

# CSAG INFORMATION PAPER:

## Deir ez-Zor: Critical Juncture in the Process Towards Syria's Normalization

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*The opinions and conclusions expressed herein are those of a number of international officers within the Combined Strategic Analysis Group (CSAG) and do not necessarily reflect the views of United States Central Command, nor of the nations represented within the CSAG or any other governmental agency.*

1. **Subject:** Deir ez-Zor: Critical Juncture in the Process Towards Syria's Normalization.
2. **Purpose:** To present CSAG's analysis of the strategic significance of Deir ez-Zor in shaping the future of Syria. It reveals the growing interest of various actors operating in the region and their efforts to gain an edge in the process of Syria's normalization.
3. **Introduction:** Deir ez-Zor, the capital of the province with the same name, is at a key junction of land lines of communication (LOCs). The province is close to the Iraq border and abundant in natural resources (e.g., oil and gas). The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) recently reinforced its position in Deir ez-Zor province, where Iranian-backed militias and Russian-backed government forces already controlled large areas. The province is also known to contain Islamic State (IS) sleeper cells.<sup>1</sup> The province is also a key access point for the US-led coalition to move troops and supplies in and out of Syria and to support the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF).<sup>2</sup> Control of this region could be key to Syria's normalization process.
4. **Facts:**
  - a. Iran
    - (1) After the Iranian president visited Syria in May 2023, the Iranian IRGC coordinator in Syria emphasized the significance of Deir ez-Zor province, and the presence of IRGC and its militias to consolidate control in the region.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Omar Abdurrahman, "IRGC reinforcing headquarters in Syria's Deir ez-Zor," *North Press Agency*, July 06, 2023, <https://npasyria.com/en/100691/> (accessed July 14, 2023).

<sup>2</sup> Jusoor Center for Studies, "Map of foreign forces' military points in Syria - mid 2023," July 03, 2023, <https://jusoor.co/en/details/map-of-foreign-forces-military-points-in-syria-mid-2023> (accessed July 14, 2023).

<sup>3</sup> Eye of Euphrates, "A new intelligence mission by Hajj Askar between Damascus and Beirut... Euphrates Eye reveals details!!" July 06, 2023, <https://eyeofeuphrates.com/ar/news/2023/07/06/9052> (accessed July 14, 2023).

- (2) Iranian-backed militias and government forces control large areas of Deir ez-Zor. Recently, the IRGC has deployed military reinforcements to bolster its position.<sup>4</sup>
  - (3) Iranian-backed militias held several military parades as a response to the alleged rumor “that the US-led coalition was preparing a military operation to liberate cities” in the area.<sup>5</sup>
- b. Russia
- (1) Recently, high-ranking military officials from IRGC met with Russian officers in Deir ez-Zor to discuss increasing coordination between Iran-backed militias and Russia-backed militias in Syria. The two sides reportedly discussed “supporting Russia's plan to launch attacks against US interest in east Euphrates,” and the Russians requested that “its role in these attacks remain confidential.”<sup>6</sup>
  - (2) A US defense official claimed that Iran, Russia and Syria are collaborating to pressure the US to withdraw its forces from Syria and mentioned the growing ties in intelligence sharing and planning.<sup>7</sup>
- c. Syrian Arab Army (SAA)
- (1) Syrian regime forces considerably reinforced its military positions in the eastern Deir ez-Zor countryside (Mayadin City).<sup>8</sup>
  - (2) Despite receiving support from Russia and Iran to maintain his regime, President Bashar al-Assad only controls about two-thirds of Syria's former territory.<sup>9</sup> Deir ez-Zor is another step in increasing its influence.
- d. ISIS
- (1) Deir ez-Zor served as a symbolic location, being the last ISIS stronghold. It was captured by SDF and coalition forces on the east Euphrates and by SAA and Russian forces on the west Euphrates.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Abdurrahman, “IRGC reinforcing headquarters in Syria’s Deir ez-Zor.”; Deir Ezzor 24, “Iranian cultural center organizes activity for children in Deir Ezzor” 2021, <https://deirezzor24.net/en/iranian-cultural-center-organizes-activity-for-children-in-deir-ezzor/> (accessed July 14, 2023).

<sup>5</sup> Deir Ezzor 24, “The Iranian revolutionary guard militia holds a military parade east of Deir Ezzor” June 25, 2023, <https://deirezzor24.net/en/the-iranian-revolutionary-guard-militia-holds-a-military-parade-east-of-deir-ezzor/> (accessed July 14, 2023).

<sup>6</sup> MEMRI, “Syrian Opposition Website: Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), Russian Generals Met In Deir Al-Zour To Coordinate Attacks On U.S. Forces,” June 08, 2023, <https://www.memri.org/reports/syrian-opposition-website-islamic-revolutionary-guard-corps-irgc-russian-generals-met-deir> (accessed July 14, 2023).

<sup>7</sup> Lolita C. Baldor, “US sending F-16 fighter jets to protect ships from Iranian seizures in Gulf region,” *AP News*, July 14, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/iran-russia-syria-military-fighter-jets-449a4c6fc9ab90981914c77e2d290f7f> (accessed July 18, 2023).

