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Iran's Rising Strategic Foothold in Syria

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Introduction

On May 25, 2017, two US representatives, Peter Roskam (Republican) and Ted Deutch (Democrat) sent a letter to Secretary of Defense James Mattis and Secretary of State Rex Tillerson urging them to take necessary measures to prevent Iran from building permanent military bases in Syria. In their letter, Roskam and Deutch noted that Iran's intentions in Syria focused on solidifying *"its access to the Mediterranean Sea by building a permanent seaport and constructing numerous military installations throughout the country. A permanent Iranian military presence in Syria would greatly harm U.S. interests in the region and decrease the likelihood of reaching a political agreement to end the Syrian civil war"*¹.

Soon after the Roskam & Deutch letter to the secretaries Mattis and Tillerson, Israeli sources, referring to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, accused Iran of building a missile base in Syria. These claims were supported by imagery intelligence (IMINT) pieces of evidence showing an alleged missile production facility under construction near the city of Baniyas, Tartus governorate, where the Russian naval base is also located².

In the meanwhile, German outlet Die Welt drew attention to suspicious Iranian flights to the Russian Hmeymim Base in Latakia around June 2017³. Besides, at the time, Israeli newspaper Haaretz reported a top secret meeting between Russia, the US, and Israel in Jordan's capital Amman in early July 2017. According to the Haaretz story, during the meeting, the Israeli side did its best to convince Moscow and Washington to remove Iran from Syria⁴.

Apart from the reported missile facility in Baniyas, at the time of writing, BBC released a story about another rising permanent Iranian base. According to the quoted 'Western intelligence source' in the claims, the compound was located only 14km south of Damascus, in the town of al-Kiswah. Analysts indicated that up to 500 personnel could reside in the facility which was probably controlled by the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps⁵.

Only a few weeks following the abovementioned BBC story, on December 1, 2017, press sources –including the Syrian state television– reported that the Israeli Air Force (IAF) struck an Iranian military facility in al-Kiswah near the capital Damascus⁶. This

¹ U.S. Representative Peter J. Roskam (6th District of Illinois), "Roskam, Deutch Warn Against Permanent Iranian Presence in Syria", May 25, 2017, <https://roskam.house.gov/Roskam-Deutch-Iran-Permanent-Presence-Syria>, Accessed on: December 6, 2017.

² BBC, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-41074830>, Accessed on: December 6, 2017; The Jerusalem Post, <http://www.jpost.com/Arab-Israeli-Conflict/Iran-building-missile-factory-in-Syria-502628>, Accessed on: December 6, 2017.

³ Die Welt, <http://www.jpost.com/Arab-Israeli-Conflict/Iran-building-missile-factory-in-Syria-502628>, Accessed on: December 6, 2017.

⁴ Haaretz, <https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/1.805844>, Accessed on: December 6, 2017.

⁵ BBC, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-41945189>, Accessed on: December 6, 2017.

⁶ Haaretz, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/1.826265>, Accessed on: December 4, 2017.

very incident marked the tense situation in Syria emanating from the Iranian forward deployments.

Most of the reporting outlets claimed that the IAF carried out the operation through the Lebanese airspace. The same sources also indicated that Syrian air defenses engaged and launched SAM missiles, though the IAF had no losses. As expected, the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) spokesperson declined to comment on the issue⁷. Israeli media underlined that the target was an under-construction Iranian military base located only about 50km away from the border⁸. It is important to note that the Syrian Baathist regime's news agency, SANA, reported a surface-to-surface missile (SSM) attack from the Israeli side, not an air strike⁹.

This report aims to assess the growing Iranian basing in Syria, something far more critical than the current presence of the Revolutionary Guards and their proxy Shiite militia in the civil war-torn country. Unlike Moscow, Tehran lacks the necessary legal basis to station permanent military presence on the Syrian soil. Article 75 of the Syrian Constitution openly states that any international treaties related to the safety and sovereignty of the state shall be subject to the National Assembly's legislation¹⁰. Furthermore, despite the heavy Russian influence on the Baath regime, Russian basing in Syria have been strongly depending on formal bilateral agreements. Thus, the Iranian bases could turn into a *fait accompli* in the course of the ongoing turmoil. Such a course would inevitably bring about important geopolitical, political-military and operational outcomes for the Middle East as follows:

- ✓ Geopolitically, such a move would enable Iran to have a foothold in the Eastern Mediterranean at a time of regional upheaval.
- ✓ From a political-military standpoint, the formidable presence of Iranian missile factories and permanent military compounds in the Levant would inevitably resonate with key regional actors. Hence, these facilities could easily trigger an Israeli military action or a new round of proxy war bonanza between the Saudis and the Iranians along the Mediterranean gateway of the Middle East.
- ✓ At the operational level, such a breakthrough would give a boost to Tehran's proxy war capacity in the region. In case the Revolutionary Guards manage to establish a missile transfer route between Baniyas and the Lebanese Hezbollah—especially given the impressive technical developments in Iran's tactical ballistic missiles and guided rockets based on the Fateh line—, and in case Tehran gets a basing opportunity in very close proximity to the Golan Heights, it could mark a groundbreaking leap in Iran's deterrence capabilities well beyond its borders.

⁷ I24 News, <https://www.i24news.tv/en/news/international/middle-east/161684-171202-israeli-aircraft-reportedly-attack-iranian-military-base-near-damascus>, Accessed on: December 4, 2017.

