



**NOR'EAST**  
STUDIES OF EASTERN SYRIA

**ANALYTICAL  
REPORT**

# **SYRIA**

## **ESCALATING TENSIONS AND POTENTIAL BATTLE PROSPECTS**

### **POLITICAL AND FIELD DEVELOPMENTS PORTEND A NEW WAR**

**16/August/2023**

## introduction:

The Syrian file has been witnessing a remarkable escalation during the recent period, on both the political and field levels. This escalation is manifested in a series of successive developments and events that have further complicated the scene. It is likely that eastern Syria will have the largest share of these transformations. The points of engagement between the suffocated regional and international powers inside eastern Syria reach point zero in some areas, This has led to speculation about changes in the map of control in the region, which could have a decisive impact on the future of the Syrian conflict. Therefore, these developments require an in-depth analysis based on reliable sources to understand the nature of current events and anticipate their potential repercussions on the general situation in Syria and the surrounding region.

The key word in the current conflict is to prevent Iran from using the strategic city of Al-Bukamal between Iraq and Syria as a corridor to finance its forces and logistical supplies. This could be enough to put the Syrian regime under more political and military pressure if the operation takes place

## Rapid political developments and their significance:

### 1. The Jordanian–Syrian border:

Many obstacles still prevent the process of opening up the Arab Gulf countries to the Assad regime, which has not fulfilled the most basic obligations and evaded its pledge to control the borders. This may prompt those countries to take opposite steps that limit the danger of drug flow, especially since their political decision is greatly affected by the US decision. This makes its ability to challenge US desires for clear escalation very limited.[1]

The Nassib–Jaber border crossing has become partially dysfunctional due to slow traffic , Besides, Saudi requirements regarding the technical specifications of trucks – which do not apply to a large number of Syrian trucks – have caused a transit crisis towards the crossing. The increased focus on the crossing is due to the rise in drug smuggling operations through it, with the Syrian regime being the main suspect behind it.

On the other hand, the Jordanian military leadership announced the downing of a drone loaded with drugs coming from Syrian territory, a day after a meeting was held between Jordan and the regime to stop drug smuggling across the Syrian border into Jordan [2]

### 2. The most prominent developments in Lebanon:

The embassies of the Gulf countries (Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar and the UAE) warned their nationals in Lebanon and asked them to leave Lebanese territory and adhere to the decision to prevent travel to the country.

This points out their knowledge of the existence of a real potential danger in Lebanon. Perhaps Ain al-Hilweh camp clashes that ended were a pretext that did not match the volume of those warnings. In the same context comes the events in the (Maronite) town of Kahala, located on the Beirut–Damascus road, when a Hezbollah truck loaded with weapons overturned.

[1] <https://www.alahednews.com.lb/article.php?id=57199&cid=116>

[2] <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/654187>

The townspeople who blocked the road protested, refusing that their town be a logistical crossing point for the Hezbollah militia. This is an indication that the Damascus–Beirut road is no longer safe for Hezbollah and Iran, and that it could be cut off at any moment.

It also confirms that the size of tensions in the country is waiting for any spark to slide into armed clashes. It is necessary here to point out that the Lebanese context and the political and sectarian divisions it contains is considered the ground on which the country is moving on. . Therefore, any abnormal escalation in this context, especially with regard to the identity and symbolism of sectarian places, is sufficient to move matters from one side to serve its interests in the next stage.

### **3. The visit of Qaani, commander of the Quds Force in the Iranian Revolutionary Guards:**

The commander of the Quds Force in the Iranian Revolutionary Guards, Ismail Qaani, visited Lebanon and Syria. It must be noted here that it is rare for Iranian comments to come out about the reasons for Qaani's frequent visits to Syria or Lebanon, but Lebanese media indicated that his current visit to Syria and then to Beirut comes "at a time when the enemies of the two countries are trying to find out what actions it is run by Brigadier General Qaani, especially at this sensitive stage". This signifies that the current visit conveyed messages regarding Iran and its allies' dedication to a potential military reaction in case of any escalation in the region.

### **4. The coalition led by the United States of America:**

The US-led international coalition has strengthened its forces coming from Iraq to its bases in Al-Omar oil and Koniko gas fields. On the other hand, the Russians and Iranians continued to gather on the lines of contact with SDF.

At the US domestic level, and with the approaching elections stage, the ruling party of the Democrats is increasingly in need of a tactical victory ahead of the elections, which could improve the nuclear negotiation process and satisfy the Jewish lobby by weakening the Iranian arms in the region through imposing a new field reality.

