam Ali Battalion, Kitab al-Shuhadaa, al-Khaidaroun and the Asaib Ahl al-Haq, which operated as "rapid response forces in combat areas."³⁰

► Afghans were integrated into the Fatemiyoun Brigade and Pakistanis into the Zainebiyoun Brigade, several thousand armed operatives each. They were deployed to the main battle fronts, in the east along the overland corridor from Iran to the Mediterranean Sea, and in the west from Aleppo southward to Dara'a. As their stay in Syria became protracted they were joined by several thousand local Syrians who, given Syria's worsening economic situation, had been tempted to join their ranks in return for material benefits. In the meantime, in coordination with the Assad regime, Iran encouraged its proxies to emigrate to Syria with their families, where they became naturalized citizens and were housed in areas Sunnis had either abandoned or been forced to leave. In certain locations their sheer numbers caused concern that local demographics might be changed.³¹ The fundamental objective was to shore up support for the Assad regime and extend Iran's sphere of influence, despite the admitted difficulty of promoting conversions to Shi'a within a population which was overwhelmingly Sunni with only a small Shi'ite minority.

► The militia operatives are trained in military camps in Iran and then either go overland through Iraq or are flown to one of the Syrian airports or the airport in Beirut. They are usually sent via the ordinary commercial flights of airlines with ties to the IRGC. Others are trained in Hezbollah bases, in Syria at the Fourth Division's training bases west of Damascus, in Syrian intelligence facilities or military bases in the Aleppo region. Shi'ite volunteers are brought to Syria in return for monthly salaries ranging from tens of dollars to a maximum of hundreds of dollars, paid by the IRGC.³²

ideal and role model for Shi'ite women. During the Syrian Civil War, defending the tomb and the shrine around it became the main justification for the involvement of pro-Iranian Shi'ite forces fighting on the side of the Assad regime, claiming that Sunni jihadists, hostile to Shi'a, would endanger and possibly destroy the site.

³⁰ Navvar Saban, "Factbox: Iranian Influence and Presence in Syria," 5.11.2020, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/factbox-iranian-influence-and-presence-in-syria/>

³¹ Orit Perlov and Uri Dekel, "The Model of Iranian Influence in Syria," INSS Insight No. 1079, July 27, 2018, <https://www.inss.org.il/publication/model-iranian-influence-syria/>.

³² خالد المطلق

► Esmail Ghaani, commander of the IRGC's Qods Force, visited Syria in March 2020. It was his first visit to Syria as commander, a post to which he was appointed shortly after Qassem Soleimani was killed. Ghaani, who came to assess the situation with Syrian army commanders and high-ranking IRGC operatives, toured the fighting fronts where Qods Force, Hezbollah and pro-Iranian militias were deployed in the Aleppo region, near the Shi'ite villages of Nubl and al-Zahra, in Khan Tuman (where many battles had been fought), and the Iranian base at Jabal Azzan. He also toured the Idlib, Hama and Latakia governates,³³ and has revisited the Syrian forces several times.

Deployment and Preparation

Overview

► In July 2022 the Istanbul-based Syrian research institute Jusoor issued its semi-annual report on the location of the foreign forces in Syria. At the time the report was written, there were 753 bases and other military sites providing security, logistics and other services, 469 of them belonging to the pro-Iranian militias. They were deployed in all 14 Syrian governates: 107 in Aleppo, 93 in Rif-Damascus, 55 in Homs, 54 in Deir ez-Zor, 33 in Dara'a, 26 in Hama, 25 in Idlib, 22 in Quneitra, 15 in Latakia, 14 in al-Raqqqa, 12 in al-Suwayda, 6 in Damascus, 6 in al-Hasaka and one in Tartus.

► According to the report, during the first half of 2022 the pro-Iranian and local Iranian-directed militias increased the number of their bases and other military sites more than any other foreign force, either because of changes in the deployment of pro-Russian militias in some regions or because of the construction of new bases, such as those Hezbollah established in the al-Hasaka governate to recruit local residents.³⁴ Moreover, the bases also help Iran get the foothold in Syria it wants to secure the military and logistic access it needs to support Hezbollah and its political-security interests in Damascus. Not all the bases are large camps and many support routine security missions or support combat. Some have roadblocks, observation posts, logistic warehouses, medical centers, training camps, distribution points for humanitarian assistance, and cultural and religious centers. In other words, even an observation post manned by five or eight Hezbollah operatives in one of the

³³ ³³ <https://www.alaraby.co.uk> زيارة قائني لسورية: رسالة تمسك بالنفوذ، 9.3.2020

³⁴ <https://jusoor.co> خريطة نقاط القوى الخارجية في سورية - منتصف عام 2022، ١7١١ 2022

forward bases of the Syrian 90th Line Battalion in the Golan Heights is included by the Jusoor Center's list of Iran's "bases and other military sites" in Syria.

Key deployment sites

► According to open reports from local Syrian or other sources, mainly those oriented towards the opposition and which customarily follow the activities of the pro-Iranian militias, today they are deployed in several key locations, including along the Euphrates from Deir ez-Zor to Albukamal, in and around Aleppo, near the main access highways in the middle of the Syrian desert, in and around greater Damascus and in the southern part of the country. Each militia is coordinated and directed both operationally and administratively by regional headquarters. A smaller regional headquarters is located in the mountain region of Latakia.³⁵

Deir ez-Zor

► Since ISIS's territorial hold on eastern Syria was released, Iran's military presence in the region has become one of the most respected and prominent of its involvement in Syria. The region has enormous strategic importance accompanied by economic, cultural and social activity, so much so that it is often called an Iranian "colony," and the city of al-Mayadin is called "the capital of the militias."³⁶ The town of Albukamal lies close to the border and is Iran's portal from Iraq into Syria. It houses three deep-strategy centers for the pro-Iranian militias: the al-Imam Ali base and access roads leading to it, the village of al-Hari near the commercial border crossing and the al-Jamiyat neighborhood in Albukamal, which serves as a kind of "security quarter." In and around the town of al-Mayadin the Iranians have headquarters, training camps and weapons storehouses, as well as guard and supervision stations at both exits the city, one towards the desert and the other towards the Euphrates. In Deir ez-Zor there are other headquarters which secure the Iranian cultural center and enable it to function. The Iranian presence in western Deir ez-Zor, towards the desert, has observation posts and roadblocks to defend the main access roads and vital facilities, such as the oil fields.

