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Accepting Regime Forces in South Syria Will Only Further Iran's Goals

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Whether openly or in disguise, Hezbollah and other Iranian proxies are deploying to the south in large numbers, greatly increasing the potential for cross-border escalation.

When Hezbollah sends its elite Radwan division to a battlefield in Syria, it usually means that intense fighting is expected, and that the unit's forces will be heavily involved. This pattern has been witnessed throughout Hezbollah's intervention in the war, from al-Qusayr to Aleppo to Deir al-Zour. Radwan fighters were also temporarily deployed to the 2017 battle of Deraa before a de-escalation agreement stopped that offensive. Today, they are returning to Deraa.

According to sources on the ground, Iran has been redeploying its Shia militia proxies to south Syria since April, particularly between Suwayda, Deraa, and Quneitra. In the past, Israel and Jordan have issued warnings against the presence of Iranian-allied forces so close to their borders, but rather than withdraw, many of these fighters are simply merging with Assad regime forces. Hezbollah units have integrated with the army's 4th Division and Republican Guard, while fighters from militias such as Liwa al-Fatemioun have been spotted within the Tiger Forces under the leadership of Syrian general Suhail al-Hassan, even adopting their uniforms and insignia.

Whether hiding within regime units or deployed separately, Iran's proxies and partners seem to be heavily involved in the latest Deraa offensive. They are also deploying around the Deir al-Adas area of Quneitra, located a scant fifteen kilometers from the Golan Heights. For instance, the pro-Assad Palestinian militia Liwa al-Quds, which has fought alongside Iranian-controlled forces since 2013, boasted of its large presence near Quneitra in May. Syrian Hezbollah factions such as Liwa al-Imam al-Mahdi—which are largely controlled by their Lebanese parent organization—may well be operating in the area as well given their combat role there in 2016. Even Hezbollah-trained Druze groups might be involved in the southern campaign, further complicating efforts to sift out Iranian influence.

Meanwhile, Russian officials have been busy meeting with Jordanian and Israeli authorities, offering deals and making promises regarding Iran's withdrawal. President Vladimir Putin and President Trump are expected to focus on the same issue during their planned mid-July summit in Paris.

As the battle for Deraa develops, two issues need to be watched closely. First, can Russia actually guarantee the departure of Iranian forces and proxies from the south, one of the most strategically important areas in all of Syria? Second, assuming Bashar al-Assad manages to expel the Syrian opposition from Deraa, can his forces stop Iranian proxies from infiltrating and controlling the borders?

WHAT IS HIDDEN IN THE CAMO

Determining whether and how Iranian proxy forces are switching attire to integrate with Assad's forces can be difficult given the diversity of uniforms used in Syria, not to mention the many different ways groups cooperate with one another. Long before the war, the Syrian army was awash in basic civilian clothing items, and even units within the same division would sometimes sport uniforms that did not match. By 2011, the growing militia trend among pro-Assad forces resulted in many Syrian fighters regularly donning military gear mixed with sneakers, jeans, and T-shirts.

Since Hezbollah entered the war in 2012, its fighters have been pictured in similarly mixed gear on a regular basis, making it difficult to differentiate them from Syrian units. Starting in 2013, some Hezbollah fighters were seen in modern woodland- and desert-patterned digital camouflage, but most used other styles until more recently.

In addition, as the group tried to market its image, it emphasized the display of specialized patches, though fighters have eschewed wearing them on many occasions. By mid-2013, certain forces on the ground were also wearing different colored ribbons to denote their origin, according to videos posted online and comments by former Iraqi Shia fighters who deployed alongside Hezbollah. Yet some Iraqi Shia fighters and Hezbollah members would regularly wear the same color ribbons as their Syrian army counterparts.

In other cases, Hezbollah forces and Iraqi fighters were seen wearing a style of camouflage close to the U.S. 1980s-era M81 woodland pattern—a style also adopted by the Syrian Republican Guard and some army units. This

includes Liwa al-Imam al-Hussein, a Damascus-based militia that identifies as part of the Syrian army's 4th Division, which is now widely deployed in the Quneitra area.

