

Al Tanaf and Beyond: What is the US Strategy in Syria?

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Abstract: The American airstrike against Iranian-backed fighters near Al Tanaf base last month represent a major change in the nature of the United States' use of force in Syria. Despite the aggressive stance adopted by the White House, the rest of the administration oppose opening a broader front against Iran in Syria before the end of the Mosul and Raqqa battles. Meanwhile, Iran is advancing and challenging the established "frontlines" with Russian support. The Syrian conflict is at a critical juncture that will determine whether Iran or the United States enjoys influence over Iraq and Syria. Without an effective anti-Iran strategy in Syria, Tehran will come to dominate the land corridor through Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon.

Introduction

Up until May 18, the U.S. and Iran had managed to avoid each other in Syria, despite both having increased their presence in the country. In contrast with Iraq, where both seem to support the central government in fighting ISIS, in Syria they are waging different wars. Tehran has mostly fought against the Syrian opposition, whereas the U.S. has concentrated most of its efforts on fighting ISIS.¹ A quick glance at the map would even show an imaginary line along the Euphrates that divides Syria into two main zones of influence, the U.S. and its allies to the east of river, and the regime, Iran, and Russia to its west. Yet, on May 18 the U.S. hit a convoy of Iranian-armed Shiite fighters close to a base at Al Tanaf. The airstrike marked the first time U.S. forces targets Iran's military presence in Syria directly. So, what has caused this change in the nature of the U.S. use of force in Syria?

Al Tanaf is a base near the Syrian–Iraqi–Jordanian borders, and it currently hosts 150 U.S. troops in addition to British, Norwegian, and Jordanian troops. Their main objective is to train and assist local armed groups against ISIS in the Syrian desert.² This presence is part of the Pentagon-sponsored train and equip program, which allows for U.S. assistance to aid in the defense of territory controlled by partner forces. Nevertheless, the authorization includes protection against ISIS only and not against the Syrian regime, Iran, and even less Russian forces. According to General Joseph Dunford, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the May 18 airstrike was a response to pro-regime vehicles that had moved into the de-escalation zone established around Al Tanaf. He said, "That was a force protection strike, our commanders on the ground felt like they were threatened at that point, and their rules of engagement allow them to do that."³ Hence, the decision to push back the Iranian militias was the result

of devolution within the American army ranks, and was a defensive tactic rather than a policy shift in Syria. Nonetheless, three weeks later Iranian-backed militias went around Al Tanaf and took control of Al Waer border control point, blocking American advances to Al Boukamal on the Syrian Iraqi border and upstream to the Euphrates Valley.

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Iran's Game In the Syrian Desert

An initial analysis of Iran's objectives in the Syrian desert might lead us to believe that Tehran's primary goal is to establish transit routes from Iran to Lebanon in order to maintain a logistical supply route to Hezbollah. A closer look at the map, however, reveals another important dimension. Indeed, chasing ISIS out of the Syrian desert will achieve two other major objectives. First, Iran would establish a strong foothold in the oil-rich Euphrates Valley, an ISIS hotbed. Second, it could challenge the American presence in the north of the valley and limit any further expansion of U.S. forces and their allies in Syria.

Iran expansion in the Syrian desert would require a link from the territory under the control of People Mobilization Units (PMU) in Iraq, through Palmyra in the Syrian desert and Aleppo where Iran-backed militias are stationed. In the former case, Iran needs to expand in Deir ez-Zor Province, whereas in the latter it needs to expand its influence and control within Hasakah Province.

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In order to achieve these objectives, Iran has adopted a twin-pillar strategy as following: The first pillar depends on engaging Iran's local proxies on the main axes connecting Iraq and Syria. Tehran has recently deployed 3,000 Hezbollah, Afghan, and Iraqi fighters to the southeastern region between Al Tanaf and Deir ez-Zor.⁴

The second pillar predicates on recruiting local Arab tribes into a PMU-like structure to maintain the region under control afterward. The IRGC has recently instructed Nawwaf Al Bashir to lead the recruitment efforts across the Hasaka and Aleppo provinces to this end⁵

