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Russia and Iran Prepare Offensive Targeting U.S. and Partner Forces in Eastern Syria

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Key Takeaway: Iran and Russia are preparing to attack the U.S. and its primary ground partner - the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) - in Eastern Syria. These threats may coerce the SDF to abandon its relationship with the U.S. and instead cut a deal with Assad. Iran and Russia will attempt to compel the withdrawal of the U.S. from Syria by inflicting deniable costs and stoking guerilla conflicts through their proxies in Northern and Eastern Syria. The U.S. must commit to defending its partners and presence in Eastern Syria in order to prevent the resurgence of ISIS and deny key resources to Iran, Russia, and Assad.

Iran, Russia, and Syrian President Bashar al-Assad are preparing to attack the U.S. and its primary ground partner - the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) - in Eastern Syria. Iran, Russia, and Assad seek to compel a withdrawal of the U.S. from Syria by imposing costs (including casualties) on the U.S. Anti-ISIS Coalition. Assad reiterated his intent to recapture terrain held by the SDF in Northern Syria in separate interviews with Kremlin-controlled media on May 31 and June 24. Assad stressed that the regime will not hesitate to use force if negotiations fail with the SDF.

Iran and Russia are consolidating their existing proxies with newly-recruited pro-regime tribal fighters in order to generate deniable combat power in Eastern Syria. The forces they can leverage include:

- **Liwa al-Baqir – a Syrian Arab tribal militia backed by Iran and Russia.** Liwa al-Baqir - a tribal militia trained by the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) - published a statement calling for jihad against the U.S. in Syria on April 6. Iran and Russia are likely helping to build the capabilities of Liwa al-Baqir in Eastern Syria. Iran coopted a prominent sheikh of the Baggara Tribe to recruit pro-regime tribal forces from Lebanon and Syria in 2017.[1] The Baggara Tribal Confederation operates primarily in SDF-held areas in Deir ez-Zour Province. These new recruits are likely joining Liwa al-Baqir, which consolidated military positions near SDF-held oil and gas fields near Deir ez Zour City from March to April 2018.[2] Russia also provides military and logistical support to up to 8,000 pro-regime tribal fighters, likely augmenting Liwa al-Baqir.[3]
- **Iran and its proxies in Eastern Syria.** The IRGC and Iranian-backed proxies including Lebanese Hezbollah and elements of the Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) are present in regime-held areas of Deir ez-Zour Province. An alleged airstrike by Israel targeted a buildup of PMF and Hezbollah in Eastern Syria on June 18. The airstrike also likely killed an IRGC Brigadier General, whom Iran confirmed died near Abu Kamal in Southern Deir ez-Zour Province. Iran is disguising some of its forces and proxies as regime units in order to obfuscate the extent of its military presence in Eastern Syria. "Cross-border militias" - likely a reference to Iranian proxies - are reportedly wearing the uniforms of the Syrian Arab Army in Deir ez-Zour Province. Iran leverages this technique elsewhere in the region, including Iraq and the Golan Heights.
- **Pro-regime tribal forces backed by Iran.** Assad and Liwa al-Baqir convened a major meeting of tribal notables from across Syria on June 2 in order to build support for operations against the U.S. in Eastern Syria. Syrian state media claimed the meeting included representatives from seventy clans from Aleppo, Ar-Raqqa, Hasakah, Deraa, and Deir ez-Zour Provinces. Unconfirmed reports suggest that the SDF arrested dozens of additional tribal representatives travelling to the meeting from SDF-held Hasaka Province in Northern Syria. Tribal representatives at the meeting denounced the presence of the U.S., France, and Turkey in Syria and called for tribal mobilization to fight them on behalf of Assad. Multiple new pro-regime militia units of unclear size and capability reportedly formed subsequent to the meeting. These units may have joined Liwa al-Baqir with support from Russia and Iran.

- **Russian combat engineers and private military contractors.** Russian combat engineers deployed to Syria in April 2018. Kremlin-controlled private military contractors (PMC) are similarly deployed in Eastern Syria and will likely participate in future attacks against the U.S. Anti-ISIS Coalition.[4] The Kremlin used a PMC-led force to attack the SDF and U.S. near Deir ez-Zour City in February 2018. Russia may use these assets to directly support an attack against the SDF or indirectly enable such an attack by helping secure rear areas for Assad. Russia may have prepositioned additional assets in Eastern Syria under the guise of operations against ISIS.
- **Other pro-regime militias backed by Russia.** Russia supports other Syrian tribal militias that operate in Eastern Syria, including a group called the Forces of the Fighters of the Tribes.[5] Russia also trains the Syrian ISIS Hunters militia which often fights alongside Russian PMCs. The ISIS Hunters – despite their name – have attacked both opposition groups and the U.S. in Syria.[6] The ISIS Hunters deployed additional forces to Southern Deir ez-Zour Province from Damascus in early June 2018, ostensibly to intensify operations against ISIS.[7] Russia could use these forces and deployments to attack the SDF and U.S. in Eastern Syria.

