



Commerce, Rail and Electricity Returning to Syria's Euphrates River Valley with Help from Iraq and Iran

OE Watch Commentary: The governments of Iran, Syria and Iraq are all seeking to grow their economies through increased trade. The accompanying passages from local Arabic-language news sources suggest that trilateral efforts are underway to revitalize the Syrian-Iraqi Euphrates borderlands, which are a key node in the strategic land corridor linking Iran to Syria via Iraq. They also shed light on some local-level efforts.

In late September 2019, the border crossing between al-Bukamal and al-Qa'im, linking Syria and Iraq along the Euphrates River was reopened. Formerly under ISIS control, the area was captured by the Syrian and Iraqi militaries in November 2017, in a coordinated campaign that relied heavily on Syrian loyalist militias and Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF). The first accompanying article, from the news website *al-Modon*, reports that commercial traffic has been minimal in the first month of operation. Although Syrian customs personnel has been deployed to the crossing, the article claims that the al-Tafuf Brigade, an Iraqi PMF formation (PMF Brigade 13) affiliated with the Imam Hussein Shrine in Karbala, is in de-facto control.

In the meantime, Syrian government efforts to re-electrify al-Bukamal and surrounding villages are underway. The Syrian Middle Euphrates River Valley (MERV) has been cut off from the national grid for much of the conflict. Portions of the provincial capital Deir ez-Zor were reconnected earlier this year, and the article describes how in al-Bukamal, the state-run electrical company "faces great difficulties in its work due to the magnitude of the destruction in the area."

At the 19th International Electricity Exhibition held in Tehran last November, the Syrian and Iranian ministers of electricity signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) granting Iran broad control over the rebuilding and upgrading of the Syrian electricity sector. Syrian officials have previously stated that over half of the country's electrical production and distribution infrastructure was affected by the conflict. Aleppo and the MERV were hardest hit, as the accompanying images attest. MAPNA Group, an Iranian industrial construction conglomerate, recently began building a 540-megawatt gas-fired combined-cycle power plant in Lattakia. Plans are in place for Iranian entities to build several smaller plants along the coast and rehabilitate or replace existing plants in Aleppo, Homs and Deir ez-Zor. The recently signed Syrian-Iranian MoU also stipulated plans "to create a trilateral electrical link between Syria, Iran and Iraq, through a joint partnership that conducts the necessary studies and technical preparations." Iraq has recently become a major importer of Iranian electricity, and the two countries signed their own bilateral agreement at the Tehran electricity exhibition, in this case to synchronize their power grids.

According to a recent study published by the Syrian Ministry of Transport and cited in the passage from the daily newspaper *al-Watan*, work is also moving ahead on rebuilding the railway connecting the Syrian city of Deir ez-Zor to al-Bukamal. The broader goal, as the article notes, is to lay tracks for a "strategic transit corridor for Syria and Iraq," linking Iran's Imam Khomeini Port on the Persian Gulf to the Iranian-controlled Syrian port of Lattakia on the Mediterranean Sea. **End OE Watch Commentary (Winter)**

"...The rail line is part of an international east-west transportation axis from Syria's ports via Aleppo to Iraq, Iran and East Asia. It represents a strategic transit corridor for Syria and Iraq..."



Middle East at Night (2012), NASA.

Source: Allameh https://eoimages.gsfc.nasa.gov/images/imagerecords/90000/90100/middleeast_vir_2012_lrg.jpg, Public Domain.



Middle East at Night (2016), NASA.

Source: https://eoimages.gsfc.nasa.gov/images/imagerecords/90000/90100/middleeast_vir_2016_lrg.jpg, Public Domain



Continued: Commerce, Rail and Electricity Returning to Syria's Euphrates River Valley with Help from Iraq and Iran

Source: بعد شهر من افتتاحه: معبر البوكمال..للحجاج والمليشيات الإيرانية
 "A Month After Opening, the al-Bukamal Crossing... for Pilgrims and Iranian Militias," *al-Modon*, 13 November 2019. <https://tinyurl.com/vxsjsnl>