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The timing of Iran's latest activities in the Syrian desert is opportune, and suggests that they are more than a mere reaction to the American presence in Al Tanaf. Indeed, the U.S.-led International Coalition is preoccupied with the liberation of Al Raqqa, and the Americans are yet to succeed in recruiting more fighters in their train and equip program. The latest estimations of the Al Maghawir Al Thoawra Brigade and the Syrian Elite Forces suggest that these recruits add up to less than a thousand fighters dispersed between Al Hasaka province and Deir ez-Zor. Moreover, Tehran relies on the lack of a U.S. strategy on how to deal with its proxies in Syria, and seems to be taking advantage of the bureaucratic machine's sluggish action in Washington to grab larger areas before an American containment strategy is formulated

Meanwhile, Iran is enjoying the support of the Russian air forces, and there is no evidence that suggests it will show any restraint if it is not militarily confronted. Recent advances made by Hezbollah troops near Al Tabqa, a city to the west of Raqqa, further reveal Iran's intentions to challenge the U.S. to the east of the Euphrates Valley.⁶



Figure 1

Logistic routes between Iran and Lebanon

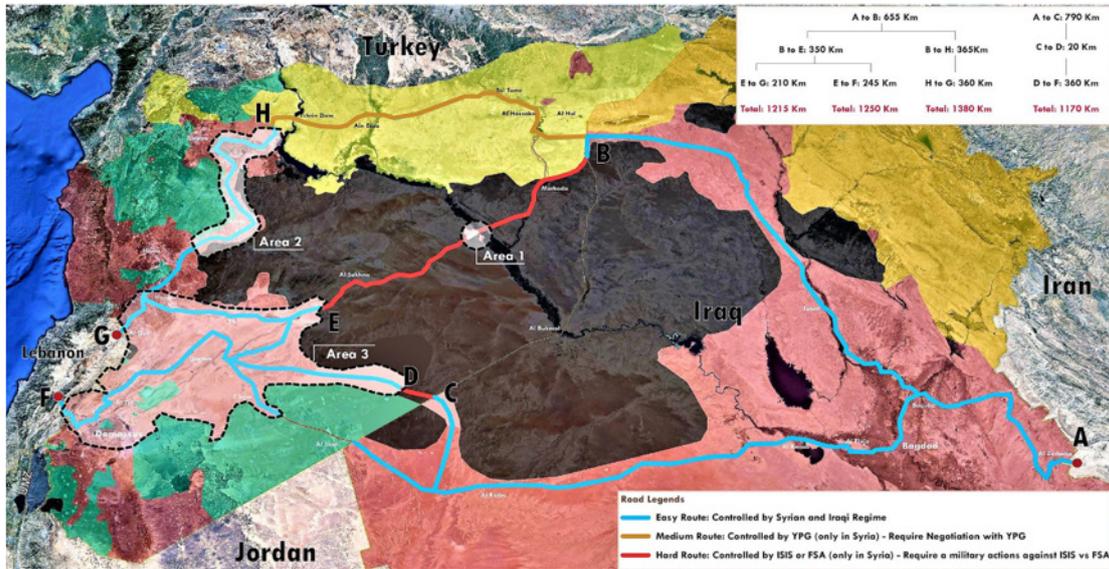


Figure 2

Loyalists forces in the Syrian Desert

Regime forces and allied militias in Area 1 and who's supporting them



Regime forces and allied militias in Area 2 and who's supporting them



Regime forces and allied militias in Area 3 and who's supporting them



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Misunderstanding Russian Intentions

American attempts to positively engage Moscow on Syria are not a recent affair, nor an initiative that began with the Trump administration. His predecessor's diplomatic efforts were culminated by the infamous Kerry–Lavrov deal in September last year,⁷ going as far as suggesting the establishment of a joint implementation center, which would represent an unprecedentedly high level of cooperation between the two global rivals. Nevertheless, the deal was met with resistance within the U.S. army, and ultimately failed.⁸

