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East-West-North-South: The Race for Syria after the Islamic State

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Increasing signs are pointing to the impending fall of the Islamic State in Syria, which has suffered a series of defeats in recent months. The territory in eastern Syria that will be freed of Islamic State control now constitutes a focus of the major struggle between the United States and Iran in Syria, as both are striving to seize the area. Early June marked the onset of the final phase of the US-led coalition's offensive to conquer the city of Raqqa, the capital of the Islamic State in Syria, with a combined Kurdish-Arab (though predominantly Kurdish) ground force – the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) – and air support provided by the international coalition, including the United States, other Western countries, and Arab states. At the same time, Iran and its proxies have also started intensifying efforts aimed at shaping Syria the day after the fall of the Islamic State. Forces of the pro-Assad coalition are currently trying to expand their control in the Deir ez-Zor region and improve their access to Raqqa and the surrounding area, and also seize key positions along the Syrian-Iraqi border.

A Collision between the Two Axes of Influence

The race to shape the Syrian arena, which is currently focused on the campaign to conquer Raqqa and defeat the Islamic State, encompasses two main strategic efforts. One, led by Iran, aims at laying the foundation for a Shiite axis land bridge from Iran in the east, via Iraq, to Syria and Lebanon in the west. Its primary mode of operation is the seizure, by Iranian proxies, of major points of passage between Iraq and Syria – with Iraqi Shiite militias (al-Hashd al-Sha'abi □ the People's Mobilization Forces) on the Iraqi side of the border and forces of the pro-Assad coalition, including the remnants of the Syrian army under the authority of Bashar al-Assad, Hezbollah, and Shiite militias on the Syrian side of the border. According to Ali Akbar Velayati, an advisor to Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, "a relationship has been forged between the popular forces, the forces of the Iraqi government and military, and the unified forces in Syria. In

practice, this is a strategic victory for Iran's allies and for the ring of resistance to Zionism that begins in Tehran and reaches Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon."

In a rival strategic effort, the US-led coalition has been operating to create a wedge running north-south to sever the Iranian land bridge and cut off Iranian influence in Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and west of the Persian Gulf. This effort is aimed at creating a buffer zone-security strip controlled by US allies, extending from Turkey in the north, via eastern Syria, southward to Jordan and to Saudi Arabia. Over the past weeks, a number of attacks have been carried out by US air forces against forces of the pro-Assad coalition along the southeastern segment of the Syrian-Iraqi border, in the region of the Syrian city of al-Tanf, located near the tripartite border between Jordan-Syria-Iraq. The United States has declared this area to be a "de-confliction" zone under its influence and will therefore not allow the deployment of forces belonging to Assad or to Iranian proxies in the region. On June 18, a Syrian fighter plane was shot down in the Raqqa region of eastern Syria as part of the air cover that the United States is providing to the Syrian Democratic Forces fighting to liberate Raqqa.

Iranian parties have explained that the deployment of forces loyal to Iran along the Iraqi-Syrian-Jordanian border is meant to thwart the US plan to divide Syria. According to the Iranians, the United States seeks to link the northeastern part of Syria that is under Kurdish control to the southeastern section of the country, up to the Jordanian border, and has therefore increased its activities and attacks in the Tanf region. The voices from Iran indicate that their forces aim: (a) to defend Iran's dominance in Iraq, the survival of the Assad regime, and Iranian strategic depth by means of a land corridor from Tehran to Beirut; (b) to destroy the Islamic State along the Syrian-Iraqi border; (c) to neutralize the US plan to dismantle Syria; and (d) to prevent US-supported forces from establishing control over eastern Syria. It is therefore no coincidence that Iran chose to respond to the Islamic State attack in Tehran by launching six surface-to-surface missiles from Iranian territory at an Islamic State target in the Deir ez-Zor region of eastern Syria. In doing so, it demonstrated its potential in the field of ballistic missiles and leveraged its message that it is at war with the Islamic State and is unafraid of operating in a sector in which the United States is working to establish its influence.