³⁵ https://orient-news.net/ar/news_show/20066130.11.2022 مصادر تكشف لأورينت: إيران تملك 5 مقرات مركزية في سوريا لإدارة العمليات،

إيران ومليشياتها خلال 2022: عام تصاعد عمليات التمدد والتغلغل والتغيير الديمغرافي و103 قتلوا باستهدافات جوية وبرية ³⁶ <https://www.syriahr.com> وتحقيقات المرصد السوري تترك المليشيات وتكبتها خسائر مالية فادحة, 26.12.2022

► The Iranian-born functionaries in the pro-Iranian militias in Syria are sneered at as "military hajjes."³⁷ The more notable are al-Hajj Hassan Mahdi, the most prominent IRGC figure in Syria; al-Hajj Kamil, Qods Force military commander in eastern Syria; al-Hajj Daan, in charge of security; al-Hajj Adkar, pro-Iranian militia commander in the Albukamal region; al-Hajj Hussein, deputy commander of the training bases; al-Hajj Ali Nur, commander of the Ayash sector, west of Deir ez-Zor; al-Hajj Emiri, in charge of supplies and logistics; and al-Hajj Ihsan, responsible for medical affairs.³⁸ Iran's project of gaining a foothold in Syria demands the presence of commanders who are experts in a wide variety of military intelligence subjects, enabling them to cope with the challenges they face. They are supported by the Iran embassy in Damascus and various Iranian legations which, through liaison officers, direct and coordinate the militias' logistic needs.³⁹

In much international assessment, Iran's fundamental objective is to establish a permanent overland corridor for the transfer of weapons, passing along the Euphrates from Albukamal to the outskirts of al-Raqqah and giving Iran a direct route to Lebanon through Iraq and Syria. In effect, during the past few years, every since eastern Syria was freed from ISIS control, large quantities of weapons have been documented as entering the country, generally camouflaged and secretly, through the main Albukamal border crossing or through the unofficial crossings between Syria and Iraq. The weapons are brought in by truck and distributed to operatives for both defensive and offensive purposes, and include short- and medium-range surface-to-surface missiles, anti-tank missiles, field cannons and UAVs, and they are stored in facilities either above or under ground, such as those located in the Ayash base west of Deir ez-Zor and the al-Imam Ali base near the Iraqi border.

► The battle order in Deir ez-Zor includes foreign Shi'ite militias from Iraq, Lebanon (Hezbollah), Afghanistan and Pakistan, as well as local village residents and members of local tribes who were recruited and make up most the militias' numbers. There are several dozen militias of varying sizes, from between a few dozen operatives to several thousand. The Iraqi militias operate as part of the "popular mobilization" forces and are commanded by al-Hajj Murtada, an Iranian who is subordinate to the regional commander of the Iranian forces. The local militias considered part of the LDF, including Fawj (Regiment) 47,

³⁷ A Hajj is a person who has made a pilgrimage to Mecca, a religious duty expected of all Muslims.

³⁸ 19.2.2022 محاولة اغتيال مسؤول "الحرس الثوري" في شرق الفرات ... من هم قادة الميليشيات الإيرانية؟، <https://www.annaharar.com>

³⁹ سفارة إيران في دمشق تدير "حرباً بين الحروب" شرقي سوريا، 22.8.2022، <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/600048#ixzz7t0Fs5Jgm>

commanded by Abu Issa al-Hamedan; the Hashemiyoun Forces, commanded by Yusuf Hamedan al-Mashadani; the Village Shield, commanded by al-Hajj Husein; and Assoud al-Ashaar (Lions of the Tribes), commanded by Nawaf al-Bashir.⁴⁰ According to a report published by a local source in July 2021, the number of militia operatives in the Deir ez-Zor governate was about 12,000 at the time of publication, most of them local Syrians, 3,000 of whom were stationed in and around al-Mayadin.⁴¹

► According to a report, in May 2022 another round of new militia operatives finished a training course; they were local al-Mayadin residents. The course was held by the Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas organization, an important militia in eastern Syria. The organization's Syrian commander is Adnan Abbas al-Saud (Abu al-Abbas), a local Syrian who returned to eastern Syria with his men after Deir ez-Zor was wrested from ISIS in 2017.⁴² Local recruitment is supported by the "dīwān [government office] for tribal affairs," formed for that specific purpose.⁴³

► In December 2022 a Syrian opposition website reported that the IRGC had significantly raised the salaries of the operatives and local residents serving in the pro-Iranian militias in the Deir ez-Zor region. The monthly salaries of civilian volunteers was raised by 100,000 Syrian pounds (about \$40) to 490,000 Syrian pounds (about \$195), while the salaries of soldiers serving in the militias were raised by 50,000 Syrian pounds (about \$20) to 350,000 Syrian pounds (about \$139). The main reason for the raise was the increasing competition between Iran and Russia in recruiting local manpower, and local groups which were also recruiting, among them the pro-Russian Husam al-Qataraji militias and the Muhammad Hamsho militia, affiliated with the Syrian army's Fourth Division.⁴⁴

► In January 2020 information was revealed about a number of key locations in regions along the Euphrates under Shi'ite militia control where dozens of various types of missiles were being stored, such as Dhu al-Fiqar missiles, whose warhead separates in midcourse, making it difficult to detect and track, Fajr 110 missiles, anti-tank missiles and Grad

⁴⁰ الميليشيات الإيرانية العاملة في دير الزور

⁴¹ <https://www.nahermedia.net> الميليشيات الإيرانية العاملة في دير الزور.. عناصرها.. قاداتها.. مهامها وتبعيتها، 15.7.2021.

⁴² ميليشيا "أبو الفضل العباس" .. نشاط متزايد لتصبح من ضمن كبرى ميليشيات إيران في سورية، 20.4.2022، <https://www.syriahr.com>

⁴³ 2.11.2022، تفاصيل حصرية لـ "عين الفرات" .. الحرس الثوري ينشئ ميليشيا جديدة من عشائر دير الزور، <https://eyeofeuphrates.com>

⁴⁴ دير الزور. December 24, 2022.

missiles.⁴⁵ According to a report in May 2022 the pro-Iranian militias established a missile base (apparently for cluster launchers) on Jabal Nisha, about 500 meters from Qalat al-Rahba, to the west of al-Mayadin.⁴⁶ Since the report was published, local sources have documented several instances confirmed by official American sources of rockets launched from areas under the control of pro-Iranian militias at American bases on the eastern side of the Euphrates, particularly the Green Village, near the large Omar oil field, and the base near the Conoco gas field. For the first time since Western Coalition intervention in Syria, which began in 2014, there was documentation at the Conoco base of an intelligence balloon with a payload of cutting-edge remote-control thermal cameras which produce continuous real-time pictures, a facet of the caution and alert measures taken by the Americans in the region.⁴⁷

► The pro-Iranian militias' control of both sides of the Syrian-Iraqi border makes it easy for them not only to smuggle weapons, but to redeploy in other areas, or move the weapons from area to area, making them immune from American or Israeli aerial attack. At the beginning of 2021 the militias moved strategic storehouses from the southern part of the Deir ez-Zor governate (the Albukamal-al-Mayadin area) to the northwest, relocating them near the town of Ayash. On the night of January 13, 2021, the Ayash warehouses were attacked from the air, an attack which at the time the Syrian regime attributed to Israel.⁴⁸ Since then the site has been used as the Afghan Fatemiyoun regional headquarters, the main site for storing missiles and a base for the advanced training of artillery units.