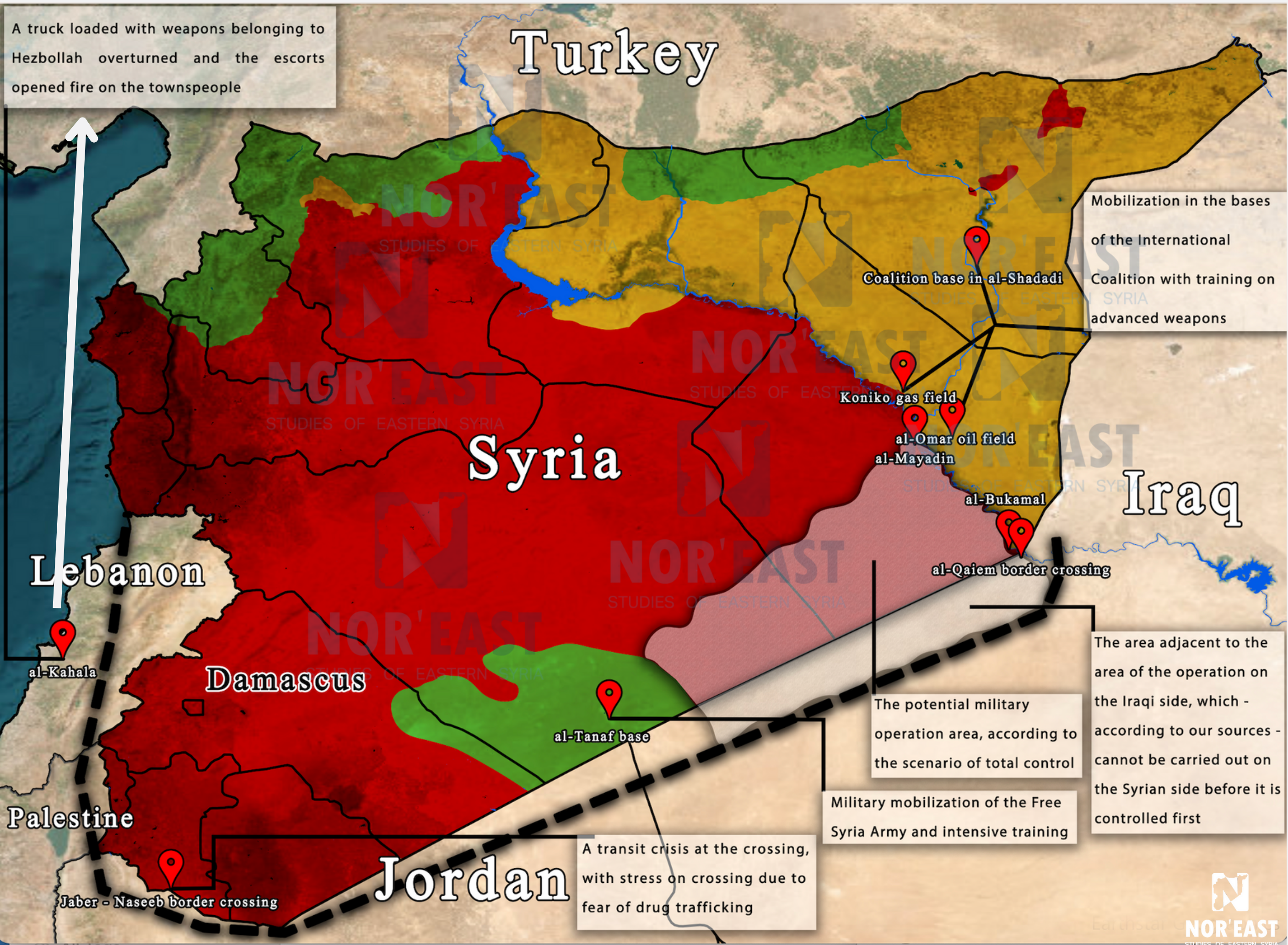
### **5. The statements of the Syrian Foreign Minister, Faisal al-Miqdad, during his visit to Iran and Bashar al-Assad interview on Sky News Arabia:**

After his sudden visit to Iran, Al-Miqdad stated on 07/31/2023 that "America wants Al-Tanaf region it occupies to be a center for terrorist organizations that it sends to this or that place, and America's main goal is to prevent any solution to the crisis in Syria." [3]

For his part, the head of the Syrian regime, Bashar al-Assad, stated in his interview with "Sky News Arabia" that Arab–Arab relations are only formal, downplaying the importance of the normalization that took place with him. Besides, Assad did not pin high hopes on further normalization with the Arabs. In addition to his exclusion of rapprochement with Turkey at the present time. These statements by regime officials reflect the blockage of the political horizon and signifies that the regime and its allies are ready for any possible military or economic escalation.

