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[Russia is Serving Iranian Interests in Eastern Syria](#)



On the night of February 7, a column of pro-government troops – 10 tanks, more than 20 armored vehicles and nearly 500 servicemen – attacked the Syrian Democratic Forces' (SDF) positions on the eastern bank of the Euphrates River. But the attack was repelled. The supposed aim of the operation? To seize the Kurdish-controlled Conoco oil refinery, though it cannot be ruled out that the real objectives were much more far-reaching.

Both warring parties want to establish control in eastern Syria, and it is therefore difficult to unequivocally decide on the prime cause of the escalation of the conflict in the eastern, Deir ez-Zor region.

Pro-government forces believed it was important to gain control over vital economic facilities, a means of effectively guaranteeing the regime's viability. Another goal was to weaken the SDF's support among various local tribes in the east of the country, and ultimately win their loyalty. This is evidenced by reports before the operation that some tribes had expressed readiness to seize the refinery and return it to the Assad regime. Also, information was leaked that tribes affiliated with the Syrian Democratic Forces had agreed to relinquish certain areas on the eastern bank of the Euphrates to pro-government troops.

Apparently, Syrian intelligence services had long been laying the groundwork to win these tribes round. The

Conoco attack was meant to demonstrate the seriousness of the regime's intentions, encouraging these groups to end their allegiance to the SDF and, ideally, to switch to the side of the government in Damascus.

Iran is equally interested in this conflict, since it seeks full control over the Syrian-Iraqi border, within a Shia corridor from Tehran to Beirut. The entire operation may have been [conducted](#) under the auspices of Iran, which is indicated by the composition of the troops, including Afghan Shia fighters from Liwa Fatemiyon as well as Liwa al-Baqir Shia tribal detachments.

Meanwhile, the Americans and SDF command may have been perfectly aware of the upcoming operation: There is reason to believe that the local tribes lured the regime's troops into a trap, provoking a military operation that was doomed to failure. U.S. air power and artillery killed more than 100 pro-government militia men, including 30 "Daesh hunter" fighters and around 10-20 private military contractors from the Wagner Group, as well as several high-level Liwa al-Baqir tribal leaders.

This debacle seriously undermined the influence of the Assad regime on the local tribal community, bolstering the position of the U.S. and SDF and dispelling the doubts of many Arab tribal sheiks as regards their choice to run the Deir ez-Zor Military Council.

Inaccurate casualty estimates

However, the precise death toll among Russian private military contractors is not the most pressing issue; the problem received huge media coverage. This is mostly speculation and explains very little about the dynamics on the ground. Instead, we should focus on the "Daesh hunters" from the Fifth Corps formed by Russia, part of the Iran-led Deir ez-Zor operation. The question naturally arises: Who actually controls some of the units of the Fifth Corps that comprise private military contractors from the Wagner Group and others? In other words, can these units be involved in operations against Israel, for example, under the auspices of Iran?

In turn, the Israeli air strikes against Iranian bases in southern Syria on February 10-11 were conducted in agreement with the American command, in response to the escalation of the conflict on the eastern bank of the Euphrates two days earlier. Since Donald Trump took office, U.S. policy in the Middle East has focused on deterring Iranian influence in the region, which is fully in line with the foreign policy of Tel Aviv. Therefore, the main goal of Israel's airstrikes was to demonstrate to Iran the seriousness of its intent to curtail the Islamic Republic's activity in Syria. In this case, Tehran initiated the conflict with its drone's incursion into the Israeli airspace. As a result, even though an Israeli F-16 was shot down, the Iranian military, as well as air defense facilities in southern Syria, was seriously damaged.

All this gives reason to believe that the Deir ez-Zor events and developments in south-western Syria are interrelated. On the one hand, the U.S. and Israeli airstrikes were provoked by Iran. On the other hand, the Americans themselves did their best to lure pro-Iranian troops into a trap. Pro-government forces supported by Tehran acted as the trigger in both cases. However, the U.S. and Israel turned out to be the main beneficiaries of the February skirmishes.

Mirage of victory: A battle for oil looms

Thus, as expected, eastern Syria, where victory over ISIS was never meant to bring the long-awaited peace, will remain one of the main trouble spots in the near future. Tensions between Damascus and the pro-American Kurdish Syrian Democratic Forces are largely generated by the location in northeastern Syria of the country's major oil and gas fields, controlled by the SDF. The Syrian regime, exhausted by the protracted civil war, has an urgent need to restore control over the most important infrastructure facilities, but its opponents will make every effort to frustrate these attempts and make Assad's victory a mirage, having deprived him of an important source of revenue.

The events of early February proved that military clashes with the Kurds, operating under the auspices of the U.S.-led anti-terrorist coalition, are not necessarily bringing the desired effect. The presence of the American military and Syrian Democratic Forces does stabilize the situation in Syria to a certain extent, making Damascus and Tehran pay attention to their adversaries. However, repeated attempts by the Syrian authorities to split the Arab-Kurdish opposition cannot be ruled out. By the way, this may lay the groundwork for cooperation between Syria and Turkey.

The Shia corridor via Abu Kamal is another conflict-prone initiative. The transfer of Iraqi Shia groups thus far not included in the quotas of the “Khashd ash-Shaabi” militia brigades through this corridor cannot be ruled out. However, the presence of U.S. military bases in two regions covered by the corridor may act as a deterrent. The bases are located in the Kurdish-controlled northeast and near the town of At Tanf in southeastern Syria, providing control over the routes for the redeployment of troops and resources from Iraq into Syria.

Not only direct but also implicit involvement in the Syrian conflict remains an issue in Russia. Following President Vladimir Putin’s announcement of the withdrawal of troops, it is not about the Russian military presence in Syria anymore, but involvement in political games in the interests of Iran. Continuing to obsess about the level of the death toll among Russian mercenaries and the downing of the Israeli F-16 only obscures the real problem: the toxicity of the Iranian presence in Syria for Russia and others.

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