Russia and Iran have increased their propaganda efforts against the U.S. in Syria, highlighting their resolve to escalate against the U.S. Anti-ISIS Coalition. Kremlin-backed Sputnik News quoted a senior advisor to Iran's Supreme Leader stating that terrain held by the SDF in Syria will become "another Vietnam for the U.S." on June 22.[8] The Russian Ministry of Defense claimed on June 10 that U.S.-backed opposition groups were preparing a chemical weapons attack against pro-regime units stationed in oil fields southeast of Deir ez-Zour City.[9] Russia also repeatedly claimed that U.S.-backed forces have both directly attacked the regime and supported attacks against pro-regime forces by ISIS in Central and Eastern Syria from June 11 - 18. Two Iranian-backed Iraqi Shi'a militias announced their intent to retaliate against the U.S. for the airstrike against their forces in Eastern Syria on June 18.[10] Russia and Iran are framing the U.S. and its partners as aggressors in order to justify and legitimize future attacks against the U.S. in Eastern Syria. The rising volume of this rhetoric may indicate that Iran and Russia intend to escalate in the near-term rather than wait for the conclusion of operations against ISIS.

Russia, Iran, and Assad have not been deterred from further escalation by the overwhelming defeat of a large-scale attack by their proxies against the U.S. and SDF in February 2018. Iran and Russia have instead enabled Assad to conduct additional probing attacks to demonstrate resolve and test the capabilities of their new forces against the SDF. Russian military engineers erected one or more bridges to enable a cross-river attack against the SDF along the Euphrates River on April 29, 2018.[11] The attack involved Liwa al- Baqir, Syrian National Defense Forces (NDF), and unidentified reinforcements from Deir ez-Zour City. These reinforcements may have included Russian PMCs. The SDF later recaptured the villages after air support from the U.S. reportedly destroyed at least one of the bridges erected by Russia. The SDF continues to exchange artillery and small-arms fire with pro-regime forces in the region.

Iran, Russia, and Assad could conduct a guerilla campaign to destabilize SDF-held areas and target the U.S. in Syria. Russia, Iran, and Assad can use their small presence in Northern Syria near reported bases used by the U.S. Anti-ISIS Coalition to disrupt and threaten the U.S. and SDF. Russia and Iran could also leverage their tribal proxy networks in order to support an increased campaign of guerilla attacks against the U.S. in Northern Syria. Pro-regime forces began infiltrating regions held by the SDF as early as February 2018 when a new pro-regime group called the Popular Resistance in the Eastern Region formed and announced its support for the jihad against the U.S. in Syria. The group carries out subversive activities to spread anti-American sentiment within Ar-Raqqa City and also claimed attacks against positions held by the U.S. and France in Northern Syria on April 12. Pro-regime elements likely also placed two IEDs that targeted a U.S.-French joint military base north of Ar-Raqqa City on June 4 and an SDF patrol inside Ar-Raqqa City on June 17.[12] Another new pro-regime group called the Popular Resistance in Manbij also declared an uprising against the U.S. and SDF in the contested town of Manbij in Northern Aleppo Province on June 25.[13] The new group suggests growing momentum behind recruitment efforts led by Liwa al-Baqir in Aleppo Province. Pro-regime elements may have placed an IED that killed two coalition service-members from the U.S. and near Manbij on March 29, 2018.

Russia, Iran, and Assad intend to compel the SDF to abandon its partnership with the U.S. The relationship between the U.S. and SDF is increasingly fragile following due to Turkey's invasion of majority-

Kurdish Afrin Canton in Northern Syria in January 2018. The relationship has also been strained by **new cooperation** between the U.S. and Turkey over the contested SDF-held town of Manbij in Northern Aleppo Province. The SDF agreed to **unconditional negotiations** with Assad on June 10, signaling an increased willingness to grant concessions in return for future protection against Turkey. The military pressure generated by Russia, Iran, and Assad in Eastern Syria may further accelerate a deal between Assad and the SDF that could force a withdrawal of the U.S. Anti-ISIS Coalition from Syria.

Russia and Iran may seize the initiative in Eastern Syria while the U.S. attention is focused on Turkey and Southern Syria. The U.S. Anti-ISIS Coalition remains focused on the implementation of the new framework agreement with Turkey in Manbij as well as continued **counter-ISIS operations** near the Syrian-Iraqi Border in Eastern Syria. The U.S. is also focused on Southern Syria, where Russia and Iran are **supporting a regime offensive** against opposition-held areas that violates a de-escalation zone brokered by the U.S., Russia, and Jordan in 2017. Russia, Iran, and Assad may exploit this divided attention to seize the initiative in Eastern Syria.

The U.S. must commit to retaining its partnerships and presence in Eastern Syria. The U.S. Anti-ISIS Coalition's gains in Syria will unravel if the U.S. fails to deter or block the continued subversion campaign by Russia, Iran, and Assad. The recent breakthroughs with Turkey over Manbij is an important step but could backfire if it leads to a wider fracture between the U.S. and SDF. The U.S. must not allow the SDF to cut a deal with Assad. Instead, the U.S. should commit to providing enduring military support to the SDF in order to deny access to critical terrain and natural resources to Russia, Iran, and Assad.

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