► The Shi'ite militia operatives stationed at the Ayash base were trained to launch short-range missiles and practice conducting terrorist attacks against the American forces. On August 24, 2022, in response to rocket fire targeting American bases, nine missile-storing bunkers in the Ayash base were attacked.⁴⁹ It was the largest American attack in Syria since 2018. According to the announcement issued by the American Army Central Command (CENTCOM), infrastructure facilities belonging to IRGC-directed militias were attacked.⁵⁰

⁴⁵ شبكة محلية تكشف مخابئ صواريخ إيران في ريف دير الزور، 18.1.2020, <https://www.zamanalwsl.net/news/article/120260>

⁴⁶ عين الفرات تكشف موقعا للحرس الثوري يحوي قاعدة صواريخ موجهة نحو مناطق التحالف وقسد، 4.5.2022, <https://eyeofeuphrates.com>

⁴⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UxLoPeEM6K8>

⁴⁸ <https://alwatannews.net/Arab>

⁴⁹ YouTube - الغارات الأمريكية على مستودعات عيش في دير الزور قبل يومين

⁵⁰ U.S. Central Command on Twitter: "Statement Regarding Precision Strikes in Syria <https://t.co/ED69Xq0tm3> <https://t.co/hpWw1NNMNV>" / Twitter

Syrian Human Rights Observatory sources documented the deaths of 11 pro-Iranian militia operatives, Syrian and non-Syrian, who were killed in the aerial attacks attributed to Western Coalition planes during 2022, and the deaths of ten more in a November 9, 2022 Israeli attack on a convoy transporting fuel and weapons near the Albukamal border crossing.⁵¹ A similar attack was carried out on a convoy transporting weapons (concealed in humanitarian assistance) in the same area on January 29, 2023, destroying several trucks.⁵²

► In October 2021, the Syrian Ayn al-Furat channel aired a report with exclusive information about the al-Imam Ali base west of Albukamal near the Syrian-Iraqi border, referred to as "the largest and most dangerous Iranian outpost anywhere beyond its borders." Construction on the base began in 2018 following instructions the Qods Force received from Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. Iran is directly in charge of the base, which was attacked in the past by Western Coalition planes, and operatives of Assad's army are forbidden to enter. According to Ayn al-Furat, the aerial attacks carried out by Israel and the Coalition in Syria have no real influence on the base's activities, since most of it is underground (although since November 2021 reports on the base have waned, apparently because of the damages caused by previous aerial attacks are being repaired and work expanding the base has been accelerated).

► According to the report, the base has three sections. One is situated southwest of Albukamal and covers an area of 600 sq.m. (about 720 sq.yd.) and is considered the most important. In addition to housing huge weapons depots of long-range Scud missiles and Iranian-made missiles such as Raad and Fajr-5, it also has the main headquarters, residences for the Iranian soldiers and officers, operations and communications rooms and food and water stores. It was built by the IRGC's construction unit under the supervision of Iranian engineers. The second section of the base is located in the al-Salbi area in western Albukamal and for the most part is hidden underground. The third section is 35 kilometers from Albukamal and serves as an aerial defense base. It has weapons and ammunition

⁵¹ On December 14, 2022, former Israeli Chief of Staff General Aviv Kokhavi, speaking at a conference held at the Reichman University, that Israel was behind the November 9, 2022 attack on a convoy of Iranian tankers on the Syrian-Iraqi border.

⁵² 30.1.2023, بعد عبوره حدود العراق لسوريا.. طيران مجهول يقصف رتلأ من الشاحنات، <https://www.alarabiya.net/arab-and-world>

storehouses and is directly connected to Iraq, which facilitates the import of supplies. It is secured and heavily guarded by about 200 Iranian, Iraqi and Afghan militia operatives.⁵³

► In addition to headquarters and weapons storehouses, the pro-Iranian militias in eastern Syria maintain recruiting offices and buildings for cultural enrichment, religion and indoctrination, generally located in the urban areas of the cities in the Deir ez-Zor, al-Mayadin and al-Bureij governates, and training camps in open areas. Guard posts along the Euphrates across from the Syrian Democratic Forces' Kurdish militias, or on the border of the desert, are partially fortified to prevent ISIS attacks. The used of tunnels for transporting and storing weapons was reported in the region of the city of al-Mayadin.

► Roadblocks have been erected along the main roads, especially the one running parallel to the Euphrates, placed according to military administration sector responsibility. Tolls are charged and the money goes into the operatives' pockets. One of the militias' roles is to secure the passage of Shi'ite pilgrims from Iraq, Iran and Lebanon to Shi'ite shrines, such as the one in Ayn Ali. It has often been reported that the pro-Iranian militias exploit the passage of pilgrims to deliver weapons from Iraq to Syria. On January 13, 2023, based on aerial photographs, the Israeli Alma Research & Education Center reported the presence of an Iranian UAV in the Deir ez-Zor military airport.⁵⁴

► The continuous friction between the Qods Force-imported and those recruited locally has often created violent clashes between Syrians and foreigners. Sometimes there is also friction with the local branches of the Syrian intelligence services and militia operatives attached to organic frameworks, such as the Fourth Division, caused by charging tolls from civilians and business owners, the methodical looting of private assets, illegal digs at archaeological sites, and struggles for control of the lanes through which weapons and fuel, and recently, drugs, are smuggled. Drugs are smuggled to Iraq by Hezbollah-Lebanon and the Iraqi militias through six Iraqi-Lebanese border crossings, most of them unofficial and under the supervision of militia commanders.⁵⁵ According to information about the seizure of drugs exported from Syria, during 2022 the authorities in Iraq seized about 31 million Captagon pills (Fenethylline, a synthetic amphetamine-type stimulant), manufactured by a

⁵³ عين الفرات تكشف خفايا قاعدة الإمام علي ببادية البوكمال.. أكبر وأخطر مستعمرة إيرانية خارج الحدود، 1.10.2021، <https://eyeofeuphrates.com>

⁵⁴ https://twitter.com/Israel_Alma_org

⁵⁵ عبر 6 معابر نحو مناطق "قسد" ومثلها نحو العراق.. الميليشيات الإيرانية بقيادة حزب الله اللبناني تجني أموال طائلة من عمليات تهريب المخدرات غرب الفرات، <https://www.syriahr.com>

drug cartel in Syria.⁵⁶ Despite the ostentatious presence of the pro-Iranian militias in eastern Syria, the Syrian army forces in the area are formally responsible for the country's borders, with soldiers from the 17th Division (infantry) and the 11th and 18th Divisions (armored corps), and what is apparently a skeleton force of border guards.

► Besides aspiring to a military foothold, Iran also wants to extend its ideological influence in Deir ez-Zor by promoting local conversions to Shi'a, distributing humanitarian assistance and conducting social and community activities. All the activities are directed and initiated by the Iranian Cultural center and its branches, and carried out by with the support of the militias.⁵⁷ One region which is profoundly influenced by the pro-Iranian militias' activities is the "enclave" east of the Euphrates of seven towns and villages, the most important of which are Hatla and Marat, whose elders have been known for their affinity for the Tehran regimes for decades.

► The militia activity is sometimes opposed by local residents. In November 2022 a virtually unknown local cell called the "Albukamal revolutionaries" pasted notices on the walls of Albukamal and neighboring villages of their opposition to the Iranian presence. One notice, which bore the title, "We see you," read, "We, the revolutionaries of Albukamal, are speaking directly to Iran and its supporters in Syria, and especially in Albukamal. We are at the mercy of al-Hajj Askar and his dogs, who continue to plunder our country of everything that is good. Do not think that our silence means we don't exist. Syria is our country and we have no intention of sitting idly by and suffering the deeds of Iran and its militias. This region, which was secure and rich before you defiled it with your presence, has become one of the most dangerous and poorest, it has turned into a highway for smuggling weapons to Syria and drugs to Iraq. The Euphrates Valley, on whose banks ancient cultures flourished, is today, because of Iran and its followers, the path to death and a hothouse for settling accounts."⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Qalaat Al Mudiq on Twitter: "Over 235 million Captagon pills were seized in MENA in 2022, an absolute record. Over 90% of seizures done by 4 countries (3 of them bordering #Syria): - #KSA: 108 M - Jordan: 54.5 M - Iraq: 31 M - Turkey: 21.3 M \$ billions that won't finance Assad's Regime." / Twitter.