Russia's position in this context is not entirely clear. On the one hand, both the Assad regime and sources in Moscow report that Russia is a partner in the Assad regime's efforts in eastern Syria, aided by Iran and Hezbollah, to derail the American plan. On May 8, the Syrian newspaper al-Watan, which has close relations with the regime, reported that "massive reinforcements of Syrian and Russian military forces have arrived in the Syrian desert, in addition to the forces of friends, in preparation for an operation to take control of Deir ez-Zor and the Iraqi border." At the same time, there have been

reports of coordination efforts in Jordan between US and Russian representatives. There have also been reports that Russia is working to prevent friction between forces of the Syrian regime and its allies and US forces, and strives to reach understandings with the United States and Jordan regarding a de-confliction zone, a de-escalation zone, and mutual attacks in southern Syria. In response to the intercepting of the Syrian plane in the Deir ez-Zor region, Russia announced that “all aircraft, manned and unmanned, of the international coalition operating west of the Euphrates River, will be identified as targets by Russian air defense systems,” appearing to create a Russian-controlled no-fly zone west of the Euphrates.

As part of the struggle for control of southeastern Syria, the United States has deployed two HIMARS multiple launch rocket batteries to the American special forces base near al-Tanf. In response, the Russian Defense Ministry stated that every entry of a foreign weapon system into Syria requires authorization by the central government in Damascus, and that the deployment indicates that the United States is not focused on fighting the Islamic State as its claims to be. The United States was then charged with failing to prevent Islamic State fighters from fleeing Raqqa toward Deir ez-Zor.

The pro-Assad coalition led by Russia and Iran appears to be following the American activity in southern and eastern Syria with great concern. In addition to the establishment of a special security zone north of the Jordanian-Syrian border and attacks on forces supporting the Assad regime, this activity has included use of a training infrastructure for forces of the Syrian opposition, the deployment of US special forces reinforced by artillery support, and an air umbrella provided by the Western coalition. From an Iranian perspective, and perhaps also from a Russian point of view, this marks a new phase in the US campaign to shape Syria in preparation for the day after the Islamic State, which is aimed at neutralizing the Iranian presence and influence in Syria.

The Potential for Escalation between the US and Iran in Syria and Iraq

The Trump administration includes elements that are extremely hostile to Iran and are pushing to expand the war in Syria as an opportunity to clash with Iran on a “comfortable” playing field. These elements have apparently suggested the idea of establishing an American-dominated north-to south running strip through eastern Syria with the aim of blocking and containing Iran’s regional aspirations. At the same time, Secretary of State James Mattis and US military leaders oppose the opening of a broad front against Iran and its proxies in Syria and regard it as endangering the capacity for a focused effort to advance the primary goal: the dismantling and defeat of the Islamic State. Therefore, at least at this stage, the US military leadership is seeking to avoid friction with the Iranians and Russians.

In the meantime, Iran is resolutely striving to progress toward its goals – i.e., more than other actors in the Middle East. It is checking the limits of US intervention, without any capacity to estimate the intensity of the United States commitment in the race to achieve control over eastern Syria. As a result, there is currently a potential for US-Iranian escalation in Syria that could spread to Iraq – either intentionally or as a result of miscalculated assessments.

Conclusion

The current race for control of territory in Syria now appears to be a competition between Iran and the United States, which have established two respective axes –with a vertical American (north-south) effort on the one hand, and a horizontal Iranian (east-west) effort on the other hand. In practice, this is another stage in the shaping of Syria in preparation for the day after the Islamic State. Thus far, the Syrian arena could be viewed as a game board with multiple squares, with the move of pieces in each square having an impact on the state of affairs in the others. First, Russia set up its pieces on the board's central-western sector, between Aleppo and Damascus, including the coastal region. Turkey followed suit, arranging its forces in the board's northern sector along the Syrian-Turkish border, including an effort to safeguard its interests in the Kurdish region. The United States focused its warfare against the Islamic State primarily in northeastern Syria, and is now trying to reorganize its pieces in the southeastern square of the Syria game board.

As a result, the country's southwestern region, from Daraa to the Golan Heights, remains open for activity and influence by Israel and Jordan, which must begin taking action before it is too late. Contacts are apparently underway to formulate a joint Israeli-Jordanian-American strategy aimed at preventing Iranian influence and the presence of its proxies, especially Hezbollah and Shiite militias, in the southern square of the Syrian game board. Israel and Jordan must also prepare themselves for the possibility that Islamic State fighters fleeing northeastern Syria could move southward and link up with the Islamic State branch at the border in the Golan Heights. Moreover, Israel must not forget Russia's influence in Syria and the need to reach understandings with Moscow, at least on a clandestine level, regarding every move in this direction. Syria may have understood as much, which would explain the increased intensity of the pro-Assad coalition's attacks in the Daraa region over the past few weeks, primarily from the air. Still, Russia understands that Israel possess the capacity to cause significant damage in Syria, and therefore prefers to maintain understandings with Israel and take Israel's concerns seriously.