The Trump administration is motivated by three different assumptions in its pursuit for closer collaboration with Russia in the Middle East. First, that Russia is open to and desirous of cooperation with the U.S. in the Middle East instead of competing with it. Second, the prospect of driving a wedge between Moscow and Tehran would further isolate Iran in the region. Third, exploiting Russian leverage over Assad would allow the extraction of necessary concessions for a political settlement. Nevertheless, a closer examination of the reality belies these overly optimistic beliefs. Not only is Russia dependent on Iran to maintain Assad in power and vice versa, but Moscow and Tehran share a common objective of preventing any further U.S. expansion in the region. Indeed, they see eye-to-eye on the necessity of a mutual agreement regardless of their many but minor differences in dealing with Washington. Lavrov, for instance, has described the U.S. airstrike near Al Tanaf a “violation of Syria’s sovereignty.”⁹

Moreover, so far, Russia has thus failed to curb Tehran’s growing influence inside Syrian state institutions. Moscow’s solution for halting the expansion of Iran-backed militias in Syria is the establishment of a 5th division in the Syrian army. The 5th division’s objective is to recruit fighters from local loyalist militias and to reorganize them under the direct command of the army chief of staff. Nevertheless, the Russians have failed so far to impose a consolidated central command, and each militia that has ended up joining the 5th division has preserved its own autonomy and chain of command within the division. Further demonstrating the limited Russian capacity in this regard, news reports suggest that Damascus is on the verge of approving a legislation legalizing Iranian support to local armed groups, and thus recognizing them as part of the state apparatus.¹⁰

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Besides, Moscow and Washington still remain at odds in their vision for a future political transition in Syria. Russia does not envisage more than a national unity government in which a Moscow-vetted political opposition can participate, whereas the U.S. still advocates change at the top leadership level in addition to broader opposition participation in a transitional governing body.

Nonetheless, Moscow is enjoying Washington’s courtship, and it will not willingly change its current status. On the contrary, the bad boy role Iran is playing in the Middle East, and the lack of an U.S. plan to unilaterally act against it, is alleviating some of Russia’s burden in Syria, and the prolonged sta-



tus quo has conveniently allowed it to begin eliminating non-compliant mainstream opposition groups under the false pretense of fighting terrorism. Just like Iran, Russia has no good reason to further cooperate with the U.S. if the latter fails to demonstrate more assertive behavior in Syria.

American Options

Turkey, Iran, and Russia have signed a de-escalation deal in Kazakhstan to establish four de-escalation zones in the opposition's main strongholds of Idlib, Homs, Daraa, and Aleppo. The halt of opposition activity in the north and center of the country, coupled with a large-scale withdrawal of rebels from the Damascus suburbs, has freed up the regime and allowed Iran-backed troops to move further east. For the first time since its intervention in the Syrian conflict, Iran is fighting ISIS, and very much like in Iraq, it is beating the Americans at their own game.

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The Trump administration has kept ISIS eradication high on its agenda, and has identified halting Iranian expansion as its next priority. However, the terms and details of an U.S. anti-Iran strategy remain vague and difficult to predict. Several serious problems are expected regardless of whether the U.S. seeks to achieve both objectives at the same time or sequentially. First, the question of how to ensure that Iran does not exploit the war against ISIS to grab more “free” areas in the Levant; second, who to partner with to fight ISIS on the ground; and third, which regional forces to rely on to push back Iran.

Indeed, the U.S. has previously relied on the PKK's Syrian affiliate, the People Defense Units (YPG) to fight ISIS in Syria, and the PMU and the Iraqi National Forces in Iraq. On whom will the U.S. depend to chase out ISIS from their last rampart in the Syrian Desert?

Indeed, the U.S. has previously relied on the PKK's Syrian affiliate, the People Defense Units (YPG) to fight ISIS in Syria, and the PMU and the Iraqi National Forces in Iraq. On whom will the U.S. depend on to chase out ISIS from their last rampart in the Syrian Desert? The YPG has already reached its geographical limits, and will not risk losing its most valuable lands through overstressing its forces. The PMU, on the other hand, is under the direct influence of the IRGC, and more importantly indirectly controls the Iraqi army. The only other available alternative is to partner with the oil-rich GCC countries and with Turkey and Jordan to support and assist the Syrian mainstream opposition to participate in the next phase of the war against ISIS. The last option however, comes at a cost—the forceful removal of Bashar Al Assad and the expansion of Turkey in the Levant—and this is a price the U.S. is not willing to pay.

