



The outcome of the escalation between US forces and Iranian militias in Syria



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An independent institution specialized in information management and preparing studies along with researches related to political, social, economic and legal situation in Middle East generally and in Syria especially in order to build bridges towards authorities and decision makers in all sectors of the state moreover, development sectors to help them in making balanced decisions concerning the region issues through providing data along with delicate, professional and realistic reports

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Introduction :

Since the end of 2021, the bases of the international coalition in Syria have been facing a noticeable threat from the militias affiliated with Iran, as at least two missile attacks were carried out or nullified in less than two weeks.

Although the threat in the past was not limited to the use of missiles, but included artillery shells, drones, and an attempted armed clash, it appears that it is one of the means of fire that will be highly relied upon in Syria, similar to the experience of the Iranian militias in Iraq.

In fact, Syria had previously witnessed field tensions between the two parties, as the number of targeting incidents between 2017 and 2022 reached at least 15 attacks, which affected - or almost hit- the bases of the international coalition in "Al-Tanf", "Koniko" and "Al-Omar" fields as well as Al-Shaddadi.

There is reason to believe that Iran may choose to further escalate on the ground against the presence of the United States in Syria. Perhaps it is possible to verify this more accurately by addressing the recent targeting incidents between the two parties after reviewing their results and implications and what may result from them.

First; The nature of the relationship between the two parties on the ground:

The Iranian affiliated militias are deployed in eastern Syria within the areas located on the southern and western Euphrates River bed; which are locally called "Al-Shamiya". The bases of the international coalition forces are deployed, on the other hand-in the areas north and east of the Euphrates River- are locally called "Al-Jazira". The deployment of US forces in Syria, which began in October 2015, has always been the biggest obstacle to the spread or access of Iranian militias to the Jazira areas, which are rich in natural resources such as oil, gas, and wheat.

In 2018, specifically on February 7, the Iranian militias tried to test the possibility of access to the Syrian Aljazeera in conjunction with the "Wagner" forces of Russia, but the international coalition quickly; however, set the rules of engagement decisively after bombing the attacking forces by the air force and artillery with a heavy fire. This prevented the attackers from taking