⁵⁷ Hamidreza Azizi, Iran's Multi-Faceted Strategy in Deir ez-Zor, SWP Comment, NO.15 MARCH 2020, <https://www.econstor.eu/bitstream/10419/256610/1/2020C15.pdf>

⁵⁸ "Paper Leaflets In Deir Ezzor Threatening Those Dealing With Iran And Its Militias," <https://npasyria.com/128535>.



Former commander of the Iranian forces in Syria, Jawad Jafari, and the commander of Fawj 47 in Albukamal (sadaa alsharqia Facebook page, November 14, 2021).

► Pro-Iranian militias, with apparently no more than a few hundred operatives, arrived in the security squares in the al-Hasaka governate to the north of Albukamal at the end of 2021. They went to Syrian army security squares in Qamishli and Hasaka, a region which until 2019 had been under the full control of the Western Coalition. To the distress of local residents, the overwhelming majority of whom are Sunnis, their first objective was to recruit members of local tribes to the militias operated by the Qods Force and Hezbollah-Lebanon. In June 2022 notices were hung in al-Hasaka of "opposition to Iranian and Hezbollah attempts to plant a stake [in al-Hasaka], recruit local residents and win their sympathy," prompted by concern over a demographic change. The notice read, "The presence of Lebanese militias commanded by al-Hajj Mahdi, which distribute drugs and plan crimes, threatens regional stability and the safety of the population...and therefore, we have no interest in a Hezbollah-Lebanon presence in our city."⁵⁹

► One of the militias recently formed by Iran in a Syrian army security square located in the al-Hasaka governate is the Khorasan Companies, with the support and help of a NDF branch and Baath brigades loyal to the army. In addition, Hezbollah-Lebanon operatives, who essentially function as a task force, set up their headquarters in the Qamishli security square near the M4 highway. A local source reported that some of the militia operatives were sent to the Hezbollah camp in the al-Dimas area west of Damascus for training in multi-rotor drone operation.⁶⁰

The Syrian desert

⁵⁹ شرق سوريا: نشطاء عرب يوزعون منشورات ورقية ضد إيران وحزب الله اللبناني في الحسكة، 2.7.2022، <https://www.alquds.co.uk>

⁶⁰ «24.12.2022، سرايا الخرساني»: آخر النسخ الإيرانية للتغلغل في محافظة الحسكة السورية، <https://www.alquds.co.uk>

► After wresting the border down of al-Qusayr from the rebel organizations in 2013 and the gradual takeover of the Syrian-Lebanese border, and as the Islamic State dwindled in size, the city of Palmyra and its nearby military airport became an important aspect of the pro-Iranian militias' presence in central Syria, and one of the most important overland avenues for transporting weapons for Hezbollah-Lebanon. Iran's regional headquarters in Palmyra provide logistic and intelligence support for the militias in the Homs desert; from Hama in the north, for the desert slopes of al-Suwayda in the south, to the outskirts of the al-Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor governates in the east. In addition to training and maintaining combat capabilities, the militias secure desert roads and vital facilities, such as the pumping station and oil-well area, the gas facility and the salt and phosphate deposits. In addition, militia operatives join the occasional searches to locate and destroy ISIS squads which attack Sunni and Shi'ite army and militia targets.

► Since 2020 and especially since the beginning of 2022, the pro-Iranian militia deployment in the Syrian desert has apparently become stronger by several thousand militia operatives. While the Russians wage a war in Ukraine, several indications have emerged of the growth of Iranian activities and movements throughout the Syrian regions, especially in the east and south. The activities include transporting weapons, erecting bases and fortifying combat positions, preparing assembly areas and training camps, and erecting roadblocks and warehouses for storing weapons and ammunition, while taking control of property and farmland. Apparently the activities are linked to attempts made by Iran and its militias to evade Israel and American attacks by redeploying, and indirectly possibly also preparing for a military confrontation that might result from regional and international issues in which Iran is involved, for which Syria is liable to be used as an arena (following Iran's support for Russia in the war against Ukraine, or because of the impasse in the negotiations regarding Iran's nuclear program).⁶¹

► Particular attention was given to the deployment of Hezbollah-Lebanon near the Maheen warehouses southeast of Homs, which included transporting weapons. The warehouses store strategic Syrian army equipment, including ammunition, which fell into the hands of ISIS and was retaken in 2107 with the support of the Shi'ite militias. According to the reports, Hezbollah-Lebanon transferred missiles and weapons from the Lebanese border to the

⁶¹ 6.4.2022, "مهمين" شرقى حمص لميليشيات إيرانية، <https://www.enabbaladi.net>, روسيا تسلّم مستودعات

Maheen warehouses to protect them from Israeli attacks, and after the withdrawal of local pro-Russian forces such as the Syrian Fifth Corps.⁶²

► Regarding the renewed deployment, it was reported that the mountain ridge to the north of Palmyra was fortified by the pro-Iranian militias. They are equipped with medium- and long-range surface-to surface missiles set into fortified shafts. In the assessment of the Alma Research Center, there are Fateh 110 missiles at the site, which have a range of 500 kilometers, and improved Dhu al-Fiqar missiles, which have a range of 750 kilometers and are the focus of Iran's missile-accuracy project for Hezbollah.⁶³ It was also reported that two operations rooms were set up, one a joint IRGC-Hezbollah room in the town of Qariateine, northeast of Maheen, and the other at the military airport in Palmyra. The operations rooms are commanded by a Russian officer and some of its members are Syrian officers and Qods Force advisors.⁶⁴

► In March 2022 a training camp was built for the pro-Iranian militias in the al-Talial region, about 20 kilometers east of Palmyra. There are between about 200 and 300 Iraqi, Iran and Syrian operatives, commanded by Farmad al-Dokhi, from the popular mobilization headquarters. The base is used to train new recruits in local militias. They are trained in the use of light and medium-weight arms, learn how to operate drones and receive Shi'a religious instruction. Several dozen operatives of the Fatemiyoun Brigade were trained by Hezbollah-Lebanon experts and IRGC advisors in the use of the UAVs stored at Palmyra's military airport.⁶⁵ It was also reported that two Irana drones used by the pro-Iranian militias southeast of Homs crashed. They took off from the Syrian army Shayrat military airport and apparently crashed because of a technical malfunction.⁶⁶ Other training bases were constructed near the town of al-Abada, near Damascus's international airport and in the al-Abbasiya region about 30 kilometers south of Palmyra on the route to the al-Tanf enclave.

► In addition to the operational challenges posed by the ISIS squads in the desert, the Western Coalition garrison in the al-Tanf enclave, near the Syria-Iraq-Jordan border triangle, is also a focus for friction with the pro-Iranian militias deployed in the region. The base was established to frustrate Iran's plan to create another overland corridor from Iraq to Syria.