⁸ Times of Israel, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/israeli-jets-reportedly-target-syrian-base-near-damascus/>, Accessed on: December 4, 2017.

⁹ SANA News Agency, <http://sana.sy/en/?p=119924>, Accessed on: December 4, 2017.

¹⁰ For the full text of the Syrian Constitution, see: http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_protect/---protrav/---ilo_aids/documents/legaldocument/wcms_125885.pdf, Accessed on: January 10, 2018.

Last but not least, one should not disregard the very possibility that the military facility in Baniyas could be a Syrian missile and rocket production center that has been constructed and to be operated in cooperation with the Iranians. In this scenario, the Syrian regime could opt for boosting its rocket and missile capabilities through the Fateh-110 line (or its Syrian version M-600 Tishreen) as well as Fajr artillery rockets. These tactical assets could provide Assad's forces with essential capabilities on the battlefield. Considering the Baath regime's ties with the Lebanese Hezbollah, such a Syrian – Iranian cooperative project would mark an alarming trend regarding regional security in the Middle East. Furthermore, in case Assad could sustainably reinforce its armed forces with enough offensive systems, he could well gain some degree of political–military shelter for his regime.

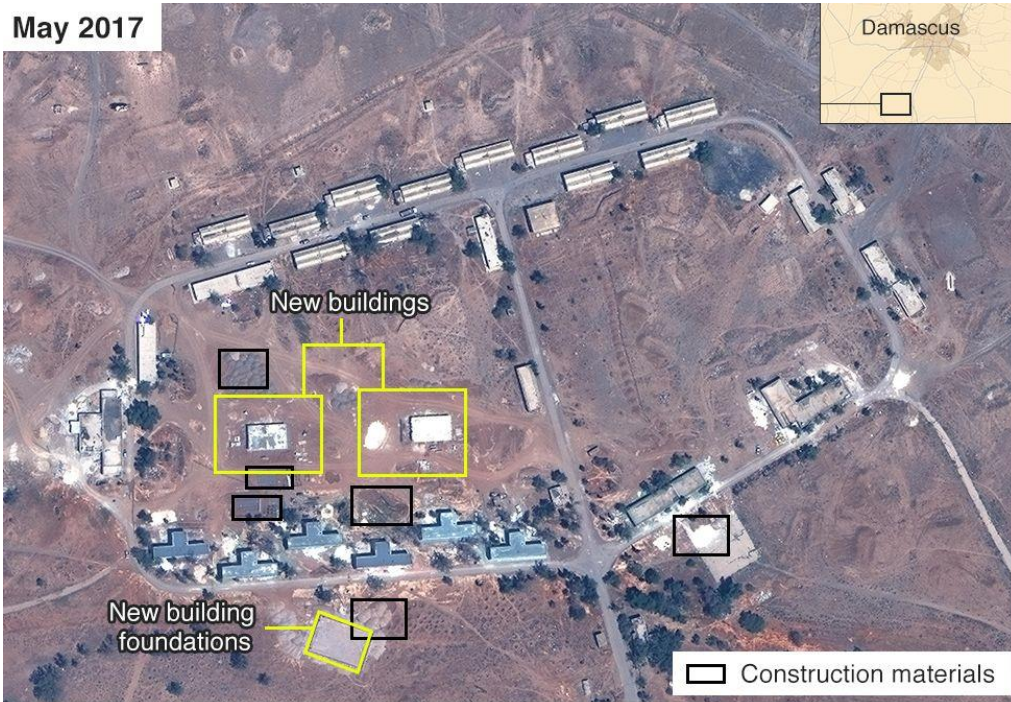
Al – Kiswah Military Compound: Iran's Tactical Outreach to the Syrian – Israeli Frontier?

Open–source intelligence sources so far highlighted two crucial military facilities belonging to the Iranians in Syria. The first one remains al–Kiswah military compound located in the south of Damascus¹¹. According to the BBC reporting, the satellite imagery revealed some two dozen buildings, possibly housing for soldiers or vehicles. The fast rise of the compound is particularly noteworthy. Below, the referred imagery includes a comparative visual analysis between May 2017 and October 2017 suggesting a rapid expansion within 6 months amidst the civil war conditions¹².

¹¹ BBC, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-41945189>, Accessed on: December 4, 2017.

¹² Ibid.

*Development of the Iranian Military Compound in the South of Damascus:
Comparative Imint Assessment in Six Months*



Source: Digital Globe, McKenzie Intelligence Services

BBC



Source: Digital Globe, McKenzie Intelligence Services

BBC

Satellite Imagery: Retrieved from BBC, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-41945189>, Accessed on: December 4, 2017.

Open – Source Battle Damage Assessment Following the Israeli Air Strikes



Satellite image following the reported Israeli air strike. Retrieved from: Times of Israel, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/satellite-shows-aftermath-of-alleged-israeli-strike-on-iranian-base-in-syria/>, Accessed on: December 5, 2017.