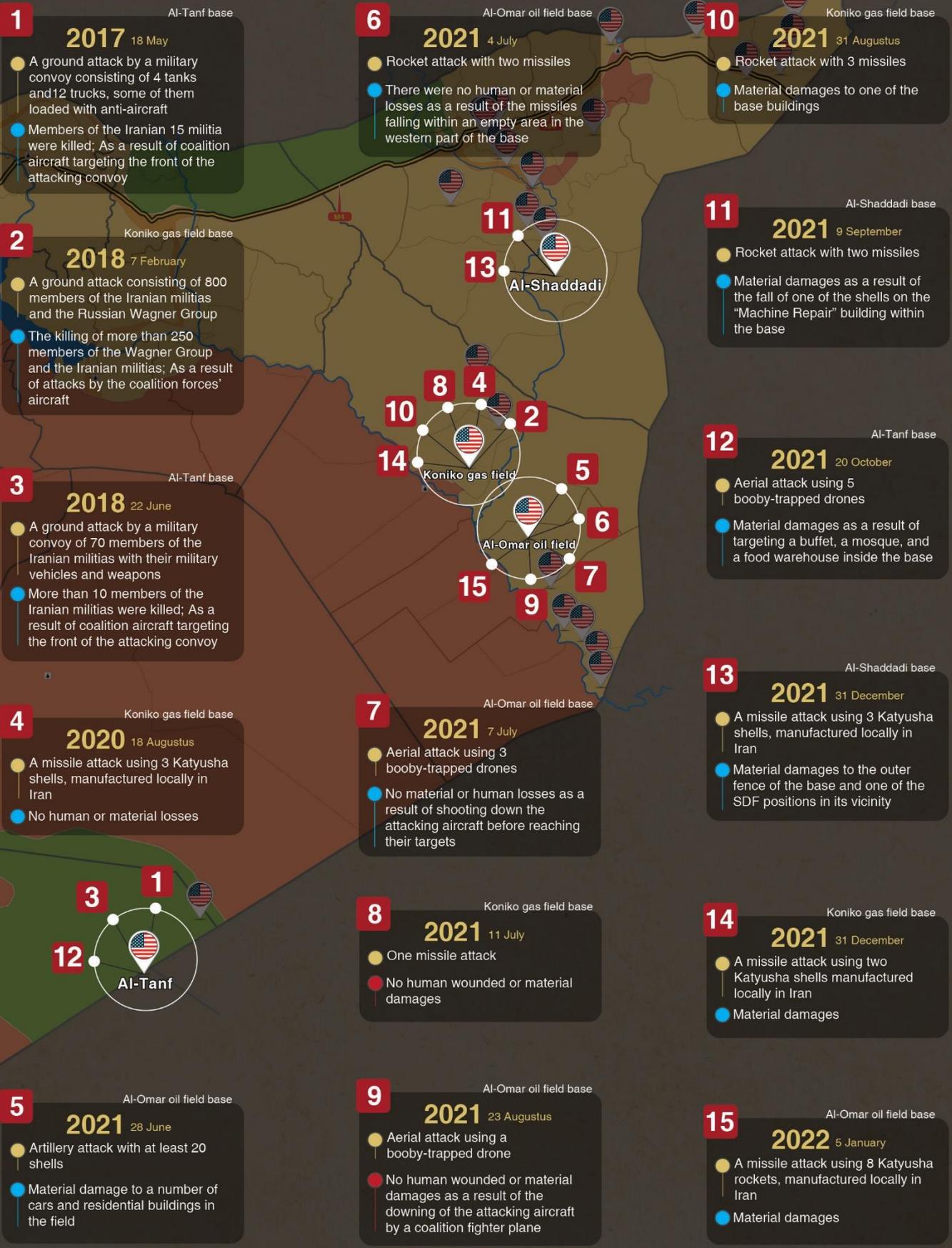
control of the Koniko field, north of Deir ez-Zor, and resulted in the killing of more than 250 militants.

Since then, the Iranian militias' reliance on direct armed engagement against the international coalition forces has clearly decreased. After that, other methods, such as booby-trapped drones and short and medium-range missiles have been used. It is worth mentioning that the reliance on ground confrontation methods was limited to only 3 times; and that was between 2017 and 2018. The goal of that didn't seem to be limited to testing the defenses and readiness of the international coalition, but rather an attempt to know the rules of engagement in relation to the size of the forces and means of combat that were used by the Iranian militias.

The killing of the commander of the "Quds Force", Qassem Soleimani, in an air strike by the US forces on January 3, 2020 was a significant event in the field relationship between the two parties in Syria. As such, the Iranian militias intensified their attacks on the international coalition bases in Deir ez-Zor and Al-Hasakah.

The "Al-Omar" field base was targeted at least 5 times, the "Koniko" field base 4 times, "Al-Shaddadi" once, and "Al-Tanf" twice.

The most prominent Iranian militia attacks against the bases of the international coalition in Syria





It is; however, worth noting that Iran didn't rely only on the militarily organized militias, but on the security cells called "popular resistance" that are active in the east of the Euphrates and work on carrying out attacks through rockets and artillery shells near the sites of the international coalition.

In October 2021, the "Al-Tanf" base, located near the border triangle of Syria, Iraq and Jordan, was attacked using 5 booby-trapped planes launched from the areas controlled by the Iranian militias in the Badia. A week before that, and after its sites were subjected to fierce aerial bombardment, the Iranian operations room of Syria's allies had threatened to launch an attack before it occurred. The bombardment was believed to be Israeli; and it was launched from the vicinity of the "Al-Tanf" base towards the area of "Palmyra" and the "T4" military airport. Although the Iranian militias used airborne booby traps to target the bases of the international coalition at least 3 times, the latter retained the right to respond to these incidents until the beginning of 2022, which witnessed a clear escalation on the ground by the coalition.