⁶² 6.4.2022, روسيا تسلّم مستودعات "مهين" شرقي حمص لميليشيات إيرانية, <https://www.enabbaladi.net>

⁶³ <https://israel-alma.org/2022/01/12>

⁶⁴ 7.4.2022, تقرير: إيران توسع نفوذها العسكري في سورية, <https://www.alsouria.net>

⁶⁵ 26.7.2022, خبراء من «حزب الله» يصلون إلى تدمر لتدريب «فاطميون» على المسيرات الإيرانية, <https://aawsat.com/home/article>

⁶⁶ 4.5.2022, ميليشيات إيران تخسر طائرين شرق حمص, <https://www.baladi-news.com>

The enclave, which is defined as a **Deconfliction Zone** (and whose radius is 55 kilometers), is secured by the Coalition's aerial and ground forces (along with the Free Syrian Army, a local Syrian rebel organization). In American assessment, Iran was behind the UAV attack on the al-Tanf garrison on October 20, 2023. The UAVs were apparently not launched from Iran, although the Iranians did provide the means for the attack and encouraged it; there were no casualties. Syrian sources claimed the attack was a response to attacks carried out a short time before and attributed to Israel.⁶⁷

► In August 2022 the Syrian rebel organization announced its forces had prevented an attack on the base by armed or suicide UAVs launched from the region of the Babil governate in Iraq by unidentified operatives, information confirmed by CENTCOM. According to Coalition information, the UAVs intercepted in the al-Tanf region on August 15, 2022, were KAS-04 models.⁶⁸ According to Iraqi media sources, a pro-Iranian militia called the Iraqi Resistance claimed responsibility for the attack, resulting in a full-scale American attack several days later on Ayash storehouses in the Deir ez-Zor governate, as noted above. On January 20, 2023, another attack involving three UAVs was carried out, wounding two Syrians. An Iraqi militia called the Group of the Heirs claimed responsibility.⁶⁹

► Iranian militias are also trying to gain a foothold in the Homs district, and not merely a military foothold. In May 2022 an Iranian organization called Nur al-Huda opened a center for ideological training in the al-Bayarat region near Palmyra in an abandoned structure. It was renovated and reopened as a hussainiya (congregation hall) for Afghan, Iraqi and Lebanese Shi'ite militia operatives. A local Syrian said they were concerned about what he called "Iran's indefatigable efforts to change the regions Sunni-Arab demography," adding that the region of al-Bayarat, located in the heart of the Syrian desert, had no significant Syrian army presence, with the exception of roadblocks. Daily life in the Palmyra region, he said, was controlled by the pro-Iranian militias, and Nur al-Huda opened its first hussainiya in Palmyra in a ceremony attended by IRGC functionaries.⁷⁰

Aleppo

⁶⁷ <https://www.nbcnews.com>

⁶⁸ <https://twitter.com/CJTFOIR>

⁶⁹ 25.1.2023, <https://www.athrpress.com> جهة عراقية تُعلن مسؤوليتها عن استهداف القاعدة الأمريكية في الننف،

⁷⁰ 31.8.2022، <https://www.syriahr.com> التغلغل الإيراني في حمص تحت أنظار مديرية الأوقاف.. تغيير عقائدي يثير حفيظة الأهالي،

► With the exception of the western suburbs, which are still held as a confrontation line with the rebel organizations in the Idlib governate, the rest of the area around Aleppo has become a center for pro-Iranian militias in Syria. It began with the Syrian army military industries in the al-Safira region and the reopening of the international airport, after which the Iranians formed an operations room in the nearby military airport at al-Nayrab. The role of the Shi'ite militia operatives includes securing the road from the city to the airport. Al-Fadl al-Abbas pro-Iranian militia and al-Nujaba movement operatives are a familiar sight in the agricultural region to the south of the city in Jabal Azzan and the towns of al-Wadihi and Khan Tuman, where they took control of property and farmland.⁷¹

► During 2022 the pro-Iranian militias deployed further along the road from Aleppo to the al-Raqqa governate, and erected bases near the towns of Maskanah, Deir Hafer and Dibsi Afnan, creating a contiguous path for the militias from Aleppo east along the Euphrates. Since 2021 the militias have successfully recruited about 3,000 local residents in return for material gain.⁷² To the south, in Homs, which joins the center of Syria to the coast, the militias also increased their deployment. Their presence is centered around the headquarters of the Syrian army's 47th Brigade of the Eleventh Tank Division, which was nicknamed al-Imam al-Sajjad. The brigade is located in the Maarin region, which became a kind of brigade commanded by Iran during the first phases of the Syrian Civil War, out of which weapons and ammunition also flow. A pro-Iranian presence is also known to exist in the military airport at Hama.⁷³

► Two Syrian towns, Nubl and al-Zahra, which lie to the north of Aleppo, serve not only as a logistics route but as an important recruiting reservoir for Hezbollah-Syria and the other militias of the local defense forces. Their proximity to the region of continuous friction between the pro-Turkish rebel organization (the Syria National Army) and the Kurdish militias which operate in the Tal Rifat area, have made the pro-Iranian presence strategically important. In addition, the opening of an Iranian consulate in Aleppo played a significant role in expanding the influence of Iran and the militias within the city, especially in the eastern parts, most of which were abandoned by their original Sunni inhabitants when the war turned them into refugees.

⁷¹ 4.5.2021, تعرف على تفاصيل أضخم مقرات الميليشيات الإيرانية في ريف حلب الجنوبي، <https://eyeofeuphrates.com>

⁷² 2.3.2022, تحركات جديدة لميليشيات إيران شرق حلب، <https://baladi-news.com/ar>

⁷³ 26.11.2022, مصدر يكشف لوكالة "ثقة" حجم التغلغل الإيراني في محافظة حماة، <https://thiqa-agency.com>

► In July 2022 sources in Aleppo reported that the Bashar Assad's carefully-guarded visit to the city was preceded by the logistic and security deployment of Syrian security forces and local pro-Iranian militias, which have a working relationship. An operations room was formed, headed by the leader of the Iranian-backed militia, the Defenders of Aleppo Corps, the Iran al-Hajj Saber Ramin, with the participation of the governor, Hussein Diab, and the leader of the Baqir Brigade, Khaled al-Mari'; Colonel Muhammad Saeed, the leader of the Palestinian Liwa al-Quds militia; Qassem Berri, the leader of the Zain al-Abidin Brigade and other local Baath Party and security functionaries. The operations room's mission was to supervise logistics, construction and sanitation in preparation for the visit and during it to deal with security arrangements. The month before the visit the commanders of the pro-Iranian militias were summoned to Damascus for a preparatory meeting. Abdallah Sabri, the Yemeni Houthi ambassador to Damascus, also attended the meeting.⁷⁴

► To formalize the connection between the Iranian establishment and the local communities, in July 2022, Nawab Nuri, the Iranian consul in Aleppo, paid a visit to the Liwa al-Baqir militia in the al-Balora neighborhood in Aleppo. The consul met alone with the Shi'ite Ayatollah Eid al-Sahab al-Musawi, functionaries from Hezbollah-Lebanon and the commanders of the pro-Iranian militias from the Shi'ite villages of Nubl and al-Zahra. During the visit, where speeches were made in praise of the "Resistance Axis," the consul presented al-Mari' with "The sword of Ali."⁷⁵ In November 2022, meeting with Iranian clerics in the headquarters of the Liwa al-Baqir, Mari' stated that "our relations with the Islamic Republic are very strong and we share a strategy for war against the terrorism of the Israeli enemy."⁷⁶ In addition, since Qassem Soleimani, commander of the IRGC's Qods Force was assassinated in January 2020, the leadership of the Liwa al-Baqir militia in Aleppo has held an annual memorial service for him. In October 2021, according to reports from local sources, al-Mari' and Omar Hussein al-Hassan, who heads the political office, visited Tehran.