Indeed the military compound is of vital geostrategic importance. The burgeoning base is located at Damascus' immediate doorstep. Thus, once, –or if– completed, it could give Tehran an important leverage on the Syrian capital. This is of particular importance for some reasons:

Although Tehran and Moscow have so far seemed to be on the same page along the troublesome trajectory of the Syrian Civil War, in fact, they have different perspectives, and even tacitly compete with each other over monopolizing the Baathist regime's client status. In doing so, the Russians and the Iranians have their own advantages and disadvantages. The Armed Forces of the Russian Federation enjoy a more institutional, doctrinal, and historical influence on the Syrian Arab Armed Forces. Declassified Cold War intelligence reports indicate that since the 1966 coup in Syria, Soviet–Syrian Baath relations had been solid with a critical military aid component. At the time, the Soviet security apparatus warned Syria's neighbor Jordan against any intervention in Damascus, and adopted an anti–Israel diplomatic rhetoric to get the radical elements of the new regime onboard¹³. Furthermore, of three primary Middle Eastern nations under the Soviet Union's patronage during the Cold War, namely Syria, Iraq, and Egypt, the Syrian Arab Armed Forces most directly resembled the Soviet Red Army's tactical approach, operational concepts, and military organization¹⁴.

¹³ For a good intelligence review of the Soviet – Arab relations in the Cold War, see: the United States Central Intelligence Agency, *Soviet Policy and the 1967 Arab – Israeli War*, 1970, Approved for release 2007.

¹⁴ Michael Eisenstadt and Kenneth M. Pollack, "Armies of Snow and Sand: The Impact of Soviet Military Doctrine on Arab Militaries", *The Middle East Journal*, Vol.55 No.4, Autumn 2001.

At present, Assad's forces still pursue the footsteps of the Russian military. Apart from Syria's Russian arms dominated arsenal, almost every *praetorian* unit of the regime, be it the Desert Hawks Brigade, the 5th Corps, or the Tiger Forces, have fought fierce battles side by side with top Russian military advisors. The bulk of these advisors, including the late Lieutenant General Valery Asapov, who was killed in action in Deir ez-Zor in September 2017¹⁵, is coming from the most elite formations of the Russian military. Notably, it is even reported that the 5th Corps falls under direct Russian control, and while the late general Asapov was a high military advisor on the paper, in fact, he may have been the chief of staff of this military formation¹⁶. Besides, since the outset of the intervention, many generals among the Syrian ranks have been proudly carrying awards and medals handed by top Russian figures including the Chief of Staff General Valery Gerasimov¹⁷. Finally, the Syrian Arab Air Force existentially depends on the Russian assistance for sustaining its combat readiness and operational continuity.

While the Russian influence on the Syrian military apparatus is profoundly structural and institutional, the Iranians mostly depend on sectarian ties with the Alawite elite, the Quds Forces' shadow over the Assad regime, and their control over the Lebanese Hezbollah along with the harvested Shiite militia from the Levant to Pakistan. Yet, the Iranians do not have their equivalent of the Russian Hmeymim or Tartus base. In other words, the Iranians' post-civil war presence in Syria is not as stable as that of the Russians. Therefore, Tehran has been attempting to reinforce its outreach in Syria through the newly rising bases. These bases, the Iranian elite probably calculate, could at least balance the Russians in snatching up the influence monopoly over Syria.

On the one hand, although it has been most probably constructed and run by the Iranians, the alleged Iranian facility still, technically, remains a military compound on the Syrian soil and under Syrian national sovereignty in terms of international law. So, the Iranian involvement emanates from a *de facto* situation. On the other hand, the Russian Federation, for example, has legal basing rights in Syria. In early 2017, the Russians have pledged a long-term basing agreement granting access to the Syrian territory¹⁸. The basing regulations cover both Tartus naval base and Hmeymim airbase for 49 years¹⁹.

Notably, the Syrian – Iranian military cooperation formally depends on a mutual defense pact signed in 2005 amidst the heavy pressure from the Bush administration of the US²⁰. Only little has been revealed about this mysterious bilateral pact. Some experts claimed that Iran promised to supply Syria with arms, including surface-to-

¹⁵ Russia Today, <https://www.rt.com/news/404410-russian-general-killed-syria/>, Accessed on: December 4, 2017.

¹⁶ Business Insider, <http://www.businessinsider.com/r-russia-says-general-killed-in-syria-held-senior-post-in-assads-army-2017-9?IR=T>, Accessed on: December 4, 2017.

¹⁷ For a award ceremony of a Syrian brigadier, see: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=75ZnAxe1UME>, Accessed on: December 4, 2017.

¹⁸ Paul Mcleary, "Putin Signs Long – Term Basing Deal with Syria", *Foreign Policy*, January 2017, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/01/21/putin-signs-long-term-basing-deal-with-syria/>, Accessed on: December 5, 2017.

¹⁹ The Washington Times, <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2017/jan/20/russia-presence-middle-east-cemeted-syrian-basing-/>, Accessed on: December 5, 2017.

²⁰ The Guardian, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2005/feb/17/usa.syria>, Accessed on: December 5, 2017.

surface missiles, MANPADS and T-72 main battle tanks. Moreover, at the time, it was reported that Tehran agreed to finance Damascus' military deals with Ukraine, Russia, and China²¹. Even more importantly, the Syrian defense minister at the time, Hasan Turkmani, dismissed the possibility of an Iranian basing in Syria²². In brief, open-source intelligence suggests that we have no legal grounds showing that Damascus granted military basing rights to Iran, as it did to Russia. Thus, from a legal standpoint, the Iranians may have gained a certain degree of *marge de manoeuvre* stemming from the ambiguity of al-Kiswah compound.