<sup>8</sup> SOHR, “After arrival of reinforcements, Secret meeting takes place between head of Tribal Army militias and National Defence,” July 09, 2023, <https://www.syriahr.com/en/303990/> (accessed July 14, 2023).

<sup>9</sup> Colin Freeze, “In the shadows, and at detention centres, the fight against the Islamic State continues in northeast Syria,” *The Global and Mail*, July 14, 2023, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/world/article-syria-isis-sdf-fighters/> (accessed July 14, 2023).

<sup>10</sup> Hamdi Alkhshali, Frederik Pleitgen and Laura Smith-Park, “ISIS ousted from last major city in Syria, state media reports,” *CNN*, November 03, 2017, <https://www.cnn.com/2017/11/03/middleeast/syria-isis-deir-ezzor/index.html> (accessed July 20, 2023).

- (2) Although ISIS was defeated in Deir ez-Zor, ISIS is still able to conduct operations, maintaining significant sleeper cells in the region.<sup>11</sup>
- (3) On July 4, protests took place in Izba, Deir ez-Zor province, against the burning of the Quran in Sweden. The demonstrators waved ISIS flags and made pro-ISIS statements.<sup>12</sup>
- e. SDF
  - (1) The SDF reinforced its checkpoints in the eastern countryside of Deir ez-Zor with personnel and heavy machinery along the lines of contact with SAA forces between July 8-10.<sup>13</sup>
  - (2) The SDF controls approximately 25 percent of Syria's territory (In Deir ez-Zor, mainly on the eastern banks of the Euphrates).<sup>14</sup>
- f. US
  - (1) US forces are deployed throughout the province mainly to assist the SDF in preventing a resurgence of the Islamic State and supporting them in securing the oil fields.
  - (2) The Kurdish internal security forces, with assistance of the US-led coalition, captured an ISIS leader along with a cache of weapons and ammunition.<sup>15</sup>

## 5. **Assessment:**

- a. Iran, Russia, and SAA gathering significant reinforcements in the region might be a precursor for operations against the SDF and by extension US forces.
- b. Following a period of successful deconfliction between the US and Russia, Russian behavior is discernably more aggressive. It is conceivable that Russia could chose to encourage IRGC in the area to attack US interests (a proxy for plausible deniability).
- c. The diplomatic environment changed in Iran's favor (e.g., KSA-Iran agreement, brokered by China). The decrease in supporting its proxy attacks against Arab countries (e.g., in Yemen) may allow Iran to reapportion resource against the US when the opportunity presents itself.
- d. Deir ez-Zor is fertile ground from which ISIS can reinvigorate recruitment efforts and launch attacks to undermine the control of the SDF and SAA. Through a combination of coercion and winning the narrative, ISIS is likely to attempt to gain the support of the local population and regain control over the region.
- e. Control of Deir ez-Zor is important for all parties. A tactical success in this area could significantly impact Syria's "internal borders," granting a stake in shaping Syria's destiny and offer strategic advantage to the victors.

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<sup>11</sup> Abdurrahman, "IRGC reinforcing headquarters in Syria's Deir ez-Zor."

<sup>12</sup> Brian Carter, "Salafi-Jihadi Movement Update Special Edition: Local Protests Suggest New ISIS Support Zone in Northeastern Deir ez-Zor, Syria," *Critical Threats*, July 07, 2023, <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/salafi-jihadi-movement-update-special-edition-local-protests-suggest-new-isis-support-zone-in-northeastern-deir-ez-zor-syria> (accessed July 20, 2023).

<sup>13</sup> SOHR, "Opposite areas of Iranian militias control | "SDF" bring in 500 military armoured vehicles to eastern countryside of Deir Ezzor," July 08, 2023, <https://www.syriahr.com/en/303765/> (accessed July 20, 2023).

<sup>14</sup> Colin Freeze, "In the shadows, and at detention centres, the fight against the Islamic State continues in northeast Syria," *The Global and Mail*, July 14, 2023, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/world/article-syria-isis-sdf-fighters/> (accessed July 14, 2023).

<sup>15</sup> Rudaw, "ISIS leader captured in Syria's Deir ez-Zor," July 23, 2023, <https://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/syria/22072023> (accessed July 24, 2023).

**6. Conclusions:**

- a. Although it seems unlikely that US forces will be attacked directly by Iran or Russia, actions taken by Iran's proxies and SAA could readily be directed towards SDF, which would directly affect US interests, create dilemmas and exert sufficient pressure which precipitates an exit from Syria at a time not of the coalition's choosing, leaving a security vacuum.
- b. Such a security vacuum would likely be exploited by other actors (e.g., ISIS).
- c. Recently, CENTCOM deployed extra assets to the Gulf region. These assets could be used as a "double-edged deterrence shield and sword" for future turbulence in the Deir ez-Zor region.
- d. Losing the Deir ez-Zor region may cause a domino effect:
  - (1) The SDF losing significant territory could intensify questions over US credibility raised in the aftermath of the ANSF disintegration and precipitous withdrawal from Afghanistan.
  - (2) The SDF could fracture with factions maintaining control of territory but at odds with the Syrian Regime and Russian backers. This might lead to a divided Syria controlled by multiple competing entities making governance extremely challenging and leaving opportunity for malign actors to flourish (similarities with Libya).