► Jawad Jafari, who until the end of 2021 commanded the pro-Iranian forces in Syria, participated in a ceremony before he took his leave of the Liwa al-Baqir and returned to Iran because of an illness. From Aleppo he went to Deir ez-Zor to part from the operatives in the eastern Syrian posts. At the Fawj 47 headquarters an event was organized in his honor

⁷⁴ 10.7.2022, الأسد في ضيافة إيران بطلب.. غرفة عمليات واستنفار أمني وخدمي سبق الزيارة، <https://www.syria.tv>

⁷⁵ <https://www.facebook.com>

⁷⁶ <https://aso-network.com/archives>

attended by village elders, tribal heads and commanders of Shi'ite militias. He also parted from al-Hajj Mahdi, the commander of the pro-Iranian forces in eastern Syria.⁷⁷

► Recently, in eastern Aleppo the four largest and most powerful militias have been openly cooperating and coordinating, after years of power struggles for control of the area against each other and against the Syrian security forces and local war barons. They are the Liwa al-Baqir, the Liwa Zain al-Abadin, the Palestinian Jerusalem Brigade (supported by the Russians) and the Aleppo Defense Corps. This last serves as a kind of indirect administrative and military umbrella for the militias operating in the Shi'ite villages of Nubl and al-Zahra, and for operatives of the armed groups from the Shi'ite villages of Qafaraya and al-Fura, who were forced into exile in Aleppo from Idlib in 2018. The current harmony is the result of the decline in financial support Iran gives local militias, forcing them to find other sources of income, such as counterfeiting medications, providing people with paid transportation and smuggling drugs and fuel. The Syrian opposition source reporting the information claimed that the office of the Iranian consul in the al-Zabdia neighborhood of Aleppo was frequently visited by militia leaders who wanted to ensure their survival and receive protection. Their objective was to relieve tension with the security forces and exert pressure on the soldiers of the locally deployed Fourth Division to enable their own operatives to share drug smuggling, trade and production.⁷⁸



Aleppo region Liwa al-Baqir leaders and operatives (al-Arabiya, February 2, 2021).

► Local sources in Aleppo, as in other regions, accuse the pro-Iranian militias of attempting to obliterate its Sunni identity and attack the sanctity of the prayer sites. According to one eye-witness report, the name of a Sunni mosque in the village of Huber, south of Aleppo, was changed to the Mosque of Our Master al-Hussein. The Iranians also wrote the names of

⁷⁷ <https://deirezzor24.net> المدعو الحاج جواد غفاري ينهي مهامه في سوريا ويغادر إلى مسقط رأسه إيران،

⁷⁸ خالد الخطيب، 10.1.2023, بعد تصارعها على النفوذ.. غياب الدعم يقرب بين 4 ميليشيات بارزة في حلب (syria.tv)

Iranian commanders and operatives killed in battle on a mosque wall, adding the name of Qassem Soleimani, who was not killed in the area.⁷⁹

Rif-Damascus

► Since the beginning of Iran's military involvement in the war in Syria, the offices of the Iranian leadership's headquarters in Damascus have been considered of particular importance because they manage the various regional headquarters. According to all the information accumulated in recent years, the local leadership in the Glass House near the Damascus' international airport controls the main route for weapons from Tehran to Hezbollah-Lebanon, and in effect serves as Iran's airbridge to the Mediterranean Sea. Operatives from the militias of the al-Nujaba movement, Liwa al-Imam al-Hussein and Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas, who participated in the battle to liberate the eastern Ghouta, have since been responsible for securing the route the airport.⁸⁰

► South of Damascus, the Shi'ite shrine of al-Sayyidah Zaynab is not only a site for Shi'ite pilgrims, it is also a military stronghold for Hezbollah and the other pro-Iranian militias deployed in the area where the Syrian army presence is minimal.⁸¹ In September 2022 the Alma Research Center issued a position paper stating that "Similar to the al-Bukamal, Al-Mayadeen, Deir ez-Zor areas in Aleppo and Homs, and southern Syria," the area of the al-Sayyidah Zaynab shrine had become "an epicenter of a growing Shiite base with Iranian affinity. In fact, it is Syrian territory controlled by elements of the radical Shiite axis led by Iran."

► The paper continued, "The civilian entrenchment in Sayyidah Zaynab is demonstrated through immigration and demography, the confiscation of land and real estate, the founding of religious centers and social associations, and religious tourism, which also serves as a platform exploited for military purposes," including support for the Iranian institute of Jihad al-Binaa, adding that "[t]he military entrenchment in Sayyidah Zaynab is a logistical anchor and a 'transit station' for the transfer of weapons for Hezbollah in Lebanon." Moreover, "A broad civilian infrastructure enables the military to operate in a sympathetic and enabling civilian environment, thereby employing the human shield tactic [sic], which greatly

⁷⁹ 8.2.2022, إيران توثق أسماء قتلاها في أحد مساجد ريف حلب، <https://orient-news.net/ar>

⁸⁰ المطلق

⁸¹ حزب الله اللبناني يحكم السيطرة على جوانب الحياة في منطقة السيدة زينب برفقة الميليشيات السورية التابعة له في ظل " 11.1.2023, تواجد شكلي لقوات النظام, <https://www.syriahr.com>

complicates the enemy's position."⁸² Thus most of the area to the south of Damascus, from the international airport in the east to the small military airport of al-Dimas in the west near the Lebanese border, of a large pro-Iranian militia presence, became a prime target for Israel. According to the Syrian Human Rights Observatory, during 2022 there were 32 aerial attacks attributed to Israel in Syria, 18 of them in the greater Damascus region.⁸³

► The pro-Iranian militia presence near or inside Syrian army bases that host them, includes infrastructure activities such as digging tunnels; preparing fortifications; and storing shipments of weapons, ammunition and parts for UAVs and components related to the missile-accuracy project. At the beginning of 2022 it became known that Hezbollah was digging underground revetment inside the old Syrian army base near the town of Khirbet al-Ward, not far from the al-Sayyidah Zaynab shrine. The base had been used to train intelligence workers and pilots, but since 2015 it has been under Hezbollah control and their Iranian advisors are also posted to it. Similar tunnels were also dug around the town of Hujayrah, apparently for the sake of caution and camouflage.