By 2016, digital camouflage had become a more regular addition to Hezbollah kits, as the group heavily promoted this style on social media to show off its modern gear and setup. Even so, many fighters still wear mixed gear.

Another Shia militia, the Damascus-based Liwa Abu Fadl al-Abbas (LAFA), has also been seen wearing the same uniforms as Hezbollah, including modern digital camouflage. In the past, members of the group were teamed with Ali Jamal Jishi (aka Hamza Ibrahim Haidar), a late Hezbollah commander who was regularly pictured wearing the same uniform and insignia as Syrian Republican Guard officers (the photos have since been removed from accessible social media sources). LAFA has likewise branded itself as a subsection of the Republican Guard.

Similar uniform switching has been seen among Iraqi Shia fighters from the group Liwa Assad Allah al-Ghalib. As early as 2016, they were spotted deploying north of their Damascus bases wearing patches and clothing from the Desert Hawks (Liwa Suqur al-Sahara), a Syrian militia. Many LAFA fighters did the same when fighting in the north.

TRACK RECORD OF BROKEN PROMISES

Besides the difficulty of distinguishing Iranian proxies from Syrian regime forces, Russia's general inability or unwillingness to keep its promises in Syria warrants skepticism about its latest security guarantees in the south. For example, when Assad used chemical weapons against civilians in 2013 and the United States was poised to launch military strikes in retaliation, Putin helped convince Washington to hold off by guaranteeing that the regime would surrender its chemical arsenal. Yet Assad kept some of that arsenal and has since used it repeatedly against civilians.

Even more tellingly, Russian forces were rebuffed earlier this month when they accompanied the Syrian army's 11th Division to push Hezbollah forces out of their positions in the border town of al-Qusayr. The plan—which was not coordinated with Iran or Hezbollah—was to take over the Jusiyah crossing with Lebanon, then move closer to Syria's Qalamoun region. Yet Hezbollah forces refused to leave their positions; instead, Russian and Syrian troops turned around and left less than twenty-four hours after they arrived, and Hezbollah soon reinforced its presence around al-Qusayr. This small incident—which was probably a Russian attempt to test Iran's reaction—shows that Moscow would probably be unable to budge Iranian proxies once they become entrenched in south Syria (or, at least, unwilling to exert heavy enough military pressure to force the issue).

REGIME PRESENCE MEANS IRANIAN CONTROL

Currently, Israel and Jordan seem willing to allow a Syrian army presence in the south. Although it is no secret that Iran's proxies are integrated with regime forces, this does not seem to bother the two neighbors so long as all such proxies separate themselves from the army and withdraw after the Deraa offensive.

Yet the presumed guarantors of this withdrawal do not seem capable of actually guaranteeing it. Russia has shown that it cannot move Iranian proxies on the ground. And even if Hezbollah and other militias do withdraw a few kilometers away from the frontier, this would not resolve broader concerns about Tehran's long-term strategic game in Syria. Iranian forces have withdrawn and redeployed many times in many places in Syria, and any move they make to appease Russia would no doubt be temporary.

As for the notion that Assad will push Iran out after achieving victory, the return of his forces to the south means just the opposite. In a major step toward fulfilling Tehran's long-term goals, the presence of Syrian forces would serve as a conduit for Hezbollah and other militias to quietly redeploy in the south anytime they like, without having to deal with opposition pockets.

Therefore, to avoid escalation in south Syria, Assad's forces should not be allowed to reoccupy the area after the battle for Deraa, and Russian forces should not be trusted to act as guarantors of Iranian withdrawal. The only guaranteed way of keeping Iran out of the south and far from the Golan and Jordan would be a third-party buffer zone along Syria's southern borders. Formulating the contours of such a force would of course be challenging, since the Trump administration is set against keeping U.S. troops in Syria, and past international peacekeeping missions designed to constrain Hezbollah elsewhere have failed (e.g., the UN Interim Force in Lebanon). Yet the line distinguishing Iranian and Syria forces grows ever thinner every day, so the need to pursue such alternatives is urgent.

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