[3] <https://rb.gy/eOca7>

# A MAP SHOWING THE MOST IMPORTANT DEVELOPMENTS ON THE OUTSKIRTS OF SYRIA AND THE POSSIBILITY OF CUTTING SUPPLY AND TRADE ROUTES TO THE SYRIAN REGIME AND IRAN



(S) [HTTPS://RB.GY/EOCA77](https://rb.gy/eoca77)

## 6. SDF and its allies:

The spokesman for the Syrian Democratic Council (SDC), Riyadh Darar, confirmed that AANES is the head of the Syrian opposition inside Syria, and that Iran is planning to strike US positions through the Arab regions in Syria. Darar also stressed that preparations for any breaches in the region exist with regard to the possible Al-Bukamal operation, and that threats from the Iranian side cannot intimidate a real force such as the one in northeastern Syria. [4]

In the same regard, differences arose between SDF and the Deir Ezzor Military Council after Abu Khawla informed the coalition leadership of his agreement to participate in the military operation west of the Euphrates, which was rejected by SDF. This paved the way for clashes in the northern countryside of Deir Ezzor, which ended with the control of the Council and the imposition of its influence on the region.

## 7. The sudden economic decline of the Syrian regime:

The accelerating economic deterioration in Syria cannot be separated from the recent political and field developments, in light of the regime's failure to abide by its commitments to combat the drugs flow across its borders. This was reflected in the assistance he was expecting from the process of opening up to the Gulf.

## Major field developments

### 1. Military build-up on all sides: (see Appendix 1)

### 2. ISIS attacks:

The organization's operations have escalated significantly in the last two weeks, the most prominent of which is the killing of 32 members of regime forces and the wounding of others in one operation, in addition to other operations that are more intensive in quality and quantity (see Appendix 2).

Based on these data, it can be said that the increase in the pace of ISIS operations is due to two factors:

The first: is the new caliph appointed by the organization, who carries a military strategy that differs from his predecessor, according to what the organization declared

The second: is the utilization of the organization's name by one of the conflicting parties serves as a means to create confusion in an area where military forces have consistently justified their presence based on the organization's conflict. They have established a connection between their existence and the organization's presence, thereby strengthening their rationale as the organization's activities become more intense.

### 3. Continuing clashes in Deir Ezzor and increasing their number and quality:

At a time when the People's Protection Units refuse the participation of the Arab forces to confront the Iranian-backed militias due to PKK's "warm" relations with Tehran. The US efforts to establish an Arab force come to play this role. On the other hand, it was reported that Iran and the regime are preparing military formations to launch operations against the US forces in Syria, under the umbrella of the popular resistance.[5]

[4] <https://rb.gy/eOca7>

[5] <https://rb.gy/eOca77>

#### 4. The Kurdish Arab conflict in SDF areas

The escalation of tension between the Arab tribes and the Kurdish AANES in the east of the Euphrates is the result of a group of factors, the most important of which are: the desire of the Arab tribes to play a role appropriate to their size and capabilities, and their awareness of their importance and the regional and international competition around them. In addition to the desire to get rid of the political and economic marginalization of the Arab tribes by the Kurdish AANES, and to present itself as a local force to acquire the support that the regional powers might provide to the Arab tribes.

The tribes east of the Euphrates have called on the Kurdish AANES to carry out political and economic reforms to ensure equality between all components. Including distributing wealth, senior positions, and privileges fairly among all components, and involving Arabs in managing governance and public affairs, in addition to improving basic services in all regions. However, the Kurdish AANES did not respond to these demands, which exacerbated the crisis between AANES and the Arabs. Recently, many Arab protests against the Kurdish AANES have emerged, resulting in many casualties.

This gap between SDF and the Arab component tempts Iran and its allies to bridge it by supporting the tribes in their conflict with the US forces.