► There is also a significant pro-Iranian presence at the headquarters of the 21st Mechanized Brigade of the Third Tank Division in the Qutayfa area, at the northeastern tip of Rif-Damascus. The Brigade headquarters are located near the town of Hala, a strategic region surrounded by mountain ridges, for several years the home of pro-Iranian elements. The battle order is between 130 and 150 operatives from Hezbollah-Lebanon's al-Ridha forces, as well as Afghan and Iraqi operatives who over time marginalized the presence of the Syrian army brigade. The proximity to the Damascus-Homs road enables the brigade to control the main supply routes for the Qalamoun region, while the surrounding mountains make it possible for the militias to deploy aerial defense and electronic warfare equipment throughout the area. The activities of the pro-Iranian 21st Brigade include digging tunnels with advanced equipment and constructing fortifications. It also established a small weapons research and development center, supervised by Qods Force advisors. There are three tank battalions, nine 122mm cannons, a Russian-made electronic warfare system, aerial defense batteries, a ballistic missile system and Kornet anti-tank missiles.⁸⁴

The Golan Heights and southern Syria

⁸² [Special Report: The Iranian Establishment in Sayyidah Zaynab \(South Damascus\), a Geographic Anchor in the Iranian Corridor - Alma Research and Education Center \(israel-alma.org\)](#)

⁸³ إيران ومليشياتها خلال 2022

⁸⁴ السيطرة الإيرانية على اللواء 21 في القطيفة - Syria Files 8.5.2022.

► Shi'ite forces operated by the Qods Force participated in the combat in 2018 which gave the Syrian army and its allies control of the southern part of the country. Some of the fighters were integrated into organic Syrian army units and wore Syrian army uniforms to camouflage their presence. At the time, the Shi'ite battle order also included operatives from the Iraqi Dhu al-Fiqar and al-Fadl al-Abbas militias, Afghans from the Fatemiyoun Brigade and elite al-Radwan Hezbollah forces, dispatched from Lebanon.⁸⁵ Since then reports have increased regarding the growing presence of pro-Iranian forces in southern Syria and along the Israeli and Jordanian borders.

► In August 2021 the Syrian Jusoor research institute published an updated map of the Iranian presence in southern Syria, comparing it to 2018 when the Syrian army controlled the region after the surrender of the Hawran rebels. The map shows an Iranian presence more than twice the size, having risen from 40 military points to 88.⁸⁶ The institute, like others dealing with the issue, did not give the pro-Iranian battle order, but it can be estimated at not more than a few thousand. According to the research center, "[s]ince the Syrian regime and its allies, Iran and Russia, regained control of southern Syria in July 2018, there have been increasing reports on websites opposed to the regime of a growing presence of pro-Iranian forces in this region and close to Syria's borders with Israel and Jordan. For example, reports claimed that these forces are present only 5 km from the Israeli border, as well as at the Nasib border crossing on the Syria-Jordan border. If these reports are correct, they belie the claims of Russian officials, including Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, that the Iranian and pro-Iranian forces have retreated to a distance of over 100 km from the Israeli border."⁸⁷ Thus the region between the towns of Zakiyah and Khan al-Sheikh and the Kiswah region to the east is one of the most important areas for the storage of Iranian weapons, which are dismantled at the international airport in Damascus or arrive overland from Albukamal before distribution to southern Syria and Hezbollah-Lebanon.

► Southern Syria has always been a strategic target for Iran and Hezbollah, and the control they regained of the Laja and Hawran areas and the Syrian Golan Heights in the summer of

⁸⁵ "Hezbollah and Iran-handled Shi'ite militias are integrated into the Syrian army in its campaign to take control of south Syria," <https://www.terrorism-info.org.il/en/hezbollah-iran-handled-shiite-militias-integrated-syrian-army-campaign-take-control-south-syria/>, July 11, 2018.

⁸⁶ 20.8.2022, خريطة الوجود الإيراني جنوب سورية، <https://www.jusoor.co/details>

⁸⁷ "Websites Opposed To The Syrian Regime: Iran Continues To Consolidate Its Presence In Southern Syria, In Violation Of Understandings Between Russia, Israel, Jordan," January 4, 2019, <https://www.memri.org.il>

2018 gave them the opportunity to concentrate forces on the pretense of defending Syrian sovereignty. For the most part the pro-Iranian militia activity in southern Syria is conducted in Syrian bases which host the forces; Hezbollah forces are centered at Syrian First Army bases. The activities include working on infrastructure, such as fortifications, digging tunnels and preparing training camps, and distributing weapons, collecting intelligence, recruiting residents to local militias and conducting various civilian activities, such as buying real estate and making limited attempts to proselytize Shi'ite ideology to local residents.

► In recent years pro-Iranian militias have been reported at bases of Syrian army Divisions One, Five, Seven, Nine and Ten, deployed in southern Syria, of Division Four and the IRGC, whose units are deployed in the greater Damascus area, and in facilities of the 90th Line Brigade deployed along the Israeli front. The latter have intelligence-collecting capabilities and observation posts belonging to the Hezbollah-directed Golan File Project, managed by a Lebanese national named Muneir Shiato, aka al-Hajj Hashem. In one of the notices distributed in June 2021 warning Syrian soldiers not to cooperate with Hezbollah, Israel was mentioned in connection with al-Hajj Hashem and al-Hajj Abu Sajjad, the commander of the Golan Fawj, who seek to establish a presence in the Quneitra region and collect tactical intelligence for planning attacks on Israel, including with the aid of Druze who live in the Syrian Golan Heights. Insofar as it can be ascertained, Qods Force advisors are present in the division headquarters, as are staff from Hezbollah-Lebanon and apparently representatives of the Afghan Fatemiyoun and Pakistani Zaynabioun Shi'ite brigades. They collect information and guide, advise and direct the Syrian army forces as part Syrian army-Iranian cooperation.

► In February 2022, Iran, through the Qods Force and local militias, made efforts to extend the sphere of influence of the Syrian army's 47th Mechanized Brigade of the Ninth Tank Division east of al-Sanamayn. Iran provided the brigade with effective anti-aircraft weapons, electronic warfare equipment and Ababil C UAVs, which have a range of 70 kilometers. In recent years, the 43rd Brigade's strategic location near the Damascus-Dara'a highway was the reason it became a Syrian army host to the pro-Iranian militias in the central Golan Heights. It has underground tunnels, weapons and ammunition storehouses and camouflaged hangars for T72 tanks and other combat vehicles. It was also reported that in

addition to Syrian army soldiers there are IRGC advisors and al-Ridha operatives from Hezbollah-Lebanon at the 43rd Brigades headquarters in al-Sanamayn.⁸⁸

► The Ninth Division's basic training camp, near the town of al-Laja, is also used by the pro-Iranian militias, and since 2015 has been controlled by the al-Fadl al-Abbas militia with a presence of several dozen operatives. The Syrian army presence there, although it is a host base, is limited. Its weapons include Golan short-range rockets and improved S200 aerial defense batteries linked to other batteries, including those positioned at Jabal al-Manea.⁸⁹ The pro-Iranian militias were also reported as erecting a new training camp east of al-Suwayda for militia operatives from southern Syria recruited to serve in frameworks directed by Hezbollah-Lebanon and Liwa al-Imam. The weapons used in training, light and medium-weight arms, machine guns and rocket launchers, were brought to the new base from Syrian army arsenals east of Homs. The pro-Iranian militias in the Syrian Golan Heights keep a relatively low profile, are camouflaged and do not attract attention in order not to give Israel an excuse to attack them.