A key nuance in the Russian foreign policy rhetoric could shed light on the abovementioned issue. Quoted by the Syrian official news agency SANA in November 2017, Russia's top diplomat Sergey Lavrov stated that the Russian and the Iranian presences in Syria depend on invitation by the host nation for waging war on terror²³. Although this rhetoric seems to be pro-Iran at first glance, in fact, it ties up Tehran's military outreach in Syria with the war on terror, not a permanent geopolitical gain, whereas Moscow secured its forward bases at least for half a century. At this point, it should be underlined that recent open-source reports indicate an "emerging splint" between Iran and Russia. In this regard, it is claimed that as the dust settles militarily in Syria, Moscow and Tehran have started to diverge on main objectives²⁴. While keeping Assad in power is, by all means, a secondary –if not tertiary– priority for the Russians, it remains the primary goal for the Iranians to sustain their direct support to the Lebanese Hezbollah. Furthermore, the Iranian presence in Syria and Tehran's commitment to the Assad clan further strains Russia's diplomatic position with US and Israel. Even the burgeoning Turkish – Russian relations could be overshadowed by the 'Assad factor'. Thus, securing a permanent base, or a chain of bases, in Syria would help Iran in making its presence solid even after the civil war.

The military compound in al-Kiswah, Damascus, could theoretically offer the promising potential of emboldening the Iranian influence on the Syrian capital, something that Tehran would score a key advantage over Moscow. This is of critical importance because Damascus means the very heart of the Syrian regime. As Dr. Fabrice Balanche of the Washington Institute precisely spelled out:

“Since the 1970s, the Syrian army has had a considerable presence in the Damascus area, with large military bases occupying the south and west of the capital. Officially, this military posture has been intended to protect Damascus against Israel, given that the Golan front is some fifty kilometers away. The unofficial goal of this setup, designed by former president Hafiz al-Assad, was better control of Damascus. Bashar's father believed that whoever held Damascus held Syria. Part of the elder Assad's effort to control Damascus after seizing power in a coup in November 1970 was to station tens of thousands of troops, along with Alawite officials and their families, in the city. ... Although (Assad) still does not control most of the country and his army can barely preserve the

²¹ Bilal, Y. Saab, “Syria and Iran Revive an Old Ghost with Defense Pact”, Brookings, July 2006.

²² Ynetnews, <https://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3263739,00.html>, Accessed on: December 5, 2017.

²³ Syrian Arab News Agency, <http://sana.sy/en/?p=118140>, Accessed on: December 27, 2017.

²⁴ Soufan Group, “An Emerging Split Between Russia and Iran Over Syria”, December 20, 2017, <http://www.soufangroup.com/tsc-intelbrief-an-emerging-split-between-russia-and-iran-over-syria/>, Accessed on: December 27, 2017.

*recent territorial gains facilitated by the Russian air force's intervention, Assad feels less threatened because he holds Damascus. And because he no longer needs Putin to defend the airspace over Damascus, he will be less likely to bow to Russian pressure, not to mention other international pressure, to cede power. What Assad does still need in Damascus is continued strong defensive military support from Iran, its proxy Hezbollah, and Iraq Shiite militias. As it stands, without a real military threat to Damascus, neither Assad nor Iran will accept a political transition in Syria, even if Russia agrees to one*²⁵.

Another importance of al-Kiswah compound is its proximity to Israel, most critically to the Golan Heights.

Israeli realist geopolitical school sees the control over the Golan Heights as a “high strategic and moral ground” for the defense of Israel²⁶. In this regard, military geostrategic importance of this crucial plateau in light of the lessons learned from the 1967 and the 1973 Arab – Israeli wars, gradual decline of the viability of the ‘land for peace’ formula, hydro-strategically vital water sources, economic considerations, and finally, the turbulence in Syria force the Israelis to further consolidate their grip on the Golan Heights²⁷. Furthermore, the Israeli control of the Mount Hermon in northern Golan offers indispensable intelligence capabilities regarding electronic intelligence and topographical advantages in electronic warfare sight lines²⁸.

In fact, the delicate balance between Iran and Russia could profoundly shape Israel’s perception and reactions.

On the one hand, it is the Russian Military Police who have been overseeing the security situation along the Golan Heights frontier within the framework of the de-escalation plan brokered through the Astana process. In this regard, the Russians have initially established two checkpoints and ten watch posts²⁹. Given the very fact that Israeli – Russian official and backchannel liaison have been kept open since Moscow’s military intervention in Syria started, having the Russian MP close to the tense border areas should not sound very pessimistic to the Israelis.

On the other hand, Iran directly threatens Israel’s dominance in the Golan Heights by its forward presence in Syria. Israel shot down an Iranian drone over the strategic plateau in September 2017, and even killed a Revolutionary Guards commander in an airstrike back in 2015 which suggested menacing activities along the Syrian – Israeli frontier. Furthermore, some Shiite groups under the control of the Revolutionary Guards’ Quds Forces branch have established a ‘Golan Liberation Unit’ to take action on the high

²⁵ Fabrice Balanche. “Damascus Control Emboldens Assad Nationality”, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Policy Watch 2665, August 2016.

²⁶ For Professor Efraim Inbar’s work, see. Efraim Inbar, *Israeli Control of the Golan Heights: High Strategic and Moral Ground*, The BESA Center, 2011.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.p.9.

²⁹ The Jerusalem Post, <http://www.jpost.com/Arab-Israeli-Conflict/Russian-military-police-deploy-close-to-Israelis-Golan-Heights-to-monitor-safe-zones-500675>, Accessed on: December 5, 2017.

ground³⁰. All these developments, along with the burgeoning and formidable Lebanese Hezbollah presence in Damascus, alarmed the Israeli political–military elite. In this respect, the IDF has even launched its most significant exercise in almost 20 years in early September 2017 to simulate a war with Hezbollah³¹.