#### 5. The transfer of forces from Arab components through areas of influence:

It was reported – as a private source confirmed to the center – that personalities had been chosen from the tribes west of the Euphrates, such as (Al-Busaraya, Al-Qur'an, and Al-Asharah) to send them to Jordan (about 300 people)

In addition to forces from the people of Al-Bukamal, who were informed of the possibility of transferring them soon from northern Syria to Jordan. The aim is to participate in the expected operation on the Syrian-Iraqi border, as the source indicated. The source also said that al-Sanadid forces were excluded from the process because the local tribes did not accept them.

The transfer process takes place on two levels: the first level is from Al-Tanaf base towards Al-Omar field at the level of individuals and leaders of the Free Syria Army. The second is from the northern regions of Syria towards Jordan and Al-Tanaf, which means that the Turkish side is in the equation, and that there is a chain in the movement of forces, Al-Tanaf may be a link of it.

It should also be noted that the meetings that took place in Al-Omar field were leaked, in which it was stated that the operation in the Syrian territories would not take place before conducting a similar operation in the Iraqi territories to cut off the supply routes for the militias coming from Iraq during and after the operation.

#### The expected scenarios of military escalation and the impact of each of them on the actors in the region:

##### The first scenario: a comprehensive operation that secures complete control of the Iraqi-Syrian borders:

This will be a broad military operation that includes a ground and air attack from the Iraqi and Syrian sides at the same time, ending with the control of Al-Bukamal, Al-Mayadin and the entire border strip with the permanent deployment of military forces.

[4] <https://rb.gy/eOca7>  
[5] <https://rb.gy/eOca77>

This will be done with the help of the Arab component east of the Euphrates, in addition to the forces of the Free Syria Army in al-Tanaf, and forces from the National Army may be added to them.

In the event of this scenario, the process will be intense and swift, and may extend to include more than 20 km on both sides of the border. The US planes that arrived in the region are among the decisive factors in the air strikes in the event of this scenario, while the forces of the Arab component on the ground will form the spearhead in the land advance.

There is no doubt that this scenario has the most impact on the regime forces and its allies, as it will choke off the Iranian supply lines through Iraq, and weaken the logistical and military strength of the militias. In this case, Iran could resort to responding directly by igniting several fronts in its areas of influence in Lebanon, Yemen, and Gaza.

In addition to the possibility of the regime and the militias resorting to popular military movements, as happened last month when forces calling themselves the "Popular Resistance" adopted an attack on US points in eastern Syria.

In this case, SDF will be one of the affected, as the expansion of the forces affiliated with the coalition directly in places adjacent to its areas of control constitutes another burden on it. This will be through establishing a competing umbrella for SDF in the east. In addition to the danger of an internal conflict within its ranks if some factions, such as the Council of Deir Ezzor and others, decide to participate in the operation in coordination with the Coalition directly without going through SDF.

On the other hand, ISIS will benefit from this temporary chaos, and may intensify its operations during the events to target SDF or the regime. As we have seen in the past few days, when its activity has become more intense and widespread.

### **The second scenario: carrying out a limited operation:**

It will be limited to air raids and intense artillery shelling aimed at closing al-Bukamal-al-Qaim crossing and the Iraqi-Syrian border completely. The crossing and its surrounding areas will be targeted in a way that makes it difficult for the militias to reuse it. In addition to monitoring the borders by deploying drones periodically in the region's sky to ensure that the borders remain closed.

This hypothesis is reinforced by the fact that the ground forces that should be used to conduct the comprehensive military operation are insufficient and unqualified. In this context, it is difficult to rely on the fighters of the Free Syria Army alone, as they barely secure the 55th area in Al-Tanaf. If this scenario succeeds, it is no different from the previous one in terms of the potential impact on the regime and the militias. However, there is a possibility that the crossing will be reopened by the militias after a while, by continuing the military pressure.

For the International Coalition, this will be considered a victory, as Iran's plans will be hindered. Likewise, for SDF, this process is safer for it, as it does not expose it to a direct confrontation with the regime or Iran, and keeps channels open with the regime and its allies. In this scenario, ISIS will not benefit as much from the chaos as in the first scenario, but in general it will intensify its operations, especially against the militias, which will be in their weakest condition.

### **The third scenario: carrying out a media sham rather than a military one:**

This will be an operation to sow ashes in the eyes, after all these leaks, statements and moves, and it is not intended to achieve any military goal. But rather there will be military movements and mobilization by the coalition, with spreading rumors and threatening a military operation to keep the Iranian forces alert. This pattern obstructs many Iranian moves and keeps the militias on constant alert, which reduces their operational and logistical capabilities. In this scenario, very limited skirmishes are expected in Al-Tanaf area (55 km), and Iranian drone strikes may also intensify on coalition bases in the region, especially Al-Omar and Koniko fields.