► At the beginning of June 2022 King Abdallah of Jordan was interviewed at Stanford University, where he said that the Russian presence in southern Syria was a source of calm, while the Iranians and the proxies were currently filling the vacuum [left by the withdrawal of the Russian forces], which was liable to exacerbate the problems along the Jordanian-Syrian border.⁹⁰ His remarks were made in the wake of news that Fourth Division, Hezbollah-Lebanon and Afghan Fatemiyoun forces had arrived at the Jordanian border and deployed at a number of locations. The militias, estimated at several hundred operatives, came in several waves in the middle of the night on vehicles loaded with machine guns. While on the ground they wore Syrian army uniforms. It was hypothesized that the Fourth Division and pro-Iranian militias, which operate under its authority and are provided with protection for distributing drugs from Syria to regional countries, were brought in to reinforce the operatives in southern Syria and to secure the drug- and arms- smuggling routes to Jordan.⁹¹

► According to an article entitled, "The drug war in southern Syria: Iranian expansions in front of limited Jordanian options," "[s]ince the signing of the quadruple agreement between the United States of America, Russia, Israel and Jordan, in May 2017, which in

⁸⁸ Syria Files 25.2.2022 – ماذا "تخبي" إيران لإسرائيل في اللواء 43 في درعا؟

⁸⁹ Syria Files, 30.1.2023 – كيف أغرقت إيران الجنوب بالسلح، وقطع الطرق على روسيا

⁹⁰ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aVxBWCNKcPo>

⁹¹ <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/politics> جنوب سورية: الفراغ الذي يملؤه الإيرانيون يُقلق الأردن،

essence included Moscow's pledge to remove Iranian militias from the Jordanian borders and the occupied Golan, Tehran has realized the difficulty of direct presence of its forces in southern Syria." For that reason, Iran has increased its efforts to recruit local Syrians were enlisted in the military-style affiliated with Iran in the implied agreement with Moscow and theoretically under its supervision. The assessment is that the process of "reconciliation and arrangement" formulated by the Russian forces changed the balance which existed in southern Syria and accelerated the significant increase in the pro-Iranian militia involvement in drug-smuggling to Jordan.⁹²



**The presence of foreign forces in Syria, summer 2022
(Jusoor research institute website, July 18, 2022).**

The Threat to Israel

► In recent years, with the gradual stabilizing of the Syrian regime and the weakening of ISIS in Syria and Iraq, the pro-Iranian militias deployed in Iraq began openly declaring their involvement in the confrontation with Israel, apparently at Iranian initiative and with Iranian encouragement. In March 2017 Akram al-Kaabi, the leader of the al-Nujaba movement, said of the formation of the Golan Liberation Brigade that its fighters in Syria would be prepared to "liberate" the Golan Heights along with the Syrian army when the campaign against ISIS ended. Nasr al-Shamri, militia spokesman, interviewed on June 11, 2021, said the Golan Liberation Brigade was ready, willing and able to participate in such an operation at the request of the Syrian government, and that its operatives had undergone the appropriate

⁹² <https://syriadirect.org>, وليد النوفل, "حرب المخدرات" في جنوب سوريا: توسع إيراني أمام خيارات أردنية محدودة، 1.6.2022.

training and had been equipped with the appropriate weapons for striking deep inside Israel, not only in the Golan Heights region.

► At the beginning of July 2018, during the fierce battles between the Syrian army and local rebel organization forces before the Syrian army returned to southern Syria, operatives of the Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas brigade were seen near the Israeli border in the Quneitra region with their commander, Maher Ajeeb.⁹³ In August 2020, Iran began forming a new military force in the Quneitra governate in an effort to expand its sphere of influence in the region. According to contemporary reports, Iran was using Hezbollah and Branch 220 of Syrian political intelligence to create a new force commanded by former Syrian army and Fawj Golan militia operatives, most of whom were Druze.⁹⁴ The Golan Regiment militia, like those like it, whose operatives are soldiers in every respect, operates for the most part as Hezbollah-Syria within local defense forces.

► Hezbollah-Lebanon, which operates a continuous network for collecting tactical intelligence along the Israeli border as part of the Golan File (or the "Syrian resistance to liberate the Golan") is a particularly important challenge for Israel. Their activity is meant to serve as a base for terrorist attacks and to support Iran's aspirations to preserve the threat of the "resistance axis" against Israel. Israel tries to frustrate Iran's plans in a variety of ways, from distributing notices warning functionaries and Syrian army units not to cooperate with Hezbollah to the targeted killings of Golan File operatives, firing artillery and aerial attacks on Syrian army facilities hosting pro-Iranian militias to disrupt Iran's comprehensive military program. They are part of Israel's interbellum battle, which so far has lasted for ten years and partially disrupted Iran's gaining a foothold in Syria and the delivery of weapons from Iran to Syria, a battle which has not yet ended. For that reason Israel has no choice but to continue to pursue its policies and modify them according to regional and international changes.

Conclusion

► The formation of an Iranian pro-Iranian militia array in Syria was one of the strategic steps taken by Iran to tip the balance of the Syrian Civil War in favor of Bashar Assad, even if he did

⁹³ "Hezbollah and Iran-handled Shi'ite militias are integrated into the Syrian army in its campaign to take control of south Syria," July 9, 2018, <https://www.terrorism-info.org.il/en/hezbollah-iran-handled-shiite-militias-integrated-syrian-army-campaign-take-control-south-syria/>.

⁹⁴ "The Pro-Iranian militias in Iraq – the current situation," November 15, 2022, <https://www.terrorism-info.org.il/en/the-pro-iranian-militias-in-iraq-the-current-situation/>.

not win the war but only survived it. The network of armed militia operatives, which today numbers in the tens of thousands, is spread among a large number of sites, including adjacent to local sites where various sects of Syrians loyal to the Assad regime, including Asian Shi'ite, Lebanese, Iraqi, Afghan and Pakistani volunteers. As the battle fronts in Syria ebb and clashes with Sunni rebels and ISIS become sporadic, the operatives of the pro-Iranian militias are integrated into cementing Iran's military involvement in securing its interests parallel to its ongoing security missions. The most recent significant military action against the rebels in which IRGC, Hezbollah and Fatemiyoun operations participated was the early 2020 takeover of the M5 highway, which links Aleppo and Damascus.

- ▶ It is safe to assume that the pro-Iranian militia operatives will remain in Syria for the foreseeable future as long as necessary to ensure the stability of the Assad regime and support the expansion of Iran's regional hegemony. However, if they may theoretically eventually be gradually evacuated from Syria by a resolution, the absorption of local operatives by the standing Syrian army means they will continue to be influenced by the Qods Force. The most obvious example is the local defense forces which have been integrated into the Syrian army and at the same time retain their connection with the Qods Force. There are thousands of militia operatives among them, including those from organizations affiliated with Hezbollah-Syria, a joint project of the Syrian army and the IRGC.
- ▶ Thus the pro-Iranian militias have become an integral part of the Syrian military, a kind of extension of the alliance between Syria and Iran and its support during the war, with the result that objecting to the presence of pro-Iranian militias in Syria would mean dismantling the entire system. That makes it difficult, both for Israel to distance the militias from its Golan Heights border, and for the Western Coalition to distance the pro-Iranian militias from eastern Syria and al-Tanf region near the Jordanian and Iraqi borders. In effect, both Israel and the United States face a situation in which the local pro-Iranian militias are integrated into Assad's army even at the price of the creation of a kind of hybrid force which is not expected to change in the foreseeable future, or at least until the Syrian army once again becomes the army we were familiar with.