Al-Modon's sources revealed that only 10 trucks had crossed from Iraq in the month since the crossing was opened. The sources were unable to determine the cargo of the trucks and whether they were of a purely commercial nature or military equipment. Despite the cancellation of so-called entry cards required of Syrian vehicles entering Iraq prior to 2011, Syrian merchants have not been encouraged to export their goods through this crossing... A source at Syrian customs recently discussed the assignment of 148 employees to support work at the crossing, mostly as patrolmen and squad chiefs. They were sent outside of the normal schedule of deployments to support customs work, in the expectation of improved traffic and transport of goods and materials. However, al-Modon's sources indicated that the Al-Tafuf Brigade of the Imam Hussein Shrine in Karbala controls the Syrian side of the crossing. The Imam Hussein Shrine here refers to an "institution" focused on pilgrimage to the holy shrines, and is responsible for the spread of Shi'ism in Syria and Iraq.

Source: وصول معدات كهربائية إلى البوكمال تمهيداً لعودة التيار إليها
 "Arrival of Electrical Machinery to Albu Kamal Preparing for the Return of Electricity," *Snack Syrian*, 27 October 2019. <https://tinyurl.com/wkad4of>

According to Engineer Khaled Lotfi, the director of the Deir ez-Zor General Company for Electricity, some of the electrical equipment and transformers needed to restore electricity to the city of al-Bukamal and its countryside have arrived at the company in conjunction with electricity projects and workshops in the city, currently focused on the village of Sabikhan. According to Lotfi, the company's work and workshops are going as planned, but it faces great difficulties in its work due to the magnitude of the destruction in the area, which has been without electricity for seven years. In a call with Snack Syrian, he refused to disclose the numbers and types of equipment that the company had obtained, merely indicating that the costs are under study. State electricity reached government facilities in the city of Deir ez-Zor in March of this year, and has returned to select neighborhoods, including al-Qusur, al-Muaziffin and al-Joura. In terms of whether al-Bukamal and its outskirts will be the new recipients of government electricity, he said "God Willing."

Source: سورية وإيران توقعان مذكرة تفاهم لتوطين التكنولوجيا وصناعة التجهيزات الكهربائية في سورية
 "Syria and Iran Sign a Memorandum of Understanding to Localize Technology and Build Electrical Equipment in Syria," *Syrian News Agency (SANA)*, 2 November 2019. <https://sana.sy/?p=1046439>

The Memorandum of Understanding... includes work to rebuild Syria's electrical grid and to localize the manufacture of electrical equipment. It also includes building power plants, transmission and distribution networks and rebuilding and reducing the damage to the distribution grid in terms of engineering, operation and customer services. The Memorandum of Understanding provides for joint investment and the exchange of technical information for power plant construction and renewable energy, as well as the reconstruction, rehabilitation and upgrading of power plants. It also includes operation and maintenance, securing spare parts for plants, repairing electrical transformers and producing electrical products and devices, giving priority to the production of smart equipment, transformers and cables. The memorandum also included the work to create a trilateral electrical link between Syria, Iran and Iraq, through a joint partnership that conducts the necessary studies and technical preparations.

Source: إنشاء خط حديدي بين دير الزور والبوكمال مواصفات عالمية ... دراسة لربط ميناء الإمام الخميني بميناء اللاذقية
 "Building of a Railway Line Between Deir ez-Zor and Albu Kamal," *al-Watan*, 3 November 2019. <http://alwatan.sy/archives/218971>

The Ministry of Transport revealed that the 142.8-kilometer long railway linking Deir ez-Zor - al-Tabiyyah - al-Bukamal is under construction using modern technical specifications in terms of speed and infrastructure. It noted that the railway is designed as a double line, with investment and execution completed for the 30 kilometers to the al-Tabiyyah station. The groundwork and industrial work all the way to al-Bukamal is 96% complete and there are 6 main stations on this line... The report noted that the rail line is part of an international east-west transportation axis from Syria's ports via Aleppo to Iraq, Iran and East Asia. It represents a strategic transit corridor for Syria and Iraq... The ministry revealed the discussion of a project linking the Imam Khomeini Port, located on the Iranian side of Gulf, with the port of Latakia on the Mediterranean Sea, in addition to a 32-kilometer project linking the Iranian city of Shalmagh with the Iraqi city of Basra, to be implemented and funded by Iran, and which will end by linking the Imam Khomeini Port with Basra and Latakia.