Baniyas (Alleged) Missile Production Facility

For some time, international observers, in particular the Israelis who closely monitor the Iranian involvement in the Syrian Civil War, have been focusing on Iran’s alleged missile factory close to the Syrian city of Baniyas located in the Tartus governorate along the Mediterranean coastline. Press sources also provided commercially available satellite pictures of the suspected facility. A comparative, open–source imagery intelligence analysis suggests certain similarities between the known missile production factories in Iran and the new, rising facility in Syria³².



A Comparative IMINT analysis; retrieved from: BBC, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-41074830>,

Accessed on: December 6, 2017

³⁰ Jonathan Spyer, “Israel is Going to War in Syria to Fight Iran”, *Foreign Policy*, September 2017, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/09/28/israel-is-going-to-war-in-syria-to-fight-iran/>, Accessed on: December 5, 2017.

³¹ Rhys Dubin, “Israel Has Launched Its Largest Military Exercise in Almost 20 Years”, *Foreign Policy*, September 2017, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/09/07/israel-has-launched-its-largest-military-exercise-in-almost-20-years/>, Accessed on: December 5, 2017.

³² BBC, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-41074830>, Accessed on: December 6, 2017.

Interestingly, Syrian opposition sources also claimed that Bashar al Assad visited the facility in June 2017³³. According to the opposition sources, the complex is located in the Wadi Jahannam (*the Valley of Hell*) in Baniyas, and the area is surrounded by Alawite settlements, an offshoot of the Shia sect that the Assad clan comes from and on which the Baathist regime traditionally depends³⁴. Even more importantly, the regime sources also confirm that Bashar al Assad left Damascus for Hama in late June 2017 to visit injured army veterans³⁵. Indeed, the official Syrian news outlet covered the story with details³⁶. Opposition sources claim that the Hama visit and the extraordinarily detailed state news agency attention was deceptive for hiding the real intent of inspecting the missile factory in the city of Baniyas³⁷.

Notably, Baniyas has an oil terminal which has been continuously receiving Iranian investment for years. Iranian and Russian tankers are periodically docking in the port, delivering refined oil or gas and loading crude oil³⁸. Furthermore, the city also holds an Iranian-built power plant. Tehran has kept renovating the electrical power plant in the 2000s. As recently as September 2017, Iranian and Syrian officials negotiated to extend the capacity of the facility by installing additional power generation stations³⁹. In other words, many indicators suggest suspicious activities that necessitate a thorough intelligence investigation.

From the Iranian defense planners' standpoint, there might be several advantages of moving a part of the missile production line into Syria:

- ✓ **Reinforcing Syria's Guided Rocket and Missile Arsenal:** For a long time, Western intelligence and strategic communities neglected the importance of Iran's tactical quasi-ballistic missiles and guided rockets.

Recently, Iran's solid-propelled Fateh-110 line has shown an impressive uptrend in operational use through more advanced Fateh-330 and Zulfiqar variants. The June 2017 strike, in which the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps targeted ISIL positions in Deir ez-Zur, eastern Syria, marked the most important milestone for Iran's solid-fueled tactical missiles and guided rockets. As a previous FRS study underlined:

“Without a doubt, the strike on Deir ez-Zur will provide Tehran with important lessons learned. Indeed, it may bolster Iran's strategic operations, confirming that long-range conventional strikes are technically feasible with existing technology. Using maneuverable systems

³³ MEMRI, “Syrian Opposition Website: Assad Visited New Long – Range Missile Facility Near Baniyas”, June 2017, <https://www.memri.org/reports/new-Iran-supervised-missile-facility-in-syria>, Accessed on: December 6, 2017.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ SANA News Agency, <http://sana.sy/en/?p=108825>, Accessed on: December 6, 2017.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Memri, <https://www.memri.org/reports/new-Iran-supervised-missile-facility-in-syria>, Accessed on: December 6, 2017.

³⁸ Reuters, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-russia-iran/how-russia-iran-keep-fuel-flowing-to-syria-idUSBRE83P0GE20120426>, Accessed on: December 21, 2017.

³⁹ Syrian Arab News Agency, <http://sana.sy/en/?p=113604>, Accessed on: December 21, 2017.

more frequently for such operations, as well as increasing the range of these systems, would pave the ground for breakthroughs in Iranian offensive missile options. ...Drastic sophistication of the Fateh family of missiles can be translated into a clear battlefield advantage for the Iranians at tactical and operational levels, especially when employed in salvo launches. Furthermore, the Fateh line, including Zulfiqar missiles at the highest-end, are road-mobile, have short launch-cycles, and might be produced in high quantities which confer additional tactical advantages. The modernization trends from the Zelzal rockets to Fateh-110, Fateh-313, and finally to Zulfiqar missiles hints at what might come next in Iran's solid-fuel ballistic missile inventory⁴⁰?

Thus, the transfer of solid-fueled, quasi-ballistic, mobile, and relatively accurate missiles to the proxies would provide them with real tactical and operational game-changer assets⁴¹. All in all, Baniyas missile factory –if completed sometime soon– might serve this goal. More importantly, as discussed earlier, the uncertain legal status of this military facility could help the Iranians deny the responsibility when needed.