Second; early 2022 bilateral escalation details:

1. Iranian Militias' Escalation:

The escalation between the two sides in Syria began on Friday evening, the 31st of December 2021; when 3 missile shells targeted the vicinity of the "Al-Shaddadi" base, south of the city of Al-Hasakah, where the international coalition forces are stationed. Two shells fell close to military points where "S.D.F" are stationed in the vicinity of Al-Shaddadi base; while the third shell fell in the vicinity of the outer fence of the base, without causing any damage or losses.

Immediately, after the coalition specified the point from which the shelling came, the SDF raided the place. It was 2 km from the city of "Al-Shadadiya" in the vicinity of the village of "Umm Al-Zar". The rocket launching bases used were found, but no trace of the perpetrators.

On the evening of the same day that the "Al-Shaddadi" base was targeted, the international coalition forces were able to monitor and spot members of an Iranian security cells in the vicinity of the "Al-Omar" field base in the



eastern countryside of Deir ez-Zor, while they were trying to set up two bases for launching Iranian-made 107mm Katyusha rockets.

The launcher was planned to be used to target the base of the “Al-Omar” field simultaneously with the targeting of the “Al-Shaddadi” base.

It is worth mentioning that the recent escalation relied on security cells made up of members of the National Defense Forces in "Al-Hasakah", which are redeployed in the vicinity of "Al-Qamishli" - the thing that undermined their activities and reduced the volume of their funding since April 24, 2021 - or individuals loyal to the Syrian regime in the area and are paid to carry out such attacks.

This means that Iran is now able to carry out operations deep in the areas of deployment of the international coalition and US forces east of the Euphrates. In addition to that, Iran can now transfer weapons, specifically missiles, to the region. Thus, raising the level of the military and security threat. Iran's escalation; however, has not been limited to carrying out attacks through security cells, but also included direct military attacks; as its militias bombed the base of the international coalition in the "Al-Omar" field with 8 rockets from the city of "Al-Mayadin" west of the Euphrates, on January 5, 2022.

2. American forces retaliation:

On January 4, 2022, the drones of the International Coalition forces carried out air strikes that destroyed missile launchers belonging to the Iranian militias. These launchers had recently been moved and re-installed in the “Al-Quriya” and “Ashara” deserts in the eastern countryside of Deir Ezzor.

One day later, the American forces bombed the military sites of the Iranian militias, as the latter had targeted the "Al-Omar" field base.

On the 6th of the same month, the heavy artillery of the international coalition carried out intense bursts against military points belonging to the Iraqi "Hezbollah" Brigades near the "Al-Mayadin" desert, and the Revolutionary Guards in the vicinity of the villages of "Hatla" and "Al-Hussainiya", which resulted in losses and human and material damage, including the destruction of a number of missile launchers.

It is clear that the American forces have become more prepared to respond to the sources of threat that they may face from the activities of Iranian militias west of the Euphrates. They are neither observing silence or the



right to respond to the imminent threat or direct attacks that may be more frequent than they were in the past.

Nevertheless, the response of the American forces is still limited to the principle of reaction without a clear strategy or formula to deal with the security or military preventive operations with the increasing threat, in light of the clear security penetration into the east of the Euphrates by Iranian militias despite the reconnaissance operations carried out by the international coalition on an ongoing basis by land. By air, through military patrols and drones, whether in the vicinity of its bases or in the rest of the areas controlled by the Syrian Democratic Forces.

Third; Motives and indications of the escalation between the two sides:

1- The escalation of the Iranian militias:

The simultaneous escalation of militias against American goals and interests in Syria and Iraq with the first anniversary of the assassination of Qassem Soleimani, commander of the Iranian "Quds Force," means that Iran is still committed to maintaining its military presence in Syria and is fully prepared to use the military option to protect this presence and further create the necessary conditions for it.

There is a clear attempt by the Iranian militias to bring about a change in the rules of engagement with the American forces in order to raise the cost of the military presence of the latter, and in the hope that this will lead to redeployment and then withdrawal, as happened in Afghanistan. Even in the event of redeployment, the Iranian militias may have the opportunity to expand their areas of influence, as the Russian forces did in large areas east of the Euphrates after the American forces evacuated a number of sites in conjunction with Operation Peace Spring launched by Turkey and the Syrian opposition in October 2019.