At the Riyadh Summit on May 20, just two days after the Al Tanaf airstrikes, the establishment of a “Muslim NATO” to fight ISIS was discussed and agreed upon and the conveniently-uninvited Iran's behavior was roundly criticized.¹¹ Surprisingly, the first course of action was a complete Saudi, Emirati and Trump-backed boycott of Qatar. The pretense under which this escalation took part was an alleged Doha “connection” with Tehran. Qatar, on the other hand, is an important supporter of the Syrian Opposition against whom Iran is fighting in Syria. Moreover, the current GCC crisis also reminds Ankara of a probable Arab role in supporting the July 15, 2016 failed coup, and will potentially feed into intra-Sunni polarization in the region.



A genuine question hence arises: how will the U.S. administration succeed in creating an anti-ISIS anti-Iran Islamic Coalition while cleaning up the havoc caused by Trump's latest adventure in the Middle East?

Iran has previously shown great ability in exploiting the chaos that reigns in the region, and has so far successfully filled the void left by the string of failing states. Russia recognizes this ability and has chosen to take advantage of Tehran's influence in Syria and Iraq to further consolidate its partnership with Iran in the Middle East

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What Comes After Raqqa?

There is strong evidence to suggest that there has been a re-deployment of ISIS forces to Deir ez-Zor province,¹² leaving few men behind in the "Caliphate's" capital. There are a number of reasons and motives behind this tactical change. First the vulnerability of the city's defenses: Raqqa became theoretically indefensible after the liberation of Tabqa. Second, the high cost of maintaining control of the city, which is surrounded by the SDF to the east, north, and west. Raqqa now has only its southern "gates" partially open for forces to move in and out of the city, and the cost of feeding its people has dramatically increased.

Third, preparing for the aftermath; with the Mosul operation reaching its long overdue epilogue, and with no realistic scenarios other than a prolonged siege in Raqqa, ISIS will have to fold back into the Syrian desert. This demands the movement of the necessary human resources, money, and machinery out of compromised locations. Fourth, the lack of trust in the residents of Raqqa; the ISIS leadership cannot arm the city's civilians in fear of them defecting during battle.

It is safe to assume that the Raqqa operation will not last for too long. The main obstacle is physical, overcoming ISIS defenses while preserving the lives of the 150,000 besieged civilians. It is true that the locals dread being under the control of the SDF, and given the choice between the YPG and ISIS they would choose neither, but since the cost of staying under ISIS control is becoming extremely high, and they are becoming less resistant to the idea of the city being taken by the YPG-led forces. The announcement of an interim local council with known and respected names will allow the creation of a positive post-liberation environment, if they are given the authority to act and to govern.

Future Challenges

The main mystery is to what extent is the USA willing to support and protect the SDF. Current observations suggest that the administration has taken a clear decision to defend these forces from Turkey only. Nevertheless, the decision taken by American forces to patrol Syrian-Turkish borders to prevent the Turkish Army from shelling YPG forces is the result of the devolution of authority inside the U.S. Army rather than a long-run strategy. Similarly, when pro-Iranian militias and regime forces approached the Al Tanaf base, it was a local decision to push them back, and the White House only knew of it later.

Iran and Russia will keep making efforts to gain back control of Syria's borders, and in



exchange they are willing to agree to the establishment of small isolated safe zones to accommodate and host displaced civilians from the city centers they aspire to control.¹³ Meanwhile, Iran will keep on advancing and challenging the established “frontlines” and Russia will support it in doing so. The only way to prevent the Iranians from becoming an incontestable force with the advantage of having boots on the ground is through developing a comprehensible policy around Iran in Syria.

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Nevertheless, a U.S. confrontation with Iran in Syria would be synonymous with the new phase of war in the region, leaving a far greater impact than a mere upgrade of the Syrian conflict. Such a confrontation would damage and most probably end the multilateral nuclear deal with Tehran. Furthermore, it could potentially put U.S. troops in Iraq at the risk of retaliation from the PMU, and permanently damage U.S. relations with Baghdad. This explains the Pentagon hesitation to further escalate against Iran in Syria despite the new administration’s tough rhetoric against Tehran. The U.S. has too many constraints to effectively deal with the situation in the Middle East, and with no intentions of sending more troops to the region, a paradigm shift is required in Washington’s alliances in the region.



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