In fact, the Syrian Arab Armed Forces would hugely benefit from boosting its production capacity for the Fateh line. Fateh family of quasi-ballistic missiles and guided rockets range from shorter range Fateh-110 to Fateh-330 and Zulfiqar (that was used at Iran's missile strike to Deir ez Zor). The line even extends to the anti-ship ballistic missile Khalij Fars, which is based on Fateh-110 with an additional seeker homing onto ships⁴². Notably, operational theaters are generally narrow in contemporary Middle Eastern battlespaces. Thus, from a technical standpoint, quasi-ballistic trajectories could efficiently stress 'traditional' missile defense systems, while these tactical missiles' 'a few hundred kilometers' range would be sufficient for dominating the battlefields with adequate offensive advantages. Likewise, short range guided-rockets, such as the Iran's Fajr-5⁴³, would also offer important solutions in targeting operational C2 infrastructures, airbases, troop concentrations and key lines of communication in narrow battlespaces. All these capabilities would score significant points for the military strategic balance between Israel and Syria – and Syria's ally, the Lebanese Hezbollah-. Furthermore, Syrian Arab Armed Forces' air defense capabilities have been drastically improved by the Russians in recent years. Assad's forces now enjoy a layered air and missile defense architecture by high-end systems such as SA-22 (Pantsir S1), SA-17⁴⁴, and probably the S-300 variants in near future. Such a defensive umbrella would provide tactical offensive units, namely ballistic missiles and guided-rockets,

⁴⁰ For a review of the Iranian Fateh missile line developing into a surgical strike asset, see: Stéphane Delory and Can Kasapoglu, *Thinking Twice about Iran's Missile Trends: The Threat is Real but Different Than Predicted*, FRS, Paris, 2017.

⁴¹ Ibid. p.6.

⁴² IHS Jane's, <http://www.janes.com/article/68625/iran-successfully-tests-radar-guided-anti-ship-ballistic-missile>, Accessed on: December 28, 2017.

⁴³ The range of unguided 333mm Farj 5 is around 75 km. The range of the C version is not known.

⁴⁴ Bloomberg, <https://www.bloomberg.com/view/articles/2015-12-17/new-russian-air-defenses-in-syria-keep-u-s-grounded>, Accessed on: December 29, 2017

with enough protection from the adversary's tactical ISR⁴⁵, and buy time for these assets to haul off for a quick knockout punch at the overture of a conflict. In fact, most of the Western and the Israeli sources take the air power option granted when assessing Israel's military intervention to al-Kiswah compound. In fact, this is not the first time that Syria's state media claims Israeli SSM strikes into the Syrian territory. In December 2016, such an incident, in which the Israelis allegedly targeted Mazzeh Air Base, was reported by the Syrian official news agency⁴⁶. Some experts assessed that the presence of Russian air defenses and electronic warfare capacity, as well as the risk of engaging Russian aircraft, could urge Israeli defense planners to use their tactical missiles when conducting surgical operations in Syria⁴⁷. To perform such missions, the Israelis have adequate assets at their disposal, such as the LORA heavy guided rocket with around 300km range, delivering a 600kg warhead with very high precision⁴⁸, or alternatively, smaller Extended Range Artillery (EXTRA) guided rockets could also be the weapon of choice⁴⁹.

If the Syrian news agency's claims are true, it marks the game-changer fact that the Syrian skies are no longer safe for the Israeli Air Force. The same news agency even speculated the interception of some Israeli precision munitions during the strike, possibly by SA-22 batteries. If confirmed, these stories suggest the gradual erosion in Israel's precision strike capabilities in Syria. The combination of an overwhelming tactical ballistic missile arsenal and an anti-access / area denial protection would be tantamount to a military boost for the Assad regime in terms of conventional deterrence. This assumption is of critical importance. Because, such a trend would bring about more and more casualties to Israel in its interventions into Syria or even into the Lebanese frontier. In addition, such a Syrian military uptrend would degrade the IAF's air superiority and operational initiative. Finally, in case Iran could make Syria gain mass production capacity in the aforementioned tactical offensive assets, Tehran could translate this military-industrial success into a major breakthrough for Damascus and Hezbollah against Israel.

- ✓ **Syria Remains Iran's Gateway to the Lebanese Hezbollah. And the Baniyas Missile Factory Could Well Serve as a Constant Rocket and Missile Supplier to Iran's Robust Proxy:** Clearly, this facility, be it Iranian, Syrian, or a cooperative one, could be used to foster the missile and guided rocket transfers to Hezbollah.

⁴⁵ Intelligence – Surveillance – Reconnaissance.

⁴⁶ BBC, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-38239779>, Accessed on: December 6, 2017.

⁴⁷ Michael Peck. "The Middle East's Worst Nightmare: A War Between Israel and Russia", *The National Interest*, December 2016, <http://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-buzz/the-middle-east-s-worst-nightmare-war-between-israel-russia-18692>, Accessed on: December 6, 2017.

⁴⁸ Missile Threat, <https://missilethreat.csis.org/missile/lora/>, Accessed on: December 6, 2017.

⁴⁹ IAI, EXTRA – New Horizons for Precision Strike Artillery – <http://www.iai.co.il/Shared/UserControls/Print/PopUp.aspx?lang=en&docid=32806>, Accessed on: December 19, 2017.