Iran's ability to use security methods to target the interests of US forces in Syria means that it will focus in the coming period on recruitment or re-arranging tasks for its militias in the security square in "Al-Hasakah" province, in addition to providing more support for making reconciliation operations succeed for the suitable environment they might provide in enhancing security-related activities. In fact, the absence of losses and



material damage among US forces in all targeting incidents cannot be overlooked; as it appears that Iran deliberately carried out non-lethal attacks; because it does not want to slide from escalation to confrontation.

2- Motives and indications of the escalation by US forces:

Theoretically, the US forces should be keen on undermining the military and security activities of the Iranian militias in Syria, so that they wouldn't be emboldened to engage in more aggressive behavior; otherwise, the image of the US military power in the region will erode. Indeed, the direct and rapid response of the US forces to the Iranian militia's sources of fire reflects an attempt to redefine the rules of engagement and an attempt to put an end to the escalation of incidents of targeting the forces and bases of the international coalition in Syria and Iraq alike.

Although the efforts of the international coalition are still limited to monitoring, raiding and responding to sources of fire, the United States' ⁽¹⁾awareness of the lack of a clear plan to confront Iran's threats in Syria means the beginning of a new phase in dealing with Iranian militias.

Fourth; Where is the state of escalation between the two sides heading?

After a series of targeting incidents against the sites of the international coalition in Syria, the leadership of the coalition stressed the commitment to protect its forces and bases from any threat that might constitute a threat to In theory, implementing this should lead to de-escalation, but the ⁽²⁾them. continuation of hostilities remains an option as well. It is likely that the US forces will continue to target the sources of attacks or the potential threat to the activities of Iranian militias east or west of the Euphrates. This, however, shouldn't mean a shift from escalation to confrontation, but rather redefining the rules of engagement.

As a result, Iranian militias may find themselves forced to withdraw from some exposed areas and redeploy to avoid being continuously monitored, or

⁽¹⁾ The Biden administration does not have a clear plan to confront Iran's threats in Syria. 11-1-2022, "Asharq Al-Awsat", [link](#)

⁽²⁾ "The Coalition condemns the attacks of the malicious parties, confirms the response to the Al-Khadraa Village attack." 5-1-2022, "Al-Hurra TV", [link](#)

probably targeted by the international coalition; let alone the increasing coordination, between the latter and Israel. The previous experience between the two parties at the end of 2021 is a case in point.

It is expected to carry out security campaigns by The S.D.F. covered by the coalition is expected to carry out campaigns in the east of the Euphrates, with the aim of pursuing cells affiliated with Iran.

This is similar to the anti-terror campaigns carried out between 2020 and 2021 that actually crippled the activities of ISIS in the region. Accordingly, it does not seem unlikely that the Iranian militias will reconsider the size and level of escalation against the US forces in Syria, if it is to be compared to the expected deterrent response that the latter could take.

But even if the Iranian militias resort to de-escalation, this will remain temporary until the scale of the risks is re- evaluated and compared with the expected gains; especially since any weakness or regression inflicted on them will be taken advantage of by Russia to enhance its reach and spread in the region.

Conclusion:

It is clear that the intensity of escalation between US forces and Iranian militias in Syria coincided with the withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan and with the expiration of the date of their departure from Iraq on December 31, 2021, as well as with the faltering of the eighth round of nuclear talks in Vienna.

Iran has long used escalation in Iraq as a pressure tool during the nuclear talks with the West; and it is not unlikely that Iran would repeat that in Syria. Its priority; however, is to raise the cost on US forces in the hope of setting a date for their exit or reducing the size of their forces and intervention tasks. In the face of that, the United States is not expected to respond to this pressure in Syria - for now at the very least - unless it guarantees the protection of its interests and allies, whether local or regional. And this requires more time, which Iran might use to impose more pressure on the field.



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