The region could witness a direct response by the coalition to the militias with air strikes, and it is more likely that there will be an indirect response by striking Iran's arms in the region. As well as targeting Iran's headquarters, especially by Israel in Damascus and the Lebanese-Syrian borders.

### **Fourth Scenario: The military operation does not go beyond statements:**

The successive news about the coalition's intention to launch a military operation may be just a tactic to send messages between the parties, as the United States is seeking to possess strengths in the negotiations regarding Iran's nuclear program.

On the other hand, the Iranian and Russian media campaigns are working to amplify rumors of the international coalition's attacks on the Syrian regime's territory.

This comes with the aim of fueling local tensions with a narrative that is consistent with the Iranian, Russian and Syrian regime's plans to develop popular opposition to carry out attacks against the US in Syria. When the regime and its allies exaggerated talk about the operation, they wanted to burn a phase that the coalition might be planning. In this state of alert and increased readiness in the region, they were able to intensify their presence and strike indirectly and at intervals against US presence in the region, with the aim of thwarting any expected operation in the future or avoiding as much possible damage as possible.



## Appendix 1

On July 16, the International Coalition conducted exercises in Al-Hasakah Governorate, northeastern Syria, where military exercises with live ammunition took place at Al-Shaddadi base, south of the governorate. These exercises came in conjunction with the Coalition sending reinforcements, including artillery, tanks and personnel carriers, from Al-Shaddadi to the Koniko gas field base in Deir Ezzor. Media reports had previously reported that the coalition forces had transferred American "HIMARS" missiles – which proved successful in the Ukrainian-Russian war – to Al-Omar oil field base and Koniko base. It is noteworthy that these missiles are fired by launchers and used in field battles to perform strikes behind enemy lines.

There was also news about US intentions to coordinate between "Al-Sanadid Forces", which is part of "SDF", and the "Free Syria Army", which is the garrison of Al-Tanaf military base at the Syrian-Jordanian-Iraqi border triangle. This news was not confirmed by any of the aforementioned parties, nor did it deny it.

[1] However, a source for the center in Al-Tanaf region stated that there is no crystallized and clear plan for a comprehensive operation. Yet there are training and equipment to cut off the road between Iraq and Syria by striking and closing the crossings at the minimum.

On the other hand, the regime sent reinforcements from Damascus and its environs to Deir Ezzor on the 17th of this month. As the 18th and 11th divisions (tanks), and the Republican Guard forces sent heavy military reinforcements, accompanied by about 200 members. The reinforcements came from the western countryside of Damascus and Homs to Al-Mayadin, which is controlled by the Iranian Revolutionary Guards in the countryside of Deir Ezzor..

More Syrian Army and Republican Guard units, including the Russia-backed Fifth Corps, were also deployed to Deir Ezzor Governorate from July 7–20 near the Iranian-backed forces and along the Line of contact with SDF.

For his part, the Syrian Minister of Defense and officials of the Quds Force of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard coordinated the deployment operations in Deir Ezzor on July 13. Where a meeting was held in the Officers Club in the center of Deir Ezzor Governorate, which brought together the Minister of Defense with the leaders of the Iranian militias.

Among them were Hajj Kamil, the general military official in the Iranian Revolutionary Guards for the province of Deir Ezzor, Hajj Hussein, the military official for Al-Mayadin, and Hajj Abbas, the military official for the border city of Al-Bukamal.

This was followed by a tour of the minister on the lines of contact with SDF in the towns of Hatla, Al-Janina, Marat, Mazloun, Al-Hussainiya, Al-Tabiyah, and Kesham in the northeastern countryside of Deir Ezzor Governorate, in addition to a visit to the leadership of the "137th Brigade" and the "Tala'i Camp" in the western countryside of Deir Ezzor.

## Appendix 2

On July 27, an explosive device exploded in a car in Sayeda Zeinab area, killing at least 6 people. In parallel, ISIS carried out an attack in early August, targeting a convoy of oil tanks in the northern Hama countryside. The attack killed seven people, most of them from regime forces, and on the seventh of this month, the organization carried out another attack targeting military checkpoints belonging to the regime forces and loyalist gunmen in Ma'dan in the eastern countryside of Raqqa, killing 10 members of the regime, and wounding at least 6 others.