Notably, some experts claim that Hezbollah, in fact, comes into the picture as the most prominent winner of the Syrian Civil War⁵⁰. In this regard, the referred experts indicate that Hezbollah's growing combined operations capabilities on the ground and its enhanced experience in urban warfare environment could decisively pay off in the near future in its native Lebanon front⁵¹. An essential aspect of Hezbollah's burgeoning military capabilities stems from the Iranian missile transfers. The 2006 Second Lebanon War and the ongoing Houthi war of attrition against Saudi Arabia proved that arming its proxies with rocket and missile systems benefits Iran to a very important extent. Without a doubt, both the Saudis and the Israelis suffered from these game-changers which directly threaten their entire territories. In the course of the Syrian turmoil, the Lebanese Hezbollah moved many missiles from Syria to Lebanon. Besides, intelligence reports suggest that Hezbollah has been boosting its Fateh-110 arsenal since 2010. In the course of the Syrian turmoil, some of these Fateh-110s are believed to be transferred to the Shi'ite non-state actor. Although the Israeli Air Force has conducted air strikes to halt some of the shipments⁵², no intelligence effort could prevent the leaks in a civil war-torn country. At the time being, Hezbollah's missile capabilities reached to a very formidable level that some studies call the organization "Iran's forward missile base" in the Mediterranean⁵³.

- ✓ **Institutionalizing the Iranian Presence in Syria:** As discussed earlier in this report, the Iranian presence in Syria through the Quds Forces, Shi'ite militia and the Lebanese Hezbollah fighters lack strategic cultural and institutional grounds that the Russians enjoy thanks to the Soviet period. Having a part of the Iranian missile production line in Syria, albeit under vague auspices, would provide Tehran with stronger and more institutionalized relationship with the Syrian Baath regime.
- ✓ **Promoting Iran as a Missile and Rocket Supplier Alternative in the Defense Market:** From an Iranian perspective, finalizing a deal with Assad to produce the Fateh line on the Syrian soil would be quite attractive, since such a move would help turning Iran into a major partner in Syrian defense planning even after the dust of the ongoing civil war settles. Even more customers could be attracted by Iran's new production line. Tehran could become a unique international arms producer, being able to deliver tactical game-changer systems despite the opposition of great powers. Compared to the emerging missile producers such as Pakistan, India, Turkey, and Brazil, this ability, namely 'advancing against major, strong winds', would mark a tremendous guarantee for many countries that cannot reach mainstream and perfectly legal arms procurement opportunities.

⁵⁰ Colin P. Clarke and Chad S. Serena, "Hezbollah is Winning the War in Syria", *The National Interest*, January 2017, <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/hezbollah-winning-the-war-syria-19229?page=show>, Accessed on: December 5, 2017.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² The New York Times, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/05/world/middleeast/israel-syria.html?pagewanted=all>, Accessed on: December 5, 2017.

⁵³ Jonathan Schanzer et.al. *The Third Lebanon War: The Coming Clash Between Hezbollah and Israel in the Shadow of the Iran Nuclear Deal*, Foundation for Defense of Democracies, 2016. p.12.

Open – Source Imint Assessment

Having monitored the alleged missile factory zone in three sectors, our open–source IMINT assessment in technical cooperation with the French Geo4i geo–intelligence firm confirms the existence of a compound in the 12km east of Baniyas located in the bottom of a valley. The facility is composed some 55 buildings most of which under construction. Two main production areas can be seen (area A and B on the Geo4I image), and a concrete production plan being installed apart (area C). The building configuration suggests the likelihood of explosive or propellant production activity.

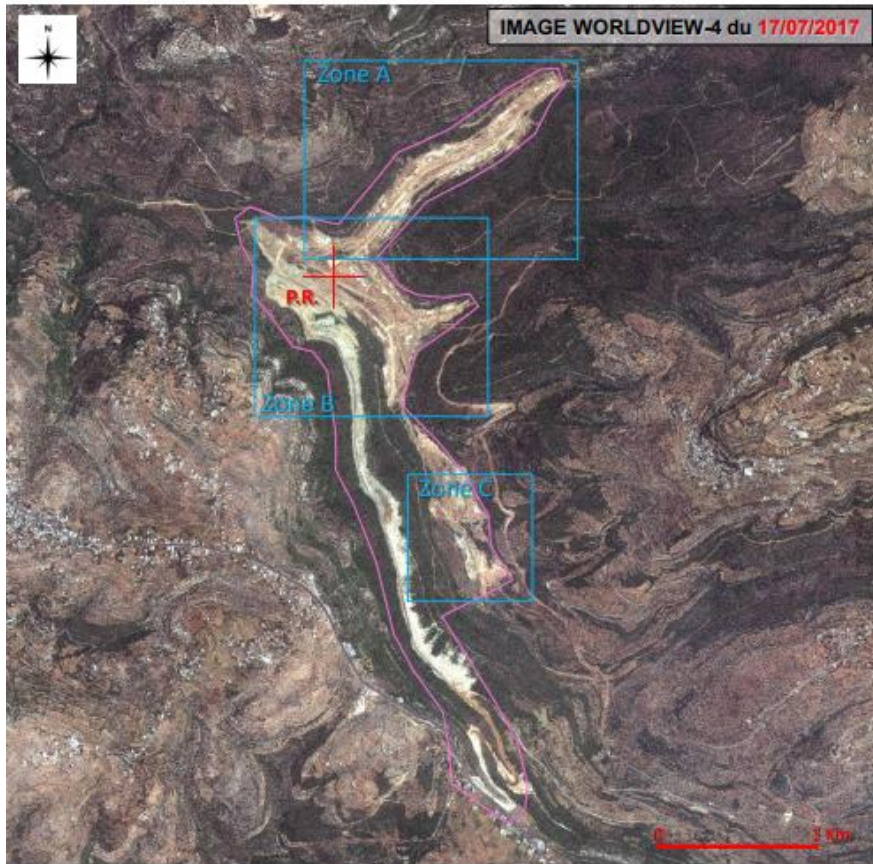
Furthermore, in addition the very fact that the building designs are suitable for explosive and propellant manufacturing plants, the building rooftops also seem to contain systems for filtration and dedusting infrastructure which are necessary for the abovementioned functions. Protective walls around some buildings are also very typical for propellant and explosive production facilities.

Nevertheless, it is rather difficult to conclude, by solely relying on the images, that the Baniyas facility is undeniably designed for missile production. In fact, the facility should be monitored in the longer term carefully to assess what kind of material is used in its activities. Besides, other infrastructures, especially those related to missile tests, must also be identified on the Syrian territory to support the conclusion. Because, once produced, some missiles have to be tested, especially to check the evolution of the propellant on deployed systems. The infrastructure spotted in Baniyas, as well as further identification of test-bed areas, would help develop a better understanding if the facility produces liquid or solid propellant, in case it is indeed a missile factory.

The size of the facility itself suggests an important production capacity potential. Yet, since it is not operational at the time of writing, there is no open-source capability to assess its productivity. The complex is relatively remote from major transport infrastructures, thus, it is estimated that rather lighter battlefield systems are to be manufactured there, such as guided rockets and tactical ballistic missiles.

The facility does not seem to have air defense protection, and as indicated above, it is still under construction. The presence of a concrete production area confirms that the complex may still enlarge and gain new advancements in the future.

Baniyas Imint Analysis (source Geo4i)



Our analyses suggest that the obtained IMINT pieces of evidence fall short of passing a precise judgment on whether these buildings are of Iranian design or not. Of course, Intelligence Studies theory and practice prioritize close coordination between several intelligence disciplines to conclude reliable assessments. Open-source intelligence collection process has various limitations, and the case of Iranian basing in Syria is not an exception in this regard. Thus, from a professional standpoint, this report concludes that while there is an undeniable likelihood of the Baniyas facility remains an Iranian missile production factory –yet under construction–, still, other methods of collecting evidence, which are not available to a think-tank work, are needed to reach an entirely accurate analysis.

Conclusion

- ✓ Lessons learned from recent conflicts suggest that the concept of home-front has been fading away due to the pressing rocket and missile technology. The Middle East remains at the very epicenter of this trend. Furthermore, each day, more non-state armed groups are becoming sharper in rocket and tactical missile operations. Without a doubt, the Lebanese Hezbollah enjoys a leading role in this respect. Thus, having an Iranian missile factory in Syria would indeed mark a military game-changer for the region.
- ✓ Besides, guided rockets and quasi-ballistic missiles offer an offense dominant regime in which any potential adversary's defensive C-RAM (counter rocket, artillery, and mortar) and missile defense capabilities could be stressed easily by overwhelming numerical advantages.
- ✓ Geopolitically, Syria is Iran's gateway to the Mediterranean and Lebanon where Tehran's most robust proxy, Hezbollah, is based. The Shiite group is considered by many as the real winner in the Syrian Civil War by acquiring new capabilities and invaluable warfighting experience. Thus, Hezbollah presence would always function as a force multiplier for the Iranian basing in Syria. Notably, any activity close to the Golan Heights would provide the Iran – Hezbollah axis with a key ability to control escalation and de-escalation patterns with Israel.
- ✓ Despite their differences of opinion, Israel and Russia have kept their backchannels of intelligence open since Moscow's intervention in Syria in 2015. Keeping this dialogue working would be essential to prevent the outbreak of a regional conflict in the Levant.
- ✓ In case the Russian anti-access / area denial (A2/AD) bubble turns against the Israeli Air Force as a potential risk factor, then the Israeli military planners could opt for surface-to-surface missiles when conducting "surgical" operations in Syria. Nevertheless, the IAF's ability to operate in the Syrian airspace may also be currently degrading due to the modernization of Syrian air defenses. This modernization trend may include high-end missiles, radars,

C4ISR⁵⁴ architectures and electronic warfare capabilities, as well as advanced interoperability –or even fusion– with the Russian systems deployed in the Hmeymim base. Such a breakthrough would considerably alter the battlespace parameters.

- ✓ Of the two alleged military facilities, al–Kiswah has an invaluable geostrategic location in close proximity to the capital Damascus, Mazzeh Military Base of the Syrian Arab Armed Forces –a key asset for the regime–, and the Golan Heights. Israel's reported air strike was an attempt of punitive signaling to the Iranians and the Assad regime. In case the regime and the Iranian contingent in Syria opt for rebuilding al–Kiswah compound, it could lead to an uncontrolled spiral of conflict.
- ✓ Differently than al–Kiswah military compound, the alleged missile production facility in Baniyas could have a longer term strategic impact. Besides, it is very close to the Russian A2 / AD nodes in Syria, and thereby, could constitute a riskier target for a surgical strike or gunboat diplomacy.
- ✓ Despite the lack of adequate and publicly available information about the alleged Baniyas military facility, the size of the installation and some building types are consistent with Israel's allegations, although the satellite imagery is not sufficient to irrevocably prove that this complex is specifically built for missile production. In fact, such building designs could be well used, for example, to produce explosives for the Syrian Arab Army too.

⁵⁴ Command, Control, Communications, Computers, Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance